

**'Hanging with the 'Cathaby Shark Gurlz' and other Runescape stories: Young  
People, Identity and Community in a Virtual World.**

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*“3,6,9 – Da Guse drank Wine,  
Da monkee chewd 2bacco on da streetcar line  
Da line broke n da monkee gut chokked  
N dey all lived tagetha ina lil Row Boat  
CLAP CLAP*

*Thank yas verree much, we da Shark Gurlz n Goodnite”*

- Performance by The Cathaby Shark Gurlz,  
Cathaby, Runescape.

*“We used to ride the trains but we got caught by the police...so now we ride  
tha Zeppelins instead!”*

*-Rocanga (12)*

*“In the end Nic, Runescape just allows me to be me, it reminds me of who I am  
and what I would like to be”* - go-sharkgirl-go (13)

## Abstract

In this research I offer a five year ethnographically informed participative observation of a popular virtual space. I explore the practices of young people within the virtual world of the online gaming community of 'Runescape'. I consider how its' young citizens construct and maintain virtual 'self' within virtual social systems, and how social groups and communities emerge and develop. These are popular virtual spaces and such games occupy an important place in the leisure lives of many young people. I examine how those identities interact with the virtual environment and the structures and institutions that are developed to allow groups and individuals to operate within its 'culture'. I suggest that the distinction between *virtual* and *material* 'existence' is not clear-cut and oppositional but porous and mutually defining – a shifting dynamic rather than a rigid division. However, virtuality is no 'liberated space' and it incorporates norms and practices that often mirror those of the material world. Online games, particularly the virtual worlds of role-playing games, sit at the interface between these two planes. The virtual world of online games offers young people a 'spectacular space' – in some ways similar to other public spaces yet simultaneously quite different – in which they can undertake creative identity work and symbolic experimentation with many of the institutions, rituals and practices that they encounter within their material worlds. Importantly, game worlds have a particular capacity in enabling participants to interact with others in a form *mediated* by the game itself. Thus new possibilities for communion are made possible. This, I argue, makes these games potentially powerful settings for young people to exercise agency in marking out and playing with identity and other social processes, particularly when many of the material arenas within which such activities have traditionally been practiced are becoming increasingly denied to modern youth. I argue that virtual space provides young people with a 'safe' arena to explore many material processes, and in this sense is an 'ordinary space' like many of the others in which they operate. However, the use of avatars also permits young people to appear in a form chosen by them. Thus, in the virtual world, 'material' cultural codes of body and conduct constituted by gender, class and race can, apparently, be effaced, opening up interesting, creative and potentially resistive possibilities for participants. I argue therefore that, online gaming is an important and somewhat under-researched space in which young people engage in new practices of 'leisure and pleasure'.

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## **Notes on the Layout of this Research**

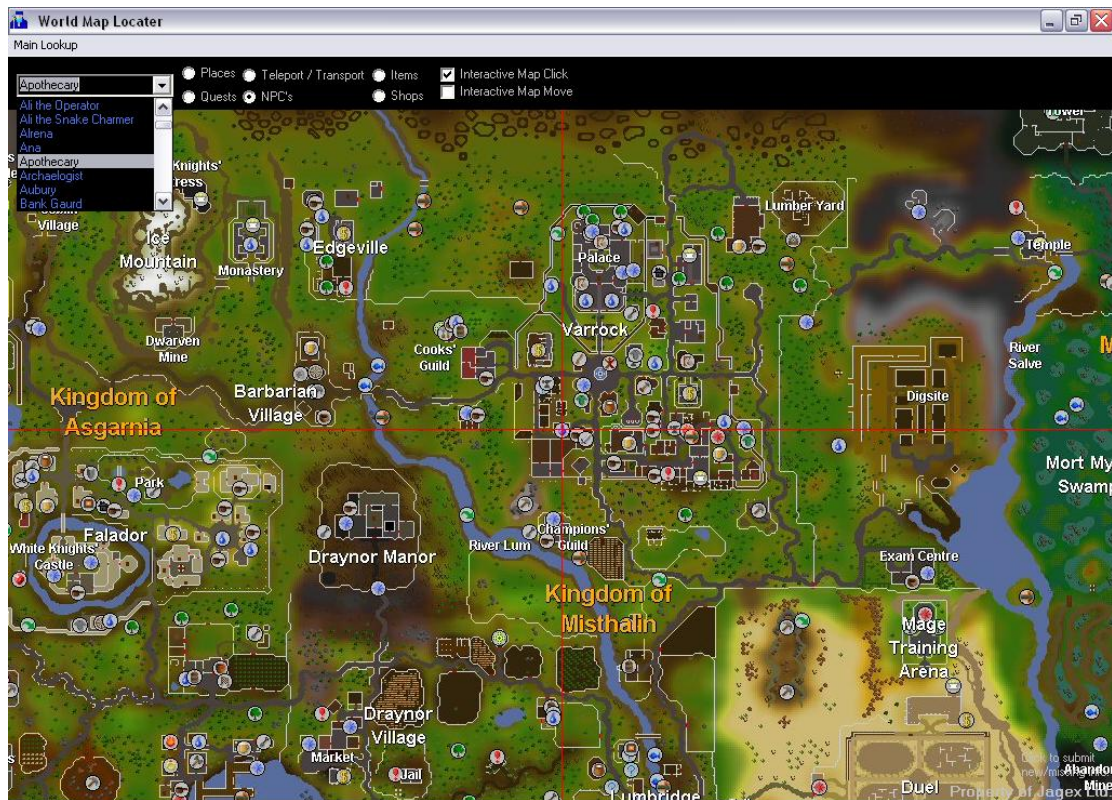
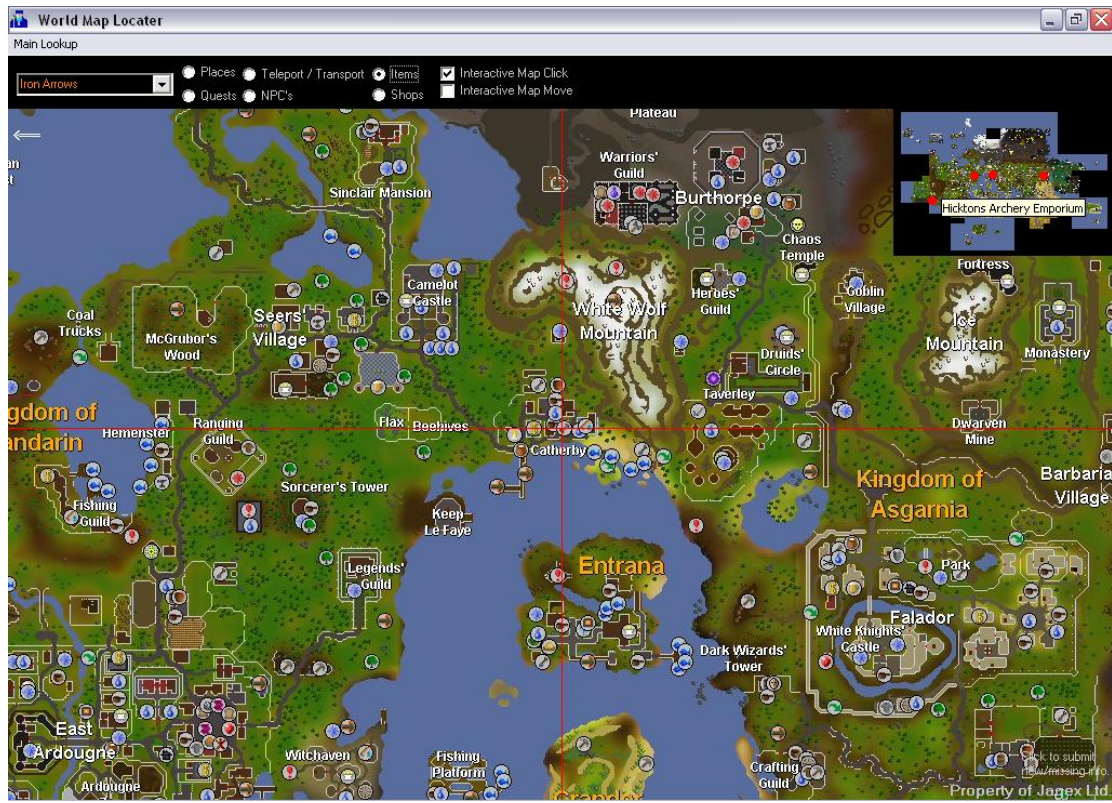
In order to maintain the ethnographic feel of the study, I have reproduced extracts from my field diaries exactly as as they were produced online at the time. Similarly some of the material is taken from in-game logs, chat windows etcc. This has resulted in some inconsitancies of spelling, layout and design. I have not undertaken any editing in this respect as I want to maintain the feel and tone of the observations as they were produced at the time.

The comments and observations from the young people have been reproduced in their exact and original form. Again I have not intervened editorially to adjust for spelling, font or layout inconsistancies.

Some names have been changed and/or substituted in order to retain the confidentiality of online identities.

The photographs in this research are in-game screenshots.

# Maps of Runescape



## **Papers, Presentations and Media Interest in this Study**

### **Publications:**

#### Peer Reviewed:

Crowe, N., and Bradford, S., (2007), 'Identity in On-Line Gaming: young people's symbolic and virtual extensions of self', in Hodkinson, P., and Bennett, A., (eds.), *Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes*, London:Routledge.

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#### Non-peer reviewed:

Contributor to, Mileham R, (2008) 'Powering Up' Wiley

### **Recent, significant conference presentations and media exposure:**

*It's good to be bad*; BSA Youth Study Group Conference, John Moore University, Liverpool, (September 2009)

*Work, Rest and Play in the Digital Playground*; Digital Cultures Conference, University of Salford (May 2009)

*Runescape: Young Peoples new Material space*; Virtual World Technologies Group (November 2007)

*Virtual Space as Learning Space*: Training agency Group Annual Conference, University of Cumbria (July 2007)

*Lost in Runescape*: Radio 4 'Thinking Allowed' (March 2007)

*Runescape and Young People* WZ678 New Zealand (November 2006)



*Hanging out in Runescape: Radio 4 You and Yours* (October 2006)

*All work and no play: BBC online* (March 2006)

*Identity, Space and Place in On-Line Gaming Communities: Young People's Practices of the 'Technological Self': BSA Youth Study Group Conference, University College Northampton, (September 2005),*

*Hanging Out: Identity Place and Space in On-Line Gaming Communities: Emerging Issues in Geographies of Children and Youth, Brunel University, (June 2005)*

*Playing the game: Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes: BSA Youth Study Group Conference, University College Northampton. (2004)*

## Chapter 1: Introducing the Virtual

*'Why do I travel to Runescape? It's just soo F\$%&ing cool that's why. It's like my life but more, and better'*

- *go-sharkgirl-go (13)*

*'Friends Friends Friends! That's what Runescape is all about'*

- *Laura Cool (14)*

*'I can do woteva I wana do n be woteva I wana be – usualy, tho, I am just me'*

- *Combat Girl (14)*

### **Once upon a time in a land a long way from here...**

Some time in the mid 1990s whilst surfing the web, I stumbled across a new kind of virtual space at 'www.thepalace.com'. Essentially a series of virtual meeting rooms, the palaces were very different from the more familiar text-based chat rooms of AOL, Yahoo-chat and the peer-to-peer interfaces of Microsoft Messenger. The user interface was graphic: instead of mere words against a black or white background, the palace rooms were photographs, participants were represented by avatars – drawings, cartoons, photos – we talked in comic-like bubbles and could even carry objects called 'props'. Because of my interest in the television show, I spent much of the next 2 years in one of the many palaces, the 'Xena Warrior Palace', which had become a virtual meeting space for fans. The television show had a well established lesbian fan-base and many of the users of this palace were young gay women. As the Xena Palace developed, it soon became a regular virtual meeting space, acting in many ways as an 'affinity space' (Gee: 2007) for the gay community. It was seen as a 'safe' public space by users who feared the stigma/discrimination of the material world. It was a place to come be the self you unable to be in real life, to test out - all be it symbolically - the things that would be impossible in the real world. I even attended a virtual gay wedding, long before such events were accepted in the material world. Users felt secure in the knowledge that the 'real self' was hidden behind pseudonyms and avatars; a virtual identity that was once described to me by a Palace user as her *'Palace-self' - its sort of me, but not me'* (vampirekisses 15).

As The Palace declined, no longer able to maintain itself financially, many of its users drifted into the newly created virtual space of Runescape. This space was different to The Palace. It was a RPG – Role Playing Game – set around a Tolkienesque environment of monsters, orcs and magic. Unlike the US-based Palace, it was written and published by a small UK on-line publishing company from Cambridge called Jagex. I was already familiar with this genre of game and many an hour had been lost to ‘Diablo’ ‘Darkstone’ and ‘Final Fantasy’ on my PC. Although visually more crude than these games, Runescape offered the additional dimension of allowing one to play against real people rather than computer controlled characters (Bots). I was also a fan of ‘Warhammer Fantasy Battle’ - a more sophisticated table-top version of ‘Dungeons and Dragons’, in which vast armies of fantasy races noisily fought each other most evenings and weekends from ‘Games Workshop’s’ high street retail outlets - so I was well aware that there was nothing like the unpredictability and excitement of playing Fantasy games against a real person in a public arena.

This approach to computer gaming was already well established within the gladiatorial ‘first person shooter’ (FPS) games, such as ‘Quake’ and ‘Unreal Tournament’. Tired of playing against the computer controlled opponents, the FPS gamer had been quick to embrace the idea of playing against other players. As one gamer points out

*“It’s about unpredictability. You always know what the Bots are gonna do, either they have real lousy AI (artificial intelligence) which is crap cos they just don’t react right, or they work on a kinda pre-programmed path. With real opponents you just don’t know what they are gonna do. You may get some fool rushing into your bullets in a suicide mission or some sneak that just camps out waiting to snipe you. What Bot’s gonna do that?”* (Scott, 17, ‘Quake’ player).

It was this fusion of on-line interactivity and ‘Fantasy’ genre that drew me and my fellow ‘Xenites’ to the world of Runescape. I am not sure that the gaming aspect referred to by Scott (above) was particularly important to my Xena-Palace friends. When I asked them what they enjoyed about the world, most saw it in a similar way

to The Palace; Runescape was a place to ‘escape’ the pressures and constraints of the material world. While some attempted to engage with the game’s narrative and structure, most of the Xenites seemed to regard this simply as a backdrop against which social interaction could take place. Yet Runescape was a game, it presented itself as such and, in many ways, the world itself seemed initially to revolve around a game narrative. It reminded me of similar online fantasy games, ‘Ultima Online’ and ‘Everquest’. But, unlike online FPS games it also seemed to borrow aspects of virtual social worlds such as ‘Alphaworld’ and ‘The Palace’ - although its social processes were far more complex and multi-dimensional. Could it be that for some players these virtual spaces performed a more significant function than simple entertainment space?

Most ‘Runescape’ players would probably refer to the game as an example of a ‘Massively Multi-Player Online Role Playing Game’ or MMORPG for short. The term is not exclusive and similar games are known as ‘MMOG’ (Taylor 2006), ‘On-line Game worlds’ (Yee 2002), ‘Virtual Worlds’, (Dodge 1998), ‘Metaworlds’ (Rossney 1996) or ‘Avatar Worlds’ (Damer 1997). However such terms have tended to be directed to rather looser social networking – visual chatting with a graphic representation of the participant or ‘avatar’ - rather than virtual space driven by a game-based narrative. It should also be noted that the idea of genre in computer games is not a rigid system of classification and there is much debate as to what the characteristics of a genre might be, what games fit into what category and indeed what different categories should be called.<sup>1</sup> In this study I intend to refer to these games as MMORPG by which I mean a computer/video game that is played online in a virtual environment where the social interactive nature of the game play requires the participation of many players in which the gaming dynamic is driven by a role-playing – or skills based – structure.

MMORPG differ from other games in the use they make of the virtual environment. Fuller and Jenkins (1995) argue that the function of the computer game is to create a

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<sup>1</sup> These loose terms have meanings amongst gamers and most would recognise the difference between a platform game and a shooting game even if they didn’t actually agree whether it should be called a ‘shooter’ or a ‘shoot-em-up’ and whether ‘Perfect Dark’ was really a ‘FPS’ (first person shooter) or a ‘puzzle’ game or an ‘explorer’.

*'spectacular space'* (69) to be explored or unlocked by the central character. Actors within these spaces are driven to solve the problems set by the environments so that they can see what further spectacle awaits them. In a game such as 'Tomb Raider', Lara Croft – as the virtual-extension of the player - is denied access to certain areas of the game environment until she has solved particular puzzles. She then progresses along a fairly linear path until another puzzle appears to block her progress. Even in the relatively free roaming arenas of 'Quake' or 'Doom', access to additional arenas with more powerful weapons and/or adversaries is limited until players have reached a certain number of frags (kills). This is usually referred to by gamers as a 'game' (or learning) curve. It is designed to keep initial levels accessible to novice players whilst challenging more experienced ones. It also has the effect of driving the game-play forward. As Fuller and Jenkins (*ibid*) observe, we are driven ever onwards to see what wonders the new area will reveal to us.

MMORPGs do not operate like this. The player is driven not by a necessity or desire to unlock further space but to improve specific in-game skills that will allow him/her to progress. Players – or 'users' as they are more commonly referred to, a term which arguably extends the experience from that of a mere game – adopt the role of citizen within a virtual world. Like its material counterpart, this virtual life requires that citizens learn a range of skills in order 'survive' their virtual existence. This will usually include skills around fighting and defence, perhaps magic or herbalism and other 'technical' skills such as mining, cooking, smithing and even prayer skills. Some of the more comprehensive RPGs will assign additional skills to particular classes (or even races) of characters, so for example warrior-based characters might have access to a more comprehensive range of weaponry and the associated skills required to wield them whilst mages will have more limited weapon skills but have access to a greater magic and/or healing spells. As a skill is practised, so the character gains experience of that particular skill. The greater the character's experience the wider access he/she has to that skill. Only through this wider experience can more complicated or advanced tasks be undertaken; only the best fishers can catch sharks, only the most experienced fighters can wield the most powerful weapons, the most skilled smiths craft armour etc. Some users choose to practice a range of skills to produce a more rounded character, others prefer to specialise.

In most RPGs and particularly the MMORPG, there are quests – or adventures – to be undertaken which can advance a characters status in the game, usually by granting access to additional areas, equipment or skills. However, whilst some players choose to undertake these tasks – and certain quests carry a considerable in-game status (for example the ‘Legend Quest’ in Runescape allows players to wear a special cape that is regarded as a ‘high-status’ item by less experienced players and affords respect accordingly) others simply use the world to follow particular trades or crafts. This is a departure from traditional notions of gaming, in that both the narrative and gaming dynamic are open-ended; there is as such no one object of the game, a fact that perplexes new players to the genre who are often confused as to ‘*how do you win?*’ Like material existence there is no real winning, just a means to advance your character to greater challenges, more wealth and higher status.

The ‘*how do you win*’ comment reveals much about the expectation of games and the gaming capitol and experiences with which prospective players approach MMORPGs. Whilst most will acknowledge that gaming by its nature has a social dimension, the traditional view of gaming is that it is a solitary activity - at best involving competitive play against a maximum of four players - with fixed narratives and objectives often based on special progression. The more open ended game-play requiring co-operation between users as much as competition and the highly interactive and social environment are some of the factors that give MMORPGs their unique flavour in the world of computer games.

### **It’s a Kid’s thing**

These games now occupy an important position in the lives of young people: Poole (2001) notes that in 2000 more video games were sold in the US than books. Industry figures:2007-8 demonstrate that: game console software sales totalled \$6.6 billion with 153.9 million units sold; computer games sales were \$910.7 million with 36.4 million units sold; on average, nine games were sold every second of every day of 2007 (Source Screen Digest). A recent UK survey highlighted that 82% of 9 to 19 year olds have at least one games console, and that 70% play computer games online. The survey also acknowledged that most young people spend nearly as much time playing video/computer games as they do with homework (Livingstone and Bober, 2005:10). Yet, like most popular media forms before them, they are central to

contemporary moral anxieties. These touch on the role, function and effect of violent imagery which are then further infused by wider criticisms and debate about the impending danger of an emergent 'bedroom culture'. In September 2006, I read a letter published in 'The Daily Telegraph' in which over 100 of the 'great and good' in the field of childhood - including Baroness Susan Greenfield, Dr Penelope Leach and children's authors Philip Pullman, Jacqueline Wilson and Michael Morpurgo – argued that the mental health of young people was being harmed by the pace of technological and cultural change. We need to replace the 'bedroom culture' with 'real' play and 'real' books, they argued, if we intend to avert the impending crisis with our children. I seem to have heard this all before somewhere. Within such assertions computer gaming merely becomes embroiled in recycled arguments: about the nature of on-screen violence, wider concerns about the value of gaming activities and a plethora of social issues ranging from childhood obesity through to racial and religious intolerance. This argument has tended to articulate wider value positions about popular culture; books are good, games and television bad (Postman 1996). Despite their somewhat 'elitist' origins, I think that there is now a tendency in such popular discourse to simply dismiss computer games as a childish pastime which, whilst catering for an immediate and shallow pleasure, simultaneously needs to be controlled in order to protect the young and vulnerable from its influences. The adult perception of games is important in this respect. Like many technological forms, computer and video games have been removed from the everyday experience of most adults. Parents tend not to relate to either games or the technology needed to play them on, let alone understand either them or their appeal. Furthermore, game-playing is often an activity that takes place away from adult's 'gaze', usually in closed bedrooms, or amongst friends. It is little surprise therefore that adults are suspicious of something they do not understand. This, of course, further adds to their appeal.

This represents what I term a 'technological gap' position. Criticisms of games are deemed to be rooted in adult failure to understand the form itself. In this study I want to consider the importance of new technological forms in establishing new non-material spaces in which young people can operate and, in particular, the importance that young people assign to such spaces. One of the issues that struck me about Runescape – as opposed to other game worlds I had visited – was the number of young people who played. Yee (2002) argues that in 'Everquest' - one of the largest

and most innovative of the first generation online RPGs - the average age of players is 26. But the majority of Runescape players I encountered seemed far younger. Game demographics are closely guarded commercial secrets and my repeated requests to Jagex to obtain details about the age of users were consistently denied.<sup>2</sup> Despite this lack of ‘official’ figures, I was able to estimate over the course of my study that the main user base concentrated between 11 – 16 years old, although there were, of course, other users outside of these parameters. This is further supported by a poll in one of the largest fan sites that estimated two-thirds of their respondents to be between 13 and 18.<sup>3</sup> I was interested to discover that Runescape was just one of many online accounts that they held; nearly every young person had, at the time, a ‘My Space’ profile, and many had further accounts on sites such as ‘Vampire Freaks’ ‘Bebo’ and ‘Facebook’, as well as being frequent visitors to chat rooms and forums.

Holloway and Valentine (2001) suggest that such social networking is central to the lives of young people and that virtual social relationships form an integral part of a wider and more complex system of interaction. For many of the young people I encountered, these virtual spaces were an important place. Most displayed a real sense of ownership over the places and spaces of these online networks. Although the young users were aware that there was an adult user-ship, they saw places such as ‘Runescape’, ‘Facebook’ and ‘MySpace’ as spaces in which they could escape from parents, hang out with friends and simply be ‘themselves’. Unlike the material world, ‘Runescape’ was not considered ‘adult-space’:

*“(it) belongs to us kids, I h8 that adults are on here....I sometimes will play on the PS with my dad but there’s no way that I gonna let him on here, its just all kindsa wrong” - Avrilsbf (13)*

*“I come on and just chill with my mates...no one hassles you, its sweeeeet lol”  
Legless42 (14)*

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<sup>2</sup> Somewhat ironically it later transpired that no one at Jagex had thought to keep this information anyway and that they later used aspects of this study to enhance their own user profile

<sup>3</sup> ([http://www.tip.it/runescape/?poll\\_id=22](http://www.tip.it/runescape/?poll_id=22)).



Such views would seem to indicate a degree of ownership of the space; that the world of the game offers some form of temporary liberation from the constraints of adult control in the material world. For young people, the desire to forge an identity separate from that of parents is a potent force. Virtual worlds often appear alien to an outsider, each has its own rituals and practices, often its own language. Of course this is exactly the point; they offer a secret world only accessible to the initiated.

But the enthusiasm of young people for virtual places also articulated an important contradiction. Whilst it is tempting to believe that the virtual somehow liberates from the material, it simultaneously remains defined by it. Merely 'being' in virtual space does not happen in a vacuum. How young people make sense of the space is ultimately defined by their social and cultural experiences in the material. Moreover, material space is itself defined through an adult discourse. At its most basic, this is about recognising the virtual as a technological creation. Young People may regard 'Runescape' as 'our space', 'Avrilsbjf' may resent adult participation in his world, but he cannot escape that the world itself was designed by and is maintained by adults.

The 'technological gap' argument I noted above, risks glossing over the adult influences operating within and behind virtual space. This is particularly pertinent in the wider consideration of computer games. I need to recognise that many adults have grown up with these games since they became firmly established in the mid-eighties. The history of the computer game points to the development of the form by a technical elite and, whilst it could be argued that the consoles – at least initially – represents a 'toy' (if that description in itself can be said to apply only to a children's plaything), the same could not be said of the computer, which arguably represents the main technological development that drove the form in its initial and mid-developmental stages. Poole suggests that technology has become domesticated and attributes this in part to the way computers and gaming consoles have become something of a 'playmate' (2001:172). Furthermore, computer games now occupy a central role in popular culture, influencing – and being influenced by – other cultural forms and as such, actors within western late-modernity find themselves situated with a bricolage of inter-textuality (Denzin and Lincoln 2003).

The divisions between how I might define adult and children's realms, and indeed between the material and the virtual, is becoming equally blurred. Yet there is still a tendency to see them as oppositional rather than inter-dependant. The emphasis on 'real', as detailed in the Daily Telegraph letter, exposes the underlying vulnerability of computer games to such criticisms. Within the argument I see the usual hierarchy of popular cultural forms; classic cultural forms such as literature – even popular literature – are seen as worthwhile, whilst the newer technological forms are rejected. This is an old debate and similar criticisms have been levelled at television, film and comics. What makes this attack slightly different is the underlying assumption that such activities are somehow not 'real'. The Virtual worlds and environments of computer games are seen as removed from those the material world.

### **Presence and Telepresence**

I can trace many of these concerns to some of the original commentaries about online spaces. In much of the earlier literature about cyberspace, virtual existence is often taken to be an extension of technology - an expression of hardware - rather than being experiential in its own right (Steuer 1992, Rheingold 1994). In the earliest considerations of the virtual, this consideration is somewhat rigid. Virtuality – or Virtual Reality (VR) as it is termed in this literature – is considered to be defined by the technology required to produce it and is seen as either a 'simulated environment' (Coates 1992) or an 'alternate world' (Gibson 1984) which is controlled and/or operated by an interface between the virtual world and the material. Gibson (1979) offers a different approach in his consideration of 'Prescence' which he describes as experience of the physical environment. In this sense it refers not to our surroundings as they exist in the physical world, but to the perception of those surroundings as mediated by internal mental processes, which are themselves shaped by additional factors such as present preoccupations or past experiences. Loomis (1992) considers this process in terms of externalization in which perception is referenced to as an external space beyond sensory organs. Steuer (1992) argues that when Gibson's thesis is applied to a virtual environment – when perception is mediated by a communication technology - the user is forced to perceive *two* separate environments simultaneously: the physical environment in which he/she is actually present, and the environment presented through the medium. Steuer refers to this process as

‘Telepresence’: the extent *‘to which one feels present in the mediated environment, rather than in the immediate physical environment.’* (1992:6).

But if ‘presence’ refers to the perception of an environment, and ‘telepresence’ to the mediated perception of an environment, like Steuer, I question how each might impact upon the other, and, perhaps more significantly, to what extent it can be argued that a telepresence experience is totally free from the medium through which it is created? This is a particularly salient question in terms of computer games. There are many attempts to identify the variables that affect the telepresence relationship with technology (Sheridan 1992, Zeltner 1992, Jones 1998, Filiciak 2003, Wolf 2001). Some writers (e.g. Rafeaeli 1988, Biocca 1992, Steuer 1992, Yates and Littlejohn 1999, Wright et al. 2002, Taylor 2005) see Virtuality as an expression of two technological strands: the aesthetic (Sound and Vision - or as Steuer describes it the *‘representational richness of the virtual environment’* 1992:11) and the interactivity of the virtual world. Virtuality, at its very essence, requires interactivity. In computer games this has tended to be seen simply in terms of interaction with the virtual world itself.

*“The distinctiveness of (video) games lies in interaction: the passivity of cinema and television is replaced by an environment in which the player’s actions have a direct and immediate consequence on the virtual world” (Stallabras 1993:102).*

I am not sure that I entirely accept Stallabras’s claim that the cinema and TV can be construed as ‘passive’ experiences, but his point about the specifically active nature of video games is well made. At the heart of every game lies the creation of a virtual space that needs to be explored or overcome to allow progression. Actors within these spaces’ are driven to solve the problems set by the environments so that they can see what further spectacle awaits them. Often the spectacle is defined by its relationship to the material (‘real’) world. But realism and the virtual are not essentially linked, even though there seems to be a popular assumption that, as technology advances, the games have become more ‘realistic’. The argument, usually put forward by the game designers, is that technological innovations in graphics – motion captured movement, the ability to render curved surfaces, near cinematic

visuals, shading that uses more colours than can be distinguished by the human eye – create a more ‘realistic’ gaming experience. As each new generation of hardware is pushed to its visual limits by designers, the next generation of consoles and graphic cards have each attempted to out do their predecessors in terms of what is often referred to by gamers as ‘eye-candy’ (a decorative distraction that adds little to game-play beyond visual pleasure). Some users have loved it. But many have complained of the virtual once again becoming defined by the aesthetic or, perhaps more accurately, the technology used to create it.

Despite the most accurate representations of the real world, as the writers in the Daily Telegraph remind us, such things are still patently not ‘real’. Given their assertions that children should get off their computer games and go and read a nice book instead, they clearly do not want them to be. So what is it that draws people into the telepresence environment of games and what is the reality that we are craving? Writers such as Elizabeth Reid (1994) have argued that virtuality is not merely a technological construction but is fundamentally a cultural process. Although her thesis is a consideration of text-based environments, her observations can equally be applied to the visual world of Runescape. It is not the technology itself which initiates and sustains the willingness of users to treat the virtual environment *as if* it were real. Rather, it is the extent to which the interface between *technology* and *gamer* acts as a means of expression for each player. As Reid suggests, ‘*within the construct, a representation of a person can be manipulated within the representation of a real or imagined environment, both of which can be manifested through the use of various technologies including computers*’ (1994: 63). In other words, virtual worlds exist neither in the technology used to represent them, nor purely in the minds of the user or participant, but in the relationship between internal mental constructs, wider social processes and practices, and the technologically generated representations that gamers assemble through their game playing. The illusion of reality lies not in the game itself but in the users’ willingness to treat the manifestations of their imaginings as if they were in fact real. As such, this mirrors the material world in the ways that cultural practices and processes constantly mediate it.

### **Better than the real**

Of course the inhabitants of Runescape do not simply interact with the game environment. The vibrancy of these sorts of games is that they necessitate interactions with other users. Within this sort of system, notions of realism and identity take on a deeper significance. The virtual identity of a user; their look, gender and race as represented by their choice of avatar; their name; their skills and characteristics; the way that they interact and speak; the language they use, represents the public 'face' of the user. Unlike the material world, such characteristics are not limited by biological or social forces but are subject to the freedom and choices of the user. This has led to a tendency to see virtual space as a means to liberate the user from the fixed identity of the material world.

Suler (1999) notes that Jim Bumgardner, the creator of Palace – inspired by Scott McCloud's concept of 'masking' in comics - believed that *'avatars enable people to maintain partial anonymity - which allows them to loosen up a bit. It's like going to a masquerade party. Seated behind their masks, people feel more free to say and do what they please'* (1999: 1). This idea of the virtual being a tool to mask the material is a recurring theme in writings about virtuality and virtual communities. Some writers (Massey 2005: 94) have seen the virtual as a means to liberate the user from the fixed identity of the material world. Lyles observes that, *'untainted by the social markers of race, class, ethnicity, and sex, truer individual identities can emerge'* (1996:114). Filiciak argues that *"our virtual self is closer to the image of ourselves than the one we present (in the material world) which is governed by requirements and expectations of real life'* (2003: 92/3). Inherent in these positions is the idea that somewhere under the mask is the 'real self' which can be revealed through theoretical deconstruction in much the same way the villain is unmasked at the end of a television show. However, as Hall (1990) points out, identity – whether virtual or material – is not fixed or given. The same point is made by Foucault (1978) who argues that identity is a discursive device – there is no 'real' identity existing *within* the self - rather identity and self should not be regarded as either fixed or permanent rather they form part of a shifting dynamic. Similarly, Haraway notes that *'The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly...'* (1991: 193). In one sense, this seems to suggest that the questions concerning the process operating

within a virtual identity are not that very different from those addressed toward material identity, and that I should consider the two, not as separate but as intrinsically linked; not a mask, but an interfacing of structures and processes.

On one hand then, this is a study about reality; what constitutes a reality and the relationship between one aspect of reality and another. As I will note again later, in 'Free Play – the politics of the video game' Parker (2004) suggests that the 'realism' of games lies not in the accurate re-creation of the material world as an aesthetic, but in its accurate re-creation of material social processes. Stallabras (1993) argues that computer and video games merely re-create the structures and practices of capitalist culture. I agree up to a point. Runescape, and games like it, certainly seemed to have a capitalist under-current. There were things to buy and the means to earn money to buy them - in fact without money it seemed as though it would be quite hard to progress very far; that axe was awfully big and inviting, and that suit of armour would certainly give me better protection from goblins. Since contemporary cultural forms are arenas in which culture is both produced and reproduced, I began to wonder if Runescape served as an agent of social reproduction. Yet as I began to observe the young people of Runescape, it appeared that for most, virtual identity was a symbolic mechanism to experiment with the institutions and structures of the material world free from the real or imagined constraints of those institutions and structures. The virtual environment of Runescape served as a site of symbolic resistant to 'adult' culture. Such a view would seem to echo that of Willis *et al.* in which young people use commercial cultural forms to '*establish their presence, identity and meaning*' (1990:2), as such it could be that Runescape represents a site of 'grounded aesthetics'. It seemed to resonate with a process '*whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and practices and where symbols and practices are selected, re-selected, highlighted and recomposed to resonate further appropriated and particularized meaning*' (ibid:21). At the juncture between production and reproduction young people are both objects and agents. Katz notes '*In the interchange, the social relations of production and reproduction that characterize a particular social formation at a given historical moment and geographical location are encountered, reproduced, altered, and resisted*' (2001:6). For Katz, it is the geographies of young people that are key this resistance.

I argue that Runescape is a *'geography'* of young people worth studying. It poses a number of questions about young people and the use they make of new technological spaces. But I did not come to Runescape expecting it to be a focus of study. Like most members I initially saw it as a 'fun place' to distract me from my work; a place where I could 'hang out with my friends' and play a bit of 'make believe'. Yet as I began to become involved with the game, I found myself visiting more often. I would log in 'just to finish that quest' or 'just to get a few more lobsters to sell tonight'. I was slowly being drawn into the virtual world. Soon I began to observe what was going on around me, to notice what other users were doing, how they conducted themselves, what sort of issues seemed important to them. I noticed that there were characters who liked to fight and gain status and respect from their feats in battle; there were entrepreneurs who exploited gaps in the virtual market space by selling scarce goods and resources: there were clans or friendship groups who seemed bound together by mutual support and inter-dependency; there were people looking for girl friends or boy friends and successful relationships that were sealed in wedding ceremonies; there were spiritual leaders; villains who would 'scam' new players – and take immense pride in their latest transgression; and heroes who saw their role as one of helping and assisting other players. Gradually it began to dawn on me that here was an entire social system made up almost entirely of young people, separate yet simultaneously connected to their material lives.

### **Research Questions:**

This led me to my key research question. I want to consider what uses young people are making of new online technological spaces such as 'Runescape' and, more specifically, investigate to what extent Runescape offers young people a site in which they can exercise both agency and communion? This question may seem simple but it spawns many sub-questions: What draws them into, and sustains their interest in the virtual arenas? Are such spaces merely 'entertainment space' or do they, as I suspect, offer something much more. As I have begun to suggest, related to this main investigation are questions about the opportunities that such places afford for symbolic experimentation – particularly in reference to identity – and about the role and nature of relationships that are forged in the virtual world. What form do interactions in this type of world take, and what importance is placed on interactions

with other players, the environment itself and the institutions and structures that exist within the virtual diagesis?

These questions lead to a second, integral but in some ways distinct area of investigation. This concerns the relationship between the virtual and material worlds. Are these two distinct realities or can one observe an inter-textual interplay between the two realms? If the virtual offers opportunities for symbolic experimentation with the structures and institutions of the material, then what influences does the material exert on virtual existence? Similarly, does virtuality offer liberation from the material, or merely an extension of it? Can it be argued that aspects of virtual symbolic experimentation 'bleed' back into the material realm? Indeed, is it adequate to make such concrete and clear distinctions between the two? Are they merely individual facets of a much larger interplay? These are complicated questions, - ones that are seldom addressed within Education and the broader fields of Youth Studies – and their scope extends far beyond the simple parameters of 'Runescape'.

The research was informed by my ethnographic imagination and consisted of a five year participative observation in world. Specifically, my data was drawn from:

- 1628 separate recorded In-Game virtual interactions/observations sessions. These represent game playing session i.e. occasions when I was logged into the game and recorded interactions and events. These varied in length but represent 4500 hours in the field
- 3247 on-line in-game virtual interviews/interactions. These were recorded interviews/interactions that formed part of the aforementioned observation sessions of which 2161 were with separate individuals.
- 50 Forum threads; a series of message postings around key topics and/or issues.
- 140 extended peer2peer virtual interviews/discussions



- 20 material focus group interviews
- 23 game observation in the material world

This represents a considerable amount of time in Runescape. In order to focus this study and address my earlier questions, I intend to concentrate on two broad practices: Identity and community. I argue that these are central to understanding the world of Runescape and the way that young people more broadly use virtual arenas. Many writers have stressed how virtual space provides opportunities to extend and experiment with identities. (Reid 1994, Turkle 1996, Kennedy 2005, Boellstorf 2008). In Runescape, the construction and maintenance of a virtual identity appears to be central to the ways that many young people structure and organise their virtual existence. Yet Virtual worlds are also highly interactive environments, in which new forms of social networks and collectives are emerging (Rheingold 1994, Jones 1998, Castells 2000, Taylor 2006). Thus I also wanted to explore how ideas of virtual community might be conceived of in Runescape.

Jagex lead developer Andrew Gower told Iron Forge Forum that that his virtual world *'represents the most popular and important virtual worlds in the Western World'* (Source Iron Forge realm). Although not as profitable as its rivals, Runescape boasts more users and more 'hits' than any similar virtual space and hence its importance and influence within the virtual field should not be under-estimated. Against such claims, I want to argue that 'Runescape' represents a microcosm of the virtual and as such provides vital and insightful clues as to what is happening within virtual space. Although I have chosen to describe it as a 'virtual world', Jagex presents Runescape as a RPG or 'Role Playing Game'. Thus many of the 'in-world' practices are associated with the narrative of the game dynamic itself – for example quests and skills development – or are broadly associated with 'living' a virtual 'life' in Runescape –for example earning money and trading. However, a range of practices have evolved that function alongside those directly associated with the game, which exist in vary degrees independent of the game narrative. Of these, the most popular is 'hanging out'. Runescape presents opportunities to meet friends, relax and *"to notice*

*and be noticed*” (Runescape user: thesaintuk). This does not appear to be very different from what young people do in the material world.

Corrigan (1976) observes the potent pleasure of simply hanging out in public spaces and this was certainly my experience of many of the young people I worked with as a Youth and Community Worker. I want to suggest that virtual space represents a new and ‘safe’ arena within which young people can undertake this age old and ‘normal’ activity. Since material space often offers young people a ‘risky’ environment (in terms of not just personal safety but more broadly in the ways that it is managed by ‘adult’ culture) I argue that virtual arenas provide alternative arenas within which young people can engage in what were formally just material practices. Thus there is a more fundamental theme running through this research; the thesis that virtual space and virtual culture is ‘everyday’. If Raymond William’s (1958) assertion that *culture is ordinary* is acceptable and valid, could it not also be argued that virtual culture is also ordinary? There is an ‘ordinariness’ about the way that young people use the technology. Virtual space is just one of a range of spaces they use and operate within. I observed how extraordinarily adept they are at moving between virtual and material domains. Conversations begun in the playground continue via phone and then in turn to, chat rooms, MSN or Runescape. Here, virtual space is not special; it is just another place to ‘hang out’, to meet friends, to chat, to just ‘be’. In this sense *telepresence* constitutes another aspect of *presence*.

Yet this ‘everydayness’ sits in contrast to the way that the virtual is treated in academic research. There appears to be a trend to celebrate – indeed venerate - the virtual realm as a disconnected focus of study. I believe there is a distinct danger of ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’ and within my research I argue the need to take a step back. The emergence of new areas of study based on anxieties of an emergent arena – for example, cyber-bullying, video-game violence – risks that these things are treated as distinct and different from their material counterparts. It suggests that (social) educators need to address new phenomenological concepts rather than consider the new *spaces* themselves. I am concerned that this risks severing the connections between the material and virtual phenomena and perpetuating the myth that what is being studied is somehow unique and disconnected. Such a position fails to notice that bullying is bullying regardless of whether it takes place via text,

telephone or indeed a note past around the classroom. Similarly violent play is violent play regardless of the perpetrator using a virtual chainsaw inside the dungeons of 'Quake' or the more popular – and some might argue 'acceptable' - pastime of running around the park pretending that a stick is a machine gun.

What I demonstrate in this study is that the virtual is highly connective and that the relationship with the material is complex but not necessarily distinct. Thus phenomena should not automatically be treated discretely – or separated from their material counterparts – simply because the arena they take place within is itself new. But I am not arguing that such things should not be studied in their own right or that they do not have special characteristics that need to be addressed. Indeed there is a curious contradiction running through much of the writing on the subject. Whilst there is a trend to celebrate the uniqueness offered by the virtual it is also, more often than not, articulated through existing discourses of analysis. This mismatch between material-based discourse and non-material subject has resulted in unsatisfactory attempts to squeeze the virtual into neat pre-existing analytical boxes. I will address this problem more specifically in Chapter 3 but want to be explicit from the outset that throughout this study is a subtext requiring some thinking outside of the existing 'academic box'. Rather than trying to fit the virtual into pre-existing structures, there is a need to be open to new, perhaps even challenging, conceptual paradigms. This requires that some of the things that are taken for granted need to be revisited and subverted. Prensky (2001) observes that there is a tension between those who grow up surrounded by technology – '*Digital Natives*' - and those who come to technology later - the '*Digital Immigrants*' (2001:1). I argue that the young inhabitants of Runescape, cyber socialised and immersed within a culture of the virtual, represent the 'Digital Natives' of Prensky's thesis. We, as academics and/or educators, can only approach such spaces as 'Digital Immigrants'; familiar, perhaps even competent, with its online practices and procedures but never truly socialised into its digital world. The natives and immigrants co-exist but sit in stark contrast to each other. Is it possible therefore, for us to truly understand the world as experienced by the 'native'? This is a question that has been the focus of all anthropological work in its attempts to 'get under the skin' of a culture (Boellstorff 2008). I argue that this study offers just such an attempt.

The study is structured in an organised and developmental way:

- In this chapter I have contextualized the study and posed the main questions and concerns that inform my analysis.
- In Chapter Two, I situate Runescape within the body of wider critical thought. I begin to explore some of the theoretical concerns raised by the study and I offer an overview of a range of theoretical positions that consider the wider debates around ideas of virtuality, identity and community. In this section I demonstrate that the virtual is in many ways similar to the material. I argue that a re-consideration of theoretical approaches is required to embrace the structures institutions and practices of the virtual world. I place Runescape into the wider historical and cultural context of gaming and consider how the development of virtual worlds has influenced the Runescape narrative. I question what are the main influences and issues that surround games and how are these linked to wider cultural concerns? In this section I also investigate the 'Fantasy' genre and begin to map how this aspect of Runescape is placed within a wider fantasy tradition.
- Chapter Three considers issues of Virtual Ethnography and explores the philosophical, ethical and methodological debates about new arenas of investigation. I situate my study within wider ethnographic approaches and argue that issues raised within the virtual world, pose similar methodological and ethical problems to those of material studies. I consider the ethical issues posed by working in a virtual 'field' and argue the legitimacy of my methodological and ethical approach to the research.
- Chapter Four and Chapter Five form the main presentation of the study. Chapter Four focuses much more specifically on Runescape as a narrative. I look at its development and how the commercial aspects of the game have shaped its structure. I also look much more closely at both the narrative, structure and gaming characteristics, and revisit the links with other Fantasy games that I began to explore in Chapter Two. In Chapter Five I address the

main question posed by the issues raised in the previous sections. The main data in both these chapters, consists of participative observations from within the Runescape world – the ‘Runescape Stories’ - and interviews with its young participants. As befits a consideration of a virtual environment, many of the interviews were conducted on-line, either through the various chat channels of the Runescape itself or through other interactive mechanisms such as MSM. This ‘virtual ethnographic’ data is contrasted with a slightly smaller series of interviews and observations from the material world.

- Chapter Six draws conclusions from the study and re-addresses the questions outlined in this introduction.

### **Endword**

Near the beginning of the Wachowski brothers’ film ‘The Matrix’, Morpheus attempts to show the hero, Neo, that what he believes to be his material life is really a virtual illusion. Neo is offered an opportunity and a choice. He can take the red pill and see the truth for himself, or he can take the blue pill and return, comfortably unaware, to the illusion of the Matrix. Morpheus urges Neo to take the red pill to see, just like Alice, how far the rabbit hole goes. Whilst ‘The Matrix’ seems far removed from the world of Runescape, this scene provides interesting parallels with aspects of this study. Virtual spaces such as Runescape raise complicated questions that extend far beyond the boundaries of the world itself. There is an interesting tension in such places; on the one hand they appear simple, childish places, yet on the other, as I have begun to explore in this chapter, they are sophisticated and highly interactive communities that pose questions about the nature of identity and how young people perceive and make sense of the world around them. This study is about taking that red pill. How far does the virtual rabbit hole extend?

## Chapter 2

### Identity, Community and On-line Games: A review of the Literature and a consideration of the Cultural and Historical context of MMORPG

#### Introduction

In the last chapter, I recalled that I was first drawn into the world of Runescape through my connections with Xena Palace. Up until then, my only experience of on-line social networking had been forums and chat rooms. All of a sudden I was confronted by a virtual interactive tool that looked like a game. Not only could I see the people I was talking to, but I could also see myself. I could present to the virtual world a graphic representation of myself. I could make my avatar look like anything I wanted to and quid pro quo I could be anything or anyone I wanted to be. The idea of ‘masking’ has been popular in understanding how identity is formed and maintained not just in virtual space, but in material space as well. I can see why such a model might be attractive to commentators of virtual worlds. The idea that the avatar acts as a mask behind which the ‘real’ material identity of the user can be hidden is a seductive image. That the mask can seemingly be manipulated at will permits some writers (e.g. Suler 1999, Lyles 1996,) to enthuse about the endless possibilities inherent in the virtual to extend what are seen as the limitations of the material. There is however also an under-current of suspicion, that somehow material identity offers more ‘authenticity’ than its virtual counterpart. Yet as I have noted, writers such as Hall (1990) and Foucault (1978) have argued for an understanding of identity that is more fluid and referenced within cultural patterns. Similarly, Haraway (1991) notes that *‘The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly...’* (1991: 193). In one sense, this seems to suggest that the questions concerning the process operating within a virtual identity are not that very different from those addressed towards material identity, and that we should consider the two, not as separate but as intrinsically linked; not a mask, but an interfacing of structures and processes. Moreover adopting a ‘masking’ approach seems to see virtual existence as something that is somehow bolted onto the real identity of the user and it seems to transcend the material in the same way that the super-heroes alter-ego extends his ‘ordinary’ self. I am not convinced that the virtual operates in such a mundane way. If we are looking

to understand virtual identity, it seems to me that we also need to investigate the same interfacing of structures between the virtual and material realms.

Since MMORPGs are in many ways defined by their virtual interactions and game-play, it seems that questions concerning the relationship between the virtual and material realms are key to understanding the internal processes and institutions of both 'Runescape' and its young audience. In this chapter I want to consider these questions of the virtual and the material; how are virtual identities constructed? What are the links between virtual and material identities and what are the implications of such links for our understanding of identity formation? In the highly interactive arenas of 'Runescape' how are collective identities constructed and maintained and what role do cultural norms, values and practices have to play in the dynamic?

### **Virtual Identity in 'Game Space'**

As I noted earlier, identity in virtual spaces has often been seen as an important starting point in considering the nature of the virtual experience. The idea that the virtual somehow extends or enhances the material makes aspects of identity important in establishing the validity or indeed the falseness of virtual space. For writers who operate against virtual spaces – those that Valentine and Holloway (2001) call the 'debunkers' - the ability to create an online identity that is somehow separate from material identity points to the constructivist nature of virtual space. How can it be real if it's all made up? The implication is that there is some degree of fixivity even authenticity within material realms that is disrupted or polluted when aspect of identity are created and transported to a virtual arena. But this gives a false impression of the material realm; it offers no more stability than the virtual arena and aspects of identity are neither clear cut nor necessarily more authentic. The idea that identity is discursive and constituted in material, social and cultural practices has a long history that circumscribes many critical positions. I want to begin by briefly considering a range of critical positions that have attempted to consider the nature of identity and its relationship with society and culture.

Calvert (2002) observes, Identity, at its most basic, is usually described by addressing the question "Who am I?" For Calvert, identity is often characterized in terms of an individual's self-definition or personality traits, their personal values or moral beliefs

and, interpersonal characteristics, all of which tend to be articulated within the roles and relationships taken on in various interactions. Similarly Asgari and Kaufman (2004) note that research has attempted to understand identity through the relationship between internal experiences and the external world (Calvert, 2002, citing Erikson, 1993, Freud, 1989, Jung, 1976, and Lacan, 1986). As I have already noted, masking has proved an attractive metaphor to explain this process. The idea of persona – a mask shaped by cultural requirements – runs through Jungian perspectives: Jacobi (1976) claims that masking is a direct result of the need to adapt to environmental constraints and conditions. In Freudian approaches ego is shaped by external processes: for example in relation to gender identity, childhood is seen as a process of ‘civilisation’ in which unacceptable feelings and actions are held in check or redirected towards socially sanctioned goals. However, identity can refer to at least two different aspects of the individual: an internalized notion of the self and the projected version of one’s internalized self. The external representation is not necessarily the same as one’s internal perception of self. Suler points out that ‘... *many people walk around in their [face to face] lives wearing ‘masks’ that are quite different than how they think and feel internally*’ (2000, para.2). Turkle further notes that people have always assumed shifting social roles when placed in different social situations, but that ‘*involvement with families and communities kept such cycling through under fairly stringent control*’ (1995: 179).

Yet these approaches seem to suggest that aspects of identity are based on internalized processes. Whilst not going so far as to claim that identity occurs in a vacuum, the links between the internal processes and the external environment appear to be weak. I would argue that identity is best understood in terms of an internal/external tension; internal identity and external (social) identity need to be considered in relation to each other. Boyd notes that internal identity refers to ‘*an individual’s self-perception in relation to their experiences and the world*’ (2001: .21), and that their social identity is perceived externally, ‘*relying not on the interaction, but the effective expression and perception of an individual’s presentation*’ (2001: 22). She argues that ‘the self’ may appear to become fragmented in different roles and different social contexts, but that this fragmentation is false. In different roles, people decide what facet of their identity they wish to express. Thus individuals simply fragment their social identities by maintaining and presenting multiple *facets* of their identity as appropriate. Boyd’s



approach echoes that of Hall (1996) who considers that 'post-modern' theories of identity have rejected notions of stability, rationality and autonomous self, in favour of a view that stresses a multi-faceted self, which is understood as being fragmented and incomplete. As Hall (1996) observes, the essential, unique, fixed, and coherent 'ego' of modernist Western philosophy is now depicted as diverse, dynamic and changing over historical time and social space.

The idea that there is a true self hiding behind a constructed façade is a concept that I find problematic. Lacan (1986) suggests that there is no internal self, no such thing as "the ego"; self has no multiplicity of parts, but only an external one. Here the unconscious is considered as another sign system - 'the unconscious is articulated like a language'. The unconscious is not unique to an individual, but is produced by culture. Lacan saw the unconscious as the construction of language and perceptions of others, there being no subject independent of language as has been argued by Barthes (1957). Thus there can be no separation between the subject and society, since society inhabits each individual. According to this view the individual can only draw from the cultural repertoire available to them. Rather than culture being produced by the self, the self is produced by culture. From this perspective, the self is not beyond language and ideology, but a complex and unstable network of differing subject positions.

Such a view is particularly pertinent to discussions on virtuality in which the creation of a virtual self reflects a range of cultural constructions that occur both within and outside of the virtual space and between what might be considered as game and not-game. The relationship between 'self' and culture is a useful tool for considering how identity might operate within popular cultural forms. Filiciak (2003) argues that identity can only be understood as a social and cultural construct regardless of internal processes, and that the number of social roles we are called on to 'play' has multiplied considerably due to the demands that society has placed on us. This is why (he argues) we are drawn to identify ourselves with, and against, social groups and structures. Such an approach is echoed in writers such as Laing (1961) who notes that man cannot assume any other identity than the one dictated by his environment. As I observed earlier, the internal and the external process are fused at the most basic level, but Laing maintains that it is impossible to separate

the two or indeed distinguish between them; we are what we are expected to be. The underlying assumption in positions such as Laing is that in society, need and identity formation are intrinsically linked. But there is also a danger that this approach assumes that the process takes place in isolation from other social processes and perhaps more importantly that the subject is aware of his/her identity – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say their subjectivity: their place and position within the process. In contrast, Althusser (1971), attempts to situate the process of identity formation into the wider ideological practices and institutions of society. He regards this as a seamless and invisible process in which identity appears natural and obvious and is situated within – and articulated through – ideological apparatus such as family, culture, the media and education.

Butler (1990) extends these ideas by identifying a process termed ‘Performativity’ in which forms of identity are internalized by the individual and culturally acquired and sustained by repetition and experience of cultural norms and values. When they are successfully absorbed, they form at least part of – or in some cases define - our lived subjectivity. Where this process breaks down they form the basis for counter-identification which involves a rejection of ideological norms and practices (Weedon 2004:6). Performativity is a useful tool for helping us understand how identity might be formed in a non material environment. There are good examples of this to be found in virtual arenas such as Runescape. Aspects of gender identity for example become defined by visual cultural markers such as modes of dress. Female avatars have a specific look – their own armour, style of dress – and it is this that initially defines their gender. As I will show later, some male users choose to adopt female avatars. How these ‘gender benders’ act out notions of gender depends on the sophistication with which they approach their adoptive identity. For some it will not move beyond a visual frame of reference, so to be a female character in Runescape will be defined by simply conforming to dress codes – looking like a women. For others there will be more sophisticated modes of play in which being a ‘women’ is integral to a more extended form of role play which might also include Fantasy race and class of adventurer. However notions of gender here will be set by cultural dictates whether they are material – ‘what it means to be a woman in the Western World in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century’ – or more developed popular cultural generic forms ‘What it means to be a woman in a

Fantasy environment'. Either way, identity is not fixed internally but directed by external cultural norms and practices.

Sunden (2003) suggests that, bodies – whether virtual or material – are not neutral objects. They are central reference points through which identities and social meanings are created. As such they are important, and sometimes contested, sites of social and cultural meaning. However, as in any system some meanings are afforded legitimacy and some are not. The body does not sit outside of this process. As Synnott (1993) notes, they act not just as a site within which identity is expressed, they also, because they are social constructions, offer or deny particular formations. Since the body shapes identity – in terms of how it is expressed through look, dress, actions – it also shapes the way that we form and participate within social relationships and communities. Just as material bodies shape and influence our material experiences, avatars – our virtual body – are crucial to our virtual experience.

Bodies, then, whether corporal or virtual, are important sites of cultural meaning, but as many writers (Duncan 1962, Palmer 1997, Foucault 1980) have attempted to demonstrate, the construction of meaning is in itself, not a simple process. We do not simply look at a picture of a body in a magazine, take meaning from it and then assume that the image has been decoded in the same way by everyone else. Representations change and shift with context, usage and historical circumstances. They are never finally fixed nor are they always real. Instead '*they are always being negotiated and inflected*' (Hall 1997: 9-10). This idea of identity – as signs, symbol and practice - is important to understanding the virtual realm. It is a cultural device through which identity is made visible, defining, at least in part, the values and meanings that go along with it. This is particularly pertinent in a highly semiotic environment such as the computer game. However visible signs of identity also signify difference and separation. As Weedon (2004) observes, '*Discourses of gender, help shape the materiality of both female and male bodies....Yet these same codes can also be used to subvert hegemonic meanings.*' (2004:7). Such difference, according to Neale, is the result of a 'comparison against the 'real' and the 'ideal' (1993: 41-44). This aspect of visual identity is often an important element of the 'resistance' of sub-cultural groups for example the 'theft' of 'City' style by 'Teddy Boys' in the 1950s (Hebdige 1979: 83). Icons – in this case clothing and objects –

form an important aspect of identity formation in Runescape where status is defined partially by class of armour and weapons worn by characters. It is also a process that can be subverted by for example choosing to wear a lower class of armour to hide one's true level or as a means of opting out of a system of representation.

So how might this process act within virtual systems? Mackay (2001) argues that central to this idea is emancipation – that users are freed from their social bonds by identification with and through their game character. As I have already noted, some authors (Rilestone 1996) have attempted to argue that it is through character that the player becomes engrossed in the fictional world. But King and Krzywinska (2006) point out that games sit at the site of the process of interpellation because the player is expected to take on a particular role rather than take on a more detached perspective - such as that offered by cinema - in which they have no control over the events on screen. As they rightly observe, the degree of interpellation is affected by the amount of 'critical distance' afforded by the type of game e.g. third person or first person perspectives. They see the process working in the general sense of the game hailing the player as an individual subject - offering itself up as an experience that requires a response from being already constituted as individual (always-already constituted). In this sense, games can be seen as one among many other sources that function effectively to constitute and confirm the status of the player as individual: creating a space that can only be occupied from one position, or in multi-player games, multiple single positions. This form of interpellation '*exists at the level of player as player who is self consciously aware of the act of playing (including all the material aspects that this involves) as well as the ability or potential ability, to function in terms of player identification with roles existing within the game*' (2006:198) This not only raises particular methodological issues that I want to explore in the next chapter but poses one of the major questions for this study: are players interpellated into the particular kinds of subjectivities offered by the in-game diagesis? Later in this study I want to suggest that this is precisely what happens.

In order to address such questions however, I need to consider the distinction between game and simulation. Historically many of the most popular games have been symbolic simulations of material processes. For example chess, which emerges in its most recognisable form in approximately the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, represents a strategy based

simulation of warfare; not only are there a range of units each with specific tactical skills available to each commander, but in the European version these have wider cultural and social connections. So for example the dominant class are represented by the King, the serfs by the Pawns, Church by the Bishop and military class by the Knight. (Interestingly similar classes of characters appear in later RPG and MMORPGs) The 'Queen' character was not given this term until relatively recently; originally called the 'General' he was an early example of an in-game character representing the player, the modern avatar may be seen as a direct descendant of this type of piece. Although often conceived as a form of entertainment, early war games also served a simulation and education function. In a sense, although the narratives may have changed, this core dynamic of education-simulation-entertainment has remained constant, particularly when one considers the origin of the popular 1980s computer game 'Missile Command' – which, according to Poole (2000) grew out of a military simulation designed to measure how many nuclear warheads a human radar operator could track before overload set in - and that the US Military are still using a variant of the FPS (First Person Shooter) 'DOOM' to train their marines. As war games developed, the simple board games became replaced by game-boards that represented real terrain and playing pieces that accurately (to one degree or another) simulated contemporary troops and their capabilities.

But there are of course differences in how 'simulation' operates in material games and in those controlled by a computer. In 'Killing Monsters', Jones argues that play '*is to enable children to pretend to be just what they know they will never be. Exploring in a safe and controlled context what is impossible or too dangerous or forbidden them is a crucial tool in accepting the limits of reality*' (2002:11) King and Krzywinska (2006) observe that such arguments stress that players are able to distinguish what constitutes the 'real' from what might be considered 'unreal'. This is an interesting contrast with more classic considerations of games. Caillois (1961) suggested that games were either rules or fiction but that rule-based games do not, and could not, have a make believe element. Juul (2005) in his commentary on Caillois, argued that video games have fused this distinction and were unique because they represented rules and fiction, an argument echoed by Atkins (2003). Earlier games studies, attempted to investigate the tension between narratology (games as stories) and ludology (games as something unique) – (see Murray 1997, Frasca 1999, King and

Krzywinska 2002). In this framework, 'Quests' – in game adventures - are sometimes seen as bridge between the open structure of games and the more closed narrative of the story. (see Tronstad 2001, Tosca 2003, Aarseth 2004) The basic idea is that the 'Quest' bridges the game rules and game fiction in that the game can contain a pre-defined sequence of events that the player then has to actualize or enact. In a broader perspective, Jenkins (2004) argues that video games form part of a larger complex of transmedia storytelling where content moves between a range of media, although writers such as Juul (2005) and Atkins (2003) reject the certainty of such a distinction arguing that games incorporate at least some elements of popular storytelling.

