
The Game within the Games: The Behaviors, Language, and Virtual Norms of RuneScape

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Introduction

The first appearance of video games marked the beginning of an age of union between gaming and the ever-growing omnipresence that is technology, allowing it to eventually graduate to a completely new experience: online gaming. There are two common misconceptions about online games that I will address now. The first is the notion of gaming as childish. In actuality, gaming represents an aging demographic, one reflected in a study conducted by the Entertainment Software Association that concluded, "The average gamer is 30 years old and has been playing for twelve years" ("Game Player Data"). The second notion is that games and technology in general have undermined face-to-face interaction, producing mere introverts enslaved to a computer, rather than individuals entertaining themselves with what truly matters: reality. However, it is clear—and current research reflects—that the online gaming community offers a new opportunity for creativity that is itself worth studying.

Researchers continue to explore the social dynamics of online gaming. While some insist that the loss of face-to-face interaction is detrimental, others argue that this loss leads to an anonymity that lends itself to the construction of identity for the individual as well as the culture that exists within online games (Wright, Boria and Breidenbach; Ducheneaut and Moore; Kolo and Baur). Some have even ventured to begin charting how social aspects of online spaces may invade offline spaces or vice versa (Taylor).

While some researchers have focused on the social aspects and behavioral correlations between virtual realities and real life, others have chosen to explore other territories, such as focusing on the social draws to online gaming. In her study of Korean video gaming, ethnographer Florence Chee demonstrates how players are lured back to a game by social forces outside of that game in "PC Bangs" (defined as rooms with multiple computers for which people pay an hourly rate to use and socialize in). This point is captured in one of Chee's formal interviews:

F: So when you go to a PC bang, is it only for friends?

S: Yes, mostly. I go to PC room with my friends to play games with my friends. But if I go just by myself it's not fun. I'm not good at games, but if I go to a PC bang with my friends, we can make a team and play with other teams. So it's kind of socialization. So I like that. Not playing by myself. Before we went to the army, we played StarCraft all the time together. When I was in the army, I was dying to go online. I wanted to play StarCraft, but I couldn't. They didn't allow it. (10)

Other studies focus on how players are brought back by the allure of new tasks and goals that exist within the game and how quickly those ties of interest are created. Edward Castronova, in his book *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*, proposes how easy it is to become immersed within a game and merge the game's interest with our own. One such point he makes is this:

Coming to own the avatar, psychologically, is so natural among those who spend time in synthetic worlds that it is barely noticed. No one ever says, 'My character's strength is depleted,' or, 'My avatar owns a dune buggy.' They say 'my strength' and 'my dune buggy.' (45)

Simona Isabella, in her "Ethnography of Online Role Playing Games," states how the community within the game itself entices players to continue playing as they represent a supportive role within the community that must be filled:

In the community people create as players (but outside game relations), there are duties that can bind people and force them to participate in a series of activities that usually every small group (a clan, a guild or an order) organizes. (sec. 1.2, par. 6)

Researchers are pushing the boundaries of virtual studies from the dull corners of technology and education to the exploration of culture and online/offline interconnectivity. These studies have only begun to show the complexity of these communities. Indeed, the increasing popularity of online games can be attributed to the massive amount of time invested by players into a game, and the growing number of outside forces that attract players to continue playing. The interactions of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) and the players within them merit study; not only can such studies provide insight into the real-world scenarios the games mirror, but they can also create a tiny window into the behaviors, interactions, and language that can usually only be experienced behind closed doors or, rather, a computer screen.

As stated above, MMORPGs have created respective cultures, features, and even languages. While many have touched on social interactions between players, and some have explored social draws outside of games, the focus of this study is to analyze the ways in which lingo and in-game norms are utilized to:

1. Establish an in-game culture and societal norms (both as individuals and groups)
2. Combat the resulting loss of interaction stemming from computer-mediated communication

With these focuses in mind, this study will explore the various genres, which act as mediums of communication, within an online game, including in-game text and non-verbal in-game interaction.

Many studies have explored the effects of games on behavior, social adeptness, formation of virtual identity, etc. However, this study will be predominantly focused on how players as individuals and groups function within a game and use the various mediums listed above to communicate and form the culture, language, and societal norms present within MMORPGs. Additionally, this study will report how the formation of these languages and norms addresses the two issues listed above and their role relative to new players as well as experienced ones.

