

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (Ed.)

Being Virtually Real?



**Virtual Worlds from a
Cultural Studies' Perspective.**

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Table Of Contents

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler

Religion Becoming Virtualised.
Introduction to the Special Issue
on Religion in Virtual Worlds.

Gordon Calleja

Virtual Worlds Today: Gaming and
Online Sociality.

Libuse Martinkova

Computer Mediated Religious Life of
Technoshamans and Cybershamans.

Kathryn Stam and Michael Scialdone

Where Dreams and Dragons Meet. An
Ethnographic Analysis of two Examples
of Massive Multiplayer Online
Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs).

Simon Jenkins

Rituals and Pixels. Experiments in
Online Church.

Randy Kluver and Yanli Chen

The Church of Fools: Virtual Ritual and
Material Faith.

Nadja Miczek

Online Rituals in Virtual Worlds.
Christian Online Services between
Dynamics and Stability.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler

Virtual Religion. An Approach to a
Religious and Ritual Topography
of Second Life.

**Pablo Martinez-Zárate, Isabela
Corduneanu and Luis Miguel Martinez**
S(l)pirituality. Immersive Worlds as
a Window to Spirituality Phenomena.

Andréé Robinson-Neal

Enhancing the Spiritual Relationship:
the Impact of Virtual Worship on the
Real World Church Experience.

Beatrice Bittarello

Another Time, Another Space: Virtual
Worlds, Myths and Imagination.

Michael Highland and Gino Yu

Communicating Spiritual Experience
with Video Game Technology.

Ludmil Duridanov and Simeon Simoff
'Inner Listening' as a Basic Principle for
Developing Immersive Virtual Worlds.

WHERE DREAMS AND DRAGONS MEET

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF TWO EXAMPLES OF MASSIVE MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES (MMORPGs)¹

KATHRYN STAM & MICHAEL SCIALDONE

Introduction

Where do dreams and dragons meet? For players of massive multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPG's), they meet online, of course! A visitor to Furcadia might be a bunny character and spend her time hopping through dreams and chatting with anthropomorphized felines. On Runescape, set in a fictional medieval world, characters wearing dragon armor can be seen trading items in front of the bank on the top floor of Lumbridge castle. It is through these two cases that we begin to understand some key aspects of this genre of online activity and interaction. This virtual ethnographic study seeks to understand social interaction through the virtual MMORPG communities of Furcadia and Runescape.

Participant-observation takes on new meaning when applied to the virtual. Using an adaptation of grounded theory and analytic induction methods, we explored the nature of these two online communities and the interaction between characters. In this paper, we begin by introducing the history of online role-playing games. Next, we explain the context in which the characters communicate in each of the sites, and present the themes that emerged from each case and in the comparison between the two. Finally, we discuss some of the main methodological and ethical issues such as the difference between public vs. private spheres, the concept of consent in challenging environments, new considerations of reciprocity within the game, the building of online trust, and representation of self as researcher.

¹ The authors would like to thank the Cayan Library at the SUNY Institute of Technology for their help in collecting the research materials for this article, the School of Arts and Sciences at the SUNY Institute of Technology for funding this research through a Crouse grant, and Deirdre Corcoran for her help with editing. In addition, we would like to acknowledge the participants of Furcadia and Runescape who answered our questions so patiently, and in some cases snubbed us or chased us into corners and chastised us. We are grateful for the insights you inspired.

A Brief History of Virtual Communities

The genesis of the Internet was a network of computer terminals and mainframe computers that could be remotely accessed across multiple, distributed locations². Known originally as ARPANET, this collection of sites was named after the US Department of Defense's Advanced Research Project's Agency (ARPA). As this system grew throughout the 1960s and 1970s, its crusaders realized "that they also wanted to use their computers as communications devices"³.

In 1979, two university students in North Carolina discovered that they could directly link their computer systems together using telephone lines. Evolving from their collaboration was the still main-frame based Unix Users Network (Usenet). This community of computers expanded into a structured setting for the purpose of exchanging messages in such a fashion that allowed individuals to carry on a type of ongoing dialog⁴. Usenet was the first example of online communities. Hine indicates that Usenet (also known as newsgroups) was a turning point in redefining community because it favored social practices that were shared over physical locations⁵. Concerning the growth of Usenet, Rheingold explains:

"In 1979, there were 3 sites, passing around approximately 2 articles per day; in 1980, there were 15 sites and 10 articles per day; in 1981 there were 150 sites and 20 articles per day. By 1987 there were 5,000 sites and the daily postings weighed in at 2.5 million bytes. By 1988, it grew to 11,000 sites and the daily mailbag was more than 4 million bites. By 1992, Usenet was distributed to more than 2.5 million people and the daily news was up to 35 million bytes."⁶

Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) also emerged in the late 70s allowing PC users to connect to another PC designated as a host computer. A host could construct a BBS by installing special software, allowing others to access his or her system through a designated phone number. Users then had access to stored software, messaging systems, and public forums. As a result, anyone with a PC and a modem was able to become a member of a virtual community. Additionally, another type of public virtual community that emerged was the chat room. When a programmer from Finland created the Internet Chat Relay (IRC) in 1988, it quickly earned thousands of users within just a few years⁷. Various commercial Internet service providers soon followed suit with similar environments. Chat rooms became primarily

² See Hine 2000.

³ See Rheingold 1993, 67.

⁴ See Rheingold 1993.

⁵ See Hine 2000.

⁶ See Rheingold 1993, 119-120.

⁷ See Rheingold 1993.

conversational forums that allow users to “speak to each other as if in the same room (in) real time interaction with other people”⁸. Researchers have established that participants involved with such computer-mediated communication have a perception of community⁹.

An example of such a community is Dungeons and Dragons, a popular role-playing game in the early 1970s, which allowed players to partake in fantastical, Tolkienesque adventure scenarios¹⁰. These adventures were eventually translated to computer games by people involved mostly in academia¹¹. Turkle explains that when these games moved to electronic forums, the term ‘dungeon’ became synonymous with virtual spaces, and “they were deemed Multi-User Dungeons or MUDs, a new kind of social virtual reality”¹². They began to gain popularity when noticed by “a flurry of articles in computer hobby magazines” around 1984. By 1992, there were over 170 MUDs on the Internet¹³.

Participants log on to a MUD through either a specialized client or a telnet program. Most are constructed by the linkage of various virtual ‘rooms’ that are imagined through narrative. In a MUD, participants assume the role of a ‘character’ as an interface to communicate with others via software commands. Character names and descriptions are entirely user-created¹⁴. Every object and character can be ‘viewed’ by participants as part of the homogenous narrative¹⁵. Both Turkle and Kendall note the social characteristics and sense of place and action within MUDs as a result of the synchronous flow of communication¹⁶.

Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) are a much newer phenomenon that evolved from MUDs. Nathan Knaack of the website MMORPG.com (established by fans and veterans of the video game industry) chronicles the evolution of MMORPGs from MUDs. In 1996, the popular MUD Meridian 59 was upgraded to a new version that traded much of its previous text-based narrative for visuals. In a MMORPG, the user assumes the role of an ‘avatar,’ a visual representation of him or herself to interact with the environment and others. However, Meridian 59 was the first MMORPG launched by a major game maker, the first covered in mainstream gaming literature, and the first to run over one unified Internet account. A year later, Ultima Online was released, known for launching MMORPGs into the public spotlight. Its mainstream success was attributed to innovation and

⁸ See Turkle 1995, 4.

⁹ See Hine 2000.

¹⁰ See Turkle 1995; Kendall 2002.

¹¹ See Kendall 2002.

¹² See Turkle 1995, 180.

¹³ See Bartle 2006, para 25.

¹⁴ See Kendall 2002.

¹⁵ See Rheingold 1995.

¹⁶ See Turkle 1995; Kendall 2002.

participant customization¹⁷. There have even been documented cases of users become highly addicted to these entertaining games¹⁸.

Another successful MMORPG in the late 1990s was EverQuest. It became a monstrous success. Like MUDs, users were able to create their own virtual characters in MMORPGs, and could also gain strengths and abilities for this character through dedicated play, and combat against one another. World of Warcraft (WoW) was launched in April 2005 with an unprecedented degree of success. This growing popularity has recently begun to attract academic attention from the likes of psychologists and sociologists, including Sherry Turkle. A recent book by Taylor¹⁹ about EverQuest, in which the author shows how playing the game is not isolating but rather a chance to grow large social networks, is reflective of a new trend that takes the study of online role-playing games seriously.

Current scholarship on game culture is thriving, as shown by the emergence of many new journals and academic programs on every conceivable angle of the topic. The introductory volume of the *Games and Culture* by Sage Publishers, for example, explores some of the many ways in which games are learning communities, function as both culture and cultural object, and can be viewed as “microcosms for studying the emergence, maintenance, transformation, and even callable of online affinity groups,” as well as allowing a space to converse about broader societal issues²⁰.

Furcadia, the focus of the first part of our study, is a MMORPG that has been designed for purely social purposes. The world of Furcadia resembles something out of fantasy literature. There are long fields of green, shrubbery, and rivers, interspersed with archways, big brick buildings, inns, fountains, marble pillars, and other such accessories. This world is inhabited by anthropomorphic animals that are controlled by the users that log on. They can choose from a variety of ‘races’ such as equine, feline, and canine. These ‘characters’ are known as fures because of their animal-like nature. The official website for Furcadia does not give a detailed account of its history, except that it was first released for public use in December 1996 and is different from many other MMORPGs in that it does not allow for user combat. It currently boasts over 60,000 active participants²¹. Runescape, on the other hand, has been in service since 1998 but has become wildly popular, with almost 10 million members

¹⁷ See Knaack 2006

¹⁸ See Kelly 2004.

¹⁹ See Taylor 2006.

²⁰ See Steinkuehler 2006; Smith and Kollock 1999

²¹ See Dragon's Eye Productions, INC. “Furcadia” from: <http://www.furcadia.com>.

worldwide. These two cases are quite different in style and method of interaction, and we chose them as potentially fruitful sites of study.

The purpose of this study is to understand how people interact socially in the virtual world of a MMORPG and how they are encouraged to do so. We are also interested in what we can learn about the online cultures of different types of MMORPG sites. As MMORPGs provide visual interfaces where actors are disembodied from their on-screen personas, a non-traditional platform of social interaction emerges. This relatively new phenomenon involves extensive interpersonal exchanges, and thus invites study within the context of both existing and emerging schools of social thought.

Methodology

Ethnography was chosen as the most effective research method due to its effectiveness in analyzing cultural elements. In deciding to pursue this virtual ethnography, the researchers reviewed various pieces of literature to highlight concerns that frame the logos and ethos of their study. The use of anthropological methods in Game Studies is well known because of the notion of play as a ‘master metaphor’ in relating to a range of social relations as documented by Boellstorff²². Scholars from this field applaud ethnography for its flexibility and applicability to many new and challenging research settings and situations. Christine Hine, author of two important reference in the field of Virtual Ethnography²³, proclaims that a researcher has two options for conducting virtual ethnography. She explains that “the first view of the Internet is that it represents a place, cyberspace, where culture is formed and reformed,” while the second “sees the Internet as a product of culture”²⁴. In other words, a researcher can approach these groups as if they are their own unique cultures, or a researcher can examine them as artifacts of existing cultures. The position of Wilson and Peterson is that these communities are unique social spaces. Despite ongoing debates as to whether they are real or imagined, these authors argue that since they are social forces, they need to be studied as such, as true communities of their own right²⁵. This is the same position that we adopt in this paper, one that we arrived at based not just on this study, but also our previous research on virtual communities.

²² See Boellstorff 2006.

²³ See Hine 2000; Hine 2005.

²⁴ See Hine 2000, 9.

²⁵ See Wilson and Peterson 2002.

Bakardjieva and Feenberg maintain that there is no set of rules for conducting online community research²⁶. They issue a caveat about privacy. They note that participants may be alienated and objectified if their words are taken for the sake of research without their knowledge. Hence, not alienating subjects is paramount, and that participants must be involved to the extent of being aware of the researcher's motives. At the same time, other scholars note that the rapid and fleeting nature of some online activity requires a revision of ethnographers' expectations and possibly decreases their responsibility in relation to privacy. The issue of what constitutes a public vs. private space plays into the researcher-researched relationship²⁷.

It was this concern of privacy that was considered when the researchers were choosing the forum for study. While MMORPGs were already determined to be a topic of interest, selecting an appropriate one raised several issues. Many of the most popular MMORPGs are subscription-based, meaning that one can only access the community for an ongoing fee. This raised concerns of potential controversy as to whether or not such spaces were public or private. To avoid such a concern, Furcadia was chosen because it is free and can be joined without restriction. Runescape has the option of membership for a fee but the character we chose was not a member and therefore did not have access to member-only areas within the Runescape world. While the researchers would have made their presence known in a free or subscription-based community, there is an inherent layer of privacy built in once members have to pay to play.

Authenticity has new meaning and complexity in the world of MMORPGs, due to the inherent anonymity of most interactions. Catterall and Maclaran recommend simply accepting the personas that subjects present, as there is really no mechanism for verification²⁸. In other words, the community should be accepted as it is being presented, as this is their own reality. One needs to be mindful that this issue of authenticity is not just a concern of the researcher. In fact, it is entirely possible that subjects themselves may be skeptical of the researcher's authenticity. Gaining trust is paramount in conducting ethnography, and in face-to-face settings the researcher has more opportunity to present credentials²⁹. In this study, the researchers' approach to establishing credibility was three-fold. A website was built to provide subjects with additional background on the project. Because the inability to confirm

²⁶ See Bakardjieva and Feenberg 2001.