For something to have an impact at the level of fantasy does not mean that it has no cultural or ideological significance. Imaginations and fictions are like enacted realities, culturally shaped and culturally active. Particular assumptions are structured into game-play. These are understood as taking place within the wider structural contexts in which such assumptions are produced – within a specific historical-social framework. Broader notions such as game progression – or more correctly the concept of progress – and that individual action is likely to be effective are implicit in all games. The experience of these ideas and concept then contribute to their wider propagation which in turn have wider ideological implications when applied to understandings of the general world e.g. the notion of individual agency is deeply structured into western capitalist society. One of the pleasures of games is that the game-world creates an impression of always receiving clear feedback on actions, a dynamic that is far less clear cut in the material world. Playing games that offer these qualities may be understood as playing a part in a wider process in which such assumptions are confirmed and reconfirmed. Kurtz (2002) suggests that this provides the most potent level of interpellation in games. He argues that, interpellation at the level of the specific representational material of a game is reduced by the limits of the virtual-reality effect – by the player's constant awareness of essential out of game sources of information. The relationship in this context is not simply between player and game world, but a three-way exchange between representation; individual; technology - the point at which the player is most interpellated is not one of disappearance into the game, but that at which they manipulate the computer hardware to respond to the representational information from the game world. *'At this point the player articulates the very heart of liberal humanist ideology, the impulse to*

*counter the irrational and the unforeseen with individual free will' (2002:117)*

### **Community: Social connectivity in the virtual gaming arena**

But in a world such as Runescape, this process must be negotiated against a wider backdrop that includes social connectivity. Rather than the 'three-way' model argued above by Kurtz, there is a need to look at how this works in a four-way exchange between technology, representation, individual and *other players*. I want here to consider how social identities might operate within virtual space. Baudrillard argues that we have entered a state of 'hyperreality' in which the boundaries between reality and fiction have become blurred '*substituting signs of the real for the real itself*' (1997:167) Such notions underpin a consideration of social links in virtual space, and many writers (Jones 1995, Rheingold 1993, Kollock and Smith 1999, Shields 1996, Castells 2000) have attempted to theorize notions of meaningful social identity and community bonds within such a symbolic system. Urry (1985) observes that both space and time are cultural constructs operating within a dynamic tension between presence and absence. Meyrowitz (1985) notes that computer-mediated communication has led to a unification of state – a converging of space - leaving us with no real sense of place. Benedikt (1991) argues however that virtual space shares the same characteristics as material space in that it allows us freedom of movement: '*Cyberspace has geography, physics, a nature and a rule of human law. In cyberspace...(we)...can search, manipulate, create or control information directly...(the individual)...can live or die as he will*' (1991:123) Jones (1995) observes that such space is socially constructed and reconstructed which structures – and allows entry to – the social relations within it. Fernback extends this argument claiming that the virtual acts as a '*repository for cultural meaning – it is popular culture, its narratives created by its inhabitants that remind us who we are, it is life as lived and reproduced in pixels and virtual texts. It is sacred and profane, workspace and leisure space, it is battleground and nirvana, it is real and it is virtual, it is ontological and phenomenological*' (1997:37). Some writers such as Sennett (1990 1992) and Carey (1995) have extended this idea even further claiming that since public life is now so fragmented it is impossible to conceive of a 'public' in any symbolic sense and that we must seek out a new space for public life – the place of social and cultural interactions, of vitality and belonging. Virtual Space offers opportunities in this respect. Yet whilst virtual space indeed has a public dimension, it

also has a private sphere. This not only concerns the encoding and decoding of data – the privacy of the email or MSN Message against the public domain of the website – but also of the ‘place’ of the user who is simultaneously logged into the public arena of the virtual whilst perhaps being isolated (in a private bedroom) in the material. There exists in the virtual, a curious tension between public and private space, which in many ways becomes manifested in the creation of a cyber-community which are simultaneously both private and public (Fernbeck 1995).

As Cohen (1985) has argued, community represents a bounded territory which may be either physical or symbolic – or both; *‘People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity’* (Cohen 1985: 118). Yet, as Castells (1997) observes, in a network society identity is defined by the relation to the ‘net’ rather than to the traditional structures and sites of kinship. Thus we look to the net-society to provide the cultural experience once provided by these institutions. As Delanty (2003) notes, new technology is ‘cultural’ in the sense that it is increasingly embedded in social life, and that a sense of community within it is often defined by using communication to create the sense of belonging. Thus he argues, the internet – through online culture – might be seen as the most social of all forms of technology. But Sassen (2002) maintains that, digital networks are characterised by decentralized access, simultaneity and interconnectivity, the very characteristics that initiate global-based technological communication. These are the defining characteristics claims Delanty that allow communication and information technology to create and shape new forms of fluid community (2003:170).

From the very beginning of the internet, writers such as Baym (1995), Reid (1994), Rheingold (1993), were quick to outline the inter-relationship between social technology and interpersonal relationships. Individuals united by common goals and interest, interact in a variety of virtual arena – chat rooms, bulletin boards, ‘my space’ and of course online games/worlds. However unlike in face-to-face interactions, in which relationships are first initiated and only then topics of mutual interest sought, virtual users can go directly to the topics that interest them and immediately pursue interaction with similar minded others (Rheinold 1993). Some writers suggested that such virtual ‘communities’ are perhaps better conceived as a ‘pseudo-community’



(Beniger 1987:369) - networks not of primary interpersonal relationships but of impersonal associations integrated via a mass medium (McLaughlin et al 1997). Others (Curtis 1992, Jones 1995, Delanty 2003, Steinkeuhler 2004) stressed the similarity between virtual and material space and sought to make direct links with material conceptions of community.

But I am not certain that this rigid division between the 'real' and the virtual is helpful. Castells (2000) argues that in Computer-Mediated Communities, the material becomes immersed in a virtual setting. This process of 'Real Virtuality' rejects some of the 'classic' ideas of how community might be conceived of within a virtual setting. As one of the early theorists of virtual community, Rheingold (1993) had pointed out that whilst virtual communities can be referred against material relationships, the real and the virtual are quite distinct realities and that each community – the material (the *real*) and the virtual – do not exist in the other realm. Net communities were not material, and conversely when material communities sought virtual identities it somehow changed their character. But I feel that this is a somewhat difficult position to reconcile. As Castells (1996, 2001) observes, technology not only communicates experience but rather the process *is itself* experience – a level of reality in its own right and not a process removed from it (Castells 1996: 373). Thus as social movements, institutions, and organisations decline, in modern society, identity itself is becoming the fundamental source of social meaning. Individuals increasingly organise their identity not around what they do but on the basis of what they are, or believe they are. This process is enhanced by computer-mediated communication. Since its users are disembodied, they can be adopted into a community network when they begin to identify with a community to which they are not geographically bound. Castells terms this process '*Personalised Community*' (2001: 127) such an idea is particularly pertinent to Runescape.

However, this argument has been criticised by writers such as Calhoun (1998) and Delanty (2003), who argue – somewhat unfairly I feel - that virtual communities are fairly limited in their ability to unify the disparate. The media's ability to broaden the range of our experiences creates the illusion of greater contact in large social networks. Rather than creating 'communities, they are developing 'imagined communities' - merely the 'feeling' of belonging to some group; '*the internet matters*

*much more as a supplement to face-to-face community organization and movement activity than as a substitute for it*' (1998:382). As Delanty (2003) argues, whilst the internet is effective in supporting existing relationships it rarely creates new networks. Yet I find these positions problematic. The power of the virtual community is that it binds together highly diverse people into networks of sociability when they would not otherwise have very much in common. Whilst I am not certain that this differs from other 'communities of interest' where the 'interest' is the focus or 'rallying point' around which the members gather, I believe that Castells' points are well made. It could be argued that whilst Xena Palace merely brought together a community of interests – individuals who liked Xena and would probably have met at a fan convention – the 'queer community' who inhabited its virtual space were drawn there not only by their interest in Xena but also because they could engage in activities that could not be performed within their material community; for example open declarations of sexuality.

Jones suggests that analogies of material communities should not be the only criteria against which virtual collectives are considered as community, since new technology require us to invent novel strategies for structuring social relations (1995:26). Baym (1995) identifies how virtual interfaces have incorporated new semiotic devices to help discourse, and that a new 'virtual language' is emerging. The 'language' of the virtual might include 'Text Speak' e.g. 'cul8er', emoticons e.g. '☺' or abbreviations, e.g. OMG, BRB, LOL. Of course language as a semiotic system requires cultural knowledge to decode, therefore these devices further serve to demark community territory, and failure to engage in this discourse effectively means that an outsider is excluded. As Cohan (1985) notes symbolic boundaries of community (such as language) also act as excluding mechanisms ensuring the exclusivity of the members. But there are other processes at play here. For example, the manipulation of identity I considered in the previous section, and new sources of induction such as 'guides to netiquette' and 'online help'. As McLaughlin et al observe, *'Reply to' and threading conventions built into most online messaging systems impose a degree of interactivity and order on the unpunctuated stream of discourse that matches and in many cases exceeds the level of co-orientation found in face-to-face conversations* (1997:147). I might also mention here how in peer-to-peer systems such as 'MSN' there is the ability to re-visit parts of the conversation long after the interaction itself has ceased.

A popular activity amongst both Palace and Runescape members was to store the conversation log files and re-post them, sometimes months later. This is of course not possible in material interaction and demonstrates how aspects of virtual communication extend and build on material practices creating what might be described as a 'virtual collective memory'.

Fernback argues that there is an ideology in the virtual that is 'collectivist in orientation' which is seen to return a sense of humanity back to users. (1997:46) Slouka further suggests that the cultural concerns about virtuality is partially the result of a deep need in humans to regain control in an alternative world since the 'real' one has been paved over and become devoid of community spirit (1995:37). But behavioural norms not only structure the community but advance its interests by providing mechanisms of support, access and meaning. As MacKinnon (1995) notes, control and intervention are required to protect users from themselves. Kapur argues that virtual life *"is more egalitarian than elitist and more decentralized than hierarchical. It serves individuals and communities, not mass audiences"* (1993:53) McLaughlin (1995) argues that community is founded on the emergence of shared standards of conduct which are usually designed to facilitate or maintain social relations in the group, for example sanctions against 'botting' (the use of automated programmes to fish, mine etc) Rothaermel (2001) observe that the main challenge facing a community is an organisational one; to convert the vision of the founder to one that can sustain itself and nourish the members. McLaughlin, Osbourne and Ellison note that *'Strategies for the management of virtual spaces with respect to issues of power and control, authority, dominance and submission have evolved...as human and non human agents (moderators and webmasters, list servers and cancel bots) serve as gatekeepers, adjudicators and imposers of sanctions for misconduct'* (1997:147) Although these mechanisms for forming groups around common interests are well established, McLaughlin et al argue here that the most highly evolved system tend to be organised on 'chat-based' networks. Shirky (1995) points out that unlike the literary spaces of newsgroups and message boards (discussions organised in terms of topics and threads to which users can read and reply to at leisure) virtual chat represents a complex spatial process in which interaction takes place in real time and that this initiates a deeper sense of community. *'when people use real-time chat they are usually less interested in what's being discussed than in who is doing the*

*discussing, less interested text than in community'* (ibid. p92)

Chat is also an integral aspect of on-line gaming, and Shirky's comments have a particular relevance to the ways that MMORPGs foster user interactions between game environment, game play and other users. Yates and Littleton (1999) have argued for the need to examine the cultural context of player interactions. Wright et al (2002) considered the way that player interactions in the online version of the game 'counter-strike' can both reproduce and challenge everyday rules of social interaction. Conventional game-specific language used by players of online games (e.g. "afk" for away from keyboard) worked to create elements of '*egalitarian camaraderie and indeed comradeship*' (2002:6). But, they argue, the use of "insider" language should be considered separate from what they term 'creative game talk'. Mastering this "insider" language is necessary if a user wishes to graduate from a novice ("noob") to an experienced player. Mastery of this language, they observe, along with strategic playing skill, is an important route to recognition as an adept insider. While the use of this insider language marks a player as adept, it still remains conventional, easily adapted to a hierarchy of skills in game performance.

The diversity of game talk reveals a highly complex social world, structured by rules and social conventions that often appear invisible to outsiders. As Wright et al observe: '*through the playing of the game and negotiating conflicts one learns the meaning of the game, the meaning of "having fun." and that "having fun," is bound up with creative actions taken to enhance the pleasure of the game*' (2002:6). Meaning becomes, at least in part, embodied in the social mediations that go on between players, through both their talk with each other and by their performance within the game. Players learn rules of social comportment that reproduce codes of behaviour and established standards of conduct, while also safely experimenting with the violation of these codes.

Wright's observations about strategies of resistance are a recurring theme in theorization about online games. Kennedy (2005) notes how female Quake players use their online activities to subvert not only traditional female norms and values, but also to challenge the patriarchal structures from within which the norms are nurtured. The female Quake community acts as a rally point for female players, a site not only

of mutual support, but a virtual marker that declares their existence and defines their identity. In the engendered world of online first-person-shooters, this is also a subversive activity. *'through the creation of WebPages, websites and webrings these women are able to recognise and affirm each others identity as 'gamer' in opposition to an offline context where they are invisible, marginalised and frequently demeaned'* (2005:14)

Parker (2004) argues that the 'realism' of computer games lies in its re-working of material social processes. Stallabras (1993: 102) rejects video games as *'a capitalist and deeply conservative form of culture'* in that they trick players into imitating idealized markets and sweatshop labour through repetitive manipulation of game objects and numbers. Since contemporary cultural forms – including video games – are arenas in which culture is both produced and reproduced it is perhaps no surprise that Stallabras and others have argued that they are an agent of social reproduction. Yet as we have seen virtual identity and virtual collectives can offer a mechanism to experiment with the institutions and structures of the material world relatively free from the real or imagined constraints of those institutions and structures. Such a view echoes Willis et al (1990), in which young people use commercial cultural forms to *'establish their presence, identity and meaning'* (2). As such, virtual communities represent sites of 'grounded aesthetics' *'whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and practices and where symbols and practices are selected, re-selected, highlighted and recomposed to resonate further appropriated and particularized meaning'* (21). At the juncture between production and reproduction young people are both objects and subject agents. Katz (2001) notes *'in the interchange, the social relations of production and reproduction that characterize a particular social formation at a given historical moment and geographical location are encountered, reproduced, altered, and resisted'* (6). For Katz, it is social geographies that are crucial in this – the places and settings where interactions take place. The virtual worlds of MMORPGs provide just such a space.

Fernbeck (1997) observes that such subversions are an integral tension within the virtual community; between a reflection of the material and as a challenge to it. Whilst it can be argued that the online community can serve to reproduce existing structures, it can also undermine them and raises *'new possibilities for resistance from*

*the collective against the culture: the nature of dissent in cyberspace seems to indicate an embrace of post-modern notions of multinarrative discourse within a decentralized, fragmented public sphere whose only boundaries are institutional or socially constructed ones*'. (Fernbeck 1997:53) Dissonance within the online collective in part focuses on the formation of the collective itself. People searching for some new form of communal bonding or a new form of social existence '*within an essentially lawless frontier, themselves constituting a dissenting voice in the landscape of cultural experience*' (op.cit:53) The act of forming part of a virtual collective, operating within its norms and values and embracing its ideological perspectives, is itself a dissenting act and a rejection of individualist society.

### **MMORPG – Historical and Cultural Norms**

As I have argued, some theorizers have attempted to link online interactions and practices with those of material communities. Put simply, virtual interactions are described as communities because it feels 'right'. There are things that are recognisable in material communities, particularly the continuous presence of other users. Watson (1997) suggests that, we can tap into virtual communities for a wealth of information, or simply question a range of people from diverse backgrounds of knowledge – what Rheingold calls 'online brain trust' (1993: 13). The notion of community as an institutionally distinct group – to draw distinctions between groups of people according to the ideas that bind them together and which define them in relation to other groups of people or ideas – is well supported in certain types of virtual collectives. In this sense the virtual world offered by MMORPGs might be seen as '*affinity space*' (Gee 2007) – a site where people interact around a common passion. As I have noted, the argument that '*as groups develop over time they generate group specific meanings (eventually evolving) new forms of speech or genres unique to that community*' (Baym 1995:151) is well supported by some studies (for example Baym 1995, Wright et al. 2002). However, as I also acknowledged earlier, virtual interaction is conducted by users whose identities may have little correlation to the identity of the person utilizing them online. Virtuality inherently prevents the interpersonal identification and judgement process by which we normally evaluate each other in material interaction. Moreover virtuality allows most of these referential elements to be manipulated and subverted at will. Boyd (2001) believes that this allows us to get to know the entire individual, but Rheingold questions if

*'relationships and commitments as we know them (are) even possible in a place where identities are fluid?...(where we) deliberately experiment with fracturing traditional notions of identity by living as multiple simultaneous personae in different virtual neighbourhoods...where people lack the genuine personal commitments to one another that form the bedrock of ...community'* (1993:60-61) In short, this fluidity prevents you from truly getting to know the person because there is a sense of removal or lack of completeness built into the interaction. Yet such fluidity also exists in the material. All individuals present themselves strategically, in the material world and I would argue that a similar process operates within the virtual. Within the structuring dynamics of game worlds, communion is possible because other cues of importance have been developed, e.g. skill levels, combat rating, frequency of logging in etc which were triggered by different visual cues which transplant those of the material. For example the grade of armour worn in Runescape. (See also; Wright et al. 2002, Kennedy 2005, Dodge 1998).

But such cues are drawn from wider frames of reference which are substantially dependent upon the evolution of the virtual world as a 'game world'. In the case of Runescape these cues are perhaps best seen as an articulation of the wider western Fantasy tradition combined with norms and convention of an emergent games culture. As I noted earlier, computer games are similar to other cultural texts and forms, operating as they do within a series of 'normalizing' values and practices. These norms might include; expressions of technological development, conventions of genre as well as connectivity to wider conventions of non-virtual games-play, textual form and cultural positions. I want therefore to briefly place MMORPG into a historical context of computer games and consider the links between gaming and modern popular culture in order to fully understand how communion is defined and maintained.

Computer games have always represented potential affinity spaces. Like most emerging forms the computer game found its roots in something of a 'technical cult'. Writers differ as to what constitutes the first true computer game: some point to Higinbotham's tennis game in 1958 (Poole 2000, Herman 1997) whilst others cite Russell's 1962 'Spacewar' (Hertz 1996, Le Diberder & Le Diberder 1998). In both cases the games were designed initially to show off the technology available.

Higinbotham had developed his simple oscilloscope-based 'tennis' game as a means of entertaining public visitors to the nuclear research facility where he worked. Russell's MIT project, in which two spaceships duelled with each other whilst simultaneously attempting to avoid the gravitational pull of the sun, differed from Higinbotham's 'tennis' in that it was solely computer based - all be it a PDP-1 Mainframe Computer design for serious scientific research. Furthermore, it displayed many of the other characteristics that were to define subsequent games; it was well suited to quick battles, it followed simple rules, it required instant and well defined eye-to-hand co-ordination, it created a feeling of 'mastery' over a system, and perhaps most importantly in terms of this thesis, it represented a virtual expression of contemporary concerns; as Poole (2000) notes, few who played it would have been immune to the Cold War connotations of the text. Yet whilst Russell may lay claim to the creation of a more recognisable text, Higinbotham was the first to demonstrate how a digital platform could be controlled in an 'entertaining' and 'competitive' way.

Both models initially remained within a tight technical community. Higinbotham saw no reason to develop his ideas further and Russell, convinced that his 'Spacewar' creation had no commercial potential, freely distributed the source code with the result that variations on the 'Spacewar' theme soon began appearing on the developing mainframe network. There were of course good reasons for the lack of commercial development at this stage. Computers were still scarce, expensive and large; Herman (1997) points out that Digital Equipment Corporation only sold 50 PDP-1s and even in the early 1970s whilst the technical cult continued to produce even more sophisticated games there were still less than 55,000 computers worldwide (Economist 28.9.96). Despite the limited hardware, this period saw the templates for subsequent games and gaming genres designed and refined. Many of the gaming elements of MMORPG can be traced to a number of these games. An early example of the 'God' game, 'Hammurabi' gave the player control of a feudal kingdom in which decisions such as where and what crops were planted, how trade was shaped and the level of taxation effected the happiness of its citizens and hence the success of the 'ruler'. ADVENT emerged in the late 60s as a text based adventure game. Unlike the graphic-based interface of other games, players offered text based responses in what was essentially an interactive adventure story. These were perhaps the earliest example of a narrative being introduced to not just enhance game play, but to actually



drive it forward. Although arguably simpler in form these were refined into the MUD games that were to become some of the first online gaming interactions in the 1980s and which were a major influence on Andrew Gower in his Runescape designs.

Whilst such games were to be so influential to later game design – perhaps because they were continually refined in this early period – they initially proved somewhat too sophisticated for a wider audience unfamiliar with the media form. When technology made digital entertainment affordable (due mostly to IBM’s micro-chip advancements) it was the simple and instantly accessible games that became the most popular with the general public. Games such as ‘PONG’ – a sophisticated version of Higinbotham’s tennis – showed off the technology far better than mere text, but perhaps more importantly, they were quick and instantly gratifying. Rather than having to spend hours at a keyboard, PONG provided an instant gaming ‘hit’ and friends could play against each other. The game, marketing itself on the simple instruction ‘*avoid missing ball for high score*’ was launched by a then new company ATARI in 1972. By 1976 ATARI was sold to Warner for \$28 million and had produced over 10,000 PONG units. Magnavox produced a PONG clone for its new home console the ODYSSEY and firmly established simplicity and game-play as the overriding principles for commercial gaming success. These principles reached their antithesis in Taito’s 1978 hit ‘Space invaders’. The game sold 20,000 cabinets on initial American release and eventually went on to gross over \$500 million in its lifetime.

This early emphasis on computer games as texts that offer instant gratification, is important in understanding the ‘norms’ of game culture because for many commentators it is precisely this aspect of the text that has come to define the form. Hertz (1997) describes gaming texts that offer instant gratification as ‘twitch games’ Twitch-based gaming sits in contrast to games that require a more developed strategy element – for example God Games, Real Time Strategy (RTS) and Role Play Variants (RPG). The tension between ‘credible’ simulation and ‘twitch’ based entertainment forms part of the historical legacy which the MMORPG titles were to inherit. In the conclusion to ‘*The War-Games Handbook*’ Durrigan (2001) somewhat cynically makes the point that War-games have survived as a genre by adapting their parameters to include Fantasy computer games such as ‘World of WarCraft’ and

‘Myst’ which he sees as having diluted the more authentic and credible historical tradition of tabletop games:

*‘One can make the case that wargame sales are better than ever, if one simply changes the definition of a wargame. That’s what the market has done in response to market demands. But that’s like saying that historical fiction should be reflagged as history books because few people will buy and read real history books anymore. No, the problem is that historical wargames were always a small market because they emphasized information and analysis at the expense of entertainment. Any gamer who was not a wargamer immediately saw that. Now that computers have made it possible for many more people to play wargames, you should not be surprised that most of them want to be entertained, not put through a training course’ (2001: 60)*

As the main advocate of traditional war-games, Durrigan is attempting to argue a particular position here; that material war-games were all concerned with simulation rather than entertainment. I believe that such a view is open to question and, perhaps more fundamentally, there is also a failure here to acknowledge that elements of Fantasy gaming have always formed an important aspect of modern war-games. As Schick (1991) observes, some of the early modern war-games displayed a level of individualism more akin to MMORPG. Schick distinguishes between zero-sum games in which players oppose each other in a win/lose outcome and non-zero-sum, in which multi-players compete for a range of outcomes that are not necessarily oppositional. It is these non-zero-sum games that form the root of the more open-ended narratives and game-play of the MMORPG. Arneson and Gyax developed a system in which players controlled individual characters rather than armies – each piece represented a single character rather than unit of soldiers – and in 1971 produced a medieval war-game called ‘Chainmail’. Unlike previous games it not only utilised their character-driven game-play but also drew on Fantasy literature, in particular Tolkien’s ‘Lord of the Rings’ which had become popular across university campuses throughout the 60s. As Gurrera (1990) observes, not only did players now have control of an individual character with which they could identify, but it became possible for that character to cast spells or wield magic swords against fantastical mythic creatures (1990:64) In 1974 they published what was to become one of the major influences on MMORPG, ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ (D&D). Significantly, the

game was initially only popular on college campuses where it attracted ‘*a literate, educated following of fantasy fiction fans*’ (Guerra 1990: 65) a factor which would be significant in establishing the form amongst the emerging technical computer elite. By 1982 it was a major title that had been published in 14 different languages.

As Taylor (2006) points out that, D&D provides the basic structure for the MMORPG that were to emerge fifteen years later and represented a fundamental departure from traditional war-games. In the game, players create characters using a range of available skills and classes and then dice roll assign points to these skills which could range from armour or weapons carried to the physical and supernatural traits of individual races and classes. Data-sheets summarising the abilities of each character control the gameplay as each player adventures through previously determined scenarios. This process is usually devised and facilitated by a controlling player termed the ‘Dungeon Master’ (DM). ‘*This emphasis on group action, adventuring and characters built out of a combination of equipment and statistical data was carried over into computer gaming with the creation of MUDs*’ (2006;21). MacKay further observes that D&D set the discourse for MMORPG in terms of both the language that players use to interface with the virtual environment (e.g. ‘character class’ ‘hit points’ and ‘level’ are all terms which first emerge as part of the language of D&D and are eventually absorbed into other types of games) and in their approach to constructing visual environments out of generic Fantasy images and character types (2001: 23). He goes on to identify five characteristics of computer RPGs that were borrowed from D&D:

- 3D first-person perspective, immersive game-play
- Non Player Character Interaction (NPC or ‘Bots’)
- Responsive Environment
- Quantified assessment of character’s abilities
- Access to a map of the game environment

Interestingly Mackay cast doubt on whether some of the earliest computer controlled avatars can actually be identified as a character since in some of the first RPG computer games characters had limited vocabulary/interaction capabilities and were sometimes represented on-screen as merely a symbol. This seems somewhat harsh. In

conventional D&D players had to imagine their character interactions with both other players and NPCs in an immersive but wholly imagined virtual environment. The players frequently drew maps of areas, terrain and even architecture of particularly important sites that were described by the DM. Mackay notes that, the DM could also pass players maps after which they were free to shift from a first-person visualisation to topographical assessment as they surveyed the map (2001:24). Early computer games mimicked this turn-based game-play, with the computer assuming the role of the DM and with the principle focus being the creation of a character that was capable of withstanding the perils of the computer-generated environment. Since computer games are as much an expression of the available technology it is little surprise that some of the earliest games were crude in appearance compared with their material counterparts. It was not until technology was able to produce more recognisable graphical representations that the visual distinctions between material and virtual games could become blurred. Moreover, as I argue throughout this piece, it is the player's identification with the character and virtual world that is key to the game-play dynamic rather than the representation of character and world.

Perhaps the earliest virtual examples of this process were MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) and, as with D&D. The legacy of this game-form can be identified in the evolution of MMORPG. MUDs were an early example of online RPG, similar in tone and structure to MMORPG save that they offer a text-based rather than graphical virtual environment. Once logged in, users were confronted with a textual description of where they are. Taylor (2006) cites the first MUD text known as MUD1:

*'Narrow Road between Lands:*

*You are stood on a narrow road between The Land and whence you came. To the North and South are the small foothills of a pair of majestic mountains, with a large wall running round. To the West, the road continues, where in the distance you can see a thatched cottage opposite an ancient cemetery. The way out is to the East, where a shroud of mist covers the secret pass by which you entered The Land'* (2006: 22)

Users must type commands to interact with the game environment, for example, 'look', 'North', 'East', 'examine', 'shout' etc. They can move around the world and

take part in quests, socialize, possibly go virtual shopping or engage in whatever activities the MUD has on offer. Bartle (1990) details how, in 1979, he and a colleague Gary Trubshaw, developed the first MUD system at Essex University, which was initially conceived as ‘...*little more than a series of interconnected locations where you could move and chat*’ (1990:7). The game soon took on many of the characteristics of the D&D type Fantasy games and by 1980, MUD1 was immensely popular. Like Russell’s ‘Spacewar’ twenty years earlier, this initial expansion was confined to a technical elite, firstly within the university but very soon beyond it. The first external players formed part of a ‘packet switching system’ that Essex University were involved in but as more external lines became available word spread and the servers were filled to capacity nightly. King and Boreland note that in Bartle’s MUD ‘*the people he knew were the game, and these people became one of the first communities to bond wholly within the context of a game-based world*’ (2003:54). Taylor (2006) argues that the popularity of the game signalled a new turn in both gaming and online culture; multi-user virtual worlds, a process helped by Bartle and Trubshaw freely distributing copies of the code to other universities around the world (a situation that mirrored the earlier ‘Spacewar’ expansion)

*‘This early ethic of public source-code release with the MUD development community, and the fact that it intersected with an audience often largely based in universities (who had ready access to the internet and technology) spawned many adoptions and variations in the scene, helping fuel the growth of multi-players in genera’*” (2006:23)

In 1989 James Aspen developed TinyMUD which attempted to move the genre away from Fantasy elements to concentrate on socialising and world building. Keegan (1997) considers that TinyMUD was significant because it attempted to break the conventions surrounding Multi-user worlds. Mackay (2001) has stressed the importance of Fantasy literature to the development of D&D. The ‘college campus’ user base had embraced the game precisely because it articulated the themes and narrative of Tolkein which had captured the ‘freespirt’ of college America in the 60s, which itself had drawn on a wider folk tradition of the old-world – possibly as part of the rejection of modern American values. Subsequent RPG games remained within this genre because it was so popular but also because it provided a recognisable

discourse in which to operate. We can identify a similar occurrence in MUD development. The MUD1 clones emerging in the early 80s remained within a similar narrative framework, partly because authors enjoyed Fantasy gaming – which is why they played MUD1 in the first place – and partly because it provided a convenient source for ideas, spells, commands etc. (Bartle 1990). As I will examine shortly, there is also a more fundamental reason for the continuation of the approach; users had become socialised to the norms of a Fantasy environment, they were developing expectations of, and pleasure from, the genre, which itself was beginning to link with and be reflected by the wider popular culture. A ‘bricolage’ of popular cultural forms was beginning to develop around Fantasy.

The Fantasy framework holds a particular influence over the attraction offered by Runescape. Porter (1994) argues that in Fantasy RPG the importance of world settings began to emerge alongside the developments in MUD and MOO (MUD Object-Orientated – a MUD variant released in 1990), with particular emphasis on the role that social capital – currency, history, institutions – was to have on game-design. Fannon (1996) further observes that by 1996 one can identify a distinct discourse of RPG defined by story and a specific world setting that would be continually unveiled and developed as each episode in the saga unfolded. This offered RPG a new sense of continuity and soon RPG players were developing additional material to add further cultural dimensions to the Fantasy gaming world. MacKay (2001) notes, this new dimension of familiarity and nuance serves to further enhance the player’s sense of verisimilitude. The appeal of Fantasy RPG (he argues) is that it provides players with the opportunity to pretend to live within another world. However as he rightly points out, it only really becomes effective when the Fantasy elements are situated within wider popular culture. RPG maintained a reciprocal relationship with other cultural forms – comics, Fantasy films and novels TV – that influence it and are in turn influenced by it; RPG players are simultaneously producers and consumers of culture. In turn a permeable relationship between the Fantasy world of the game and the material world of the player can be identified.

It is interesting to note that whilst the RPG as a form lends itself to a range of narrative genres, it has tended to be the Fantasy genre that has come to define the game-form. Searles (1982) defines ‘Fantasy’ as *‘fiction wherein the people, places*

*and/or events are impossible or at least downright improbable...the fiction is told for its own sake and...attempts to convince the reader that the unlikely or improbable or impossible matters being narrated are true – at least for the duration of the reading of the story’ (182:171).* Searles terms this system ‘Coherent Fantasy’ and identifies a further sub-genre within it which he terms “Pure Fantasy”. This sub-genre can be identified by five narrative forms:

- A story in which ‘*someone from our world ventures, falls or is abducted into another more magical world’*
- ‘*works which take place entirely in magic worlds, with no concrete links to our time and place’*
- Stories where ‘*magical and fantastic events occur in our mundane world’*
- ‘*Stories in which animals think, speak and act with human intelligence’*
- ‘*Stories that have been handed down from time immemorial, the great legends of many cultures, which have been used by contemporary authors to provide new insights into the ancient myths or into our own time’*”

(1989:152-153)

Most role-playing games would seem to draw on the elements of the ‘Coherent Fantasy’ with ‘Pure Fantasy’ being the most popular narrative within it.

Searles argues that Fantasy is storytelling with the emphasis firmly on the story. ‘*Fantasy may be the last refuge of the honest-to-goodness storyteller’ (ibid: 171).* Conron (1989) asserts that the ‘*story must come first. You can’t start with a theme. If it’s the real thing the theme will be inherent in the story’ (1989:14)* Farrington further observes that ‘*The fantastic should weave in and out of the fabric (of the) story and not the emergency kit used to get...(the) hero or heroine out of a sticky situation!...the fantasy element should be so central that there would be no story without it’ (1989:9).* Fictional environments operate according to their own system of internal logic that drives and maintains the institutions and structures in much the same way that natural and social laws drive material society. The Tolkien model of Middle Earth – arguably one of the defining frameworks of RPG Fantasy – serves as a good example of this process. J.R.R. Tolkien created an entire civilisation within the Fantasy realm of ‘Middle Earth’, even going so far as to creating languages and

histories for the races that populated it's kingdoms, which have in turn become absorbed into the discourse of Fantasy. This pseudo-socio historical framework creates an impression of a *living* imaginary world. Farrington (1989) suggests that works like 'Lord of The Rings' tend to '*focus on a created world with it's own rules, customs, history and creatures*' (1989:6). As Fine (1983) notes, writers such as Tolkien:

*'...describe their fantasy histories, languages and mythologies as being real...they separate their belief in their creations from their belief in the existence of the world in which they reside. Yet they treat their creations as if they are real, maintaining their 'fabric of belief' and that they themselves are only historians writing the record of a civilisation...who must cast light on an obscurity in a historical document'* (1983:131)

As a process, this is not very different from the devices I detailed earlier in my consideration of how users make sense of virtual experience. It is also similar to the ways in which game designers attempt to create an empathic environment for their game-play. Rather than the critical distance of conventional war-games, the RPG Fantasy experience stresses an authentic, realistic world that exists and is continually changing and developing. Verisimilitude depends on the games ability to engross players and to convince them that the world is both believable and worthwhile. Rilestone (1996) argues that: '*we are indeed creating a fiction not a simulation: dealing not with reality but with the impression of reality, even the impression of fictional reality*' (1996: 3) I have already raised tension between gaming and simulation earlier in this chapter but what Rilestone is really attempting to identify here is how realities are mediated, maintained and controlled. Fictional reality '*maybe one in which untrained farm boys can shoot down elite soldiers ... (or) ... it maybe a wholly realistic representation of Medieval England....whatever it is we should be allowed to become engrossed in it: to accept it as real*' (*ibid*). In MMORPG this process of acceptance again occurs through the character or avatar. The character is the interface – the imagined point of contact – between the player and the fictional world. However, the fictional world also acts an arena within which this contact can take place and as such the nature of both the interaction and the role play are at least in part defined by the setting within which the narrative develops.



The fictional world of Middle Earth is a particularly influential setting for RPG because it is also a 'shared world', one that transcends Tolkien and has been adapted by many different authors and experienced through a range of different interfaces. In a sense Middle Earth has grown and changed in much the same way as a character itself. Perhaps the best example of this process is the Tolkienesque Star Wars Universe in which different aspects of the fictional world as depicted in the original six films have been developed across a range of additional media (novels, comics, video games) and by many different authors and artists. MacKay terms this process '*imaginary-entertainment environments*' - fictional settings that change over time as if they were real places and that are mediated through a range of forms (2001:29). They are collaborative in the sense that each informs and is in turn informed by the other, but at the same time, anonymous in that the brand name 'Star Wars' or 'Middle Earth' is more important than the individual contribution. Each time a new work is published, it serves as an update, a channel of fictional world narrative into our material world narrative. Baudrillard (1996) argues that the distinction between medium and message is no longer valid; the medium itself cannot be identified in a pure sense, rather it has been '*intangibly diffused and diffracted into the real*' (1996:30). Another interesting aspect of this phenomenon is that it allows participants to play an active role in the creation of the world through the channels offered by the various manifestations of Fandom. The traditional realms of 'producer' and 'consumer' are increasingly blurred; For example, the 'Runescape' realm has been vastly enhanced through mediums such as fan-fiction and websites which have extended the histories and philosophies of the fictional world far beyond the boundaries of the original game, ideas that are then recycled back into the 'official' universe when they are reflected in the weekly 'official' updates.

Of course, this process can only operate if there is consistency and a shared understanding of the fictional world. As I noted earlier, fictional worlds are structured by a system of logic - an artificially created set of rules that structure and bind these many disparate parts. Consequently characters, environments and institutions are required to act and behave within a prescribed system of belief that both legitimates and constrains the fictional reality. Some of the most contentious issues within forums often concern minor technical details: for example whether certain classes of character would wield particular types of weapons ('Runescape') or

whether ‘dwarf history’ would really sanction particular alliances (‘Warhammer’) To the uninitiated such things are dismissed as trivial – perhaps somewhat ‘geeky’ - yet to those with the necessary capital, it goes to heart of the systems realism and helps to moderate the development of the fictional world.

Such *‘imaginary-entertainment environments’* serve an empowering function, in the sense that they encourage an active relationship with the game culture. McNamara (1999) draws a distinction between real and imagined entertainment environments. The entertainment environment, he argues, is a space in which the spectator is mobile, autonomous and free to choose from a wide range of options from which he organises his event. Whereas in ‘entertainment environments’ it is material space that is transformed, in ‘imaginary-entertainment environments’ imagined space is experienced through a material interface, allowing the participants to experience the imaginary in a concrete (real) way. McNamara argues that this results not in a temporary transformed physical environment but a reconceptualised imaginary world. Schick (1991) observes that this system depends on the interfacing between Fantasy games and Fantasy genre, which itself finds its roots in an older model of consensus storytelling. Aarseth further argues that *‘new media do not appear in opposition to the old but as emulators of features and functions that are already invented’* (1997: 74). Both MacKay and McNamara consider then, that the RPG allows the actualization of something that has always been potentially present in all literature; the idea of the fictional world, autonomous from a discrete body of work that grows, changes and develops through the collaboration of many contributors.

The Fantasy genre has a rich and diverse heritage which is itself actualized through RPG. The original D&D games were loosely based on a Tolkien-inspired Fantasy world; whilst not a direct manifestation of Middle Earth, many of the races, concepts and ideas were recognisable. Holmes (1988) also acknowledges that the early generation RPGs touched on a wide literary base that included Edgar Rice Burrows, Robert E Howard, H Rider Haggard, A Merrit, H.P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith. Similarly Gygax (1983) acknowledges the debt of ‘Alice in Wonderland’ for inspiring the idea of a land beyond the rabbit hole – the central idea of ‘the dungeon’. These early games were not a direct manifestation of Fantasy world but rather an eclectic expression or pastiche of the genre. Second generation RPG (for example

Advance Dungeon and Dragons – AD&D – and the early commercially available PC Games) maintained a more reciprocal relationship with Fantasy Literature. Margaret Weiss' 'Dragonlance Trilogy' (first published 1984) was an attempt to book-match RPG and Literature. Kirchoff (1987) points out that each of the main characters in the series represented each of the main character classes in AD&D (although loosely based again on Tolkien character-classes) and the character's ethical and moral dispositions complimented AD&D system of alignments. Weiss acknowledges that she used the AD&D game to troubleshoot her concepts (Weiss 1995:1). The influence of these first and second generation games brought many people into the world of Fantasy literature. By 1996 TSR had published 12 modules of AD&D and 55 novels now used or featured the 'Dragonlance' setting (TSR 1997). More recently a similar strategy was adopted by Games Workshop who used their publishing arm 'Black Library' to extend and enhance the development of their 'Warhammer' and 'Warhammer 40k' tabletop and computer range of games. As MacKay (2001) points out:

*'TSR's strategy of using novels to stimulate interest in role playing successfully brought new role players into the fold. Readers were drawn to the game to discover what they were missing. In turn the publication of novels based on role playing games influenced the literary genre itself as new authors used the game as inspiration for their own tales' (2001:20)*

Poole (2000) stresses that we can see a similar cross-pollination in the realm of cinema, although he notes this has been less successful. Films based on games lose the main driving force behind games narratives, interactivity, whilst video games cannot match the technical aesthetic quality of film. Poole's thesis mainly concentrates on science-fiction and I am not sure that his criticisms are as cleanly imported into the Fantasy genre. It is interesting to note here that 'Fantasy' as a genre – at least in the way I have been discussing it so far - appears to be confined to literary forms. The nearest film genre that matches the narratives of D&D/AD&D is a small sub-genre termed 'Sword and Sorcery'. Looking at most Hollywood film databases, it soon becomes clear that there were no sword and sorcery films released in America prior to 1978. George Lucas' 'Star Wars' released in 1977, with its fairy tale undertones; *'in a galaxy far, far away...'*, a classic Fantasy narrative (a kingdom

under threat, a princess that needs rescuing) and characters that echoed those of Tolkien (Luke Skywalker's alliance resonates with the Fellowship in Tolkien's 'Ring' trilogy); demonstrated that Fantasy themes could not only be updated, but the technology now existed to realise them on screen. Weisbrot (1998) argues however, that there had always been an appetite for Fantasy on American television pointing to early shows such as 'Sheana Queen of the Jungle' (1955) and 'Wonder Woman' (1976) both of which demonstrated 'Pure Fantasy' characteristics. From 1978 onwards however, we see a plethora of Sword and Sorcery emerging from Hollywood studios: e.g. 'Hawk the Slayer' (1980), 'Conan The Barbarian' (1981), 'Ladyhawk' (1985) 'Dragonheart' (1996), 'Lord of The Rings' (2000). Within the context of this study, the influences of cinema are clear. Many of the Runescape users stated that they had been drawn to the Fantasy genre by favourite films and television: for older users 'Xena – Warrior Princess' was one of the most cited texts whilst for the younger player Peter Jackson's 'Lord of The Rings' series had proved most influential. This interest in the Fantasy genre represents a desire to return to a system of simple moral values: Devotees were

*'..looking for good versus evil, if not in real life then at least in (their) play life. Its initial popularity was `indicative, to some extent, of celebratory reaffirmation of it's fairy tale morality' (Mackay 2001:22)*

'Sword and Sorcery' cinema and Fantasy-inspired TV shows are simply part of this process. D&D/AD&D were to become slowly absorbed into the melange of Hollywood culture; 'Maze and Monsters' (1982) attempted to capture the tone and feel of RPG in a cinema whilst D&D itself became a CBS cartoon. Soon 'Dungeons & Dragons' became a sub-genre of Fantasy in its own right characterised by a certain ahistorical, piecemeal conflation of courtly romance literature, supernatural and gothic literature, folklore, mythology, social and cultural pre-occupations, morals and ethics, and as Eurasian history, all within the popular imagination of American Culture. As Fine observes:

*'The structure of Dungeons and Fantasy worlds reflects the American image of a potentially unlimited supply of treasure' (1983:76)*

## Virtual Fantasy and Social Space

Whilst the Fantasy Gaming provides the communal focus within which MMORPG could develop, it is important to also recognise that the development of online social world shaped how the form was to evolve and come to be used. Four years before the development of 'TinyMUD', 'Lucasfilms Games' had launched 'Habitat' an online graphical environment for multiple users. Any potential user could access the world providing that they had a home computer and modem. Once logged in they would experience a cartoon-like graphic representation of the world, themselves and other users. Just like in a conventional chat room, users were free to interact with others who were logged on at the same time, and in a similar fashion to MUDs they were also able to roam around the world interacting with whatever objects they discovered; the main difference was that this took place in a graphic rather than text-based environment – it looked like a game and in many ways felt like one too. Morningstar and Farmer (1990) observe that 'Habitat' was open and pluralistic in terms of its design. It had no fixed set of objectives, rather it offered a broad range of possibilities from which the user could choose depending on their own particular mood or motivation: these could either be free form (hanging out with friends), personal (running a business) or activities with established rules and/or goals (a treasure hunt). Taylor further notes that 'Habitat' represented a water-shed development in networked virtual worlds: *'It was one of the first online graphical spaces in which average computer users could fashion for themselves avatars and undertake living in a virtual world'* (2006:25) Habitat ceased to operate in 1990 but was reborn in a slightly different Japanese guise 'Populopolis' although the technology re-emerges in the US in 1995 as 'Dreamscape' and 'Vzones' these environments have become more sophisticated as they have developed. Users can now meet up with friends, role play, play mini games, buy and decorate their own virtual living space and participate fully in a virtual world. With an economy, housing system and emergent player culture, such places anticipate the mass virtual worlds of MMORPGs

'The Palace', was to offer another significant development. Developed in 1994 it borrowed many of the characteristics of 'Habitat', but also facilitated a high level of user customisation. Rather than being a single virtual world, 'The Palace' represented an interactive universe of diverse virtual worlds or palaces. Anyone with the

appropriate technical skill could set up their own palace and link into the Palace network. Suler (1999) notes that the Palace worlds consisted of three user-customisable components:

- The 'Room' or visual backdrop in which the interaction took place. Most palaces adopted visual themes – often based around interests or TV shows (Xena Palace for example) – and could consist of many different rooms;
- The Avatar or 'av' – the visual representations of the individuals in the room;
- Props – or objects that could be carried from palace to palace.

Although the Palace rooms were fixed by the owner of that Palace, avatars and props could be customised and a whole sub-culture grew up around their creation and distribution. As well as offering localised virtual interaction within individual rooms and palaces, the virtual network had the capacity for vast social interactions. The Palace Arena represented a huge interactive area in which I can remember watching with over 6000 other 'palacers' a live streaming of a major music concert – itself an indicator of how high profile The Palace had become!

Environments like 'Habitat' and 'The Palace' were 2D worlds offering a 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective. In 1996, Worlds Inc released 'Alphaworld', a 3D environment that was to become vastly influential in the development of virtual worlds. Unlike other customizable worlds 'AlphaWorld' initially only had one avatar - a faceless humanoid named 'Cy'. In terms of content it adopted a similar approach to other virtual worlds, interaction, building homes etc, however a more novel approach was that in order to access the community, potential users were invited to apply for "immigration numbers" that would allow them to become "citizens" of 'AlphaWorld'. The 3D environment of 'AlphaWorld' paved the way for a more game-based virtual social system and in the early 1990s graphical multi-user games emerged from the MUD tradition. These virtual spaces combined online interactive multiplayer MUD gameplay with the cultures and 'worldliness' of the graphical social networks. 'Meteridien59' (1996) and 'Diablo' (1996) offered players the opportunity to engage in online gameplay in real-time graphical space. But it was 'Ultima Online' released in 1997 that set the standard for the subsequent MMORPG development.

'Ultima Online' was the net-based successor to the more conventional 'Ultima' series of games, and within months of launch had passed the mythical 100,000 subscriber benchmark - far in excess of its MUD counterparts. It was standard RPG in the tradition of AD&D, but the online version exploited a wealth of virtual possibilities. Borrowing elements from GODGames, RTS and offline D&D, players found themselves immersed in a highly detailed virtual environment: they could design clothes for their avatars, look after pets - training them to do tricks, construct houses - which could be decorated and even include object d'art - trade, even run small businesses. But it was at the socio-cultural level that 'Ultima Online' was to be truly influential. Kolbert (2001) observes that it was one of the first examples in which items created within the virtual world were exchanged for hard currency in the material world. It also had to cope with a mass virtual unrest when 'citizens' stormed Lord British's stronghold in protest about the way the world was being administered. ('Lord British' was the virtual personae of the lead designer), thus the 'Ultima' administration had to tackle one of the biggest challenges to these game worlds; mass community management. When the next major world, 'EverQuest' launched in 1999, Internet users - many of whom in the United states now enjoyed the fast connection of Broadband - were well used to spending their leisure time online. The games culture was already well established with online capability becoming increasingly popular in the computer community and even the consoles via Sega's 'Dreamcast' beginning to explore net-based gaming. The success of 'EverQuest' really piggybacked on the earlier culture of MUDs and table-top gaming as well as drawing on other technical advances such as graphics, connection speeds and the well established virtual world culture.

'EverQuest' represents the MMORPG-backdrop against which 'Runescape' was to launch in 2001. Like 'EverQuest', 'Runescape' has many of the characteristics of a RPG: doing quests, hunting monsters, advancing a character through levels, and competing against fellow players. But on the other hand, unlike other game genres it has no real objectives - no set objectives or finishing line - there is no winning as such. It is open ended and offers the player no closure. Users are encouraged to immerse themselves within the virtual space and do with it what they will. Through this process users build identities, histories and communities. I need to acknowledge that whilst many genres have touched on some of these elements it is MMORPG that

have drawn all these aspects together. MUDs have a history of this type of social milieu and early virtual worlds also offered users a limited sense of gaming, so in many ways MMORPG is not a new genre entirely. MMORPG popularized what had already begun to form for a number of years the notion of shared persistent world environments full of both instrumental and free action. As Taylor (2006) observes in her study of 'EverQuest', MMORPG offer the user the chance to live and through that living, play.

### **Conclusion: Identity and Community in Runescape**

So how might the ideas I have been discussing operate in the virtual spaces of Runescape? I argue that MMORPGs as a games form more naturally lend themselves to a notion of affinity space and consequently a sense of communion than other genres. This is achieved through a sense of both game culture and the popularity and developed narratives of the Fantasy genre. They also offer their 'citizens' in varying degrees an extension of material spaces and processes. I think it is important to note that much of the initial writing concerning virtual space was confined to the text based environments of chat rooms and Multi-User Dungeons - MUDs (see for example, Reid 1994, 1995, Rheingold 1993, 1994, Turkle 1995, 1996 Curtis 1992, Rafaeli 1988). The emphasis of these text based environmental studies was that MUDs and chat rooms provided space for virtual peer-to-peer interaction in real time (enhancing the time-shift of conventional email). As I have noted, some writers (Rheingold 1993, Garton et al. 1997) have argued that the social relations were similar to those of material communities and attempted to theorise the formation and maintenance of virtual communities. The virtual world of the MMORPG considered in this study offers a further enhancement in that there is a graphic representation of both user and environment. Dodge (1998) suggests that this element provides a visible and tangible physical interface for interaction; the graphical identities of avatars offer a virtual mask similar those in MUD studies, but the anonymity of a graphic environment is very different from that found in text-only chat environments, where only the name you have chosen publicizes your online identity. The avatar, symbolically enhances – either consciously or unconsciously- aspects of your 'real' identity, they also allow people to create any kind of body that they want to present to others (Calvert, 2002). It gives you a 'look', which, perhaps more importantly, helps set up in users the sense of realism that is so important in the creation of cultural representations of identity.



MUDs and MMORPG are highly interactive environments. However, as I have noted, they differ from a simple chat interface in that they bring a virtual-social role and purpose to the arena. This helps to create a cultural framework in which the interaction takes place. In the case of Runescape this takes the form of a D&D inspired semi-medieval environment - towns, forests, dungeons, etc – within which users live their virtual lives. The narrative borrows heavily from the Western Fantasy tradition a genre that not only allows, but drives, many of the institutions and structures of the game dynamic. As I will suggest later, it is similar to a conventional (off-line) role-playing game in which the act of playing is defined by a sense of purpose and structure. Skirrow notes that the structure of video games can be seen as a sharing that of traditional folk-tales which *'provides the motivation for a hero to struggle with a villain which leads either to defeat for the hero ... or to his victory and return'* (1990: 322), an image that is particularly pertinent to the narratives of MMORPG. Turkle adds that *'at the heart of the computer culture is the idea of constructed 'rule-governed' worlds'* (1984:60), and that this feature of consistent formal (but not moral) rules appeals to children (op.cit:74). It is this structure that sets this type of virtual arena apart from other interactive social spaces.

As I showed earlier, virtuality at its very essence requires interactivity. Computer games are not just technological forms, they also operate within a social system of representation. As such they are important social and cultural spaces. Reid (1994) reminds us, that it is the inter-relationship between external technological and internalized social process that allow gamers to accept the creation of virtual worlds; the relationship between subjectivity, social processes and practices and the technologically generated representations which gamers assemble through their game playing. As I argued earlier, Poole (2000) describes this in terms of a symbolic interaction between various semiotic modes. Games operate on the level of 'icon' where objects, rather than being granted real physical attributes, exist principally as symbols: simple visual frames of reference whose significance is learnt like rules. But in some virtual environment this process becomes more complex and the process becomes inverted in that the virtual is ascribed physicality. We see an excellent example of this process in Dodge (1998) where he notes that *'The avatar seems to exhibit the same sense of personal space that bodies do in the real World'* (1998:8).

Jeffrey and Mark (1998) observe that passing through an avatar, whilst being technically possible, was considered impolite behaviour - Damer (1979) terms abuse of avatar space 'Avabuse' - so users tended to walk around other avatars as they would if the people were in material space. The illusion of reality lies not in the game itself but in the users' willingness to treat the manifestations of their imaginings as if they were in fact real. As such, this mirrors the continuous mediation of the material world by cultural and social practices. Of course inhabitants of virtual worlds do not simply interact with the game environment. The vibrancy of these sorts of games is that they necessitate interactions with other users. Within this sort of system, notions of realism, identity and social relationships take on a deeper significance. The virtual identity of a user; their look, gender and race as represented by their choice of avatar; their name; their skills and characteristics; the way that they interact and speak; the language they use; represents the public 'face' of the user. Unlike the material world, such characteristics are not limited by biological or social forces but are subject to freedom and choices of the user.

In this sense there are explicit links between the virtual and material domains. Turkle (1995) considers virtual arenas as space in which individuals construct multiple expressions of self – imaginative self or unexplored aspects of the self - in what she terms a '*culture of simulation*' (1995:9) As Asgari and Kaufman (2005) observe, some males may try out and explore feminine aspects of their personalities – the concept of 'gender bending' to which I referred earlier. Conversely, female users may choose to reject traditional notions of femininity in favour of more radical or oppositional expressions (e.g. Kennedy 2005, Taylor 2006). Such a notion again calls into question the idea of an inner self. In a later essay, Turkle (1996) argues that virtual space is a space for thinking about the material world. Rejecting the idea of unitary self in favour of multiple selves, she sees virtual space as an arena in which ideas of identity can be deconstructed and rebuilt as required, in this sense identity is both fluid and multiple. Shirky (1995) echoes this point claiming that identity is flexible in material communities as well as virtual ones, as we switch between multiple personae in accordance with situational constraints. For these writers, virtual space is a symbolic space an area of experimentation articulated through the material. Gee (2003, 2005) attempts to situate these ideas into the context of role-playing video games. He identifies 3 types of identity that are at stake:

- Real identity- this is really a person's material identity or aspects of identity that are manifested in the material world. This is the element that has direct link with the virtual since it is this that acts as a point of reference for virtual choices.
- Virtual identity – this is the symbolic identity, the one that is seen to liberate the material, the identity of the character in the world of the RPG.
- Projective identity – decisions of material identity that are projected into the virtual, for example whether the character will reflect or reject the user's material values and norms which are then mediated through the requirements of the virtual environment.

This can be a highly complex process. In the material world, there are areas of identity that an individual can control - work roles, ideological values, and social relationships. However, there are many other dimensions that individuals have little control over - biological sex, race, age, and other physical features - which are all important in construction of identity. In virtual environments, these areas can be controlled, making the exploration of identity more flexible (Calvert, 2002). In RPG games with their emphasis on character development this process is even more marked. 'Projected Self' within these environments reflects additional structures and processes such as skills, work trades, notions of being good or evil. Suler (1999) considers, the virtual offers gamers the chance to concentrate on a particular characteristic that they may not be able to express in the material world and as Castranova (2001) observes, in virtual worlds a user's virtual identity performs a social role and consequently '*the process of developing ... (user)...capital seems to invoke exactly the same risk and reward structures in the brain that are invoked by personal development in real life*' (2001:16). Boyd (2001) notes that whilst it may appear that some users can misrepresent themselves online by projecting a false image, this misrepresentation actually allows other users access to all that could be potentially seen about them – 'the projected self' as fusion of material and virtual.

Projected identity in this sense can be linked back to the ideas of Lacan I explored in the earlier section. Lacan (1986) considered identity in terms of a mirror; ego

formation is dependent on reference to and against external objects, through which the individual believes him/herself to be whole, autonomous and unified. Lacan stresses that this process places the ego within a symbolic matrix – an observing individual and sign within a symbolic series of signs, but at the same time dividing the ‘self’ from the ‘self’ as sign and referent. Weber (1991) notes that within this process the *‘the ego comes to be by taking the place of the imaginary other’* (1991:14) Thus ‘self’ and ‘other’ can only be understood as whole or complete when considered in relation to the other. The reflected image must be instantly recognizably related to the physical body in order to maintain identification.

I can see this process working in the material/virtual dynamic. In the material this reflective process provides a source of feedback that allows the individual to modify their projection to convey the image they wish to present. In the virtual this process takes place in much the same way but through the use of avatar – the digital representation of self. By controlling this representation – through look, language and behaviour - the individual is able to perceive themselves. Schleiner (2001) observes that in video games, the user develops his/her character/avatar and constructs his/her identity through the reflective connectivity that his/her identification has with the avatar’s movements in game space. The avatar operates as an externalized Lacanian “mirror image” of the player; Users are exploring their identity through their virtual characters but they are reflecting themselves through those images - how they want others to see them. The avatar therefore performs as both self and other. As ‘Self’ it is bound to the player through a keyboard, mouse or controller - it reduplicates and renders in visible form the player’s actions. But at the same time it is ‘other’, both limited and freed by its difference from the user it can accomplish more than the user alone (see Rehak 2003). This is best illustrated by the avatars ability to rejuvenate after being killed – the user’s failure within the game dynamic. *‘Rapid-fire representations of violence and death ...and the formal mechanisms by which avatars can be paused, erased or restarted are necessary moments in the cycle of rebirth: a staging within technology of the player’s own vicious circle of ego-confirmation’* (2003:107). In this respect it has been noted that: *‘computer games provide the ultimate chance to eliminate regret’* (Loftus & Loftus 1983: 33)

But there is a problem here. As Weedon (2004) points out, in Lacanian theory this

process is itself a misrepresentation. Far from being autonomous and unified, individual subjectivity is divided and based on misrecognition – the identification with ‘other’ (the mirror) is merely an attempt to cope with this fragmentation. Similarly there is no truly reflective avatar in the sense that it is a visual image of the player that seems to stare back and duplicate actions as would a reflection in a mirror. The avatar is a reflection of embodied reality in respect not of appearance but of control (Rehak 2003:107) Moreover within the Lacanian perspective, the ability to control meaning and symbolic order is beyond subjectivity. The language of representation pre-dates the representative process and represents a discursive position. Thus, whilst it appears that the user can model their avatar at will, they are in fact only able to create a visual representation from those that are available in the game. Similarly how that representation is decoded – and how language, behaviour and practice are themselves represented – will be articulated through a discourse as will the users attitude to the structures and processes of the virtual world. Whilst virtuality potentially removes the *control and consequential* elements of the material world, the cultural and societal forces that help us make sense of material existence remain constant: we always come from somewhere. As we observed in the previous section, by logging into the virtual an individual can choose to be male or female, black or white, to engage in virtual work or not, but their understanding of what it actually means to be a man or a woman – the nature of an oppositional discursive position should they choose to adopt one -, a black or a white character, the role and function of work – or indeed the contrast between work and leisure – will have been shaped by their cultural experience. Identity in the virtual is not a blank canvas and virtual space remains a discursive arena *already shaped* by the social and cultural. It offers no liberation from the material world, but an intriguing interface between two planes of existence

A player in a virtual world is not a transparent medium. Players provide a link between external and internal cultural patterns: the real and the virtual. In virtual worlds and online games like Runescape, players can change their physical appearance and virtual persona at will. The player’s material identities remain hidden behind a virtual mask but the virtual identity constructed can articulate a number of discursive positions. These may co-exist or, perhaps, conflict with the player’s actual material world. In everyday life, many physical characteristics are unalterable, and

this fixity underpins a range of social opportunities, social constraints and social institutions. As we have already noted, Foucault (1978), Bourdieu (1984) and others have pointed out that identity is inscribed on the physical body and as Reid notes, *'Social structures based on bias towards... differing portions of humanity depend on the ease to which we can assess each others bodies and ascribe identity to physical form'* (1994). Once the fixity of physical form is stripped away by the absence of constraint that virtual worlds afford, cultural meaning can be *virtually* manipulated at will. *'The physical world...is a place where the identity and position of the people you communicate with are well known, fixed and highly visible. In cyberspace, everyone is in the dark...On top of the technologically imposed constraints, we who populate cyberspace, deliberately experiment with fractioning traditional notions of identity by living as multiple simultaneous personae in different virtual neighbourhoods'* (Rheingold 1993:61) In these circumstances, the physical self adopts the role of symbol and becomes a kind of virtual *cyborg*. (Haraway 1991, Butler 1992, Reid 1994). This manifests a constructed and embodied self *beyond* the physical, existing in a world where identity is, at least partially, self-defined rather than pre-ordained. As Filiciak observes *'we cannot talk anymore about a single identity that produces temporary identities subordinate to itself...we should rather talk about hyperidentity which is related to identity as a hypertext to a text'* (2003:97) It is a process that is continually updated rather than a finished formation. This is the ultimate late modernity, in which identity is, however temporarily or transitory, not *given* but *made* (Bauman 1997:71).

