

NPC MEMORIALS AND SCROLLS OF 'RAISE DEAD': MORTALITY AND LIMINAL
TRANSITIONS IN THE TEXT-BASED ROLE-PLAY OF *NEVERWINTER NIGHTS* AND
GUILD WARS 2

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department
of Comparative Cultural Studies

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Arts of Anthropology

By

Kimberly D. Andrew

May, 2014

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ABSTRACT

Rites of passage are culturally prescribed rituals which transpire outside of ordinary space and time, used to deliver participants from one stable social identity to the next. When performed in the persistent virtual worlds of online roleplaying games – specifically within the fantasy settings of *Neverwinter Nights* and *Guild Wars 2* – rites of passage such as coming of age, initiation, marriage, childbirth, retirement, and mortuary ritual expose the values and tensions of participants, reinforce social ties, and defend the meaning of communally composed mythic narratives. These rites of passage fulfill the selfsame function of delivering participants from ambiguity to aggregation which Victor Turner (1995 c1969) and Arnold van Gennep (1960 c1906) have established in their studies of “real world” rites of passage while providing participants with new myths to live by in a similar capacity to the movie industry which Lee Drummond describes in *American Dreamtime* (1996).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction.....	1
Rites of Passage in Persistent Virtual Worlds.....	1
“Betwixt and Between” – Meaningful Points of Ambiguity in Online RPGs...	6
<i>Real World vs. Game World</i>	8
<i>Player vs. Character</i>	10
<i>Game vs. Story</i>	19
Summary.....	22
II. Review of Relevant Literature.....	25
Defining Persistent Virtual Worlds.....	25
<i>History</i>	27
<i>Cyberethnography</i>	30
Rites of Passage Part 2 – Reference Material.....	32
<i>Initiation to Retirement</i>	34
<i>Marriage and Sexuality</i>	37
<i>Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Coming of Age</i>	41
<i>Mortuary Rites, Resurrection, and Return</i>	44
<i>Undeath</i>	49
Summary.....	53
III. Research Methodology.....	55
Field Sites.....	55
<i>Neverwinter Nights</i>	58
<i>Guild Wars 2</i>	62
Methods of Data Collection.....	64
<i>Participant Observation</i>	64
<i>Surveys</i>	66
<i>Semi-Structured Interviews</i>	66
<i>Document Analysis</i>	67
Methods of Data Analysis.....	68
Results.....	68
IV. Virtual Professions - Leveling up Indefinitely?.....	72
Initiation.....	73
<i>Initiation as an Anomalous State</i>	73
<i>Initiation as a Short-Term Liminal Event</i>	79
Retirement.....	80
Discussion.....	84
V. Virtual Romance – White Gowns and Erotic Roleplay.....	86
Performing the Virtual Wedding.....	88
Interpreting the Virtual Wedding.....	91
<i>Analytics of Sexuality</i>	91
<i>Symbolics of Blood</i>	94

Discussion.....	97
VI. Virtual Children – Avatar Pregnancy and the Ethics of Young PCs.....	98
Challenges of Parent-Child Roleplay.....	99
<i>Passage of Time</i>	99
<i>Environmental Dangers</i>	101
<i>Sharing Intellectual Property</i>	103
Interpretations of Parent-Child Roleplay.....	104
<i>Rituals of Reversal</i>	104
Discussion.....	106
VII. Virtual Mortuary Rites – “Grab the corpse and let’s go!”.....	108
Separation.....	110
Liminality.....	115
Aggregation.....	116
<i>Resurrection</i>	116
<i>Permadeath</i>	121
Discussion.....	125
VIII. Virtual Undeath – Roleplaying the Liminal Persona.....	128
The Liminality of Undeath.....	129
<i>Lich</i>	130
<i>Vampire</i>	131
<i>Spirit</i>	132
<i>Animated Corpse</i>	133
The Sociality of Undeath.....	135
<i>Necromancy</i>	135
<i>Secondary Mortuary Ritual</i>	136
Discussion.....	137
IX. Conclusion.....	138
Myth, Meaning, and Mystery in Persistent Virtual Worlds.....	138
From Liminality to Aggregation – Avenues for Future Research.....	142

LIST OF FIGURES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

i. Figures

Figure 1 – Plane of Roleplaying Activities.....	22
Figure 2 – List of Semi-Structured Interview Questions.....	67
Figure 3 – Interview Data for Transitional Events.....	69
Figure 4 – Interview Data for Frequency of Transitional Events.....	70
Figure 5 – Table of Epitaphs.....	123

ii. Illustrations

Illustration 1 – <i>Neverwinter Nights</i> chat window.....	17
Illustration 2 – <i>Guild Wars 2</i> chat window.....	18
Illustration 3 – <i>D&D</i> dice system.....	28
Illustration 4 – <i>Neverwinter Nights</i> server list.....	55
Illustration 5 – <i>Guild Wars 2</i> server list.....	55
Illustration 6 – <i>Guild Wars 2</i> defeated screen.....	72
Illustration 7 – <i>Guild Wars 2</i> wedding ceremony.....	86
Illustration 8 – <i>Neverwinter Nights</i> den.....	98
Illustration 9 – <i>Neverwinter Nights</i> spirit realm.....	108
Illustration 10 – <i>Guild Wars 2</i> necromancer with undead minion.....	128

I. Introduction

“Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man’s life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined.” (Van Gennep 1960 c1906:3)

“The anthropology of performance is an essential part of the anthropology of experience. In a sense, every type of cultural performance, including ritual, ceremony, carnival, theatre, and poetry, is explanation and explication of life itself.” (Turner 1982:13)

“It is not only that virtual worlds borrow assumptions from real life; virtual worlds show us how, under our very noses, our ‘real’ lives have been virtual all along. It is in being virtual that we are human: since it is human ‘nature’ to experience life through the prism of culture, human being has always been virtual being.” (Boellstorff 2008:5)

Rites of Passage in Persistent Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds provide a unique window for examining the performance of culturally prescribed transitions – what Arnold Van Gennep has labeled in 1906 as *Rites of Passage*. Van Gennep identifies three stages to every rite of passage: separation, margin, and aggregation. Since Van Gennep’s landmark study, the most noteworthy of anthropologists to examine this model for rites of passage is Victor Turner. Victor Turner expands upon Van

Gennepe's three stages, using symbolic analysis to shed light on the embedded meanings within each. He expounds particularly on the middle stage of margin or "liminality" as well as the related but generally more flexible category of "liminoid" (Turner 1982:55; Turner 1995, c1969:94). Though similar in name and function, liminal phenomena tend to be culturally collective, concerned with natural disjunctions and central social processes, while liminoid phenomena tend to be more individualized and "continuously generated," defined by their position as commodities of choice rather than obligation (54-55).

These distinctions between liminal and liminoid come to a head when we consider questions of cultural behavior in cyberspace. Tim Gale (2009) classifies virtual space in general not as liminal but rather as liminoid according to attributes such as economic marginality, changeability, plurality, and position as a leisure activity (131). He situates *persistent virtual worlds*¹ among Turner's "permanent 'liminoid' settings and spaces," in the same vein as bars, pubs, and social clubs (Turner 1982:55). This is not to say that inclusion in the "liminoid" category necessitates exclusion from the "liminal" category. As permanent liminoid settings, persistent virtual worlds may "generate rites of passage, with the liminal a condition of entrance into the liminoid realm;" and likewise, as sites of social drama, they may perform "crisis events" and other liminal transitions in order to "ascribe meaning to [these] 'social dramatic' events" within the bounds of a liminoid setting (Turner 1982:12, 55, brackets mine). The core premises that 1) liminal phenomena can provide entrance to the liminoid realm, and 2) liminal phenomena can be performed within the liminoid realm;

¹ Persistent virtual worlds (definition): persistent, predominantly synchronous networks of people, represented as avatars, which exist in shared virtual environments that are perceived either through textual description or sensory experience and are facilitated by networked computers to enable people to participate from different physical locations.

enable the study of culturally significant rites of passage in the leisure sphere, as I will demonstrate via the persistent virtual worlds of *Neverwinter Nights* and *Guild Wars 2*.

The anthropology of performance, the study of rites of passage, semiotics, and cyberethnography coningle in the study of persistent virtual worlds. Here, players socialize and build communities. Here, players manipulate imaginary identities. Here, players make avatars into art. Here, players transform textual speech into collaborative storytelling. Here, players re-create legends. Here, players synthesize new cultures from the union of imaginary worlds and historical plausibility. Here, players live new myths, generating relevant, meaningful experiences in the leisure sphere to supplement the deficiency of myth, meaning, community, and rites of passage afforded to them by more culturally centralized institutions. Joseph Campbell describes this deficiency as the “failure of religion to meet the modern world,” and proposes that we need new myths to help us navigate our relationship with ourselves and with the planet (Campbell and Moyers 1988:24). His call for new myths has been answered by several media genres – movies, novels, magazines, music, and the like. Yet the roleplaying element of persistent virtual worlds offers consumers something which these other mediated myth makers do not: *agency*, an active part in the performance and production of meaning, reminiscent of the interactive/co-constructive part played by audience members in oral storytelling traditions (Bauman 2011:712).