Methodology

Game Selection

While there are many MMORPGs that could be studied, such as World of Warcraft, League of Legends, EverQuest, Guild Wars, this study will revolve around RuneScape. This particular MMORPG has various distinguishing factors that make it ideal for study.

RuneScape is a free to play game with very few age restrictions. Anyone can play RuneScape without downloading it, as long as they have Java, and without purchase. This guarantees a large fan base as well as one that consists of a variety of players, including those who play recreationally and professionally.¹ This is because no potential players are hindered by large downloads, need for a powerful computer, monthly costs, or an initial purchase fee.

Second, despite RuneScape's free application, it also supports a member world. This means that while it attracts players who may not have one of the above listed items (extra cash, adequate computer, etc.), some players do play substantially; the monthly cost of RuneScape membership now runs at \$7.99 USD, so anyone paying this amount will usually be inclined to play more and most likely take the game seriously. Not only does the existence of a free and members area lend itself to the purposes of this study, but it also allows for further distinctions to be drawn between those subcultures within the game.

Furthermore, due to lack of age constraints, which exist in other games such as World of Warcraft, the participants of the study can range anywhere from eight years old to thirty or older. This is significant in the fact that it essentially eliminates the bias of an older or younger demographic with respect to the cultures that may be had in MMORPGs.

While it is certain that the attributes of RuneScape may not be found in all MMORPGs, these do allow it to more easily be related to other games like it.

The Game of RuneScape

There are a few things that must be understood about the community under study before we can go further. The following is a brilliant synopsis of RuneScape by *MMO Reviews'* website:

RuneScape is set in a fantasy world of warring races, ravaged landscapes, and sinister powers. Having chosen an adventurer, players are free to find their role within it: to live by the sword and face hundreds of enemies, to further the storyline in RuneScape's quests, or to train in any of a number of skills. ("RuneScape Review")

The virtual world of RuneScape is divided up into various kingdoms, regions, and cities, most commonly referred to as Gielinor. Players can traverse this landscape by walking, running, teleporting, and various other means of travel. Every area of RuneScape offers different monsters, quests, items, and training areas to be experienced. Here is a more precise explanation of RuneScape as given by *MMO Reviews'*:

Players appear on the screen as customizable avatars, setting their own goals and objectives. RuneScape does not follow a linear storyline; players choose their own goals. Players can fight Non-Playable Character (NPC) monsters, complete quests, or increase their experience in any of the available skills. Players interact with each other through trading, chatting, or by participating in both combative and cooperative mini-games and activities. ("RuneScape Review")

The accepted currency of RuneScape is gold coins ("Gold Pieces," or GP for short). These coins can be traded with NPCs, other players, and the Grand Exchange (an automated service that players can use to buy and sell items) for various items and services. It is worth noting that

¹Some players have professional sponsorship such as YouTube partners: some players are paid simply for uploading interesting videos of themselves playing the game of RuneScape.

RuneScape also possesses an offence system that operates in accordance with its rules; punishments can include bans (a temporary or permanent disallowance of playing the game), mutes (disallowing any speech within the game), or warnings. As findings and conclusions are presented, in-game terminology will be defined as needed.

Locations

Various locations within RuneScape have been selected for observation of players and their interactions; for our purposes, a server² that is nearly full will be selected so that observation can yield the most data. Locations have been selected based on the following criteria:

1. Number of people who frequent the area
2. Amount of interaction that takes place in the area
3. Kind of interaction that takes places in the area (e.g. social, functional, etc.)

With the above criteria in mind, all realms of RuneScape and its players will be represented by three distinct areas:

1. Areas of trade/skill: These will be areas players frequent for the purpose of bartering with each other, be it trading GP for items or items for items. This will also include any area that players go to train a skill or gather materials.
2. Areas of Combat: Any area commonly known as combat training grounds or player vs. player areas
3. Areas of Social Interactions: Any area players frequent with the sole purpose of interaction for the sake of interacting. This includes places of gathering, chatting, etc. Such interactions can also be found in the above two areas; however, for our purposes we will treat these areas as mutually exclusive.