I argue therefore that critical considerations are often problematic. There has been a tendency to adopt a 'make fit' approach where material based theories are shoe-horned into ideas and observations of virtual space. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, Valentine and Holloway (2001) identify two main strands in the consideration of virtual space: the 'Boosters' who see the virtual arena as a valid space that provides opportunity to improve on the material; and the 'debunkers' who consider virtuality as less authentic than material space, a poor copy of the real. Both strands have had a tendency to keep the material and the virtual separate; they are distinct and discrete. Virtuality and materiality are understood in opposition to each other but not as a fluid and dynamic interface. In the remainder of this study, I want to demonstrate that in Runescape a dichotomous model of the virtual/material

relationship is no longer useful. Online and offline worlds are inter-related in complicated ways. Some critical writers have attempted to point to the ways that virtual space and online identities and communities are tied to wider norms, values, identities and networks. They are structured by both technology and culture and the relationships between the two. However, it seems to me that such a neat compartmentalization of both virtual and material space fails to grasp the dynamic nature of both. A user's relationship with both the material and the virtual is not so clear cut. Young people have a blurred and messier dialogue with online and offline identities, social networks, and the cultural contexts within which these are created and maintained. For many young people, virtual space is a somewhat mundane space amongst many other spaces – they have become adept at moving between virtual and material spaces and the contexts, identities and networks within which they operate seep between realms. This is particularly pertinent as material public space is increasingly denied to young people. I want to argue, for a more dynamic and porous understanding of virtual space. Runescape represents an opportunity to study how such a model might be conceived.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

In this chapter I want to outline how the data in this study was collected and consider what methodological and ethical issues might be encountered working within a virtual environment. There is a temptation to see researching virtual, rather than material, space as problematic; particularly whether ‘cultural immersion’, and therefore ethnography, can actually happen within a virtual arena. This reflects the questions I began to consider in the last chapter of whether virtual environments are in any sense ‘real’: indeed, whether they can be understood as ‘spaces’ at all. In this study, I take the view that virtual space offers a context for ‘agency’ and it constitutes a sense of ‘being in the world’ (Hillis 1999:78). As we have seen it has much in common with the material world, and any methodological tension between material and virtual should be rejected. If data collection is rigorous, then the process and validity of ethnography in virtual space should be recognised as any other ethnography (Hine, 2000, 2005). Mann and Stewart (2000) note that one of the major challenges for the on-line researcher is to move from meeting people ‘in the flesh’ in the material world to working in the insubstantiality of the virtual arena. In ‘virtual ethnography’ the researcher must *‘actively engage with people in online spaces in order to write the story of their situated context, informed by social interaction’* (Crichton and Kinash, 2003:2). But there is a problem. Since virtual space offers some anonymity, Mason (1996) and Suler (1999) both stress that researchers should identify themselves within the research process. Suler admits that whilst this can reduce research objectivity, it is the very *subjectivity* of virtual ethnography that is its strength; *‘... one’s thoughts and feelings... are refined into a powerful tool. By joining and participating in the group to be studied, the researcher becomes the very thing s/he is studying’* (1999:1). I wish to suggest that this reflexivity is fundamental to all qualitative research, particularly ethnography and later in this chapter I will argue that concerns over non-disclosed research – what might be described as covert observations - within a virtual setting are misplaced; not only is such research valuable, but it is both legitimate and ethical.



### **Towards an ‘Ethnographic’ (?) study**

This study took place over a period of five years participation in Runescape and in this sense it takes the form of an ethnographic style study. A range of data was gathered from within the game world (whilst I was a participant in the game), collected from related sources (forums and newsgroup postings) and from interviews with gamers. The majority of data was collected from the virtual using the public and private ‘chat’ mechanism built into the Runescape interface outlined elsewhere, or using additional peer2peer tools such as Microsoft Messenger. Some interviews were conducted in the material world in the form of small focus groups or during observations of young people playing the game. It is a fundamental assertion in this study that since Runescape represents a fusion of both virtual and material experience, and that since both sources are acknowledged to carry equal validity, it is appropriate to cite data from each without distinction.

The study consists of the following range of data:

- 1628 separate recorded In-Game virtual interactions/observations sessions. These represent game playing session i.e. occasions when I was logged into the game and recorded interactions and events. These varied in length but represent 4500 hours in the field
- 3247 on-line in-game virtual interviews/interactions. These were recorded interviews/interactions that formed part of the aforementioned observation sessions of which 2161 were with separate individuals.
- 50 Forum threads; a series of message postings around key topics and/or issues.
- 140 extended peer2peer virtual interviews/discussions
- 20 material focus group interviews

- 23 game observation in the material world

This represents a considerable amount of time logged into the game and generated a range of different types of raw data. Schwandt (1997) argues that what constitutes the data within a piece of research is ultimately dictated by what the researcher is hoping to uncover. In order to understand the richness and complexities of Runescape an ethnographic style participative observation approach seemed the only viable method. Hine argues that this research method helps *'make explicit the taken for granted and often tacit ways in which people make sense of their lives'* (2005:5). The ethnographer seems to operate between worlds as both native yet also a stranger. This sort of research method requires a complete immersion in the virtual world. Genzuk (2003) notes that an ethnographic approach is informed by three main methodological principles:

- **Naturalism.** This stresses that research needs to take place in 'natural' settings – those that exist independently of the research process. This idea rejects the artificial nature of experiments or indeed arenas and settings set up principally as a setting for research. It stresses first hand contact with the phenomena under research as opposed inferences from experiments or what participants say in interviews about what they do elsewhere. Naturalism also implies that social events, practices and processes are explained in terms of their relationship to the context in which they occur. This implies that ethnographic researchers need to develop ways to reduce – or remove – the impact of their behavior on the setting being studied. In this respect, participant observation is a particularly useful ethnographic method.
- **Understanding.** This idea highlights a 'constructionist' perspective. Ethnography seeks to reject casual or mechanistic causality in terms of social behaviour, concentrating on the need to gain an understanding of the cultural perspectives on which behaviours are based. Genzuk (2003) argues that this is particularly important in more familiar settings since the risk of 'misunderstanding' behaviours decreases with familiarity to the setting. Thus, it is necessary to learn the culture of the group being studied before valid

explanations can be produced for the behaviour of its members. In this respect, participant observation and unstructured interviewing are important to the ethnographic method.

- **Discovery.** Ethnographic methods highlight a process of ‘discovery’ rather than one of ‘testing’ a specific idea or hypothesis. Thus, whilst research begins with a wider interest in certain social phenomena it is subsequently focused as the research proceeds. Similarly, and in parallel, theoretical ideas that frame descriptions and explanations of what is observed are developed over the course of the research.

Hammersley (1990) identifies a range of ‘key features’ through which these themes are expressed:

- People's behaviour is studied in everyday contexts, rather than under experimental conditions created by the researcher.
- Data is gathered from a range of sources, but observation and/or relatively informal conversations are usually the main ones.
- The approach to data collection is ‘unstructured’ in the sense that it does not involve following through a detailed plan set up at the beginning; nor are the categories used for interpreting what people say and do predetermined or fixed. This does not mean that the research is unsystematic; simply that initially the data is collected in as raw a form, and on as wide a front, as feasible.
- The focus is usually a single setting or group
- The analysis of the data involves interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions and mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis often playing a subordinate role.

As a set of methods, ethnography is not far removed from the sort of approach that I use in everyday life to make sense of my surroundings. Similarly, in the virtual world of Runescape, there is a wealth of data that helps me to unpick how users make sense

of their everyday virtual lives. In this sense, everything in Runescape constituted data; choices of name; the choices and ‘looks’ of avatars; the choice of clothing and weapons/items carried; the places that users chose to meet (or not meet); the classes of character and the specialist skills that users chose to concentrate on; the social networks – both formal and informal - that users engaged in; the practices, rituals and institutions of the world. All these aspects of the virtual world help to unpack its culture in a similar way to that of the material world. But I was also interested in the user – what does it ‘mean’ to be a Runescape citizen. Morrow (2005) argues that whilst academics have been very good at studying children – concentrating on what they *do* – researchers have been less adept at giving them a voice in research. In this sense, participant observation was less important than giving users a ‘voice’. I wanted to know how it ‘felt’ to be a ‘player killer’, to be ‘scammed’, to be a ‘high level mage’. Why might a player ‘gender bend’ or follow their clan leader? Thus much of the data presented in this study – in keeping with the ‘naturalistic’ theme of ethnography – is formed from the words of the participants themselves.

I would argue that any ethnographic approach requires a long term commitment. The world you experience as a ‘noob’ is not the same world experienced as a well developed player, established tradesman or clan member. The dynamic nature of the world means that it is continually updating and some of the developments have long term impacts that perhaps do not become apparent in the early stages. I think it is a little like being transported to a far away and alien culture and being expected to find meaningful data and commentary after spending a week there. There is data to find of course but I might well question how valid it might be. Over the course of this study, Runescape has developed from a bedroom operation, through version 1 into Runescape 2. The world is un-recognisable from those early days and indeed some of the initial data I collected is now no longer representative of the new society. But it is this aspect that makes a world such as Runescape so exciting. Like real life it continually moves on and at best I can only offer a snapshot at any given time.

Of course, as the game developed I developed too, not only as a player but in my understanding of the game. ‘Playing’ Runescape requires users to grapple with many of the structures and institutions of the world – what Denzin and Lincoln (2003) describe as a bricolage of techniques and practices. Because one of the themes of this

study is the inter-relationship between material and the virtual, I attempted to move between the two arenas and be mindful of how aspects of the world impacted on both game and non-game space. The extended networks that surround the game – both material and virtual – were important in this respect. Although I spent time with players in material space, I attempted to focus most of my research time in-world. This is after all a study of a virtual space. Although aspects of the material are integral to the way that I make sense of what I observed in-world, what I am interested in are the ways that I make sense of the material as referenced *through* the virtual not despite it.

### **Too much data! – organisation and reduction**

Studying Runescape produced a great deal of data that needed to be organized in a rational and systematic way. Dey (1993) notes there are two main categories of analysis open to the qualitative researcher – content analysis and thematic analysis. Content analysis is arguably the more simple method. Using this method, the researcher evaluates the frequency and saliency of particular words, phrases or ideas within the raw data in order to identify keywords or repeated ideas. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) argue that whilst content analysis is both efficient and reliable, its usefulness for the ethnographer is limited because it fails to take into account the context within which the data was generated. Thematic analysis in contrast, moves beyond counting words and focuses on identifying and describing implicit and explicit ideas and themes. Each approach can be either ‘driven’ by the data itself or by the theory or hypothesis that the researcher wants to assess. Theory driven approaches are guided by specific ideas or theoretical positions, thus analysis categories are often determined prior to the consideration of the data. In a data driven process, it is the data itself that forms the basis for developing the analytical paradigms. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) note that the two positions are not mutually exclusive, each can borrow aspects of the other. Thus, theory-driven analysis does not preclude the analyst from uncovering emergent, data-driven themes, which may then be added to the analysis, and similarly data-driven analyses may generate theories to explain emergent structure. For this study I wanted to adopt the most flexible approach to help me deconstruct the world of Runescape. I felt that a hybrid of data-driven and theory-driven thematic analysis offered the most

appropriate scope for this ethnography, in that it provided a more nuanced approach to the analytical process.

Whilst the collection of raw data might be described as a ‘naturalistic’ process, the subsequent organization, reduction, analysis and presentation processes, remove the data from the setting within which it was generated. This is of course true of any ethnographic research – it might be argued of all qualitative studies – but as Hine (2000) acknowledges, this process is seen to have particular implications for virtual data since it is removed from the very thing that gave it meaning – its virtuality – and placed into a material setting. I am not certain how much of a ‘problem’ this really is. In this study I am arguing for the inter-relationship between the material and the virtual, thus each is, in research terms, an aspect of the other. In this respect virtual data cannot be seen to be wholly a product of its virtual setting but rather as a product of the porosity between the virtual and the material. Thus its removal from setting is no different than the process that occurs in material qualitative research

Working in the graphical worlds of the virtual offered some distinct advantages in terms of my data analysis. Mann and Stewart observe that in conventional qualitative research ‘*moving from data to theory usually involves a preliminary process of reconstituting field notes and oral data as text*’ (2000:193). Sometimes, as part of the data reduction process, aspects of data become lost or lose their context – usually at the point of transcription. As Seidman warns, within this process, participant’s thoughts ‘*become embodied in their words. To substitute the researcher’s paraphrasing or summaries of what participants say for their actual words is to substitute the researcher’s consciousness for that of the participant*’ (1991:87) Both Runescape and the peer2peer technologies – particularly MSN – allowed me to keep a copy of the conversation log, thus the digitally generated script of participant’s interactions was always available in their complete form. In virtual interactions, language is ‘played out’ in very visual ways, thus ‘emoticons’ (for example ☺ - happy, ☹- sad, :P - joke) and other aspects of ‘netiquette’ (for example ‘LOL’ – laugh out loud,) add further depth. Morgan (1988) observes that in focus groups, aspects of non verbal behaviour is seldom noted, thus in many ways transcripts form little more than a record of what had been said. The depth offered by a visualized form of language, allowed me to side-step this problem. The participants in my study

had become adept at using text based communication to convey complex emotional ideas. Furthermore, the use of screenshots (the ability to ‘digitally photograph’ the Runescape screen) allowed me to keep visual records both setting and context. Thus, I no longer needed to intercede in turning ‘reality’ into text. *‘Analysis can begin from data which are not already coloured by the researcher’s theoretical and methodological choices – choices which can construct a different version of events’* (Mann and Stewart 2000: 193)

As I noted earlier, I had already been a Runescape user for about a year prior to beginning my research thus, in keeping with data-driven analysis, I set up a series of ‘key-codes’ from which all subsequent sub-codes would be drawn. Initially these were based around the ‘key skills’ discussed in chapter 4 which in turn were cross referenced to ‘class’ of character and ‘level’ of character. These were then further cross –referenced wherever possible to virtual gender and material age (when available). I also noted locations and kept screenshots for references about armour, weapons, clothing and high status items. Therefore in the initial stages, I could identify for example, all ‘interactions involving female fishers’ or ‘what weapons were carried by male fighters of level 77 and above’ Whilst forum postings offered less focused information, many were class specific, therefore it was possible to make informed guesses as to the virtual make-up of some of the participants. For example the ‘lightning’ forum was usually populated by ‘smiths’, ‘miners’ and ‘armourers’ thus, whilst postings to this forum were not exclusively about these topics I could make an informed decision that the views being expressed represented those of users who under-took trade-based roles in the world. Material generated data (for example focus groups and observations) was coded separately from my virtual data as I wanted to use it as a control.

As my study increased, this simple method of coding was no longer adequate to explore the richness of the culture I was observing. Although I kept my original frames of gender, class, skills and level – these forming the primary structures of Runescape – I began to introduce codes based around emerging structures, practices and popular concerns (for example: Clans, Player Killing, Scamming, Trading, Luring etc) Some of these were time specific (for example ‘holidays’ – see ‘*Combatgrll8*’ comments in Chapter 5) whilst others appeared to be endemic (for example user

comments about Jagex). I also introduced coding frames based on themes I had identified from my observations (for examples attitude to leisure, work, gender-bending). Later, some users – for example ‘Brimmy’ ‘TronsQueen’ and the ‘Cathaby Shark Gurlz’ – were treated separately to the main data. This was because, they either had ‘celebrity’ status within Runescape (for example ‘Brimmy’) and as such warranted independent analysis, not least because they had access to high-level items or because I spent so much time with them that they formed an independent study in their own right (for example the ‘Cathaby Shark Gurlz’) This latter group were useful as part of the ‘control’ mechanism, against which other responses could be analysed, and as a wider barometer of emerging trends and concerns in the world (new skills, practices or items). Of course, my research concentrated on different aspects of the world at different times so not all the codes were ‘active’ all the time or at the same time. Although I ended up with a great many codes, these were then re-synthesised and combined to address the specific areas of this study after my fieldwork had finished. I used two main codes in line with my research themes: Identity and Community. I also introduced a third umbrella-code which I termed ‘In-game Practices’. This covered observations that initially did not fall into the other codes or which I felt revealed aspects of the narrative of the world. This ended up forming much of the data presented in Chapter 4. Within each there were a number of ‘contextualizing’ sub-codes. (For example: identity/gender; community/clans; practices/scamming) which helped me organize my data into categories that reflected the areas of importance I had identified from my in-game observations. This made the task of tracking the data manageable and allowed me to build up a ‘library’ of data streams coded around key themes and ideas. It also provided a means of structuring long in-world sessions into manageable analytical sections. Often the same section addressed a number of themes but this is to be expected in a vibrant world such as Runescape.

Whilst the idea is fairly simple, I found that this coding framework provided me with a systematic way of organising my data and perhaps more importantly offered a mechanism that facilitated formative analysis. This form of structural coding enabled me to track a large number of themes in large data logs whilst affording the flexibility to adapt to changes in the Runescape environment – for example the introduction of Runescape 2. Miles and Huberman (1994) observe that the analytical process is



dynamic. Thus analytical frameworks must be flexible in order to reflect the vibrancy of what is being researched. Runescape is a continually changing setting, I needed to be able to adapt the ways that I organised my data in order to keep track of this dynamic environment. As I noted earlier, it was not just the world that was changing, but also my role and status within it. Far more of the world is available to higher status and/or experienced players. The data collected as a ‘noob’, whilst being valuable, is different from the experiences of being a seasoned user – if only in terms of who you can speak to, who will speak to *you* and more importantly what you can actually speak about. I argue that my analytical framework grew as I grew in the world, and thus expresses the Runescape experience. Morrow (2001) argues that one of the difficulties of studying children in any setting is that the researcher can only approach the data as an adult – it can never be seen in the same way that its young participants experience it. I suspect that this is something that many ethnographic-style studies struggle with but it highlights how the key aspects of the method become lost in the analytical process. In my journey from the ‘childhood of noobdom’ to the ‘adulthood’ of seasoned player I was able to analyse my data from *within* each stage of development not from outside it, or subsequent to it. Thus the development of both my analytical framework, and my subsequent ethnographic narratives, reflect my development as a virtual citizen as much as they reflect my development as a researcher of Runescape.

### **Researching Runescape culture.**

I argue that studying social spaces such as Runescape requires a subtle shifting of what is considered as ‘social’ and ‘space’. Jones, observes that since material researchers typically travel to material places to study material culture, can it equally be argued that travel to virtual ‘places’ is similarly possible – for, in the virtual, ‘*is there a “there” there?*’ (1999:18). As I discussed in the last chapter, this also questions whether when I get ‘*there*’ I can claim to be even meeting ‘people’. Sheilds (1996) asks, if identities are flexible, swappable and disconnected from real-world bodies, can it really be said that I am studying ‘real’ people? I think that this is a false question. As I argued earlier, to dismiss virtual identity as somehow not ‘real’ is unhelpful. In this respect, a consideration of what constitutes ‘field’ in a virtual world is central to how this problem is resolved. ‘*Should we consider the Internet an environment in itself or should we consider it a complementary part or an extension*

*of our own environment?*' (Sudweeks and Simoff 1999:31) or is it, as I suggested in the last chapter a porous fusion of the two?

The writers who see the virtual world as an extension of the material world do so because virtual experience is at all times tethered in some fashion to material experience' (Jones, 1999). *'the idea that you can isolate anything, any one piece of your life, and try to define it without referring to all that is connected to it is nonsense'* (Horn 1998: 46). In this sense how I make sense of the virtual is to some degree referenced through the way that I make sense of the material. I would further argue that there is much evidence to suggest that many members of virtual communities extend relationships maintained online to real-life interaction (Stone 1991, Turkel 1995, Parks and Floyd 1996). Thus there is considerable 'spill-over' between the two realms. Denzin argues that when a virtual world is seen as an extension of the material world it follows that the meanings transmitted by virtual communication are seen to be formed by, and associated with, material life yet are also tied by conceptual language to the embodied world: *"cyber-narratives are grounded in the everyday lives and biographies of (those) who write them"* (1999:108). Reid (1994) and Kendall (1999) argued very early on that the social context of the material influences and shapes online behaviours; *"participants draw on their offline resources as well as understandings gained in offline experiences to negotiate and interpret their online interaction"* (1999:58). Since the ways that I make sense of both virtual and material situations and interactions are themselves products of past material and virtual experiences, it also follows that virtual data that is generated by virtual research must itself reflect both spheres

If the links between the virtual and the material are so strong, I might question if it is possible to argue in methodological terms that virtual worlds represent discrete fields. Whilst some writers attempt to argue that virtual space represents a fictionalized space beyond material existence (Gibson 1984), most appear to acknowledge that a virtual arena cannot be conceived as a single culture but rather as a series of spaces that are somehow different from both each other and from material existence. The focus of many studies is how these differences are manifested and articulated. As Reid notes, researchers who view virtual worlds as separate fields generate data from communities of common interest and affinity spaces *"whose specialise meanings*

*allow the sharing of imagined realities*” (1995:183). A similar argument is put forward by Gee (2007) in his consideration of the links between computer game culture and affinity spaces. Thus it is the combination of a range of factors – norms/values, institutions, practices and interactions – that creates the ‘there’ under investigation (Fernback 1999)

Schwandt (1997) notes that “*what constitutes data depends on ones enquiry purpose and the question one seeks to answer*” (1997:60). Studies which are focuses on virtual culture seem to imply that a virtual world may be seen as either an environment in itself or, at worst a simulation of some aspect of the material and at best an extension of it. However, as I have noted, there is an inherent falseness in such a dichotomy. The danger of approaching the virtual and the material as distinct and discrete is that much of the richness of practice and interaction that occurs in each is lost. Research needs to focus *between* worlds rather than just within them. Playing Runescape is about moving between the game, the game world and other non-game spaces including the material. That additional influences slip into field is in itself the vitality and richness of the field. External factors are not pollutants to be kept out, but a vibrant and valid aspect of the data.

Although I have chosen to conceive of my research arena in this way, Runescape still presents practical methodological issues that need to be addressed. One of the interesting aspects of virtual research across many arenas is that there appears to be a common and shared understanding of norms and common standards of online behaviours and language. Some writers (For example Rinaldi 1996) have argued that these form the ethical framework for online behaviour. Whilst I will consider this again within my wider discussion of ethics, ‘Netiquette’ as a concept can be understood in two ways. Firstly it can mean a set of conventions and rules which structure all kinds of practice in online area – the norms and practices of the Runescape world for example. Secondly it is often used to refer to standards of courtesy in the virtual environment – such as not walking through another user’s avatar. One of the main devices in the study of a virtual world such as Runescape is the ‘chat interface’. I found that in Runescape’s chat windows, as in other online games, text tended to follow the rules of conversation, rather than the formality usually associated with writing. Thus I considered typos and other mistakes to be

more acceptable because I saw them as the textual equivalent of ‘umming’ and ‘ahhing’. Similarly slang (‘ROFL’ – ‘rolling on the floor laughing’) Phonetic writing (‘2day’ ‘B4’) and the use of emoticons (‘:P’ ‘☺’) were also acceptable since they helped fill in some of the missing context I discussed earlier. Wherever possible I have quoted text as it appeared rather than attempt to ‘edit’ or ‘correct’. Such an approach contrasts with the more formal exchanges that might be expected in email or forum posts for example.

But in many other ways, research based on virtual interaction mirrors that of its material counterpart. As with any other forms of qualitative research, online interaction should not be inappropriately edited and a comprehensive description of the virtual research context is always required. The management of the interaction is subtly different however. When I am required to structure or regulate virtual ‘real time’ chat – such as peer2peer - my involvement automatically becomes part of the log, the electronic record or script for the session. In this sense I also become part of the dynamics of the session. Mann and Stewart (2000) point out that whilst in FTF a tape or video recorder can be switched off in order to allow an issue to be sorted out, in online environments the text is the only means of communication. They acknowledge that researchers need to make a case by case decision about whether editing out this material is somehow interfering with a participants own words. But again, I am not certain that this differs significantly in spirit from a FTF exchange. Whilst the mechanism might be different, the editing out of a section of log rather than simply not recording it in the first place, I believe that this simply forms part of the structuring and management of any research interaction. Furthermore, there is a ‘transparency’ in recording such interjections so that I can assess it later as to its appropriateness. If rules and expectations are outlined from the beginning and if necessary participants are given the opportunity to respond to these statements, then I argue that I am seen to be involving and even empowering my participants. I would argue that heavy handed facilitation may constitute unethical practice, particularly if it constrains the participants so that they feel their opinions are not valued. This resonates with much of Morrow’s (2005) criticism of academic research involving children and young people, in particular her claim that in many cases research is something that is done *to* young people rather than *with* them. As they are not active

within the research process the experience is not empowering and in many cases it actively dis-empowers young participants.

When I was undertaking my research I tried to ensure that I was mindful to these considerations and the wider methodological issues I identified earlier. However there were also practical issues that, to varying degrees, affected the way that the research developed. In order to maintain the integrity of the Runescape virtual arena and in keeping with the ethnographic approach and philosophy of the study, it seemed appropriate to use the main interactive tools of the world – its private and public ‘chat’ windows – as the main tool for data collection. This kept me in touch with my research arena in the sense that I could experience exactly what my co-participants were experiencing – I would view events from the same interface ‘window’, hear the same sounds, see the same text. I did not need to rely on interpretation since I was there. It also helped mute some of the inherent difficulties within the virtual text based interactions that I discussed earlier in this chapter. However it is a very limited tool for complex interaction and on occasion when more complicated or private responses were required I found that I was required to use additional peer2peer technology. This was mainly for practical reasons: during busy periods of interaction it is extremely hard to follow the thread of a conversation using the in-game communication – it is not designed for long and complicated interactions such as interviews; MSM allows several conversation ‘windows’ to be open at once therefore it was possible to speak with several participants in a structured and organized way. Furthermore it offers the facilities for ‘group chat’ in which several people can share in and join a conversation. Interestingly it is for this reason that clans and guilds of Runescape use this method to co-ordinate their collective actions – particularly on complicated raids or transactions. In this sense, the use of peer2peer could be considered a normalised Runescape activity for some types of user. However, I acknowledge that peer2peer also removes the subject from the field and there is the criticism that my virtual interactions merely become disembodied text and subject to the concerns I outlined earlier. I think in this particular case the practical reasons outweigh the more philosophical criticism. Furthermore, the peer2peer interviews only formed a small percentage of the overall research and it was only used for subjects with whom I had a well-established virtual and often material relationship. I was

completely familiar with these participant's virtual identity and character. This meant that I could trust their interpretation of the events they were describing as I already had considerable in-game experience of them – a little like talking on the telephone with some-one you know well.

As I became more well known, I was able to build up a social network of 'friends' and in order to facilitate this I tended to operate from one account 'Chainsaw Nic' (my original Runescape account). However, I kept one other active – Power-saw Nic - to allow me to log in, whilst not always anonymously, certainly with a lower profile. As 'Chainsaw Nic' developed, I was not able to access certain newer developments and areas of the Runescape world, for example 'Tutorial Island', low level mining/fishing points and some parts of Lumbridge Castle, thus this 'noob' character allowed me to revisit these aspects of the game. I also wanted to undertake some triangulation, and used my alternative account to verify data and information I had collected as 'Chainsaw Nic'. I accept that this perhaps works against some of the 'naturalism' of an ethnographic style approach, but again feel that the practical advantages justify this methodological dilemma. For the much of the early and middle parts of this study I worked as a teacher at a secondary school in which some of the students already played Runescape. Initially I worked more closely with many of the students I taught. As the study progressed, these students would then introduce me to other users they had met online. This proved a useful mechanism and I was able to further develop my research network via my 'MySpace' and 'Facebook' accounts, bringing in friends and then in turn, friends of friends. It was through these material then virtual connections that I was able to set-up the focus groups and the game observations. Again I saw these material interactions as a way of verifying and expanding my virtual data

One of the areas I had to rely on trust and intuition was with regard to participant age and gender. I have claimed that the majority of young people involved in this study were aged between 10 – 19 years old. I acknowledge that since Jagex do not keep demographic details of their user-base there was no mechanism to verify if the details given to me by the young people were accurate. In the previous chapter I argued that since material identity is not fixed or given, I cannot impose similar constraints in the virtual world. However, it could be argued that gender and age are subject to some

degree of fixivity, although I maintain that what it *means* to be a young man or young woman transcends such rigidity. Thus I wanted to employ some devices to support the validity in this area of data. Thompson (1988) argues that in conducting research we attempt to find out the truth in three ways; through reasoning, research and through our personal experiences. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) extend this idea claiming that the three approaches are over-lapping and complimentary. Van Dalen (1973) suggests that when confronted with a problem we often call upon our personal experience to help solve it through an appeal to our past experience. I undertook this study with nearly 20 years of Teaching and Youth Work experience working with this age-group, combined with considerable gaming and virtual social-networking experience. I believe that this gives me a sound base from which to judge the validity of participant's responses. I also found – by crude experimentation – that, contra to popular anxieties, in a virtual world in which there is continual daily interaction, it is extremely hard to maintain a credible identity that is substantively different from that of material existence, particularly when there is an experienced professional analysing one's actions. Of course, some 'adults' might well have slipped through the net, but this is also a feature of the virtual world.

Although I believe that my experience was vital in helping to verify the validity of data I also put into place some structures to support my beliefs. I had material experience of many of my initial contacts and the connection of the 'second wave' with my students gave me some certainty that they were approximately the age they claimed to be. As some participants contacted me through my 'MySpace' and 'Facebook' accounts I had the additional security of being able to verify limited details against their 'MySpace' and 'Facebook' profile – age, sex, location, interests etc. My material interviews/observations allowed me to test out virtual data against that provided by a material group and were in essence the control aspect of the study. If the material group behaved and/or responded in a similar manner to my virtual participants I could be fairly certain of the accuracy of both sets of data. Material interviews were conducted as part of a focus group (3-6 members) similar to the peer2peer conference discussion of my virtual research, Material observations were more random in that they were dependant on who was playing at the time, which on reflection also mirrored the informality and spontaneity of the virtual participative observations. In both cases questions were unstructured with the interactions taking

the form of informal chats rather than structured interviews, thus I did not need to use many of the facilitator strategies I looked at earlier. I felt that this gave the young people ownership of the process, but more importantly avoided directed responses, and hence deterministic data (Buckingham 1993).

Forum responses were recorded from direct posted questions by both me and other members. They allowed me to get responses from players who fell outside my in-game observations and allowed more targeted questions around specific topics. They also provided more substantial responses. I also felt that as a well developed fandom had grown up around the game – in the form of fan sites, tip sites etc – it was important to acknowledge this aspect of the user base in my data. I rejected the use of on-line questionnaires for the reasons outlined earlier, and found that the semi-structured threads of the forums provided a similarly structured line of investigation. As it turned out, most of the useful data came from in-game encounters although forum data was in-valuable as background data to what issues were affecting the wider Runescape community. To a certain extent it also operated another level of verification control that I could check in-game data against.

Therefore, the vast majority of data was obtained from in-game observations and discussions which were enhanced in the virtual realm by more extended and developed discussions and interviews using other virtual arenas. Of these nearly half were with separate individuals mostly via casual in-game encounters. Runescape is a tight community with each server holding approximately 2000 users and as many of the members stick to a particular server it was easy to build up in-game relationships with other players simply because I would encounter them daily. As I note in Chapter 4, Runescape is a well organised social world. Players who specialised in particular merchant skills – fishing for example – tended to stay around the key locations for that skill, whereas warriors and Player Killers used areas near high-level NPCs or the Wilderness. This meant that I could use the in-game organization to select and target interactions with key classes of player. One of the best areas for general interaction tended to be the fishing location of Cathaby. Most players would pass through to either fish or attempt to buy fish. I found that people were happy to interact whilst ‘fishing’ – perhaps it relieved the boredom!



### **Ethics – could I? should I?**

If the afore mentioned processes and methods represent the language of this study, then the ethical framework forms it's grammar by providing structure and a regulatory paradigm for the research. However just as language is ever changing and evolving, the ethics of research need to also be considered in a fluid and dynamic way. I initially struggled with this area of the study. Ethics provide a set of moral principles and a code of conduct; As Seiber (1993) observes it puts into place: *'The application of a system of moral principles to prevent harming or wronging of others, to promote the good, to be respectful and to be fair'* (1993:14) Although I would not argue with the broad sentiments of this assertion I found that many aspects of Runescape did not fit neatly into this ethical box and whilst it seemed tempting to simply get the correct shaped conceptual box, within ethnography at least, these principles are often presented to a new researcher as rigid and un-moving. Brunel University identifies four key ethical principles that underpin what it considers to be 'ethical research'.

**Autonomy** – i.e., *respect* for the autonomy of the individual, and protection of persons with impaired or diminished autonomy by the provision of safeguards against harm and abuse. The duty of the researcher is both to recognise the research participants' capacities and perspectives and their right to make choices about whether or not they will take part in any research project. That person should also be treated so as to allow them to act in an autonomous way.

**Non-Maleficence** – the researcher is under an obligation not to inflict harm or expose people to unnecessary risk as a result of the research project. This is particularly important when the research participants may have impaired or diminished autonomy.

**Beneficence** – the obligation to maximise benefits and minimise harm. This principle obliges the researcher to assist others to pursue their interests. However, there may be conflict between, for example the principle of autonomy (the right to make an informed choice) and beneficence (where part of the study involves non-disclosure to that person as it may do them harm). Paternalism occurs when a researcher acts in the belief that an

individual's views should be disregarded since it is in society's interest to do so. If one principle is to be overridden by another, the researcher must be able to justify that decision to the satisfaction of independent scrutiny.

**Justice** – the obligation to treat each person in accordance with what is morally right and proper. This principle is concerned with people receiving their due. Equality of opportunity is particularly important here, and is of particular importance when considering inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Within the field of virtual research, ethical issues are still very much unresolved. Many studies look to material ethnographic frameworks to provide a blue-print for how to structure virtual research. In research based in material realms, most writers – those that I am going to call the *conformists* - present ethical ethnographic frameworks as simply *good practice*, a way of protecting both the researcher and subjects (see for example, Warwick 1982, Brewer 2000, Murphy and Dingwall 2001). Other researchers – whom we might term the *transgressors* – argue that the data ends justify the research means (see for example Humphreys 1970, Calvey 2008) Of course within a social arena, the conformist argument is compelling: questions of overt and covert research design, the power/status relationship between researcher and participant, the need for researchers to consider, and take responsibility for both the long-term and short-term results of their actions; issues of confidentiality; harm and benefit; all have important resonance when we delve into and unpack other people's lives. Yet when these material frameworks are applied to virtual fields, there seems to me an over rigidity in the material-based position which seeks to seize the moral high-ground and within which the transgressor position soon becomes tantalizing and seductive. Of course, it has long been acknowledged that, when studying vulnerable groups in society – children for example - researchers must tailor their data collection methods to both the sensitivity of the research topic and the vulnerability of research subjects (Goffman 1963, Hobbs 2002, Lee 1993). But I am uncomfortable with the curious tension between ideals and positions which stresses study-based tinkering rather than a reconsideration of underlying principles. The dynamism of ethics soon becomes lost under the weight of acceptable material-based practice. This seems to be most prevalent in the plethora of writings that form 'handbooks' for aspiring

researchers. Rather than pushing the boundaries of ethical considerations to accommodate the subtle nuances of the virtual, they seem to simply ‘tow the party line’: so for example, whilst O’Reilly (2005) argues against introducing over prescriptive guidelines she negates a re-evaluation of more fundamental ethnographic principles when she later notes that covert research – in either field - damages the whole research community and undermines principles of honesty, trust and openness. I am not sure where such sweeping generalisations get us. Newton (1995) argues for an ethical approach that sits in contrast to the traditional attempt to develop a context-free ethical framework to guide research. He notes: *‘Ethical theorists have traditionally defined freely determined action according to a law of rationality from which they can derive criteria for moral behaviour at once universalisable and intrinsically intelligible’* (1995: 12) Clearly for O’Reilly, ‘covert’ ethnography is one slipped ethic too far but it suggests to me that more attention needs to be paid at the macro rather than the micro level: that virtual research requires its own sets of principles that reflects its particular nuances rather than simply ‘borrowing’ from material ethnography and then finding it does not fit. Douglas (1996) further argues that the ethical positions seen in many research frameworks do little more than to stifle research to such an extent that it ends up serving only the interests of the most powerful groups in society, a point which is particularly salient to the consideration and study of the newer social arenas of the internet.

Research into virtual arenas thus presents its own specific difficulties. This is in part a result of the mismatch between material-based and virtual-based principles and practices. In one sense this is unavoidable. Ethical guidelines for virtual research (see for example Schrum 1995) have tended to be drawn from what has been the normal practice in material fields simply because the necessary precedents, research experience and legal framework are not yet in place for the virtual realm. Some of these earliest guidelines have really been concerned with legal rather than ethical frameworks and have concentrated on the rights of a researcher to access online data rather than providing a blue-print for research practice (Elgesem 1996, Sharf 1999). Yet Kitchin (1998) observes that I cannot realistically fall back on more familiar regulatory and moral frameworks because these simply do not exist or function on-line. As some writers have observed, the virtual is often characterized as ‘lawless’ - an arena for the breaking with norms and the transgression of cultural rules and values

(Murray 1995, Shields 1996) Mann and Stewart note that the nature of law is *'reflective and responsive, looking to history and tradition and reflecting the status quo'* (2000:3). But as Kramarae (1995) observe, the virtual is a new arena; many of the things that are being done within it have not taken place before –either in other technological space or indeed in material space – so I cannot rely on these traditional notions of law, legality and morals to provide me with any regulatory framework with regard to ethical positions. Whilst I would not share his absolutist position in regards to virtual space, Kramarae's point is well made. Of course ethics is more than this rather instrumental view – it is about a concern for the other and 'doing the right thing' - but Kramarae reminds me that these somewhat intangible notions are articulated through more tangible and traditional (material) practices. I argue that whilst I can reference some aspects of the virtual through material experiences – indeed this is its ordinariness – the material and the virtual realms are not automatically interchangeable when it comes to how I structure and conceive of my existence within it. I cannot and should not apply an ethical principle to the virtual simply because it has served other researchers well in the material. As I have argued, the relationship between the two arenas is more complex than that.

This section is not meant to be an exhaustive consideration of the relationship between ethics, ethnography and virtual realms, but studying Runescape does throw up a number of ethical issues that I will address here. I want to consider two broad yet inter-related strands:

- Researching in virtual arenas opens up issues of public and private space; is what is said online considered to be public, or is it private conversation that happens to be embedded in a public space? Closely associated with this are questions around the idea of informed consent and ethical issues of covert and 'non disclosed' ethnographic study.
- There are questions concerning truth and validity in non-material spaces. Whilst data gathered through computer-mediated-communication may be interesting and insightful, if the participants are not material, what credence can be given to information transmitted?

### **Covert research and the politics of ‘the public’**

In the early stages of my research, when I began working with users contacted via my school connections, my identity as a researcher was obvious and I was explicit with participants about the nature of my online activities. Later I sometimes declared it but for much of the time I also operated as participant-observer – what I would describe as the ‘normal’ status of a user within a virtual world. This seems to reflect much ethnographic work in the material world. There is a long history of covert or semi-covert research in ethnography, yet it appears to be rarely justified and at best tolerated. The term itself is often presented in an emotive way implying as it does something ‘underhand’. Yet as a ‘practice’ it covers a range of methodological approaches – from deliberate misrepresentation of the researcher to operating outside of ‘informed’ consent – some of which seem in tension with these negative connotations of the term.

The International Sociological Association Code of Ethics notes:

*Covert research should be avoided in principle unless it is the only method by which information can be gathered and/or when access to the usual sources of information is obstructed by those in power (ISA 2001)*

The criticism of this approach is based around a number of research themes: the impossibility of obtaining informed consent to participate in the study; the problems associated with misrepresentation and deception of participants and the exploitation of subjects who have no control over how they are represented. I am not sure that aspects of this approach are all that different from more acceptable practices, I argue that even in ‘ethical’ research, participants have little or no control over how they are represented once the research is ‘written up’. Such ideas seem to resonate with the guidelines issued by Brunel University. A need for research to ensure the ‘autonomy of participants’ and to guard against their potential ‘harm’ might not preclude a ‘covert’ approach in all cases. There may be settings in which practices that could be deemed to be ‘covert’ do not fall foul of such principles.

These are not new objections. In a water-shed piece, Erikson (1967) argues that disguised observation in social research is an unethical practice. It cannot be ethical, he argues, to misrepresent oneself for the purpose of gaining access to research subjects or to misrepresent the nature of the research. Erikson cites four main problems with such an approach: Firstly; the researcher can cause undue harm to his subjects. Since the researcher has had to deceive subjects in order to gain access to a research field, then the environment must be so far removed from the researcher's everyday experience that s/he cannot possibly know the consequences of actions within it. Secondly; deception damages the reputation of sociology and negates and closes off legitimate areas of research. Thirdly: inexperienced researchers are forced into making moral and ethical choices that they are ill-equipped to handle. Fourthly; in covert research, the researcher betrays the complexity and subtlety of the social structure being observed. These objections have formed the guiding principles for many ethical frameworks and recommendations. There are fundamental difficulties with these criticisms. Adler, Adler and Rochford (1986) argue that as a Neo-Chicagoan sociologist, Erikson's comments sit in stark contrast to the Chicago School's 'conflict' approach to research which they argue, actively supports many of the things that Erikson rejects. Deception is rejected by the symbolic interactionist Chicago Sociologists because it is seen to disrespect both research subject and research field by undermining the subtlety of the scene and the integrity of the participants. The researcher is further compromised because rather than performing a neutral and objective role, s/he is assigned a specific 'insider' position. This is contrasted with a more existentialist sociological position – as exemplified by a 'conflict' paradigm – that recognizes that individuals hide information from other people – particularly 'outsiders'. Adler et al. argue that covert research is a legitimate practice that enables the researcher to *'dig behind people's superficial self presentations and discover the truth behind their attitudes and behaviour'* (1986:367) In rejecting an absolutist ethical position, existential sociologists argue that the individual researcher should be left to make moral and ethical judgments based on the individual circumstances they find themselves operating within. This should be applicable to all research situations and not just those that are deemed 'sensitive' because the same practices operate in all social situations (Goode 1996)

But in attempting to develop a set of ethical guidelines that are applicable to virtual space, I am not sure where Erikson's arguments really get us. There are practical difficulties in declaring oneself within an arena such as Runescape, not least when the virtual is afforded a different research status from that of the material. Garton et al. question whether researchers must '*identify themselves if they are only participating in the electronic equivalent of hanging out on street corners or doughnut shops where they would never think of wearing large signs identifying themselves as 'researchers'*' (1999:93) Once again I seem to return to anxieties about the medium itself. Research into virtual space is no more likely to 'misuse' data or harm participants than its material counterpart and as Paccagnella (1997) further observes, even in material based studies, explicit research practice does not necessarily mean that participants will be aware of data collection or the use to which that data is put. Moreover the subsequent 'conflict' approach places the emphasis on individual studies and researchers, which in itself is not conducive to the development of a wider set of principles. Although as more studies are undertaken they will eventually contribute to the precedents and experience I noted earlier. Yet even these precedents do not guarantee clarity. Reid (1994) observes that material based research does not always explicitly declare whether permission was obtained and Denzin (1999) admits that in some of his early virtual research he operated covertly and did not seek permission to use forum posts. (Indeed, who would he ask for permission, especially given that some 'virtual identities' are sometimes transitory) As Reid (1996) acknowledges, the lack of clear guidelines force virtual researchers to make their own judgments on how best to these interpret precedents.

I think that there are fundamental problems in applying Erikson's arguments to a game world, not least in how the 'participant observation' is actualized as a research practice. In Erikson's model, the covert researcher is presented as an illegitimate interloper who has no place within the social sphere that is being researched. I do not believe that this is how game-based worlds operate. As a participant observer in the game environment I had a vested interest within the game dynamic. I did not simply 'lurk' (slang for the practice of detached hanging around – although it could be argued that this in itself constitutes a legitimate in-game activity), I was actively engaged in all aspects of Runescape culture. As I noted in the introduction I did not initially come to the game to research it, I played Runescape because I enjoyed playing

MMORPG. It was only later that it became a focus for my academic study. By this time I was firmly embedded as a ‘normal’ user of the world, and although my agenda towards the game changed, my online activity remained exactly the same. I fished, I mined, I fought, I went on quests, but more importantly I just hung out and chatted as I had always done. Conversations about all aspects of the game are normal, social interaction between players is actively encouraged and thus I would argue that the character of the game dynamic is not substantially altered – if indeed it is altered at all - with the introduction of a research agenda. Moreover, whilst I was aware that I was working in a space in which children and adults mixed freely, this was again not that unusual in a game-based environment – indeed I would argue that this is the ‘normal status’ in most areas of online play. I was not then the alien observer that Erikson hints at, Runescape was as much my world as any other user.

But whilst I engaged in normal activities in an environment within which I was considered a normal user I was not always open about why I asked the questions that I did. Adler et al. note that covert research can be seen as deliberately deceptive because it is a role in which ‘*the researcher disguises the purpose and interest behind his or her participation at the scene*’ (1986:367) In this sense I did engage in deception; I was not always clear about my purpose. However, I would argue that there is a significant qualitative difference between ‘not declaring’ and ‘disguising’. It is the distinction between omission rather than commission; ‘what I have done and what I have failed to do’. Furthermore, within Runescape the concept of disguise and deception are perhaps not as clear cut as they might be in other spaces. I argue that all social space is to a certain extent analytical space. As I noted in my earlier chapter, meanings are ascribed onto the ‘look’ of the body and identity formation – either individual or collective – is fundamentally a social and visual act. Thus in the material we are called to make judgements based on appropriate visual representations. In Runescape social acts, rituals and practices are played out in similar visual ways, including subversions and deceptions. Many of its norms and practices are in place by convention – shared understanding and agreements – rather than an externally enforced legal framework. Kitchin’s (1998) earlier observations about the ‘lawlessness’ of the virtual realm is particularly pertinent to aspects of Runescape. Subversion and deception in a visual world necessitates that all is not always what it is seen to be. This is particularly true when positions that appear to be



in opposition to the legitimate values and practices of the world are themselves legitimate values and practices. Deviant activities such as ‘scamming’ and ‘luring’ are encouraged thus users have learnt to be wary of all encounters. Similarly ‘Player Killers’ (Players who kill and rob other users) highlight this sense of unease further; the individual you have just met might seem legitimate, but

*“how can you be sure that he has just offered you a ‘real’ dragon battle axe, maybe it’s fake – maybe he just wants to kill you?”* (Brimmy 17)

Thus in Runescape the analytical aspect of social interaction is not only accepted but amplified. In some respects Runescape represents a pre-modern culture; one of mistrust, one in which citizens are not protected by civilizing practices and structures; in which ethical positions encourage and support the withholding of information. In this society what seem to be familiar practices and rituals have a different meaning and capitol to those we take for granted in the late-modern material arena.

But of course, as I argued earlier, these pre-modern virtual practices are mediated by the late-modernity of the material. I am arguing that *in game* there are ethical positions that are in opposition to those outside of it. Whilst I am not sure that I can seamlessly transpose late modern ethical principles into an arena where oppositional practices are the norm, I am not suggesting that there is no porosity in the process. Similarly I am not advocating that in-game morality can exist outside of the diagesis, - so for example because killing is permissible in the virtual realm it should somehow be acceptable in the material – but I am noting that moral and ethical principles impact and collapse across the two arenas. Thus, whilst in the material, murder is not morally justified; the act of killing in the virtual represents a legitimate mechanism of progression – an accepted symbolic process by which players advance in a game - and thus is considered a ‘moral’ act. This in itself requires a shifting of moral perspective and I argue that our ethical principles require a similar shift. If I revisit the earlier quote from Adler, Adler and Rochford that describes covert research as a process by which we *‘dig behind people’s superficial self presentations and discover the truth behind their attitudes and behaviour’* (1986:367) then the following observations describe a similar process as the way to survive in Runescape:

*“No Nic, you can never be sure what you see is what you are getting. If you are going to buy something that is expensive, take your time...see who is in the market, what are they like, who are they selling to, what is the price....are they there everyday?...talk to them...and then again...” – SassySammy (17)*

*“ You can never be sure in the Wilderness – I just make polite conversation but keep my eyes open....you need to think about what he is saying...listen to him carefully before you know if you can trust him lol” – Spaceman5*

It seems somewhat problematic to criticise a research approach that draws on exactly the same process that constitutes normal behavior within the realm under investigation. In a surveillance society, the very act of surveillance is itself a legitimate activity.

But there is another strand to this argument that centers on whether what is ‘said’ online is ‘public’ or the ‘property’ of individual authors and whose collection as ‘data’ requires consent in the first place (Hine 2000:25). As in material space virtuality is defined by the ‘public’ status of its interactions. Conversations in Runescape occur through text based interaction that is “... *the essential and most common element of virtual ethnography*” (Crichton and Kinash 2003:2). This is not very different from material ethnography. The young people interviewed discussed how they used Runescape and other virtual spaces such as ‘MySpace’ as arenas within which to define self through text, and, equally importantly, to seek *public responses* from peers through comments and messaging. In such arenas, Messages and texts form an integral part of the process of mutual identification between users:

*“Nic, there’s no point posting if someone isn’t going to message you back telling you what they think of what you said” - Tasker 666*

*“I have 287 comments – yay!!” Midnight FantasyX*

As I considered in the previous chapter these should be seen as discourse that constructs ‘representations’, establishes ‘identity’ and creates ‘relations’ (Fairclough, 1995:5). Wright, Boria and Breidenbach (2002) observe that *public* interaction

between users is a fundamental feature of all online games. Interaction in Runescape is a public activity. The interface window (see Figure 1) displays all conversations between users and the openness – the ‘public status’ - of what is said is accepted and acknowledged by all users. Homan (1991) argues, that whether a space is public or private is always relative to the definitions of those who occupy it and this resonates with the idea of virtual communities, where there are no pre-existing cultural understandings of the nature of the media to appeal to or be guided by in defining the situation. But as Goffman (1971) acknowledges, the ‘private’ always operates within a public arena. In Runescape, the two realms are clearly delineated by accepted practices. Whilst the main ‘chat’ interface is considered public – words appear in both the main game window above the characters who spoke them and in the conversation log directly below it – there is also a facility for ‘private chat’ which is only visible to those in the conversation loop – this appears as blue superimposed text on the main game window (see figure 1). This privacy is supplemented by peer2peer technology which many citizens use alongside the main communication tools of the game itself.



**Figure 1: Runescape interface**

This is a particularly well-established practice with clans and guilds where many players may need to be coordinated in relative secrecy. This delineation between public and private aspects of play is well developed across all on-line games, particularly those in which there is some form of oppositional play against other teams or individuals. It is not that different from material based systems used by the military or sports teams. In Runescape, the phrase ‘move to private’ is a well established protocol and indicates that users no longer wish to be ‘heard’. Conversely then, it is also legitimate to surmise, that what is not on the private channels is intended for public consumption.

### **Confidentiality and Consent**

However ‘public’ consumption need not challenge participant anonymity and potentially their confidentiality. It would be usual in a study that quotes directly from young people to maintain their confidentiality by either changing names or using other mechanisms of disguise such as ‘Young Person A’. Although it could be argued that virtual names hide material identity I have attempted to argue both in this chapter and previous chapters that a user’s on-screen name is an integral and perhaps the most tangible aspect of their virtual identity. As I noted earlier, many of the participants in this study knew that I was recording their responses and I have permission to use their words. In these cases I have left their on-screen identities as an acknowledgement of their co-operation and help. Where I was recording more casual interactions I have changed the names. As many users choose their names carefully as an extension of their on-line personas I have attempted to use names that still capture the essence of their identity. I accept that this is researcher intervention, but I justify it in terms of maintaining the tone and feel of the interaction and as a homage to the young person’s unknowing contribution to the study.

Issues of consent were less straight forward. For participants in material interviews and focus groups I obtained hard copy consent forms signed by a parent or guardian where appropriate. In the case of virtual data collection, I developed an ethical framework that mirrored material studies, although as I have argued earlier in this chapter, material mechanisms are not always appropriate or practical in the virtual realm and in places this constitutes a ‘best fit’ process. For participants I contacted via peer2peer I always obtained an electronic copy of my permission form, again

verified by a parent or guardian. I had to take this aspect on trust, but as this group was almost exclusively consisted of young people that I had a well-established relationship with I felt that this constituted an ethical position. As detailed earlier I took the position that forum posts were in the public arena. I emailed the correspondent asking for permission to use their posting, usually via the forum itself since only a few display personal email details. Where this was impossible – for example where the forum didn't provide for this facility such as in the case of 'tip.it', one of the larger of the support/tip sites – or where the correspondent didn't respond, I either rejected the data or used it in a more general way. Where I have used this source of data I have ensured anonymity as detailed above.

In game interactions fell into three groups:

- Casual interactions and observations – what I have described as 'non-disclosed' participative observation - clearly do not have explicit consent but as I argued earlier are still valid within this sort of research. Such encounters are almost impossible to try to track down after they have taken place but I did attempt to let users know what I had been doing by posting on the in-game forums – a regular meeting place for most users. I have again ensured anonymity as detailed earlier.
- Developed in-game encounters such as long conversations or meetings over a short period of time – for example whilst fishing or level training – took place over varying periods ranging from 1 hour to a week. In such cases I obtained consent via the in-game chat log since email permission was not practical
- Sustained in-game interactions were treated in the same way as peer2peer participants. I chose this method where I felt safety and/or ethical issues made this more appropriate than communication outside of the game - for example young women – or where the nature of the encounters made other methods less practical – for example regular visitors to 'Cathaby' or 'The Wilderness'.

### **Participant risk – what does it *mean* to be a citizen of Runescape?**

If as I noted above, '*the non-disclosure of research identity in computer-mediated-communication research appears to be an unresolved issue*' (Sanders 2005:71) can it be argued that participants are being placed in undue harm by covert research. The Brunel University ethical guidelines seem to suggest this to be the case. The fear of 'participant risk' is a key aspect in concerns about non disclosure, particularly in an environment involving young people. I am not sure that the virtual environment itself provides anymore risks than might be experienced in a material environment. Yet it might be that the participant's *perception* of what it means to be situated in the virtual could set up an ethical dilemma for the researcher. Coomber (1997) argues that the relationship between private-public on the internet is ambiguous and that consequently participants in virtual research could be 'tricked' into performing illegal activities. This is a pertinent observation and might certainly apply to social networking arenas such as 'MySpace' and 'Facebook' where the private – corporate – ownership of the technology is masked by a belief that it constitutes public space. In Runescape this is less of a problem. In game controls – such as moderators and conversation filters – prevent offensive and illegal activity. Moreover, there is a tacit recognition at least, that Runescape is very much Gower's creation and that Jagex are always in the background to 'police' online activity. In many ways this is not unlike a material based society.

A particular area for concern in this research is that its participants are children and young people. As I noted earlier, in terms of research field, an arena in which young people and adults mix is part of the 'normal' status of Runescape – indeed it is a feature of all forms of online games. In this respect then, my research is not open to the criticisms of Erikson considered earlier. However, I am mindful that particular care is needed when research involves young people. I looked to material recommendations in this respect. The Association of Social Anthropologists produce ethical guidelines but interestingly these make no specific mention of children. The British Sociological Association suggests researchers seek expert help when dealing with young people and vulnerable groups. Neither addressed children online directly. Interestingly, the National Children Bureau has recommendations that closely mirror those of the ASA but these do briefly touch on computer and on-line interactions although the NCB are more concerned with child protection than the ethics of social

research. As an experienced teacher and youth worker I was well aware of these issues and well used to what constituted ‘good practice’ in terms of interactions with young people.

Morrow (2005) argues that such guidelines are a little unhelpful in that they tend to raise questions as to whether young people are competent to give ‘informed consent’ to the research process. This, she argues, is not a particularly empowering position to adopt towards young people. Mayall (1994) adds an interesting dimension to the ethics debate when she argues that it is not the method of data collection that should come under scrutiny, but the subsequent analytical process and use to which that data is put. *‘However one might involve children in considering data, the presentation of it is likely to require analysis and interpretations for some purposes, that do demand different knowledge than that generally available to children, in order to explicate children’s social status and structural positioning’* (1994:11). Waksler (1991) suggests that this process undermines the status of young people in research since it places adults as the sole articulators of the motivations and structures behind the behavior of young people; we should view young people as ‘different’ in their competencies rather than lesser.

There are some interesting questions of power and status raised here. It might be argued that within any research there is an in-balance of power between researcher and participant. Murphy and Dingwall (2001) note that the researcher occupies a powerful position since it is they who decide what is to be studied, how it should be researched and ultimately how it is ‘written up’ and presented. This implies little participation and inclusivity in the research process. O’Reilly argues that *‘awareness of the potential for exploitation and the role of representation is the first step in trying to avoid it’* (2009: 60) and it might be argued that ethnography offers a less exploitative method than other methodologies in that it stresses relationships based on trust and rapport (although, as I noted earlier, there are similarly opportunities for deception). Ethnography adopts a naturalist position. It listens to participants, and attempts to understand their worlds through their own points of view. However, as Gledhill (1994) notes, it is important to recognise that within this process, ethnographers still have control and influence of the data and there have been

instances where research has been accused of ‘othering and exoticising its object’ (O’Reilly 2009; 60)

Runescape raises interesting questions about the research relationship between researcher and participants. In its virtual arena, power and status are not articulated in the same way as they are in the material. As I will observe in more detail in Chapter 4, skill levels, class of character and possession of virtual goods form the social capitol upon which status and reputation are based. There were many occasions early on in my research, when participants had far more developed characters than my own and thus occupied a more ‘powerful’ position within the Runescape world. As demonstrated by this example, many users were not afraid to exercise this power;

*“I will answer your questions Chainsaw, when you have made your bones. Come see me then and we can talk about it” - ZamJam*

ZamJam’s assertion that he will only speak to me when I have ‘made my bones’ illustrates that power is not always vested with the researcher. Indeed the relationships of trust and rapport upon which ethnography is based are not afforded automatically, they have to be negotiated and won. Similarly I was expected to defer to the authority of CombatGirl as ‘clan mother’ when she felt that one of our sessions on Runescape would be better spent engaged on a ‘raid’ rather than research. As I progressed in the world, higher status and ‘celebrity’ users were more willing to speak with me because my levels and clothing demonstrated that I had ‘served my time’. It was my virtual rather than my material credentials that gave me access to their world.

Interestingly, power, status and reputation whilst being based on virtual attributes are actualized within both in-world and off-world practices. I found that in some cases this power framework extended out of the confines of the virtual itself and seeped into my material interviews and focus groups, as the following example illustrates:

*Helzbelle: But you wouldn’t understand that Nic as you are just a ‘noob’*

*Nic: I am actually level 40 Helz*

*Helzbelle (laughs) Everyone under 60 is a noob to me, I worked hard to get there*

*Justinjustout: Helz, you are the first ‘legend’ I have spoken to*



*Helzbelle: Justin, you noob, shut it, you shouldn't even be speaking to me*  
*Basketball: That's not fair Helz, everyone needs to get a chance to have their say*  
*Helzbelle: No, on Runey, he couldn't come up to me...I got a legends cape and its not 'allowed'*  
*Justinjustout; But we not on Rune you noob*  
*Helzbelle: What that got to do with it. You are still a noob whatever.*  
*BonBon: She is right Nic, you just can't do that. You should apologise Justin*  
*Nic; Does everyone agree?*  
*(general agreement)*

This exchange from one of my small focus group discussions demonstrates how virtual power and influence become actualized in material based research instances. Helzbelle's 'status' as a 'Runescape Legend' extends beyond the confines of the virtual world and the other participants in the discussion are expected to defer to her 'authority as a high end player in the same way that they would within the world itself. This power relationship over-rides all other power structures that might have originated in the material such as age (Helzbelle was one of the youngest in the group) or my status as 'adult' (I was her youth worker) or 'researcher' (all the participants had been involved in previous focus groups). There was a general consensus in regard to her 'authority'. Helzbelle was a young person who had 'made her bones' and was to be respected as such.

But, as O'Reilly (2005) rightly points out, the power of representation ultimately lies with the researcher. I have tried to recognize this in my research and I have attempted to give children and young people their voice – it is their words that form the raw data of this study alongside my observations and feelings. I have adopted a 'hands off' approach; I have recognized that for many, Runescape represents an empowering space and have reflected this in the way that I have presented my material. I interacted with young people as a fellow citizen of Runescape – as I noted earlier, this was as much my world – rather than as an 'adult' in their game world. Runescape is in many ways a leveling experience, we compete in the world on equal terms thus I hope in this respect to have reduced as far as possible any power imbalances that might exist between myself as an adult researcher and the younger participants within my research. I am also mindful of what it might mean to be an adult in 'young

peoples' space, and despite my affirmation of the normality of this situation I sought to put appropriate safety checks into place to protect both myself and my participants.

Sharf (1999) warns that the virtual provides a greater danger when dealing with sensitive and/or personal information since the technology does not afford the researcher the degree of control that s/he might have in the material. In terms of Runescape, I don't believe this to be the case, as I have demonstrated virtual research shares much in common – in terms of practice – with its material counterpart. Whilst I do not think that virtual participants endure any greater risks than they might do in similar material research arenas, I do think that Sharf's warning speaks to a particular attitude to the participant-relationship to the technology that to a certain extent brings an ethical argument full circle. As a new arena for social research, the virtual will always be open to criticisms and anxieties as to its appropriateness as a research setting, its methods of data collection and the role and risks of its participants. In the end, I found that there were no single set of ethical guidelines that could adequately cope with the demands and practices of researching gaming worlds. Whilst I had hoped that a coherent set of ethical principles for studying virtual worlds could be drawn from the piece, I now feel that Runescape is a unique arena and that such an approach is not viable. In the end this has become a 'best-fit' scenario between accepted material practices and those required to cope with the nuances of virtual society. However, I have adopted an ethical position in this research in which I have tried to develop 'situational ethics' that is sensitive and alive to the immediacy of the virtual environment. I hope that it adds to the precedents and protocols for future study.