Roleplaying² means “to experiment with or experience (a situation or viewpoint) by... [assuming] the attitudes, actions, and discourse of (another), especially in a make-believe situation” (Dictionary.com). Roleplaying games (RPGs) exhibit a style of play similar to method acting, where participants “reproduce recognized reality” in a fictional role

² Roleplaying (definition): to experiment with or experience (a situation or viewpoint) by... [assuming] the attitudes, actions, and discourse of (another), especially in a make-believe situation (Dictionary.com).

by creating a psychologically sound persona based on firsthand and secondhand reference material, identification of character motivations and background, improvisation, props, and the participants' own personality and imagination (Bandelj 2003:390, 393). Freedom of imagination for method acting and roleplaying games alike is limited by predetermined rules for the setting and performance; Nina Bandelj calls this type of agency "structured agency" (388). Structured agency applies to all three types of roleplaying games: *live action roleplaying games*³ (LARP), *tabletop roleplaying games*,⁴ and *online roleplaying games*,⁵ yet among these, online roleplaying games allow for the greatest expression of creative identity play due to the disembodiment of virtual space.

The structured agency of online roleplaying games is nevertheless challenged by ambiguity which sparks between the far-from-distinct spheres of work and leisure, performance and play, player and character, real world and game world. This perilous ambiguity bears the caul of Turner's liminality, "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial," (Turner 1995:95). The function of rites of passage, as described by Turner and others, is to navigate eruptions of cultural ambiguity akin to those mentioned here, delivering the participant from one stable social identity to the next. As socially-driven games, a quality which has been validated through research by Boellstorff (2008), Taylor (2006), McBirney (2004), and others, I will argue that rites of passage within online RPGs serve the same moderating purpose as rites of passage in

³ Live action roleplaying (definition): built on the model of improvisational theater and historical reenactment... [it] combines theatrical fantasy story building with character driven plots in a communally created narrative... where a weak hero/avatar gains power and influence...interacts safely with inverted, dark forces, and enacts heroic quests [through the physical actions and descriptions of the player] (Milspaw and Evans 2010:214).

⁴ Tabletop roleplaying games (definition): a type of gameplay system that involves collaboration between a small group of players and a gamemaster through face-to-face social activity with the purpose of creating a narrative experience (Cover 2010:168). These games are also called pen-and-paper RPGs.

⁵ Online roleplaying games (definition): games based on the fantasy genre [which] have evolved into full-fledged virtual worlds (Aupers 2007:1).

the “real world,” ascribing meaning to social events and managing the perils of ambiguity by delivering participants from one stable social identity to the next.

Using data gathered through participant observation over the course of a six month study, player postings on associated game forums, and twenty-one semi-structured interviews, I have evaluated the following *performed* rites of passage according to the affiliated symbols employed and meanings expressed by my informants: birth, coming of age, marriage, parenthood, initiation, retirement, and death. In further accordance with the game mechanics of online RPGs, I have divided death into the following subcategories: serial death/resurrection, permadeath, and undeath. These rites of passage are performed by player characters in mythic, virtual settings. Virtual refers to both the technological medium and the condition of liminality, while mythic refers to fantasy settings in which “larger-than-life, nonhuman or superhuman beings perform feats and have experiences outside the realm of possibility in everyday life,” settings which allow participants to explore questions of human experience through exaggerated symbols of those very experiences (Drummond 1996:12-13). In such settings of myth and magic, participants are able to confront and overcome vestiges of danger and uncertainty from their “real” lives which are otherwise beyond the scope of their control (Malinowski and Redfield 1948:31). Finally, mythic questions are not explored individually in isolation but collectively among a community of roleplayers. For the purposes of this thesis, *community* refers to a networked group of roleplayers on the same server whose characters can and do interact in shared space and time.

Of the communally observed rites of passage listed above, one of the most fascinating to examine from an anthropological perspective is mortuary ritual, given the high frequency and vast mutability of death in online RPGs. Through the primary lens of mortuary ritual, I

will contend that rites of passage in online roleplaying games serve to expose community values, establish meaning, and reinforce social ties among community members, fulfilling the selfsame function of delivering participants from ambiguity to aggregation which Turner and Van Gennep have established in their studies of “real world” rites of passage while providing participants with new myths to live by in a similar capacity to the movie industry which Lee Drummond describes in *American Dreamtime* (1996).

“Betwixt and Between” – Meaningful Points of Ambiguity in Online RPGs

Rites of passage allow players to navigate the tensions of ambiguity that arise over the course of roleplay. In order to understand the interpretations which I will propose for rites of passage in the following chapters, let me first establish the ambiguities which give rise to this need. I previously listed four meaningful points of ambiguity which appear in online roleplaying games: work and leisure, performance and play, player and character, real world and game world. Although each of these pairings more accurately represents spheres of influence than binary oppositions, I have chosen to separate them by the word “verses” to depict the dualistic nature of most virtual gameplay design. By modeling this dualistic nature, I intend to point out the tendency among video games to exaggerate the mythic constructs of duality which are already so prevalent in Western cultures, constructs which Drummond (1996) identifies as “animal \leftrightarrow artifact/machine, us/self \leftrightarrow them/other, and life force \leftrightarrow death force” (97). Animals in video games are presented as either allies to fight with or monsters to kill. Artifacts are tools to use or threats to destroy. *Non-player characters*⁶ (NPCs) are good guys to fight with or bad guys to fight against. And in the rare instances where the sides of “good” and “evil” are less than clear, factions of “us \leftrightarrow them”

⁶ Non-player character (definition): artificial intelligent “non-player” characters; a character in a role-playing game or video game who is controlled by the gamemaster or computer, rather than by a player (Bainbridge 2007:2; Webster’s Online Dictionary).

are no less bracketed; instead of following moral lines, game designers merely demark conflict along other points of separation such as race, nationality, or credo.

Please note that race in video games is better understood as species, with differing biological attributes and lifespans. The commonly playable humanoid (as symbolically opposed to monstrous) races of *Neverwinter Nights* are Dwarf, Elf, Gnome, Half-Elf, Half-Orc, Halfling, and Human, while the playable races of *Guild Wars 2* are Asura, Charr, Human, Norn, and Sylvari. Animosity between races is common, and in some cases results in outright war. This racial conflict, in addition to other factional conflicts such as nationality and credo, is included in the *lore*⁷ and scripting of the games.

I have previously called attention to the player's structured agency in online RPGs, but it is important to understand where the structure comes from. The scripts (programming) and foundational lore of these games are written by production companies or private server designers before players enter the games themselves. Therefore the dualistic nature of game design – while catering to the desires of the game's target audience for a simplified version of “history as it should have been” without the prejudices of the past or the impersonal warfare of the present – is not determined directly by members of that audience (Pinder 2006:45). Instead, players enter the game *after the fact*, much like children born into the culture of their parents, and their agency lies not in rewriting the world but in manipulating existing lore to build meaningful relationships, express values, address tensions, tell satisfying stories, produce future lore, and – since these are, after all, games – to have fun in any and all ways feasible (for a deeper discussion of lore, see “Chapter III”).

⁷ Lore (definition): knowledge gained through study or experience (Merriam-Webster). In fantasy RPGs, lore refers to the history, beliefs, and practices of game-world cultural units (such as races, classes, nations, and factions) which have been established as canon inside the magic circle of the game.

To conclude my introduction of ambiguities, then, I have clustered work/leisure and performance/play together under the single subheading of *Game vs. Story* due to their shared points of contention. In the following passage, I will elaborate on these three central domains of ambiguity as a foundation for my study on virtual rites of passage: Real World vs. Game World, Player vs. Character, and Game vs. Story.

Real World vs. Game World

In 1938, Dutch scholar Johan Huizinga introduced the concept of the “magic circle” to the study of play and ritual. According to Huizinga (1980 c1949), play precedes human culture, so all other domains of civilized life (work, art, myth, ritual, etcetera) must be “rooted in the primeval soil of play” (5). Play creates a separate and temporary world of perfect order which is maintained by a magic circle of special rules. Huizinga (1980 c1949) states: “Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the playground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain” (10). Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle is complementary to Joseph Campbell’s description of sacred space and Turner’s discussion of ritual space. Campbell describes sacred space as space which lies beyond daily news and social obligations, “where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be” (Campbell and Moyers 1988:92). The sacred space of virtual worlds, commended by the anonymity allowed by virtual embodiment, is fertile ground for identity play. Turner (1982) additionally emphasizes the need during the ritual stage of separation to clearly demarcate sacred space and time from the profane/secular world (24). So, in

conjunction, does Huizinga designate “special rules” which govern behavior and belief systems within the liminoid spaces of all play and ritual. Schultz and Lavenda (2009) call these special rules and the establishment of cognitive boundaries for play “framing” (167). Multiplayer video games are framed through the interaction of game mechanics and social norms (Dixon 2008). Players learn from this framing what they can expect and how to behave appropriately within virtual settings. Another way to express the distinction between real world and game world is to discuss the player’s orientation either outside or inside the magic circle.

The ambiguity of this subsection stems from the fact that the outside/inside boundary of virtual worlds is a messy one. Players enter the magic circle without leaving the real world behind. Unlike similar activities such as method acting, live action roleplaying, and *historic re-creation*,⁸ online RPG avatars are virtually embodied – they are disembodied from physical experience. Players can participate in the magic circle without matching their physical actions to their virtual behavior. They sit at keyboards and multitask – eating, drinking, watching TV, taking care of siblings, talking on the phone, and performing innumerable other tasks while engaged in the virtual world. They interact with other players at the same time that their characters interact with other characters. And not only is the player’s experience of setting disjunctive, but their experience of time is likewise fragmented. Players come together from different time zones around the world; this factor makes coordinating *roleplay events*⁹ difficult in its own right, especially since each person’s

⁸ Historic re-creation (definition): [the attempt] to re-create life, not as it was but as it *should have been* during [historic] times (Pinder 2006:45). Unlike other “reenactment” groups... the personas chosen are not actual, historic persons... Rather, individuals choose a fictional “persona” of someone who *could* have lived in a particular time and place (Lash 2009:32).