Participants

The methods employed by this study include direct observation of players, interactions with these players, and interviews with people involved in the community. Only players who have been interviewed will be denoted as individuals and referenced as such. Special attention will be given to varying experiences, as well as use of jargon, performances of cultural norms, and outside attitudes of players observed and interviewed. In addition to this, third party sources such as magazines, social media websites, and real-life conventions may be noted to see how in-game culture manifests within its own genres. Attention here will be given to:

- 1.) What are main topics of concern as opposed to fringe topics?
- 2.) How do interactions as well as jargon develop (e.g. what are the dialects within the greater gaming community's language?)?
- 3.) What are the differences and similarities in the experiences to be had between using these related genres and playing the game itself?

Results

The following section outlines the various jargons, behaviors, and norms learned through observation.

Areas of Skill

There are twenty-five different skills in RuneScape that can all be trained and "leveled up."³ Players earn experience in particular skills by completing specific tasks or various in-game

²Within RuneScape exist different servers. Servers exist for the sole purpose of allowing numerous players to play at one time (as one server cannot hold more than 2000 players). All RuneScape servers offer the exact same world; however, some are labeled for specific purpose, such as role-playing, completing quests, etc.



Figure 1 All RuneScape Skills (Red Box - Combat Skills, Blue Square - Member Only Skills) for the user “Nublom”

activities. However, some tasks and activities may lend themselves to an experience⁴ gain in multiple skills. As players level up various skills they are able to perform new tasks, enter new areas, complete new quests, become more adept at the activities related to said skill, and gain access to new resources and materials. For instance, when a player achieves level 10 in Fishing, they may be able to access new fishing spots, be able to catch new fish, and catch previously accessible fish faster or more successfully.

Skills are generally separated into two categories: combat skills and non-combat skills. It is worthy to note that nine of the twenty-five skills in RuneScape can only be accessed by members.⁵ Combat skills,⁶ comprised of seven different skills, include any skill which is used in or may affect a combat situation. The remaining seventeen skills are regarded as non-combat skills; some of these include Firemaking,⁷ Fishing,⁸ and Woodcutting.⁹

Generally players who occupy themselves predominantly with combat skills are known as “pkers,” short for people-killers.¹⁰ People associated with mainly non-combat skills are known as “skillers.”¹¹ Based on observation, various skills within the game are dictated by which areas they can be

trained in; for example, some skills require the harvesting of specific resources which can only be found in a number of regions whereas other skills merely require items within the player’s inventory and can be exercised anywhere. Depending on a player’s motives, she may seek out a highly populated area when training is not place-specific or the skill is low-maintenance (some skills are automated in the sense that multiple things can be done/collected by a singular command from the player, thus these skills require less attention), or a low population area if the resource of interest is hard to come by and the player does not want others to harvest said resource. Also, as stated earlier, low maintenance skills that are place-specific, such as Fishing and Woodcutting,

³The maximum level a player can achieve in any skill is 99 or 200 million experience, with the exception of Dungeoneering, which has a maximum level of 120.

⁴Experience (exp) is the in-game quantification of time spent on a specific activity that is attributed to a specific skill.

⁵Member skills include: Agility (how agile a player is, allowing them to navigate various obstacles within the game as well as run faster and longer), Construction (the ability of a player to construct a house), Farming (the ability of a player to grow various plants in the game), Fletching (the ability of a player to craft various arrows and bows), Herblore (the ability to create varying potions which possess various effects), Hunter (the ability of a player to catch various animals within the game, and possess pets), Slayer (the ability of a player to defeat specific NPCs which require special knowledge or items), Summoning (the ability of a player to bring into existence various monsters which can aid them in their endeavors), and Thieving (the ability of a player to steal from varying NPCs and shops).

⁶Combat skills include Strength (how hard a player hits), Attack –(how often a player hits), Defense (how much damage a player withstands), Constitution (how much health a player possesses), Magic (a player’s ability to cast varying magical spells and their strength), Range (a player’s ability to use bow and arrow related attacks and their strength), and Prayer (a player’s ability to use varying prayers which boost a player’s abilities, protect them from their opponent, or harm their opponents abilities).

⁷The ability to create fire from varying sets of wood.

⁸Fishing is the ability to catch varying types of fish.

⁹The ability to harvest logs from varying types of trees.

¹⁰Persons categorized as such are interested in combat with other players and their in-game activities are influenced by this.

¹¹This designation represents people who are interested predominantly in gathering and various non-combat activities within the game.

which require a field of trees or a sea of fishing spots, generate more interaction between players as they are all in the same collective space as well as partaking in a low-demand task.