²⁷ See also Orgad 2005.

²⁸ See Catterall and Maclaran 2002.

²⁹ See Catterall and Maclaran 2002.

personal details is a dyadic problem³⁰, it seemed likely a vehicle for subjects to confirm information might encourage them to reciprocate trust. Secondly, the user names chosen by the authors included Ethnographer and AnthroProf, in order to help provide information to other players. To compliment this, an interview consent form was drafted explaining terms of the interview process, as well as providing the researchers' contact information.

Creating an interview consent form is a required part of the larger process in obtaining permission for the interviews. Our consent form, adapted from Creswell's³¹ included the study's purpose, a promise of confidentiality, researcher contact information, and directions to sign and return it electronically. By having each interviewee review the conditions of the form, the researchers were requesting the trust of their subjects, and expressing their trust in them. In terms of general consent while we were acting as participant-observers in character, we identified ourselves as researchers as appropriate, which usually meant when the interaction became long enough or relevant enough to do so, or if we were engaging people on public chat. The speed with which characters come and go makes the constant self-identification awkward, and some scholars have recently questioned the need to do so in a public space³². We followed the conventions of ethnography that assume that non-restricted spaces such as the games in our study are public spaces.

Data Collection and Analysis

Although researchers can typically gain entrance into a community through an individual who is already an established member, the researchers in this study had no existing relations with anyone who could assist them in gaining cultural footing in Furcadia or Runescape. Lurking was an attractive alternative. This is a form of non-participatory observation that has typically had a negative stigma. Bakardjieva and Feenberg recommend that lurkers request permission prior to entering a virtual community, otherwise they are nothing better than spies³³, but their hesitations have been more recently overturned in favor of those such as Catterall and Maclaran³⁴ and others who think that it is a legitimate and appropriate method of data collection. Recognizing that the observations made during the lurking period might still

³⁰ See Hine 2000.

³¹ See Creswell 1997.

³² See also Rutter and Smith 2005.

³³ See Bakardjieva and Feenberg 2001.

³⁴ See Catterall and Maclaran 2002.

be used in research, it was important that the researcher's presence not be misleading. As Furcadia has no communication vehicle to reach the entire community, the administrators were emailed to obtain research permission. Unfortunately, the request went unanswered, thereby cutting off the possibility of obtaining explicit consent from the manufacturers.

In the process of constructing our identity as researchers, we were mindful of how users might view our presence. Typical users of both sites pick screen names, and complete a description for others to view at their discretion. For the researcher's character, a URL for the project website was provided explaining the researcher's role.

The process of interviewing MMORPG participants was the next consideration. Having already decided upon both face-to-face and online interviews as a form of triangulation, the majority of interviews were to be conducted virtually. Our initial approach was to use methods adapted from grounded theory³⁵ and analytic induction³⁶, in which the original topic areas are loosely defined and themes allowed to emerge during the ethnographers' experiences and ongoing analysis. The theory is modified during the research process to fit new observations and the scope of the theory can be more easily controlled³⁷. To establish what types of general questions would be of interest during the interview process, the works of Howard Rheingold and Lori Kendall³⁸ were consulted because these two authors had investigated virtual communities in great depth and brought useful advice to the project. Additionally, the researcher's initial lurking led to refinement of the questions.

At the onset of the project, we were particularly interested in the following areas: personal interest, comparison between online and offline, relationships and interaction, and commitment. As happens in most ethnographic studies, our questions evolved as we went along and we found new areas of interest and different emphases depending on the case.

Written textual interviews were conducted with all of the virtual subjects because this was the same context in which they were already participating. Attempting to understand the group within its own terms, it seemed appropriate that the interviews with these subjects were done in synchronous text. While this style of interview may present concerns about the lack of visual cues available in traditional discourse, it is suggested that the anonymity of the medium may allow enhanced opportunity for openness. Meanwhile, subjects have a variety of emoticons and other textual manipulations to express emphasis and feeling when necessary³⁹.

³⁵ See Glazer and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987.

³⁶ See also Manning 1982.

³⁷ See Bogdan and Biklen 1992.

³⁸ See Rheingold 1993; Kendall 2002.

³⁹ See Catterall and Maclaran 2002.

More recent debates suggest that current practice in virtual ethnography is to make new assumptions about online interaction and analyze what is present, rejecting the need to compare it to traditional ethnography in a typically negative way⁴⁰.

Participant observation and interviews in both sites took place over a period of 2-3 months. The case studies of each site were done separately and then compared, so it is interesting to note a surprising overlapping of themes, considering the sites are quite different in nature. In the case of Furcadia, a total of 8 online interviews and 3 offline interviews were conducted, along with 11 sessions of participant observation. In the case of Runescape, 15 brief sessions of participant-observation, in which some questions were asked of passers-by, were noted and analyzed. We note that at least 5 of these sessions were taken up in learning how to function in the game.

Fortunately, all of the textual dialog encountered within a given Furcadia session could be saved for later reference. This feature of the software was useful as it allowed the researchers to have a record of interactions. Runescape dialogs were the subject of extensive field notes rather than captured as transcripts.

The Case of Furcadia

As noted above, Furcadia is a virtual fantasy world where players assume the role of an anthropomorphic animal known as a Furre. The realm of Furcadia is divided up into different sections known as dreams, each with their own distinct theme. However, players have the option of downloading specialized software where they can customize their own unique dreams for others to visit. There is also a wide variety of personalities found amongst the individuals, from very friendly fures who welcome newcomers and researchers, to those who are venomously selective about whom they interact with.

Figure 1: Choosing Character Traits in Furcadia.

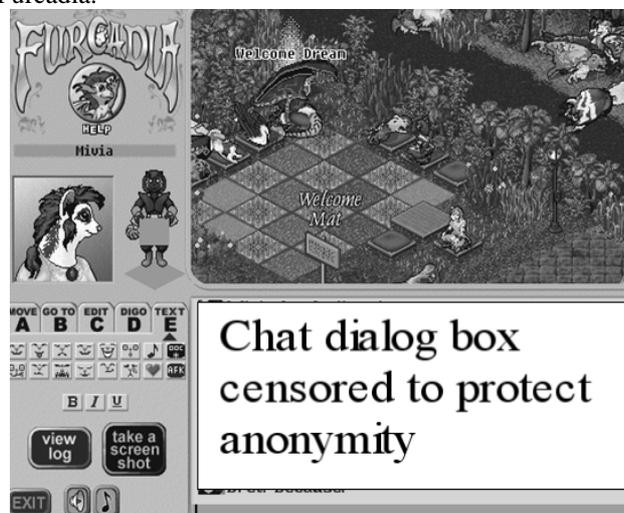


⁴⁰ See Hine 2005.

Upon launching the software for the first time, users create their own characters using the Furre Editor program. This companion tool allows one to setup the name, password, species, gender, and colors of his or her avatar (called a furre in Furcadia). There is a variety of species in which to craft a furre after, including feline, canine, and equine. The choice of gender further customizes one's furre, and includes the opportunity to not specify gender.