⁹ Roleplay event (definition): social material being given an ‘episode’ status: for example, a bank transaction, a meeting between friends, an argument between lovers. The seeming coherence and unity of an event is thus detached from the stream of ongoing social life (Yardley-Matwiejczuk 1997:1).

availability of play time inevitably varies according to work, school, sleep and other real world constraints. Moreover, “real world time” competes with game world time, where temporal flow varies between active and passive interaction with the game world. Game time is delineated by a series of parallel factors such as game speed, game pace, cut scenes, lag, time limits, story time, progress time, server time, world time, and nonlinear time phenomena such as forum activity and revision/replay (Tychsen and Hitchens 2009). In case of point, I observed a number of roleplaying events which were planned ahead of time via forum websites associated with the virtual reality *servers*¹⁰, and in many of these cases scheduling conflicts arose due to mismatched player availability or misunderstandings about what “time standard” was being used as the point of reference. In one example, ambiguity regarding the start time of a Halloween event on *Guild Wars 2* (whether the host meant for players to show up at 5 PM CST, PST, or *Server Time*¹¹) led to a several-hour-long misunderstanding. Other temporal conflicts in online RPGs include character aging and the appropriate duration of roleplay pregnancies.

Real world interference in the form of references, remarks, and/or memorials to real world individuals or events can threaten the solidarity of the magic circle and are therefore moderated by explicit policies which vary depending on the game and server but typically emphasize avoidance or limitation of *out-of-character*¹² (OOC) communication. OOC communication will be addressed in the subsection below.

Player vs. Character

¹⁰ Servers (definition): different types of “realms” on which a player-character can engage in the game’s world (Bates 2009:109).

¹¹ Server time (definition): standardized time according to an in-game clock which allows “people who are in different locations [to] use it as a point of reference for coordinating events” (Ceallach 2014).

¹²Out of character (definition): anything that a player says or does that is not spoken or done in-character, such as asking a rules question (Ciechanowski 2008).

The *avatar*¹³, hailing originally from the Sanskrit word for an incarnation of Vishnu, is the digital persona which a player embodies within the virtual world setting. Avatars are not an identical reflection of the person controlling them, but their customizable nature has led them to be interpreted as transparent reflections of the player's inner self (Boellstorff 2008:130). In online roleplaying games, the avatar becomes something more than a mere reflection, however; it becomes a *player character*¹⁴ (PC). Player characters are the chief actors within the game's narrative. Whether they are slaying dragons or acting out sexual fantasies, roleplayers "must be willing to 'bracket' their 'natural' selves and enact a fantasy self. They must lose themselves to the game," (McBirney 2004:415). Performing a player character requires roleplaying, exhibiting characteristics synonymous with "pretend play" and "improvised theater" (Sixma 2009:10). This emic distinction between *player character* and *player avatar* is reinforced by both administrators and players.

In one administrative example, a forum post for the *Neverwinter Nights* server *The Vast* offers advice to new players about how to avoid making a "Mary Sue." A Mary Sue is "an author avatar, wherein the writer creates an idealized version of him/ herself and sticks the resulting character into the story," (Jackson 2004). Mary Sues are frowned upon because they violate the premise of collaborative storytelling. First of all, they are avatars, not characters. As avatars, they cannot act as symbols of human potential in the same way that characters can. Second of all, as idealized avatars, Mary Sues are inhumanly perfect. No matter what challenges a mythic hero must face, their humanity is what makes them lovable; and their suffering, their imperfection, is what makes them human (Campbell and Moyers

¹³ Avatar (definition): the virtual embodiment of persons... used in many online worlds... a position from which the self encounters the virtual (Boellstorff 2008:128-29).

¹⁴ Player character (definition): any character that is played by a player, not the GM, enacting a fantasy self (Ciechanowski 2008; McBirney 2004:415).

1988:4-5). Other players cannot love a perfect character; they cannot love a Mary Sue.

“Playing a Mary Sue” is synonymous with bad storytelling, a deleterious attribute when the purpose of PCs in a roleplay environment and a primary source of their entertainment value is to drive the fictional narrative.

In one player example, an interviewee shared with me that learning “the very basics of roleplay” meant learning “the capability to separate [herself] from [her] own character.” Likewise, when other informants speak about skilled roleplayers whom they have known over the course of their tenure with online roleplaying games, they reliably tie the concept of “player skill” to that player’s capacity for fictional characterization.

To summarize this argument, players in online roleplaying games must navigate three separate identities: their “real” self, their online self/avatar (restricted in most settings to forums, private messages, and OOC chat), and their character(s) (McBirney 2004:415). Since it is not always readily apparent which identity is being expressed through the avatar at any given time, the premise of player/character separation creates a gap of potential ambiguity which players must negotiate to make the most of their roleplaying experience.

One domain within which this ambiguity bears particular significance is conflict – specifically conflict between two or more PCs. Conflict in online roleplaying games is generally classified as either Player vs. Environment (PvE)¹⁵ or Player vs. Player (PvP).¹⁶ PvE refers to “combat and activities in the game which are not focused on competing against other players to succeed;” it is the solo and cooperative play of game mechanics and story completion (GW2 Official Wiki). PvE players explore new territories, fight monsters, and

¹⁵ Player vs. Environment (definition): combat and activities in the game which are not focused on competing against other players to succeed (GW2 Official Wiki). It is the solo and cooperative play of game mechanics and story completion.

¹⁶ Player vs. Player (definition): conflict with other players. A specific type of PvP which transpires between characters as opposed to players is called Character vs. Character (CvC).

interact with non-player characters (NPCs), but they do not fight each other. The word “environment” in PvE does not refer to nature specifically but encompasses all pre-programmed obstacles including cultural constructions and NPCs. Conflicts embodied in PvE are generally invested with less emotion or severity than conflicts with other players. Conflict with other players, also known as competitive play, falls into a separate category called PvP. An additional level of conflict which can be observed in *Guild Wars 2* is World vs. World (WvW), which refers to large-scale PvP that takes place between the residents of competing servers (GW2 website).

PvE toes the line between game mechanics and roleplay when players attempt to level up their characters without concern for their character’s motivations for completing quests, entering dungeons, or hunting and killing monsters. Killing the same monsters repeatedly for no purpose other than leveling is called ‘*grinding*’¹⁷ or ‘farming experience’ and is discouraged on many *Neverwinter Nights* servers because it detracts from story progression.

PvP and WvW toe the line between game mechanics and roleplay when players decide to approach interpersonal conflict as an avatar acting within a game as opposed to a character working to progress its personal story. In the persistent virtual worlds of *Neverwinter Nights*, a further terminological distinction is made between Player vs. Player and Character vs. Character (CvC). PvP is outside the narrative and therefore disruptive to gameplay, while CvC may reasonably occur within the course of a fantasy storyline. Some servers which forbid PvP will still allow CvC because of its relevance to roleplay. Other servers present specific rules for notification, player consent, and character death regarding

¹⁷ Grinding/farming (definition): playing time spent doing repetitive tasks within a game to unlock a particular game item or to build the experience needed to progress smoothly through the game. Grinding most commonly involves killing the same set of opponents over and over in order to gain experience points or gold (Janssen).

CvC in order to maintain the continuity of the storyline and avoid *griefing*.¹⁸ Griefing is “purposefully engaging in activities to disrupt the gaming experience of other players,” a practice which has been analyzed in detail by Burcu Bakioglu (2009) and Richard Page (2012). Griefing can take a variety of forms, but one of those forms is player-killing. Player-killing typically involves an imbalance of power; the killer will attack other characters for experience or loot, prey on weaker characters, or wait for their victim to resurrect only to kill them repeatedly (Page 2012). Regulations governing CvC are written to protect player characters against griefing. An example of such regulations can be found on the *Neverwinter Nights* server *Thay*, where CvC is allowed on the conditions that the fight is initiated for a roleplay purpose and the player is notified via private message beforehand; CvC which does not follow server guidelines may be considered griefing and can result in the offending player being banned (Jechal 2009).

As demonstrated by *Thay*’s CvC policy which requires the player to notify his or her target via private message before initiating conflict, the primary way that player/character separation is expressed in online RPGs is through textual communication. In the persistent virtual worlds of *Neverwinter Nights* and *Guild Wars 2*, the primary mode of communication is through programmed “chat channels.” For *Neverwinter Nights*, these textual discourse channels are: talk, whisper, party, shout, tell, and DM¹⁹. For *Guild Wars 2*, the channels are: say, guild, party, squad, team, map, private, and emote. In both games, the choice of channel determines who will receive or “hear” the message. In addition to these channels, third party

¹⁸ Griefing (definition): purposefully engaging in activities to disrupt the gaming experience of other players (Bakioglu 2009). A common type of griefing is player-killing.

¹⁹ Gamemaster/Dungeon Master (definition): often described by players as “God-like,” the DM occupies a supreme status: he or she creates the worlds, plots, and scripts that become a make-believe setting for the game itself, plays the roles of “non-player-characters,” orchestrates encounters with hostile creatures... and so on (Waskul 2006: 20). A GM in [online] games is either an experienced volunteer player or an employee who enforces the game rules, banishing spammers, player killers and cheaters (Webster’s Online Dictionary).

websites offer downloadable chat programs to supplement the scripted communication *within the game*. One branch of programs which has seen increased use over the last decade is Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) or “voice chat” (Halloran 2011). Communication is further supported *outside of the game* through email, forums, and messenger programs like AIM, Yahoo, and Skype.