Areas of Trade

Although trade is not limited to any one area, as two players can trade with each other at any time and any place, there are places where many players collectively trade. As such, these places have become known as a trading ground of sorts. Observations show that players choose to gather in specific places, most likely because trading is most successful here due to the number of players and the fact that most players expect these areas to be known for trading. There are numerous trading areas both big and small; however, the three most popular areas of trade observed include banks, the Grand Exchange, and the City of Varrock.¹² Within these trading realms, multiple interactions take place, the most significant of which include item lending,¹³ trading,¹⁴ advertisement,¹⁵ gambling,¹⁶ and people gathering.¹⁷



Figure 2 Grand Exchange packed with players trading (Farrell)

¹²In the case of banks, trading is most convenient here because players can easily access their bank, an extension of their inventory that can hold a greater number of items. As such, trading here is much easier and can be done much more successfully (should a player need to withdraw more gold coins, a different item, etc.). The Grand Exchange offers this same advantage; however, its in-game function as an automated selling/buying interface attracts players who are interested in buying and selling items and other services. As such, players choose to manually trade here as well. In the case of Varrock, there are a handful of areas in the city that are crowded with traders. This is explained by the fact that Varrock is one of the most frequented cities of the free-to-play game, and perhaps the member game as well. Most of these trade areas within Varrock result from an excess of players trading within the bank and Grand Exchange, thus spilling out into common ground that is the city.

¹³Item lending is an in-game interface that allows players to temporarily give another player a specific item for a given amount of time. Although this can be given at no cost, players usually charge a flat fee or hourly rate for the item. The purpose of item lending is so that players can use better materials/gear in NPC combat or resource gathering that they would otherwise not have. Usually the items lent are hard to obtain or very expensive, thus making it more practical to borrow and gain temporary advantages.

¹⁴Trading is the simple transaction between two players that can include items for items, money for items, or something for nothing. Bartering usually occurs in trades and there are many different items and services to be traded. Most players begin this interaction by spamming, entering a specific phrase into the public chat multiple times, as well as using text effects, glowing text, animated text, etc. Commonly used phrases are usually formatted as, “buying/selling item x!” Other information which can be included in these phrases is the price, the user name of the person, and symbols which might attract attention, such as “Buying all arrows 25gp each----Skullface95!” This is important to someone attempting to trade an item because often the trading area is very crowded and these techniques capture other players’ interest.

¹⁵Advertising is the way by which players in these populated areas of trade also spam phrases and the like. However these phrases usually entail a third party game site or clan within the game of RuneScape. Relevant information or the purpose of the said clan or website is usually included.

¹⁶Gambling is the creation of simple games which utilize trivial items such as dice that can be rolled or seeds which can be planted and grow a specific color flower (chosen at random) and allow players to place bets on their outcomes. Most of these games are regarded by players as scams because they involve trading gold coins to other players in exchange for nothing and are based solely on an honor system.

¹⁷This entails walking through populated trade areas with an enticing purpose in an effort to get others to follow and join in. The main purpose of this technique is usually associated with drop parties—free gatherings in which a singular or group of players simply drop rare and expensive items on the ground for others to pick up. This can be done as a clan activity, or sometimes by players who are ultimately quitting the game and getting rid of all their items in a recreational way. Many players who follow these gatherers also spam the message of the leader in an attempt to get others to follow.

Many trade specific jargons exist such as “ty” (thank you), “np” (no problem), “trade” (please send a trade request or accept my trade request), and “sale” meaning a player has a variety of items for sale.¹⁸ Other terms that play major roles in this environment are the quantifications of gold coins.¹⁹ As you can see these abbreviations and the phrases mentioned above are useful in conveying the most information in the fewest words—allowing phrases to be spammed faster and give the most information in one line of text.

Areas of Combat

Throughout RuneScape players can battle against NPC’s; however, there are only a handful of areas in which players can fight other players. These areas include mini-games and the wilderness.²⁰ Many mini-games are declared as “safe” meaning a player does not lose any items upon death. However, some, like the wilderness, are dangerous. Areas within the wilderness can be limited to single-way combat, meaning 1v1; however, other areas of the wilderness are designated as multi-combat and can consist of any number of players fighting any other number of players: such as 1vs10, 10vs10, or 1vs1. The last thing to know about the wilderness is its organization into levels: players within the wilderness can only attack players of the same combat level.²¹ However, as players venture “deeper,” the level of the wilderness increases sequentially. This means that for every level in the wilderness a player enters, a player of that level difference may engage said player. For example, a combat level 3 in level 1 wilderness can only fight opponents of that combat level or 1 combat level higher; a combat level 3 in level 10 wilderness can fight opponents, or be hunted rather, by players anywhere from their combat level to combat level 13 and vice versa. You can begin to understand how higher levels of the wilderness may be associated with greater danger as well as greater rewards.