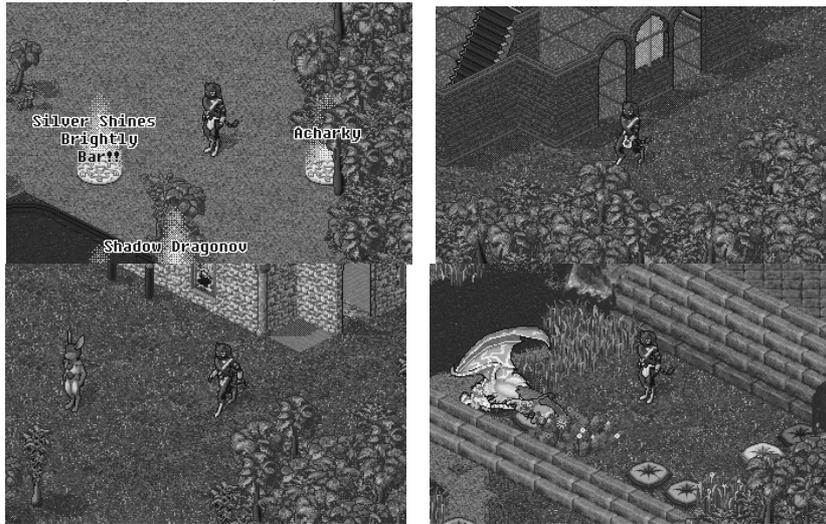
Many additional attributes can be customized such as fur, hair, vest, trousers, eyes, and boots (See Figure 1). Each has 10 separate characteristics with a pallet of 25 to 55 colors to choose from. The user also must create a unique name and description of his or her furre, visible to those who click on it during the game.

Figure 2: Typical Screen in Furcadia.



Once in the game, the controls in Furcadia are pretty basic. The window is divided into different sections, including a command box, an action window, and a dialog window (See Figure 2). The command box shows a profile of one's furre, and can be used for a variety of actions. The action window displays the visuals of interaction as one controls his or her furre. The dialog window located captures the typed text of the user and any others within view of the action window.

Figure 3: Furcadia “Dream” (area or world).



As previously explained, the landscapes that furies move over are called dreams (See Figure 3). Participants on Furcadia can choose to move between 9 standard dreams at any time. These are accessible through one of the menus on the software, and each have their own distinct theme. The user-created dreams can be visited simply by walking over a ‘portal’ that users can place in designated areas. A portal is basically a doorway to another dream, represented on-screen as a glowing circle of light.

Motivation for Participation

Each individual interviewed in this study expressed a specific motive for participating in MMORPGs. While the many of these were similar, they each had their specific nuances. For example, both xMidnight Shreadx and Khamore avowed that they only used Furcadia because it allowed them to keep in touch with existing friends. Yet Khamore expressed an interest in meeting additional friends and learning about their real lives, while xMidnight Shreadx was most content with continuing his long-term relations. Figure 4 shows characters in a typical interaction.

Figure 4: Typical Interaction Between Furcadia Characters (note: screen names blacked out to preserve anonymity).



Erik Strongman and Rootu Diimori both maintained receiving satisfaction out of role-playing various personas. While Erik Strongman’s used multiple characters as extensions of specific personal traits he had, Rootu Diimori claimed “the majority of the characters I play are not made up. They’re real people.” In fact, the persona he based his furre after was on an Asian rock star.

Both Paul and Barry, who were members of other MMORPGs beyond Furcadia expressed slightly different motives. Paul found it enjoyable to experience a game in the company of others, while Barry was amused at role-playing in the midst of additional actors.

Representation of Self

When participants start off in a virtual environment, they choose and customize the look of an avatar that represents them. However, as this avatar is designed to go forward in interpersonal situations, the participant may choose to shape more than its outward appearance. One may manipulate the identity of on-screen persona to best obtain the personal reward he or she is expecting to receive from the MMORPG.

An example of this is seen with Leif Muscleman. He had explained that part of his motivation was to role-play through various characters. The connection between his multiple online personas and this reward is illustrated in the following interview segment:

You say, “is there any significance to the name you chose?”

Leif Muscleman: sadly no, i try for names that i like, or use a lot. i Try to stick with the same bases with each name, I choose the name because it sounds appealing to me. The first name for all my alts are one i choose because i liked the sound of the name.

You say, “what is an alt?”

You say, “I never heard the term”

Terri Coalclaws: that would be me, i am Alt of Leif.

Leif Muscleman: another character.

You say, “ohhhhhh...so you are playing two characters at the same time? is that common for people? any how do they differ?”

Leif Muscleman: actually i am playing four at once. ITs not uncommon to play two or three, its just hard to do, best way to do is keep them seperate. i have all three grouped here so i can watch them with one screen.

As Leif Muscleman’s reward from participation was playing various roles, he customized multiple characters in order to carry out that end. When asked about the personas he enacted through his characters, Leif Muscleman explained:

“Each character resembles me in one way or another. Take Terri there, she is sweet and docile, and Lexie shows Frustration, and this alt here shows strength and willingness to stand for what i think is right.”

While Leif Muscleman’s goals are obtained through the personas he enacts, another example of personal malleability comes from xMidnight Shreadx. What he valued in Furcadia was consistency in maintaining communication between himself and his friends. When asked how his online identity compared to his real one, he reported:

“I would say they almost co-exist. I think Furcadia to some degree, through all my experiences on it, has shaped my personality in real life, and vice versa. So I think at some point they kind of converged, and there’s really not much of a difference.”

xMidnight Shreadx expressed the opposite of Leif Muscleman, in that he had not taken on a persona different from that he would present face-to-face. However, the identity xMidnight Shreadx expressed in Furcadia enabled him to meet his goal just as Leif Muscleman’s role-playing helped him meet his. xMidnight Shreadx looked to maintain friendship and consistency, and therefore his online personality was congruent with that of his offline. Personal Malleability lets participants shape their personas as much or as little as they want.

Interaction with Others

It is evident that the types of exchanges that occur in Furcadia are negotiated between participants. Offshot spent over twenty hours per week on Furcadia, yet she complained that most of the people she encountered “are just empty cans rattling about whatever mundane thing they come up with.” When asked how she came to interact with such people, she stated that she simply left her furre in one spot until someone sparked her brain. She continued to say that she was not terribly outgoing online because in face-to-face situations, she has to react. Furcadia allowed her to decide to what degree and with whom she wanted to interact.

Another example of the ability for users to choose their level of interaction came from Paul, a self-proclaimed connoisseur of MMORPGs. When questioned how outgoing he was online on a scale from 1 to 10, he claimed he was a 14. Paul stated that it was easier to be a jerk within a game and not feel bad about it because there are no consequences. In real life, he noted:

You get punched and stuff like that. In game, it’s totally different. You don’t think there’s a consequence cuz it’s a fantasy realm.