Given this extensive list of communication options, it becomes necessary for the successful online roleplayer to develop at least some proficiency with code switching. Code switching is pragmatically switching between languages or language registers for a number of potential purposes including but not limited to “emphasis, clarification, or addressee specification, or to gain or retain attention...” or “to construct imaginary... roles” (Paugh 2005:63). Despite the diversity of communication mediums, virtual world communication constrains itself to two central “codes” or registers: *in-character*²⁰ (IC) and out-of-character (OOC). IC refers to anything said by the character being performed, while OOC refers to anything said by the player through the avatar. IC and OOC communication can be designated in numerous ways.

First, specific channels may be assigned to an IC or OOC role. In my field experience, the *Neverwinter Nights* channels ‘tell’ and ‘DM’ are predominantly reserved for OOC communication because they are private, ‘shout’ for OOC communication because it is publically posted to all community members regardless of their location, ‘whisper’ for IC roleplay because it is semi-private but still visible to characters standing within close enough proximity, and both ‘talk’ and ‘party’ are ambiguous because they are public channels which address a limited audience yet are negotiable as communication mediums for either the

²⁰ In character (definition): speech and actions performed as if spoken or done by a character, much like an actor in a play (Ciechanowski 2008).

character or player. In *Guild Wars 2*, the OOC channels are ‘guild,’ ‘party,’ and ‘map,’ because they are publicly posted to all community members regardless of location and ‘private’ because it is private, while emote is used for IC roleplay and both ‘say’ and ‘squad’ are ambiguous for the same reason that ‘talk’ and ‘party’ are ambiguous on *Neverwinter Nights*: they are public channels which address a limited audience yet are negotiable as communication mediums for either the character or player.

Since the ‘talk’ channel in *Neverwinter Nights* and the ‘say’ channel in *Guild Wars 2* are both the most commonly and popularly used channels in each game and likewise the most ambiguous regarding the Player vs. Character separation, text features are regularly added to communication through these channels in order to reinforce the IC/OOC separation. This second manner of designating the separation between IC and OOC relies on the assumption that all chat is IC unless identified otherwise. The most common text features which I observed in my field research for identifying OOC chat in *Neverwinter Nights* is the use of double slash marks (//) before the OOC comment. In lower frequency, I also observed double reverse slash marks (\\) before the comment and double parentheses (()) surrounding the comment. In the chat window, these OOC messages would appear like this: “//OOC text,” “\\OOC text,” or “((OOC text)).” For example: “// sorry guys but I'm off to bed, it's 3ish am here.” In *Guild Wars 2*, the most common method of designating OOC chat which I observed is the aforementioned use of double parentheses (()) around the OOC text, brackets [] around the OOC text, or simply double parentheses ((before the comment. For example, “((Don't forget to idle move if you've been stationary for too long.))” With IC chat, the assumption that roleplay is taking place is reinforced through the use of nonverbal

expressions or *emotes*.²¹ Nonverbal character behavior in virtual worlds can be classified as either rhetorical (intentional) or non-rhetorical (unintentional) (Verhulsdonck and Morie 2009:6). Emotes are an example of rhetorical nonverbal communication, where the player gives textual evidence to convey the character's actions. In *Guild Wars 2*, emotes are designated through the /emote channel command and are posted immediately after the character name, while in *Neverwinter Nights* they are either placed between two asterisks * * or, in rare cases, between brackets []. Discourse examples from each game are provided in *illustration 1* and *illustration 2*.



Illustration 1: The *Neverwinter Nights* chat window is displayed on the bottom left side of the screen. In this example, the characters Aeon, Midnight, and Destiny are speaking and performing emotes IC in the “talk” channel. Aeon and Destiny are also speaking OOC using private messages called “tells.” Character names have been randomly generated using the 7th Sanctum Name Generator (<http://www.seventhsanctum.com/generate.php?Gename=fantasynamex>).

²¹ Emote (definition): a symbol or phrase, used in chat or in online games, such as the common *glee* or /slap, that represents an action or emotion. In some MMORPG's, emotes correspond to scripted animations of the character (Webster's Online Dictionary).



Illustration 2: The Guild Wars 2 chat window is displayed on the left side of the screen. In this example, multiple conversations are taking place synchronously across three channels. Sunknight, Dirk, Maverick, and Violet are speaking OOC in the guild channel. Sheol is speaking OOC in the say channel. Grail, Ruby, and Maxim are speaking IC in the say channel. And Sin, Maxin, Ruby, and Quake are speaking IC using the /emote command. Character names have been randomly generated using the 7th Sanctum Name Generator and names displayed over avatar heads have been concealed to protect player/character identities (<http://www.seventhsanctum.com/generate.php?Genname=fantasynameex>).

A third manner of separating IC and OOC chat is spatial. In *Neverwinter Nights*, PvE areas are generally assumed to be IC, while special rooms are designated for OOC chat. These rooms allow players to discuss real world issues and construct memorials to real world individuals without breaking the magic circle. In *Guild Wars 2*, PvE areas are generally assumed to be OOC unless designated otherwise by roleplaying events, allowing players to level up their characters without narrative consequences, while cities where leveling is a lesser concern are generally assumed to be IC.

Having introduced the linguistic ambiguity of IC/OOC which embodies the Player vs. Character conflict – the problem of separating the self and the character which is exemplified by the failed separation of a “Mary Sue” – let us take a moment to discuss the context in which this ambiguity appears; namely, speech acts. Coherent discourse analysis requires the

researcher to break discourse into discrete units. O’Connell’s “discourse events” and Salazar’s “speech acts” in virtual worlds constitute the same unit of measure: a “body of text that proceeds from a sole source at a time-stamped start point and ends at publication in a text chat window where it is received by one or more sinks,” or in simpler terms, a single post submitted by a player to the chat window (O’Connell, et al. 2010; Salazar 2008:5). The structure of a speech act contributes to linguistic ambiguity in virtual space since these units of text are limited to a finite number of typed characters and do not become visible to the other players until the point of publication.

A final note to make about the Player vs. Character separation is the role of the Dungeon Master (DM). Just as the player’s identity is purposefully delineated from the identity of the PC, so the DM is purposefully delineated from the characters he/she contributes to the world either through scripting or direct control. Characters controlled by a DM or by environmental programming are called non-player characters (NPCs) (Waskul 2006:20). There is disagreement among players about how to treat NPCs compared to PCs. This is largely due to the ambiguity of the NPC, who can act as a character in the storyline but who can also be little more than an interactive element of the environment (refer back to my discussion of PvE vs. PvP). For many players, how they interact with NPCs depends on whether or not a DM is observing or participating in the roleplay.

Game vs. Story

I introduced this subsection previously as a combination of the work/leisure and performance/play ambiguities. I did so because, while certain traits might be attributed to each of these four notions as abstract entities, in practice the separation is far from clear. Turner (1982) points out in his discussion of ritual performance that the distinction between

work and leisure is in fact an artifact of the industrial revolution (32). Among the definitions of work he gives are: the “expenditure of energy, striving, application of effort to some purpose,” and “things done, achievement, things made, books or piece of literary or musical composition” (30). The achievement-driven nature of online RPGs and the narrative production of roleplay both abide these definitions despite the fact that video games traditionally fall within the scope of modern leisure. Stef Aupers (2007) likewise portrays the blurring of work and play, in his case through the lens of character professions (gathering and production trade skills) and the dedication players show toward these professions in online RPG settings, contributing several hours per day to harvesting resources and crafting trade objects for minimal reward beyond the labor itself (16). Moreover, in some ways, roleplaying limits video game achievement in favor of literary production. Time spent roleplaying is time lost for obtaining experience, items, and resources. Roleplayers must consciously sacrifice their achievement time in order to socialize with other players and construct shared narratives. In this manner, they have altered the rules and objectives of the game as written by the production company, but can roleplay really be considered work? Schultz and Lavenda (2009) acknowledge that play, ritual, and art are all creative activities; however, they highlight minor yet still meaningful differences to distinguish the separate categories; they argue that art lies separate from play because it has rules, and ritual lies separate from play because ritual reasserts the status quo while play can be used to challenge it (194). The magic circle of play in virtual worlds has many rules, some explicit and others socially transmitted; the games also allow players to produce aesthetic products in both textual and avatar form. As a case of point, Tosca and Klastrop (2009) use fashion in *World of Warcraft* to illustrate the time, effort, and cultural meaning which is instilled in the

production of character aesthetics, while Christina Liao (2013) connects the art of avatar construction to both aesthetics and performance. Moreover, Huizinga's (1980 c1949) theory of play situates art and ritual alike as products of play, the order of which tends to express itself in beautiful aesthetics (11). By these measures, is virtual gameplay art? Then again, virtual worlds are liminoid spaces; and being marginal, they provide functions to reinforce their status quo at the same time that they serve as social commentary. Can we therefore classify virtual gameplay as ritual? These questions underscore yet another pressing ambiguity which players must navigate.

In large part, that is because gameplay is not a single, objective experience. Gameplay means multiple things to each and every individual, and what one player desires or gleans from the game is considerably different from another. For example, consider Richard Bartle's taxonomy of MUD players. Multi-user dungeons (MUDs) are the predecessors of online RPGs, whose participants Bartle (1996) has grouped into four types: achievers, explorers, socializers, and killers. Using his typology as a template for roleplaying behaviors, we can expect play, work, art, and ritual to differ in interpretation based upon the player's intent. Consider that for a socializer, the initiation task of completing quests might be work, while the same task might be play for the achiever. On the other hand, for the explorer, slaying monsters might be ritual, while the same task might be art for the killer. Players manipulate these interpretations by putting forth productive effort to achieve a desired end. Whether the result of that effort is entertainment (play), economic gain (work), a stimulating product (art), or a socially meaningful end which enforces the status quo (ritual), players will likely experience all four aspects of gameplay at one point or another.