### **Conclusion: The 'truth' is out there....**

In this Chapter, I have presented the methodological and ethical issues that surrounded my research of Runescape. I believe that such research will always be viewed as problematic because it involves virtual rather than material participants. Those with little or no experience of virtual arenas will question the validity of virtual 'field' simply because it draws on unfamiliar practices and devices (Mann and Stewart: 1999). Similarly as Fernbeck suggests, Ethnographers working in cyberspace must '*develop a sense about the truthfulness and candour of their informants just as ethnographers of the non virtual must*' (1999:216). Therefore,

wider concerns about validity in qualitative research are equally applicable to research in the virtual world as well, thus virtual ethnography must defend itself rigorously.

I have argued that is it possible to defend data in the field where anonymity and pseudonymity are the norm and where participants may choose to exploit the virtuality of the medium, to experiment with the presentation of self. This of course assumes that people in the material world are not also operating in much the same way. Whilst the boundaries in the virtual may be different, *in principle* I can see no substantive difference in researching the two arenas.

Boshier (1990) claims that electronic networking opens possibilities for deception because many of the cues that normally circumscribe roles, and which foster or inhibit participation, are not present. But similarly, the material world also offers opportunities for deception that would not be present in the virtual; so, the material – the embodied me – gives me the capacity to do some things that I couldn't do if I wasn't material. Unlike the material where participants are largely known to each other, at least on a visual level, in the online environment there is no such recognition. Users of virtual spaces can change the way they express their personalities, can switch genders, change their age, or become fantasy characters in virtual worlds. As consistency in identity has strong associations with authenticity, these possibilities have clear implications for data. According to Thu Nguyen and Alexander (1996) the central question has become '*without the materiality of lived existence how can one sustain responsibility for one's own words, written or oral*' (1996:104).

The opportunities for experimenting with self presentation are a deliberate feature of 'Runescape' and other such virtual environments. Users in chat rooms are usually identified by a descriptive name that is sometimes chosen to '*promote a certain image or invite a particular response*' (Newby 1993:35). In Runescape of course, the researcher has more tangible criteria on which to establish consistency. There are a range of differing visual representations that make up the avatar including physique, gender, hair colour, facial features and dress. In one sense these are not so very different from the representation of corporal bodies in the material. In Runescape there are a finite number of variations and many users spoke about encountering another character that looked and dressed exactly like them. However, a simple left click of the mouse also brings up players statistics and it is extremely unlikely that

two players could replicate each other directly. There are occasions, discussed in more detail in the next chapter, when players deliberately attempted to pass themselves off as high level players. Whilst it might be possible to deceive the inexperienced and casual observer, to a mindful or experienced player such activities were soon apparent. It is this additional data – rather than simple names or look - that ultimately uncovers such deceptions. In Runescape there is no fluidity of names. Names are unique to individual players and once set are locked for the life of the account. The only way of operating a deception is to choose a name that is similar to another player – which is what took place in the example I discuss later – but this in itself is not a credible deception. The only reason for engaging in such deception is as an attempt to gain in-game status. Players who chose similar names to high status players were soon ‘outed’ as ‘noobs’ and eventually abandoned their accounts.

In this sense, Runescape is a secure environment within which to research and I was sure that there was consistency in the characters I encountered on a regular basis. The only way of operating a deception was by taking part in ‘double-play’ where more than one person operated an in-game character account. However, since this practice was against the rules of the game and was strictly enforced by Jagex who random sampled where accounts logged in from, I found few players who engaged regularly in this practice. Of course virtual non-game space – such as forums – offered no such safeguards. But Kendall (1999) notes, continuity of self in text-based virtual communities may even go beyond consistency in the use of names. She noted that in her study, users were known by their fantasy character name but they could also be identified by known personality characteristics, a shared history with others in the group, and information about their offline lives. I would argue that virtual norms of consistent behaviours suggests that researchers may test truthfulness against regular patterns of interaction, even in virtual worlds

I have briefly considered the ways that Runescape might enable participants to engage in deceptive practices about themselves but such deceptions are also a feature of material interactions. I argue that one of the strengths of this study is that its ethnographic-style approach requires a long-term immersion in the arena. Mann and Stewart (2000) suggest that researchers investigating virtual worlds may find ways to defend data if they spend time with participants over a prolonged period. As Kendall

(1999) observes, they will learn to interpret participants identity in the same way that the participants themselves do. In virtual areas *'participants actively interpret, evaluate and react to each other's online presentations and do not recognise all such performances as equally vain or real'* (1999:66-67). Not only does such an approach give a profile of the continuous online self, it also avoids a tendency from virtual world members to resist the attentions of researchers who only make brief visits to their world. Kendall goes on to suggest that researchers who are seen to take a superficial approach may not penetrate the anonymity of member and the honesty of responses may be more difficult to evaluate. In the end, the strength of any study is the credence given to the data generated. This is directly linked to the rigour of its methodology and analysis. As Sweet (1999) observes any research ultimately comes down to the establishment of trust between researcher, participant and those to whom the analysis is presented to. That the virtual is somehow considered less 'trustworthy' and methodologically problematic comes down to its newness and the lack of familiarity with its processes, rituals and practices. As experience of virtual worlds becomes more and more common and trust in the virtual arena grows, I believe that the perceived potential for methodological and ethical 'difficulties' in virtual research will diminish until it is no greater than that for face-to-face and other forms of material enquiry.

## Chapter 4

### Runescape, Jagex and how I became a ‘Warrior Monk’

#### **Introduction: Java – not just a roasting**

In Chapter 2, I considered the wider cultural and historical paradigms within which a world such as Runescape could emerge. I argue that it is important to reflect on the structures and frameworks of on-line game worlds, since it is these that provide the narrative parameters within which in-game practices evolve. Boellsorff (2008) observes, that it is the design aspects of virtual space – how it is conceived, planned and executed – that offer its’ citizens the raw materials from which they may begin to build their virtual society. Thus a contextual appreciation of Runescape is important if I am to understand the wider aspects of its culture and consider why identity and community practices emerge and develop in the way that they do. In this Chapter I want to extend this idea by taking a closer look at the world itself and considering how Jagex came to develop the realm in the first place

Importantly Runescape is not like the most modern computer games. In some ways it seems to reflect the gaming ethos of the games that emerged in the pioneering days of the form. Firstly it is a JAVA based game; a particular programming language designed for on-line interactive communication which allows multi-platform virtual access and interactivity. Although heavily criticised by some developers – and perhaps now over-taken by ‘Shockwave’ which offers faster 3D support- Java has emerged as one of the important virtual on-line interactive platforms. With the development of J2ME (Java 2 Micro-Edition) it has rapidly become one of the preferred platforms for mobile (phone) gaming technology. But this is not simply a technical departure from other MMORPGs, the use of Java has had significant social effects on how Runescape has developed. Providing that the appropriate Java plug-ins are loaded into the browser (Internet Explorer no longer comes with Java pre-installed) games based on this platform are relatively quick and easy to download. This has enabled Jagex to develop Runescape as an almost instantaneous gaming experience. Unlike other computer games, I did not need to buy a disc with the programme on it, I simply logged into [www.runescape.com](http://www.runescape.com), registered with the most basic information, and I was straight into the game World. The game needed to load

into my browser but this was quick, a few seconds using my broadband and perhaps a couple of minutes on one of my later dial-up connections.

This instant play has helped the game to develop. From personal experience I know how important this aspect is. As I noted in chapter 1, I first encountered the game whilst I was a user of 'The Palace'. Following a series of technical difficulties a number of members had begun to research alternative meeting spaces. Soon there were postings on the XWP bulletin board that if servers were down, members could be found at a "*New and Exciting World that was just like Xena, - no lag, no wait time, straight in and you going*" (Vampiro: Palace List posting). A few days later, the Palace once again began to suffer from severe 'Lag' (net-slang for a delay in transmitting data) and those of us online at the time decided to move our interactions to this alternative site. About thirty minutes later we were back online together as though nothing had happened. Yet somehow this new experience was richer – we laughed at each other's new avatars, we explored areas of the world together – and for some of us Runescape became our regular meeting area. Had our being in Runescape necessitated the purchase of a disc and/or a lengthy download such as 'World of Warcraft' we would certainly not have migrated. It would have defeated the object; we needed immediate access and Runescape could provide that. Later, participants in this study recounted similar experiences:

*"It was great, I heard about it from my friends at school so I went home and could meet them online almost straight away"* – Oliver (13)

*Yeah, ur right. I thought I would give it a go, I mean its not like I had to spend any cash just to try it, better even than a demo on the magazine...sits kind of risk free – crawfishspills (14)*

This aspect is important. For most young people the instantaneous interactivity of the web is often taken as a given and taken within the context that other interactive platforms and sites such as MSM and MySpace allow instant access, the ability to try the game '*risk free*' was important to many users. It also allowed a relative freedom from ones parents:

*Lol yeah Craw me too, I didn't even have to ask my dad, cos it was just there. My dad loved it when I told him cos I didn't ask him for money to buy it, and it was better than most of the free stuff you get on the web" – lucylovestew (13)*

Of course it wasn't just the technology that aided this aspect of development. Jagex's decision to make the game free has paid dividends in terms of how its user base has developed. In Chapter 2 I noted how the codes for the earliest games were freely distributed which helped kick-start the form. I see echoes of the same mechanism here. Some writers on the fan-site forums have remained sceptical to the ideas behind this free-version, seeing it as a shrewd business decision to get users hooked into the game before encouraging them to move onto the subscription based member service. I am not sure that this is a fair criticism and the free version seems much more in keeping with the 'bedroom development' culture of Jagex. But to understand this fully I need to look more closely at Jagex itself.

### **Jagex...From Bedroom to Boardroom!**

*'It is May – about two months after the launch of the second generation version of the world, Runescape2, - and I am in Cambridge sitting in an unassuming office in the nerve-centre of the Runescape operation. The anonymity of the glass building in the Science Park – its lack of even a sign – says nothing to the outside world as to what hides within. This is in stark contrast to the offices of Electronic Arts and Eidos I have visited earlier, both resplendent in the images and icons that have made them famous. Only the line of expensive performance cars outside, hints that this might hide the creators of one of the UK's most successful online worlds. The modernity of the building and 'hi-tec' interior seems a far cry from the medieval fantasy kingdom of Gielinor. There is a faint electro-static hum in the air and everywhere I look there are rows of monitors with programmers and artists creating monsters, buildings, trees and in one case sand! Yet despite the obvious electronic wizardry, I am also reminded of the world that these obviously talented persons are creating. As they weave their technological 'spells' the room is vaguely reminiscent of some of the busiest areas of Runescape. Andrew Gower's 'techno-elves' work in much the same way as the rune-miners digging for ore in the Dwarven mines or the shark-fishers of Cathaby – slowly, diligently, with a sense of purpose and pleasure in what they are doing. Sitting opposite me is a shy unassuming man of about 30. Andrew Gower has been described as a 'Gamers Game-creator', a man who seems far more at home telling me the intricacies of his new in-game sport –*



*Gnome Ball – than talking to me about his success. He seems almost embarrassed by his wealth – as though he cannot quite understand it – and as we talk about his eyes dart about and he fidgets somewhat nervously. This is in contrast to the slickness of his Marketing Manager Constance Tedder who interjects and ‘steers’ the conversation. They both seem amused – yet flattered – that their creation is the subject of ‘academic study’. We chat about how Runescape was created – and then Andrew leaves to play Gnome Ball!’*

- *Field-Diary Entry*

Andrew Gower tells me that he began work on the forerunner to Runescape in 1998. The original game, never released to the public, had isometric graphics and was called ‘DeviousMUD’. Gower was later to claim that he although a fan of MUDs he decided to develop a graphic based MUD simply because he couldn’t find a way of getting a text MUD to stand out (<http://forge.ironrealms.com/2007/05/03/runescape-founder-speaks-out/>). In 1999, Gower began what was essentially a ‘technical’ re-write of the game. DeviousMUD version 2 was virtually identical to the original in terms of graphics and narrative, and was released as a public beta – although withdrawn almost immediately. Now at Cambridge University, Gower and his brother Paul began work on a second complete rewrite. This time the isometric view was replaced by a mixture of three-dimensional and two-dimensional sprites and the narrative structure and gaming aspects re-written, bringing it more in line with emerging titles such as ‘Diablo’ and ‘Ultima Online’ . Renamed RuneScape, this re-worked game was released to the public as a beta version on 4 January 2001. For the first year, Runescape was operated from Gower's parent's house in Nottingham. By the December, Runescape had managed to attract over 1 million accounts so the Gower brothers joined with Constant Tedder to form Jagex - Java Gaming Experts - in order to take over the business aspects of running the on-line game.

I thought at the time that the story had an almost rags-to-riches ring to it – I wrote on my interview pad ‘*Gower: the Geek Gamer made good*’. Yet, whilst the ‘geek made good’ image is romantic in its telling, the Jagex corporate webpage [www.Runescape.com/jagex](http://www.Runescape.com/jagex) reveals a more ambitious and astute sub-text to these developments:

*“We intend to become a significant online operator in all the major gaming markets worldwide; developing and commercializing highly compelling persistent character games that appeal to as wide an audience as possible, based on cutting edge technologies developed in house.”*

Much is made of the sophistication of the Java- based game engine and the desire to create and maintain a ‘play anywhere’ gaming philosophy for their virtual world – the team are attempting to set up ‘Runescape Partnerships’ to enable potential players to access the game from third-party websites. The simplicity of the early Java graphics do not appear to have deterred hardcore gamers. Fig 1 details an example of the visual feel of RS1, it is somewhat crude and a long way behind the finesse of its competitors. Although Java in theory allows play from any browser, and much is made of this point by Jagex themselves, I am not certain that the ‘play anywhere’ philosophy was particularly significant in the games development. Whilst some players seemed to enjoy this aspect – and there was a certain social dimension in playing with friends in the same material space - many players also complained that they couldn’t play anywhere because the Java code was easy to block on school servers and I found little evidence that for most, playing Runescape differed from playing other games in that it tended to take place on the family computer. In the early days of the study, I did encounter a significant group who played at school but the attraction here seemed more about subverting school rules than the game itself. As I have already acknowledged, the fact that the game was both free and instantly accessible seemed far more important factors.

There was another important element that allowed the game to develop quickly; its gameplay was kept dynamic. I noted in Chapter 1 how MMORPG differs from other games in that the game dynamic initiates pleasure not from spatial but from character progression. RS1 took this aspect as its starting point but then added MUD elements through its system of quests or adventures – perhaps in homage to its DeviousMUD influences. The quests added an additional dimension in that they almost seamlessly unlocked additional areas, lands and equipment. This use of quests to expand the Runescape territories was interesting as it presented the MMORPG concept as an epic narrative.



Fig 1

New lands had to be discovered and won rather than simply becoming update expansions. As one fan observed:

*“Its like being inside the adventure...you get to understand the background to the new country or place” - Widget2 (15)*

Similarly, I wrote the following in my diary one evening on RS1:

*Runescape continues to unfold for its citizens like the pages of a fantasy epic. I was sitting in the main square in Varrok waiting for Vikkii when a group of excited users rushed into the square and sat down by the statue opposite me. They were dressed in Rune armour trousers and Adamant chest pieces a sure sign that they hadn't completed the Dragon Quest yet since Rune Chest Armour only became available after the Dragon had been slain. One carried a 'Dragon Breath Shield' which confirmed my initial reading that he was about to embark on this quest. They talked excitedly about what it would mean for one of their group to be a 'Dragon Killer' the status and 'buffs' that would receive from his wearing 'Full Rune'. They were joined by a girl dressed in full trimmed rune armour. She was obviously a high-level player – the 'trimmed Rune' revealed as much and she wore a red party hat which together would have cost her many thousands of gold pieces. In her hands she wielded a Rune 2H Sword the most powerful weapon available. She asked them 'if they were doing the Dragon*

*Slayer? 'Yes' they answered. 'Nervous?' Again, 'yeah very'. 'My heart was pounding when I killed her' said the girl. (Mine too I thought). She talked them through her experiences of the quest as an old warrior might tell his students tales of his adventures. 'Maan' said one of the group 'I cant wait to see Elvarg the Dragon and be able to voyage to Crandor Island' I could almost imagine the longing look in the eyes of the group as they pondered this for a moment and all answered 'yeah'*

This process was kept vibrant by constant updates by Jagex. There were also regular updates of equipment and character skills, sometimes through the use of quests but often not. As the game progressed, Jagex moved from random updates to bringing in a new aspect of the game weekly. Sometimes the official Runescape site would announce the update but sometimes it would merely hint. An additional pleasure was built into the game as us regular users competed with each other to discover what the new Monday update was. If new equipment or clothing were introduced they immediately became 'must have' items and entrepreneurial members were quick to exploit the market by selling the goods at premium prices.

*"maan, the weekly updates were so a stroke of genius by Jagex. Every Monday I used to rush round and find what had been added. You could always get gold from the noobs who were desperate to find the new place or get the new stuff but were too frikken lazy or not skilled to get them for themselves. I made a mint outa them Gnomes Robes, like a cool mill" - Sanguinus (forum)*

Similarly my field notes indicate that I funded the purchase of my dragon Battle axe (about 200K) from the sale of Runes following my early completion of one such update, the Rune Mysteries quest. I later write in my Quest blog: *'I discover that the secret to quick wealth is to quickly exploit the update and move on thus meeting the high initial demand. I remind myself that this is not unlike a 'get rich quick' activity in the material but I soon feel like a 'ticket tout' peddling my wares outside a sold out concert. It is not a good feeling and I don't try this again'.*

Over this first year, Runescape was funded by commercial sponsorship and by the sale of online advertising space, mainly a large advertising banner that was situated above the gaming window. On 27<sup>th</sup> February 2002 Jagex launched an additional

service called 'members edition'. For a modest monthly fee of £3.20, \$5.00 US dollars, or €8.40 per month 'members' gained access to additional skills, equipment and perhaps most importantly in-game territories. Although still essentially the same as the free addition, 'members' significantly changed the focus of the game. The gaming area was expanded by an additional 100% with an additional range of quests and associated skills. Players were also able to duel with each other and a number of smaller competitive mini-games were introduced for example, Gnome Ball. Membership also had the advantage of giving players access to a range of exclusive servers, which overcame the over-crowding and drop out that had plagued the free servers at the more popular times of day (3pm – 11pm UK time).

*'The first night of 'members' is strange. I meet 'thesaintuk' in Falador as normal at 7.30pm. As we have taken out membership we opt to log into a 'member only' server. Falador is a busy mining town, usually inhabited by miners, smelters and metal workers who constantly bug you to buy their wares. As thesaintuk remarks all is unusually quite. In the market place where there should be hundreds of members there are a mere handful. I recognise one or two of them from the mines. Jaromayo comes up to me 'duel ya Nic?' I stare at the screen blankly. He insists I duel him. I PM (private message) thesaintuk 'what is he talking about', 'dunno' she replies. Jaromayo continues his insistence. I click on him and get the usual status information, his level, his experience points and an option to trade. I click on me and bring up a sub-menu. At the bottom is a new option 'Duel'. I select it and before I know what is happening we are fighting. I am wearing full rune and wielding my Rune axe. As a level 60 I kill him easily. It seems kind of senseless but as I look around many people are duelling. Clearly it is part of the new 'members only' sub routines. We head south along the path to Draynor village – the usually busy bank is empty. 'Its like that bit in 28 days later' says thesaintuk. I find myself agreeing with her. Weird!*

*Later SassySammy messages me to come meet her over in the new member's areas. She is in a place she describes as the 'Druid Village' I head north out of Falador and meet Sassy and Max walking down the mountain path. 'Come look at this Chainsaw' she exclaims. She is clearly excited as her avatar is jumping around. We cut through the grass and encounter a long chain-link fence twice as high as my avatar. We follow it and eventually pass through a set of iron gates. We are in the member's area. Somehow it feels special, almost like we are privileged. I imagine that passing through 'Check Point Charlie' from East to West Berlin must have been similar – I laugh at myself for the analogy. Sassy is keen to explore. thesaintuk pm's me that she has teleported to the other side of the area behind a snow*

covered peak. I curse her mage abilities and wish that I had opted to concentrate on developing my magic skills. Me, Max and Sassy have to walk. Suddenly three white wolves jump out of the snow. I have not seen any of these before – they must be new monsters. They are level 40 – not an easy kill even for a well equipped player and Sassy is only wearing her monk robes – and have an annoying habit of running away before you can kill them only to return once they are ‘healed’. We dispatch the first group and continue our ascent only to have it halted by a larger and meaner white she-wolf. She is level 90 and makes straight for Sassy’ There is no one else about!

- Field Diary entry

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Membership proved popular, and whilst the free-game continued to attract users, the member’s game was generating income for Jagex. By 2003, Jagex were attracting, according to their corporate site, 5 million free accounts (2.8 million logging in over 3 times a week) and over 400,000 paying members. The free members were now breaking even which removed even more financial burden from the company. This income allowed for rapid expansion by Jagex, who brought in a team of additional designers to support the Gower brothers and a commercial/marketing group underneath Constant Tedder the commercial director. The company also moved into its large premises in Cambridge Science Park – although its exact location was a closely guarded secret – and the online customer support was significantly expanded. (Jagex have only been accessible on the telephone by a privileged few!)



Figure 2

In March 2004, RS1 was completely updated by the visually superior Runescape2 (see figure 2) Although almost identical in terms of game-play to RS1, the update added much needed visual polish to the game, bringing it more in-keeping with the expectation of the genre although still a long way behind its main disc-based competitors. RS1 players were seamlessly ported into Runescape2 so there was no need for players to re-register and no loss of characters/equipment – in fact I can recall logging out of RS1 late one evening and when I logged in the next day finding myself exactly where I had been the night before but in a much enhanced visual environment. Runescape 2 immediately became the main game and the ‘2’ tag soon disappeared. RS1 was kept going for nostalgic reasons under the name ‘Runescape classic’ where it attracted a cult following until it finally closed to new accounts in January 2006. Runescape 2 added additional gaming enhancements such as new combat menu systems, ‘talking heads’ interaction with NPC (non player characters) and additional character customisations, for example hairstyles. It also introduced a crude class system into the game with players being able to choose combat specialisms such as warrior, ranger or mage, each of which carried their own specialist weapons and protection. This aspect again began to bring Runescape narrative more into line with the bigger games of WOW and Everquest as well as drawing upon the more established conventions of the fantasy genre. Runescape still falls short of range of classes offered by the larger games (Everquest for example offers 15 classes including cleric, necromancer, bard and shadow knight) and is yet to introduce the idea of different races. Jagex have declined to answer whether this is a deliberate attempt to keep the game simple and focused or more a concern with the limits of the JAVA platform, but there is much speculation on the fan forums where there are repeated calls for the game to be more reflective of the environments found in other popular fantasy texts – most notably the races and classes offered by Warhammer and those seen in the Lord of the Rings films.

*“When Runescape (2) came out I thought, oh shit, where are all the races?...I thought it was going to be like Warhammer but its nothing like what I expected. Shame cos, I really like the idea of being something different... each could have their own skills and armour and stuff... it would really stop the game from being repetitive”*  
Widget (15)

*“it suxs a bit, I cant even wear Female armour now because its only available in RSC. I used to put it on and at least you could pretend to be an Amazon warrior like in Xena lol” - Katspaw (14)*

*“I really wanna be a hobbit! ... why not make it so that some quests or skills can give you an option that the makeover mage can turn you into a diferent species?.... after all, homo sapiens aren't that cool” – Illusions Paw (Forum)*

By 2006, Runescape had expanded a game of 150 quests, 2000 items and 22 character skills. It had nearly 6 million free accounts and an active membership of 850,000 with Jagex employing a staff of 300. It had extended its server network to over 100 based in the main play location – UK, USA and Australia. – and had plans to develop different language beta versions of the game. On May 3 2007, ‘Digital Media Wire’ reported that Runescape had surpassed 1 million subscribers which mean it now has more subscribers than any game of its kind outside of South Korea. Gower noted that:

*“Runescape is the most popular MMORPG in the Western World (though not as profitable by a long shot as WoW)... It's likely touched more Western people's lives than UO, Everquest, DAoC, Shadowbane, CoH/CoV, EQ2, Eve, Vanguard, D&D Online, and LoTR Online combined. Accessibility has a lot to do with that”*  
(Iron Forge Realms)

In terms of wealth, Gower has come a long way from the bedroom in his parent's house. It is hard to get hold of accurate figures since Jagex will not release financial details but they claim to have been in profit since 2002 (source: Red Herring) Real Business reported in 2006 that, the Gower brothers own 79% of their company, Jagex, whose £2.7m profit on £5.2m sales in 2005 values it at about £40m. With past dividends the Gowers are worth in the region of £32m. With the recent subscription announcement this figure is likely to be in excess of £50m. Although put in context this is very little when compared with WOW which has 8 million players paying as much as \$15 a month to play the game and estimates suggest generated \$1 billion in revenue last year for Blizzard its creator. But DFC Intelligence has forecast that the



worldwide online game market is expected to grow from \$3.4 billion in 2005 to more than \$13 billion in 2011. (Source: Red Herring). Jagex is a major UK player.

Despite this success Jagex remain remarkably down-to-earth as a company. Proud that the game has been spread by word of mouth in the playground, rather than through expensive advertising the company continues to keep the 'bedroom development' feel. I discussed as much with Constant Tedder on BBC Radio 4's '*You and Yours*' programme in late 2006. Constant Tedder is very much the public face of Jagex whilst Andrew Gower, on the two occasions I met him, was shy and withdrawn preferring to talk with enthusiasm about the game he had created rather than the success of his company. At an organisational level Jagex keeps a tight control over the operation of the game ensuring that it is a fun and safe place to be. Cheating and bullying are tightly controlled by an in-game system and through the use of moderators. The company works closely with users, and interestingly their parents, via regular meetings and on-line forums to keep the game reflective of its fan base. As an extension to this, the Runescape website contains a variety of safety information, tips for parents and even an educational page in which they attempt to map Runescape with key areas of the curriculum.

Jagex also claim to work closely with third party sites such as Ebay, to control character and goods trading. This has been a major difficulty with games such as WOW where users have created accounts, built their characteristics up to an intermediate or high level and then sold them – sometimes for vast amounts of money. The same situation exists for rare goods and currency. Character development and in-game currency represent a considerable time investment, and consequently it carries a real value in the material world. (A quick glance at Ebay shows that very rare Runescape items such as party hats are worth over £1000) Since, Jagex are committed to ensuring a level playing field for all players – Gower argues, somewhat Zen-like, that success in Runescape is an expression of the effort put in by the individual - such activities are against the spirit of the game and heavily sanctioned. On the one hand this seems to be an attempt to keep the game running smoothly and to protect them from the current moral panics concerning bedroom games. But I also feel that this is a genuine attempt to escape the faceless organisations that appear to control other such games. Certainly Jagex pride

themselves on being accessible to all users and appear to argue that the Java-based approach is an expression of this belief. In a recent interview with Forge, Gower commented:

*“I find it funny to watch something like Vanguard (a new MMORPG) release when it can’t even run on the vast majority of people’s PCs...Accessibility wants to come in but you’ve locked the door and buried the key! I was at SOE’s offices a few years back, before they launched EQ2, and John Smedley was showing off the game to us and, incredibly, almost boasting that the system requirements were so high, as if producing high system requirements means you’re a real man. This kind of attitude baffled me at the time, and it continues to do so”*

The operation of Runescape is yet another expression of that belief. Perhaps such ideas are somewhat old-school and reflect the early days of games when game creators were a technical club that shared ideas with fellow enthusiasts. Gower struck me as a ‘gamers’ game creator, a creative individual that still finds fun in his creations rather than seeing them in solely commercial terms. I think that for Jagex, games are only fun if they are fair and if everyone can join him in the playground. As a result, Jagex want to appear to have a human face – even if perhaps it wears a wizard’s hat!

### **We’re off to see the Wizard...**

I observed earlier, that Jagex have deliberately made Runescape an easy game to get into. Without having a disc to purchase, I simply went to [www.runescape.com](http://www.runescape.com) and clicked on the link for the game. Once the Java window opened, it was a short wait for the main game to download. Before being able to access the game, new users must first create an account but again, for free members, I found this straightforward. I was only required to give minimal information which included email address and confirmation that I was over 13 (although there is no check and my then 10 year old son easily created an account). When I took out full membership more detailed financial information was required but I did not find this as complex as setting up my WOW subscription where accounts are ‘locked’ to particular servers, resulting in my having to co-ordinate registration with any friends/family with whom I was proposing to play.

The main information required from all new users is that they choose a screen name and password. Some users seem to take great care in this aspect and screen names are often influenced by television, film or the fantasy genre. Other users just seem to be eager to enter the game as quickly as possible – although less care at this stage appeared to be a focus of regret later when their characters became more established and players found that the rather rushed collection of letters and numbers could not be edited. I will be exploring this aspect of Runescape identity in a later chapter but it is worth noting at this stage that 20 players in this study actually deleted their accounts to reset a more convincing name, whilst about 150 others said that they regret their initial choices but felt themselves to be too established to change. I was not surprised by this; like in most virtual arenas, screen names soon become very important, forming a central part of the on-screen identity, and it tended to those with less virtual experience that fell into the trap of hurrying through this stage of registration. I had no such dilemma. I adopted the name ‘Chainsaw Nic’ which is an identity that I have used throughout my gaming. This identity had three main benefits:

1. Familiarity: I originally ‘moved into’ Runescape as part of an established virtual community, thus it was natural – indeed important – to maintain this identity so that I would be known to my fellow ‘Xenites’. I had already been an active member of a number of other online games – most notably ‘Quake’ – where I was also known by this tag. ‘Chainsaw Nic’ was thus well established as my online-self and in this sense represented a ‘natural’ and simple extension to material ‘Nic’. When my status ‘changed’ from that of a ‘pleasure’ gamer to ‘researcher’ I considered changing my name, but by that time I had already established a number of important in-game networks and felt that, since ‘re-starting’ a character was a ‘frowned upon’ activity for established players, I would lose this connectivity.
2. Naturalistic: From a methodological perspective, I am not sure that it is even desirable or accurate to juxtapose the status of ‘gamer’ and ‘researcher’ in this way; thus to acknowledge this shift in focus in such a formal manner seemed to undermined some of the ethnographic principles upon which my research was based. Suler (1999) notes in his piece about ‘The Palace’ that he also struggled with his online identity when he began to undertake his ethnographic work. He argues the need for complete transparency in this type of virtual

study and thus chose the name 'The Virtual Ethnographer' as a means of highlighting the research element of his online activities. I do not agree. I argue that such an identity actually cuts through the 'naturalism' that characterises ethnographic style work. As I argue elsewhere, Runescape represents a pre-modern fantasy environment. Whilst it is a virtual social arena it is also a RPG space. As such, naturalism requires some degree of engagement with this aspect of its narrative. The name 'Chainsaw Nic' resonates with the ruggedness and savagery of aspects of the fantasy environment. As a 'Warhammer' gamer, I had already used a chainsaw wielding religious zealot called 'Chainsaw Nic' in my tabletop battles and I was keen to re-create this character within an appropriate virtual narrative. Whilst not all users share such connectivity with either the role-playing aspect of the world or the more general fantasy narrative, as I will demonstrate later, the relationship between virtual identity – particularly one's name - and the virtual culture of the world is a powerful social dynamic within Runescape society.

3. Connectivity with self: I noted in a previous chapter how the avatar acts as a symbolic extension of self. As I acknowledged above, I felt that the name captured part of the flavour of the Runescape world, yet 'Nic' also represents part of my identity in the material. The 'Chainsaw' pre-fix had originated from my time as part of the 'Quake' online game community. It is somewhat ironic that whilst 'Chainsaw' suited the gladiatorial narrative of a First Person Shooter, I was actually given it due to my failings as a FPS gamer. Unable to aim a gun accurately I had to resort to the use of 'close combat' weapons such as chainsaws – something that was not without skill in on its own terms since obtaining a 'frag' (kill) with such a weapon was notoriously difficult. It thus also acknowledges within the character my failings and successes as a computer gamer (Loftus & Loftus; 1983) This forms part of my 'hidden self' the pleasure of which is only available to the user (Suler 1999)

My name chosen I was required to make further choices concerning my Runescape identity. Unlike a chat-room or MUD, players in MMORPG are represented by a visual character or 'avatar'. In most games this is customisable and so there is scope to edit one's visual appearance. The desire for a 'unique' visual representation is

often one of the most pleasurable aspects of the narrative. In Runescape this is limited in comparison with other MMORPGs. Runescape players are limited in that there are none of the traditional fantasy races available to them, thus new users can only pick a human appearance. There is scope for customisation however. There is a choice of gender, body shape, facial appearance, hair style and colour and, for male characters a choice of beards. Players must also choose their default clothing which is again customisable in terms of colour and style. Different clothing, including headwear and footwear, is available throughout the game – either from shops, armouries, rewards from adventures or other special events – so there are endless possibilities to customise a unique look as players become more established in the game. Gender and appearance can also be changed in-game by visiting the ‘face-mage’ who for a fee will work her body altering magic (although within most groups of users such non-naturalistic behaviour is a much-ridiculed, ‘noobish’ activity). But changing hair styles and colours is a simple matter of visiting the barbers in one of the main towns – Falador. For a new player, choices are somewhat limited however, which for some serves as an incentive to be successful in the game:

*“My stuff sucked when I first got it, I remember being a noob in Varrok and there was this girl dressed up in cool God Armour and I thought one day I am going to have that...full Guthrix, looks gr8 with a Robin Hood hat and Ranger Boots”*  
– JamJam (14)

Whilst for others it is a point of irritation:

*“Shit, I hated it when I was a noob, everyone looked the same cos you cant afford shit and your stuck with the shitty default stuff.....lol I was mining in Dwarven mines and there were 3 other versions of me – identical, even down to the bald head...maan we pissed ourselves, but it kinda sucked that you couldn’t be an individual”*  
- Zucker (15)

This desire for a unique identity is a recurring theme in this study which I will return to more fully in the next chapter. Since the ‘look’ of one’s avatar represents the most tangible aspect of the virtual self I thought long and hard about this aspect of my identity. Compared with other MMORPGs I had played the choices were simple.

Without races and/or classes of character built into the game dynamic, any decisions were to a certain extent merely aesthetic. However, I wanted to try to create the warrior monk character that I had been using in my tabletop fantasy gaming and I knew from playing ‘Everquest’ and ‘Darkstone’ that ‘religious’ characters were often seen as being approachable and non-threatening which I felt would help me in this new world. At this stage I did not consider gender-bending. Unlike other games – most notably the ‘beat-em-ups’ (‘Tekken’, ‘Dead or Alive’, ‘Virtual-Fighter’) - where choices of gender often have ‘difference’ built into the narrative (female characters are weaker but significantly faster), the Runescape dynamic makes no such allowances. I was also un-aware at this stage of the comparative social advantages of being a female that had evolved within the in-game culture. Thus I chose a male avatar; white skin-tone- to fit in with the ‘western’ traditions of fantasy literature; long spikey hair – which looked vaguely religious to me at the time!; dressed in brown robes to signify the traditional image of a ‘monk’. I was later to discover that ‘Monk robes’ were available in-game and was able to secure these from another player as part of a ‘trade’ a few weeks later. I felt pleased with my choices and wrote in an email to one of my Xena colleagues;

*“Nic doesn’t look as much like a monk as my painted figures in Warhammer, nor is it all as polished as Everquest, or as good as the Avs on XWP, but I think he looks rather cool – in a Java- sorta way”*

Once this registration/set-up process was complete, I was transported into the Runescape world. As figure 3 demonstrates, the Runescape interface is not complicated. The main window displays the Runescape world, my avatar, other players, their names and their combat level. Clicking on a player also allows me to access other statistical data about the player and invites certain activities such as trading. From here I can also see what other players are saying and open private chat windows to interact with players in other parts of the Runescape world. Player interaction is essentially public. There is no audio facility as in the more sophisticated games and all dialogue is text based. The screen at the bottom of the interface displays all the dialogue that is taking place in the immediate area, and dialogue also appears over the character who is speaking. Figure 2 illustrates how this process takes place



Figure 3

In popular locations – Falador Market for example – keeping track of a conversation can be extremely complicated and some players opt to use ‘Private chat’ which allows one-to-one conversations between users on the ‘friends list’ (Again, figure 2 illustrates this – the friends list is displayed as a sub-menu to the right of the main screen) This conversation appears as a different coloured text on the main screen. Interaction with NPC is slightly different. This dialogue takes the form of ‘talking heads’ which appear at the bottom of the main interface – see figure 4. For most players this form of interaction is part of a quest and it adds to the storytelling dimension of the adventure.

Movement is a simple ‘point and click’ mechanism that is standard in most God and RTS games; I simply use the mouse to point to where I want my character to go and the avatar will move to that location. There is also a map to facilitate easy movement over longer distances. Sub-menus allow me to run if required although this is limited by the ‘agility’ level of the character and whether they are suffering from ‘Fatigue’. Certain objects such as walls, fences and other obstacles block movement and I sometimes need to find away around them or may be able to climb over. Other sub-menus allow me to view my statistics, select what items I wish to carry or wear, and perhaps most importantly to choose styles of combat and magic.



Figure 4

Like many other online and offline games new players cannot enter the game directly and must first visit 'Tutorial Island' to learn these basics of moving and interaction within the virtual world. Here I was also taught basic skills – cooking, fishing, mining – that I will require in my adventure as well as learning about basic combat and magic. The tutorial takes the form of a series of simple challenges set by an in-game expert e.g 'Master Fisher' who will not allow me to move on until I have successfully completed his/her task. These get gradually more advanced and set the tone of the Quests that will take place in the main Runescape world. This was a late addition to the game – 'Chainsaw Nic' was dropped directly into the game with little or no idea as to how it worked and how to do things – and whilst some users are initially frustrated that they cannot get straight into the game, it is generally agreed that this has improved the game's initial accessibility. Some aspects such as mining, and cooking can be complicated and more advanced skills such as smelting require players to know what combinations of elements need to be put together. Without some sort of guidance it is easy for new players to become lost and disheartened. Somewhat surprisingly, given that many players rush through this aspect in order to get to the game proper, once you have left Tutorial Island, players are not able to return to 'top up' their knowledge and any gaps must be filled by accessing the online (text-based) tutorial on the main Jagex site or one of the many fan sites that have



grown up with the game e.g. Tip.it. Once Tutorial Island is completed new players are transported to Lumbridge Castle to begin their virtual life in the game.

*“Tutorial Island wuz painful, I just wnted to get to my m8s, but l8er I felt lika real noob cos I couldnt remember how to do anyfin” – LucylovesStew (13)*

*“yeah, I remember Runescape 1, I got dropped at Lumbridge Castle and was like ‘what tha fuck is goin on here?’ it was weird. If vix hadn’t helped me out n shown me stuff I would have given up I think” Sassy Sammy (17)*

Just as I began my research, (before the introduction of ‘Tutorial Island’) I revisited Lumbridge Castle and tried to recall what it was like to be dropped in there as a new player:



*“Lumbridge is a small town in the central kingdom of Misthalin. It is situated to the south of the main city of Varrok and to the west of the desert kingdom of Al- Kharid. It is surrounded on its south side by dangerous swamp-land and to west lays the sleepy village of Draynor and the mysticism of the Wizards Tower. The town is protected by a large castle area and has a busy bridge at its centre which is one of the few crossing points over the large river Lum. It is a bustling place second only to Varrock in the variety of citizens you can find there. It is the starting point for all Runescape noobies who form a gaggle around the Runescape guide standing beneath the direction sign. In this respect I remember that it is not the place to be a successful or high level player. I am soon engulfed by poor confused noobs who ask me for help, try to trade worthless items such as ‘burnt meat’ or simply beg for me to give them money. All are best ignored as there are too many to help and most are demanding. It is no wonder that those who ‘re-spawn’ here after getting killed hastily make for one of the exits.*

*Yet I re-discover it is an exciting and refreshing place, where I am reminded of what it was like in my early days in RS. I can still get a sense of what an enclosed community it provides for Runescape's new citizens. Everything that a noob needs is here. A series of 'opponents' from simple Level 2 spiders to the more demanding level 6 goblins. The shops sell the equipment needed by a new player and there are sufficient quality drop items to 'earn' some money. There is a variety of food to test cooking skills – cows for meat, chickens for eggs, farms for corn and a mill to make flour. The main trades are well served with mining points, a forge to smelt metal and simple fishing points for low level fish. It is also a good starting point for low level quests such as 'the cook's apprentice' or 'the restless ghost'. It is little wonder that few leave its confines in their first weeks of Runescape.*

*There is an exciting mix of characters here. More NPCs than in any other area I suspect and for those with the time and/or inclination to talk to them there is much useful knowledge about how to 'survive' Runescape or merely to add to the back-history of some of its areas, institutions and religions. Sadly most users – over enthusiastic in their quest to 'raise levels' – rush from shop to shop or monster to monster, too busy to appreciate or take the time for these subtle additions to their world. Everywhere people are trying to trade, asking questions, fighting, mining, fishing, smelting, waiting for items to re-spawn, and chatting to each other. In this respect Lumbridge is far too busy and a somewhat un-restful place.”*

- Diary entry

### **Skill-beyond-skill!**

The importance of Tutorial Island cannot be underestimated. RPG and MMORPG games depend not on special progression but on developing in-game skills and characteristics. The more advanced these become, the more sophisticated are the tasks that can be undertaken. To date there are 22 skills and characteristics to be developed, of which 8 are exclusive to member worlds: Some of these relate directly to combat and add to a player's overall combat rating:

**Attack** - Gives accuracy of melee attacks

**Strength** - Deals more damage in melee attacks

**Defence** - Lessens the chance of an enemy hitting

**Prayer**- Gives short boosts/power-ups for combat skills

**Magic** - Use many magical spells to kill enemies and perform other tasks such as

teleporting.

**Ranged** - Use ranged attacks such as bows to kill enemies

**Hitpoints** - Allows more life so you can take more damage

These skills tend to be highly valued, although depending on what type of character is being developed – Warrior, Ranger or Mage - it is usual for players to concentrate on either Melee skills, Range skills or Magic skills respectively. Of course some players opt to create an ‘all-round’ character – which is probably the easiest way of advancing quickly in the game - but many players have chosen to specialize in order to add an additional dimension to the game. This seems important to some players given that there is no narrative mechanism that allows players to choose a class or race of character. More sophisticated users further refine their in game skills to fit the profile of Fantasy Archetypes. For example, Rangers also concentrate on Thieving, Fletching and Woodcutting skills, Herblaw is often practiced by players who dress as Monks and Armour related skills such as Mining and Smithing by those who play as Warriors. Keeping this correct skills profile is seen as a way of customising game-play beyond the game-mechanism itself. This is a loose arrangement and forums are full of discussions about what types of arrows elven archers would use, what weapons a Monk should carry and whether Mages should wear robes or armour. Sometimes this is taken to extremes to keep the fantasy as real as possible. Sassy Sammy proudly told me that as a Warrior Nun she had held off on one of the main quests of the game – Dragon Slayer – until she was strong enough to fight the dragon in just Nun’s robes on the grounds that a Nun would never wear armour!

The Non-Combat skills are:

**Construction** - Build and furnish your own house

**Runecraft** - Make runes used to cast magic

**Agility** - Pass objects and traps safely.

**Herblore** - Make potions with magical properties

**Theiving** - Steal items and disarm traps

**Crafting** - Make jewellery, Ranger Armour and more

**Fletching** - Make bows, arrows and other ranged weapons

**Slayer** – Ability to slay larger monsters

**Mining** - Mine ores and metals for smithing and crafting

**Smithing** - Make metal armour and weapons of different grades

**Fishing** - Catch fish for cooking and eating

**Cooking**- Cook fish, pies and other food

**Woodcutting** - Cut a variety of trees for fletching and fire making

**Firemaking** - Burn wood to cremate bones or to cook food

**Farming** - Grow vegetables and herbs for other skills

Some of these skills are only available on Member Worlds and others are initially linked to quests. Some skills are linked, for example mining and smithing and many require the purchasing of additional equipment or can only be practised in certain areas e.g. mining in mines, smithing at a forge and fishing near water. As a skill is practiced so the player's experience in that skill grows. Once a certain pre-determined level of experience is reached, the player advances a skill level (see figure 3, the various skill levels are displayed in the sub-menu on the right e.g. the Player's mining skill is at level 25, and cooking at level 34). At certain pre-determined levels, new skills or characteristics are made available to the player. So, for example, at level 1 fishing the player can only fish shrimp, at level 40 lobster and level 80 shark. What differentiates these skills from the main combat skills is that they tend to be linked more to the social aspects of the game. There are clearly market orientated skills that are directly linked to the supply and demand mechanisms of the game. These are Fishing, Cooking, Mining, Smithing, Runecraft and to a lesser extent Woodcutting, Fletching and Herblore. Some players choose to specialise in one or more of these skills in order to make money by selling their wares to other players. Since skill experience, particularly at the upper levels, represent a considerable time-investment it is not always possible for all players to have the necessary experience to access high-level items in the game and they must rely on specialists to supply the market. Since high level items are often the product of high level experience, the items can be sold for a high price. So for example cooked shark represents the highest food-stuff in Runescape – it replenishes the most energy by providing the highest healing experience points (the amount that a player's 'hitpoint' level is increased by following attack or injury) In order to cook shark, I required Level 76 Fishing and Level 80 Cooking. This probably represents in the region of 200 hours of game-play invested in each of these skills alone. Cooked shark is therefore a foodstuff that is in high

demand but can only be supplied by very experienced players, and consequently can be sold for 1kgp each. Rune armour, which requires high level Mining and Smithing commands an even higher price since Rune ore can only be mined in some of the most dangerous areas of the Runescape world.

I chose to concentrate on the Fishing skill, seduced by the claim that it is one of the few non combat skills that allow me to make “*something from nothing by collecting fish as a raw resource*” (Finlay: the game fishing tutor). Since everyone requires food to replenish health points and fish is a popular choice, fishing can be a very profitable skill to have, particularly if combined with ‘cooking’. It is also one of the more ‘social’ skills. Most of the main fishing spots are in busy and well populated areas – for example Cathaby – and since fishing is a slow activity, most fishers are happy to pass the time by chatting. I found that particularly amongst newer citizens, it tended to be only when they were engaged in these non-combat activities that they had time to simply relax and talk. Most clans need a regular supply of food thus I soon found that providing a regular and reliable food-source was a good way of building up social networks across the world. By the time I could fish and cook shark I had regular ‘contracts’ with some of the main clans. But reaching this level requires a substantial investment in terms of effort and game time. The table below, taken from my in-game skill diary, illustrates the number of stages required to reach the high-level fish.

Name	Fishing lvl	Fishing exp	Cooking lvl	Cooking exp	Healing	Tool / Bait
Crayfish	1	10	1	30	1	Crayfish cage
Shrimp	1	10	1	30	3	Net
Sardine	5	20	1	40	4	Fishing rod + Bait
Herring	10	30	5	50	5	Fishing rod + Bait
Anchovy	15	40	1	30	1	Net

Mackerel	16	20	10	60	6	Big Net
Trout	20	50	15	70	7	Fly rod + Feather
Cod	23	45	18	75	7	Big Net
Pike	25	60	20	80	8	Fishing rod + Bait
Salmon	30	70	25	90	9	Fly rod + Feather
Tuna	35	80	30	100	10	Harpoon
Lobster	40	90	40	120	12	Lobster cage
Bass	46	100	43	130	13	Big Net
Swordfish	50	100	45	140	14	Harpoon
Shark	76	110	80	210	20	Harpoon



*I begin my fishing career by talking to Finlay the Fishing Tutor on the beach, south of the graveyard in Lumbridge. He explains about the different kinds of fish and gives me a free small fishing net*



**Crayfish cage (Level 1):**

*When I first start fishing, the only things that I can catch are shrimp and crayfish. These small creatures can be found only behind Lumbridge church or the pond between Lumbridge and Draynor village, making them an ideal starting point for noobs. I find that one of the best places to also gain cooking experience is on the edge of the pond near Draynor Village. I catch*

crayfish, and there are willow trees around to get wood for my cooking fire. To catch crayfish, I need a 'Crayfish cage', that I buy in nearby Port Sarim Fishing Shop for 20 gold pieces.



**Net (Level 1):**

As well as Crayfish I can also catch shrimp. These small creatures can be found in many parts of the sea in RuneScape. As I also need to level cooking I soon discover that one of the best places to fish and cook is on the seashore near Draynor Village. Just a little Southwest of the bank there's a fishing spot where I can catch shrimp, and there are lots of trees around to get wood for my fire. To catch shrimp, I need the 'Small Fishing Net' that Finlay gave me. Later I lose it and have to buy a replacement at the Port Sarim Fishing Shop for 5 gold pieces. I find that I can also catch anchovies with the net when I reach level 15.



**Baiting at sea (Level 5):**

Once I catch enough shrimp my fishing level finally reaches 5, and I am at last able to catch sardines. To catch sardines, I need a fishing rod and some bait. A fishing rod costs 5 gold pieces and Bait costs 3 gold pieces. Finlay tells me that I can also catch herring with bait and a fishing rod, but I will need level 10 fishing to catch them. I can catch both sardines and herring from the sea. To use my fishing rod and bait, I need to have both in my inventory. Then I right-click on the fishing spot and select the second option, which is 'Bait'. I use one bait each time I catch a fish. I begin to discover that this is time consuming and expensive.

**Baiting in river (Level 25):**

I can also Fish with bait in the rivers of RuneScape, but I am

*not able to catch sardines or herring here as these are sea fish. When I fish with a fishing rod and bait in a river, I catch pike. This fish heals 8, and I need level 25 to fish it. As before it requires a fishing rod and some bait. I start fishing as before. Bait is the second option when I right click on the river fishing spots. I get attacked in Cathaby by a NPC and discover that I can also get bait from killing zombies and banshees. This is good news since it reduces the financial cost of raising levels whilst also advancing my combat skills.*



**Big Net (Level 16/P2P):**

*I reach level 16 and begin big net fishing. As well as catching mackerel I sometimes find other things washing into my net such as oysters, seaweed, leather gloves/boots, or every once in a while a treasure casket. These can contain coins, gems, talismans or even a half of a key. One of my fellow fishers tells me that wearing a Necklace of Skills will increase my chances of getting treasure. I try to source one from craftsmen in Falador market. They are expensive and I decide to stick with my Dragonstone Amulet. I reach level 23 and I begin to find cod in my net.*

*Tigsrulz tells me that once I reach level 46 I can start catching bass with my net or even big bass if I am lucky enough (which can be stuffed and mounted using the Construction skill). When I reach 46 I try this out but decide to carry on catching lobsters. They are more lucrative on the open market and I am fed up with catching seaweed and old boots in my net. They are not very appetising!*





***Feathering/luring (Level 20):***

*I reach level 20 and begin fly-fishing. I need level 20 fishing to catch trout, but level 30 fishing to catch salmon. To fly fish, I need a fly fishing rod and some feathers. Like all other F2P fishing equipment, I buy these from the fishing shop in Port Sarim. The shopkeeper tells me that I can fly fish only in the RuneScape rivers. I cannot use my fly-fishing rod and feathers on fishing spots in the sea. To fly-fish, I simply click on the fishing spot and select "Lure". I use one feather each time I catch a fish. Like 'baiting' this initially seems expensive but I soon discover that I can get feathers from killing chickens.*

*Although there are a number of fly-fishing spots throughout Runescape some locations offer advantages over others. When I am just fishing and cooking for experience, Lumbridge is probably the best place to be. I just fish, get some wood, start a fire, cook my fish then either drop or eat. I find that fly-fishing is probably my bet for power fishing because it has a high catch rate and can earn over 50% more experience per hour than catching monkfish, even at level 90+! When I want to bank/sell the fish however, the Barbarian village is probably the better place. I fish, cook them in the barbarian house farthest to the North (there's 2 ever-lasting fires), and go North into Edgeville and bank my fish to sell later.*

*Later, at level 38, I find that as a member I can catch rainbow fish by using stripy feathers rather than regular feathers. Stripey feathers are obtained by snaring tropical wagtails. Rainbow fish can be used raw to hunt barb-tailed kebbits, or cooked and eaten to heal 11hp. I am not certain that they are worth the effort and stick with my lobsters.*



### **Harpooning (Level 35):**

*Yes! Level 35 and I am at last onto the big fish. I get a Harpoon (Port Sarim fishing shop, costs 5 gold pieces) and head off to the beautiful island of Karamja (I take the boat from Port Sarim). I go down to the fishing dock, located North of the banana field. The trip to Karamja costs 30 gold pieces and another 30 to get back and it starts to get expensive. But I am able to catch tuna with the harpoon. I simply right click on the fishing spot and select "harpoon". Tuna is good for training on low level monsters that won't hit that hard. For example, Karamja Volcano has red spiders and skeletons which are good for training. I try to avoid the Lesser Demons which attack me there.*

*Next on the harpooning chain is swordfish. I need level 50 fishing to fish these. They heal 14 hp, and I catch them at the same place I catch tuna. The problem with swordfish is that depending on my fishing level, I seem to get more tuna than swordfish when harpooning for them. Like the tuna, I also need a harpoon to catch swordfish.*

*When I at last reach level 76 I start catching the bone-crunching sharks. They heal an amazing 20 hp, and I catch them at the same place I go big net fishing, Cathaby. I discover that these sell cooked for 1K gold pieces and are in very high demand by PK clans. I start to make serious money. Tigz tells me that I can obtain barb-tail harpoons from Barb-tailed Kebbits (level 33 ). A barb-tail harpoon is wieldable, which frees up 1 more inventory space. That's handy as it leaves one more space for a shark*



### ***Caging (Level 40):***

*I reach level 40 and now can also fish lobsters on Karamja. I need a "Lobster Pot" to do this. The lobster pot costs 20 gold pieces from the Port Sarim Fishing Shop where I am now a regular customer. I soon discover that lobsters are a great way of making money. Many people prefer lobsters for training food as they heal 12 hp. Cage is the first option when I click on the sea fishing spot. They are much easier to fish than swordfish and my levels begin to increase rapidly. I still have my eyes set on those shark!*



### ***Heavy Rod Fishing (Level 48):***

*When I reach level 48 fishing and have completed enough Barbarian Training, I am able to catch leaping trout. At higher fishing levels I can catch leaping salmon and even leaping sturgeon (there are strength and agility level requirements as well). I use a Heavy Fishing Rod, as well as bait to catch these fish. I find my Heavy Fishing Rod under Otto's bed. I can use a variety of items as bait: bait, feather, fish off-cuts, caviar, roe. As a bonus to fishing experience, I also gain a small amount of Strength and Agility experience. The leaping trout and salmon are no different than their fly fishing counterparts except that these fish cannot be cooked. But if I use a knife with a leaping fish, I obtain 10 cooking experience as well as one or more of the following: fish off-cuts, roe (trout, salmon), caviar (sturgeon). But sometimes cutting up the fish gives me nothing. The roe and caviar can be used on 2 dose potions to enhance them. A dose of these potions will heal a few HP as well as the normal potion effect. I try it out, but return to my trusty lobsters. Quick and easy now!*



### ***Fishing without a Harpoon (Level 55):***

*At 55 Fishing and with more Barbarian Training, members can use their own bare hands to capture fish! I try and find that this is exactly like Harpoon fishing, but I also get some Strength exp as well. However, to do this, I need a Strength level equivalent to the fishing level that is needed to normally catch this fish. For example, Tuna requires 55 Fishing and 35 Strength to capture. I am not certain it is worth all the effort to keep all my skills level and return to concentrating on Fishing and Cooking. Using the barbed harpoon offers the same advantage of not using an inventory space for equipment. This is one of the 'fun' items that Jagex occasionally put in – not much use to a serious fisher!*



### ***Vessel (Level 62):***

*When I complete 'Tai Bwo Wannai Trio' quest and reach level 62 I attempt to catch my own Karambwan which heals 18 each if cooked properly. Firstly I need loads of Karambwanji for bait. I use a small net to catch them in the lake just south of the Tai Bwo Wannai village fire ring. When I have enough, I grab my vessel and head across the log bridge and up to the north shore. I use a Karambwanji with my vessel to load it, then I click on a fishing spot and away you go! I have to reload my vessel after each catch. This is a pain! I have completed the 'Fairy Tale Part II' quest and can access fairy rings. This means that I can use code CKR for the Karambwanji lake, and code DKP to reach the Karambwan fishing shore. This makes things much easier. Like 'bare hand' fishing I decide that whilst this is a fun distraction to do with friends – I go out with thesaintuk – it does nothing to add to my skill development. I can nearly fish shark now.*

As my diary reveals, reaching a high level in any skill is a long and complicated process, thus it is little surprise that high level items such as cooked shark command a high price. Many members lack either the time or the motivation to put the necessary hours into this sort of training. It is much easier for them to be furnished by the market. The Runescape 'market', is highly evolved and complicated. There are particular social groups – Clans and/or Guilds – who vie for control of the most lucrative items. I will look more closely at this aspect of the game in a later chapter but it is worth noting here that these skills form the basis of a merchant class who trade their skills and abilities and who set the market price. The following quote from a posting to the 'market forum' gives a taste of how the economy works:

*“Now there is one very important respect in which RS differs from ML (material life). I was talking with Sonn about the value of nature runes. Typically these sell from 350 gp to 500 gp, with about 400 gp being a typical price. But it is possible to buy them for as low as 100, so the true price range is 100 to 500. Sonn and I were debating how much they should cost. It's just like in ML, it depends on demand and supply. We know that, members get natures from the members area, and then go to free-play servers, where the natures are much harder to get. They can sell them for up to 500, because people are willing to pay that. On the other hand, sometimes people have a lot of natures, and are quite willing to sell them for a lower price, if they feel it is worth their while to do so.*

*But all resources in RS are essentially 'in-exhaustible'. Every time you fish, you pull a fish from the sea or river, and that fish is added to the game. These cannot be overfished. Of course, resources can disappear from the RS world as well. When you eat a fish, it does restore health, but the fish is now gone. You can see this with money. In a ML economy the money supply is strictly controlled, although governments do make decisions on how much money is pumped into the economy. If you mine and smith armour, then you sell it to the shop, money is introduced into RS. That money stays with players, until they eventually buy something in a shop, when again the money effectively disappears. So this is why the price of nature runes obeys the same economic laws as the price of ML objects. The price of 100 to 500 is just an expression of how much money buyers have to spend, (and how easy it is to get that money), versus how hard it is for the sellers to obtain the nature runes.*

*People in RS are constantly mining, and selling what they make to the shops. For example I have mined and smithed a lot of steel short swords. I was trying to get mining up, but also using the 'superheat item' spell to get my magic up. Not many people in the game (if anyone) are interested in actually using a steel short sword. It's not good enough. So I sell them to the shops, and I make a lot of money. The shops do keep them for awhile, but I'm not sure if they keep them forever. Anyway, no one wants to buy them. So these steel short swords are resources that I've created, and then sold, so they effectively disappear, but the money I obtain has gone into my bank account. This imbalance, I believe, means that overall money is constantly flowing into the RS economy. So people then have to spend their accumulated wealth on something like useless goods. The price of party hats has gone up from 1 million gp to about 5 million gp over the last year or two and some people are willing to spend 750,000 gp to buy a Dwarf Multi-Cannon. This is why I think that the price of Natures will keep on rising”*

*- Breen*

What is interesting here is how Breen draws a direct comparison between the dynamics of the Runescape economy and how he perceives things to operate in the material world. Yet he is also aware of the 'idealised' aspects of Runescape resources. This aspect of MMORPG play draws on the GODGAME genre in which players manipulate virtual social and economic systems from an external 'godlike' position. Hertz (1997) argues that it is the ability to use the virtual to extend material processes that provides the pleasure for this type of play. Since the 'God Creation' is essentially an artificial *simulation* of material processes, they can be manipulated and enhanced. In this respect, complex processes can be easily manipulated and made visual. Hertz rejects this as an over simplification of the material in which complex, and what could be seen as important social processes, are reduced to a single click of the mouse. What might take generations to create and/or destroy is reduced to a few seconds of animated sequences. It is control without consequence, or what Hertz refers to as '*gardening...a digital window box*' (1997:219.)

Squire (2005) argues that it is this simplification that *adds* strength to the virtual process particularly when games such as 'SimCity' or 'Civilisation' are considered in a wider educational context. Whilst he acknowledges that 'Civilisation' is not a

simple game – indeed the students in his study described ‘Civilisation 3’ as a highly complex and difficult game to play – it reduces management of its key components into manageable and ‘bite-size chunks yet requires the player to see the interconnectivity of each:

*‘Civilization III includes hundreds of game concepts, ranging from its six government types... to 13 terrain type... To play Civilization III successfully, one must not only understand these terms, but understand the strategic significance of each (i.e. what is the comparative advantage of cities in river valleys vs. woodlands).’ (2005:3)*

Simplification in this respect is about educational accessibility. By reducing the consequences of complex processes to what is essentially a ‘cause to immediate effect’ relationship, the students in Squire’s study were able to *experience* (‘learn’) the consequences of a range of decisions that would not have been possible in a material or traditional educational setting. Atkins (2003) acknowledges the benefits of such experiences but warns against such generalisation being played out to its natural conclusion – something that can only be understood in terms of a hegemonic process.