Other subjects reported different ways of coming to interact. Supul Arua explained he did not seek out discourse, but that others typically engaged him. Conversely, Rose Ann engaged people actively, claiming to have made about 30 friends. Also partaking in more active group discourse was xMidnight Shreadx who attested to hanging out in particular areas and joining in on conversations when he was so inclined.

The common thread in these examples is that participants interacted with others at their own discretion. The design of the environment allowed participants this flexibility. Since participants could choose where to be, whether or not to react to others, and how to react, they were directly responsible for negotiating their level of inclusion.

Arguably, these negotiations served to advance an individual toward his or her motive for participation. For example, Offshot claimed that Furcadia allowed her to shoot the breeze and pass time by babbling randomly. Her ability to choose whether or not to react sustained this motive. If Furcadia forced her to react, she could not fulfill her intentions because she would be involved in undesired discourse. Yet if she could never react, she would also be unable to fulfill her purpose because she could not partake in any discourse. The design of Furcadia empowers participants to benefit from choosing their degree of social interaction.

Reciprocity and Friendship

Participants on Furcadia form relationships online that may be casual or very intimate. In our example above, we saw that some chose to interact sparingly, while others actively sought out vast numbers of friends. Relationships are dyadic, triadic, or group-based. An inherent fundamental principle of relationships is that there has to be some type of reciprocity. In other words, when one makes a decision to interact with others, there has to be some type of benefit that he or she is receiving, with the assumption that those interacted with are receiving a reward of their own.

As with real life relationships, the currency of reward may not always be the same for the individuals involved. This is illustrated by the evidence that those interacting in MMORPGs have reported distinctly specialized benefits. For example, Illorelif reported that participating in Furcadia filled a creative need in his life because he was able to role-play using various characters, and this proved to be an entertaining path to fulfillment. Khamore proclaimed that he was fascinated in being able to “meet new interesting people and gain an insight into their lives outside of Furcadia.” Paul confessed that online gaming “makes it a little more enjoyable than just sitting there and thrashing a button and being by yourself.”

Illorelif, Khamore, and Paul each provided testimonial that their rewards were of personal value. It is these examples that help us recognize that while one’s reward may be of specific and personal benefit, their ongoing participation directly or indirectly assists others in achieving their own specific personal benefits. Although one’s interaction with others may not be a direct reciprocal exchange of common currency, his or her participation in the MMORPG is one atom that allows such reciprocity to continue. Because Furcadia supports both single relations and complex structures, it is reasonable to assert that these individual benefits may stem either directly from a single relation, or interactions within groups.

The Case of Runescape

Have you ever visited Varrok, Falador, or Al kharid? If you were a Runescape player, these would be familiar worlds where you would carry on your business, such as efforts to level up and trade things with other players. For example, one might trade runes, the magical stones that are the basis of the game, or foods such as lobsters, soups, cakes, and sharks that would contribute to your health points. Runescape is also a land of monsters of the kind that would inspire childhood nightmares: imps, demons, zombies, ghosts, skeletons, suits of armor, and giants, among others.

In the process of trying to ‘level up,’ a player has chances to fight and kill some of these monsters, as well as other players like him/her self or computer players. In this section, we present an introduction to the game and the themes found in the separate study of Runescape. It was not until the themes emerged from each that they were compared to each other, the results of which are presented in the results and discussion section.

Runescape, set in fictional yet recognizable countries in Medieval Europe, along with other places, has been in use since 1998. It present, it prides itself in being one of the most popular games on the Internet, with almost 10 million active players worldwide. General information about the game is available on the official website. Upon entrance to Runescape, a player chooses from a long list of sites that are housed in different countries, where you can see how many players world-wide are currently logged into each site (Figure 5). The choice might be to go to a site near home, avoid a heavily-populated site, or go to a previously-arranged site to meet friends.

Figure 5: Choice of Worlds in Runescape.



Characters are chosen along with styles of clothing and weapons, the quality of which depends on the amount of money a character has or is willing to spend. A typical Runescape character is depicted in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Typical Mid-Level Character.



The game is both individual and collective. Since the objective of Runescape is to become a higher level, it would seem that it is primarily individual. For some players, that appears to be the case. At the same time, participation in Runescape is enhanced in many ways (social, economical, safety) through joining others. In this section, we explain the aspects of the game that are collective and give examples of different types of interaction, particularly between players of different levels.

“Crafting is when you make items such as leather gloves, boots, or jewelry. You can make items instead of having to buy them. It is pretty individual. It’s pretty easy and fun because it’s simple and there is not really much to it.”

It is difficult to summarize that people are doing individual things though because there may be an ulterior motive. For example, it is possible to pick vegetables in a cabbage patch and that is not a collective activity. However, most members do not appreciate cabbage as a food, even if it contributes to their health points, so their reason for hanging around in the cabbage patch might be on a pre-arranged drop-trade (illegal trading between accounts).

“There are some things that you do that might be more fun with a friend to talk to, but it’s no big deal either way, like fletching (carving wood into bows and arrows). It’s just work that you need to do.”

Consensus among the players we chatted with was that the most fun thing about playing Runescape is, “being able to work with all of your friends and leveling up.” The skills levels such as attack, defense, magic, and strength, as well as other more mundane abilities such as mining, fishing, or cooking, are the main emphasis of the game and the accumulated skills (in the form of levels) of each player are displayed publicly as they walk through the landscape. Players tend to look at the stats of the other player before striking up a conversation or asking for assistance, as the reaction of very high-level players is rather predictable in most cases.

Friendship and Coordination Efforts

The meaning of friendship in the context of this game is different for those who are acquaintances offline as well and those who are friends exclusively online. It is relatively easy to spot players who are also friends offline because of their comments to each other in public chat (Figure 7). They discuss topics such as events that happened in school, mutual acquaintances, or even specific requests like, “Can you bring my hat to school tomorrow?”

Figure 7: Offline Acquaintances Talk in Public Chat (note: screen names blacked out to preserve anonymity).



Online friends are people who are fun to talk to or help your character in a variety of ways. Some examples might be that a character is trying to complete a quest and the online friend provides the required raw shark for a tribute. In other cases, friends are people who watch out for each other, give each other free ‘stuff’ such as raw chickens or potato seeds, or give hints about what needs to be done. This is in sharp contrast to high-level strangers who are more likely to tell newer users to go away, call them a ‘noob’ (newbie – a new user or officially, someone under level 20), or dismiss or ignore them. New users often ask questions about the game and higher-level players frequently tell them to go to Rune Headquarters, a frequently consulted site with guides about the game, to find an answer they could easily have given out.

As evident from analysis of online public chat areas, many of the players are schoolmates or otherwise acquainted with each other in their offline lives. The types of conversations with people they know are quite different from those of exclusively online friends. As described above, schoolmates talk about school events, crushes, and local gossip. Online friendships as a whole tend to stick to topics related to the game, such as, “Did you buy Runescape money off the Internet?” or general topics such as favorite bands or geographic location. During one observation, we noted a group of characters discussing their favorite cartoon program, Naruto.