The common thread among these endeavors is that, for all roleplayers, their virtual activities are accompanied by collaborative storytelling which takes place inside a video game.

Despite the importance of the Real World vs. Game World and Player vs. Character ambiguities, it is therefore this third domain of uncertainty which my informants seemed to find the most difficult to navigate and the most compelling to offer their insights on. The conflict of Game vs. Story manifested in the interviews as a pair of competing ideals: 1) as games, online RPGs should be fun; they should not contain elements that are boring or upsetting; and 2) as environments for collaborative storytelling, online RPGs should create meaningful experiences; they should not be silly, light, or cheap. Both ideals are subjective measures. The intersection of these two ideals creates a plane of possible entertainment, where both values are in some cases complimentary and in other cases at odds with one another. All activities within the virtual world fall somewhere on this theoretical plane which I have displayed below in *figure 1*.

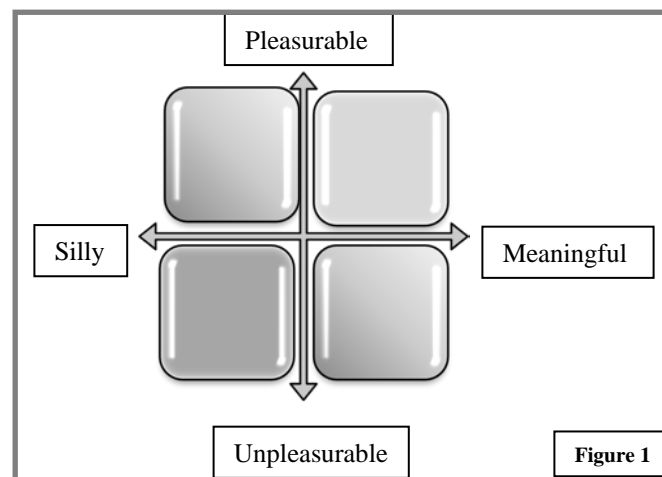


Figure 1: All activities within the virtual world fall somewhere on this theoretical plane. The X axis shows the spectrum of silly to meaningful, while the Y axis shows the spectrum of unpleasant to pleasant.

Summary

The conflict of Real World vs. Game World is the most evident conflict which many researchers see. It is this conflict which begs the question: why study the worlds of online RPGs when they are, after all, imaginary? To answer this question, I refer back to Huizinga's (1980 c1949) statement that, regarding the magic circle, "there is no formal difference between play and ritual" (10). Consecrated space abides by its own rules, be it the chapel of a "real world" church or the pixels of a digital temple. The people who interact in these consecrated spaces and the meanings they generate are no different in quality; only their manner of interaction differs, and the structured agency which this medium allows. The Real World vs. Game World ambiguity does create a challenge for roleplayers and researchers alike, but it is a necessary challenge, for through it we begin to understand what it means to be human – constantly inhabiting the ambiguous space between material and symbolic realities.

The conflict of Player vs. Character is likewise the most evident conflict which many players see. It is this conflict which reinforces how virtual interaction is, at its core, a human endeavor. PvP (conflict with other players) is a more emotionally invested activity than PvE (conflict with the elements of the game) because social interaction in online RPGs is more meaningful than interaction with the programmed components of the game. No character's story can be told in isolation; instead, players seek out roleplaying events to play together and collaboratively compose their character narratives. The very challenge of distinguishing between IC and OOC discourse, alongside the social protocols developed to navigate this challenge, point to the fact that discourse is an essential aspect of the RPG experience. The stigma of the "Mary Sue" likewise reinforces the importance of characters who are believable; who are emotionally accessible; who are not, but could be, real. The performance

of mythic characters, then, as with any mythic pursuit, is the social endeavor of a community, and the ambiguity of Player vs. Character a challenge which must be answered communally.

The conflict of Game vs. Story applies each of the aforementioned ambiguities and reaches beyond them to the deeper concern of player performance and researcher interpretations alike. This third conflict begs the questions: why perform rites of passage in persistent virtual worlds? What is their function? What is their appeal? What is the relationship between online RPGs as games and online RPGs as socially devised narratives?

To reiterate my thesis statement in regard to *figure 1*, I contend that rites of passage in online roleplaying games serve to expose community values, establish meaning, and reinforce social ties among community members. Regardless of whether the ritual events are perceived as pleasurable, unpleasurable, meaningful, or even silly; regardless of whether participation is perceived as work, play, ritual, or art; I intend to demonstrate that roleplaying rites of passage for transition events takes the event itself (birth, coming of age, marriage, parenthood, initiation, retirement, and death) and situates it closer to the meaningful pole of the spectrum than where it began. Meaningful roleplay offers a stabilizing response to tensions which are provoked by conflicts between real world and game world, player and character, and game and story. Meaningful roleplay offers a safe outlet for expressing other, more personal tensions. Meaningful roleplay offers a mythic lens of interpretation and resolution to the uncertainties and deficiencies of contemporary life. Finally, meaningful roleplay exposes community values tangled up with each rite of passage listed above, allowing participating roleplayers to strengthen their social bonds as they navigate the tensions of ambiguity from one stable identity to the next.

II. Review of Relevant Literature

“Fantasy gaming is a social world, luxurious in imagination and filled with mysterious delights. This is a world of distant keeps, regal castles, glistening starships, fierce hippogriffs, rainbow dragons, and fiery jewels. It is also a world of dank dungeons, villainous necromancers, green slime, and omnipresent death. It is a world of dreams and nightmares; yet unlike these constructions of our sleeping mind, these worlds are not experienced in a state of reverie or unconsciousness. These worlds are experienced collectively – they are shared fantasies.” (Fine 1983:72)

In this chapter I will establish a definition of virtual worlds, review the history of online RPGs both as games and as subjects of scholarly pursuit, introduce the practices and important persons of cyberethnography, and discuss samples of current research as they relate to the virtual rites of passage which I will analyze in later chapters.

Defining Persistent Virtual Worlds

Every scholar seems to have their own opinion as to what defines a virtual world, but for the sake of my research I have compiled the following definition: virtual worlds are persistent, predominantly synchronous networks of people, represented as avatars, which exist in shared virtual environments that are perceived either through textual description or sensory experience and are facilitated by networked computers to enable people to participate from different physical locations. I borrowed the initial skeleton of my definition from Mark Bell (2008:2). I had to adjust it, however, because Bell demands a sense of “common time” that is shared between players and cannot be paused, while some online roleplaying games

and *massively multiplayer online roleplaying games*²² (MMORPGs) relevantly possess both *synchronous*²³ and *asynchronous*²⁴ components. Players may, for example, interact in a synchronous manner within the game itself yet post supplemental roleplay material to a community forum to plan events or elaborate on details of a social exchange which could not be typed or arranged with proper alacrity and efficiency in “real time”. In such contexts, the story is not being paused and common time is not being interrupted – the social, asynchronous actions on the forum are devised in addition to the synchronous roleplay, providing further depth and richness of detail to the story either prior to roleplay or retroactively. I therefore adjusted my definition to require that virtual worlds are *predominantly* synchronous, permitting the inclusion of asynchronous interactions so long as they supplement and do not replace the synchronous components. Bell’s definition also fails to represent the textual and interactive/immersive elements of virtual worlds, so I augmented mine with fragments of the definitions provided by Bruce Damer (2008:2) and Ralph Schroeder (2008:2). One supplemental definition of virtual worlds to consider is anthropologist Tom Boellstorff’s (2008) definition that virtual worlds are: “places of human culture realized by computer programs through the Internet” (17). The three key features of such virtual worlds are that they are “(1) places, (2) inhabited by persons, and (3) enabled by online technologies” (17). My definition shares these three priorities with Boellstorff, although I hope through the distinctions I have made to resolve some of the objections which have been raised in regard to the generality of Boellstorff’s definition. After all, it is the

²² Massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (definition): any story-driven online video game in which a player, taking on the persona of a character in a virtual or fantasy world, interacts with a large number of other players (Dictionary.com 2013). MMORPGs have larger server populations than regular online RPGs.

²³ Synchronous communication (definition): [communication where] “common time” allows for mass group activities and other coordinated social activities...[and] an awareness of space, distance and co-existence of other participants found in real life spaces giving a sense of environment (Bell 2008:3).

²⁴ Asynchronous communication: [communication where] participants need not be on-line at the same time, and can collect and respond to messages at a time which is personally convenient... (Fox and Roberts 1999:645).

persistence of these virtual worlds and the social networks harbored within them which make virtual worlds so worthy of consideration, not simply as liminal or liminoid spaces, but as coherent cultures with their own internal social structures and self-contained rites of passage.

History

To understand online roleplaying games as they exist today, it is important to follow their progression to the present from the tabletop simulation war and strategy games of the 1960s-70s. These provided the foundation from which, out of dissatisfaction with existing games, Dave Arneson and E. Gary Gygax devised the rules for *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). Published in 1974, *D&D* was the first fantasy RPG with established rules, offering an innovative, collaborative alternative to existing styles of competitive gaming (Fine 1983:14-15). Gary Fine's analysis of the psychology, structure, demographics, and culture of *D&D* in *Shared Fantasy* (1983) likewise distinguishes itself as one of the earliest examples of social science research on fantasy RPGs.