Whilst this process creates the illusion of an autonomous social system, it is actually a highly controlled and directed environment. The citizen is forced to conform not only through an acceptance of what has to be done to be successful, but also by the expectations of the game in terms of genre and narrative. As Atkins notes, that these simulation aspects of games works because *‘We already know the story we are supposed to tell’ (2003:132)*. Within this argument the simplification process identified by Hertz is seen to be a product of this conformity. As god-influenced-game-play operates at a societal level, citizens within the text are treated as a homogenous mass and there is little or no attempt to address issues of social difference. Thus whilst later games attempt to reflect gender and race in the animated interface, within the virtual society there is no sexism, racial tension or religious intolerance because such issues are either ignored or statistically averaged out. As King and Krzywinska (2006) further observe, even in the individual-based narrative of ‘The Sims’, any attempt at deviance or individualistic behaviour is addressed by

the game-engine which takes hold of the ‘misfit’ character forcing him/her to conform.

Both Hertz (1997) and Allan (2003) extend this line of enquiry by questioning the controlling nature of a game-play that creates the illusion of player autonomy. They argue that this results in a narrative that is not able to recognise, or indeed react to, ‘grey areas’ of play. Miklaucic (2002) cites an interesting issue in the ‘SimCity’ series. Since the game narrative does not recognise social deprivation as being linked to deviant behaviour (merely your city’s contentment rating) here are little or no alternatives to tackling crime save to build prisons and extend police control. Not only does the narrative suggest this but the player learns it – bigger prisons and more police must be the answer to rising crime since when these are extended in-game the crime rate drops. If I drop these examples into Squire’s thesis that the simplicity and reductionism of games is their chief learning strength, then I must also acknowledge the hegemonic processes at work within the learning dynamic. Since the moral and cultural frameworks don’t declare themselves the player becomes socialised into accepting simplified frameworks as solutions to material issues; SimCity is not just a reflection of reality but a utopian vision of it, thus more police and larger prisons must indeed be the answer to a rising crime rate in vulgar material environments.

Of course all games stress certain levels of conformity in terms of rules and norms that the player learns in order to ‘play’ the game but for King and Krzywinska (2006) there is a fundamental contradiction operating here. On the one hand games, like all media texts, are discursive - as products of a western capitalist and patriarchal system, dominant values are embedded into their narrative and representations - yet on the other, the game-play fails to reflect such discourse. So for example, whilst the Runescape market is structured by a version of consumer and capitalist utopia and references patriarchal sub-texts, female characters earn the same money and have the same opportunities for ‘career’ success as the male characters. King and Krzywinska’s point is well made. But in Runescape I am not convinced that this tension is a ‘mechanistic’ as the authors suggest. Carthamno is a level 90 fisher. Within the game narrative the cooked shark that she produces is no different to that which is produced by any other player of a similar level. The rate that she produces



shark – about 200 an hour – is also reflective of her in-game ability. Yet there are many users who will not buy her product because she is a girl. She tells me that “*they somehow think that my shark is not as good or will not heal as much as other fishers*”. I suggest to her that maybe it is just a ploy to push her price down, but she tells me that she receives the same response even when she cuts her rates. I encounter a similar situation for Runesis3 when she attempts to sell Rune Ore on the Falador market list. Such prejudices hint at the “*unpredictability*” and “*irrationality*” that Scott,(the Quake player in my introduction) referred to as a feature of on-line gaming. This is part of the porosity between virtual and material domains. In MMORPGs it is the social interaction *between* players that articulate these values and practices rather than user interaction with the narrative structure itself. Social relations are played out *against* the narrative backdrop, thus whilst the narrative permits female users to access resources, produce goods and sell their wares at the same rate as their male counterparts, how they choose to act on their abilities – and the attitudes and prejudices that other users bring to bear on these relations – are drawn from much wider points of reference from both within and beyond the virtual realm itself.

### **Combat:**

The combat skills operate in much the same way as the Merchant Skills. As each skill is practiced so experience grows and my level increases. Once a pre-determined level is reached, I can wield particular classes of weapons and wear different types of armour. Armour and weapons afford a bonus to the combat skills; so for example a Dragon Battle Axe adds to my strength experience, whilst Dragon Armour adds to my defence. The most basic Warrior weapons and armour are bronze, and the most advanced, Dragon Armour. Similarly Rangers have a spectrum of different bows and arrowheads available – the most prized combination being Magic Bow, Rune Arrows and Black Dragonscale armour with a Ranger Helmet and Boots - whilst Mages can cast a complicated array of defensive and offensive spells which can be enhanced by various combinations of robes, hats and amulets. The combination of bonuses offered by different combinations of weapons and armour is extremely complicated, but put simply the higher a players combat rating, the better armour and weapons he/she can wield and the easier it is to fight higher level monsters and players. But combat in Runescape is highly balanced and simply wielding the strongest weapon does not necessarily guarantee my winning a fight. Alongside choice of weapons and armour I

can also choose a particular fighting style. Each of these combinations are either more or less effective against particular types of enemy e.g. Ice Giants are particularly susceptible to hard hitting blunt weapons so the best combination is to use a Strength attack using a Dragon Mace. How I equip myself and my choice of fighting style is therefore crucial to the success of combat. These combinations are available from various sub-menus on the interface. (See Figure 5).

Combat with NPC is usually simply a matter of my choosing a combat style and clicking on the chosen foe. As damage is inflicted on each combatant so their hit points (or life) decreases. I can replenish my health by eating food. Once the life reaches zero the combatant dies. NPC usually drop items as a reward – anything from money to herbs, even armour. Like Player Characters each NPC has a combat rating although these are fixed. Generally speaking the higher the NPC combat rating the better the drop – so Emperor Black Dragons at Level 200 drop Rune Armour whilst goblins at Level 6 drop a few gold pieces. There are over 75 different NPC. Particular classes and/or types of monster/character are associated with particular drops and it is quite normal for players to hunt out a particular NPC in order to obtain a particular drop item. Indeed some items – for example the herbs required for herblaw – are only available as drop items. Combat can also be co-operative and it is normal for less experienced players to tackle higher level NPC as a team – usually the main player using a melee attack (‘tanking’) whilst the second player uses arrows or casts spells (ranging). If my life reaches zero, I die. This means two things. Firstly I am transported from whatever area I am in and re-born at Lumbridge Castle and secondly – and much more importantly – I lose whatever items I was carrying including my armour and weapons. For high level players, being killed is often a costly mistake and it is little surprise that it is to be avoided at all costs. Player on player combat is only permissible in certain areas of the game. The Wilderness is particularly dangerous as it is the only area where a player can be attacked by groups of other players and killed. If I am killed here whatever items I am carrying are immediately drop items. There are certain players called PKrs – player killers – who simply hang out in the Wilderness with the sole aim of attacking and killing weaker players and then selling whatever goods they can scavenge from the ‘kill’.



Figure 5

I can also choose to ‘duel’ – a friendly way of testing out combat skills and increasing combat experience. Unlike conventional combat, duels do not result in the loss of equipment although the loser is still transported to Lumbridge. Interestingly, the duelling system has been changed since its’ introduction as a feature of Runescape 2. Initially a duel could take place anywhere in the Runescape world but this was soon changed to specified duelling arenas. I see here an example of Jagex attempting to close a subversion of the game. Many players used duelling as a quick and easy way of transporting themselves across Runescape space; As a player told me “*why spend an hour walking the length of the map when you could be transported to the central territories by simply losing a duel*” – the common ploy here was to remove all your armour to make the kill even easier for your opponent. But there was also a more developed subversion. As I have already observed, killing an opponent affords combat experience. Many players simply ‘hung out’ in Lumbridge with the sole aim of duelling in order to increase experience:

*“lol yep its cool, all you gotta do is duel your mates in Lummy. If you get killed you re-spawn exactly were you die, and you just start again no probs. Tis sweet n easy to get your experience up and its risk free” – Alfie (16)*

However, since most forms of combat carry with it the risk of being killed – and the subsequent penalties that this imposes – ‘risk free levelling’ was seen to be, whilst not strictly against the rules, certainly against the spirit of the game. This seems a more likely explanation for Jagex’s action than the excuse that players didn’t like to be continually harangued with ‘duelling requests’ – particularly as continual ‘trading requests’ has remained a feature of the world.

Combat forms one of the main ways to progress in the Runescape world, even in relation to non-combat skills advancement. For example, to obtain a drop item, the NPC carrying it must first be killed. Thus, in order to advance in Herblore I have to obtain herbs, but in order to obtain the herb I must first kill the druid carrying it. This emphasis on ‘killing’ is perhaps one of the most controversial features of the modern computer game and the morality of this as a mechanism of advancement has caused some members to question the morality of this aspect of the narrative:

*Laura:*

*“I am not that happy about killing cows to simply get up a few levels. When I first morphed into Lumbridge as a noob, I can remember walking across the field to the farm and seeing all these guys just butchering the animals to level up”*

*Max:*

*“yeah, but that’s the point Lau, I mean you go for the cows because they don’t fight you back – tis an easy kill and a quick way to level.*

*Laura:*

*“Yeah, I get that but why not fight the other monsters, there are low level goblins and spiders to train on – I dunno, the whole ‘killing’ thing just makes me a little uncomfortable (laughs) maybe I am a sensitive vegetarian or summit”*

*Tom*

*“Vegetarian wuss more like”*

*(Laughter)*

*Laura*

*“nah, not a wuss, just don’t see the point in killing stuff it’s just not exciting its just a glorified violence, what we need is a way to level your other skills in a more interesting way”*

*Max*

*“you don’t play a lot of computer games do you Laura”*

*(Laura laughs)*

*Laura*

*(still laughing) “obviously”*

This extract from a focus group is interesting. Laura finds herself caught within the tensions between a perceived autonomy and the structured nature of the narrative that I was discussing earlier. In order to advance, Laura must kill things yet as she rightly points out this is a ‘sanctioned’ violent act that Jagex has worked into the narrative. To disagree with this – to choose to exercise one’s authority – merely shuts down one’s position within the narrative. As a vegetarian, Laura is not able to sidestep a fundamental mechanism of the game dynamic because the narrative is unable to cope with grey areas of play. Unlike, merchant skills – where it was the male players acting out their prejudices that made advancement for Carthamno problematic - Laura is blocked by the narrative itself. Allan identifies similar difficulties in the game

'Black & White' where the punishment system of beating the player controlled character is not interpreted by the game as being subject to any moral judgement:

*'The player of 'Black & White' might worry about the possibility of injury produced in excessive creature correction, but not about that act as an act of abuse' (2003;133)*

However, more complex issues such as the sacrifice of a group of villagers to save the entire village is interpreted as an evil act and sanctioned accordingly. The difficulty here is that players believe that they are operating in – or indeed creating their own – moral framework, they are actually subject to the moral whim of the game designers who themselves are articulating particular moral positions that are expressed through game-play and narrative.

But, I am not sure that the Jagex designers are themselves in a position to exercise this degree of moral autonomy. Like most media texts, Runescape operates within a recognisable framework of conventions that enable quick and easy de-coding by the player. To attempt to alter these frameworks is a risky strategy and whilst most designers attempt to push the boundaries of their genre it always remains a fine balance. Pushing too far – presenting an audience with something that does not 'look' or indeed 'feel' like a RPG – is a risky strategy that could spell commercial failure. Thus the use of violence as a symbolic mechanism of narrative progression has been normalised by the historical development of the game-form itself. Russell's 'Spacewar' it's numerous clones and the success of 'Space Invaders', all galvanised at an early stage many of the norms and practices that came to define the form. One of the things that these early games established was the instinctive pleasure in many forms of play - shooting at things. There has been much research on the pleasure of violent activity in games (see for example, Goldstein, 1998; Grodal, 2000; Sherry, 2001) and, although it is not my intention to enter the debate further at this point, it is worth noting that many of the participants in this study enjoyed not only the 'fighting' elements of Runescape but games in which "*shooting at stuff is the whole point of the game*" (Oliver 13). Whilst studies such as those mentioned earlier, have made much of the pleasure of 'gun narratives' (see also Cumberbatch, Maguire and Woods 1993, Griffiths 1999, Colwell and Payne 2000). I am not sure that it is particularly difficult to understand its appeal. Gun play has been a central theme of play activity almost

since the invention of the weapon (Griffiths 1999) and war games, with their emphasis on combat, have existed since the earliest civilisations (Durrigan 1997). As part of the pilot study I interviewed some older gamers who recalled playing ‘Cowboys and Indians’ in their childhood and aspects of simulated combat was a recurring theme of their early playground experiences. I might also note that many forms of play, including most sport, is actually centred on a form of target practice; whether that be attempting to score a goal in football or simply to hit the ball with a tennis racquet<sup>4</sup>

The combatitive nature of ‘Space Invaders’ is also interesting from another position: ‘Space Invaders’ utilised the same simple game-play techniques that first appeared in PONG. A simple laser turret fired laser bolts at an ever-advancing phalanx of digital aliens, as each wave was destroyed it was replaced by one that advanced faster. It was the first game to offer a true open-ended game play experience; as Poole (2000) observes, as long as you could destroy each wave they would continue to be replaced.

*“Therein lies the game’s special tension: it is un-winnable. The player’s task is to fight a heroically doomed rearguard action...the war can never be won. Earth will be invaded” (37)*

Of course the game was not really about ‘winning’ in the conventional sense. It was impossible to defeat the machine but the competition was not really with the game narrative, it was with other players: what level could you get to and was it higher than your friends. There are distinct links here to the level based approach of RPGs in which there is a similar open-ended structure in terms of character development. Few games set a maximum for each area of development and whilst high level players have reached levels that unlock the most advanced skills in the game, many are still driven by a desire to reach the top slot in the league tables of the world’s most skilled players:

*“When I got to 90 combat and could defeat most NPCs, I thought sod it and went off and did my fishing n stuff...but then I decided I wanted to be the top warrior....I am*

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<sup>4</sup> This argument was actually a popular defence against accusations of violence used by several groups of ‘Quake’ players I interviewed early in this study.

*now 98 and still just in the top 50...it looks good when everyone see your name there” - RuneFisher (14)*

### **Quests:**

The Fantasy Narrative also lends itself to an emphasis on combat. Runescape presents itself as an un-tamed pre-modern environment full of all manner of threats and monstrous creatures. Users are encouraged to immerse themselves into this fantastic world in the same way that one might immerse oneself into a fairy story or epic myth. As Gower explains it to me, *“Its kill or be killed, it’s kind of exciting in that respect...but it is also heroic, the player’s individual struggle with his surroundings”*. This *“heroic struggle”* seeps into many aspects of the game-play, but I argue it is most overt in the Quest system. Quests or Adventures form the backbone of the Runescape world at least in terms of the Game’s narrative. They are similar to what Ellis (1992) describes in *‘Visible Fictions’* as *‘Mini Narratives’*. They are adventures or legends in which the player can participate. Most are highly structured and scripted, and the linear rigid structure provides an interesting contrast with the free-flowing dynamic of the main game. There are 124 different quests of which only 18 are available to players of the non-member free game. This can be interpreted as an attempt to encourage players to sign up for member accounts, although Jagex wouldn’t admit to this directly merely indicating that it was a way of enhancing the member world – which amounts to much the same thing. To begin a Quest I need only go to the particular start location and begin to talk to one of the characters who will set the scene and outline the particular problem or dilemma.

Let us look at how a Quest is structured. One of the first Quests that most players undertake is ‘The Cooks Assistant’. This outline is taken from my ‘Quests Diary’ and was one of the first quests that I attempted:

*“To begin this adventure I first talk to the Cook in Lumbridge Castle, (he is easy to find because he is marked with a particular ‘Quest Symbol’ on the inter-face map) He asks to help him get the ingredients – flour, eggs, milk, - for the cake because he has forgotten to buy them. To start the quest I must tell him that I will help. In order to complete the Quest I must obtain all the ingredients which requires some walking around the locality and also depends on my having particular items of equipment.*



**Flour:** I get a Pot in Lumbridge Castle. Then heading northwest I find a windmill. There is a grain field west of the windmill. I pick one Grain and go into the windmill. I go up to the top floor and use my Grain on the hopper. I operate the hopper and go back down using my Pot with the Flour.

**Egg:** I find some eggs at a farm located northeast of Lumbridge. After I find the farm, I look for some chickens there. I find some eggs near the chickens.

**Milk:** There is a house near the chickens at the farm. I enter the house and get a bucket. I exit the farm and go to the east of this farm. I find some cows there. I use the bucket on a Dairy cow and I get a bucket of milk.

*After I get all the ingredients, I return to the Cook and he offers a reward”*

Although ‘The Cooks Assistant’ is an example of a simple quest it gives a flavour of how the Quest system works. Quests either require a degree of experience to undertake and usually involve the slaying of high level opponent – similar to the ‘Boss Battles’ of other games - or are time consuming as the player is required to walk around the Runescape world to obtain items and information - as in the ‘The Cook’s Assistant’ Often Quests will involve a mixture of both strategies. Quests are rated as either ‘Easy’ ‘Medium’ or ‘Hard’. Compare the comparative simplicity of ‘The Cooks Assistant’ with the more complex requirements of ‘The Legends quest’. The following extract is also taken from my Quest Diary some three years later. Notice the more developed visual style that accompanies the diary of a ‘high level’ player:

**Start:** I begin by speaking to Radimus Erkle in a small shack in the Legends' Guild.

**Skills:** 56 Magic, 52 Mining, 50 Agility, 50 Crafting, 50 Smithing, 50 Strength, 50 Thieving, 50 Woodcutting, 45 Herblore and 42 Prayer.

**Quests:** I need to have completed Family Crest, Heroes', Shilo Village, Underground Pass, Waterfall. I must also have 107 Quest Points.

**What I Need:** An Axe (Rune or better), Charcoal (bought from the Tai Bwo Wannai general store), Hammer, 2 Gold Bars (4 or 6 recommended), 3-4 Lockpicks (bought from the Rogues' Den store), Runes to cast one of the four charge orb spells (any of them will work) at least two times, 2-3 Uncharged Orbs, Snakeweed and Ardrigal (Jungle Potion herbs), Water Filled

*Vial, Rope, Sapphire, Emerald, Ruby, Diamond, Opal, Jade, Red Topaz, 1 Soul, 1 Mind, 1 Earth, and 2 Law Runes (SMELL Runes).*

**Quest-Obtained Items:** *Machete, Papyrus, Radimus Map.*

**Recommended Items:** *Decent armour, food, Prayer Potions.*

*I first, enter the gates of the Legend's Guild, and speak to **Sir Radimus Erkle** in the small shack left of the doors.*

*I find some Papyrus on the table, as well a Machete in the cupboard.*

*I am given 3 tasks: Map the Khazari Jungle, befriend the Natives and bring back a token of their friendship. He also gives me some Radimus notes.*

**Mapping the Jungle:** *I take three pieces of Papyrus, some Charcoal, a Machete and a Rune Axe, with my Radimus Notes, and head to the Khazari Jungle, south of Shilo Village. I speak to one of the **Jungle foresters** near the Jungle Wall. He tells me that he will give me a special item, if I show him something 'impressive'.*

*I enter the jungle by cutting myself a way through the Jungle Wall, with my Machete and Axe. I have to map the West, Central and East Jungle. I walk around, going to each part, and clicking 'Complete Radimus Notes' once I am in a certain part, until I have mapped all three parts. I bring the map back to the Jungle Forester. The Jungle Forester gives me a Bull Roarer, which I find that I need later in quest.*

**Ugandulu:** *I try out my brand-new Bull Roarer, somewhere in the Jungle. Hmm, should be careful, as it attracted Jungle Wolves and Jungle Savages! After a little while, **Gujuo** appears. I show my good mood and I try to be friendly to him. He says that he needs help to save one of his friends, **Ugandulu**.*

*I go west along the Jungle Wall, until I find three rocks, which I 'search'.*

*Nothing! I search them again, and try to squeeze through (50 Agility needed). I am now in a cave with a Fire Wall. In the middle is Ugandulu. I investigate the Fire Wall and speak to Ugandulu, who will tells me that only Holy Water will extinguish the flames.*

*I leave the cave and call for Gujuo again.*

**The Holy Water:** *Gujuo tells me that only a bowl made from the 'Metal of the Sun' will hold the Holy Water, and he will give me a sketch of the bowl. I head out of the Khazari Jungle,*

*bank in Shilo Village and take a few gold bars, along with a hammer, and head to a nearby anvil. There's one in the northern part of Tai Bwo Wannai. I use a gold bar with the anvil (50 Smithing required) and make a Golden Bowl (this fails several times – expensive!).*

*I go back to the bank and get a Lockpick or two, Pickaxe, SMELL runes (1 Soul, 1 Mind, 1 Earth and 2 Law) and the 7 gems. I don't forget my Axe, Machete, Map and food! CD tells me to also bring along 1-2 Prayer Potions for the enchantment too, as it's possible to fail (and have my prayer drained).*



*Now, I go to the Holy Water Pool, located in the central section of the Khazari Jungle. I look on the map to find out where it is. There are tall reeds near the Pool, so I use my Machete on them to get a Hollow Reed (this is not rare as CD tried to tell me!). I use this reed on the Pool to fill my bowl. After that, the Reed becomes unusable and will be tossed away. Do not try to leave the Jungle with the Holy Water, or it will be gone! I do this the first time and end up frustratingly having to do this bit all over again!*

*Before I head back to the cave with flames, I signal Gujuo with the Bull Roarer. He congratulates me on obtaining the Gold Bowl filled with Pure Water. I ask him to enchant my bowl, but make sure you have 42 Prayer points! Otherwise, Gujuo will not enchant till then. (As a monk I have lots of Prayer points!!)*

*Once I have the Pure Water enchanted to Holy Water, I return to the cave and use the Holy Water on the Fire Wall. I am able to walk through the fire now without being damaged. Now, inside the Fire Wall (or Fire Ring), I search the desk to find a fairly heavy book more on Ugandulu. I read the book, then, speak to Ugandulu. He seems to change before my very eyes and throws (by casting a spell) me out of the fire. I get hurt - 8 damage.*

**Helping Ugandulu:** I look for a Bookcase with a hole behind it, on the northern wall, and search it.

I eventually manage to squeeze through. I continue along the path and I see a large Ancient Gate. I use my Picklock with it, and unlock it (50 Thieving required).

Next, I see three Boulders on my path. I crush each of them with my Pickaxe (52 Mining required) and continue. I see a Black Gate; and have to use my Strength (50) to open them. I fail the first time and temporarily lose some strength levels – an annoying wait!.

I run south past the level 83 Deathwings and find a Jagged Wall. I jump over it and continue along the passage, until I find a Marked Wall on my left. I search it, and I find a riddle; I have to place the SMELL runes in the correct order on the wall, which is: Soul, Mind, Earth, Law, Law. Common Sense!! This only needs to be done once. I appear in a room with water pools and stalagmites now; I place my gems on the stalagmites. Once I have placed a gem correctly, it disappears from my inventory. This is just trial and error until I get it correct. I am lifted into the centre of the cave, and I receive a Book of Binding. With this book, I learn how to defeat demons, and how to make Holy Water Vials.



To make Holy Water Vials, I have to fill a vial with Holy Water, and enchant them by clicking 'Activus' on the last page of my book. Blessing vials drains my Prayer and Magic. Once I've blessed them, they can be wielded as a stackable Ranging weapon, and are ready to be thrown at demons.

**The First Fight:** Prepare for battle! Tigz warns me that if you want to have Holy Water Vials, make them now, because after you defeat the first form of the demon you'll face, the Holy Water Pool will become contaminated, making it unusable. Hmm good advice Tigz, it

helps to chat to someone who has done it. I head out of the caves. I grab Prayer Potions, food, armour and weapons from the bank, and head back to Ugandulu. I use some Holy Water from my bowl on the Fire Wall to walk through. I use the Book of Binding on Ugandulu, and a level 182 Black Demon appears; **Nezickched**, my enemy during the quest. He drains my Prayer, so I quickly drink a Prayer Potion and turn on Protect from Melee. He's a piece of cake to defeat. When he dies, I take some damage – like with the Retribution Prayer.



**Into the Caves:** I talk to Ugandulu again. He thanks me and give me some Yommi Tree Seeds.

I exit the cave, and try getting some more water from the Holy Water Pool. The water is now contaminated, so I bull-roar for Gujuo and ask him what's happening with the water. He says I must go to the water source itself, and that I need a Bravery Potion before being able to go any deeper. I get some Snake Weed and Ardrigal, and mix them into a vial to make a Bravery Potion.

I prepare to go deeper. I bring armor, weapons, potions, food, an uncharged orb, runes for any Charge Orb spell, a Rope, a Pickaxe, Lockpicks, Hatchet, Machete and Map. Bring around 6 Prayer potions and fill the rest of my inventory with food. I am ready to take fight and take damage.

I head back into the cave again, where I placed the gems. To the north of the room I find another Ancient Gate; I search it for a riddle.

I cast a charge orb spell on it while holding an Uncharged Orb in my inventory; Wow, I am lifted straight through the door. I find out that I need to cast the spell any time I enter through these doors.

*I am now in a room with a dark hole and a Winch; I use my Rope on the Winch, drink my Bravery Potion and go down. Luckily I only need to drink the potion once and the rope remains there for future use. I fall down and take high damage.*



***The Fallen Heroes:** I try taking the Blue hat that lies on a ground and a ghost named Viyeldi speaks to me. I proceed down the cliff, climbing over the rocks. High agility is a great advantage and I take a lot of damage here. You can also temporarily lose some Agility levels if you fail obstacles – which doesn't help!*

*Once I am down, I have to beat the 3 Fallen Heroes, **San Tojalon** (level 106), **Irvig Senay** (level 100), and **Ranalph Devere** (level 92). Protect from melee is strongly recommended. I try to also fight them using a Halberd and Range them, while hiding behind one of the many little walls, saving lots of Prayer potions.*



*Each of the warriors drops a Crystal Piece. I collect all three pieces, and use them on the furnace to the northeast to smelt them into a Crystal Heart. Then I use the Crystal Heart on the Mossy Rock in the center of the room to get a Glowing Crystal Heart.*

*Hmm..I look at the minimap, I notice that the rock seems to be in the middle of an eye – the eye of a Dragon head!.*

*Now I go south to the Shimmering Field, and look for the Recess next to it. Using my Crystal Heart on it, I am able to pass. I run west, past the Lesser Demons, and I see some Boulders. I try pushing one, but a ghost named Echned Zekin appears and stops me. I tell him that I am looking for Holy Water, and he tells me to kill Viyeldi. He'll also give me a Dark Dagger.*

*Now, the path splits: I have two choices, a shorter, evil, but more difficult one, and a longer, good, and easier one. If I choose the first option, I will have to fight the Fallen Heroes again in the last battle. I don't want to do this again and as I need to restock food and potions, the second path is the way to go.*

*As soon as I get the dagger, I take it to Ugandulu and he gives me a Holy Spell. I go back out of the Jungle, and restock food and potions, and bring more Charge Orb runes and another Uncharged Orb. I go back down the caves to the Boulder and try to push it again. Echned Zekin appears and he is angry. I cast the Holy Spell and he turns into Nezikchened!*

**The Second Fight:** *As soon as the Demon appears, he drains my Prayer again. I drink a Prayer potion and turn on protect from melee again. He throws a dagger at me, causing a lot of damage. Some food is enough to heal from that. Again, this demon is quite easy to defeat. Once I defeat him, I get out of the caves.*



**The Yommi Tree:** *I Bull-roar for Gujuo, and tell him the good news. Now it's time to plant my Yommi Tree (45 Herblore needed)! I germinate the seeds by using some Holy Water on them.*

*Now I look for Fertile Soil: those dots I can see on brown ground. I look on the map to find out where they are. I use my seeds with them to plant my tree! I immediately use some Holy Water on it to make it grow faster, and after it's grown, I quickly use my Axe on it several times, before it rots. I end up with a totem pole.*

**The Totem Pole:** *I am nearly there! To prepare for the final battle; I get some more Prayer potions and food. I go to the eastern part of the Jungle and use my Totem with the Dark Totem. Nezikched appears! He tells me he will defeat me and drains my prayer again! I quickly drink a Prayer potion, turn on protect from melee and fight him. He only uses melee. This demon is strong; I need patience to defeat him.*

*Once he's defeated, he says things like 'I'll be back' etc. We have heard that before, eh? Using my Totem on the Dark Totem again, Gujuo appears and thanks me. He offers me a Golden Totem!*

**Completing the Quest:** *Yay! I head back to the Legend's Guild and give my Golden Totem and completed Notes to Sir Radimus Erkle. He tells me to meet him in the main hall. I enter the gates and talk to him again. He declares me to be a legend throughout Runescape.*

*I can choose 4 of the skills that I can get 7650 experience in, and I can spread it as I like. I can eventually earn 30,600 experience in a single skill, if I want to.*

### **Rewards**

- *Bull Roarer, Book of Binding and the Dark Dagger.*
- *7,650 experience in the 4 skills of my choice - possible skills include Attack, Strength, Defence, Prayer, Magic, Hitpoints, Agility, Herblore, Thieving, Crafting, Mining, Smithing and Woodcutting.*
- *Access to the Legends' Guild.*
- *Access to the Kharazi Jungle without a map.*
- *Access to the Legends' Guild Store, where I can buy Mithril Seeds, the Right Half of the Dragon Shield, various Keys and other items.*
- *Ability to get my own Oomlie Wraps.*
- *Ability to smith Gold Bowls and make Holy Water Vials.*



- Ability to buy a white Legends' Cape from the Legends' Guild and wear it.
- Ability to buy the Right Half of the Dragon Shield.
- Ability to wield the Dragon Shield.
- 4 Quest Points



As you can see, the more advanced quests require a higher degree of experience in particular skills in order to start (for example 'The Underground Pass' requires Level 25 in Range, Thieving and Agility) and/or are extremely long to complete. For example the 'Legends Quest' took me 8 hours playing time and I had already obtained the appropriate skills and equipment in advance. The rating system also gives an indication of the level of reward on completion.

Most Quests offer three levels of reward:

- **Quest Points (QP):** These are awarded on completion and add to the overall profile of the player. They range from 1QP for a simple quest to 5QP for a very advanced adventure.
- **Experience Points (XP):** These are added to the overall experience in particular skills and characteristics contributing to an advance in skills levels. Usually the experience rewarded is linked to the skills and characteristics required of the Quest itself. So for example, 'The Cook's Assistant' rewards 300 points of cooking experience.
- **Material Rewards:** These take the form of new equipment, the ability to use specialist equipment or allow the player to access new and/or secret areas of Runescape. Some Quests also introduce new skills. So for Example 'Dragon Slayer' allows players to wear Rune Plate Armour, whilst 'Druids Quest' allows players to use the Herblaw skill and 'Lost City' provides access to the Fairy Kingdom of Zanzaris.

Although Quests are not a compulsory element to the game, most players I spoke with saw them as a necessary and integral tool for advancing within the virtual social system. Some players regarded Quest Points as an important aspect of virtual development:

*"I always make certain that my QPs are at their highest rating. I spend my time training to make certain I have the skills for the next Quest. There's nothing like seeing all the quests complete on your Quest Scroll" (Axia 16)*

Yet for others it is the more tangible benefits of Experience Points that is the driving force behind quests:

*"Chainsaw, if you wanna get your strength up quickly go do the Knights Fortress Quest, it gives you shit loads of combat experience and you can do it in a hour. You'd be a noob not to you know" - Lostforgood (13)*

*“I try to do the quests because it’s a good way of getting your experience up quickly. It takes ages to fish, and you have to battle with other players for a good spot, yet if you do the (Fishing) Quest you will go up 7 levels, I did...The trick is not to do a quest while it is easier to build up skills in the conventional way...sure you go up lots of levels but you are better off saving it until its hard to get that experience...its like in cooking, it gets easier once you have got up a few levels, but then to make any real progress you have to start making cakes and apple pies or cooking lobster. You know how easily that burns, and burnt lobster means no cooking XP so that’s the time to do the quest and get it up” Emily (13)*

I can see here how Emily employs a strategy to maximise on the rewards of a quest at a time when it is most useful to her development. Although they form a popular distraction from everyday living within the virtual world, and are entertaining as stories, it is through this highly engineered process of self-development that quests are really integrated into the system beyond the game itself. This of course is even more apparent when I consider the material rewards.

*“I am training for the Heroes Quest. I want a dragon battle soooooo badly it hurts”  
nimrod2345*

*“OMG what Quest you need to do to make Runes?..if I do that I can sell them to Mages” - Vcew217*

*“As I see it, the only point of doing Quests is to get stuff, I don’t care about the QPs it’s the stuff I want. Its like that dwarf passage one (“The Fishing Contest”), I hated crossing over the ice mountain with those wolves, they were a real pain until you did the quest and then you could use that mine shaft to go under the mountain, no wolves and you get a cool place to get your range up by killing the dwarves in the bar, why else would you do it? It was a pain in the ass! The other reason I do Quests though is cos sometimes the stuff makes you look good. Yeah I know everyone did the Dragon Slayer to get Rune plate but when you wore it the noobs could see that you were a big player, same with the Dragon Axe, only the Heroes carry them and now there is the Legend cape...see if you got one then everyone knows that you have done the Quest and you get respect....” -DarthVader342*

DarthVader342's comments are interesting. Not only do they illustrate how the links between material reward and self benefit drive the quests forward – he did the 'Fishing Contest' to get access to the Dwarven Tunnel which he perceives of benefit since it allowed him to avoid an opponent – but we also see how they are directly linked to status. Only the most experienced players can complete the hardest quests and the rewards – Rune Plate, Dragon Axe, Legends Cape – serve as a material marker of their abilities. It also helps that these items afford additional characteristic bonuses to combat skills – the Dragon Axe for example is the hardest hitting weapon in the game - making them desirable items to own. This in turn adds further to the holder's status in the game.

Unlike other MMORPG, players need not necessarily band together to undertake a quest as only two actually require another player. This adds to the 'play-anywhere' philosophy that Jagex are keen to foster. Unlike 'Everquest' for example, players can log in and do all of a quest or just little bits at a time without having to wait for team mates to log in. Although some forums complain that this adds to the individualistic nature of the game it also side-steps some of the complaints on the forums of other MMORPGs, namely that players were waiting to undertake a task and were unable to proceed because team-mates had failed to come online. Whilst it could be argued that group quests add to the overall community of the game, most players I spoke with liked the fact that they didn't have to rely on friends. In fact, most players seem to do quests with friends anyway. I certainly did on the longer quests – see diary above - sometimes to ease the boredom of endless walking around, sometimes to protect me from monsters or PKs but mostly because *"its more fun to do it with someone, especially if you cant work it out"* REMz24 (14) This seems an important aspect of quests; community and social networking develops naturally – friends meet up and help each other out – rather than being forced by the game narrative itself.

At a textual level quests form a seamless way of introducing new skills, areas and equipment into the game. The epic narrative nature of the quests allow these items to be inserted into the overall narrative in a believable way – they have an explanation and background,– they are 'discovered' and 'revealed' rather than their simply appearing – which adds an almost cultural validity to their appearance. A small

number of quests further add to the history and culture of the world by revealing or explaining facts and incidents that have become integral to the Runescapes canon – the ‘Plague City series does much to tell us about how the kingdom of Kandarin, and the City of Ardougne in particular, developed. Some quests introduce seemingly ‘fun’ items into the world; for example ‘Gertrude’s Cat’ allowed players to have a kitten companion whilst ‘Recipe For Disaster’ let me change it into a ‘Hell Cat’. These approaches to quests add to their cultural mystique in the early days of each update. This is cleverly exploited by some players. As new items or areas are revealed at each Monday update, key players are quick to exploit new skills and access to areas to find what treasures maybe contained therein. New and rare items are also desirable items that can either be sold for a profit or add status. Some items do both. For Example, ‘The Grand Tree Quest’ allowed players to access the Gnome tree wherein one could buy exotic gnome robes. These had no function in the game save their rarity in the early weeks of the quest’s introduction – it required the killing of a level 172 Demon so was not easily accessible to all players – and consequently they could be sold for 1000% profit.

I see then that quests underpin the game at a number of important levels and are an important mechanism of enhancement for experienced users, in terms of both status and progression. This is also a driving factor for novice players but for new players the simpler quests such as ‘Cook’s Assistant’ and ‘Ernest the Chicken’ also serve as an entertaining way of introducing key areas and places. Before the development of Tutorial Island, new players were simply ‘dropped’ into Lumbridge Castle and left to discover the world for themselves. Many of the players, daunted by the prospect of encountering a high level monster, and I suspect unsure of what they should actually be doing, merely stayed in and around the Lumbridge castle and the nearby village at Draynor until curiosity finally took them further afield, sometimes into disaster. The quests provided a semi-structured introduction to Runescape geography and gave players more familiar with console type game-play, a recognisable game type task; the linear structure of some Runescape quests mean that they look like – and more importantly play like – the more traditional computer games – there are tasks and puzzles to be undertaken which in turn open up new areas and set objectives that must be met, similar in tone and structure to Jenkins (1998) observations of off-line games.

As I see from this quote, the quests serve as an interesting way of easing new players into the free-roaming space of the Runescape world:

*“So I am just dropped into this strange place, I talked to the guide who welcomed me and then I am like, ‘what the fuck do I do now?’ I didn’t leave Lummy for days, I just wandered around killing stuff and then Janni said I should do the cook quest, I loved it, it gave me something to do, a purpose you know...I then started doing other quests and soon discovered Varrok...I know some people hated the quests but I not sure I would have got there so quickly without them...they were like a focus” HahaHa (17)*

### **Runescape as an immersive narrative**

A simple glance at the Runescape map (see page 1) shows why a new player such as HahaHa might be daunted. Although nothing like the size of ‘Everquest’ or ‘WOW’ the Runescape world is never-the-less a vast virtual arena. As a narrative, Runescape takes place within the realm of Gielinor, which is divided into the Kingdoms of Misthalin, Asgarnia, and Kandarín, the tropical island of Karamja, the Kharidian Desert, the Wilderness, and various dungeons and other sub-areas. Whilst the over-all theme falls within the usual Tolkein-inspired ‘Fantasy’ conventions each area has its own sense of identity and culture. Often these tend to articulate either conventions of the genre or wider social and cultural stereotypes. So for example, Karamaja fulfils the expected norms of golden beaches, lush green tropical forests and dark-skinned spear-carrying natives in grass skirts with bones through their noses. Similarly Kharidian is represented by an Arabian Nights inspired pseudo-Arabic kingdom with camels, belly dancers and kebab shops. The remaining kingdoms are predominately white in the western fantasy tradition. In this sense, Runescape is fairly conventional and players who have seen the ‘Lord of The Rings’ films, played ‘Warhammer Fantasy Battle’ or read any Fantasy literature will feel immediately at home in the Runescape world. This is exactly the point and serves as yet another example of Jagex’s play anywhere philosophy. The narrative, doesn’t seek to extend or challenge the expected conventions of the genre and in many ways simplifies and edits it into a more digestible form so that nothing gets in the way of the game-play itself.

What makes this interesting for the player is the way that each area uses the conventions in a total and seamless way. Monsters, races, quests and characters are

all woven together to reflect the traditions, culture and identity of the particular kingdom or area. For example, Dwarves are represented in the usual Northern-European inspired manner; small, heavily bearded cave dwelling characters with a Norse-type helmet, runic writing, who excel at drinking, mining and metal working skills. The creatures that inhabit this area and the quests which begin here are all influenced by these cultural traditions. Similarly the Gnomes are more akin to wood-Elves who inhabit trees and are more attuned to natural influences. Again the quests that originate from here reflect these ideals. The main trading and civic centres for each human kingdom are represented in quasi-medieval style architecture with castles and walled cities. These contrast with the 'Dungeon and Dragon' (D&D) inspired underground areas – dungeons, sewers and secret passages - which are inhabited by ghosts, zombies, spiders and dragons, and the darker hostile areas inhabited by goblins, trolls and giants.

This structured organisation does not just reflect Fantasy conventions, it also performs an important structuring process within the game-play itself. As I noted earlier many of the player skills depend on quests, drop items and equipment which are in turn associated with key areas, races and creatures. For example Druids excel in herblore and therefore the Druid Village sells the best herblore equipment. Creatures in that area tend to drop herbs needed for potions. Dwarves have access to the best mines and sell the best mining equipment. Only large towns are sufficiently developed to have a forge and smelting area to produce metals and armour or have enough shops in which certain items can be bought and sold. Rare and uncommon items tend to be found in the most hostile regions or are only carried by the larger monsters. Some creatures are found all over Runescape whilst others are confined to certain areas or perhaps just one location. So dragons and other dungeon dwellers are only found underground, Ice Giants in frozen areas, Scorpions in the desert, whilst high level monsters such as The Emperor Black Dragon or the Kalphite Queen are only found in a single location. This adds to their mystic status and again forms part of the structuring process. Obtaining items is not a random process, as I became more familiar with Runescape culture I began to learn where to obtain the things I required – or was at least able to make an informed guess.

Earlier in this chapter I touched on the way in which the Fantasy genre explores aspects of morality in terms of the classic tension between Good versus Evil. I also noted that the games worlds operate on a structured system of duality. This is also reflected through representations within the Runescape narrative. In the D&D tradition there is a strong magical element. Good and bad wizards, and associated mystical characters, align themselves to forces of Light and Dark. As one might expect, in Runescape, good wizards wear blue and have long white beards – looking similar to the classic images of Merlin – whilst dark wizards have black robes and black hair. Similarly monks of the cults of light wear traditional brown robes whilst followers of demon cults wear red. Colours are used to enhance the semiotic system in a conventional way. Green, red and black are used to portray evil characters – black characters tend to be the most evil and most challenging, for example Black Dragons (combat level 250) and Black Demons (combat level 190), whilst less threatening or good/neutral characters tend to be represented in lighter shades. This differentiation process tends to be structured in a rigid way and there is little or no variation of type. So Dragons are always portrayed as being evil – even when they are simply protecting their eggs – Demons are represented in the Judeo-Christian tradition with horns and tails, fairies are generally good and look like traditional victorianesque interpretations, whilst Trolls and Goblins are unintelligent and war-like. Again this tends to follow classic Fantasy conventions and for some players takes away the ambiguity inherent in RPGs

*“One of the things that I like about Runescape is that, unlike some games I could mention, you know where you are. If a character is bad he looks bad...there’s no guessing and no messing, what you see is what you get.....you ever seen a good character that looks like a black demon lol....also, and I think this is more important, you know that you aren’t going to just come across something bad unless you are in bad place like a dungeon or somewhere like that....one thing I hate with RPGs is that you will be strolling along somewhere and all of a sudden you get attacked without warning. I hate ‘Final Fantasy’ for that, it’s the worst!” - DantesGf*

For players such as DantesGf, the Runescape world, in which multiple tasks need to be balanced, is already complicated without having to deconstruct at the level of narrative and genre. Whilst it could be argued that this takes away the spontaneity and



element of surprise from the game, for many players it is the interaction with player characters rather than NPCs that holds the key. Many of the players I spoke with regarded other users as the key point of interaction, rather than NPCs which were often seen as a means to an end – an extension of the game environment and/or narrative. There seemed to be an expectation that a Fantasy environment should look like a Fantasy environment but that it also should be seamless – not get in the way of the social/game interactions between users.

There was also an expectation that it looked like other similar games.

*“I logged on and I felt like I was in Xena or something. It was just like Warhammer, there were dwarfs, and knights and goblin hoards and good and bad magicians...I thought yes this is just like Sundays at Games Workshop” Oliver (13)*

*“It is just like Diablo only with real people” - Silas*

Most of the familiar Fantasy classes are represented somewhere in the Runescape world and for the most part conform to type, the main omission being Elves who do not feature at all in the game. I found this somewhat surprising given how much the game reflected a Tolkeinesque approach to Fantasy and in light of the prominence given to this race within the genre itself. This has not gone un-noticed by some of the more hardcore Fantasy fans.

*“Whats weird is this. When I first got into Runescape I had just watched the first episode of LOTR (Lord of The Rings) and I had played a few games like it, ‘Darkstone’ I think one was called and ‘Baldurs Gate’ on the PS2 anyways I get here and theres no elves...I soo wanted to be an elf....but how can it be a proper fantasy game without elves...you ever read a book or seen a film without them in, they are a major race of middle earth!” - Legolas897 (18).*

*“Don’t bother with Runescape, it’s a poor representation of a Fantasy world – no Elves, that says it all!!” – Anonymous Forum Posting*

This omission also contrasts with the popularity of Eastern inspired RPGs in which the elfin representation of characters – particularly young females – is a key and striking image. Indeed it is a testimony to the power of the Western Fantasy Tradition that it has been able to maintain its success in the wake of the Japanese dominance of the console market. There seems to be an interesting distinction between the Western influenced RPGs of the computer game and the more Japanese influenced RPGs of the consoles. This is a somewhat loose distinction, there are obviously cross-overs, but it is never-the-less a valid one. Given that until a few months ago most MMORPGs were computer based, it perhaps un-suprising that the major games should draw on the platform's gaming heritage and traditions, particularly given that in Japan most gaming takes place not on computers but consoles. But the consoles also represent a huge Western market amongst young people – 3.75 million consoles were sold in the UK in 2005/6 (Source: Chart Track) - and one of the biggest selling console RPG is Squares 'Final Fantasy' series – the last two games in the series FFX and FFX-2 are estimated to have sold 10 million units worldwide on just the PS2 alone (Source: Gamespy). The Final Fantasy games consistently came out as the favourite RPG amongst the young people in this study with second place going to the similar 'Zelda' series from Nintendo. Whilst Square's games were initially criticised on release for reflecting a more western representation of characters – a rejection of the traditional manga inspired look - the narrative and characters are fixed firmly in the Eastern fantasy tradition. In this tradition, Dragons and Demons often have good traits and characters with bestial characteristics – such as those displayed by Trolls and Goblins – are not always considered bad. There is a tension then between the familiarity of the image systems operating in Runescape and the popularity of a different set of conventions inspired by a different tradition. But then Runescape was already at odds with some aspects of the 'Fantasy' tradition. The Anne McCaffrey 'Dragon Riders of Pern' series had already broken the traditional Western myth of the portrayal of the Dragon as bad – this has been further extended in the minds of young people by Christopher Paolini's children's books 'Eragon' and 'Eldest'. David Pullman's 'His Dark Materials', television shows such as 'Buffy' and 'Charmed' have questioned the representation of Light and Dark magic and even the 'Ring Trilogy' is less clear-cut in terms of the representation of Good and Evil characters. This is not to say that the Runescape world is dull and un-imaginative, far from it

These representational systems are important in structuring the Runescape narrative because they function in much the same way as the conventions of game-play to which I alluded to earlier. Their function is to draw the user into a familiar environment. Although as a noob I was unfamiliar with Runescape as a narrative text, it provided me with a broader framework of sufficiently familiar representations, narrative structure and game-play mechanics for me to be able to engage with it's world. In short, it looks and feels how I *expect* a MMORPG to look and feel. This non-challenging diagesis and structured narrative are a key aspect of player immersion within Runescape and hints at why the realm has been so popular. But the apparent dis-connectivity between the Runescape narrative and the emergent console RPG tradition is a salient point in this respect. The introduction of the NPC 'talking head' to which I referred earlier opens up an interesting debate about the way that the Runescape narrative dynamic works. This aspect of the game was a new development for Runescape2. Prior to this, Runescape 1 had simply inserted the appropriate NPC dialogue into the conversation log. The move divided Runescape users, with many complaining that it *"interrupted the flow of the game and looks a little false just like a bad cut scene in other games. Why cant they just have the characters say things and it appear above their heads"* (Forum posting – *lightingmix*). Jagex countered that it was trying to emulate the consoles 'cut scenes' and that *"many users find that it enhances their game experience. They feel much more a part of the story and are immersed in the game"* (Runescape forum response). But given the nature of the game-play in both RPG and MMORPG I find this observation by Jagex a little difficult to reconcile. Cut scenes – short sequences that inserted into narrative to enhance or move the story forward – have always been a contested feature of computer games particularly in terms of the ways that they immerse or distance the player (Klevjer 2002). The combat sequences in the RTS 'Command and Conquer' series were preceded by a series of cut scenes that contextualized the mission but were specifically designed to play on the emotions of the gamer:

*"..You start by witnessing a desperate battle that sees your troops in full flight or you will have to stand by while enemy units rampage through a defenseless village shooting civilians. By the time you start you're supercharged – its not another level but a heroic crusade"* (PC Gamer September 1997: 65)

In the 1990 Space war-game series ‘Wing Commander’ the choice of cut scenes viewed was a direct result of how successful the player had been in previous missions; perform well and you would be rewarded with scenes of Terran Confederation victories, fail and these scenes would be replaced by Kilrathi massacres. Both series often made use of live action sequences starring big Hollywood stars to enhance this aspect of the game, many of whom could have been considered ‘A List’ at the time, for example James Earl Jones and Mark Hamil. As the PC Gamer review highlights, these sequences were not simply concerned with adding additional visual flourish. Klevjer (2002) notes that cut scenes provide a unifying logic for the game and reward for the player for successfully completing a task or level. Boon (2001) argues that cut scenes not only represent an important way of developing a plot, but more importantly provide a complex means of developing character information that might not be available through the in-game narrative. Fundamentally they help immerse the player into the virtual world by providing context and purpose. Since the online characteristics of MMORPG do not readily lend themselves to this use of cut scenes, such devices tend to be only used to move quest narratives forward and in this respect it might be argued that they form a similar immersive role.

However, such approaches are not without its critics. Thompson (2005) notes that FMV cut scenes are visually too far removed from in-game graphics and serve to distance rather than immerse the player. He further argues that this distancing is amplified since the lack of interactivity in cut scenes render the player passive. The use of Hollywood stars creates in players an illusion of a film within a media form that is already more evolved than film: if you can engage *within* the narrative, shape and extend it, why would you simply want to watch it, with no control over what happens. Of course this identification process was less of a problem for RPG and MMORPG titles since both genres focused on an individual rather than global approach. Poole (2000) notes that if genres such as GODGAMES or RTS offer the player the chance to transcend ones individuality then the RPG allows the player to be truly individual in a world where the individual has real power. He argues that the level-based development structure based on experience points serves to ‘domesticate’ skills – even the supernatural since magic assessed numerically ceases to be ‘magical’– and that consequently individual action is seen to have deterministic consequences for both characters and events (2000:54). Mackay (2001) is not

convinced however noting that the individual within an RPG system is actually defined by a range of processes and that individual action is merely an articulation of the range of positions available to the player at a given time. Boon (2001) adds that since cut scenes enhance this aspect of character development, players are further defined by the cinematic scenes available. In this respect the individual is little more than an expression of the game-play dynamic – just one of a range of symbolic processes.

But RPG can be seen as a more individualised response to the macro-environments of both GODGAMES and RTS. In RTS, for example Atkins (2003) argues that there is no attempt to situate the player *inside* the text, since RTS is not about replicating the ‘real experience’. Critical distance both allows and requires that the player question the text – ‘what if I do this ‘ - and in this sense such games are more historical in approach than perhaps traditional gamers give them credit to be.

Equally importantly, since MMORPG are an on-line gaming experience, this individuality is further enhanced in that it controls and defines interactive game play between players rather than with the non-player-characters (NPC) of offline RPG and is in many ways more akin to traditional (pre-virtual) RPG. The tension between material RPG and Virtual RPG adds an interesting dimension to this debate. Whilst it could be argued that RPG computer games had many advantages over similar manual games, they also had one important drawback for traditional game designers; computer games did not reveal their internal workings to players and consequently whilst they were far more accessible, for hardcore gamers they lacked the depth and levels of game-play offered by material RPG. With board or card based RPG the complicated manuals that covered every different type of combat/ defensive scenario and allowed customisation of weaponry, spells and armour had the additional function of laying bare the dynamics of the game-play. One of the most popular modern fantasy games, Games Workshop’s ‘WH40k’ has a basic rule-book of 267 pages with each force having an additional codex of approximately 70 pages. Even the most complicated computer game did not require this level of reference.

I came to computer RPG as an experienced Warhammer Gamer yet I could get into the game a lot more quickly as I was relieved of the need to master a lot of the games

mechanics. Whilst there is undoubtedly a pleasure in being adept with the esoteric workings of WH40K, the easier access to computer RPG meant there were far more people able to enjoy this type of game. However they were also a lot harder to design. One of the defining features of material gaming had been a bedroom culture of game design and customisation. Playing complex games gave players skills and experience to vary game-play and game scenarios, particularly in the early fantasy war games in which the status of the 'Dungeon Master' ultimately depended on their ability to create ever-more exciting and challenging narratives. In the early days of computer games most users simply lacked this technical capital to access the internal workings of a virtual game. As I noted earlier, the original computer variants were really confined to a technical elite and it is only comparatively recently (from the mid 1990s) that on-line games culture has opened up a player modification market even though some Amiga computer games included map-editors to customise levels as early as 1986 and bedroom programming had been part of the 8 and 16bit computer culture for some years earlier; the Space-based war/exploration game 'Elite' published for the BBC micros in 1984 allowed player customisation to users with comparatively limited skills<sup>5</sup>

I can identify links between GODGAMES, RTS and MMORPG which are perhaps best considered as opposite sides of the same game-coin. Both concern the development and management of processes: whilst the GODGAME/RTS requires the management of complex economic and social processes, MMORPG is concerned with the development of internal processes and how the individual operates within a socio-economic setting. If the GODGAME is about looking in from a position outside of the system, then MMORPG is about being the individual within the system and looking at the socio-economic from the inside out. Runescape as a narrative sits at the juncture of a range of forms, conventions and traditions. As Ellis (1992) notes, there is considerable audience pleasure in working within the familiar and the use of stereo-typing and accepted conventions act as a short-cut within the game itself. There is even, I would argue, a distinct pleasure in identifying what has been left out or subverted. The embracement and rejection of familiar traditions forms the substance of the 'affinity space' and in this respect it adds to the realm's

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<sup>5</sup> BBC Micro-Computers were an emerging feature in schools and colleges at this time.

‘ordinariness’ Everything is as it should be and the player knows exactly where he/she is, which represents an important aspect of game-play for players such as DantesGf. Jungian psychology has attempted to explain this in terms of the creation of archetypes and at least on one level I can see Runescape as a virtual articulation of these ideas. Runescape is certainly ‘Mythic’ in its approach, as one user noted “*It is like being inside a familiar fairy tale*” and ‘Warhammer Fantasy Battle’ has used a similar simple representation to great effect in its complex table-top and computer game series. In Chapter 2 I explored the links between Fantasy Literature and Fantasy Games. It is important that Runescape situate itself within the conventions of the tradition if only to ensure that it is accessible to its user-base. It is perhaps not up to the game to push forward the boundaries of a genre. It merely provides a back drop against which virtual narratives can be played out. A blank canvas against which players and users can mould and change their stories at will. Ultimately it is the players who create their own fantasy not Jagex.

In this chapter I have attempted to consider how Runescape has developed as a game text and how this links with the philosophy and development of its creator Jagex. I have tried to offer a limited over-view of the game itself, introducing its game-play, narratives and some of the institutions and practices that its citizens work within and in this respect I have detailed some of my experiences with, and observation of, the main structures and practices of the narrative. This is not an exhaustive consideration of the game and in the next chapter I will revisit some of the ideas in more depth and consider how other aspects of the game operate. I have also considered how Runescape has attempted to balance the expectations of the Fantasy genre – and wider games culture - with building an accessible and interesting game-play for its users. These structures are important because they underpin the arena within which the young people operate and ultimately shape and constrain the ways in which young people can construct and live out their virtual lives. But there are others forces that operate on the inhabitants of Runescape, practices and institutions that exist outside of the virtual, within the material world of the player. In the next chapter I want to look at how the player is situated within this text. In particular I will consider how identity and community are expressed within the Runescape realm and consider more fully the relationship between material and virtual realms.

## Chapter 5

### Hanging out: Identity and Community in the Virtual World

#### **Introduction:**

In the previous chapters I have attempted to outline some of the difficulties and concerns that the virtual arena has presented to academic studies. In critical writing, the virtual arena, lacking in the ‘physicality’ of the material world, has created problems of both validity and credibility for some writers. Yet as I have demonstrated, the argument that the material world offers a more tangible understanding of aspects of identity, self and community is at best questionable, and our understanding – the very theoretical/methodological base – upon which the validity of the ‘material’ is based, is equally applicable to the virtual arena. Similarly, as I alluded to in the introduction to this study, there is a popularist concern – almost a moral anxiety – that the virtual arena represents the very worst aspect of a bedroom culture. The underlying tone of the letter in the Daily Telegraph that whilst it is acceptable to stay in ones bedroom to read a book, staying in the same bedroom engaged in a computer game or interacting in a virtual social network is undermining childhood, seems a perverse, somewhat protectionist, argument given that the majority of the correspondents were writers of books for children.

But behind this confusion and faux concern, both the virtual arena in general, and computer games in particular, have continued to flourish. As I demonstrated in the previous chapters, computers games are highly evolved texts with both substantive and integral links into the popular cultural dynamic. Whatever society might think about the worth or the validity of virtual space, I argue that there is no getting away from the fact that nine million young people world-wide regularly log into the virtual space of Runescape – moreover one million of them are happy to pay the equivalent of \$5 a month to do so. In five years, Jagex has evolved from a simple bedroom project to an important and profitable company. What is more important is that it has achieved this status not through the advertising budgets of its corporate competitors but through simple word of mouth. As I noted in the introduction, the games market is huge, lucrative and influential. Some may quibble about its worth or its validity as a site of identity and interaction, but I cannot under-estimate its popularity amongst



young people. For me as both a teacher and youth worker the debate is simple; if it is popular – if this is a space that young people choose to operate within – then it is not only a valid field for research, it is an important site to understand what it means to be a young person in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this chapter, I want to revisit the question I posed in the introduction: what are young people doing with Runescape? To answer this I need to consider more deeply the institutions and practices of the virtual world of Runescape and consider how this impacts on their expressions of identity and community. I will consider the relationship between the virtual space of Runescape and the material world of the young people that use it. Runescape, I argue, is not a simple childish space that can be easily dismissed; rather, it represents, for its young users, an important arena for symbolic experimentation, reflection and consideration of material existence.

### **Identity: Names**

In the introduction to this study, I quoted from Scott a young Quake player who outlined the attraction of online play over conventional off-line gaming. Online play was considered to add an additional dimension of un-predictability – the ‘human’ element – to the virtual playing arena. It is little surprise therefore that the earliest popular examples of online play were the gladiatorial ‘first person shoot-em-ups’ such as ‘Quake’ or ‘Unreal Tournament’. In these games the players go one-on-one, or team up in clans, to try to kill – or ‘*frag*’ - other players. Interestingly such games remain popular with many Runescape players and I can perhaps identify a fusion here of Dunnigan’s (1997) tension between the twitch-based gamer and the more committed strategist characteristic of table-top RPG. A whole culture of ‘fandom’ has grown up around this style of play, as each player struggles for a distinct online ‘signature’ to confirm identity. Web sites such as ‘Polycount.com’ allow players to download a range of character models known as ‘*mods*’ or ‘*skins*’ – the way that their character is ‘seen’ by other players – in order to customise or personalise their virtual persona. ‘Tags’ or character names are closely guarded, and range from the predictable ‘Neo’ and ‘KombatGrrl’ to the more distinctive ‘Matilda the Cleaner’ or ‘Poison Oaky’. Impersonating or stealing another player’s tag – virtually stealing their identity - is regarded as the most heinous breach of gaming etiquette (punishable by banning on some servers) and the best players – or their characters - are written

about with a hushed reverence on the various message boards that surround the culture.

Although potentially fluid, names act as a fixing device within the wider fluidity of the virtual. The name can be used as another kind of mask; it can hide material identity and also give hints about the people who have chosen masks of expressive power and imaginativeness (Danet et al. 1995). Lee (1996) notes in such environments the masking and unmasking of material identity is part of a general atmosphere. However, for Myers (1987) they are 'trade marks' recognised by friends and enemies alike and become a badge of identity. Bechar-Israeli (1996) argues that people rarely change their names, even though it is easy to do so. As netiquette decrees that appropriating another's name is a cardinal sin (Bechar-Israeli 1996) most users would probably resign themselves to taking the consistency of names on trust. As Reid states *'the uniqueness of names, their consistent use, and respect for – and expectation of – their integrity, is crucial to the development of online communities'* (1991).