They were reprimanded by passers-by who suggested that they should not be advertising on the site and that they could be reported for breaking the rules.

“No matter what you choose to do in RuneScape – whether you’re a fighter, a fisherman, or a Mage – there is something you can gain by going on quests”⁴¹. The quests range from very easy, such as the Cook’s Assistant Quest where the player helps the cook bake a cake for the duke’s birthday, to difficult quests such as the Demon Slayer where the player helps the Gypsy stop a might demon from destroying the city of Varrock. The rewards are coveted by players and include anything from a silverlight sword or the use of a special anvil to a gift of expensive gold bars. Players use two main strategies for making quests easier – asking for help from friends and visiting ‘cheat sites’ on the Internet that give step-by-step advice about completing quests.

The use of the telephone in conjunction with playing the game is common practice, as it makes the game more interesting and players can work together to advance their status. This practice is almost always done with players who know each other offline, although they admit that some of these friendships have very little meaning or activities outside of Runescape. Telephone conversations about Runescape can include strategies to do illegal behaviors as well. One example would be to plan a ‘drop trade’ where items from an abandoned account are left in a low-traffic area for another player to collect.

Although offline friends might chat about other topics while they work or do quests in the game, their main topic of conversation is related to what is happening on screen. There are some activities, such as fletching (or carving bows and arrows from logs) that are repetitive but require that the character stays in one area, and this time encourages conversation about other topics since there is very little actually happening.

Non-playing characters (NPC’s) join the ranks of computer players. Players talk with NPC’s, particularly when they are about to begin a quest, but they do not fight with them. Although NPC’s look similar to regular players, they are easily recognized and differentiated from the others because they are color-coded yellow. Players can talk with them and receive one of a set of pre-programmed responses that are amazingly appropriate.

⁴¹ See West 2006.

Gangs and Clans

Friends join forces for a variety of reasons and may travel in small groups (approximately 6-8 people) or clans, which may have large numbers of people who organize themselves and wear team capes. Both groups can cause trouble for single players, especially in the wilderness where ‘killing’ and instantaneous removal of all carried items occurs. Gangs typically hang around in front of the wilderness and plot schemes to steal items or kill lone players. Approached by some higher-level gang members, one respondent was approached and told that he was going to be ‘bait.’ If he was willing to go into the wilderness and entice a high level player with ‘good stuff,’ to fight, the gang would follow him up and attack him from behind, later to share their earnings with him. The negotiations for this type of activity take place in private chat. The player acting as bait reported to the others, using private chat, that the fight was about to begin and that he was ready for backup. Clans, for similar reasons, are feared by low-level players, who can be seen running away from them.

Flirting and Marriage

Across genders, friendship can take different forms, resulting in boyfriend-girlfriend pairings and sometimes marriage. Killed dude56 reported that he had 94 girlfriends, a character who had been approached him and asked, “You look rich and handsome, do you want to be my boyfriend,” to which he replied, “whatever.” From then on, she was added to his friends list and they could not kill each other, which came in handy from time to time. Other players, such as dragonman44, found it convenient to allow only one girlfriend at a time.

Flirting, although present in the game, is not a main focus for most of the players we observed. In some cases, analysis of players’ public chat showed numerous cases of female players chatting about attraction to male players or recent flirting behavior. It seems quite possible that much of the flirting behavior takes place in private chat.

Marriage was one option for couples that enjoyed each other’s company. Weddings take place in a special members-only chapel, where only official friends are allowed to come. Dropping off a wedding gift, players attend the online wedding that could last as long as half an hour, and leave with a small gift after the bride and groom have been declared husband and wife and completed a virtual kiss. Thereaper22 reported attending one wedding, dropping off a ‘burnt fish’ and leaving with a slightly-better gift of a shield. He mentioned that divorce is also possible.

Marriage is expensive, however, and only members can marry. Membership to the site costs about \$5 per month but not all players have credit cards or parents who are willing to pay that amount. For the romantic at heart, eloping is possible and has occurred. Str ownz9833 reported having a friend who traded rings with another player and declared themselves married, at which time they vacationed on an island (Karamja) with a nice dinner of lobsters, trout, asargnian ale (beer) and a slice of cake ,all of which was cooked and bought by str ownz9833, a higher-level and wealthier member.

The rules of Runescape include the following: no offensive language, no item scamming, no password scamming, no cheating/bug abuse, no impersonating staff, no account sharing/trading, no macroing for unfair advantage, no multiple log-in, no encouraging others to break rules, no misuse of customer support, no advertising, no real-world item trading, no asking for personal details, and no misuse of official forums⁴².

When detected, players may choose to report the behavior and can be muted for an amount of days or banned completely. There are many variations of cheating. Some lay people serve as moderators and can report people for misbehavior. These players receive a free membership for their efforts and are bombarded with requests by others to give them free memberships as well.

A commonly broken rule is that of ‘No multiple Log-In.’ Players may create more than one Runescape account but the characters from each account may not interact with each other or engage in any item transfer⁴³. In addition to the real possibility of item transfer, players explained that they like to use different account as ‘like a hobby account.’ For example, Firedragon2246 has a main account and then a pure account that focuses only on woodcutting and firemaking. According to his comments on public chat, “Both of your accounts will look cool because one is sort of good at everything but not the best, and the other will be the best at just one skill.”

It is interesting to note that ‘choobs,’ or ‘cheating noobs’ describes the behavior of using a macro to obtain a high-level. They normally do not have the knowledge that it would take to get in that position, and it is rather easily detected. Respondents explained that it is usually quite easy to tell who the ‘choobs’ are because they might be members and have full dragon (the best kind of armor) but at the same time they do not know basic things about the game, such as how to make leather. It is interesting to note that players sometimes refer to new players as, ‘froobs,’ which translates to ‘freaking noobs.’ The game does not allow the use of

⁴² See West 2006.

⁴³ See West 2006.

swear words so players come up with inventive spellings and abbreviations for most words they wish to use.

Using our ‘lurking’ methodology, we witness a variety of ways to regulate behavior and socialize new players. Newer players, or ‘noobs’ tend to ask naïve questions and make outlandish requests, for example, “Can I have your full rune (an expensive set of armor?)” They are dismissed quickly and rather harshly by those even just a few levels above them. Mid-level players (over 20) explained that this kind of impolite dismissal happened to them when they first came so they do not feel bad about doing it to others. On the other hand, players are sometimes surprised by experienced players who give them gold coins unexpectedly or are willing to part with objects that a newer user would find quite useful. Comments in public chat express players’ surprise and appreciation for unexpected and wildly generous gifts or trades.

Betrayal

Where there is friendship, there is also betrayal. As explained by Knife45,

R (Respondent): “Example. You go into the wilderness with a friend and you think you are going to gang up on other lower level people and kill them, and let’s say your friend is a lot higher level than you, He can’t attack you in low-level wilderness, but if you get into higher-level wilderness, he can turn on you. Let’s say you have stuff, you know, like an abyssal whip, he might kill you to get it.”