D&D uses a dice system to represent the forces of luck and chance in collaborative storytelling. "These dice rolls," as Fine explains, "which determine (through the rules) who is killed or the extent of injury, provide some formal structure for an otherwise *very* flexible game" (7). In addition to combat, skills and saving throws in *D&D* allow players to roll for just about any imagined experience – from the likeliness of success at scaling a dungeon wall to the physical effects of imbibing alcohol. To accomplish this, the basic *D&D* system utilizes a core set of seven dice: a d4 (tetrahedron), a d6 (hexahedron), a d8 (octahedron), two d10s (decahedrons) which can be rolled together to determine a percentage out of 100, a d12 (dodecahedron), and a d20 (icosahedron). A photograph of a standard *D&D* dice set is provided below in *illustration 3*.



Illustration 3: *The D&D system utilizes a core set of seven dice. From left to right: d4, d6, d8, 2d10, d12, d20.*

D&D was still in its infancy when Donald Woods designed the first text-based RPG for the computer: *Adventure* (Aupers 2007:5). Shortly afterward, the 1980s saw Trubshaw and Bartle invent an early form of virtual worlds called multi-user dungeons (MUDs). Not only did these communities meet all three of Boellstorff's requirements for virtual worlds; they were places shared by persons through online technologies; but they exhibited many of the cultural behaviors which can be observed contemporarily in MMORPGs. Describing MUDs of the mid 1990s, Sherry Turkle (1997) writes: "players create characters who have casual and romantic sex, hold jobs, attend rituals and celebrations, fall in love and get married" (73). Turkle's research during this time focuses on roleplaying as a medium for players to explore alternative identities and the various, often subverted aspects of their psyches, laying the groundwork for subsequent research on gender and identity politics. Julian Dibbell (1998), also writing about MUDs, explores virtual worlds as scenes of culturally marginalized behaviors such as sexuality and crime. Dibbell discerned from his research that the meaning of such behaviors – for example, virtual rape and its impact on the victimized players – cannot be understood exclusively by either real world or game world definitions, but only in the ambiguous space where these two worlds interact, the space of

human emotions and ethos. It is here, at this intersection of real and virtual realities, where symbolic meaning is constructed and performed.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the first online roleplaying games followed MUDs into the virtual field. One of these games was *Neverwinter Nights*. Premiering in 1991, *Neverwinter Nights* originally charged \$6 an hour to play (Etheredge 2006:22). This classic version of *Neverwinter Nights* was hosted by AOL from 1991 until 1997 when it was taken offline despite player protestations (Medar 2001). The current version of *Neverwinter Nights*, which is the version I am using for my thesis, was released in 2002 and follows the mechanics of *D&D 3rd edition*, including a digitalized version of *D&D*'s dice role system as discussed above (Blevins 2002). The newer version of *Neverwinter Nights* has been studied by Hilde Corneliussen (2005) in order to explore the presentation and construction of gender in video games.

Returning to our abbreviated history of virtual worlds, the year classic *Neverwinter Nights* was taken offline also marks the release of *Ultima Online* (UO) as the original MMORPG (Aupers 2007:6). *Ultima Online* charged \$10 per month to play (Etheredge 2006:23). UO's popularity lit the way for other MMORPGs including *Everquest*, *Lineage*, and *Dark Age of Camelot* (Aupers 2007: 6; Etheredge 2006:23). These games, with *Everquest* (EQ) in the position of preeminence having reigned as the most popular MMORPG in its genre for over five years, witnessed the dawn of a rising interest in video games among social scientists (Etheredge 2006:23). The fluidity of real world and game world economics in EQ, for example, led to an avenue of research into virtual world economies (Castronova 2004; Castronova, et al. 2009; Kushner 2007). In addition to

economic studies, other EQ scholars have taken a thoughtful comb to the game's real world demographics (Griffiths, et al. 2004a; Griffiths, et al. 2004b) and psychology.

Paying monthly subscription fees to play in MMORPGs was the norm at this point in virtual world history, as you can see from the examples above. The release of *Guild Wars* in 2005 altered this aspect of the subculture; here, monumentally, was a commercial online roleplaying game whose producers made it globally available without a subscription fee (Etheredge 2006:12). Three expansions followed the release of the initial game: *Guild Wars: Factions*, *Guild Wars: Nightfall*, and *Guild Wars: Eye of the North*. Game updates for *Guild Wars* as recently as August 2013 have kept this persistent virtual world alive despite an exceeding number of players migrating to the sequel *Guild Wars 2*, released one year prior. *Guild Wars 2*, like its predecessor, does not require users to pay a subscription fee. Since *Guild Wars 2* is a new and thus far unstudied member of the MMORPG family, I have chosen to use one of the *Guild Wars 2* roleplaying servers as a secondary field site in order to establish a comparative basis between this game and my data collected from *Neverwinter Nights*, a veteran game of more than a decade.

To conclude this historical review, let us look at the titan of MMORPGs: *World of Warcraft*. Released in 2004, within three years *World of Warcraft* (WoW) boasted more than 8.5 million subscribers across four continents, moving MMORPGs further into the realm of the mainstream than ever before (Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008:4). Multiple books and innumerable journal articles have been published about *WoW*, addressing a myriad of virtually cultural attributes. As my primary source of theoretical material for rites of passage in online RPGs, I will discuss several of these *WoW* references in the subsections below.

Cyberethnography

Naming the practice of anthropology in virtual worlds is much like defining the virtual worlds themselves, in the sense that the specific names and definitions are predisposed to change with every researcher one reads. To credit the interdisciplinary perspectives of sociologists and other social scientists who have contributed valuable ethnographic (participant observation) data to this field in addition to the anthropologists, I have elected to use the term ‘cyberethnography’ in place of ‘virtual anthropology’ for the purposes of this thesis. With that being said, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff’s research into the persistent virtual communities of *Second Life* – whose chapters span topics such as the life course, gender, sexuality, kinship, grieving, and social networking beyond the virtual world – is nevertheless one prominent source of inspiration from which I draw both comparative material and methodological insight.

William Bainbridge, one of the sociologists (and a religious studies scholar) alluded to above, is a particularly prolific source within the field of cyberethnography. Among the works he has authored is a *World of Warcraft* ethnography (2010). Bainbridge has also published several articles which apply to the subject matter covered within this thesis including virtual religion and digital memorialization (Bainbridge 2007; Bainbridge 2011; Bainbridge and Bainbridge 2007).

In addition to Boellstorff and Bainbridge, my methodological approach to cyberethnography has been motivated in large part by two additional authors: Sandra Lopez-Rocha (2010) and Alex Golub (2010). Lopez-Rocha’s research on Chilean migrants to England utilizes the modality of cyberethnography; she conducts participant observation through email and chat programs, applies document analysis to asynchronous material (websites), distributes questionnaires, and works with focus groups. Two of the advantages

which she attributes to asynchronous communication are the flexibility and control over their participation which this type of interaction offers informants. Like Lopez-Rocha, Alex Golub supports the use of asynchronous material in cyberethnographic research. He argues that what makes games like *WoW* so engaging is not the immersive environmental qualities but rather the networks of meaning and emotional connection which players build through collaborative projects, projects which may not necessarily stay confined to a single virtual world but instead spill over to guild websites, vent servers, and even the actual lives of the players. If a cyberethnographer wishes to paint an accurate picture of their informants' lives, he argues, they must follow the project into all of these domains through a multi-sited ethnographic approach. It is because of these two authors that I have included in my definition of virtual worlds the condition that persistent virtual worlds may have asynchronous components so long as the worlds themselves are predominantly synchronous.

One final resource which has proven significant to the formation of my ethnographic methodology is *Analyzing Qualitative Data* (Bernard and Ryan 2010). I have used this text as an aid during data processing, following the authors' models of coding for codebooks and Key Word in Context (KWIC) analysis.

My resources for virtual discourse analysis are discussed above under the subheading *Player vs. Character*.

Rites of Passage Part 2 – Reference Material

Characters in online roleplaying games typically do not begin as children. Instead, they are born in playable adult forms, with their closest approximation to infancy being found in their mechanical weakness. Most characters, that is, begin at level one; they must develop both their skills and social lives through advancement in the game. Initially, this

process parallels the player's secondary socialization into the virtual world culture. That is, players in persistent virtual worlds must "learn how to operate in the new environment and effectively interact with other residents" (Boostrom 2008:11). New players must not only learn the explicit rules but the unspoken expectations and dialect. In this way, new players and new characters experience initiation in a parallel context. Although rites of passage which affect the player (as opposed to those performed by the character) will not be discussed in the body of this thesis, more information about how roleplayers are socialized into virtual world cultures can be found in T.L. Taylor's "Play Between Words" (2006).

Despite the fact that rites of passage which affect the player are not a concern of this thesis, understanding rites of passage within the magic circle does require a foundational understanding of the player's real world journey from "newbie" to roleplaying veteran. Qiaolei Jiang divides the "gamer's lifecycle," into four stages: Confusion (0-1 month), Excitement (2-4 months), Involvement (2 months - 4+ years), and Boredom (2-4 months) (Qiaolei 2008:27). Each stage poses certain implications for the player character(s). For example, Qiaolei observes more focus on romance and social roleplay in the later stages of the gamer lifecycle than the earlier stages. These stages are measured experientially, by shifts in player's feelings, behaviors, and values over time rather than according to the player's chronological age.