Figure 3 A map of the wilderness and players fighting within it

There are a variety of reasons a player may venture into the wilderness such as “pking,” looting,²² resource gathering,²³ and questing.²⁴ Players within the wilderness may run around

¹⁸Conversation of sales can include a price for which a buyer can have all the items in this collective sale. A sale can include items of a specific skill or common theme, such as fishing supplies, combat supplies, etc., or simply a mixture of unrelated items.

¹⁹Many players find it inefficient to say 2,000 gold pieces, or 2,000 “gp” even, so many other abbreviations exist to counteract this. “K” represents one thousand gold pieces, and “m” represents one million gold coins. For example “1k” would be 1,000 gold pieces, and 1m would be 1,000,000 gold pieces.

²⁰The wilderness is an area in which if players die they will lose all of the items in which they are wearing and holding with the exception of their three most valuable items. However, if the player is “skulled”—meaning they have shown an act of aggression towards a neutral player (attacking a player first)—then upon death they will lose all items they are wearing and carrying.

²¹Combat level is determined by a particular combination of combat related skills.

²²Upon a player’s death in the wilderness, items are dropped for the victor to claim; the victor being determined by who dealt the most damage. However, not all items are picked up, this is at the discretion of the victor who will decide what items they desire and what items they will simply leave. After a certain amount of time, all players within the area will be able to see the items dropped as well, rather than the victor exclusively. As a result, some players choose to wander the wilderness searching for this phenomenon in an attempt to take valuables that may have been missed or left behind; this behavior is known to players as “looting,” and the people who commit this are referred to as “looters.”

searching for an opponent, sit in place waiting for an opponent, fight other players, or watch other fights that are taking place. With regard to singular vs. multi-combat areas of the wilderness: exists singular as well as clan²⁵ battles.

Within clan combat various abbreviations and behaviors exist. Some behaviors clans take part in are: “dd,”²⁶ “fall in,”²⁷ “spread out,”²⁸ “luring,”²⁹ and “piling.”³⁰ Overall, clan combat is comparatively simpler than singular combat as you will soon see.

Singular combat possesses its own terminologies as well. These terminologies include: “fight,”³¹ “off,”³² “gl,”³³ “pot,”³⁴ “Owned/Pwnt,”³⁵ “DM,”³⁶ and “RM.”³⁷ A player can run from a fight at any time they please; however, they are not safe from their opponent until exiting the wilderness, which is done by simply leaving the area. Also during a fight players can regenerate health lost with the use of food.³⁸

Many players who “pk” choose to specialize in a certain style of attacking such as range, magic, or strength. Players who specialize in a specific field of combat are generally known as “pures.” There are numerous types of pures, each with a unique style of combat. For example, the identity usually associated with “strength pure” is a low defense level with a high strength level, resulting in superior strength associated with that combat level. The style of combat preferred by these players involves quick melee weapons coupled with a more powerful secondary weapon that can be used in conjunction to swiftly execute opponents. Some wilderness techniques are more preferred than others, but usually are left to the discretion of the player.

Some styles within the wilderness, regardless of how successful they are, are met with disapproval. For example, “rushing,” as it is known, involves players who use a combat weapon with

²³Resource gathering is the process by which players attempt to harvest resources through the use of various skills, in this case within the wilderness. Some resources can only be obtained within the wilderness and as such are of higher value because they are harder to harvest with the constant threat of death. For example, runite ore, a highly coveted metal that can be forged into runite armor (a relatively strong armor which can help deflect damage in battle), is only available within the wilderness to non-members. Runite armor was for a time the most valued armor in the non-member game. As a result many players would traverse the dangers of the wilderness with the sole purpose of harvesting said resource.

²⁴Questing is the process of completing a quest. It is worthy to note that some components of various quests lie in the wilderness, or require the entrance into the wilderness in order to complete. Thus, some players can be found in the wilderness simply trying to complete a quest.