I (Interviewer): “And then are you still friends?”

R: “Yes, most of the time you wouldn’t like it but you could still be friends. If he gives it back to you or something. Sometimes they just want the extra experience and they’ll give it back to you.”

Status and Collected Items

The bank is where a great deal of activity happens (Figure 8). Like scalpers outside a concert, players congregate in front of the bank and approach others to buy and sell items. With a marketplace atmosphere, offers come and go so quickly that it can be difficult to follow. When two players are interested in making a deal, they trade on a separate screen. Although most trades are accomplished without incident, players are careful to check the merchandise because there are rumors about dishonest traders who engage in false advertising and other forms of trickery. Trading relationships tend to be primarily business-like and players do not appear to invest much in avoiding hurt feelings or prolonging the interaction.

Figure 8: In Front of the Bank (note: screen names blacked out to preserve anonymity).



Status and Interaction with Players Across Levels

Money and other items are important status symbols. Awareness of these status inequities affects players' decisions about how to react to others. One respondent, CrushBritney2, explains:

“The better items you have, people are going to try to be your friend, and probably are going to try to beg off of you. When you look at them, you can see their level and the items they are wearing. If they are wearing full dragon and they are strong and have all this good stuff, you can probably guess that they are rich. I know that rich people won't talk to you. My friend tries to beg off rich people a lot but less than ¼ of the time he is successful. I don't even bother.”

Interaction between players is very much related to status. One respondent explained that the reaction of players of different status to a greeting is very predictable. First, the character showed him what happened when he greeted someone of a lower level – he was asked for his red boots. When he greeted a character of higher level, he was told, “Get lost or I’ll kill you, noob.”

In addition to interacting with other characters, a player has the opportunity to interact with computer players, who look quite a bit like other avatars but are easily recognizable by some markings. Computer players interact with other players as well. One respondent noted:

“If he’s a lower enough level, just kill him. If he has a quest icon above his head, then talk to him and try to start a quest. If you complete a quest, then you might be able to use a special item. The lost city quest gives you the power to use a dragon long sword or a dragon dagger. (Dragon is the best kind of weapon). There are also dragons that blow fire and can kill you, they are one of the strongest creatures on Runescape. When players see dragons, they usually just run away.”

Some people can kill dragons, like the one shown in Figure 9, but that is difficult. Dragons’ levels can get as high as 188. For illustration, the strongest monsters in the game are kalphite queens level 323.

Figure 9: Character Fights Baby Dragon.



In accordance with the emphasis on status, there is a character who is well known as being ‘the best Runescape’ player. Her screen name is Zezima, and although she apparently has stopped playing the game, she is widely known for having the highest statistics. Users understand her to be possibly one of the founders and earliest players of the game.

Death

Surprisingly, death is not the end of the world for a player. Death is a problem for players because it causes them to lose their carried items. NotLvingskool explained:

“If you die, then you lose all of the items you were holding. Then you respawn as the same person. You get to keep your three most valuable items. There is also a bank that holds your items safely, and those are not destroyed by the event. You can get killed by a player or computer player or you can get killed by disease or poison.”

Another player explained that it is irritating to spend the time retrieving the items that were lost in a death:

“It’s bad to be killed because you lose all of your stuff so you have to work until you can buy it all back. It can get really annoying. Examples of work are mining and fishing.”

Gods and Prayers

Three gods are important in the game: Saradomin (wisdom), Zamorak (chaos) and Guthix (nature and balance). There is one mini-game called Castle Wars in which teams of players fight for the gods. At churches you pray for the holy god saradomin and get prayer points that help the player in battle by burying bones (Figure 10). Zamorak has many followers such as the black arm gang and the Zamorak wizards. Guthix is the most well known god and the strongest of the gods. The gods have colors also-blue and white for Saradomin, red for Zamorak, and green for Guthix.

Figure 10: Prayer Points Awarded for Burying Bones.



Prayer is another skill that can be cultivated by burying any kind of bones available. Prayer points help players in battle and have other advantages in combat. Players can recharge their prayer points by praying at an altar. Prayer points will allow prayer powers to be used including protect from combat melee (hand-to-hand), protect from magic, and protect from range (bows and arrows). Another power of prayer is that it increases attack power by 15%.

In summary, Runescape provides an interesting example to extend our initial themes found in Furcadia, with the main differences appearing to be the importance of skills and

money/gold to represent status, and the subsequent incentive for various kinds of cheating behavior. In the following section, we provide a detailed comparison of themes that emerged in the two cases and suggest further possibilities for study.

Results and Discussion

Using an adaptation of analytic induction as described by Bogdan, Biklen and Taylor⁴⁴ in which similarities are identified and then subcategories developed, we compared our individual results for each case. Table 1 (below) shows a comparison of the themes that emerged in one author's exploration of Furcadia and the other author's exploration of Runescape.

⁴⁴ See Bogdan and Biklen 2001; Taylor and Bogdan 1998.

Table 1. Comparison Between Themes Identified in Furcadia and Runescape.

Topic	Furcadia	Runescape
<i>Commitment and Motivation for Participation</i>	Keeping in touch with friends; meeting new friends, satisfaction of role playing; enjoying of acting	To play with friends and level up; Motivation includes social and competitive; Game is individual and collective
<i>Representation of Self</i>	Naming conventions reveal something of self; players use multiple identities simultaneously; emphasis on personal representation	Players have multiple accounts because different levels are good for different things; Emphasis on sharing accounts; Emphasis on exhibiting wealth
<i>Interaction with Others</i>	Players choose with whom to interact; view interactions as having few or no consequences; random chat	Highly status-based interaction; Equal status help each other; Higher and lower status are characterized by rudeness; Random chat less common; Focuses on game and complex methods of cooperation (ex. Gangs and clans)
<i>Reciprocity and Friendship</i>	Relationships formed can be dyadic, triadic, or group-based; reciprocity results in distinct and individualized rewards	Difference between offline and online friends; Status differences define friendships; Helping and betrayal; Cross-gender friendships and marriages
<i>Other Themes of interest in each case</i>	Design encouraging participation; cliques; relationships co-existing online and offline differing from those only online; the role of user-created content in forming social relationships	Role and ethics of Rule-Breaking and other types of cheating; Betrayal; Cross-gender relationships; Virtual Marriage; Role of magic and prayer; Characteristics of interaction with computer players

The first theme is commitment and motivation for participation. Both cases showed that keeping in touch or playing with friends was important. Furcadia players emphasized meeting new friends and the joy and satisfaction of the role-playing aspects. Runescape players, on the other hand, were more motivated by the competition of leveling up, which they did on their own and with the help of other players.