Compared with MMORPGs, FPS do not represent particularly sophisticated modes of play. However they serve as a good illustration of the pleasure of online identity. In Chapter 2, I discussed the idea that identity is discursive and constituted in material, social and cultural practices. For gamers such as Scott, the creation of a virtual persona entails the acquisition of status and becoming recognised as a successful player. Since he cannot become embodied in the material sense within this virtual framework, his name or tag must take on much of the role that his physical self would in the material world. It is more than simply a term by which he is de-marked from others; it represents how he chooses to present himself in the virtual. This is subtly different from a name within the material. Most of us are named by our parents and have no control over how we are known. Perhaps more importantly, in the West we have lost much of the original meaning behind our names. They are reduced to simple, un-connected, yet familiar cultural codes which are associated with an individual. So for example whilst 'Nic' would be a recognised and accepted name few would recognise it's deeper meaning as 'victory of the people' and even fewer – if any – would associate this meaning when meeting me; I am simply 'Nic'. However, in the virtual I am free to present this meaning, or indeed anything else I

choose. But, as I have already noted, this ‘freedom’ is tempered by, and mediated through, a range of cultural practices, which act as a cultural frame of reference. So in a gladiatorial game like Quake, many players would use connotations with the game narrative – ‘big-gun-chick’, ‘Slay-u’ - or draw from wider popular cultural references that they believe carry credibility in the realm – ‘Tank Girl’ ‘Neo’ or ‘Darth Vader’. This is a risky strategy and what is ‘cool’ for some players is not ‘cool’ for others:

*“lol I hate it when you are on a server and there are lil noobs running around called Neo and Morbeus. They think they are soo cool but I am like get an original name. Why would you want to be ‘Neo345’ it means that there are 345 other Neos, they are just wannabeeees” – Big-Gun-Chick (18)*

In these cases status and identity are diluted by poor choices. The original and desired connotations are transplanted by a different range of connotations that operate within the virtual culture. These are different, and in this case oppositional, to those that exist within the material world. Some users attempt to sidestep this by using and manipulating popular cultural capitol:

*“I wanted something different, so that I would get noticed, but it also had to be credible you know. I really liked Besson’s film ‘Leon’ ....the little girl Mathilda wants to be an assassin like Leon...in the film Leon refers to being an assassin as ‘cleaning’, so there it was....I needed a girl’s name and something that fitted with Quake – Mathilda the assassin – Mathilda the Cleaner. Cool eh Nic?”*

*- Mathilda the Cleaner (17)*

In Runescape, the name culture I encountered on the Quake servers does not appear to be so well developed. This is not to say that virtual names were not important, but the process lacked the sophistication that I had seen elsewhere in similar virtual spaces, particularly on ‘The Palace’. As I noted in Chapter 4, choosing a virtual name is one of the first things that a prospective player is required to do in order to create an account. Some players rush this process but most then come to regret it as they progress and become more successful. Several of the young people I spoke with had even re-started new accounts to get a more ‘credible’ name second time around. As

one might expect, names often articulated the wider fantasy genre and there was a tendency to see that names came in waves. After the ‘Lord of the Rings’ films I observed a plethora of players named after the principle characters – usually Legolas – and similarly following the release of the recent chapter in the ‘Halo’ series of games, there appeared in Runescape variations on ‘Master Chief’ ‘Halo’ and ‘John – 117’ It is not particularly surprising that users drew on a limited cultural frame of reference. Some users spoke that it allowed them to pretend to be their favourite characters from film, television and most importantly video games. It is interesting that ‘borrowing’ from another genre or text did not seem to carry the same negative connotations that I observed in Quake. Users appeared much happier to accept the transplanting of characters from elsewhere and in some cases would even accept their transplanted characteristics:

*“[speaking to a character called ‘Legolas238’] I knew that you would be a good archer with a name like that” - Dragonslayervince*

*“There was this level 28 guy on who called himself Darth Vader, he had full black armour and carried a red dragon sword, he looked deffo cool” - Tomtomclubz (13)*

What is particularly interesting is how ‘Tomtomclubz’ – a high status player - is happy to accept the look of ‘Darth Vader’ as being ‘deffo cool’ presumably because the black armour and red sword made him look like the character from the film. In terms of in-game status ‘Black Armour and Dragon Sword’ do not represent a particularly good or high status armour/weapon choice yet because they articulate the connotations of the characters name they are given credibility despite his novice in-game status. Compare this to a later conversation I had with ‘Tomtomclubz’:

*“I was in the wilderness and there were these noobs who had highwayman’s masks and black armour. This Danno guy told me that they were trying to look like ninjas....ninja noobs more like, who wears black in the wilderness?”*

Here a similar visual representation is dismissed partly because it is considered to be a poor choice for the location but mainly because the name ‘Danno’ does not summon

up connotations of a ninja in the way that ‘Darth Vader’ had in the previous encounter.

But if in some cases virtual names underpin the virtual persona; they also help to shape the nature and type of interaction that occurs. Players with recognisable names - particularly from films and other games – reported that it was much easier to initiate conversations with other players. Similarly those with amusing or unusual names were considered to be approachable if some-one needed help or assistance.

*“I don’t find my name a problem, in fact some people actually come up to me and chat about the game because of it...I like it...sometimes its hard to make conversations because everyone is so busy” - FinalFantasyFan*

*“Yeah lots of people come up to me and say ‘you seem nice, help me with this, get me that’...noobs!” Jar-O-Mayo(15)*

This again illustrates how the disembodied virtual name is required to take on aspects of identity that would normally be ascribed to other characteristics in the material world. Jar-O-Mayo’s name implies fun and consequently he is considered to be ‘safe’ and not threatening; his name seems not to suggest that he regards such users as “noobs” or that as a high level player he might pose a threat.

I would like to argue here that names form an important and defining aspect of identity in the virtual arena. This is an often overlooked aspect of MMORPG. Recently much more attention seems to have been paid to ways that the avatar represents and extends the ‘self’ of the player rather than the ways in which how he/she chooses to be named impacts on the virtual world. For example, Suler (2000) argues how the avatar performs a masking function and can be used to project aspects of the player’s identity which are either hidden or not possible within the material realm. Taylor (2006) makes a similar case for the choice of avatar and class in ‘Everquest’ arguing how they reflect material references within the virtual. But a character’s name is also a cultural reference point that exists in both material and virtual realms simultaneously. Whilst it is possible to customise the look of the Runescape avatar, this is dictated by the game narrative – partly by what options are

available and more importantly what garments, armour, weapons etc bestow in-game status and protection. Thus whilst players are free to select from the available options, their choice is limited and influenced by the dictates of the virtual world, not the material one. I have already observed how my attempts to make ‘Chainsaw Nic’ look like a warrior monk was somewhat muted until I was able to obtain ‘monk robes’ sometime into the game. Often it is only the most advanced players who are able to make deliberate choices in how their character is presented to the world. A good example of this are the ‘Rune Knights’ a group of high level players who choose to wear bronze armour (the lowest armour class) as a means of subverting the armour and weapons hierarchy; the underlying message being projected is that this clan have such high combat skills that they do not need the additional bonuses afforded by the higher armour/weapon classes. Most other players are forced to conform to the paradigms set by the narrative in order to advance.

In contrast, the choice of name may be influenced by both material and virtual factors, which will in turn have virtual and material consequences such as how it is both constructed and perceived; in semiotic terms it’s cultural encoding and de-coding. Thus whilst the choice of a name may be influenced by the virtual diagesis – ‘SlayU’ in a FPS or ‘Legolas’ within a RPG – the construction, choice and meaning are based firmly in the material, beyond the diagesis. It will of course carry with it connotations in the virtual which may be different or even in opposition to those it carries in the material world, but this virtual de-coding will itself be referenced by a material reading; for example ‘Darth Vader’ wears black armour, Ninjas are not called ‘Danno’. Since choices of names do not necessarily carry the same cultural currency across both realms they are more fluid than the visual representations of the avatar. ‘Jar-O-Mayo’ is actually a clever pun on the player’s material name, ‘Jeremy’ rather than any desire to gain credence or popularity in the virtual. Similarly other names such as ‘Max Power’, ‘EmoandProud’ and ‘Christian-girl-for-life’ reveal personal rather than in-game interests. In this sense, name is more of an extension of self rather than an avatar which, whilst serving player projection of identity must also serve the user’s role within the game.

*“I arrange to meet CombatGirl in Edgeville to the far North of Runescape. Edgeville is a lonely and desolate place in the lower levels of the Wilderness. It’s only inhabitants appear*

to be PK clans and those brave enough to venture up there to sell their wares to the PKers. CombatGirl is equipped exactly as I expect a PK clan mother to be: Zamorak God Armour, a Dragon Shield and Skirt. She wields one of the rarest and arguably the most powerful melee weapon in the realm; an Armadyl God-sword! I comment on the impressiveness of her battle-wares and she responds somewhat indifferently that as her name is CombatGirl I should not expect anything less. "I would look a real noob wouldn't I if I couldn't back up the name". I agree and suggest that it wouldn't really have been a good name for Mage. She flips me a rude gesture and I decide that maybe this is not a player with whom to be flippant. She has a reputation for being a ferocious fighter, a girl prepared to take on all comers. The Skull and Crossbones above her head indicates that she has already been busy tonight. She seems aptly named, but I wonder about the stick she must have received as a low-level player with what must have seemed a rather presumptive choice of name. I ask her about it. She seems distracted for a moment and replies 'Wanna see why I am called CombatGirl?'



We descend deep into the wilderness. I am somewhat nervous as we go much further than I have ever been and ask her if we will be safe. She laughs and tells me I will be just fine with her. As if on cue, a PK gang appear from the other side of a lava stream. "Wanna try us out? combat you noob" they taunt. Her reputation hasn't extended to everyone, I think, or maybe they are simply seduced by the promise of her rich pickings. After all, her weapon alone would fetch several millions on the Falador open market. CombatGirl moves to private chat "FFS Nic! This is the downside of the name" she whispers "Every noob wants to try and have a go" I wonder if she has ever really considered this aspect of her choice of name. Perhaps she regrets it. However, this doubt is soon cut short as I watch her skilfully dispatch her would-be attackers. "CombatGirl by name, Combat Girl by nature" she grins! She does a little victory dance and laughs! Obviously 'Chainsaw Nic' is not so intimidating!

*It's kind of depressing and I feel slightly noobish next to her. "Never mind Nic" she laughs "at least ur good at fishing...go get me some shark boy" More laughter – I glare back!"*

*- Diary entry*

For high status players, name, reputation and status exist beyond any other virtual representation of self. Like most games this relies on the use of 'hi-score' tables. In Runescape, the top scores for each skill and the overall most skilled players are published weekly. Since the narrative depends on skill and character development, the most skilled players perform an aspirational role within the world. I can again see how a user's name rather than their avatar is instrumental here. Here individual identity is expressed in terms of the degree in achievement in specific skills and characteristics, which is understood in terms of a players name rather than their visual representation. The vastness of Runescape – its geographical area, its many servers and that it operates continuously – means that it offers comparative anonymity. It is un-likely that most players will encounter any of the 'Top 20' users. However, such players do attract something of a celebrity status, with some players entering them into their 'friends' list in order to track when they log in. Other players attempt to piggy-back on their status by operating a name deception. Since most players can only identify top players by name – it is unlikely that they will all have signature representations or given the demands of the game will always be represented in that way – it is possible to pose as another player by naming a character in a similar fashion. For example, over the period of this study the top player in 'combined skill' was a user called 'Zezima'. Over the course of this study I encountered other players named 'Zazima' and 'Zezzima' who attempted to pass themselves off as 'Zezima'. Often more casual players were duped into believing that they were interacting with a serious and very high status player. Since 'top players' are also trusted players, unscrupulous citizens can use this trust to fuel further and more serious deceptions such as 'scamming' or 'luring'. Such deceptions can take place because some users are able to cleverly exploit the disembodied aspect of a 'name culture'. However, this tends to only work against comparatively in-experienced players – or perhaps against those who want to believe that they are perhaps encountering a Runescape celebrity. More experienced players are able to look for additional verbal and non-verbal clues to establish a user's virtual credentials. This is much liked lived, material existence, and in this respect the material and the virtual differ only in the relative meaning and



value attributed to codes. Thus, whilst name is an important aspect of virtual identity, it is only part of a more detailed and refined cultural system.

*“I only meet Zezima once. It takes many months of email exchanges – eventually brokered through Jagex - to set up the meeting and we agree that in order to validate his identity we will use a password. It all seems a little ‘cloak and dagger’ to me but he seems to enjoy the need for this ‘protection’ that comes with his notoriety. However, when we meet I am surprised by how he presents himself. He is dressed in simple ‘default’ clothing which gives no hint as to the level of skills that he possesses. I am surprised. In a world in which visual representations of success are a central aspect of play, for a high level player he seems too shy and unassuming – almost nervous as we chat. I ask him what motivates him to be the top of the Runescape Hi-score tables. He tells me that it gives him a “buzz”. He likes the idea of being different. Other people use their goods to represent their success in the game, but he tells me “I prefer to let my achievements speak for themselves, I don’t need to show everyone what I have done, it’s enough to know that I am the best”. I am not sure that I agree with this completely and point out to him that visual representations of wealth – for example armour, weapons and high-status goods – also denote their wearers success. He claims not to see this, and we discuss the point for a few minutes. His answers seem a little too measured and I recall the secrecy and theatrics surrounding our meeting. I think that he gets exactly what I am talking about. He has actively chosen to adopt a less ‘showy’ representation of self. He is a little like the Rune Knights I spoke with a few weeks ago. He represents himself in a simple way because his achievements within the world allow him to. He is not defined by what he wears or how he presents himself in-world. He reminds me of Andrew Gower – a man who takes success – and its accompanying wealth and status - in his stride. Zezima approaches the Runescape world in the same casual way. I wonder if they are one in the same. I ask him as much but he dodges the question. Weeks later, when I speak to Andrew, I ask him about my suspicions. He does not answer me but smiles knowingly!”*

- Diary entry

### **Identity – the ‘look’ of Runescape.**

I noted earlier that the visual representation of a player – in terms of their avatar – was considered by many writers to be a key aspect of establishing and understanding virtual identity. In Chapter 4 I considered the appeal of player customisations in games and suggested that this was a pleasure inherent in nearly all genres. Most developers have built this feature into their games as either a reward for completing particular tasks, as a hidden feature or as items that can be purchased or traded. Games magazines and websites are full of hints and tips as to best way of securing such items and most gamers I spoke with talked about the desire for choice in how they looked on screen – just like in the material world, no-one wanted to look exactly like their friends.

One of the most popular computer games amongst the young people I interviewed was ‘The Sims’. It is like a RPG in structure; players control families, organising the way they look, how they dress, the type of house they live in, how it is furnished, even what career path they follow. Due to the sheer amount of customisable items, no two ‘Sim’ families are entirely alike; they are unique to their particular creator and therein is one of the appeals to the young player<sup>6</sup>. Girls in particular spoke about the appeal of dressing their characters and in this sense the game serves as a virtual alternative to the more traditional dolls and dolls house they had used earlier in their childhood:

*“My favourite Game-boy game is the Sims, I have got it on my computer to. You create these families and can dress them up to look really cute or in nice clothes. There are these sites where you can get extra items – nice tops n stuff – and so I dress them up differently each day. The best thing about the Game-boy version is you can swap stuff with your friends” – Emma (11)*

*“Lol yeah the Sims is a laugh. I try to get new stuff so my family is different from everyone else.....you can even have boyfriends, its well funny when you get them to kiss...(laughs) I used to do that with my Barbys when I was little...(everyone laughs)...it aint pervy, its kinda cute” Holly (11)*

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<sup>6</sup> Some players have made a career out of creating ranges of themed items, from skins – the look of the characters – through to items of dress and furnishings for houses.

Whilst some computer games have been immensely complicated in terms of creative processes and planning, it is the underlying simplicity of game play that induces pleasure for the player. The ‘Sims’ players I interviewed all started with the playground craze ‘Tamagochi’ (hand held virtual pets) and most either had ‘NEO-PET’ accounts (online Virtual Pets) and/or played ‘Nintendogs’<sup>7</sup> regularly. The virtual pet connection is a salient point. At the textual level, these pet-games represent, in varying degrees, minimalist examples of the more complex processes of the advanced RPG games. Their ‘creations’ function in much the same way as a pet would in the material world: The player is attracted to, and forms an attachment with, her creation. If neglected it will decline and eventually die, but if nurtured it will flourish.

I argue that similar processes of attachment operate in MMORPGs. However in all RPGs the connection between avatar/character and user is not externalised in the same way as it might be in these simpler games. The avatar is not simply a pet. As the visual reference for the player on-screen, it also plays a central role in the virtual representation of self, thus the desire for agency in the way that a player is represented virtually is particularly significant in on-line play where the look of a player’s character forms part of their on-line signature. It is little surprise that within such an arena character modification and customised items takes on an additional rigour. I can see two different types of visual up-grades: the cosmetic up-grade in which additional items and/or skins simply change the look of the character – a good example of this are the un-lockable costumes in beat-em-up games such as ‘Dead or Alive’; the true up-grade in which additional items and/or look affords real bonuses and characteristic up-grades.

In FPS the models and skins are purely cosmetic even though some players may attribute additional material-based characteristics to particular modifications. So for example some ‘Quake’ players opted for a character called ‘Tank’ in the belief that as the biggest character he would be harder to kill, whilst other downloaded the ‘40k Space Marine’ character believing that its power armour would afford the same degree of protection that it did in the table-top 40k game. Whilst there was no

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<sup>7</sup> Nintendo’s virtual puppy range of games for their hand-held console the DS

advantage of using models – or for that matter disadvantage since others believed larger models were easier to hit -, some skins did afford additional advantages. The skeleton character ‘Bones’ is a good example. Although the physics of ‘Quake’ means that it is no harder to hit a skeleton than a seven foot, 500lb marine, ‘Bones’ lack of body mass made it easier for players to hide against certain backgrounds. The choice of this skin was considered a distinct advantage in the darker arenas. The ‘Alien’ modification afforded similar advantages and was the model of choice amongst a group of players I watched playing. But whilst in ‘Quake’ there is no distinct correlation between the model itself and the way that it ‘inhabits’ and ‘performs’ in the virtual environment this is not the case in all games. In many games where there are choices of characters the distinction is not purely cosmetic. For example in the beat-em-up genre, the choice of character will usually affect the way that the game can be played; Bigger characters are slower but can take more hits, whilst female characters tend to be faster, more agile but less robust. Similarly in certain third-person adventure games the choice of character may not only affect how the game is played but dictate what storyline the player follows – an excellent example of this is the ‘Resident Evil’ series, in which different aspects of the story unfold depending on the character being played and the moral choices made by the player.

In RPG and MMORPG, visual representation is even more complex. As I noted earlier, the choice of character, class and race and whether the player chooses to be aligned with good or evil, all effect how the character interacts with the virtual world. This is much more pronounced in ‘Everquest’ and ‘WOW’ where the choice of classes and races is an integral aspect of game-play and dictate skill and development paths. Although Runescape offers a more simplified narrative in this respect - with no pre-determined races and classes – a lack of stratification at the narrative makes for more complex rather than simpler identity choices for the player. Comparatively free from the narrative-driven choices of similar games, and within a more identified ‘human’ frame of reference, Runescape citizens are able to explore visual identity at deeper level. I noted earlier how avatars in ‘Quake’ were afforded material characteristics that were not necessarily present in the virtual realm. As Taylor (2002) observes, avatars form the material to work with when you are in a virtual world. Whilst I noted earlier that names also perform an important structure of identity and

status within Runescape, for many users it is their avatar that mediates – at least in a tangible way – between personal material identity and social virtual life. I argued in chapter 2 that identity is fluid and discursive. Virtuality allows exploration of an identity that can either correlate or conflict with the player’s material self. Turkle suggests that *‘when we step through the screen into virtual communities, we re-construct our identities on the other side of the looking glass’* (1995:178) and as I argued earlier, within RPG there is a long tradition of adopting personae that extend material existence. We can see in RPG that the very nature – the role playing aspect – implies that some form of symbolic extension of identity is inherent within the game dynamic itself.

*“It is Saturday afternoon in Sutton town centre. I am in Games Workshop, it is noisy and crowded with young men playing an array of tabletop RPG games. Some parents stand around casting their eyes over the proceedings with a confused and slightly embarrassed air. Scattered over the terrain tables are a variety of well detailed miniatures, some extremely well painted, others less so. James proudly shows me his ‘Blood Angels’ Space Marine Army. It consists of a series of robotesque marines, each resplendent in a blood red uniform. Most carry fearsome looking weapons. Some are mounted on bikes with flags. One appears to be an exoskeleton with two huge canons. There are several tanks. There must be forty models here, but James excitedly tells me each of their names and their ‘back history’ – how they came to be enrolled in the ‘Blood Angels’, what campaigns they have fought in. I learn that his army is dedicated to “defending the emperor of the Terran Federation”, that he has a “tech priest” who looks after their equipment and that the blood angels are regarded with suspicion by other Space Marines. As he describes each part of his army he picks up a miniature and hands it to me almost reverently to inspect as a proud general might invite inspection of his troops on parade. His friend Martin comes over to join us. I ask him if he has a space marine army. He laughs and gives me a look of disgust. I feel that I have insulted him as he explains that his is a Chaos Marine Army. “You’re nothing but traitors” says James, and they descend into an argument as to whether the emperor of Terra deserved to survive the Rebellion of Horus. It is a complex discussion, filled with faux-historical fact, argument and counter argument. I am soon lost, but am amazed by the depth of knowledge of these two twelve year olds. “How do you know so much?” I ask. They stop mid argument and look at me as*

*though I have just asked them the most stupid question in the world. I probably have. The room seems to have gone very quiet. James sighs, and in a somewhat exasperated voice informs me: “How are you supposed to fight Nic if you don’t know who you are fighting, why you are fighting and what you are fighting for?” They look at each other and smile. Martin mouths the word “noob”. I realise that I probably am”*

- *Diary entry*

I assumed that this role-playing aspect would be somewhat diluted in Runescape. Compared to the wide choice of similar RPG games, the lack of formal character classes and a single race choice of human seemed to be the perfect ingredients to stifle the creativity of role play. I noted earlier that this was a frustration for Fantasy purists, but the wider user-base saw this ‘restriction’ as a building block for creativity and experimentation:

*“I like the human only approach. I mean it makes it all much more believable, who knows what the fuck it must feel like to be an elf, much better to be a simple human...like my ranger (archer), its much more believable and I think it makes the game easier to play, you can identify with your character more easily”*

- *Bagabones (14)*

‘Bagabones’ identifies an important tension in Fantasy role-play and demonstrates one of the interesting aspects of identity formation in the virtual world. I see here not only how identification and believability in ones character is important, but also the role of the avatar in creating and sustaining this process. It is harder to believe – or even accept – that one might be an elf, with the associated elements that might go along with that character – usually including excellent ranging abilities - , whilst a demon-slaying human archer appears to present few such problems. This contradiction hints at an important aspect of virtual identity; that it is constantly referenced through the material. I see a similar process in the following exchange:

*“I think that there only being one race makes you think harder about your character and what they should be like. I know that most people on here moan about how WOW lets you be this or that, but who cares. I am a knight but my friend pretends to be an*

*elf, all you need to do is get your range skill up, buy a magic bow and wear black dragon range armour, and range boots...you will have the best range skills in the game. All that's different is that you haven't got the pointed ears" - Pure-warrior*

'Pure-warrior' demonstrates the creativity that some players use to extend and enhance the game play. What is interesting is the distinction he makes between himself and his friend. He *is* a knight, a human character, whilst his friend needs to *pretend* to be an elf. Once again it is the material reference point of being human that then provides the building blocks for the virtual pretence of being an elf. His friend 'becomes' an elf by adopting the various cultural markers associated with the race – good ranging armour and skills. This is enough to provide him with his 'elven' status and we see how additional graphical representations – pointed ears for example – are less important. It is a form of virtual 'dress-up'. This contrasts with being a human knight. 'Pure-warrior' tells me later that he always considers himself to be a knight, even when he isn't wearing armour and that knights are expected to behave in an appropriate and courtly manner. What is interesting is that in his mind there is no recognition of pretence, he simply 'is'. Whilst it is perhaps not surprising that adopting the identity of an elf is problematic it is interesting that human characters carry with them instant identification even when aspects of that identity are themselves removed from the user's every-day lived existence.

This is further extended when I consider how aspects of the virtual identity spill back over into the material. Consider the following forum posting:

*"No who needs different races. Theres nothing better to focus you on your character than it being something you already know like a human...no thinking 'what would an orc do' or 'whats a dwarf going to carry' with a human character you already have what you need in that department. It leaves you free to consider how they would act in a particular situation. My character is a cleric so I try to make certain that he always acts like a monk. I try to help people and find that when I am playing I get into the zone of a monk...I feel almost happy and peaceful...lol yes even when I have to go slay something – even my girlfriend noticed!" - Martin17 (18)*

Again I see here how adopting a human identity within the virtual poses fewer problems than taking on board the attributes of another Fantasy race. I note how ‘Martin17’ identifies with his virtual character and that having to think like a dwarf or an orc disrupts the process. Once again, adopting a human role seems to pose less of a problem, even though it is also removed from the material experience of Martin. He seems happy to experiment with being a monk and uses his cultural experience to fill in the blanks, where as having to completely invent an identity is less attractive. There is of course a contradiction operating here. The Fantasy genre is so vast that the attributes and characters of a range of Fantasy races are well documented. Being an elf, dwarf or orc actually poses no more problems to a user than thinking and acting like a monk or knight where the characteristics are equally constructed by a range of cultural indicators. It is the user’s perception rather than the reality of the situation that seems to be driving identity in these cases. I can also see how material characteristics once again form virtual building blocks in the virtual world, although in Martin’s case this appears to be a two way process. Martin suggests that his virtual identity has an effect on how he acts and feels in the material. Many users noted that it was how their avatar appeared that effected not only how they felt but how other characters re-acted to them:

*“Monks, you always know that you are ok if you find a monk, they seem to always be happy players” – WutangKlan (16)*

*“I think how you look does effect how you feel. Ok I know this sounds weird but if I am feeling pissed off I go to the barbers in fally and get a new hair cut...instant happy zone....or maybe I go shopping in Varrok (laughs) yeah, its just like the Bentalls Centre on a Saturday, retail therapy rules!” - Tina (15)*

*“If you feel down, go get your top armour, and I talking full dragon, party hat, whatever you got...go parade round Lummy castle in front of the noobs...man, that makes me feel so good and I catch myself smiling all night” – Alfie (16)*

Again I see how the identification works between user and avatar and how this process is firmly rooted in material concerns. Tina’s comments about feeling good about her hair cut are directly linked to her material experience; she projects past



feelings of material hair cuts onto her experiences in the virtual. She herself makes a similar link in her comment about ‘retail therapy’. Virtual shopping in Varrok makes her feel better in the same way shopping in Bentalls on Saturday would in the material. In both cases the feel-good factor is based on the link between avatar and player; Tina takes on the experiences of her virtual self and is able to then transfer those experiences from material to virtual and back to the material again. I also see in these quotes how, similar to material existence, the virtual body mediates between the individual and the world. How it is presented and the meanings that are attributed to the representations carry important cultural capitol in the virtual as well as the material.



*“I ask Tina to take me shopping in Varrock. She eagerly agreed and we arrange to meet up on Saturday afternoon. Varrock is a busy and popular location for clothes shopping. It boasts two main shops – a ‘Miscellaneous Clothes Shop’ and ‘The Fancy Clothes Store’ - as well as a number of stalls and areas where other users sell their own wears, drop items and pickings. Tina wants a headdress to complete her ‘shaman’ image. There are none in the town shops and we move between the stalls asking if anyone has one for sale. After about half an hour we draw a blank. Tina starts to get fed up and exclaims that we will never find one here. I suggest that we move into the main barter area. It is very busy with each user calling out what they have for sale. It is sometimes hard to keep track and Tina tells me that she only goes*



*and play choices” (2006:116)* MMORPG present a more complex dynamic in that their avatars are also social objects that are constituted in culture prior to any form of social interaction. In this sense both names and bodies, whether material or virtual, are not neutral objects but sit at the central pivot of how identity is both formed and shaped. Synnott (1993) argues that *“The body is not a ‘given’ but a social category with different meanings imposed and developed by every age and by different sectors of the population. As such it is therefore sponge-like in its ability to absorb meanings” (1993:1)* Thus whilst some bodies are considered legitimate, others are not and since they are socially constructed they facilitate or deny particular forms of identity. This argument seems to resonate with how the process operates in virtual worlds. Runescape is unique amongst similar MMORPG in that its avatars are uncomplicated by the distractions and dictates of Fantasy races and classes. This allows a tighter focus on the representations of the virtual body. Users have some freedom in how their virtual selves are represented. There are of course aesthetic choices, hair, face, beards etc, but more importantly there are what I would term structural choices: body size, age, race and gender.

Like other virtual worlds, structural choices afford users with a degree of symbolic experimentation. Race serves as an interesting introduction here, offering a strange tension between the racial representation of the Runescape narrative – in terms of NPC – and that of its community in terms of the racial choices open to players. Users can select through a range of skin tones – from pale white through to very dark brown – and facial and hair characteristics can be adapted to present crude representations of different races. However, the default model is essentially ‘White Western’ and so these minor adaptations tend to give the impression of, for example, a ‘White Western’ body with dark skin rather than a true representation of a different ethnic group. Players I spoke with tended to select skin tones that fitted with their own material ethnicity. I found that some users would add a slightly darker skin tone in order to represent what was describe to me by one young player as *“not black, Nic, just a healthy tan” (Holly 13)*, but few white players would play as a black character. There were of course exceptions to these more general observations. There were some white players who adopted ‘Jamaican cool’; their characters had dark skin with dreadlocked hair and bright clothing. Similarly another group of users described themselves as ‘gangstapimps’; black characters usually in sharp clothes and bald

heads. These players would use names that fitted with these representations: ‘PimpingNick’ ‘Rastamanjon’ ‘GangamanJax’. I was not particularly surprised to discover this. It seemed to reflect the popular culture of the material world and the current attraction and ‘coolness’ associated with certain aspects of black culture. However, there is an interesting contrast between this ‘black-influenced’ white culture and how non-white culture expresses itself on Runescape.

*“Take the ferry from the small jetty at Port Sarim and in a few minutes you will find yourself in the lush tropics of the Island of Karamaja. It is a picturesque tropical island – straight out of any travel book – with lush beaches, palm trees, beach bars, surf and even a volcano and pirate village. Its chief exports appear to be fish – particularly lobster – and bananas (there are a number of banana plantations dotted around its shores. Its inners are less hospitable, dominated by a large volcano it is inhabited by giant scorpions, spiders and around the volcano mouth lesser fire demons. Most people who venture here stick to the shoreline and most days there will always be a gaggle of fishers clustered around the jetty. This has been my ‘home’ for the last few weeks as I train to raise my fishing level. One night, bored of the usual crowd, I walk away from the jetty and encounter a group of players, dressed in tropical shirts, panama style hats lounging around on the beach sipping tropical cocktails. Although the ‘Gangstapimps’ describe themselves as a ‘fishing clan’ I have never seen them at any spots I have used and certainly not at the main jetty on the island. They all look remarkably similar. Bald heads with small goatee beards or long multi coloured dreddlocks. They all have dark or very tanned skin. Their ‘tropical’ attire appears to be a form of ‘clan colour’ instantly de-marking them as a collective. There doesn’t appear to be any focused activity – unusual for a clan – and they spend their days simply hanging out and jive-talking in mock Jamaican accents. They remind me a little of Ali-Gee, and I am sure that this character provides an important frame of reference for them as to what it is like to be Jamaican and cool. They seem to fit in well with the rather stereotyped representation of a tropical island – almost as though they have been placed there on purpose to add depth to the tropical; experience. Their names are as clichéd as their attire – ‘Rastamanjon’, ‘Pimpin Nick’ ‘ReeferJo’ – yet the humour of their tags doesn’t appear to be lost on them and they laugh and joke when I question them about their stereotyped representation: “Nic mon, you worry too much, just relax and listen to sum bob mon”*

*I ask them if they really like reggae or if this is all part of the game. They wont bite, telling me that they got washed up on the island following a shipwreck and have “gone native mon, its sweeeet!”*

*Some weeks later I meet them again in Cathaby. Against the ‘Olde English’ charm of the fishing village their theatrics look clumsy and out of place. They have all swapped their hats for eye patches, and they now look more like Hawaiian-Shirted pirates – a curious combination. Tigz doesn’t like them dismissing their antics as posing and goes off to fish leaving me with the group. Dressed in my monk robes I feel a little dowdy compared with this colourful collective. We sit by the jetty and chat. I learn that they are on their way to the city of Ardouge as part of a treasure hunt. Does this mean you have left your island I ask them? They laugh and tell me “No mon, but we spreading the sweetness and tha love, we want da whole of Rune ta be da gangstapimp” As they leave, laughing and singing Bob Marley songs I am left pondering this thought. Although it would be colourful I am not certain that Runescape could really handle a ‘Gangstapimp’ revolution”*

*- Diary entry*

Although I found Runescape to be racially integrated on the surface – for example overt racial intolerance is dealt with quickly and severely – it remains a predominantly white environment. Partly this springs from the Fantasy narrative itself which acts as a means to celebrate white structures and institutions. The human NPCs all tend to be represented as White European with the exception of the inhabitants of the jungle, tropical and desert kingdoms that are either black or tanned skin. These representations are simple and also somewhat stereotyped. – natives of the jungle carry spears, wear grass skirts and have bones through their nose, whilst the inhabitants of the tropical island of Karamaja wear tropical shirts, drink rum and grow bananas. I hinted earlier that such stereotyping acted as a narrative short-cut so that complicated cultural representations did not get in the way of game-play or the narrative itself. (I could make a similar case for age; the wisest characters are nearly always represented as being old) Similarly I could also argue that Fantasy as it is understood in the Tolkein-model is essentially a western and white tradition. Fantasy races and a narrative based around knights and castles allowed little room for racial experimentation. This is not lost on some users:

*“Theres a lot of bitching on the forums about why there are no black characters. DERH! That’s because it’s a Fantasy game which is based on the ideas of old world Europeans. In these fairy stories and folk tales there are no black characters so how can you suddenly invent them and stay true to their spirit. Yes, a black dwarf would be pc I suppose but it would also be wrong because dwarves are not black. It’s not a racist thing, at least I don’t see it as such, Runescape just reflects a storytelling telling tradition which is probably more racist if it was tampered with. I don’t get these people! Isn’t it a bit like arguing that there are no white characters in Sinbad!”*

*- Bob’s keeper (18)*

‘Bob’s keeper’ outlines some important points, particularly about the way that some players approach the Fantasy genre. However, by locating the narrative within such a firmly established set of conventions it allows little room and no formal structures within which to celebrate non-white culture. This is exasperated by the single race approach which highlights aspects of ethnicity more than in other similar games where arguably it becomes diluted within the range of Fantasy races. The problem is that some avatar expressions then become marginalised. As Adams (2003) notes, there is a tendency in games – and I would argue in the media at large – to go down the familiar path of representing black characters as cool when they are athletes and rappers. (See also Hall 1997) We might also add to this the ‘Hip-Hop- Chic’ of more recent titles such as ‘GTA -San Andreas’ and the ‘DefJam’ series of games which is the representation being articulated by the white members of the ‘gangstapimps’. This is further complicated by the way that the non-white NPC are utilised within the game. There is little use of non-white NPC as key characters – what I would term, high status narrative characters – and the black characters tend to be relegated to a ‘cannon-fodder’ role in peripheral geographic locations beyond the main kingdoms in which much of the narrative and game-play takes place. In this sense non-white NPC are treated like other non-human races such as orcs, trolls and to a certain extent dwarves

The problem arises when this representation and positioning within the narrative, presents non-white characters as ‘other’ - a representation that goes against the norms of the virtual world. Whilst some black young people did indeed play as black

characters others chose to adopt a white identity because they felt that it fitted better with the game. Similarly, white players such as Holly choose to distance themselves from what is clearly seen as something different. Some users do play against type, but it seems that the ‘Jamaican cool’ and ‘Gangstapimp’ players merely articulate a predominantly white construction of black culture and such race swapping is not a popular or recognised activity (as indicated by Tigzrulz’s intolerance towards the ‘Gangstapimps’). To play Runescape then is to articulate a predominantly white discourse in which avatar choices tend to celebrate wider material aspects of whiteness and non-whiteness. One young black player sums up how he feels by telling me:

*“Not much point playing as a black man, Nic, Runescape is a white mans story and so you have got to be a white man. There aint no room on Rune for us N\*\*\*ers (laughs)” – Alfie (16)*

Aspects of race and ethnicity contrast somewhat differently with the gender representation and choices within the game. Gender represents an important structural choice within Runescape culture, which un-like the previous discussions of race, does not present such difficulties for users. Unlike race swapping, ‘Gender-Bending’ – playing a virtual gender that is different from your material one – was a recognised and accepted practice.

*“As soon as I click ok, I become a girl. I become Sassy”  
– SassySammy (17).*

*“I know plenty of guys that are girls and a few girls that are guys. No one cares who you are in RL, it’s who you are and what you do on Rune that matters”  
- OrionsBelt, (15).*

*“Sassy is really my mate Sam. We all know she is a guy but when we are on Runie we treat him as a girl. I don’t care that he is my girlfriend on Rune, she looks good and she has class armour. If she looks good then I look good. Most of the time I actually forget that she is Sam” - Sir Max Power, (18)*

These quotes raise interesting questions as to the role of gender within a world such as Runescape. On the one hand, there is no difference in the way that male and female characters can play the game. Skills and characteristics advance equally regardless of a player's chosen gender; weapon and armour classes – and associated bonuses - are exactly the same for both. Yet within the narrative diagesis, Runescape would seem to articulate a virtual patriarchal discourse: NPC fall into classic gender roles, males tend to occupy the positions of power and influence – for example guards are always male, kingdoms are ruled by kings not queens - whilst women perform secondary roles such as consorts to influential characters. Similarly the representation of female avatars, compared to that of male bodies, is highly sexualised, drawing on classic Fantasy and Anime/Manga images – large breasts, wasp-like waists, revealing clothing. There are structural reasons why a male player may wish to adopt a female identity within such a system. For 'SassySammy' and 'OrionsBelt' the decision to play as a girl was linked directly to game-play. Whilst it is true that the formal narrative makes no gender distinctions, the emergent game culture affords female avatars distinct advantages in certain situations.

Although no official demographics exist, I estimate that the gender split in Runescape to be 20% Female 80% Male<sup>8</sup>. This figure is significantly lower than studies of other on-line games. Guernsey (2001) observed that in a 2001 PC Data online 50.4% of all on-line game accounts were held by women, whilst an ELSPA commissioned 2004 survey noted that in the US Women accounted for 39% of active gamers (Krotoski 2004). Yet in MMORPG the figures appear to be somewhat lower. Laber (2001) noted that in a survey of the three main MMORPGs - 'Asheron's call' 'Ultima-online' and 'Everquest' - women made up 20-30% of the subscriber base. Whatever the true demographics, in my observations, male avatars outnumbered female avatars to a significant degree. In this sense the female body is something of a scarce resource in the Runescape world. This affords it status. Kinder argues that within such narratives women are often placed as objects of a male quest, waiting to be rescued by male winners (1991:106). This seems to capture the Runescape situation perfectly. As a new player it is easier to get help and additional items from other players if you are female:

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<sup>8</sup> This figure is based on my interview sample and is broadly in keeping with Jagex 'guessestimate' of 15% females when I discussed this aspect with them in early 2006.



*“When I first spawned in Lummy I didn’t know what I was doing. I asked for help but no one cared. Then I suddenly saw that all the girls were getting lots of help. Logged back in as a girl and that was that...never looked back lol” – OriensBelt (15)*

Similarly high status female players are also held in high regard. The desire to have a successful girlfriend is a factor here as is a certain degree of flirting: *“I wanted to play as a couple, but you don’t get much chance to do that on here. Me n Max got fed up of being called ‘gai’ when we did quests together so I just became sassy ... and she looks cute!” (Sassy Sammy)* Thus within the world of Runescape it is easier for a young man to be ‘female’ and ‘cute’ rather than to be thought of as ‘gay’.

*Thursday afternoons are always quiet on Runescape. As there is no one to trade lobster certs with I catch up with Sassy and Max in the bank at Draynor Village. Sassy has just raised her levels and is now able to wear Adamant armour. She looks good in the green, although it clashes with her spikey lime-green hair. She runs around the bank waving her bare midriff at the somewhat baffled onlookers. Some clearly approve of the effect and she receives numerous compliments. “She is a pain” Max whispers to me “She been like this since last night” I try to speak with her, “Soo Sass whats it like to be a green killer” She winks at me and excitedly tells me how the night before her and Max spent the evening down in the sewers killing zombies to raise her attack and strength. “They kept chasing after Max” she giggles, “He got soo pissed off that he stormed out and nearly got killed by a black knight!” “Shut it” Max replies curtly. “He sooo narky” she whispers to me. She dances flirtatiously in-front of Max “Love me?” she asks “your such a girl” Max tells her “ur right” she quips “and that’s why you luv me”*

- *Diary entry*

But why would male players engage in such activities when most players are fully aware that gender-bending takes place? The answer lies in the attitude that many players adopt to the virtual world. At a simple level, there is the fact that most gender-benders are male, with most female players using female-based avatars. Therefore many of the young men I spoke with believed that there was a good chance that the girl they were speaking to was a girl in ‘real-life’ and more-over that they

would be able to recognise if this was not the case. However, ‘Orionsbelt’s’ first quote reveals a more sophisticated view of the virtual environment. It appears to suggest that there exists a marked differentiation between virtual and material life. That once an identity is adopted within the virtual; it takes on a reality of its own that is sustained until the player logs out. ‘Sir Max Power’ hints at much the same thing in his discussion of his differing virtual and material attitudes to his friend Sam. Here there is no confusion over how the de-markation of gender in each arena, both are considered to carry validity within its specific realm. Max’s comment that he actually “forgets” that ‘SassySammy’ is Sam demonstrates how deep the identification within the text actually is.

For the young men who gender-bend, there seems to exist an opportunity to symbolically experiment with a differing identity, all-be-it in an extreme way. Interestingly this does not appear to be in conflict with wider issues of masculinity. What is not acceptable in the material seems to be actively embraced in the virtual. I can partly explain this in terms of a structural decision to adopt a practice that lets the player advance within the narrative – in much the same way that beat-em-up players use female characters for their speed and agility, or many gamers are happy to play as Lara in the ‘Tomb Raider’ series. These examples are slightly different to the situation I have looked at in MMORPG. These conventional games maintain a critical distance between on-screen character and player; thus, Lara remains Lara – I am only *permitted* to control her. As I have seen however, in MMORPG there is a more integrated link between player and avatar in which I see an interface between material and virtual concerns. It seems then that in gender bending I can identify a virtual subversion of material structures and practices. Can I identify a form of virtual masculinity operating here?

Virtual Masculinity appears to articulate wider notions of power and gender that exist outside of the virtual environment itself, but which are also somehow short-circuited by virtual nature of the power arena. Edley and Wetherell (1996), reject Athusser’s direct links between identity and ideological structures claiming that that it relies on an image of the individual as a passive rather than as an active participant in the construction of his social reality: *‘if it is the case that a man’s identity and his way of relating to the world around him are largely dependant on the social institutions in*

*which he is embedded, then it is by no means an easy matter for him to change the way he is ... (male) identities are constructed through a set of social structures which exist over and above the individual actions of any particular man' (1996:217).* This position recognises that each culture contains its own themes and/or ideas relating to men and masculine identity. A shared understanding of what it means to be a man. But it also stresses that this masculinity represents an ideological position. Griswold (1994) identifies *'the cultural diamond'* effect in which shared meanings become embodied in form. Thus men are seen to be constituted in a very real form, through cultural meanings or ideologies. More importantly however, the perspective recognises that in the construction of masculine identity there is no single or consistent image of manhood, merely a range of different representations. As Edey and Wetherell (1996) observe: while a culture may contain multiple discourses of masculinity it should not be assumed that they happily co-exist. Masculinity – like other forms of identity - is an ideologically contested territory. In this sense masculine practices of the virtual world need not conform to those of the material even if they are mediated through material concerns.

The key to this more cultural approach to identity is the recognition that the process of producing cultural meaning is circular. As I identified in Chapter 2, Althusser suggested that, ideological positions, in this case patriarchy, do not declare their own partiality ; it does not offer itself as just one sense-making system amongst others, instead it presents itself as the natural, normal and straightforward way of seeing the world. As Kaufman(1994) acknowledges, patriarchy becomes *'just a fact of life'*, thus while men accept that they live in a male dominated society, they do not feel themselves to be powerful. Patriarchy naturalises men's power and privilege but as Edley and Wetherell point out: *'Men are simultaneously the producers and products of culture; the masters and slaves of ideology'* (1996; 218). The patriarchal system rests on the success that men have in gaining control of 'cultural meaning'- what it means to be a man what it means to be a woman. It is through this ability to control the ways in which society thinks about such things that has provided men with their position of power. Furthermore as Gramsci (1971) observes the hegemony of a dominant culture is never absolute, it never fully achieves the position of being the only available way of making sense of an event or situation. Instead, it has to be continually defended against the challenge of other subordinate cultures.

I can identify the way that this process operates at the very core of popular culture. On one level cultural meaning represents the symbolic domain of masculinity; a set of complex interlocking unconscious myths about men. Whilst the nature of myth is a complex concept I may simply define them as collective fantasies that flow from the social unconscious, giving structure and substance to a society's political, social, economic and cultural existence (Horrocks 1995). But, as I have already tried to demonstrate, cultural discourse is both symbolic and practical. Thus within mythical narratives, icons are fashioned, who seem to contain within themselves a spectrum of emblematic meanings. Such myths can be both fictional and non-fictional but they have to be inculcated and maintained. The myths of masculinity; assertion, power, courage etc promise rewards for conformity and punishments for transgression. The severity of the punishment can also be linked to the insecurity with which the myths are held. So, within the Fantasy genre I may identify a bricolage of texts that are endlessly repeating certain aspects of manhood – the 'warrior hero' for example. To a large extent they also exercise women and femininity as demonstrated by Runescape's narrative approach to women in terms of Quests, NPC etc. Horrocks (1995) argues that there is also an unconscious betrayal here; some of the men become female 'heroines' within the male couple. The feminine slips in the back door, as the repressed always will. Segal best sums up the unstable nature of the discourse: '*...the strenuousness of the masculine identities is a pointer not to their solidarity but their fragility: to be 'mucho hombre' is not a birthright, but an accomplishment won and maintained with pain and difficulty.*' (1987;187).

This seems to reflect the arguments put forward by Clover (1992) that I considered in an earlier chapter. Virtual and Material aspects of Masculinity do not conflict because the virtual provides an arena in which material notions of masculinity can be symbolically extended in ways that are not possible within the material realm. It is not that masculinity is surrendered in favour of a female body, rather that it allows alternative masculine discourses to be explored, which of course may or may not include those that are often associated with female discourses in the material. In the same way that Clover's subjects used the 'Final Girl' in 'stalk and slash' films as a focus for a symbolic exploration of disempowerment, I can see how in gender bending representations, alternative masculine discourses are explored through a non-

masculine virtual body. Given the patriarchal structures of Runescape, such experimentation cannot take place using a masculine avatar since the virtual culture remains at least partially locked to material discourse. But since this is also partially linked to strategic aims of the game play the alternative discourses are not seen to directly compete with more traditional readings. Of course it helps that the representation of woman in Runescape is itself not a challenging discourse:

*“Sassy is rather cute, and I think looks well hot....She has nice boobs, she wears a hot cropped top which means you can see her belly, and when she bends over you get a mint view of her ass. She looks like one of those Manga girl warriors, shame she hasn't got the same blue hair!” - SassySammy (17)*

But this is where the symbolic resistance argument begins to break down. Since the game uses highly sexualised representations of women, which are themselves reflective of a patriarchal culture, it is hard to see how it offers alternative readings in any meaningful or resistive way. Part of this again comes down to the way that the virtual – as the site of symbolic experimentation – is itself reference through the material. So to return to Edley and Wetherell's (1996) argument, part of the way that patriarchal control is initiated and maintained is through its ability to control these points of cultural referencing – in this case the female form. Thus it is able to set up a system of representations that conform to the expectations of the genre. Since this discursive position is expressed through a hegemonic process it presents itself as a natural and ordinary way of looking at the world. In a virtual world, alternative and conflictive positions operating within, through and against more dominant and accessible representations and structures – in Boellstorff's (2008) terms 'the material we have to work with'. Thus gender bending simultaneously expresses aspects of dominant masculine values whilst at the same time providing the site within which alternative discourses can be constructed. Had the representation discourse been more challenging – the ability to play as a female Orc or Dwarf for example – I am not sure that gender-bending would be either as acceptable or as popular as it is. The cult of the body is a powerful tool in this respect.

However, the representation of the female form in Runescape sends out a number of conflicting messages that is problematic for a range of users, particularly young

women. As I have already noted, the basic female form is a stylised and sexual representation. This is further exaggerated by the range of clothing and armour which is cut to keep the most flesh on display. So tops are little more than bras whilst skirts are short and flow when the character walks. Female clothing is set by default so for example it is not possible to wear male armour or robes without it defaulting to the female version. The same is not true of male players who can, if they wish, wear armoured skirts – or indeed any skirt that might be available from shops or as a drop item. This sets up a number of strange contradictions in the narrative. Male monks for example adopt a modest style of dress in keeping with the class and type – recognisable long brown or red robes depending on their alliances – whilst female clerics are presented in a far more sexual way – short robes and cropped tops. Similarly female warriors fight in little more than an armoured bra and mini skirt which despite its lack of substance affords the same protection as the full plate armour of the male player. For some players this dual representation detracts from the ‘realism’ of the narrative:

*“Female armour just looks wrong...sexy....but its just wrong”- psypsyjenni (14)*

*“I really hate going out slaying with my Bf. He gets to go out suited up and I have to fight in my under-wear. It doesn’t look right” - DelilahLioneye (16)*

These representations are linked to the conventions of the Fantasy genre in which female characters are usually portrayed in scant and tight fitting outfits. MMORPG have extended this traditional view, one assumes in order to meet the expectations of what designers consider to be their core demographic – young men under 30. As I have seen the Runescape narrative offers little to challenge the dominant view of the Fantasy world, yet alternative readings are able to operate within its paradigm. Young women I interviewed felt caught between the obvious sexual over-tones of this representation of the female body and their desire to be presented in an attractive and sexy way in the virtual world. Sometimes the stereotypically gendered characters were an idealized representation which liberated users from their material bodies;

*OMG!! Who wouldn’t want to look like a Runescape avatar? She has great boobs, no belly, looks hot in everything she wears – I mean clothes actually fit her and how*

*many girls can say that if your not Kate Moss. And she is totally kick-ass, she kicks serios butt. I soo wish I could beat up boys like that lol” - MelanieConvict (15)*

Users like ‘MelanieConvict’ seem little concerned that the avatar is a somewhat narrow and heavily discursive representation of woman. For her, Runescape offers the choice to look how she would want to in the material. It empowers her in terms of looks but more importantly it offers her a perspective on life that again is perhaps not available to her in the material – to be ‘kick ass’ As such it reflects notions of power in terms of being and feeling attractive to other users and being and feeling powerful within the world. Like the gender benders, there is the possibility for her to offer a different female discourse. There is of course the danger of not recognising that being female in both the virtual and material arenas articulates a range of different positions and the female form carries with it a range of sometimes conflicting meanings. However, whilst it is not my intention to offer a simple textual analysis I again see that the virtual world affords body choices – and the associated embedded meanings - that are not always available to users in the material. I am not simply arguing the somewhat obvious point that virtual RPG offers the users the chance to be represented in an idealised way but rather that it acts as a mechanism within which young people are afforded the ability to actually *make* those choices.

*“Combat Girl takes me to meet her PK clan. It is an all female band of high level warriors called ‘The Sisters of Battle’. I observe that this is the name of a WH40k army. “Yeah” one of the ‘sisters’ grins “A couple of us used to play” I am pleasantly surprised to hear that these young women were actively involved in the Warhammer scene. My experience had been that it was almost exclusively male. Perhaps this explains their clan. I ask them about it. “We are not into pretending to be boys or a bunch of male wannabees like some girls who play computer games” Runechick tells me “ Nor are we the sort of girls who go round saying ‘ooh we girl gamers’. We just girls who like playing computer games and who got together to have some fun on here” “Yeah and to kick some boy ass” interjects Hammerchickslayer. “Its not like that Hamz” retorts Combat girl, “Its just that most clans on here are male, so it kinda figures that when we kick their ass its gona be boy-ass dat we kickin!” They all laugh. While we have been talking, Runechick has removed her armour. In her ‘Zammy god armour’ she cuts an intimidating figure, yet in her ‘civies’ she is*

*curiously feminine, displaying none of the punk-manga-chic so popular with many female players I have seen “I am a girl” she tells me “Yeah its good to look sexy but I wanna look like a girl to do it, not a fuckin cartoon” “You look more sexy with your Abyssal Whip” Combat girl tells her. The sisters fall about laughing, but poor Runechick looks a little embarrassed. “Lets go kick some boy-ass” she retorts, quickly putting her armour back on. I am glad that I am along as an observer, I not sure that I fancy being on the receiving end of this group of amazons!”*

- *Diary entry*

Whilst choice of how one looks is an important factor particularly for young women, it is also important to note their dissatisfaction with the range of choices available. Since patriarchal representations are hegemonic it is little surprise that in reflecting traditional representations of fantasy women, Runescape also re-enforces a particular discursive position and an associated power dynamic. The problem of course is that for ‘MelanieConvict’ and ‘Runechick’ it is almost impossible to operate outside of the system. Representations and choices are articulated through particular values and beliefs about the world – how one should look to feel ‘beautiful’ or ‘feisty’. However, there are groups of young women who operate against this trend. Although few in number, I encountered some female gender-benders. In some ways women who play as men are somewhat more interesting than the male gender-bender, given that there is no obvious in-game advantage for this gender swap. Some of the young women I spoke with saw it as a mechanism to escape the cycle of a highly sexualised representation:

*“When you use a girl avatar no one takes you very seriously. You are just all tits and ass. I got tired of being followed by noobs asking if I would be their girl friend. Its worse than school and I just wanna play you know. Then when they see you got a legends cape they are all like ‘omg theres a girl that’s done the Legends quest’ like sooo!!! I work hard on here...its just not worth the hassle.” Rune Princess (15)*

*“Princess is right. Playing as a guy lets you just get on with the game. If I wanna feel sexy I just go back to the face-mage and swap back” Hacknslash243 (15)*



This exchange is interesting in a number of respects. I see here the difficulties experienced by young female players in the virtual world. They seem to be subject to many of the pressures and hassles that they experience in the material world and have developed appropriate strategies to deal with this aspect of the game. Notice how 'Hacknslash 243' is not adverse to feeling 'sexy' or being portrayed in a sexual way, it is the associated power exchange which accompanies it that she objects to. She uses a male body to remain 'invisible' in the game; it is a tool that lets her engage with whatever activities she chooses. This is in contrast to the 'Sisters of Battle' who work from within the system, using their exaggerated feminine representations as an expression of their power and status in the world. Hacknslash243's instrumental use of the body is similar to the male gender benders who use the female form to advance their status within the game. In-game gender relations are complex; with the female form remains decorative 'eye candy' which never-the-less affords it's wearer with particular forms of power and status, whilst, for 'Rune Princess' at least, the male form is a means of being taken seriously in the game. I also see how instrumental choices of body are fluid. If the young women want to feel sexy, they simply change back to a female form. Body choices and their associated connotations can be manipulated, worn and cast off.

But there is a danger in such ideas. Polsky (2001) argues, virtual bodies are socially constructed by a range of practices. As such they are social objects that can never escape the social. Whilst Virtuality potentially removes the *control and consequential* elements of the material world, the cultural and societal forces that help us make sense of material existence remain constant: we always come from somewhere. Logging into Runescape a young person can choose to be male or female, black or white, to work or not but their understanding of what it actually *means* to be a man or a woman, a black or a white character, will have been shaped by their cultural experience. This is in effect what 'Rune Princess' and the male gender benders are attempting to escape. The use of stylised representations creates problems simply because they glamorise and objectify aspects of gender. Male bodies articulate particular stereotyped aspects of masculinity – over developed chests and biceps – whilst female bodies not only have to cope with an unrealistic physical representation but also with the overtly sexualised text that such bodies represent.

Virtual identity is not a blank canvas and virtual space remains a discursive arena *already shaped* by the social and cultural. It offers no liberation from the material world, but an intriguing interface between two planes of existence. A player in a virtual world is not a transparent medium. Players provide a link between external and internal cultural patterns: the material and the virtual. In virtual worlds and online games like Runescape, players can change their physical appearance and virtual persona at will. The player's material identity remains hidden behind a virtual mask, but the virtual identity constructed can articulate a number of discursive positions in a similar way to that in the material. These may co-exist or, perhaps, conflict with the player's actual material world. In everyday life, many physical characteristics are unalterable (although I would also acknowledge the radical deconstruction of the physical body implied by Foucault's work *and* recognise the problems associated with taking this position to its 'end-point' e.g. Hall, 1996:11), and this fixity underpins a range of social opportunities, social constraints and social institutions. Identity, as Foucault (1977), Bourdieu (1984) and others have pointed out, is inscribed on the physical body. Yet once the fixity of physical form is stripped away by the absence of constraint that virtual worlds afford, cultural meaning can be *virtually* manipulated at will. In these circumstances the physical self adopts the role of symbol. This manifests a constructed and embodied self *beyond* the physical, existing in a world where identity is, at least partially, self-defined rather than pre-ordained. As I have already noted earlier, identity is *made* rather than *given* (Bauman 1997:71)

### **Identity and Community: hanging out**

Virtual identity is neither simple nor un-complicated. It is not an interchangeable mask that is laid over a user's material life but a complex inter-relationship of a number of differing structures and positions. As Taylor notes:

*"As each user encounters an avatar...he makes sense of it through a variety of social and personal stories (that) ...help form the structure through which avatars act as agents for users. This experience can be expansive or constraining and can foster further immersion, identification and affiliation or limit it" (2006:118)*

This process underpins the social life of the virtual world and as such forms the basis for how virtual communities and social groups are made sense of. This idea can be extended in other ways. Book (2003) notes that virtual worlds might serve a similar function to tourist locations in the material world; they allow participants to escape from their everyday-life into another place. Arguably, they simultaneously offer the potential to break out from ‘the constraints of the self’, in the way that one might escape the routine of one’s everyday life whilst on holiday

Runescape has a number of popular ‘tourist locations’, places where citizens go to hang out. Some players simply use the world as a meeting place and divorce their virtual self from the activity around them.

*“I don’t bother with the quests and stuff, I don’t think I have got a level over 10 but I like to come here and enjoy the scenery... we just come here to meet and chat, its nice up on the cliffs looking over the ocean. I meet my sisters and we just hang out*

- Katspaw, (14)

Here the virtual world itself, like material meeting spaces, acts almost as a tourist location, a place to escape from real life into a fantasy environment in which one can simply enjoy the ‘sights’ and chat to friends. But for others, aspects of virtual bodies – how you look on line – are never far away; for many, the virtual world - like its material other - provides an opportunity not just to hang out but be noticed:

*“For me, going online or to a (clan) meet is like going out on Friday night. I want the noobs to know I am there. I put on my best armour so they know Jazz is on the board...most of the time I hang at Lummy, sometimes noobs want to challenge me but usually it’s just a good place to meet my sisters, to be seen, you know”*

- Jazzygirl, (14).

But Book’s tourist analogy also operates on a more sophisticated level. Some players use locations within the world to add depth to their virtual experience;

*“One of my favourite places on Rune is the Braxton Waterfall. You can just sit back by the river and relax...I could watch the water for hours its so pretty.... not that many people come here so it’s a great place just to be, you know”*

- Axegrrl, (16)

Axegrrl’s observations are interesting on a number of levels. She feels the need for a place where she can escape from the everyday world of Runescape having presumably already escaped the everyday world of the material and just have time to herself. Interestingly, she is willing to treat the virtual world *as though* it was real. Runescape avatars cannot ‘sit’ and indeed the ‘waterfall’ is little more than a photo with a few pixels that suggest movement. However for ‘Axegrrl’ this represents a real location that induces peace, tranquility and a palpable sense of relaxation. As I have already noted, this partly depends on the identification process between player and avatar. But I need to also consider the way in which ‘Axegrrl’ imagines place and space within the virtual world. This is rooted in the interactivity of the virtual world. For some online gamers ‘*spectacular space*’ referred to by Jenkins (1995) is merely an arena within which game activity occurs and excessive visual detail interrupts game play. Limited by the connection speed of phone lines, the vast amount of data used to create the most realistic representations of the environment merely slows up connection speed and is regarded as unnecessary by gamers. In such cases place and space become imagined rather than visualised, and it is sufficient for gamers to know where they are for the game process to go forward:

*“When I do a quest or go into the wilderness or (duelling) arena, I make certain that I have low detail on. I don’t care what it looks like I just need to know I am going to hit the other guy quicker” - Tom (17)*

While in this case the online world becomes fashioned by technological necessity and constraint, the need to treat it as real place remains constant. Tom later described his favourite online places:

*“I like the Dungeons in Rune, you gotta jump the lava and avoid being hit by stuff . . . the first time I saw a Black Demon my heart was really pounding, they can zap you with a fire bolt, you can almost feel the flames (laughs) . . . and there are some neat*

*little corners to chill an watch the rangers trying to kill them . . . On Quake, sometimes when I re-spawn after being killed, I go up to the top of the gothic cathedral where you can hide in the shadows and look down . . . you gotta keep ducking down because there are these huge gargoyle things that stick out and you gotta watch that you don't hit your head on them . . . Its kinda scary though cos its so high I sometimes feel dizzy. . . . But it's a great place to camp with a long range weapon like the rail-gun, particularly if there's a fat guy down the bottom, someone like Tank, he's a real easy target."*

Here is another example of the ways in which the virtual is afforded material characteristics. But what is interesting is how these are able to initiate real feelings and emotions. Tom talks about these places as if they are real; his emotions and feelings are precisely placed and embodied. He feels a real sense of height at the top of the cathedral which then initiates feelings of dizziness. Similarly encountering a Black Demon near the lava flow makes Tom feel scared. These places and encounters evoke real rather than virtual feelings. Tom's idea that it is necessary to duck to avoid hitting the gargoyles is also interesting. The programme's collision control does not even register the gargoyles - which poses an interesting philosophical question as to whether they then truly exist - however, Tom treats them as though they were materially there, actually ducking his head as he demonstrates this and leaping about in his chair as he shows how to jump the Lava Streams in Runescape. Despite the fantastic elements of the game, Tom's understandings are still placed in the material world but the material and virtual have become fused together so that situations and actions in one initiate appropriate feelings and actions in the other. But there is also a contradiction present. There is an interesting tension here between the way Tom suspends his disbelief in terms of killing or being killed and his subsequent 're-spawning' (resurrection) - which represents the game's virtual fantasies - and his interaction with the environment, where he continues to reference the virtual through the real. Here the Avatar performs as both 'self' and 'other'. As 'self' the avatar is bound to the player through a keyboard and mouse, duplicating in visible form the player's actions. But it is also 'other' operating 'beyond' the user. Both limited and freed by its difference from the user, it can accomplish more than the user alone (Rehak, 1997).