The emphasis of symbolic age over chronological age is not unique to virtual cultures. Susan Rasmussen (1997) has observed among the Tuareg of northern Niger, for example, that marriage, childbirth, place of residence, and the cultivation of social reserve are at least as important as chronological age for assigning individuals to age-related roles.

To reflect the altered, symbolic life course of roleplaying characters, I have organized the rites of passage in this thesis to begin not with childhood but with leveling up through classes and professions from initiation through retirement. Next I move into social life with marriage and sexuality. Following marriage is the subsection for pregnancy and associated discussions of playing children in fantasy RPG settings. Penultimately, I look at traditional mortuary rites in conjunction with resurrection and undeath. I conclude by summarizing the patterns of behavior which my thesis has revealed and identify avenues for future research.

Initiation to Retirement

Playing in online MMORPGs, whether or not the player intends to participate in roleplay, begins with making a character. The process of character building follows a fixed structure which allows players to set their gender, appearance, and intended career trajectory. In *Neverwinter Nights*, character careers are called classes; in *Guild Wars 2*, they are called professions. Careers are important in online RPGs because they are *paths of becoming*. Characters begin play at level one, and each level afterward is a miniature rite of initiation embedded in game mechanics. A low level character is not a complete character; it is limited by what it can do, where it can go, and what it can buy/use. When a character raises their level, they unlock new items which can be bought/used, new skills which can be performed, and new places where they can travel without threat of immediate defeat. Careers describe the specific means by which a character can advance in level. All characters increase their level by gaining experience points, which they do by performing such tasks as completing quests or fighting monsters. Yet some careers are geared more toward certain activities over others. That is, some careers are better suited to close combat while others are suited to ranged combat; some are suited to healing allies while others are suited to opening locks.

Downloadable content for *Neverwinter Nights* has expanded the list of classes available, but the basic list which a player may choose from consists of: barbarian, bard, cleric, druid, fighter, monk, paladin, ranger, rogue, sorcerer, and wizard (Corneliussen 2005:11). This list is borrowed from the list of core classes in *D&D 3rd edition*. Original *Guild Wars* offers players six professions to choose from: warrior, ranger, necromancer, monk, mesmer, and elemental (Etheredge 2006:53), while *Guild Wars 2* has removed monk and added the professions engineer, guardian, and thief (Guild Wars 2 website). Choice of class influences roleplay and experience gain, but it also poses differing degrees of difficulty depending upon the type of class being played. Magic-users, for example, are more difficult to play at mid-levels, which explains Castronova's (2004) observation that EQ players will pay more real world money to purchase an advanced level magic-using avatar than an avatar leveled in a more martially-oriented class (192-193). The cultural importance of character careers as *paths of becoming*, to this extent where players will buy and sell advanced level characters for real world money, can moreover be interpreted as both a reflection and critique of America's capitalist economy. As a reflection, the importance of character careers mirrors the American myth of the "self-made entrepreneur," the belief that a man or woman can achieve any status in our society according to the amount of work they put forth, the amount of money they make, and the professional status they obtain. As a critique, Stef Aupers (2007) argues that the popularity and significance of character careers, themselves a reflection of capitalist concerns, function to challenge American capitalism by allowing players the freedom to choose their career paths, control their schedules, and engage directly with production and the consumer community. By doing so, online RPGS create a career

utopia in the leisure sphere which symbolically opposes the alienation of labor and product which many players encounter in the work sphere.

Among roleplayers, the mechanical progression of leveling up within a class or profession is paralleled in roleplay by the character's social development from untested adept to experienced master. For players and characters alike, this journey is one of "learning" (Bainbridge 2010:87). Characters gain mechanical experience as they learn about the world and improve their fighting skills by slaying monsters and completing quests, repetitive activities which have become so ritualized in online RPGs that a low level character in any fantasy RPG can expect to exterminate their share of vermin and run errands for local NPCs (Gazzard and Peacock 2011). Characters gain social experience as they learn how to cooperate in parties to complete quests and the nuances of their careers through master-apprentice roleplay.

Academic writing about leveling up and rites of initiation in online RPGs generally focuses on the player as opposed to the character. Bainbridge's (2010) chapter about "learning" is the best exception to this rule. Otherwise, beyond the bounds of cyberethnography, George Weckman's (1970) article about initiation offers many useful symbols for analyzing initiation rites.

At the other end of the career spectrum, when a character has progressed as far as they can within their class or profession, the player is left at an impasse. Will their character change career trajectories? Will they focus on other aspects of roleplay such as marriage or child-rearing? Will they support new characters as a master/teacher/mentor figure? Or will the character retire? Retirement of a character can mean the end of playing the character, a reversible and symbolic death as opposed to a permanent and literal one; retirement can also

mean the character's intentional choice to step back from adventuring and perform the social role of a retiree. In this latter capacity, retirement roleplay may be compared to and contrasted with real world retirement studies such as the work by Mark Luborsky (1994).

From first level to maximum; whether that means 1-20, 1-40, or 1-80 depending on the game and server; initiation and retirement manifest as both rites of passage and anomalous stages of the life course. "Chapter IV" will analyze them in both regards.

Marriage and Sexuality

Deviance in virtual worlds can take many forms, but one of the more controversial subjects within roleplay communities is sexuality. MacCallum-Steward and Parsler (2008) have observed that "many players are dissuaded from role-play because of its perceived connection with sexual activity and cybersex" (237). Partly, this dissuasion reflects hegemonic and religiously influenced values; partly, it reflects personal preference. Among the arguments in favor of roleplaying sexual content are the comparable safety of exploration and freedom of choice which the internet entails and the claim that mediated exhibitionism contributes to a greater body politic seeking to redefine gender and aesthetic preconceptions (Jones 2010). Beyond a difference in values, however, sexual content in online RPGs risks something which the same content in films or novels does not: victimization. Since Sherry Turkle's (1997) and Julian Dibbell's (1998) early work on rape and assault in MUDs, age and consent have become significant points of tension in online RPGs, tension which further stigmatizes the at times prevalent practice of cybersex.

Please note that in roleplaying communities there is a meaningful difference between cybersex and social roleplay. Cybersex has been defined by cyberethnographers as "social interaction between at least two persons who are exchanging real time digital messages in

order to become sexually aroused and satisfied,” while social roleplay abides by the extra condition that sexual or romantic activity must be contextualized within deeper character narratives (Brown 2012:262). Story-driven social roleplay is also known as erotic roleplay (ERP)²⁵. ERP does not represent a universal standard in persistent virtual worlds, and is still quite the contentious topic amid fantasy roleplayers; nevertheless, ERP subcultures can be found in nearly every online RPG.

Just as there is a difference between cybersex and ERP, there is another important difference between ERP communities and fantasy roleplaying communities. ERP communities manage social roleplay through a combination of written and unwritten rules of sexual conduct which prioritize mutual consent and respect of personal limits. Ashley Brown’s (2012) study of ERP in *World of Warcraft* and Tjarda Sixma’s (2009) study of a BDSM community in *Second Life* identify explicit rules for ERP regarding obtaining OOC consent, posting limits in character profiles which other players should respect, using safe words such as “fade to black” to discontinue sexual activities while leaving the social storyline intact, and avoiding pedophilia (I will explore this fourth criterion further in the subsection *Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Coming of Age*). Roleplaying communities which are not ERP communities manage social roleplaying in different ways depending upon the community. Many control for it by requiring all players on the server to be over 18-years-of-age or by asking players to constrain erotic roleplay to private messages. The restriction of ERP to private messages can be seen in Bainbridge’s (2012) ethnography of *WoW*, where he observes that ERP conversations were “quite rare on public chat channels,” during the window of his research, as they were carried out instead primarily via whispers and private

²⁵ Erotic roleplay (definition): “social interaction between at least two persons who are exchanging real time digital messages in order to become sexually aroused and satisfied,” with the condition that sexual or romantic activity must be contextualized within deeper character narratives (Brown 2012:262).

party chat (212). Other roleplaying groups will warn or punish players severely for transgressing beyond fixed ceilings for social roleplay. On the *Neverwinter Nights* server *Bruehawk*, for example, official policy includes the following statement: “Cyber-sex, cybering, or any other explicit description of sexual activity is prohibited and subject to an immediate key-ban” (Monkeylord 2009). ERP policies on both fantasy and social servers reflect a growing sensitivity toward internet victimization since the crisis events which plagued MUDs of the 1980s and 90s (Dibbell 1998; Turkle 1997).

Another way that roleplaying servers manage social roleplay, as my thesis argues, is using rites of passage such as weddings and births to make sexual and romantic roleplay meaningful, so as to reassert stability and reformed social bonds within the RPG community. The unifying and stabilizing role of marriage can be interpreted as transference from contemporary American culture, where it is believed that “sexual intercourse is legitimate and proper only between husband and wife” (Schneider 1968:38). Although four decades have passed since Schneider analyzed the American kinship system, marriage is still a powerful symbol. Its transference to online roleplaying environments is exemplified by the prevalence of “traditional” weddings in online RPGS, and is even reinforced by the challenge of deviant ones. In the case of deviant weddings, as with Max Gluckman’s (1963) rites of rebellion in Africa, the institutionalized expression of social tensions in fact “renews the unity of the system” as I will discuss further in “Chapter V” (112).