²⁵A clan is simply a group of players within RuneScape who come together under a specific name, and may include commonalities in ideals, attitudes, and common interests between players. Clans within RuneScape can be both official and unofficial.

²⁶An abbreviation of death dot, a phenomenon in which multiple players stand in the exact same area as to give the presence of only one player in an attempt to trick or entice other players.

²⁷The act of everyone using the “follow” interface (a system which once engaged allows the player to automatically follow another player) on a singular person, usually the leader of the clan.

²⁸Simply spreading out over an area in an attempt to intimidate or spot other players.

²⁹One person in the clan attacking and running deeper into the wilderness to entice another player to follow him/her; usually leading said player to an area where the clan is waiting.

³⁰The act of all clan members attacking a singular opponent in an attempt to kill them faster, usually used in conjunction with luring and clan pking in general.

³¹This word is a shorthand of the phrase, “Would you like to fight?”

³²Usually expressed to mean “Stop attacking me” or “Do not attack them. They are part of our team.”

³³“gl” is usually expressed before a fight meaning good luck.

³⁴This means, “At this time consume any potions you might possess and wish to use for our fight,” and is usually expressed as a courtesy.

³⁵“Owned” or “pwnt” is expressed by the victor of a fight as a sign of dominance, or by on-lookers when one opponent is doing exceptionally well or has killed the other.

³⁶Short hand for death match; meaning players will agree to fight to the death.

³⁷Short hand for re-match, meaning one of the players wishes to fight the other again, usually expressed when one opponent has run or died.

³⁸Consuming food within RuneScape gives players a specific amount of regeneration based on the type of food

a strong special attack³⁹ and then simply run once that special is exhausted in the hopes of instantly killing their opponent. Also, within this category of disapproval are “farcasters.”⁴⁰ These methods are believed to be cowardly and have even resulted in counter groups who specialize in deflecting these attacks and swiftly bringing down the user of them. Running from a fight, dishonoring a death match, using protection prayers (prayers which deflect damage done by other players), “safing,”⁴¹ and not “skulling”⁴² are all behaviors that are generally frowned upon.

Analysis

Denotation and Connotation of In-Game Experience

How quickly players attach meaning to a game which they invest their time is natural. With the overwhelming choices when it comes to player customization, in-game goals, learning in-game techniques, norms, and language, regard of one’s avatar or any differentiations of it from the real world becomes so diluted they simply don’t care or even acknowledge the difference between the character and themselves. These ideals and automatic attachments of value allow for an environment which both mirrors reality but can be manipulated in ways which allow it to almost be greater than reality. Anne-Mette Albrechtslund qualifies this manipulation as expressive productivity in her ethnography titled “Online Identity Crisis”:

Gaming culture often entails a great deal of ‘expressive productivity’—practices where players create stories, comics, machinima, etc. based on the game. This productivity seems to be a common way for players to ‘circulate feelings about the game to each other and reflect on their own experience.’ (sec. 2 par. 2)

Without care for one’s in-game possessions, achievements, or status, elements such as culture, trading, and societal norms would simply not exist: nothing that exists in reality would be present in a virtual world, and yet prior research as well as the above observations suggest otherwise. It is with this information that we can assume many players either disregard the game as simply a game, or automatically connect with it, despite the fact that “it’s only pixels!”

Most notable in my results is the amount and breadth of information that must be understood to not only function within the game, but also to grasp the various norms and cultures that exist. One must first understand the term “pk” and the area with which it is associated to begin to understand the patterns of behaviors within it, what is acceptable, and what is common or uncommon. That is to say nothing of actually functioning well within that environment, which may encompass knowing even more information.

The next point of interest is the variety of areas within which players function. Although used here as a way of organizing the information presented in this study, the formation of these areas as described above exist as a functional example of sub-communities within the game. It is interesting to note that the virtual world encompasses both sub-communities of socialization (such

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³⁹Special Attack is an action that can only be completed once or twice in a given period of time that usually enacts severe damage.

⁴⁰These are players who use magical spells to create a freezing effect that freezes the player in place so a player is unable to run from or fight their opponent.

⁴¹The process of eating food multiple times or at times that is believed an unreasonable amount of health, as it does not allow for the opponent to have any chance of killing said player.