Representation of self was a bit surprising to us because members of both games used multiple identities or multiple accounts. Furcadia players talked more about personal representation revealing something about themselves while Runescape players were more interested in the exhibition of their fancy costumes, luxurious clothes, expensive weapons and other signs of wealth that would have nothing to do with their offline lives.

Interaction with others is where the two cases begin to diverge. Furcadia players made conscious choices about interaction with other players, but these choices were personal or intuitive. The interactions were characterized by brevity and were seen as having few consequences. Random chat was an attractive feature of the experience. Runescape players viewed their interaction in a different way because it was so highly based on wealth and skill-level status. Interaction with those of lower status contained evidence of begging and talking with those of higher status could easily result in a rude dismissal. Random chat was less common and even frowned upon or discouraged, and game-related talk was given priority. Complex methods of cooperation including the joining of small gangs or larger clans were used by players to increase their possible advantages.

In terms of friendship and reciprocity, both games contained signs of these features. In Furcadia, players' tendencies to make friends appeared highly individual. This is because the environment of the game is such that it is designed for social purposes. Meanwhile, Runescape friendships could be divided between people who were already friends offline and used the game to play and socialize together, and new friendships online which were primarily developed for game play. Friendships between equals was more common, although some friendships between players of unequal levels could develop, particularly if the interaction helped one or both and was not detrimental to the other. Players did not make strong emotional connections with new online friends, however, as they had little stake in continuing the relationship unless there was a continuous need for a person of that level or with generous tendencies. Cross-gender friendships and romances were evident, with some resulting in official marriages or unofficial ring-trading and elopement, honeymoon on a secluded island included.

Finally, our analysis resulted in short lists of themes that might be more relevant to one or the other case. In Furcadia, here are some examples of intriguing themes that would benefit from further study: if the design of the online environment itself encourages participation; cliques; how relationships that co-exist online and offline differ from those strictly online; and the role of user-created dreams in meeting new people or perpetuating existing social relationships. The following topics were particularly salient in Runescape: the role and ethics of rule-breaking and other types of cheating, the experience of bullying and betrayal, the dynamics of cross-gender relationships; virtual courtship and marriage; the role of magic and prayer; and characteristics of interaction with computer players.

In relation to the mixing of online and offline life, we learned that relationships formed within the game tend to focus on the game when extended into non-game forums. Yet, sometimes a game can be used to continue relationships that were originally formed in real life. As seen within Runescape, telephones were often used to coordinate activities that were taking place on the screen, with conversations revolving around game-related topics. Meanwhile, participants of Furcadia, such as xMidnight Shreadx and Khamore, reported using the environment to maintain the stability of existing friendships.

Time investment and the meaning of participation were interesting because participants often reported spending a significant amount of time within the games. The case was made in both Furcadia and Runescape for players finding meaning within their actions and interactions with others. In Furcadia, entertainment and companionship were often driving forces to engage in play. Similar evidence is seen in Runescape in that users willing to subscribe were allowed to actually marry, and did so with celebratory zeal. If investing a significant amount of time in these environments is not evidence enough of meaning on its own, then certainly we can assert that companionship and marriage are strong indicators of rewards from participation.

Money and status seem very important and we would have liked to spend more time learning about the meaning of 'rich' or the purpose of decorating personal spaces for participants. In Runescape, for example, the clothes and armor of each character also seem very important to them and that is certainly connected to status but we only got a taste of that. It is less important to know which items are expensive, such as pantaloons or party hats, than it is to find out why players feel like wearing them helps them to 'look cool,' and what happens once a player looks cool.

Methodological issues

In the Methodology section above, we attempted to anticipate some of the methodological and ethical concerns might be present in our study: public vs. private sphere, representation of ethnographers' identities, trust-building, and reciprocity. As we completed the study, we revisited these areas and while some of them were present, particularly with rapport building in Furcadia, few of them evolved into substantial concerns overall.

On the other hand, some unexpected methodological issues that appeared were the following: While we provided screen names that would give another player a sense of our purpose, many of the interactions were so fast that the other person would not have had a chance to 'opt-out' of the research project. At the same time, it would not be feasible to introduce our characters to every other player we came across. As a compromise, we answered questions openly and introduced ourselves more thoroughly in situations where we had a chance to chat with another player at more length. Another surprise was that players must be 13 to play the game. In order to minimize ethical problems of inadvertently interviewing minors, we asked people their ages at an appropriate time in the conversation and ended the interviews when the other players said they were under 18. However, it must be stated that people have many reasons for not revealing their true ages and this method will need to be rethought in future studies as the conventions for virtual ethnography, and the meanings of public vs. private vs. virtual spaces, become standardized.

Limitations of the study and Future Research

The main limitations of this study are contained in the relatively small number of cases and observations, and in our choices of what to view. We conducted the observations at times of day that were convenient for us and for this reason we may have missed different types of users, although this may be partially negated due to the global reach of the games. Although traditional ethnographers tend to spend a great deal of time, even years, familiarizing themselves with the necessary skills and vocabulary to be able to converse intelligibly with local people, virtual ethnographers are still working out the conventions of working in this new medium. In our case, we spend only several months and did not focus much on using the game as a player would or trying to 'level up.' Instead, we made characters and obtained the minimum skills that would allow us to interact with other players and observe their

interactions with each other. One other significant point to note is that we assume that the characters we observed were mostly mid-level characters, and they interacted with us mostly as the ‘newbie’ characters that we were. In the case of Runescape, which we summarized as highly status-oriented, we were looking through the lenses of those average, mid-level characters. Newer players or experts would inevitably have given us different perspectives. Finally, we consider our analysis merely a first step in identifying important themes for interaction between players on MMORPGs. We envision future studies might include some of the following ideas or adjustments:

- Include a wider range of MMORPG’s. An extensive list of MMORPG’s and a comparison between them is currently available on Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_MMORPGs)
- Content analysis or ethnomethodological study of the rapidly-running textual features that accompany these sites
- Choosing newer users or experts, sometimes called “leets” (elites), to learn their perspectives on interaction with others
- Analysis of gender participation and interaction⁴⁵
- Exploration of the players’ experiences and perceptions of rules and cheating⁴⁶
- Meaning and styles of participation for players of different ages
- Role of race and ethnicity in various MMORPG’s
- Comparison of use of different methodologies to study same MMORPG’s
- Focus on the blending of offline and online by studying other sites where this is discussed, such as MySpace pages or online forums.

In conclusion, we are encouraged by this relatively new topic of study. Some initial themes have been identified and appear promising, and they could be expanded and tested on these two interesting game sites or others. The research carried out in both Furcadia and Runescape were done over a period of only a few months. Additionally, the views expressed were indicative of the researchers’ participant-observation and interviews with approximately two dozen subjects. A longitudinal study might be most appropriate in our two scenarios as such an extended observation of Furcadia and Runescape may show the emergence of additional

⁴⁵ See Taylor 2006.

⁴⁶ See Juul 2005.

themes, modify our existing themes, or lend more evidence to strengthen and support our existing themes.

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