However, 'Axegrrl' offers a slightly different approach to this level of interaction within the virtual world. This is best illustrated when she discusses with me how she views her role within the Runescape world. One night, we sit in a quiet bar in 'Edgeville a small hamlet on the fringes of the 'Wilderness' and she described how she spends the first part of her gaming session at 'work': smithing and mining in the mining points in the nearby forests. It is through this activity that she generates income with which she is able to buy the things she needs in the world: armour, food, clothes and so on. I accompany over a week's 'work' and observe how for her, these activities carry the genuine status of 'working'.



*"It is a Tuesday evening in the summer holidays. I am lying in the long grass in Braxton to the west of the Seers Village. In the background, barely audible, is the low burble of the waterfall but apart from this Braxton is silent. Axegrrl is sitting on a tree stump next to me playing with a lump of rope. We are the only people here. Every so often she gets up and stares into the pool "Its lovely here" she says. Braxton is a lonely and desolate place but I have to agree strangely beautiful. I am tired out. I have spent the last few days 'working' with Axegrrl: mining, smelting and smithing armour. This is our respite after work; doing nothing.*

*Mining is a long and arduous profession. Mining points are always situated a distance from civilisation. This means a time-consuming trek from the bank – where we store our equipment – to the mines. When we arrive they are usually crowded.*

*Axegrll rushes for one of the coal-ore points, pulls out her rune pickaxe and waits for it to 'respawn'. She needs to concentrate because the ore will only respawn periodically and there will always be several other players waiting to pounce. Timing and concentration are important to net the prize. The rock turns black to indicate it has coal – Axegrll raises her pickaxe and strikes. “Yessss” she exclaims. I assume this means she has been successful. She repeats this until her inventory is full – about 15 pieces. I am mining iron ore for her. This is less popular but I am continually bothered by giant scorpions and must break away from my mining in order to see them off. When our inventories are full, we head for the furnace in Falador. Here we combine our ores to produce steel bars. Sometimes the ore fails and we watch as our mining efforts turn to 'failed ore' Useless and Frustrating! We carry the steel bars up a winding path to the forge, where Axegrll turns them into steel chest plates. It is then back to the bank to deposit the plates before we return to the mine to begin the cycle again. From ore to chest plates takes about one hour. The mines are busy, the furnace is busy, the route to the forge is busy and Falador bank is always packed. I have to chat to endless NPC to be allowed to perform the actions I need to complete each task. Axegrll takes it all in her stride. Smithing and mining is her 'work'. She has done well on it as her purple party hat clearly shows. My fingers are sore from all the clicking and typing that I have done. By comparison, the loneliness of Braxton is paradise. I can do nothing. It is bliss”*

- *Diary extract*

Often these 'work' locations – particularly mining areas - attract many users so she seeks out quieter places to chat and/or wind down from the stresses of work, in the same way she might do after school. There is yet another tension between the real and the virtual here. Axegrll and Jazzygirl, like most other players, both admit to playing the games on their own in a bedroom. They are already in their own private space yet they still feel the need to seek out *private* virtual space within the *public* arena of the virtual world. Privacy it seems is not a simple matter of logging off. It is important to both of them that they remain connected to the interactivity of the virtual even in the desire to remove themselves from actual interaction with others and be alone.

Interestingly, Axegrll later admits to having never seen a real waterfall or indeed having sat by a real river, so the virtual also creates a symbolic experience of how an event in real life might actually feel. This cyber-experimentation is deep rooted throughout the virtual world. Jar-o-Mayo (15), says that, despite having never fished in real life, “... *there’s nothing like sitting or fishing on the beach at Karamaja after a hard days fighting*”. Again I see how the virtual performs a symbolic experimental role. What these players are demonstrating is a desire to recreate the ‘real’ material world within the virtual, but doing so in a way that might not be possible in the material world. But the symbolic cannot, of course, be completely abstracted from a material cultural frame of reference and, as Tom shows, it is embodied in very real form. To reduce the virtual to a technological manifestation of the material world - to claim that Tom’s gargoyles are merely a collection of pixels - would be to misunderstand the nature of virtual environments or indeed environments in general. I might equally argue that material manifestations are subject to the same constructive nature. Aspects of colour, smell, taste and touch – almost like Runescape’s pixels – are chemical and neuro-responses to external stimuli. Runescape’s environment are not merely technological constructions, but fundamentally cultural. Indeed, it is the interface between technology and gamer that acts as a means of cultural expression for each player, marking out space ‘. . . *within the representation of a real or imagined environment. . .*’ (Reid, 1994: 3). As I noted earlier in this study, virtual worlds exist neither solely in the technology used to represent them, nor purely in the minds of the user or participant, but in the relationship between subjectivity, social practices, game technology and the representations that gamers assemble through their game playing. Sometimes, the real penetrates the virtual and young people remind themselves of the boundaries to their experiences:

*Rastaman jon: “I gonna go to Karamaja, chill out on tha beach, fish and listen to sum Bob Marley”*

*DustDevil: “You can’t do that you noob it’s not real”*

*Rastamanjon: “I know \*sulks\* but it’s a kewl thought”*



As I noted earlier, games work at the level of ‘icon’ where objects, rather than being granted real physical attributes exist principally as symbols: simple visual frames of reference whose significance is constructed and learnt. In some circumstances, as with Tom in the dungeon, the process becomes inverted and the virtual is ascribed physicality or, as Dodge notes the ‘. . . *avatar seems to exhibit the same sense of personal space that bodies do in the real world*’ (1998: 8). I pointed out earlier, how Jeffrey and Mark (1998) observed that passing through an avatar, whilst being technically possible, was considered discourteous so gamers walk around other avatars as they would people in material space. In Runescape this is standard practice amongst established and experienced players and players who fail to observe this protocol are branded ‘noobs’ and their behaviour challenged. Again I see that it is not the game itself that requires or creates a sense of the material, but the willingness of its participants to treat the virtual as though it were ‘real’ in a material sense.

But the virtual space can also be used to supplement material space in more sophisticated ways. Axegrll’s waterfall is not an isolated incident. Other players use the space to extend material existence in highly complex ways:

*“Last year my dad lost his job, he’s ok now but we didn’t have money so we Couldn’t go on holiday and I spent the six weeks playing Rune. I used to go down to Cathaby and hang out on the beach, when the sun came through my window it was nearly like being at the seaside . . . lol this is sooo stoopid I know but guess what . . . I used to go to the gnome village for cocktails in the evening, it was well good, I would meet up with my friends and we would all put the same beats on and pretend like we were at Ibiza or something”.*

*- Combatgrll89 (17)*

Here I see an example of a powerful imagination creating a narrative of identity, a true expression of Book’s tourist analogy. Combatgrll89 recreates in the virtual what she imagines herself doing in the material if circumstances had been different. In this sense the virtual performs a material role, she uses Runescape locations to add depth and authenticity to her everyday lived-experience, in the same way that some material tourists regard the capacity of experiences gained in certain travel destinations as enriching the self (Bennett, 2005: 154). I again see the way that virtuality performs a

symbolic role. These gamers demonstrate a desire to create imagined aspects of the real material world within the virtual, but they do so in a way that, invariably, is impossible for them in the material world.

In the introduction, I discussed Parker's (2004) thesis. I argue that this seems to sit at the centre of how the symbolic process works. The division between 'work' and 'leisure' on Runescape is crucial to understanding how virtual space is used by these players. It is worth noting at this point that talking about 'work' in virtual worlds is perhaps a problematic process. I accept that this idea of 'work' is open to the criticism that it reduces labour practices to a series of simple mouse clicks. Hence it could be argued that such simplicity devalues the activities themselves. To reduce complex activities such as smelting, smithing and crafting to a simplified and single action, takes away the skill and patience required to undertake this activity in the material. Whilst there is merit to this argument, up to a point, I argue that it fails to recognise how the rituals and practices of the work place are woven into a simplified activity. Of course, the young people do not experience the sweat, conditions and exhaustion of mining in the material world, or require the intricate skills of a material jewellery maker, but in a sense they do not have to since Runescape is not about simulating this level of material process. I would argue that such skills could never be transplanted from the material. They are merely represented. However I can identify the rituals and practices of the work place even if Runescape cannot recreate the sensory conditions. This is a theme I will return to later in this chapter.

Like Axegrll, many Runescape players regard their main in-game activity as 'work', which is then contrasted with leisure time spent at vacation locations. Work space and leisure space are kept quite distinct. As few players are old enough to have jobs in 'real-life', it seems that Runescape provides them with an arena in which they can act out an experience of what they *think* it is like to be an adult worker. They assign different and distinct spaces to each activity so that the two contrasting realms of work and play do not become blurred. During one session, for example, Axegrll becomes annoyed when another player attempts to sell her lobster;

*“It was a good price but he pissed me off. The noob couldn’t see that we are trying to relax here, if he wants to sell his stuff he should go to somewhere like Draynor or the (fishing) Guild, that’s where people buy lobbies”*

What irritates Axegrll here is that the world of work (more specifically *someone else’s work*) impinges on her leisure space. It is little surprise therefore that players like Axegrll seek out quieter spaces to escape and relax but, evidently, it is sometimes a struggle to keep the two worlds apart.



*“It is Saturday night. I have been mining all afternoon with Jazz, Tina and Marcus in the desert mines. We have been resting in the centre of Lumby, but Marcus is complaining about the noobs and wants to meet his friend Uriaheepz in Varrock. We head for the city but take a detour via the bank in Draynor. It is usual to mine in ‘civies’ to allow the maximum inventory space for ore. Now we are going ‘on the town’ Jazz wants to make certain she has her armour so that “I can impress the noobs” We head to the bank. Jazz and Tina exchange clothes and ask Marcus his opinion of various configurations of armour and weapons. In the end, Jazz opts for gold trimmed black armour with her dragon battle, whilst Tina chooses her new shaman robes. Marcus opts for dragon-scale ranging armour and a magic bow. It has taken forty or so minutes to get dressed but I have to admit they look good.*

*As I expected, the bars of Varrock are packed. We opt for a spot by the market square on the main thoroughfare through the town. An endless stream of citizens parades in front of us engaged in all manner of activities. As the night wears on, groups of boys call out to Jazz and Tina who giggle, point and respond or simply feign lack of interest. They enjoy the compliments and once the boys leave, the pair compare and exchange thoughts, discussing who was the hotter. Friends come and go and we chat or do a little trading and I manage to sell some Runes. When a high status player comes through Jazz shouts out “hey cute boi” – sometimes they come over but usually they ignore her and she dismisses them with a “pick-on-tha-cute-girl-why-don’t-cha” We hang there for maybe two hours. My fingers – already tired from the days mining – ache from the endless conversations, banter and, much later, singing that spending Saturday nights with Jazz entails. I think back to the quiet evenings a few weeks earlier with Axegrrl and I begin to really see the appeal for her. Who wants this every night? I message her, she is by the waterfall. I am jealous!”*

- *Diary Extract*

For other players this distinction between work and leisure is less important and the busier locations provide an opportunity to socialise and more importantly to be seen:

*“I don’t see why people go to the waterfall, what’s the point, no-one’s there. We hang out in Varrok, in the bar or on the square ... people can see you there” - Rune Thief, (14)*

*“LOL! tha cathaby shark gurls! We hang in cathaby, so if yas wants ta cum c us yas knos wer we r. Dats y we stay dere so thut ppl can cum 2 uz.....sum ppl jest stay fer a lil n chill n others, dey stay fer tha nite, n dance n sing wid uz. Is fun, yas should cum c” - Tigzrulz (13)*

*“Friday nite, or Sat during the days the best. Get yer best clothes on and come hang on tha jetty where you can chat, piss about ...or theres loads of hot bois to see...yumm!!” – Daisychain (13)*

For these ‘Cathaby Shark Gurls’, virtuality is about utilising and creating leisure not work space; Logging into Runescape allows them to build and

maintain a highly visible social network. Virtual space provides an opportunity to meet up with friends, chat and look good. In this sense it is not very different to the malls, parks and other social spaces that young people occupy in the material.



*“Nestled deep within the member’s area of RuneScape, to the west of Camelot, under the shadow of White Wolf Mountain, is the small fishing Village of Cathaby. Despite its size and its ‘members only’ status, Cathaby is a busy and well populated area. It is the ultimate ‘go to’ town for fishers of all levels – many people stop-over to buy fish for their journey over the mountain - and it is also considered to be a fun area in which to just hang out. On most evenings there is a healthy cross-section of the RuneScape population – if not hanging out there, then simply passing through. It is here that I encounter the ‘Cathaby Shark Girls’.*

*As RuneScape clan they are unusual. Their name appears to be fluid – with a variety of different spellings of ‘Girls’, ‘Gurl’z, ‘Gurl’s and ‘Grrll’s being used by different members at different time. They also have a fluid membership although the core group consists of Tizsrulz, CDUK, DaisyChain, go-sharkgirl-go and Kornbepraised. They are all highly experienced fishers and fund their extravagant lifestyle by selling cooked sharked to high-level PK clans. I am first introduced to them by CombatGirl who is one of their regular clients. There is a strong bond between the two clans and both The Sisters of*

*Battle and the Cathaby Shark Girls regard each other with sisterly affection. As CombatGirl tells me “It’s important that us girls look after our own” Conversely, The Cathaby Shark Girls have little time for PKing, they fish and cook shark. On Runescape, cooked shark means money “although all da betta fer tha ‘Battles’ kickin dat boy-ass” Go-sharkgirl-go tells me laughing. There is a great deal of laughter around the Shark Girls. On one level I am not surprised. There is clearly a great deal of money to be made in the shark trade as well. I find myself thinking that I would also keep smiling if I had their bank balance. Their lifestyle is beyond extravagant – even in Runescape terms. Each of the girls seems to possess every high-end goods and high-status equipment that is available. On the first night that I speak with them they are all sporting party hats that they change with frequent regularity. “LOL, yeah we each have every colour” they boast. This represents in the region of 100million gp per girl, and that is before we get onto the armour and weapons. I am impressed.*

*The girls work in the same diligent manner that I saw in Axegrrl., They are focused on their fishing and have a reputation that they will always meet their ‘contractual requirements’ There is a great deal of trust between the girls. Two fish and two cook. The girls instinctively trust each other with catches that represent many, many hours in-game. All proceeds are shared out equally and there appears to be no argument as to who caught or cooked the most fish. Mutual co-operation is taken as a given. In Cathaby they are something of an attraction. Whether it is their status as high level fishers, their reputations for always delivering, or simply that they are fun people to be around I am not sure, but people travel just to see them. Tigz in particular is well aware of their status and keeps the group in order through her MSN chat network – particularly when they are expected to perform for the ‘tourists’. They chat, they laugh, and make up little dances much to the amusement of the passers by. What everyone is waiting to see however is their performance of ‘the skipping song’ Periodically the girls perform a rendition of the popular rhyme “3,6,9, da guse drank wine, da monkey chewd 2bacco on da street car line, da line broke, and da monkey got choked and dey all went ta heven in a lil row boat, CLAP CLAP” Each girl has her own line from the song which is*

*accompanied by a dance and/or action. Their performance is seamless. Given that the song is 'sung' in text and that the accompanying actions are part of the games 'emototronics' the performance is a masterpiece of co-ordination. I begin to understand the importance of the MSN Chat interface and experienced just how difficult this is to achieve when I was invited to form part of the performance. No matter how many times you see this, the crowd are always enthralled and when it is finished the girls collapse into fits and giggles – as though they performed for their own enjoyment. They remind me of virtual cheerleaders except rather than cheering on an accompanying team it is the squad itself which is the focus – almost as though they are 'bigging up' themselves.*

*Yet they are also conscious of their celebrity status. They are well aware that their job is not only to fish shark, but to be seen doing it. Part of this high visibility is to pass on a sense of enjoyment and fun. "I need ta make certain we hav da best stuff cuz tha fanz expect it" laughs Kornbepraised. I have heard this sort of thing before from other high-end users and it often comes over as arrogant. The girls however, seem natural and uncomplicated. They provide pleasure for those around them – it is as much their job as the fishing contracts on which they work on night after night."*

*- Diary entry*

Again I must note the curious tension between material privacy and virtual interactivity. It is the privacy of the girl's material world which affords the conditions for the interactivity of their virtual existence. It is also an interactivity that appears to only be possible in the virtual as material interactions do not appear to have the same attraction. Yet these players appear to have little or no interest in the game narrative, it simply provides an arena within which socialising can take place although they also acknowledge the need to raise virtual capital to support this process:

*"Y em I a Cathaby Shark Gurl? If ya dunt ern mony, den ya cant buy stuff, if ya cant buy stuff den ya dont luk gud – simple lol" - CDUK (14)*

*“(laughs) Cd iz rite. U need 2 train 2 get ur skills up, den yas can relax Ince yas cen mak eze money!” Go-sharkgirl-go (13)*

This exchange reminds me that interactivity at this level is not a simple process. It requires a complex interplay between the requirements of the game narrative and the demands and the expectations of the wider virtual social environment, which is in turn driven by a desire to socialise and interact with peers. Arguably the telephone or a more conventional chat room would furnish this need to socialise in a more effective and less complicated way. But the interactivity of the virtual is also a highly visible process. It is not just about meeting and chatting to friends, one has also to be *seen* undertaking these activities. The Cathaby Shark Gurlz are a good example of this. One user attempts to explain further:

*“You see yourself and you see your mates. You see how good you look, you probably thought hard about what you were going to wear, maybe it took ages to save up for that armour or perhaps you have a high status item like a party hat. Your mates will also have dressed up...in a group you look well fly!. Cant do that in a chat room, or on the phone. Using those things isn’t the same...meeting on Runescape is like being there, its like being on the street or park or just round a mates house” thesaintuk (17)*

Runescape then is about ‘hanging out’ which seems to present itself as a visible activity. Being able to ‘see’ ones friends helps to maintain a sense of their ‘being there’ in much the same way that Tom believed in the gargoyles and Axegrll experienced the peace of the waterfall. It helps make virtuality seem somehow tangible, and it becomes more like the material. But of course maintaining these sorts of relationships in virtual space is also important as they enable processes to be recreated in the virtual when circumstances make it difficult for those same processes to be maintained in the material world. Runescape provides a new form of public space which has distinct advantages for young users over that afforded by material spaces. As I noted at the beginning of this study, public spaces also tend to be adult spaces. Lipsky (1978) argues that, in public space young people are increasingly subjected to surveillance through the institutions of the adult gaze and more



importantly adult mechanisms of control. Arguably “the street” “the park” or other places where young people have chosen to meet, have always been adult space despite their contested nature. But as I have argued, technology has become increasingly important in marking out new leisure spaces for youth culture. As material space is increasingly denied young people – through dispersal orders, ASBOS, and curfews - it is little surprise that they have found new and innovative arenas in which to hang out;

*“We used to meet in the park, but it closes at night” – Ilovetrent (13)*

*“Centre Court shopping only lets small groups of kids in now, and none after school...what do you do if it’s raining?, Even Costa don’t like us in there now”  
– Claraspiercings (13)*

*“Yeah exactly Clara!!... Where do you hang out?...street?...too fucking cold....Youth Club?...boring....Rune is like the next best thing” - Kornbepraised (13)*

These new virtual arenas contrast with the traditional material spaces in that they arguably offer young people some degree of autonomy. Although it is also important to acknowledge the ‘power geometries’ of virtual space through which some young people are able exercise more autonomy than others (Massey 1994: 149). I have also argued that perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of young people’s practices in virtual worlds is the capacity that these offer for some form of resistance to adult culture. Some writers (e.g Raby 2005) maintain that considering resistance in contemporary cultural settings is essentially problematic, but others, (Katz 2001) argue that the places that young people occupy and use - their geographies - should always be seen as potential sites of active resistance. Resistance in this sense - as Hebdige (1979) reminds us – is always a visible activity. Young people lay claim to Runescape because its visibility – that they can both see and be seen – adds legitimacy to the arena, in much the same way that other technological spaces legitimate a very visible form of identity. This in turn facilitates an environment in which they can engage in ‘adult’ activities and experiment with ‘adult’ process and structures such as ‘work’, free from the perceived control of adults.

Hanging out in this sense, is also an empowering activity. Consider this quote from ‘Tigzrulz’ one of the ‘Cathaby Shark Gurls’ I encountered earlier.

*“Tha lifaz like ma rents jest dont gettit n my m8s neva culd undastnd y I like it n wot itz like ta be dere ... coz tho me n Almi onli went out on rs it woz tha same as goin in rl...itz tha same feelins n stuff, en 2 me it woz like we wer realy 2getha, like havin a rl bf...we wuld hang n we wuld go to tha pub n we wuld get eachotha prez...we wuld cyba n dat woz so hot cos I usta pretnd dat he wuz realy dere...it wus diff wid ma rl bf, not as gud sumhow..rs woz betta n I cried wen he went wid MiMi..1 nite he told me dat he luvd me but den jest sed bye n every1 knos dat bye dont mean nuttin widout hugz n xxxs n den I knew...n I didnt do enefin fer dayz cos I wus cryin...ma sistaz just hugged me and we didn’t do enefin”*

- Tigzrulz (13)



Tigzrulz is a particularly complex character. She regards herself as one of the ‘Cathaby Shark Gurls’ a group of young women who meet and hang out in Cathaby, one of the busy locations on Runescape member world. As such they are a highly visible group who pay little or no attention to the game-narrative that continues on around them. They log in to meet, socialise and hang out. As a group they have developed their own rituals and practices. ‘Tigzrulz’ speaks online in a form of ‘text speak’ an abbreviated and shortened form of language. She will only use this language in a virtual world, which contrasts with my material conversations with her when she speaks in a more recognisable and ‘ordinary’ way. As such the two forms

of language demark and add legitimacy to each arena. In the virtual arena, she and her friends have developed a particular means of communicating which marks them off from other groups within the same space but also resists against other forms of discourse. She has cast aside adult language in favour of a semiotic code that she has adopted and refined for herself. It is a way of structuring and ordering her virtual life.

I can also see how being on line initiates real feelings and emotions for her. The feelings that she has for her virtual boyfriend are presented as just as real and valid as those she feels for her material partner. There appears to be no contradiction or conflict as each boy is assigned a role and function in his respective realm. I see that although her virtual relationship is mediated by material activity and ritual – giving each other presents, meeting up – it has been extended in the virtual to engage in her experience of more adult relationship activities – going to the pub and having (cyber) sex. Tigzrulz tells me that she sees her virtual relationships as a way of testing out in a safe environment what she is not yet ready to partake in within the material realm. So in this sense, her virtual boyfriend is a kind of ‘dry run’ for what she hopes to do later. She can experiment safely and at a distance. Yet the virtual experience is merely a simulation of the material. She also adds additional practices and rituals which are unique to the virtual – how ‘Almi’ was supposed to tell her he loved her for example. The pain of the break up was real, the loss of her virtual partner initiated real not virtual tears yet she turned to her virtual friends rather than material friends for support, presumably because her material friends would not understand ‘*wot itz like ta be dere*’. Runescape in this sense is like a secret club, only the initiated can truly understand the relationship between material emotions and virtual action.

This use of language and the development of sophisticated rituals help users to mark out their virtual experiences from those of other arenas. It is clear from Tigzrulz quote that she regards her virtual activities as both different yet as valid as those in the material realm. Her assertion that ‘Almi’ was somehow ‘better’ than her ‘RL’ boyfriend is interesting, as is her use of slang – ‘RL’ ‘Lifaz’ - to describe non-virtual activity. Although RL stands for ‘real life’ few players actually refer to it as such, almost as if they do not want to acknowledge the difference between the two arenas. Yet as I have already argued, virtual and material experiences are self referential and are acknowledged and experienced by and through each other. Tigz tells me one

night that she meets up outside of Runescape with a few of the ‘shark gurls’ *“to hang out, shop and chat....its just like being on Rune really, except my clothes don’t look as good....(laughs)....its no different nic, but at the same time it is different, does that make sense?”* Both material and virtual ‘hanging out’ appears to pick up from where the other one left off. Both Virtual and Material existence are inter-linked and can be dipped in an out of at will.

### **Community – power and status**

*“What’s the point of getting Rune or Dragon if you can’t show the noobs you have got it. When I got my dragon battle I went straight to Lummy and the noobs kept following me about wanting to see it. That was the best, I really felt the don” - Laura Cool, (14)*

The visibility of the ‘Cathaby Shark Gurls’ is also important because it defines their status within the virtual world. Like ‘Laura Cool’ and ‘Rune Thief’ they have celebrity status within the world and their ‘role’ is to be seen as such. Laura Cool’s comments about her dragon axe are particularly interesting and echo some of the sentiments that we have seen earlier. Of course whilst the language of the Shark Gurls is an important tool to create a symbolic boundary to mark their difference and status, it tends to be the simpler visual codes that act as cultural markers of social position. I have already noted that there is a hierarchy of weapons and armour based around an increasing combat bonus. In the early days of Runescape the best weapons and armour afforded wearers high status in the world because only the best players could wear or wield them. Laura Cool’s status in the world was defined by her combat achievements and the dragon battle axe was a visual representation of those achievements. To hang out wielding it was to be recognised as an experienced and accomplished player. However, as the game has progressed and more players have achieved a level at which they can wear the best armour, other markers have been utilised in a similar way.

What is interesting is that these new ‘status’ items are divorced from the advantages that they afford at the level of narrative. Whist Dragon legs and skirts – the lower part of a suit of armour – are still relatively rare and offer the best protection, they have been supplemented by a range of more specialised weaponry. Items such as mauls,

dragon spears and whips offer their wielder a range of more specialised – but not necessarily more powerful – attacks. Unlike Rune weapons and armour they cannot be made by a skilled player armorer but are rewards for undertaking particularly difficult tasks or slaying high level monsters. They also require specific high level skills to wield – whips require level 80 ‘slayer skill’ for example – so again act as a visual representation of achievement. However, other items offer no such bonuses. ‘Robin Hood Hats’ and ‘Ranger Boots’ offer a small bonus but are highly prized items worth many thousands of gold pieces, whilst ‘God Armour’ – ordinary Rune armour decorated with the symbols of one of the three Runescape deities – although offering no in-game advantage over standard Rune - are amongst the most desirable and expensive items in the virtual world. The rarest items are party hats. These afford no bonus or protection and are purely decorative. They come from a special series of virtual Christmas crackers that were given away by Jagex at the first Christmas the game was operating. As such they represent an important aspect of Runescape’s heritage and are extremely rare. They are graded by colour and are worth between 20 – 50 million gold pieces. Since this sum represents many hours of virtual work, possession of a party hat denotes not only wealth but longevity in the game. It sends the message that the player is so well established that he/she can invest money in a trivial item. That the Shark Gurls have a complete set each, speaks volumes about their status and reputation in the game.

To possess such items, and more importantly to be seen wearing them, affords notoriety and status in the social system that extends beyond the desire to simply customise a unique visual representation for one’s virtual self. The item itself becomes a symbol of status and affords on its wearer a range of connotative meanings in much the same way that designer labels and premier goods do in the material world. However there are also players who gain status from opting out of this system. As the number of Dragon wearing inhabitants has grown, this process has become subverted by some of the very best players who now choose to wear the lowest grade of armour – Bronze (for example the ‘Rune Knights I mentioned earlier) This is a form of symbolic resistance to the norms of the virtual world, and the players’ status within the arena is highlighted through their non-conformity. They do not wear the best armour because their characters are so strong they do not need to. Other players embark on similar reckless behaviours such as fighting high level monsters wearing

rare items thus sending out the message that they are so well developed that they consider themselves to be safe. It also of course reinforces their notoriety within Runescape society adding more virtual capital to their celebrity status.

Again I see here how virtual space is the arena in which status is created and maintained, and in which a ‘virtual meritocracy’ emerges. This hierarchy of players is central to the structural fabric of Runescape. But these norms and values are not products of the narrative dynamic itself. They have emerged through in-game consensus, constructed through the dynamic of a *virtua-culture*. Although combat achievement and armour afford status it need not necessarily have been so. There is nothing in the ‘rules’ of Runescape that dictates that this is a game requirement, but the culture has evolved in this manner because combat has been valued over other skills and become the criterion against which a successful player is defined. Like its material life counterpart, *virtua-culture* represents a system of shared or contested meanings and values that are embedded and expressed in form and practice. Superficially, it seems that this culture has evolved to meet the needs of players operating within the virtual world, a means to establish structure and meaning in the interactive network. But I can also identify a virtual hegemony at work. Whilst the norms and structure give the appearance of being somehow ‘natural’ to the virtual world – perhaps even part of the rules of the game – they are actually being driven by an elite which enjoys, at the very least, a kind of consensual status: a virtual meritocracy. It is these players who influence and shape the Runescape world and their authority within it appears seldom challenged:

*“there’s an un-written rule on Runescape that unless you are level 40 or above you don’t talk or go on at high level players. Its considered noobish behaviour and its just not done. Everyone knows who is a high level player, its combat over 80 or some-one with money or a reputation like a klan leader or something” - Harley (17)*

*“omg ..I not gonna argue with him, hes got a party hat” - Oliver (13)*

*“I was in the members dungeon and Amittabha came in with his clan...they all had god armour and he had full dragon legs and a maul.....everyone just moved aside...I was like that’s sooo impressive” - MyPuddin (15)*

I can see this process operating clearly in the way that prices of key items within the Runescape world are fixed and maintained. As I have argued, for the most part, status within the virtual world is linked to the armour a citizen is able to wear. By controlling the production and distribution of armour one also succeeds in controlling a stratifying structure within the virtual world. Although the price of lower grade armour is fixed by the game itself (through game-controlled shops) the higher status armour - Rune and Dragon - is only available as a reward item or more usually through specialised player armour smiths. Rune Miners and Rune Smiths are particularly high-level players and very few citizens reach the required skill levels to practice these crafts. Consequently, the items they produce are in high demand, they command a high price and the market is effectively controlled by an elite. This is perhaps best illustrated by looking at how Rune armour has remained as the armour of choice amongst most Runescape citizens. For much of this study, the price of Rune was kept artificially high by an in-game cartel operated by an 18-year-old player named Brimmy. Significantly, Brimmy neither mines nor smiths himself, rather he brokers deals through a complex network of traders, smiths and miners. By carefully controlling production and distribution, supply is kept just short of demand, which has of course added to the status of owning Rune. Brimmy has built up a reputation as the main distributor and is now recognised as the individual who sets the price of Rune. More importantly once the price of Rune is set, no one seeks to challenge it and it simply becomes absorbed into the culture until the next period of re-adjustment.

*Of all the high level players that I have tried to make contact with in the course of this study, Brimmy is by far the easiest to track down. Somewhat appropriately for an armour and ore dealer, he operates out of the main bank in the mining town of Falador on World 3. Falador has rapidly become the centre for player trading, and the main market in the park area is always busy. It is often hard to keep track of all the trades and on the few occasions that I have attempted to do business there I have ended up really confused. Brimmy agrees to meet me in the Bank. He tells me that he doesn't use the Falador market for the same reason, the bank keeps him close to the trading – and I assume within a recognised trading arena – but in an area where he can at least follow what is going on with his many trades. I question if he is worried about coming out of the market, wont he be concerned that people don't know he is there? Brimmy laughs, and tells me that “if you seek him you shall find”. He is a*

*surprising character. Unlike many of the high status players – TronsQueen and Tigz for example – he gives very little away as to his pivotal status in Runescape economics. There is no showy display of equipment (as I encountered with CombatGirl or Tigz) nor is he surrounded by many clan ‘minders’ in the same way that TronsQueen and Tron operate. If I didn’t know, I could easily mistake him for just another noob in the bank. I am surprised about how well spoken he is. Apart from the odd piece of Runescape ‘slang’ he is word perfect. He shrugs, and tells me that he has no need to represent himself in this way – “I am who I am Nic, all this party hat nonsense is really rather noobish” I agree but can’t resist asking him if he actually has a party hat. He laughs “I have many party hats you noob, why, would you like to buy one?” “Maybe, if I get interviewers discount” I tell him. We laugh. Our conversation is interrupted as three heavily armoured warriors enter the bank. “Brimmy, my man” They shout. “Rune miners excuse me” he whispers. The group huddle in the corner. They are obviously on either private chat or MSN because I cannot over-hear their conversations but I get the impression that all is not going well with their negotiations. One of the trio storms out of the bank – only to return rather sheepishly a few minutes later. No one in the bank pays much attention to these antics, they are used to this type of thing! They huddle together for a few minutes more. I guess they are trading and soon the trio leave and Brimmy saunters back over to join me. “Trouble?” I ask him. He shrugs “Some people are hard to trade with Nic, they just don’t want to pay the going rate” “ahhh I say, so what is the going rate for Rune?” Brimmy pauses, stares at me for a second and laughs. “It’s whatever I say it is”*

*- Diary extract*

I soon realise that it is hard for most players to challenge this system because the narrative ensures that the production of Rune artefacts remains a shortage skill. The ability to mine and smith Rune represent the pinnacle of these already time consuming skills – Levels 85 and 99 respectively – and few players have the inclination to invest the time needed to develop them to this level. Combined with this, Rune ore is itself a shortage item which can only be obtained in the most dangerous locations. Thus Rune Smiths represent highly skilled and dedicated players who expect a substantial economic return on the time invested to develop their skill – in this sense they are master craftsmen whose premium work must be paid for:



*“oh, if the price of Rune goods dropped I would just stop making them because it wouldn't be worth it...its already dangerous trying to get the ore....and mining the coal you need to make the armour is painful!, nah, I would go and do something else...its sweet whilst its lasting tho” - Suxitansee (17)*

Of course if everyone then followed ‘Suxitansee’s’ policy there would be no one to produce Rune anyway, so he knows that he remains in a strong position. Whilst the price remains high only the most successful players can afford Rune weaponry. Unfortunately, most citizens will need to own the best weapons and armour to reach the highest levels of combat and become successful players. It is a vicious circle within which many players become trapped. This stratification is maintained through careful manipulation of the game’s narrative dynamic itself. If I consider the world in terms of a system that encourages player development I might assume that market forces would eventually prevail. As more players reach the required levels to mine/smith Rune, the market will become flooded with Rune items and the price will fall. The problem with this approach is that player development cannot keep pace with game development. There are always new skills and quests being added through the weekly updates and as I have just noted, players need to invest many hundreds of hours in the single skill before they reach the required level to perform the most advanced tasks. Most gamers I talked to play an average of 3 hours a night and this game play is spread over a number of different activities. Since the virtual world is evolutionary, by the time most players reach the required level, the world has moved on. There is then new armour to make or more powerful spells to master. The top levels always remain just out of reach of most average players, and even though many players aspire to them, few manage to arrive. Consequently, controlling interests remain in the hands of a minority.

To their credit, Jagex have attempted to break this cycle by introducing ‘shop’ items that afford the same bonus as Rune items. For example the Warrior Helmet can be purchased from the Fremennik Village and affords the same bonus as a Full Rune Helmet which can only be obtained through Runesmiths. However, as I have already argued, there is little correlation between the narrative-driven bonus system and the capital of the emergent virtual culture. Thus it is the item itself rather than the

protection it affords that is attractive. Whilst the Warrior Helmet might serve as a useful tool within the games narrative, in terms of the social system, a Full Rune Helmet is the choice of most players. Interesting when Runescape 2 was launched, Jagex avoided adding the ability to smith Dragon Armour as a skills level. However, as an aspirational item, it was once again only available to highly skilled player. Jagex argued that as ‘aspirational’ items they are available to all players who develop the necessary skill levels to possess them. Whilst there is some merit in the argument, the problem is that the majority of players will only obtain the necessary combat levels by operating within the armour hierarchy and are thus subordinate to the power system that I have just outlined.

This doesn’t seem that different from material existence. High status items – designer fashion items for example – depend on their scarcity to maintain their status. This can be linked back to the idea of identity as a means of demarking oneself from ones peers, although I acknowledge that there is a fine line between owning a ‘must-have’ item in order to conform to the dictates of fashion and then also ensuring that similar items are not available to everyone, in order to protect one’s exclusivity. In the material this process can be subverted by the use of ‘fake’ or copy items – the Burberrry hats and D&G sunglasses sold in street markets are a good example of this. To some extent fakes enable young people to obtain the ‘look’ without having to outlay the money that the ‘real’ items would actually cost. This is not possible in the virtual world since technology makes the duplication of in-game items impossible. Although some players attempt to get around this as one user explains in the following exchange:

*Haxblax (16):*

*Yeah, there’s no way of making an item look different on Runescape. If someone is wearing Full Dragon then you know its Full Dragon...there’s no way to scam. (laughs) I like that cos, I hate scammers! (clenches fists) Why would you pretend to have something you don’t, its just not honest Nic. Like there was this guy that had a Bronze Sword and he had changed the colour slightly so that it looked kind of reddish you know, he was going round telling everyone it was a Dragon Long...so wasn’t....what a noob.....I just hate it...why not just put in the time and get the real thing (raises hands in exasperation)*

I agree, we chat for a bit and then I ask him about the ‘Police’ sunglasses he is wearing

*Haxblax:*

*(takes them off and gives the sunglasses to me)*

*(laughs) no way are these real man, you can get up the market for a tenner.*

*Nic: How’s that different from scamming on Runescape though?*

*Haxblax:*

*(laughs) it just is...I mean everyone round here wears fake stuff...like who is gonna pay a hundred quid for a Burberry cap when you get one from the shop up the road for waay less (laughs and puts his hand on my shoulder) I am a student bruv, I aint made of money. My girlfriend has a D&G bag...everyone thinks it’s real but it’s not...(laughs)..it’s not like a fake longsword (laughs)*

What is interesting here is the tension between the material and the virtual. In the material ‘Haxblax’ appears to see the use of fake goods as a necessary evil – neither he nor his friends can afford the designer items so the use of copies is acceptable – there is an almost unspoken agreement or conspiracy in which the ‘fakeness’ of such items is not alluded to. It is a ‘fact’ of their world that designer goods are unobtainable and thus the use of alternative methods is considered acceptable. In the virtual, the illusion of a level playing field – that anyone can obtain a Dragon Long Sword if only they play for long enough – means that similar acts – colouring ones Bronze Sword to look like a Dragon Long – is seen as a subversive act and is unacceptable. In this case, status is not simply a process that must be won, it must also be seen to be won.

Yet as the virtual world has developed, so the status of Rune has changed. As more players have reached the required level to wear Rune armour and wield Rune weapons it has become the bench-mark by which established players are marked. Until a player reaches level 40 – the level at which Rune armour can be worn - they are regarded as ‘noobs’ – prospects who are yet to make the grade of the game. As such, Rune represents an important developmental stage in a player’s career and is

thus still an important item within the virtual world. To control Rune, is now to gate-keep admission into a social hierarchy. However, Rune's role as a signifier of high status players has been taken over by other cultural artefacts. Interestingly, it would seem at first glance that the new breed of high status items – Party Hats, Abyssal Whips and God/Dragon Armour – sidesteps this controlling interest. As drop items they exist outside of the productive-hierarchy and are in theory available to every player. However, although the narrative creates this impression of autonomy, rare items are subject to the same manipulative processes as other virtual goods.

I have already established that there is no direct link between the needs of the narrative and those of the virtual culture. These new cultural markers afford nothing to the gaming dynamic at the level of narrative. Like designer labels their status is derived at the level of connotation rather than functionality. Since they operate beyond the game narrative, their power as a means of celebrating status is rooted within the virtual culture itself. Unlike the commercial items – the production of Rune for example – high status items originate beyond user game play. They enter game space in three ways:

- Special seasonal drops by Jagex: It has become a tradition that at important holidays Jagex will introduce special drop items – for example crackers at Christmas, Easter Eggs or Rubber Chickens at Easter and Pumpkins or Grim Reaper Scythes at Halloween.
- Monster Drops: Some rare items, for example Dragon Chain Mail, are dropped in the normal way by defeating high level monsters or by beating 'Random Event Characters'. 'Random Event Characters' require players who have remained in one place for a considerable period of time to complete a simple task. Mime masks represent a good example of these items.
- Treasure Hunts: Some 'Random Event Characters' drop treasure scrolls which require players to follow a series of clues to discover buried treasure. They are graded at levels 1 – 3. Level 3 treasure hunts are usually long and

dangerous but the rewards are usually a rare item, for example an item of God Armour or Robin Hood hat.

There are approximately 100 such items although of these only about 25 can be described as high status. Moreover rarity does not in itself guarantee that an item will be high status. For example, the Grim Reaper Scythes that were the first Halloween drop items are now nearly as scarce as Party Hats yet do not command anything like the same money on the open market. Similarly the Easter Eggs from the first Easter drop are now rarer than party hats – most people ate them – but are not considered to be valuable. Since the status of an item is also not linked to its role within the narrative this inconsistency poses the question as to what makes certain items more desirable than others? The Easter Eggs provide a clue to the answer. Unlike the other items, eggs are ‘carry slot only items’ – they do not appear on the user’s avatar – and consequently ownership remains hidden. Given that the Runescape world is essentially a very public arena, it seems that high status items need to not only be visible but visually appealing. This was confirmed by some high status users I talked to:

*“When I first made some money the only unusual item you could get was a party hat. These were still quite cheap cos no one could see a use for them, but I thought they looked cool. I got mine from a guy in Fally for 17k – what a bargain! Soon after that all the top guys started to wear them...only cos there was nothing else...But if Jagex had done a decent Easter drop- maybe the bunny ears they did recently - the Party Hat might not be so big now” - GoGoer (19)*

*“Thing is Nic, what do you spend your money on when you make loads...you want something that no one else has, but you want everyone to know that you have got it”  
- RatedRsuperstar (13)*

*“Some people think that the Maul is shit...but it looks fucking cool when you use it”  
- mattnjeff (15)*

*“I don’t know why a party hat. I think that first of all they were the only thing you could buy and then when people saw the top guns wearing them, they wanted them too*

*so that they could look like them. This just pushed the price up which made people want them even more” – Sweenscape (18)*

‘Sweenscape’s’ comments are particularly interesting. It suggests that the process is cyclical. Only well established and high status players have access to rarer items. This is partly because it is difficult and dangerous to obtain them, but also because it requires a significant financial investment to buy the items from other users. As ‘GoGoer’ notes, celebrity players have historically favoured certain items – partly because in the early days of the game choice of items was fairly limited - which then add to the status of the item itself. Such items then become desirable which in turn adds status to the next generation of possessor which in turn strengthens the status of the item even further by pushing up the price.

Prices of rare items are of course kept high by the network of traders that operate across the virtual world. High cost, maintains the premium status of an item and in turn expensive items become a cultural marker of financial success in much the same way that premium items operate within the material world. (See for example Brimmys’ inventory below). However, this is somewhat muted on Runescape and economic wealth does not necessarily equate to status. I have already noted concerns that games merely recreate the social processes within which they were themselves created. Stallabras rejects video games as a *‘a capitalist and deeply conservative form of culture.’* (1993: 104) in that it tricks players into imitating idealized markets and sweatshop labour through repetitive manipulation of game objects and numbers, and that its innate objectification *‘leads to...an ever greater blurring of the use of people as instruments in the world and the game’* (*ibid*) and it might be argued that the aforementioned processes merely re-create the capitalist discourse of the material.

Whilst there is merit to such an argument up to a point – the Runescape world operates on a broadly economic model of supply and demand of goods - unlike the material world, economic wealth does not necessarily equate to cultural wealth or status. Whilst the cultural markers – Dragon, Party Hats etc – carry with them an economic dimension, in that they represent a capital investment and as such serve as a visual representation of the owner’s wealth, this does not in itself afford respect or social standing:



*“There was this girl, and she had full dragon, Abbysal whip, red party hat, the works...but she was only level 50!!...she hadn’t even done the Legends quest...I asked her where she got her stuff from and she said her BF got it for her, noob, I hate that, she should earn it, she thought she was the don but everyone just laughed at her”*

- Ting (15)

*“(laughs) What a Nooob! Yeah having cash don’t mean nothing without putting in the time” - Penny16 (14)*

Economic wealth – or at least showy displays of expensive goods – does not guarantee status and it seems that the relationship between goods and status is more complex than a mere representation. Whilst goods serve as a visual reference point of status, achievement and levels appear to be equally important. In this respect, Runescape remains true to the spirit of the RPG and the leader tables I discussed earlier are instrumental in maintaining this. Although many of the skills can generate income which can then be used to buy goods that may be useful in advancing the player within the world, it appears that it is the ability – the skill level itself – which affords respect and status rather than any tangible benefits that this might bring. Whilst ‘hanging out’ is in itself a visual activity, the pleasures associated with being seen, it is mediated through – and in many ways articulates – a cultural perspective of

the virtual social system. For Katspaw it is the rejection of this system that induces pleasure. It is a safe place to meet and escape the material into a fantasy realm and for her hanging out exists beyond the requirements of the narrative. For other users it is also about being publicly recognised as a successful and established player. Yet the markers that establish this identity are complex and also extend beyond the narrative. It is not the virtual world itself – or the wider narrative paradigm – that dictates how power and status are manifested, but the rituals and practices of the young users themselves. To hang out in Runescape is to take on a range of structuring processes and to articulate a range of interest positions.

### **Community – stability in an unstable world:**

So far I have presented a rather negative view on the way that rare goods are used to manipulate status and power within the Runescape world. However, far from frustrating the ordinary player this system is not only accepted but also actively embraced as a means of stabilising communion. Hegemony is constituted precisely by the unchallenged relations and predominance of elite power. As Gramsci puts it, hegemony is formed in the ‘... *‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group...*’ (1971: 12). The power of the elite lies in its acceptance as ‘normal reality’ by those in subordinate positions. In Runescape, this virtual hegemony is successful because there is a perceived benefit to the virtua-culture. The economy of Runescape is a complex system involving both currency and barter transactions. A fixed and stable pricing system obviously allows the economic structures to function smoothly. The authority of the elite is tolerated because it is seen to add structure and stability to the virtual economics of the virtual world. As such, elite interests become the ‘universal’ interest.

*“You have to know the price because there are a lot of scammers out there. I met this guy in Edgeville and he was selling a Rune mace, but he wanted 27k for it, everyone knows they are only 14k in Varrock, no ones gonna pay more for them however hard they are to get” - JazzyGirl (14).*

*“The way the game fixes the prices is important to me because I don’t use gold pieces (gp) much, I like to trade goods. I get coal for 1000gp a cert and can*



*trade it for lobster certificates cause they also sell for 1000gp. You can cook them and sell them for 2k at Edgeville. I wanted to become a smith but I am never going to reach a high enough level so it's easier to mine coal and then trade it. Everyone needs coal... its easy money" – Sherminator (16).*

*"... I don't know how we get the prices but everyone knows them and you always know if you are getting ripped off" – Kayonobe (16).*

We see here how effectively the system operates. The players are well aware of what constitutes a fair price for the goods they deal in. Notice how JazzyGirl is unwilling to pay over the odds for an item despite its rarity – rune weapons may command status but not, it seems, if you are ripped off in the process. Sherminator's observation about wanting to become a smith is interesting. He realises how hard it is to reach the required level and has developed a compromise through specialising in a high demand, yet attainable, skill – coal mining. It is clearly lucrative. When I spoke with him in the Dwarven Mines he was wearing the best armour and weapons available on Runescape – his helmet alone would have cost 2 million gold pieces – and it seems that some citizens have found that concentrating on low cost, yet essential, items is an effective path to the acquisition of virtual capital. As my time with Axegrll taught me, mining is a time consuming task. Sherminator estimates that he has invested over 2000 coal mining hours in his armour, but since essential items are not made obsolete by game development, he realised that he had time to build up funds. I can also see how effectively the process of acquisition remains hidden. Because the system does not openly declare itself, all three players appear to believe that prices are fixed by the game itself and not subject to internal manipulation.

This is a further example of the invisibility – and effectiveness - of hegemonic power practices. While some citizens are happy to work within these structures and practices, there are others who are more aware of the power systems operating and they actively seek to subvert them:

*"TronsQueen controls lobster fishing and the price of lobby certs. I was in the (fishing) Guild and there was this guy trying to sell his certs for 1.5k and everyone was telling him they are only worth 1k...so like he's arguing with*

*everyone and being a total noob about it. Then TronsQueen comes in with Tron and just says 'they are 1k' ...but he tells her to f off, so she just gets the fishing clan to occupy all the fishing spots so he can't fish no more. It was like that for weeks, the clan just didn't move" - Sassy Sammy (17).*

Both Tron and TronsQueen are longstanding and well-respected citizens with an excellent level of skills and achievements; a fact well illustrated by the way that they are able to mobilise a clan of other players to 'protect' their fishing operation. The crime of the 'noob' was not necessarily that he wanted to get more money for his goods but rather that in doing so he was seen as challenging TronsQueen's authority within the world, an action perceived as destabilising an established trading equilibrium. Clearly this was not to be tolerated by either the clan or, interestingly, the other fishers. Even within the semiotic world of the virtual, TronsQueen is able to exercise real authority in the way that she closes down an important trading location, achieving substantial consent in doing this. This discussion reflects a model of authority characterised as fundamentally Weberian. TronsQueen is nothing if not *charismatic*. Like most charismatics, she has the capacity to respond to the multiple social anxieties and risk associated with citizenship of a world in which access to resources can be quickly barred. She seems to engender a conviction on the part of followers that she has some almost divine quality, perhaps the capacity for revelation which itself contributes to social and economic stability. However, she is not only charismatic. I also suspect that the narrative genre in which Runescape exists is, itself, amenable to TronsQueen drawing on a form of *traditionalist legitimation*. Her position as 'queen' resonates a timelessness and historical past that is it seems, for many, immune to criticism. Charisma and tradition are clearly significant elements of a virtual cultural capital, sustaining and advancing the position of elites.

But with Power also comes responsibility. For TronsQueen, the mobilisation of her clan was not simply about protecting her own rights and authority it was also about protecting and policing a system in which her authority resides. Deviant behaviour is not tolerated within Runescape because the structures and systems upon which it is founded are themselves finely balanced. I can make a distinction here between the 'rules' of the virtual world as it exists in terms of a Jagex product – that is to say as a commercially operated game – and the 'rules' and norms that have evolved within its

social system. As an on-line operation, there is a fairly rigid set of rules that ensure the safety and enjoyment of users and each new member is required to electronically agree to these before they can complete registration. These include an agreement not to partake in bullying, sexist, racist or homophobic activities and not to engage in a range of ‘illegal’ activities. Such activities are those which might afford players unfair advantages in terms of character development. These might include sharing characters, scamming (attempting to mislead other players whilst trading) and not to use ‘auto-bots’ (small automatic programmes that allow character to continue with a task when the player not logged on to raise skills levels quickly e.g. auto-miners, auto-fishers) Breach of these rules is punishable by a ban. However, because Runescape is so large, it is impossible for Jagex to control every interaction and they rely on a system of self-policing. Jagex argue that since ‘cheating’ affects the entire community, ‘straight-edge’ (non cheating) players will be happy to report other users who break the rules. This is supplemented by a network of player-moderators who have additional powers and responsibilities above those of the ordinary virtual citizen.

Above this ‘official’ system a range of accepted norms and practices have evolved from the user-base itself. These range from simple netiquette practices – walking round rather than through another avatar – to more complicated practices, such as where and with whom one can trade. In many ways this forms the *legitimate* paradigm within which citizens operate; it is perceived as beneficial rather than imposed. As I have already noted, sometimes such practices are hegemonic as for the new citizen it is often hard to differentiate what is a real rule and what is an evolved practice. The new Runescape Citizen becomes socialised into a range of norms and values, which are a *mélange* of imposed rules and cultural practices. On the whole this produces a stable virtual social system. Since the culture rests on the principle that for each player to advance within the society they must first advance at a personal level, thus individual deviancy which affords a player an unfair advantage threatens the system for all. Conformity and consensus form the main stabilising structure for most citizens. When I discussed with users what their main concerns or fears were about playing online, the fear of scammers (players who deliberately cheat and/or mislead other players) was consistently cited as the main anxiety of living in Runescape. Players such as TronsQueen and perhaps to a lesser extent Brimmy, see their role as maintaining this consensus:

*“It’s good that everyone knows how much Rune Armour is, it stops them getting ripped off. Some noobs winge about how its not fair that they cant get their armour cheaper but most players seem happy because they know that by buying through me they wont get scammed, its worth paying for that....your right, I do do well out of it, but then its good for everyone else too you know” - Brimmy*

*“It’s not easy being a clan mother. You have to be fair and make certain that noob players, however annoying they are, don’t get scammed. There are some right shits out there and who is going to look after people if better players like us don’t....When I first logged into Rune, I didn’t know what the fuck was going on, its better now Tutorial island is up but it’s the little things that are confusing, like who and where you trade shit. Some people h8 clans, but for me its about protecting what you built up and making certain that its good for everyone, Jagex cant do it so we gotta. We are really like a family” – TronsQueen.*

TronsQueen suggests that her role is to act as a primary socialiser. The stability that her authority adds to the virtual social system acts as a safety net to protect more vulnerable players whilst at the same time helping them steer through the difficult inter-relationship between formal rules and evolved practices. That she takes these responsibilities seriously explains her status and authority within the virtua-culture. But as she also recognises, her role is given not enforced and that if she *“wasn’t a good clan mother, then I so wouldn’t be clan mother for long”*. Thus whilst I can see power working in Weberian – and individualised - modulations, Runescape practices also illustrate subtle demarcations of a ‘networked’ power which create the sense of a ‘virtual-social’. Virtual status is based on stratified networks of interaction between gamers. In this respect, networks in the virtual world reflect those in the material world. As well as sustaining social (virtual) order, they function as a source of trust and reciprocity that can offer a virtual ontological security forming the ground of day-to-day virtual life. This is a stability and security in which virtual identities can be made potentially productive. I have already noted the *disciplined* way in which gamers engage in Runescape’s virtual division of labour. TronsQueen, and others’, authority rests on creating a balance through which a valued position within the wider virtual world is maintained – by deploying various stabilising practices - whilst also

ensuring that her band of followers stay sufficiently loyal to be immediately mobilised to enforce this position if necessary.

A complicated tension in the power dynamic operates here. This is perhaps most easily understood in the context of the clan system. Clans – or *Klans* as some are known on Runescape – are highly co-operative networks in which small groups of players share common and well defined goals. They are usually highly formalised and disciplined with a recognised internal structure and often having their own sets of rituals and symbols. The most successful and organised have a clearly defined style (for example, black armour and purple capes -Silver Knights - or white robes and rune helmets - Rune Druids). Many are self-sufficient units having their own high level miners, smiths and cooks whose roles are to furnish their clan brothers/sisters with whatever items they might need. Although a growing number of clans have dispensed with this and set up semi-formal contracts with reputable suppliers such as The Cathaby Shark Gurls’ to supply them with consumables. CombatGirl explained to me that in her opinion this helped to keep the clan unit more focused. Some, such as the Rune Monks have dedicated their virtual lives to good and they protect citizens from player-killers in the wilderness areas. Others, like the Silver Knights, are highly organised bands of marauders that steal and pillage their way across the Runescape world. As I have already shown, there are even gender specific clans for example the ‘Sisters of Battle’ whose goal is well spelt out in their motto “striking a blow for gender equality across the Runescape world”. A common feature of all these differing groups is that they seldom comprise individuals who know each other in real-life. Their existence is precisely a production of the virtual itself, and as such are a formalising of the interaction between virtual selves. They are fundamentally social.

Clan membership is a popular activity on Runescape. I was invited to join a clan within hours of first logging into the game and agreed, simply because it is hard to cope with the difficulties of the virtual world on ones own. Well developed social networks are not un-common within the virtual worlds of MMORPG. In Everquest for example, these groupings are formalised at the level of narrative in terms of the game’s Guilds. However, what makes them interesting in Runescape is that unlike Everquest or WOW they are not a required aspect of the narrative. Runescape can be

played as a lone player, one is not required to team up with other players to complete quests and advancement within the world can be undertaken successfully without formal networking. Players are drawn to them because they offer stability and security:

*“My Klan is like having a family on-line, but the coolest family you could have” - MiaCulpa (14)*

But also because playing on Runescape is perceived as a social activity:

*“Runes more fun when you have your mates to do things with...if you belong to a clan you get mates that you only have online....guess this is why some people have virtual GFs” - Grigoria3 (13)*

Thus clan membership is a key device in the stimulation of inter-player interaction and in many ways supplants the family as a key social institution of the virtual world, again offering a source of trust and mutuality. Clan membership legitimates not only the virtual self, but also an individual's virtual activity – their role and function within the virtual culture. It adds purpose and meaning to the virtual existence. The clan provides a setting in which the virtual individual can elaborate a self identity by ensuring safety and stability in what is potentially a difficult and dangerous environment. Like ‘material’ identity, the virtual identity is fundamentally social. Even players who detach themselves from the game dynamic speak of their virtual self as part of a small collective. Katspaw, for example, sees her virtual meetings as a ‘meeting of the no game Klan’ rather than simply catching up with a few friends online:

*“Yeah a few people ask me why we see ourselves as a Klan. Its so that people recognise us....thats the best thing about being on Runescape, is that people know you are a group and not just a few mates hanging out...its like knowing you belong to something ..just me and my sisters” – Katspaw (14)*

*“Katspaw’s right. If you are a group, you need to be seen as a group. Then you stand for something. We don’t play the game so its what gives us meaning on here”*  
– Asuka17 (14)

Meeting is a bonding experience but these are not just friends. The klan members are her sisters and these mutual bonds bring not just stability but meaning to their virtual existence – a shared identity. Of course this need to ‘belong’ can be identified in playground and neighbourhood friendship groups and gangs throughout the world. What is significant in clans is the way that they bring young people together in spite of differences that would not, perhaps, be tolerated in the material world. Members of virtual groups – the clans - do not to share the common geographic or demographic characteristics that bring young people together in the material world. Virtual goals and values replace material bonding criteria. I observe, for example, how TronsQueen holds her clan together in near military obedience, based not on physical but on virtual presence. She has a striking capacity to exercise a virtual charisma and to exude the qualities of leadership from a virtual self.

Clans act as socialising networks which legitimate practices and offer social stability to the virtua-culture. As such, they have a tendency to tow the Jagex moral-line; that deviant behaviour is bad for all players. But the narrative offers a curious tension with the Jagex position, and there is also the opportunity to experiment with a different moral perspective which in itself threatens this stability. Many clans exist to support player-killer activities. Far from being interested in protecting more vulnerable players they exploit weakness in order to further their own development. Yet this can also be seen as a positive contribution to the social system as one PK attempts to explain:

*“No Nic, it’s not really about being bad but it is the survival of the fittest. We add the excitement, without the risk of being killed by people like me, what would be the fun of going into the wilderness. Lifes not all good, so why should Runescape be different”* – Slaine765 (16)

Curiously, Slaine765 sees his role as a structuring device, His assertion that the virtual social system represents the “*survival of the fittest*” initially seems at odds with the

wider cultural dynamic yet on closer analysis there is merit to Slaine765's arguments. Without the threats that PKs bring to the Wilderness many of the other structuring devices could not function effectively. Earlier I considered the importance of Rune armour and weapons in affording status to Runescape players. Part of this status was attributed to the scarcity of Rune and the small number of Rune miners and smiths. One of the main areas that Rune is mined is in the Wilderness where miners are subject to the risk of being attacked and killed by PKs. It is their ability to operate in such hostile conditions that sets them apart from other players. Without the risks associated with working in the wilderness it is possible that Rune would not have gained the status that it has. In my discussions with miners it soon emerges that what puts them off advancing to Rune is the danger that mining the ore affords. Thus PKs ensures the status of not just Rune ore but Rune miners as well. Like Scott's experiences on Quake, the threats afforded by PK Klans add additional excitement to what is essentially a potentially safe, somewhat utopian environment.

*"omg I am scared of PKs but whats life without some risk!" – Jazzysfriend (15)*

*"I get sick of these people moaning about PK n stuff, if you don't wanna get pkd then stay out of the fucking wilderness lol. Actually, there's a serious issue here. If you just play safely all the time, what excitement is there, I mean surely there is no fun in achieving something unless it was, well um an achievement!! I value what I have done cos it was difficult to do it and I had to fight off other people. There are some high level users who have forgotton the fun of doing things, they just sit back play it safe and get fat. I just look at them and think, ow you ever going to reach your full potential if you're scared about dying and losing your stuff! You'r just going to stay stuck!" - SunZuStudent (17)*

SunZuStudent reminds me that it is the risks associated with a task that often give it value. Her comments about the more established players not reaching their potential are interesting. As my character developed I noticed that there is a temptation once you have become an established player to 'play it safe' for fear of losing hard earned goods. I encountered many citizens who adopted precisely this strategy, yet I would argue that for these players, Runescape provides a somewhat skewed perspective of the virtual world. It becomes a 'safe' environment where one can develop skills and



gain achievements without any of the risks associated with the material world. It also ultimately hinders development as in the case of the miners I mentioned earlier. For those willing to take risks there are higher rewards, a message not lost on many player.