⁴²Skulling is the act of becoming “skulled.” See also footnote 20.

as groups of role playing or socializing) as well as communities of functionality, such as the areas of trade and combat. Even more interesting is that these areas are burned into players' minds with repetition—masking a much truer notion of conformity. Within the real world, the issue of conformity is a known one and often resonates differently on an individual basis. However, within the virtual world it seems conformity manifests itself in a way which allows players to pursue their in-game purposes in the most efficient way possible, such as traveling to places known for trade if they wish to buy or sell an item.

The Realm of Creation

The phenomenon of players manipulating in-game material to satisfy their needs is another practice to be noted. However, this individuality can also transcend via conformity to the purposes of a group of individuals, if that need is indeed popular enough or resonates with enough people.

For example, within RuneScape there is an activity known as “law-running.”⁴³ This activity was not an official game creation but rather a player's creation, easily identified as such due to its lack of polish or any official in-game interface. This practice most likely began with a singular player who wished to create law runes faster, eliminating the time it took to make the trip between the bank and the area of creation. As a result, this activity enticed more players who saw the potential gain it offered them and it became an unofficial activity; this activity further developed to encompass its own name, location, and even particular servers on which it took place. This is just one example of the manipulations and contributions individuals and groups of players can make and how they can become traditions within the game.

Another way in which societal norms can be created is the avoidance of things which are frowned upon. Just as players create to help their gaming experience become more efficient, they also tend to avoid things which make gameplay more difficult. For instance, a recent addition to the behavior of RuneScape is the process of singular combat within the wilderness. Previously, players would simply attack another player and the fight would begin. However, today you will see players ask another player to fight before attacking. This is because previously many players would simply run from a fight, which would mean wasting potions and prayer that might have been used prior to the initiation of the fight. As a result, the process of asking another player to fight before actually fighting established itself, and as such the process of simply attacking another person was negatively received. This example illustrates how the collective frustrations experienced by many players can sometimes manifest itself into another form of creation. However, even more interesting is that, even if players collectively outcast a specific behavior, it can still occur in-game. All in-game players are individuals and are not required to uphold the accepted norms. Sometimes these infractions are a result of a player being unfamiliar with the game (referred to as a “noob,” “newb,” or “nub”) or because a player simply doesn't care.

The first type of creation can be somewhat summarized in the term, coined by James Paul Gee, “semiotic domain,” meaning “a distinct collective consciousness shared by people with similar interests, attributes or skill sets” (27-28).

The second is captured in Ian Bogost's book, *Persuasive Games*, which states some creations only exist because of the processes and logic by which we limit them; Bogost uses the example of returning bad merchandise:

⁴³The process by which various players hold the raw material (pure essence) needed to create law runes—an object used in the skill of magic—and trade them with players who possess actual law runes; this process allows some players to quickly create law runes, gaining them experience in the skill of Runecrafting, while allowing others to make money, as law runes are significantly more expensive than pure essence.

While we often think that rules always limit behavior, the imposition of constraints also creates expression. In our example, the very concept of returning a defective product is only made possible by the creation of rules that frame that very notion. (“Procedurality” pars. 5-7)

Behaviorism and its Uniqueness in the Virtual World

There exist very prominent distinctions between the behaviors that are strictly followed and those which can be skewed. Regarding unofficially established behaviors, this simply correlates to how many people hold true to that principle. Other things that can affect these rules are how they align with the official rules. While the consequences of official rule breaking are bans, mutes, and warnings, the consequences of unofficial rule breaking are limitless and varied. These can be as simple as being taunted or called a “noob” or being ignored, or as severe as being banned from a clan. The differing roles of official versus unofficial rules within the gaming community definitely creates a more complex space in which to inhabit, especially when these rules can interact in conjunction to each other or as extensions of each other. While conducting interviews with players, I asked the same question: “What kind of unspoken rules would you say exist in RuneScape?”

Simon: RuneScape is a free world, no rules exist; you can do whatever you want and say whatever you want.

Dean: It depends whether or not you are the type of player to communicate with other players. All I do is pk; pkers have their own type of rules. Such as “ragging” other players, and even posting your name on RuneScape rag lists, which causes other players to rag on you.

One player suggests there are really no rules, while the other offers insight into some specific rules. The second player mentions something crucial to understanding the difference in each of their responses: “pkers have their own type of rules.” Just as knowledge presents a level of functionality as mentioned above, this knowledge also permeates the realm of unofficial rules. A player may be completely ignorant of unofficial norms or, based on their participation in a particular realm of RuneScape, may be well versed in them. This relationship could be comparable to a lawyer’s expertise in any particular field of law—it is all relative to what law they practice. This ambiguity of unofficial rules exemplifies the relativity of many space-related topics, such as the role of experienced versus inexperienced player. For instance, when players are asked what constitutes a talented player or a new-player, each responded differently:

Dean: Well, honestly I couldn’t answer that because I’ve been playing for 6 years and I still consider myself a noob, because I’m lazy. Some players have the dedication and time to get all [the gear and skill levels].

Simon: A pro player, I would say, is combat level 120+, has at least 150-200m, and has really good gear. But there are also pro skillers that keep skill levels high, but have low combat level. A noob would be a low level player with no good gear who is not very wealthy.

Even after six years of active participation, one player views himself as a noob, while the other has a clear and concise vision of an experienced player. Again, this only accentuates the relativity of terms such as experienced players and unofficial rules.

Objectivity in Environment

With all the unspoken traditions and rules that a player must follow, it is obvious how frustration or even isolation can occur. However, the interesting thing about a virtual world, in keeping with the other points discussed above, is its ability to transcend these issues. With regards to learning, players can continue to educate themselves regardless of anything else. The game itself provides an environment conducive to learning about how to interact within that environment even if the players themselves do not communicate it. While this may be harder to accomplish with

respect to social and cultural norms, it is possible just as it is with functional norms. The environment, which is created by both the game and players, allows players to learn the lingo, determine accepted values, and work through how to play the game, and yet is still entertaining; it is on this premise that much research has suggested using virtual games to educate. Here is just one example of this suggestion by researcher James Paul Gee:

I argue that schools, workplaces, families, and academic researchers have a lot to learn about learning from good computer and video games. Such games incorporate a whole set of fundamentally sound learning principles, principles that can be used in other settings, for example in teaching science in schools. (215-17)

Another example is this paper. A reader might have experienced frustration when trying to comprehend the material due to the fact that certain terminology might have been unfamiliar, even though that word was clearly defined earlier in the paper. Thus, even if no one presented the meaning of a particular word outside of this paper (such as a player in a game), there would still be access to that information. This microcosm begins to represent the learning-conducive environment a virtual reality can create, a place where knowledge is accessible to everyone independent of everyone and everything else that functions within it.

Conclusion

The virtual world and the players within it have a complexity which can be paralleled to that of the real world. However, the amount of manipulation and accessibility within an online game allows it to possess characteristics which are beyond the real world. While in-game consequences exist, both in the form of unofficial and official ones, they are comparatively lax; as such, the virtual world can sponsor many more unacceptable behaviors than the real world. With this in mind, the world of virtual reality is more or less limitless in a sense. It is interesting to see the way in which individuals choose to further their characters and identity within the virtual world and how this generates into common interests. With the easygoing nature coupled with the fact that the entire world can be encompassed on a digital screen, the aspect of creation is just one

The game itself provides an environment conducive to learning about how to interact within that environment even if the players themselves do not communicate it.

example of how elements of the real world can be taken much further in a virtual reality. Any player can create a new tradition or behavior—whether it is allowed or not—that has the chance of spreading or becoming known as a norm. Although what become norms are usually those elements to which the largest number of people can collectively respond positively, there are elements which can reach this same level in spite of negative reaction. The most prominent example of this is the developers of the game themselves: people in places of power who can add anything into this world without any process or approval. The characteristics of virtual realities that make them so relatable to real life also allow them to inhabit features of almost every field of study.

The point is there is still much that can be explored within virtual realities despite all the research that exists already. A new focus could be given to the exercise of real world phenomena such as conformity, social trends, and creation, and how they manifest within a virtual reality. Also, the interactions between players can be studied in much more depth using variables such as new players vs. old players, developers vs. players, and social norms vs. functional norms. There is an excessive number of behaviors and amount of culture within a game and an equal number of variables that affect those things that can be studied, not to mention how other genres of expression can lend themselves to these in-game behaviors or adapt to them. The most important differentiation that exists, one which research has yet to explore, is the

role of a player's avatar as an extension of the player versus as a vehicle for creation. In one sense, the avatar is of relation to the player and in the other its purpose is to produce anonymity. From the subtle happening of in-text usages (like elongating words for emphasis), to the well-known traditions of a game set by players, the world of virtual realities has much to offer and at the very least should be used as a versatile research tool.

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