*“Sheesh! In the end its only a game, take a damn risk cos what you gotta lose. You can just play the game, not go anywhere dangerous and stuff but your not going to get very far and you sure as heck are not going to get respect. You know that old saying ‘no pain no gain’ well that’s what its like on Runey. If you don’t take a risk and go do the hard quests or get mining in the wilderness your always gonna be just a noob!!”*

– Tulli (15)

Tulli is a well established player with a thriving Rune mining business. When I encountered her she had all the markers of a wealthy and well developed Runescape citizen – party hat, full dragon armour, and a Legends Cape. For her the virtual environment encourages risky activities precisely because the risks associated with it are symbolic. Her assertion that *“no pain, no gain”* resonates with the activities of many entrepreneurs. Yet the loss of goods also represents a ‘real’ loss in terms of material time and resources invested in virtual development. Her comments that *“in the end its only a game”* do not sit so well with other well established players:

*“it might be ‘only a game’ but it’s a game that you have spent time and effort on. I know it took me weeks to get my ranger armour – that’s a lot of nights just clicking and training – I would be well sick if I lost it to some scamming noob! Its not as simple as Tulli makes out. Cos on here achievements carry a real cost in terms of time and effort”* – ManxCat (16)

Although others take a more philosophical perspective:

*“I get what she means I guess. My stuff took lots of nights playing to get, but that’s what makes it worthwhile. I think if it was easy to get stuff then you wouldn’t feel so good once you got it. Now people know that I get Rune Ore despite the pks. Its like karma lolololol”* - Niteshade (18)

Yet, according to Niteshade, the social system also appears to require deviant behaviours in order to focus and balance such achievements. The Pks add vibrancy to what would otherwise be a somewhat sterile culture. Although Niteshade describes it as a simple requirement – his comment about karma - there is a more complicated aspect to this. There seems to be more of a conflict of moral positions, between those that want to experiment and articulate alternative positions and those who feel threatened by the challenges that alternative positions bring. I see a clash here between the idealised structure of the game and the emergent social system. A good example of this is the recent debate about the practice of ‘luring’ and Jagex’s somewhat laissez-faire’ attitude to it’s practitioners. ‘Luring’ is a form of scamming in which plays are enticed into the wilderness, usually with the promise of a trade. Once there they are attacked by a PK gang who steal their goods. A significant number of players have attempted to argue that this is against the rules:

*“Its just scamming plain and simple” - Lightningismygirl*

*“I really don’t see why Jagex don’t do something about it. It’s just not fair and its not right. They say they want to make the game fair and safe for everyone, so why not start here. Its no different from auto-botting!” JanThaMan (16)*

Jagex argue that although ‘Luring’ is against the spirit of the game it is not strictly illegal. They take the position that the areas where players can be attacked are clearly marked and that victims enter these areas willingly. They argue that PK is a legitimate activity and that such behaviour adds to the landscape of the Runescape world. There are many citizens who share this view:

*“What I don’t get is why all the fuss. You know where you can and cant go, you cant baby these people. I don’t want Runescape turning into kiddiescape” – LongjonRon*

*“It’s about responsibility I think Nic. Some people don’t want to have to take responsibility for themselves. They just want this cosy little world where everything is nice and they don’t have to think. I reckon it adds a little excitement if you have to think twice but obviously others don’t.” - SaintCelestine (15)*

I noted in the previous chapter how the Runescape narrative has difficulty in coping with ‘grey’ areas of play, and it was through the virtual social that such issues were resolved. King and Krzywinska (2006) note that within RPG the moral dimension - whether players, through their in-game characters, choose to ally with good or evil - impacts on both how the narrative develops and on player/character interactions within the game. In ‘Everquest’ they argue, characters who associate with good are often killed on sight in towns aligned with the darker forces, although interestingly the converse is less likely. They argue that the ability to choose a moral perspective within this type of narrative allows players to explore, with the associated consequences and thrills, a rejection of the traditional hero roles often found to be operating in traditional Fantasy games.

*“Players aligned in this way can indulge, vicariously, in the transgressive social behaviours consonant with the role of thief, ogre, barbarian, berserker or evil wizard” (2006:195)*

The concept of experimenting with the dark-side is not a new idea and the appeal of Evil has been a recurring theme in both film and Literature (Freeland 2000). Bullfrog had already explored similar concerns in their ‘Dungeon Keeper’ series of games in the mid 1990’s, whilst the Games Workshop RPG series ‘Dawn of War’ and ‘Mark of Chaos’ have blurred the distinction between good and evil by asking players to question the moral legitimacy of the traditional hero’s actions and behaviours. The illusion of an autonomous moral position is not confined to computer games and has been a feature of a range of media texts. For example, I have already observed how Clover (1992) questions the morality of engendered violence in stalk and slash cinema, a genre in which a predominantly male audience are positioned to identify with the murder of mainly female victims, and before cinema, comics and literary texts were subject to similar moral panics (Barker 1989). However the online nature of MMORPGs not only allows experimentation with moral frameworks but actually encourages, and in many cases requires, players to reject or subvert traditional positive values. Self interest and self preservation underpin the skills-based progressive nature of the game-play and there is considerable in-game capital to be gained from aggressive behaviour – encouraging player/player combat, killing players

that stray into protected areas, deliberately misleading newer users – as well as status from being allied with the dark forces.

The appeal of such symbolic experimentation is particularly potent amongst younger users. Media texts – and particularly emerging media forms – offer young people a chance to experiment with what is essentially a highly controlled and ideologically powerless material position (Willis et al. 1990). Clover (1992) argues for example that in stalk and slash texts, the identification with ‘final girl’ allows a young male audience to experiment with aspects of disempowerment. I can see echoes of a similar position in computer games when I consider the male players identification with a plethora of central female characters, but the thesis might also help to explain this rejection of traditional hero values in MMORPGs. The material existence of young MMORPG users is seen as embodying a Western cultural perception of youth – valued on the one hand as a resource for the future, yet derided on the other as a source of danger and disorder (Griffin 1993, Bradford 2004). Since cultural institutions stress both control and conformity which demonises behaviour that seems to reject societal norms and values (Willmott 1966) there are few opportunities to explore alternative moral frameworks free from the institutions of adult gaze (Lipsky 1978) and where such behaviour is not subject to sanction. Steinkuehler (2004) argues that computer games are attractive precisely because they offer a critique of (or alternative to) these institutions within contemporary society. As I argued in Chapter 4, MMORPGs create an illusion of autonomy through the simplification of complex ideas and social processes. This, combined with the way that they seem to mirror material place, thus provides an arena within which, free from these material constraining mechanisms, materially disempowered young people feel empowered to take part in processes that would be impossible in their material lives. Similarly, it is little surprise that young people who are always urged to conform – as articulated through ideas of ‘being good’ the traditional realm of the hero – recognise, to quote from Bullfrogs ‘Dungeon Keeper’, that “*sometimes it’s good to be bad*”

What I found interesting during the luring debate, was that the anti-luring camp appeared to see Jagex’s role to be one in which they furnish citizens with a completely moral and risk-free environment. SaintCelestine’s comments about responsibility appear to sit at the centre of the argument; should virtual space be an

idealised place or should it carry with it a degree of risk in which users need to be responsible for their own actions? I find it somewhat ironic that in an arena that affords freedom to its audience - which moves it beyond 'adult' control - that some players should then look to a parent figure to sort out conflict. The anti-luring faction appears to want a solution to be imposed from above rather than taking responsibility for it themselves. Yet is this a reasonable or indeed viable position for a virtual social system? When Jagex finally took action to curtail certain PK activities, a famous riot took place on world 66 (see below) which seems to suggest that such interventions are not always desirable in such a finely balanced system.

*"It is December 10<sup>th</sup> 2007. I am standing in World 2's Varrock Square, where hundreds have gathered to protest Jagex's decision to remove PKing from the Wilderness. The Forums have been full of calls for citizens to "take to the streets" and it appears that their requests have been answered. The chat box moves impossibly quickly as it tries to keep up with the incredible amount of text being generated; All I can see in front of me is a mass of people and a mass of text – the two appear to blur into each other and my connection is suffering severe lag. A vast majority of the 'chants' are pro-PKing messages, with themes such as "no pk no play," "bring back wildy," "we pay to pk," "we want no trade limit," "Wildy riot," But it all extends beyond mere words. Some players have activated Retribution and at least one citizen has killed themselves and left behind a gravestone. Others have lit fires which look strangely beautiful. Amusing typos are ubiquitous and although the situation is serious I find myself laughing.*

*Many players who are in support of bringing back the PKing in the Wilderness are wearing pink skirts. In contrast, blue skirts are seen on those who support Jagex. Black and green robes, according to some citizens I talk to, are meant to signify neutrality; hopefully my monk robes suffice in that regard.*

*At several points the "@@@@@@@@@@@@@@" spam covers almost the entire screen. I am not sure that this means anything other than an expression of civil disobedience. Zezima is rumoured to have appeared, but I haven't seen anyone level 138. With public chat hidden, the message "That's not your cat." disappears in about seven seconds. For some reason this makes me laugh. A level 9 politely asks that the*

*spamming stop, as the Wilderness is not coming back... but who hears him? There are hundreds of ex-pkrs here, rioting.*



*Some criticism of the new quest changes for 'Bounty Hunter' is present, including one angry person claiming that "bh is for froobcakes who don't know how to pk." I whisper this to CombatGirl who I see from my friends list is online. She laughs. "Are you not there?" I question. "Nah" She laughs back I look shit in pink"*

*I've already seen reasonable evidence of several autotypers, but I can't be bothered to find out who's doing it and report them. It's not like their messages stand out or anything, though, not against the sheer tide of riot messages. I think that Jagex have bigger things to worry about*

*There are, of course, people who ask the rioters to stop, and others trying to whip up those around them to "riot against the rioters,". They are, of course, drowned out in the PK spam. Several people say things like "Boo hoo, cry babies" and "Get over it, pking isn't coming back" "pking is for noobs," etc. One person spams "Reported" and I'm not sure why.*

*It is now three hours later and it seems to have died down a bit now. As far as I can see there aren't as many people in the city square proper although there are still many pink robes running along the small alleys and side streets. Most of the fiercest rioters have formed a train and are walking around Varrock square, chanting and*

*spamming. Despite the apparent shrinking of the number of rioters, I doubt this event will be over soon.*

*Alright, I've seen enough. Clearly, anti-Jagex sentiment is still strong, with hundreds of discontent players massing to voice their outrage, an outrage that does not seem to have cooled since early December. This resentment shows no signs of letting up soon unless Jagex implements a PKing-related update to cool some of the anger caused by the removal of thousands of players' favourite pastime."*

### **Community practice: playing the game.**

In order to understand the complexities of these positions I need to step back from the 'Luring' Pking debates themselves and consider wider issues in the world of Runescape. Taylor makes an interesting distinction between two types of players that she encountered on Everquest; the Casual Player and the Power Player. Typically, she argues, the Casual Player is a user who invests only a moderate amount of time in a game whereas the Power Player is seen as a hardcore gamer with little real life interests to ground him (2006:70). Although I am not convinced that such rigid definitions are helpful in deconstructing gaming motivations, they do help illuminate different styles of play. On Runescape, the term Power Player is not often used but 'Players' – as distinct from 'noobs' which is often a term of abuse – are users who manipulate the virtual world for their own ends – 'Camping' (not actively engaging in combat but waiting for un-suspecting players to come by) Hardedging (deliberately building up combat strength characteristics in order to ensure maximum 'hit' values) and Puring (creating characters with 'Pure' combat skills at the expense of all other characteristics so that their combat value is equal to their 'Hit' 'Strength' and 'Defence' values) are all examples of 'Player' tactics. Similarly 'Players' would often be seen to manipulate some aspect of the narrative through loopholes in the gaming dynamic – for example 'Luring'. This action is seen to conflict with the purity of game space in which there is an expectation to work with the spirit of the game rather than just its rules. In this sense 'Players' are seen to challenge the 'legitimacy' of the virtua-culture. As one member described it to me:

*"All players care about is winning! They don't give a shit about anyone else or what they do to win just as long as they come out on top" - TheSaint (16)*

Sometimes such behaviour is described as ‘noobish’ but ‘Players’ are too sophisticated and developed to be seen as ‘noobs’ in the usual sense. Whilst the anti-luring faction seek to place the responsibility back on the game designers – somehow it is Jagex’s fault for setting up the conditions within which these activities can take place – others argue that this falls into an ethical choice on the part of the gamer. As ‘TheSaint’ acknowledges, such users are *“not interested in playing fairly”* ‘Players’ such as ‘Slaine765’ reject this accusation and are unhappy with being labelled as being unethical. He argues that his clan are not out to spoil other members enjoyment of the game but that rather than playing directly by the rules he actively employs strategies that attempt to bend them. He actively differentiates himself from ‘scammers’ who he sees as cheats, regarding his approach as a legitimate gaming strategy:

*“No, Scammers are people that break the rules, auto-botterz and that sorta thing. We don’t scam, but we did make the choice not to be a good character. If the game allows you to be bad then you gotta expect behaviour like that. I mean, why have a thieving skill in the game if you aren’t meant to develop and use it”*

For Slaine765, an alternative moral position is a legitimate gaming position which fits perfectly with his view of the Runescape world. If Slaine765 could be described as a ‘Player’ then his approach to the virtual world seems to offer a different notions of what constitutes the pleasure of playing Runescape. In a sense this returns me back to earlier discussions concerning the nature and pleasure of different approaches to gameplay. I see in ‘Players’ the tension between simulation – or dedicated’ play - and that of the twitch gamer alluded to by Durrigan (2001). ‘Players’ may be considered to extend the boundaries of what many users regard as legitimate play and have much in common with RPG players in the earlier D&D games.

Although it may be termed a MMORPG, in Runescape the RPG – the role playing aspect – is muted. Unlike traditional RPG, computer role-playing, whilst it emphasises character development, it does not require most players to get under the skin of their characters. As I identified earlier, there are many players who for example attempt to identify with their character as an elf, warrior etc but this is not a



driving characteristic of the game's narrative, rather an in-game enhancement that players use to extend their playing experience. As MacKay (2001) observes, much of this original driving force behind the genre, in which the game was a fantasy simulation of the real, has been lost in favour of a more competitive narrative. 'Players' can be seen as attempting to reclaim some of this RPG territory and it is really this that separates them from other dedicated players and the renegade scammer. I have already seen how Slaine765 uses the Runescape world to construct and work within an alternative ethical perspective – for him to be a thief means acting and thinking like a thief to the extent that he will employ legitimate strategies that push the rules of the world to the limit. In this sense he displays true deviant behaviour both within the narrative and at the level of game-play.

Other 'Players' adopt similar tactics; they appear to share much more of a RPG approach to Runescape. At an extreme, players like Tigzrulz adopt a virtual-specific mode of discourse which extends beyond the narrative, yet most seem to work within the gaming parameters of the Runescape world. Here the 'fun' of the game – if the game can indeed be said to be simply about having fun – is the totality of the immersion within the virtual world. They typically developed their characters in a particularly pure way, perhaps inventing histories to explain how they got there, in much the same way as the young 'Warhammer' players had earlier. Their characters usually conformed to type – monks did not wear armour and concentrate on certain skills, elven characters were good rangers etc. In a game where race and classes are fairly limited, this style of play is accommodated but not encouraged by the narrative; I have already noted for example that race in Runescape is limited to humans so it is less common to find players who attempt to adopt other racial characteristics.

This way of existing within the virtual world contrasts with more the 'accepted' styles of play of the casual and/or regular dedicated users who tend to focus either on the quests or on skill development and might well avoid the more dangerous monsters and areas. Few casual players for example had gathered a war-band to fight the Kalphite Queen (Runescape's highest level monster who can only be tackled by a group) although most I spoke with confessed that they would like the Dragon Chain that she dropped. One of the differences here is that 'Players' would not dream of buying this on the open market: The pleasure in owning an artefact comes from

winning it rather than just having it. ‘Non-Players’ in contrast, would simply train to reach the required level to wear it and use another skill to generate the money to buy one from another user. These users do not understand why ‘Players’ would put themselves in danger in this way:

*“Why would you fight the Queen, she’s just too hard. You know most people die trying and for what....if I want a dragon chain I will go buy one, there’s always some one selling one. These guys just try too hard, get a real life” - TheSaint*

I think it is this aspect that seems to resonate with the moral anxieties surrounding MMORPG, that they somehow take over your life and certainly forms the basis for established user’s criticisms. When ‘TheSaint’ argues that players are just fixated on winning she really means that she feels they spend more time on their in-game activities than she considered to be legitimate. It is hard for established players like her to keep pace, yet many of the ‘players’ I spoke with were not disaffected or disengaged from material existence nor did they see themselves as renegade players, merely that they found enjoyment from immersing themselves within the game in this way. This did not seem that different from other aspects of ‘fandom’ I had encountered. These Runescape users seemed to gain pleasure in much the same way that some fans of films and television shows attend conferences and meetings dressed up as their favourite character. Interestingly, this style of play is not directly rewarded by the narrative, although honing type-specific skills brings with it other benefits; for example ‘Players’ who used monk characters often had well developed Herblaw skills and could sell potions on the open market. Yet the question of what constitutes accepted play still remains. Why is it that this style of user should be seen at odds with other modes of play – what is acceptable and normal play anyway?

I have already noted how some users structure their virtual time in terms of work and leisure. This was seen as a way of making maximum use of the time on-line. However, not all users approach the Runescape world in this way and this organised and structured approach to the game was a characteristic of more dedicated users and ‘Players’. Since in-game progression depends on advancing player skills and characteristics and that being successful in this is not always possible simply by doing Quests or simply living in the world, training – working on a particular skill merely to

level-up – has become an acceptable and recognised activity. Whilst all users need to engage in this activity, the most dedicated users tend to seek out the most effective way of levelling quickly. It is this sort of behaviour that seems to demark ‘Player’ behaviour from other users. Typically, ‘Players’ will know what weapons and monster configurations are the quickest to advance a particular combat skill – the in-game bonus system makes this aspect of playing particularly complicated and is probably out of reach, or interest, to the casual gamer. Often, ‘Players’ will make use of dedicated fansites and forums to build up a knowledge base on the quickest methods of advancing – indeed many of the most established players run their own sites to exchange information with like-minded users. Approaching each task in an organised way is the key here, as one player explains:

*“You have to know what to use and when to use it. Sometimes the same level monsters give you different exp points depending on how you fight them and there are definitely some that are easier to kill than others. Its about deciding what you want to do and then finding the best way to go about it...let the noobs piss around with whatever they want to fight..if you want to be the best you have to be dedicated!”*

*- Whileliter (15)*

This desire to be *‘the best*, drives a systematic approach to each task. In a world where status depends on success it is little surprise that many players choose to work hard at this aspect. But being *‘the best*’ is obviously problematic in a world like Runescape. The narrative is open ended with continual updates and the upper levels of the game continue to move on as well as the addition of new skills which adds further demands. Clearly the leader boards have an important function to play here in establishing success, yet the dynamic nature of the game requires extraordinary dedication and focus from this class of player. Without self-direction it is easy to fall behind as Whiteliter goes on to explain:

*“You have to set a goal and then decide what you are going to do. It takes a long time to level at the top end of the game, but you have just to get on with it. Sometimes I get pissed off and don’t wanna do it anymore but then I just refocus on my goal. I think what will it be like to level 126 combat and it keeps me going”*

For Whiteliter, it is the goal rather than the activity that initiates the ‘fun’ of the game. One of the aspects of MMORPGs is that once a citizen reaches the upper tiers of play there are long gaps between experience levels and levelling up represents really hard work. I noted earlier how gaining particular level in a skill opens up a new ability or allows the user to wear or wield particular armour and weapons. What is interesting is that ‘Players’ tend to continue well beyond the maximum level of advantage. In effect they are playing to simply raise their skills rather than to open up additional in-game advantages. Most players recognise that at times training is monotonous and many regard it as boring yet necessary. ‘Players’ appear to tolerate this aspect of the world to a much higher extent than other users in order to meet their own personal goals. It is this approach to goals that determines what sort of player you are and how you see your role within the Runescape world.

This approach to the game asks us to question how pleasure can be gained from such routine and un-interesting activity. In a world where there is so much to do, why would a user choose to concentrate on this area? The Runescape world builds a model of play in which the game dynamic seems to work against more traditional modes of gaming – even online networking. Gaming in this arena is not about traditional notions of ‘fun’; it involves dedication, hard and often monotonous work, it requires efficiency in its execution and a sophisticated knowledge of its rituals and practices. I found it interesting that the most dedicated players I met regarded Runescape as neither a game nor spoke of it being fun. They concentrated on more developed ideas of engagement and reward. Many regarded their in-game activities as work. This confuses traditional notions of ‘play’ and questions the structures and divisions in the young people’s material lived experiences. The divisions between work and play – between school and leisure time – become further complicated by a virtual existence that fuses aspects of the two. Caillois notes that play represents ‘*an activity that is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, regulated and fictive*’ (1958:43) Within this model, play is considered to be violated when it is contaminated by reality, obligation or professionalism. ‘*What used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession. What was an escape now becomes an obligation and what was a pastime is now a passion*’ (ibid:45). In this framework, work is seen as some form of suffering whilst play represents a blissful relief. Once outside elements

impinge on this dynamic, the world of play ceases to be special and becomes part of the vulgar material.

Yet in Runescape I see models of play that seem to turn this idea on its head. Dibbell (2006) argues that leisure activity is increasingly intersecting with work and productive activities. I see examples of this in the way that players of MMORPG have attempted to generate material income through the sale of virtual goods and characters. (RWT as it has come to be known). This is itself a lucrative market. Although such activities are banned by Jagex, I encountered several players who were making a modest income in this 'illegal' activity. In his study, Dibbell had managed to generate \$11,000 in 9 months. This, questions further the separation of play and the ordinary but more importantly shows an intersection of game and non-game space; the virtual and the real. Taylor observes that if I consider "*the webs of connections and practices that weave between the game and "nongame" space, the idea that there is an autonomous circle of play set off from the real world seems increasingly tenuous*" (2006:88) (See also Crowe and Bradford 2007, King and Krzywinska 2006, Lehdonvirta 2005) As I have argued, many of the practices and institutions on Runescape make sense, or moreover produce pleasure, because they are mediated through similar institutions and practices within the material. Symbolic experimentation is grounded not in the virtual but the material. Sutton-Smith (1997) notes that historically play itself has always been interlinked with ideas of identity, community and civilisation. Juul (2006) observes further that whilst play can be contextualized by its spatial separation from ordinary life it is simultaneously interconnected with more serious considerations. In some ways this returns us to the concerns of both Stallenbras and Parker that I considered earlier. They both argued that playing video games were directly linked to wider social process and specifically the processes of production. As I have attempted to demonstrate in this study, it becomes impossible to divorce virtual activity from the wider material considerations within which it is situated. This is applicable at both the level of production and consumption. Dibbell (1998) argues that it is the digital nature of play in new technologies that allow it to intersect with the digital nature of work. Far from removing it from ordinary life as in the Caillois model, it actively encourages fusion and intersection, particularly with capital and commercial culture. Thus in

Runescape, play is also a productive process which resonates across a range of material and societal practices.

The idea that there is something like a 'pure' game-space that remains removed and somehow undiluted by the material is a concept that is hard to sustain. Yet at the same time it seems to fuel the mistrust of virtual activities which require more than the traditional notions of what constitutes play. However, the same in-game activities are dismissed as being unimportant and more importantly unproductive. The letter to the Daily Telegraph is able to reject virtual activity as 'not real' partly because of this model that fails to acknowledge the connectivity between play and real life – or more correctly 'worthwhile' real life. There is a lack of understanding here about what constitutes pleasure in the virtual world. Virtual pleasure requires connectivity with material life; rather than polluting play space the material defines and enhances it. The symbolic experimentations afforded by Runescape offers learning experiences – of work, of gender of key social practices – that both intersect and transcend the material. There is clearly a pleasure in this connectivity. Mortensen (2004) notes that the social play in RPG is a pleasurable and motivating experience best understood in terms of a seductive mutual interplay between players and games, which in turn leads to an engagement with, and production of, the social. Aarseth (1997) considered the relationship between player and game a more instrumental way. The pleasure and connectivity is founded on 'risk taking' in which the player can explore a range of strategies and goals. Runescape seems to offer a wealth of relational pleasures with both the narrative and with other users. Runescape users are not isolated individuals they are highly connected people in terms of both the game and its social networks. They are inhabitants of a social system that sits at a juncture between the material and the virtual. The connectivity of their world – with other users, with the social system and with the material – questions many of the cultural practices that I may take for granted. I see interesting and complex re-configurations of the relationship between work and fun, learning and play – a simultaneous interweaving of both instrumental and social orientations.

Yet the connectivity of Runescape extends beyond its virtual boundary. The virtual world is porous and the substance of connectivity seeps back into the material whilst never quite escaping ordinary life. The virtual also exists within the real if only in

that it is set against and measured by the cultural constructs of the material world. The two worlds are porous, although the real becomes mutated – unmade and remade - by the virtual. The virtual self does not exist in a cultural vacuum but has fashioned cultural experience to meet the requirements of virtual existence. If the traditional fixity of meaning can no longer be relied upon then different criteria have been woven into the institutions and structures of virtual world Space and activity within the virtual are subject to a whole new range of forces acting upon them even if some are indeed borrowed from the real. More importantly, success and status are now defined in a different way. Cultural attributes that are valued in the real world do not necessarily represent cultural capital in the virtual, and the maintenance of position and status also draw on different systems of value and belief. Sony once famously describes its cyber-arena as ‘the third place’; Runescape with it’s complex systems of interaction are the third place given form.

## Chapter 6

### Concluding Discussions: Beyond The Virtual



*One day a young man went up to Guthrix, god of Nature and Balance.. ‘Lord’ he asked ‘how does one reach enlightenment?’ Guthrix looked at the young man and smiled. ‘Once there were two men who travelled to the kingdom of Gielinor to seek their fortune. They came across the river Lum where they began panning the water for gold. Each was fortunate enough to find not gold but a large natural gemstone. The first man went home, and put the gemstone in a drawer – everyday he would take it out, smile at the way that it caught the light and rejoice at how fortunate he was to enjoy its beauty. But the second man continued to work until he had enough gold to take the gem to a master craftsman in Falador to have it cut. The gem cutter was skilled at his task, and when he had finished the gem had so many faces that it captured and caught the light from every angle. Such was the gem’s beauty that when the man held it up to the sun even the gods in heaven smiled in wonder. I tell you now, that the way to enlightenment is to recognise the many parts that make up the whole. In the same way that it took many faces to make the gem shine, only by seeing each for what it truly is can we shine like the young man’s gemstone’ Excerpt from *The Song of Guthrix – Book of the First God War* (Runescape Legend) with acknowledgement to ‘*The Song of Tara*’*

It might seem strange to begin the end of a study about virtual worlds with a spiritual story from one of ‘Fan-Fic’ (Fan Fiction) sites that have grown up to enhance the Runescape experience, but I think that it aptly speaks to the way that virtual worlds are conceived and made sense of. I began this study to address three broad and inter-related areas of research:

- What uses are young people making of a popular technological space such as Runescape?



- What opportunities does Runescape provide for its young citizens to explore and experimentation with identity? What are the implications of such experimentation for social relationships and can I argue that virtual space offers young people new opportunities for communion?
- If virtual spaces offer opportunities for symbolic experimentation with the structures and institutions of the material, then what influences does the material exert on virtual existence? Similarly, does virtuality offer liberation from the material, or merely an extension of it?

Thus I acknowledged that such questions require an investigation of the relationship between material and virtual spaces, and a consideration of the way that young people use and identify with the two realms. I suggested that far from being distinct arenas, there is porosity between the material and the virtual; that their practices, structures and rituals are inter-related and inter-referential. In this final chapter I want to revisit these broad questions and consider what implications this research might have for professionals working with young people.

### **Material and Technological Spaces.**

I ended the last chapter with a consideration of the inter-relationship between play and ordinary life, and suggested that the original disconnected model was severely challenged by new modes and arenas of play and existence. Whilst many commentators have traditionally been able to keep these realms apart, MMORPG begin to distort the boundaries between what have tended to be seen as distinct and separate. Whether such distinction ever truly existed is open to speculation, yet it seems that virtual social systems such as Runescape have begun to bring the question of connectivity to the fore. One of the main themes that run through this study has been the inter-relationship between the material and the virtual. Critically there have been those who have attempted to argue that virtual space is an improvement on the material, a way of liberating us from the vulgarity of everyday existence, a chance to overcome material limitations (for example Rehak2003, Calvert 2002, Suler 2000, Crawford and Rutter 2007). Others (for example Rheingold 1993, Calhoun 1998 McLaughlin 1995, Delanty 2003) have seen virtual arenas as a poor substitute for the ‘real thing’ – disembodied identities that lack the authenticity of the material. What is

significant is that both conflicting positions share the same model of the virtual-material dynamic; that virtual and material are in fact not seen as a dynamic at all but as two distinct and separate spheres of existence. At best connectivity is considered a bridge that somehow links the two spheres of being. Yet in Runescape, notions of the virtual and the material are blurred. When young people sell virtual goods for real money or structure their virtual existence on material processes it becomes hard to sustain a separatist position.

But at the same time there is a distinct problem with attempting to re-contextualize the relationship between material and virtual. It is little surprise that the body of writers who reject the validity of virtual space also reject integral links with material existence. Virtuality is considered a poor simulation of the material and as such, the arguments necessitate that the two realms are considered as distinct and separate arenas. Virtual space is seen to pollute the material with the threat that its participants become detached from the fullness of the 'real world' (Robins 1991). Yet writers who have championed the cause of virtual validity have often succeeded in 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'. Virtual existence has been presented as a disembodied place to be contrasted with the materiality of non-virtual environments. Virtual space is an opportunity to transcend the limitations of our physical world and perhaps more important our physical bodies; the ability to create, and re-create online identities contrasts with the fixivity of our material identity. But as I argued in Chapter 2, there is also a long tradition that conceives material identity in the same fluid way. Rather than seeing the virtual and material identities as aspects of the same physicality – whether virtually or materially initiated and maintained – these writers have tended to consider the physical body as not only invisible within the process, but often unimportant and irrelevant (Stone 1991, Springer 1991, Tasker 1993, Plant 1997). Within this model, interactions are considered to extend material relationships. Such relationships are seen to have moved beyond the physicality of the material, and are based, not on the coincidence of offline proximity, but on genuine and shared mutual interests. (Holloway and Valentine 2001) In these arguments virtual identity is not merely removed from material identity, but is seen to somehow transcend it – the hyper-identity that Filiciak (2003) referred to in Chapter 2. The problem with such assertions is that whilst they attempt to explain the virtual as a legitimate area of experimentation, they simultaneously suggest that somehow material experiences are

suspended; as though the connectivity between virtual space and material space is oppositional – that each only has meaning in terms of how one differs from the other. The virtual and material are conceived not just as different but also discrete.

The nature of gaming space is no less problematic. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) argue that there is a space situated between game and non-game space into which users enter as they are about to enter a gaming world. This space – they term the magic circle – demarks a bounded area that exists beyond the material world. As such it is an important area. It symbolises a rejection of the material in favour of the rules of the virtual – which may or may not correlate with those of the everyday life of the user. In general this area represents a symbolic acceptance of game rules, culture, institutions and practices – an agreement to work within the fictionalized institution of play. This sort of approach is particularly problematic in the case of Runescape. The idea of a ‘magic circle’ that somehow transcends the game and the non-game seems messy. I am uncomfortable with the idea that rules and narrative – the game dynamic – can be separated from other aspects of the user’s life. As I noted at the end of the last chapter, the argument that the authenticity of play requires it to be divorced from ordinary life in order for it to have any form of freedom is an argument that is very hard to sustain in relation to virtual play. Play space is indeed difficult and contested space, but so is material space. It seems to me that many of the rules, structures, practices and interactions that must be negotiated in game space are not so very different from those that exist in the material. Setting up a boundary around those practices seems to negate the way that game space interfaces with material space. As though pure play can only take place in a bubble that is divorced from any form of cultural experience or material concerns.

The role of technology has an important part to play here, particularly the attitude that young people adopt towards new technological forms. When Fuller and Jenkins (1995) speak of the creation of ‘spectacular places’ or Salen and Zimmerman (2004) note the existence of ‘fantastical’ stories, the language of their arguments hides the ordinariness of new technology in the lives of young people. The last twenty years or so have brought huge technological advances in the realms of interactive virtuality. Technology now surrounds and shapes our daily lives. As technological innovations advance it becomes more ordinary and less magical, particularly to ‘Digital Natives’

(Prensky 2001). Despite claims from manufacturers about the merits of the latest generation of console, what was extraordinary is now ordinary – even expected. It is a process that Poole (2000) argues is the domestication of the machine. Leisure in particular has been the arena of many technological advances and played an important part in this domesticating process. The latest console, the ‘PS3,’ draws on processing power that far exceeds the mainframe used by Higginbotham for nuclear research back in the 1960s. This is to simply entertain us – to allow us to play. As I argued in Chapter 2, technology has moved the computer game beyond the realm of the technological elite and into mainstream, everyday culture.

But there is still an attempt here to distance and separate the arenas. Even the name of the Sony machine – ‘The Playstation’ – demarks it from the world of work (a name which was curiously dropped when Sony launched the second generation Playstation as an all round entertainment machine; ‘PS2’ implies something more than mere ‘play’). Yet the technology I use to work is now virtually the same technology I use to play. My Runescape computer which creates spectacular spaces is also my work computer on which I produce spreadsheets and documents. Mobile phones, music players, digital cameras have a myriad of uses that sit across a range of realms. These arenas seep into one another until they become the stuff of everyday life. The young people in this study were just as likely to communicate with each other using the pages of ‘MySpace’ and ‘Facebook’ as they were to go out and meet each other in the material – it was considered no different from calling or texting a friend on the phone. Meeting on Runescape was just an extension of this process. The virtual is so immersed in the practices and institutions of the everyday life of young people, that it simply represents another facet of their ‘real’ lives. New technology brings new systems and new practices but these become absorbed into our everyday lives. We then adapt and these new rituals in turn form part of our own social networking and practices. As Taylor observes “*It is not that new phenomena never (or simply) appear, but that they emerge in relationship to a web of practices, technologies, networks, structures, attitudes and a range of actors other than ourselves*” (2006:152). In this study I have attempted to consider the real ways that young people use and make sense of Runescape space. It seems problematic – if not actually inaccurate – to attempt to separate the virtual from the real, the game from the non-

game. In this sense technology and everyday life are so intertwined as to make meaningful segregation impossible.

Yet it seems to me that many commentators keep the virtual and the material separate, not because they are distinct realms but because it suits the position of particular arguments. For the pro-virtual lobby, the validation of virtual space rests in the ways that it transcends the material. For the oppositionists it is about demonstrating how the virtual threatens the stability of the material. For professionals working with young people, the idea that virtual space may in fact represent real and everyday space is threatening and challenging. It becomes easier to dismiss the virtual as ‘not real’ an argument which then of course brings with it a plethora of value judgements and assumptions. But to dismiss technologically created arenas in this way shows a misunderstanding of technology. Part of the problem I argue, is the impression that many commentators have of the MMORPG player. It would be easy to see the Runescape user as an isolated individual who spends his/her time working away on unproductive tasks with little or no interaction with other citizens. The narrative structure seems to present itself as one that facilitates and encourages individualized play, yet as I have argued its’ emergent social structure requires that we re-contextualize how we consider the user’s relationship with the virtual game-world.

### **Game Space? Ordinary Space? Just Space?**

When I began this study I had been playing Runescape for nearly a year. I was struck by the opportunities it seemed to offer and to a certain extent seduced into believing that it offered endless possibilities to extend the material existence of its young users. However, as I looked deeper, I began to realise that to live in Runescape was to be subject to possibilities and constraints which were similar to those operating within material existence. I began to conclude that it was not so very different to the social and cultural spaces of the material. If Williams (1958) is correct and culture is indeed ‘ordinary’ then virtua-culture is equally ordinary. There is a sense of realness about it that permeates across Runescape’s structures and institutions. It reminded me of the jewel in the fan -fiction: for the young people working and playing within it, virtual space just represents one facet of a more complex whole of everyday existence. It is something to be dipped in and out of, alongside a range of other places and spaces. This is what makes it both ‘real’ and valid. What is needed is a model of the virtual

that recognises the porosity of the relationship between material and virtual arenas. The virtual neither extends the material nor is subordinate to it. The connectivity of Runescape is fluid and dynamic. Virtual spaces such as Runescape sit at the juncture between material and virtual aspects of culture. As game space and material-virtual space it is important.

Castronova (2004) laments the ordinariness of such space. He argues that everyday life is seeping into games to such an extent that the very thing that's makes them interesting and unique is being lost. For him games space offers the opportunity to extend and experiment with aspects of everyday life, an aspect that will become lost if it is vulgarised by the ordinary; *'living there will no longer be different to living here'* (2004:196). For me, this ordinariness is the strength of symbolic experimentation. I am unhappy with the idea that games space, or indeed general virtual space, can be abstracted from everyday life. That there is a 'pure space' that can somehow be contaminated seems to be a falsely oppositional model. As I observed earlier, Runescape accommodates a range of contexts and modes of play. Studying Runescape demonstrates two inter-related aspects of how young people make sense of the virtual and material aspects of their lives. For the young people in this study the material and virtual are not separate, but bound up one in the other. Arguably, they coexist in a world that increasingly constrains young people's freedom whilst granting some simultaneous access to new and novel opportunities. Virtual space exists within the material if only in that it is set against and understood by the cultural conventions and practices of the material world. The two worlds are porous and young people make and re-make the material through the virtual, and vice versa. The virtual self does not exist in a cultural vacuum but fashions virtual cultural experience from material experience and knowledge to meet the exigencies of virtual existence. Most importantly, virtual environments are irrevocably social spaces, to some extent 'imagined communities' and perhaps the potential setting for a range of important social and cultural interactions of vitality and belonging.

Some writers (Kitchen, 1998) suggest that research in this area confirms a utopian vision of virtual life at the expense of understanding how ICT is used and understood in the material world. I argue that to understand virtuality it is necessary to explore and understand what is actually happening within these online worlds. Unlike other

popular locations of virtual space, MMORPGs offer realised and complete worlds which borrow from, but also extend, the material. These are virtual play-spaces, social and fantasy arenas not dissimilar to material play spaces. Arguably, these game worlds offer a utopian and essentially unrealistic representation of the world which, in some ways, falls short of the material world. Yet, simultaneously, they offer abundant possibilities for play that could not occur in material space. The dragon is 'there' to be fought and the user no longer needs to pretend. It is this contradiction of being both less yet more than the material that is so important and so interesting in these domains.

What Castronova (2004) misses is the crucial role of the imagination in creating and managing the spaces and places of the virtual environment. I argue that virtual environments encourage and enhance the imagination as a 'space of freedom'. For example, young people are able to play with representations of embodiment: gender, race or ability. Yet, this capacity must not be reified. Young people are, like the rest of us, materially constrained by the factors of social difference. I have argued how virtual environments offer 'breaks', 'holidays' and 'sabbaticals' from the fixivities of the everyday material world. This is important in theorising the arenas of resistance and agency in late modernity. I fail to see why attempting to keep the everyday world out of this process should necessarily be seen as a conflict to be won or lost. Similarly is keeping virtuality out of everyday life any more a desirable state of affairs? Indeed the metaphor of a conflict is misleading and ultimately leads to a misunderstanding of material and virtual space as well as culture and identity. Culture and identity are not an avatar of the material that can be removed at will when I enter virtuality. They are what I am and what I do and hence are integral to understanding the ways that young people make sense of lived experience whatever space they choose to operate within at any given moment.

### **Socialized Play in an Individualized World**

Whilst, unlike other games in the MMORPG genre, Runescape is not dependant on socialized play, I have demonstrated in the earlier chapters how highly interactive networks have been constructed to facilitate character development and game advancement, particularly at the higher end of the world. Notions of identity and status are heavily linked to both informal and more formalised networks of play.

Users do not merely interact at the basic level – hanging out, chatting – although, as I have shown, many do choose this route and continue with a rewarding virtual experience. Advanced and developed users form more complicated interactive systems based around notions of trust, interdependence and reputation. That these exist beyond – I might even say *despite* – the individualized narrative tells me a lot about how young people regard this technology. Virtual space is not individualized space, indeed at the high end of the world, well established and influential citizens are amongst the most social in the game, able to utilise the technology in highly creative ways. Clans, trading alliances and other social networks – forums, fan sites – all intersect with the narrative. To be a citizen in a virtual world is to be plugged into a wealth of social networking.

To hang out in Runescape is to embrace a complicated and diverse environment. As I have already argued, game-play requires players to co-ordinate a range of in-game factors; Armour and weapons afford different bonus across the three key combat skills, different monsters are susceptible to different forms of attack, drop items are only available at certain locations, key tasks require certain skill levels before they can be undertaken, goods are traded in certain key locations, quests require a range of items prior to embarking, spell and range combinations must be worked out etc. In order to cope with this degree of complexity, the social system is based on a community of knowledge that holds and shares this knowledge base. An ‘information elite’ has emerged who’s role within the broader Runescape community is to furnish other players with this knowledge. Again this operates outside the main game narrative. Jagex argue that much of the fun of Runescape is the discovery or learning curve offered by the world’s practices. In reality however, many of these are so complex that without some form support, many players would not be able to meet the demands of the society. A library of knowledge has developed around the game in the form of websites, forums and message boards which acts as an extended social network. Jenkins terms such networking a “*collective intelligence*” (2002; 1). This collective is held together through mutual production and exchange of knowledge. All the important websites that furnish Runescape are run by practicing citizens. As I illustrated at the start of this chapter, some sites extend the role-playing aspect of the realm by creating interesting and exciting back-stories designed to enhance the in-world experience. Most however feature a comprehensive range of information



including data-bases, quest ‘walk-thrus’, maps and skills calculators as well as tips and hints for skills development.

What is interesting is the way that these extended networks contrast with the competitive aspect of the game. Although power and status within the game depend on successful skills development and the acquisition of goods and items, players approach the world with a spirit of mutual support. But as Hills (2002) reminds us, there are intrinsic links between this type of fan culture and the power and status within the world. Runescape is not simply a community but also a social hierarchy in which “*fans share a common interest whilst also competing over fan knowledge and access to the object of fandom and status*” (Hills 2002:46). In Runescape, status does not just rest on skill levels or the possession of items, but also on reputation, and most importantly, knowledge of the game. The reputation of the most advanced players, those that sit at the top of the social hierarchy, is at least part-based on their gate-keeping role. It is they who hold the knowledge of how to acquire their status and level. As I have demonstrated, they also control the mechanisms that provide a pathway to this level. The most powerful of these tools is this ‘insider’ knowledge. What is vibrant about these extended networks is that they provide an opportunity for all citizens to contribute to the knowledge-base, but more importantly to discuss and challenge the contributions of others. These networks not only operate from outside the narrative but simultaneously sit both inside and outside the game world itself. As such, game space is extended and enhanced and this type of networking is both collaborative and bonding – an example of Gee’s (2007) affinity spaces.

Yet information networks are not always so formal. Friendship and peer groups also form an important source of information and knowledge. Again this operates outside of the game structure and it is these networks which often form the main channel through which users become socialised into the norms and practices of the world. Steinkeuhler (2004) argues that users of MMORPG are embedded in “*communities of practice*” and that it is through such communities that individuals come to understand both themselves and the world. Such connections sit between game and non-game space but more importantly cross on-line and offline arenas. One of the most interesting facts concerning Runescape’s development is that it has achieved its level of subscribers almost entirely by word of mouth. Offline networks have become

embedded into virtual networks as friendships seep and extend across the two realms. Many of the users I talked with played alongside offline friends – sometimes in the same room after school, but more usually in the evening when physical interaction is impossible. Although social networks become extended as users develop in the world, forging new alliances and friendships, this primary network will usually consist of offline relationships. For some users, this primary network is a simple extension of the material. Limited by places to meet and socialise the virtual becomes just another place to meet and hang out. In this sense it forms a patchwork with other social networking arenas which can be seamlessly dipped in and out of. Conversations in-game for these users differs little from conversation between young people in any other space, with the focus being on external interests and concerns. It is a way of extending existing relationships beyond the confines of material space, yet it is very much defined by the existing practices of the material. Ownership of place and looking good are as much a feature of these networks as the nature of the interaction itself. It is an arena, to create and “*own your own space, dress up, look good and simply hang out with friends. If there are cute boys there it’s even better!*” (Katspaw).

But for other users these networks offer more sophisticated practices. For many citizens established material friendships get left behind and there is the opportunity to make new, virtual friendships. Again, for some users virtual relationships recreate those of the material. The desire to socialise and “*feel like your really dere*” (Mixxii 14) allows relationships to be formed across boundaries that would make material interactions impossible. The validity and importance of such relationships should not be underestimated. Many virtual friendship groups met nightly and there were dynamic and on-going topics of conversations. Young people would discuss their day, exchange information about bands, update each other on boy/girl friends, exchange advice, laugh, cry and support each other. Again, it was the very ordinariness of such interactions that was striking. Here the virtual was not a special place, just a different space. Yet there was another level to these interactions. For certain users, virtual networks were not based on offline concerns but formed an integral aspect of the virtual system. Here in-game connectivity is based around not external concerns but on in-game status and respect for the achievements and abilities of others *within* the world. For these users, social networks become incredibly

important. Of course, there is still the need to socialise; as I saw earlier, it provides a break from the tedium of 'work' or in-game tasks. For some it is leisure time to be contrasted with the work of in-game advancement, for others it is a mechanism to get through the tedium of levelling up. I found this an important aspect when I spent time with the 'Cathaby Shark Gurls'. Although shark fishing is a lucrative in-game activity it is also a slow and often boring process of endless mouse clicking. Although, not initially sharing off-line connections, socialising, chatting and performance became an integral part of the 'Shark Gurls' routine, as a way of relieving the boredom of work. Significantly, what began as a virtual connectivity to pass the time soon became a material group as the girls arranged meetings and trips to see each other at weekends. Within the virtual arena the social network around the girls became well developed and other users in their extended networks would come to visit and chat with them and also to watch them whilst they worked. As such, they enjoyed celebrity status. The very visibility of their interactive network allowed them to extend their status and reputation way beyond the boundary and function that it had originally been established for.

But for some, connectivity also forms the basis of advancement in the game. Being part of a good team or clan is also important. Connectivity and trust were important here. For the Shark Gurls this was about trusting a friend to sell a catch that might have taken 30 hours to collect; for player killers such as CombatGirl it was about ensuring that clan brothers and sisters would protect and support you in the wilderness; for TronsQueen there was the mutual dependency that her clan would occupy the fishing ports day after day whilst they depended on their clan mother to furnish them with their requirements for day-to-day existence; for Brimmy it is about trusting his network of miners and rune-smiths to work within strict price guidelines. Within this system, honour, interdependency and commitment are key characteristics. Being a good team player, utilising important group and team skills are vital or the system would simply collapse. Although the narrative seems to encourage individualized approaches to the game, this is not an asocial world. It requires participants to be actively relational in their modes of engagement. Strong social networks are important because the most established players need to be able to call on one another for help and assistance. Yet these networks are not just social collectives, they are integrated communities of knowledge. For the PK clans for example it is

knowing what characteristics and skills your clan can bring to each encounter. It is trusting not only that your mage is able to utilise appropriate spells, but that they will be able to adapt should you choose a different style of attack or weapon. But whatever the main focus of the clan, status and reputation have an important role to play here. It is important that within the network, a player is seen as a good and reliable member – someone who is knowledgeable, experienced and can be trusted to perform when things get tough, or when a cooked shark deadline is looming. This is why most clans are seen as tight-knit communities, almost family-like. Mutual trust and respect are integral to task success and members are expected to put aside their own individualized concerns for the benefit of the group. In return, for players with the necessary skills, there is the opportunity to advance rapidly. Many of the clans that I encountered were well established virtual collectives who joined the game together and brought with them the necessary team skills honed on other games. In particular the more successful PK clans had already established themselves on the FPS arenas where combat was even faster and more complex. A commitment to the wider network seems to suggest that in an arena like Runescape, virtual socializing moves beyond the simple interaction of a chat room, or more informal social networks such as Facebook. Here, the virtual requires the complex interplay of a variety of networks and collectives in order for the social system to function.

### **What are our children doing with new technology?**

As I argued in the last chapter, Runescape offers a range of modes within which to approach the virtual. Depending on how they want to approach the world – the type of character, ethical position, level of engagement with the narrative etc – users can adopt different and sometimes conflicting games forms. As such, the Runescape user cannot be neatly compartmentalized. Such diversity offers a complex inter-relationship between the material experiences of the user and his/her virtual activities. Play within Runescape is reliant on a number of inter-connected structures and practices that situate the user both within and against the virtual world. It is not the abstracted rules of the game that operate here but an inter-play of online and offline activities, experience and space. Users approach the Runescape world with a range of prior knowledge and experience as well as expectation of the gaming session. These in turn drive the mode of play that both shape and are in turn shaped by the gaming experience. In this sense Runescape is a dynamic environment that is hard to capture.

Its participants and communities are fluid, reflecting a range of changing concerns and pre-occupations. Some writers (McNamee 1998) have become distracted by technological aspects of the virtual, arguing that engagement within a virtual world requires access to technology and technological capital. This somehow makes it less valid than non-virtual experiences. Whilst it is true that technological capital acts as a channel of stratification that excludes those who do not have access the entry level technology, once this point is made I am not certain how this moves an argument forward. Virtual space is subject to the same limitations as material space. One could equally argue for example urban space requires young people to have the necessary channels to access aspects of its environment - proximity, transport etc. Simon (2004) notes that there will always be a multiple and varying contexts that come into play when a user attempts to engage with any environment. Technological competence is just one of a range of stratifying factors that mediate the virtual experience.

It seems then that the virtual experience can be messy and subject to a range of factors and contexts. The boundary between the material and the virtual is blurred, contested and subject to a process of negotiated definition and redefinition. I argued in Chapter 5, that issues such as race and gender do not disappear online but become imported and mutated in a range of differing ways. Similarly, social processes such as what it means to be 'adult', combined with adult rituals and practices – work for example - are inoculated and played out in complex ways. But as I have argued throughout this study, in Runescape, it is not the imposition of an externalized game dynamic that shapes and influences this negotiation process, rather an internal reaction to the requirements and parameters set by the virtual environment. In Runescape I see a rejection of a passive audience response to media forms. When the writers in the Daily Telegraph ask the question '*what is new technology doing to our children?*' I might reply by turning the question on its head and asking, '*what are our children doing with new technology?*' In Runescape they appear to play an active and participative role in shaping the virtual world within which they reside. I might attempt to compare this virtual existence to that of their material counterpart in which their ability to effect meaningful change on their society is extremely limited. But the structures through which this is achieved in the virtual are referenced through the same structures that exist in the material; work, the family, friendship groups, social identity, gender. I might further see this as a simple matter of transference; that

material structures have been adopted and re-located within the virtual. But it is not as simple as this. The virtual is understood through these structures yet is able to be adapted and extended despite them. The productive institutions of work, aspects of race and gender, notions of age, class etc are not just simulated within Runescape, they are recreated to meet the demands of the virtua-culture, and then re-assimilated back into the material. It is through this cyclical process of negotiation that young people make sense of both aspects of their lives – virtual and material.

It might be tempting within such an argument to understand Runescape space as a mechanism that locks down oppositional modes of play. This is certainly a common view of computer games in general; that the system prevents alternative and oppositional positions. So, for example, games based on capitalist forms and structures merely recreate the same processes at the level of the virtual. However, in Runescape though modes of representation are recreated, they are also redefined by symbolic experimentation. Moreover there exists within the system, the opportunity to interpret and reinterpret rules and structures to take into account preferred readings or to meet the individual and/or collective needs and goals. Runescape users adopt a range of positions in order to make the same game a different playing experience depending on their own concerns. In this sense, Runescape users approach the world on their own terms and shape their own virtual experiences. Sometimes these conflict with the externalized norms of the world's designers – as in the case of luring - but often this takes the form of adapted internal norms and values. The virtual experience is extended and adapted through a form of virtual- socialisation that occurs through similar structures to that of the material. What seems to emerge from Runescape is a tension between the system as an externalized framework on one hand and an internal cultural dynamic on the other. It is interesting that this internal system of practices is often regarded as the legitimate system. These norms and values – the price of 'Lobster Certs' for example – are maintained and controlled internally, that is from inside the game. Far from requiring external controlling agents, this internalized system provides stability and control. It is also in a sense an empowering experience for its young participants.

However, the very fluidity that allows multiple modes of expression also brings with it a series of problems. Within such a system there exists the opportunity for

symbolic experimentation within a range of ethical positions. Despite the external controls, Jagex have not been able to micro-manage the world to lock out particular gaming quirks and practices that operate against the ‘spirit’ of the world. Whether it is desirable for a world to be micromanaged in this way is a matter open to further investigation. As I argued in Chapter 5, Jagex’s attempt to filter out PK practices resulted in social disobedience and virtual riots. That a similar event sparked the storming of Lord British in ‘Ultima On-line’ seems to suggest that virtual populations are not as easily ‘managed’ as some designers think. In Runescape this ‘spirit of the game’ is a loose concept that seems to embrace a notional understanding of fairness to all users. This in itself is a contested term. Some users clearly see the Runescape world as a utopian environment and look to outside controls to protect their interests. Other citizens interpret this ‘spirit’ in a different way; a world based on a Tolkien narrative should carry with it elements of danger and dissent: pre modernity in a late modernity form. Thus for ‘Player Killers’ it is perfectly within the spirit of the world to adopt an alternative moral perspective.

Within such discussions there still seems to be a notion that one can isolate a pure mode of play – the correct way of playing Runescape. Deviant practices such as ‘scamming’, ‘luring’, and ‘trolling’ are seen to be modes of expression that conflict with this ‘correct’ view and are rejected by the ‘purists’. But there is a fine line between autonomy and control. When Jagex attempt to step in they are accused of meddling un-necessarily in user space yet when they leave well alone they are accused of “*abandoning us decent players to the cheats*” (EmilyRange 16). Jagex argue that it is hard please everyone but ultimately see Runescape as their commercial property to shape and mould for the benefit of the widest user-base. Many members, particularly those who have grown up with the game from its early bedroom development days, feel that they also have a great deal invested in the world. This is seen to be a way of legitimising some of their in game practices:

*“Whos game is it, I been playing this for 5 years...without people like me there would be no Runescape, at least not like it is now...I think this lets me PK sometimes!!”*

*-Slaine765*

The question of '*whos game is it*' resonates across a range of problems not least around ownership of virtual goods that can be sold in the material for material money. Morris (2004) argues that MMORPGs are always 'participatory media' and that the final game experience will always be a mix of input from both parties. The question of ownership of space is important. I have argued that for many Runescape users, its virtual space has become a new *public space* within which to pursue many of the material activities that are becoming difficult within the material itself. It is natural that there should be some feeling of ownership here - a sense agency, of belonging and identity. Whether such ownership legitimizes certain practices needs further consideration. I need to look more closely at the ways in which virtual space allows for alternative modes of play. In this study I have touched on the ways that Runescape legitimises certain activities but I need to consider how anti-social virtual behaviours and different ethical positions impact on virtual existence. What are the inter-relationships between modes of play and the varying contexts within which users operate? Unfortunately these questions are complex and are for another time and a different study.

Yet Runescape space is also social and cultural space. It is a public space that has been shaped by the young people who work and play within it. As material space is increasingly denied to young people (through contemporary discourses of risk, danger and vulnerability) they have found new means and channels within which to express themselves. The technologies of the internet and computer games, and the geographical spaces and places within, have become 'cool places' in which to hang out. The virtual towns, rivers and open spaces of Runescape are not so different from those found in the material world, and the uses to which young people put them as cultural artefacts is similar to their activities in many streets and shopping malls. Unlike these 'privatised' arenas, Runescape offers the opportunity to create a true public space within which notions of agency can be legitimized. Yet even here there is still a tension to resolve with the commercialization of the world. Runescape still represents in part the commercial and intellectual property of its designers and the extent to which agency can truly be autonomous is sometimes problematic. Here the Runescape user is both consumer and citizen. It is sometimes possible to read these as acts of resistance, not in any heroic way but as young people marking out their sense of agency. However, I should not assume that virtuality liberates young people from



the 'power of place'. On the contrary, virtual environments are social and spatial productions that entail the complex assembly of technologies, competence and imagination through which new place-based norms and disciplines evolve.

### **Endwords: Beyond Runescape?**

In conclusion, I want to return to the questions that I posed at the start of this chapter. There has been a paucity of research exploring young people's experiences in virtual worlds, particularly within the broad fields of Education and Youth Studies. Whilst I acknowledge the work of others (Dodge 1998, Wright et al 2002, Yee 2002, Kennedy: 2005, Taylor 2006, Boellstorf 2008) I suggest that Education disciplines have paid comparatively little critical attention to what young people actually do while gaming online and how they understand and make sense of this. Similarly, whilst Holloway and Valentine (2003) explore the importance of ICT in constituting contemporary geographies of young people's lives, they fail to give any real attention to the significance of either online gaming or virtual social game worlds. One of the unique aspects of this research is that it offers a longitudinal study of the relationship between young people and their digital playground from within virtual world itself. In this study of Runescape, I have attempted to investigate how young people use one of the most popular of the emerging virtual spaces. I have considered how the space has emerged as a new form of public arena within which young people meet, and which have arguably come to be seen as a substitute for traditional material spaces. In doing this, I have also considered the extent to which such places provide arenas for symbolic exploration of material structures and practices and considered how aspects of agency and autonomy impact on wider cultural issues and concerns. I have argued that although it is tempting to see material and virtual arenas as separate and distinct, they appear to be more inter-related and inter-connected than the traditional models of virtual space seem to suggest. I have also sought to show that virtual spaces are valid and real and represent an important aspect of the everyday lived experience of many young people.

These issues have important implications, particularly for professionals working with young people. Practitioners can no longer simply dismiss virtual arenas as mere game spaces that have no bearing on real life. Models which seem to separate these aspects from the everyday lives of young people not only provide an inaccurate view on the

importance of such arenas, but more importantly fail to understand the ways that young people make sense of their lives. Virtual space and its inter-relationship with material space is an important arena and as such provide a range of opportunities for working with young people. That well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, important opinion leaders and professionals working with children can write a letter to a major UK broadsheet expressing their serious doubts and concerns about the damage that emerging cultural forms appear to be inflicting on young people is both alarming and somewhat sad. That technological forms can be dismissed as ‘unreal’ shows how little we understand young people. Poole (2000) identifies contradictions in social attitudes to computer games that mirror Western cultural perceptions of youth and young people. On the one hand, young people are valued as a resource for the future yet, on the other, are constantly derided as a source of danger or disorder (Griffin 1993, Bradford 2004). Similarly, whilst technological discourse continues to define social progress (Mosco 2000: 348) computer games are, as identified above, often dismissed as lazy entertainment. The combination of the two is the cause for much anxiety as demonstrated by the letter to The Daily Telegraph. Adults rarely understand the allure of gaming - as I have argued, often hidden away in bedrooms and concealed from the regulatory gaze of parents - dismissing it as frivolous or, sometimes, dangerous in its capacity to absorb vulnerable young people. The history of youth culture shows that as young people create new spaces for pleasure adult reaction is never far behind.

Runescape and similar virtual worlds offer young people new geographies of leisure and pleasure, ‘cool places’ whose appeal is increasing. The ability to interact instantly with distantiated peers offers young people new pleasures, taking them from one local context and restructuring their relationships ‘. . . *across time and space*’ (Giddens, 1990: 21). Runescape re-replaces young people in other modulations of the local and is an important aspect of the physical constitution of its user’s leisure lives. Virtual place has become an adjunct to material place. MMORPGs have, I suggest, considerable potential for young people to ‘make’ their own identities as they negotiate a range of exotic and challenging virtual environments. However, as I have argued, there are analytic tensions between material and virtual space. For Aoyama and Sheppard, cyberspace is dependent upon constraints imposed by the material, and virtual space may ‘*reproduce rather than challenge geographical space*’ (2003: 1152). Heim

suggests that the ambiguity of virtual existence as life in virtual space permits us to *'hav[e] it both ways, keeping a distance while at the same time putting ourselves on the line'* (1992: 76). Jenkins (1998) takes a middle path and extends the link between virtual and material play space by noting that the fantasy of play is common to both arenas and shaped by material culture and environment. Inevitably, perhaps, online and offline spaces are mutually constitutive (Valentine and Holloway 2001). I take neither a utopian view of virtuality, nor a position that suggests that computer games are damaging or exploitative. My view is that virtual spaces must be understood as social contexts - in principle, like any other - where young people spend parts of their leisure lives:

*"I got 2 or 3 virtual GF on here. I take dem out, talk to them, find out wot girls like talking about, doin, that sorta thing. I go to an all boys school so it stops me making mistakes wid my real GF"*  
- *IamSinji (12)*

*"It's what I try to tell everyone! MMORPGs give not only a good social education, but encourage teamwork, team building (to form a successful party you will not only need nice people, but people of different classes, such as healers and damage dealers), time management skills (within the game of course), map reading skills, financial planning (Will I be able afford that spell at lv 20 if I buy this shiny new sword now), as well as giving a completely fascinating look at how economies develop. This is on top of the fact that RS teaches you to deal with people who are out to get you. If you are a good player and you meet a higher level PK (Who would normally shoot on sight, and can't understand your language), you can use emotes/gestures (such as /dance, /smile, /plead) in order to convince them to stop. (This doesn't always work of course)."*  
- *Duncan (17)*

Durrigan (2001) observes that traditionally games – as an expression of leisure activity - have been used as a way of helping us make sense of our everyday lives. The 'virtual spaces' offered by games space provide a reflective critical distance between ourselves as the main participant and the substance of our everyday lives. Similarly, 'agency', 'identity' - both crucial dimensions of young people's shifting ontological status and central to any notion of youth culture - community and lived

*experience should be considered relationally as both spatialised and placed'* (Massey 2005: 184). I have argued that only by observing and analysing what young people do in such spaces can I truly tackle the importance that the virtual plays in their lives. 'Hanging out' in Runescape and virtual worlds more generally, offers occasion to reflect on the ways in which young people creatively configure and re-configure practices of 'doing' identity and community. I have demonstrated that virtual space is ontologically constituted and shares some characteristics of material space, having ' . . . geography, physics, a nature and a rule of human law' (Benedikt 1991: 123). Like material space, the virtual acts as a *'repository for cultural meaning - it is popular culture, its narratives created by its inhabitants that remind us who we are, it is life as lived and reproduced in pixels and virtual texts'* (Fernbeck 1997: 37).

*"In the end Nic, Runescape just allows me to be me, it reminds me of who I am and what I would like to be" - go-sharkgirl-go (13)*

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