A second interesting parallel can be made between the use of marriage and death by roleplayers to make roleplay meaningful and anthropologist John Borneman’s (1996) interpretation of Foucault’s “symbolics of blood” and “analytics of sexuality” (216). Foucault’s premise, which Borneman employs as the focus of his discussion, is that “a

discourse on sexuality and life has replaced one centered on marriage and death” in modern societies since the nineteenth century (216). Borneman’s counterargument favors a return to the symbolics of blood – of marriage and its relation to death and closure as opposed to its relation to sexuality and choice – as the focus of anthropological discourse (217). More to the point, he proposes a holistic vision of marriage which recognizes the associations between marriage and endings as well as marriage and children and new beginnings. Character marriage is deeply rooted to both endings and beginnings in fantasy RPGs – it offers a way to conclude character storylines without killing those characters at the same time that it opens the door for new familial connections – and is therefore complimentary to Borneman’s framework of analysis.

More than mere transference as reflected in the “white wedding” archetype, marriage in virtual worlds is a powerful symbol which online roleplaying cultures appropriate and modify to fit their own semiotic schema and pragmatics. For example, when Janet LeValley (1997) examines the virtual reality *WorldsAway Dreamscape*, she notices that many typical wedding accoutrements such as cakes, flowers, and rings have been discarded. Instead, common marriage practices include the exchange of avatar heads to represent shared perspectives and symbolically meaningful keys labeled “key-to-my-heart” (123). When Cristin Etheridge (2006) examines a *Guild Wars* marriage, she notices behaviors unique to the virtual world setting such as hiring musicians for the wedding according to their profession as well as their musical talent – requested entertainers included 2 mesmer violin players and 6 ranger flautists (118-119). As for *World of Warcraft*’s social roleplay, despite the contention mentioned above, MacCallum-Steward and Parsler (2008) concede that “many successfully role-played acts concern the gradual growth or relationships culminating in

weddings, break-ups, or even virtual ‘births’ (237). The dangerously marginal position of ERP among roleplayers is thus juxtaposed by the popularity of marriage roleplay.

Meanwhile, the subject of birth as the product of sexuality and marriage roleplay leads into the next subsection of this chapter.

Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Coming of Age

Character pregnancy unfolds in many respects as a continuation of the discourse about cybersex. Pregnancy is, after all, the consequence of social roleplay, and child characters which are born through this process force players to deal with the difficult question of how to handle children in fantasy RPG settings. The problem of children in fantasy RPG settings offers challenges in two general domains: (1) game mechanics, and (2) roleplaying children.

The game mechanics of character pregnancy and childbirth differ from game to game. In fantasy RPGs, hypersexualized avatar bodies (Corneliussen 2005) and the goal-driven rather than socially-driven mechanics of the game make pregnancy difficult to embody. Custom scripts on the *Neverwinter Nights* server *Argentum Regio* allow lycanthropes to mate and create infant NPCs as part of an annual quest sequence, but while the server is in beta these scripts only apply to a small portion of the server population; moreover, this kind of programming stands as the exception, not the rule (*Argentum Regio* wiki). Fantasy RPGs rarely allow players the option of making child characters – the closest approximation is the child-sized races of halflings and gnomes in *Neverwinter Nights* and height manipulation in *Guild Wars 2*. Limiting the range of character avatars to adult bodies restricts how young player characters can realistically be.

A better virtual world for the examination of pregnancy and child scripting is *Second Life (SL)*. Lomanowska and Guitton's (2014) ethnography of pregnancy and childbirth in *SL* reveals a developed commercial system for playing pregnancy including but not limited to pregnancy tests, pregnancy probability simulators, avatar bodies at each month of pregnancy, and birthing centers. Child avatars are also available for play.

Recognizing that the game mechanics of pregnancy are challenging enough in fantasy RPGs, the roleplay of children is unfortunately even more so. Concerns regarding roleplaying children emphasize danger – both within the real and virtual worlds.

Real world danger relates primarily to pedophilia, as exemplified by the ERP rule mentioned above and the precedent set by sexual predators in MUDs (Brown 2012). To revisit the *Player vs. Character* distinction explored in “Chapter I,” the online self is one of three identities which the player must switch between; it is a performed identity. Because it is impossible to confirm whether the player performing such an identity is actually an adult, cybersex fosters certain age-related tensions in addition to its existing animosity. The risk of sexual activity among child players and the subsequent legal responsibility which they evoke is referenced by several *Neverwinter Nights* servers as the reason behind their ERP policies, the *Bruehawk* server's immediate-ban-for-cybersex policy among them.

The risk of child *players* notwithstanding, the risk of cybersex between child *characters* fosters just as much if not more resistance. That is not to say it does not happen. Tom Boellstorff's (2008) ethnography of *Second Life* presents examples of residents who roleplay as children for sexual purposes. Regardless, the possibility of pedophilia roleplay is the first significant danger posed by the presence of children in fantasy RPG settings. Historical plausibility aside, this type of pedophilia roleplay goes one step further than child

pornography, which is also illegal in our day and age, because players involved in pedophilia roleplay are not only observers but participants in the illegal act.

The second danger is environmental. Fantasy settings are inherently dangerous. MacCallum-Steward (2008) identifies World War I as a primary source of inspiration for *World of Warcraft*, and McBirney (2004) interprets *Diablo II* through the lens of mercenaries and barbarians in Medieval Europe, but no matter which era of history the game designers draw from the common thread between these games is violence. The gruesome death of NPCs may be evocative, but violence toward children – especially child PCs – stokes a deeper level of repulsion. As one informant expressed to me, “killing kids is still considered a taboo in a lot of video games, so a lot of players would be reluctant to roleplay killing a kid or unnerved to see/hear someone else do it.” Between the dangers posed by real world predators and the dangers posed by the environment, it seems the roleplay of infants and young children within fantasy RPGs is typically (but not absolutely) relegated to the domain of emotes and NPCs until the child can function as a young adult within the persistent virtual world. This point where a child NPC can be made into a playable avatar without cultural resistance serves then as the character’s coming of age.

Despite these challenges, players in online RPGs continue to roleplay pregnancy, childbirth, and children. Referring back to Schneider’s (1968) model of American kinship, a family is not complete until children are added to the picture, so meaningful family roleplay inevitably initiates the conversation about the position of children in virtual worlds. The performance of pregnancy and child characters is also used, like deviant marriages, as ritualized rebellion to reinforce the validity of the roleplay community’s ethos regarding

child characters. The dangers to children described above, and the social use of parent-child roleplay, will both be explored in “Chapter VI.”

Mortuary Rites, Resurrection, and Return

Death is an involuntary rite of passage which all human beings must undergo. In MMORPGs, it is also nigh-unavoidable. Yet part of what makes death in virtual worlds so engaging is the fact that it is serial. Characters die frequently, repeatedly, and in some games quite casually, as Lisbeth Klastrup (2007) describes in her discussion of death as part of the player’s daily “grind” (7). Although death takes multiple forms in MMORPGs, this kind of in-game character death is the most common, characterized by a period of liminality during which the player is between realms and incarnations, and must face the process of either reclaiming their body/possessions, waiting for someone else to resurrect them, suffering whatever death penalties the games’ programmers have included to give the game a more challenging and realistic flavor, or otherwise starting over with a new character (7).

Recurring Player Character (PC) death breaks the pattern of typical death rites in its final outcome – that the dead character at the stage of aggregation is not disengaged in body and memory from the living but rather returns to walk among the living once more (Kaufman and Morgan 2005:323). Lisbeth Klastrup, the author mentioned above, is the premier scholar on death in MMORPGs. She addresses many elements of in-game death including liminality, variation of death penalties, methods for studying game-world death, the staging and marking of game-world death, the functions of character death and death stories, and even the imposition of social death where a character is punished through exile from a group or guild (Klastrup 2007; Klastrup 2008). Her research is very insightful, although it neglects certain

discussions regarding permadeath, mortuary humor, and the social impact of resurrection which I have supplemented with other authors as described below.

Another contributor to research on virtual death is Dan Dixon. Dixon (2008) examines the purpose of serial PC death as a game mechanic and proposes alternatives to this “loss of time” model of death-as-punishment. The loss of time model of death, he argues, makes serial PC death little more than an annoyance, and creates a void of language and meaning which another concept must summarily fill. “If the impact of death has become reduced and is escapable, then there must be the death that exists that is the total loss of one’s character” (3). That death which destroys a player character beyond the possibility of returning through traditional means is known in online RPGs as *permadeath*.²⁶ Permadeath can be systemized by game mechanics, implemented as punishment by server administration, or chosen voluntarily by players as a means of story progression and/or resolution.

Memorialization within online RPGs likewise occupies a unique space. Memorials for real life events or persons are not the focus of this thesis, but they have been covered in detail by Sarah Hebert (2008), William Bainbridge (2011), Elizabeth Losh (2009), Martin Gibbs et al. (2012), and Mitchell et al. (2012). However, PCs and NPCs can also be memorialized after their death or retirement, in which case memorialization shares a split function of retirement/mortuary rites for the departed/bereaved character and the construction of player “artifacts” for triggering collective memory (Papargyris and Poulymenakou 2009:8). Kylie Veale (2004) contributes a historical framework for memorialization practices, which she approaches in a virtual context from Van Gennep’s stance of grieving as mortuary ritual. Her model of memorial motivations and characteristics is comprised of two hypotheses: (1) Memorials manifest online as a result of one or more of four motivations:

²⁶ Permadeath (definition): the permanent destruction of an avatar (Klastrup 2007:4).

grief, bereavement and loss; unfinished business; living social presence; and/or historical significance; and (2) Online memorials adhere to one or more memorial characteristics: invoking remembrance; a demonstrable array of kinships; and/or as a surrogate for the deceased. Papargyris and Poulymenakou (2009) discuss artifacts of collective memory in the context of following refugees from the discontinued game *Earth & Beyond* to other MMORPGs in order to study the formation, sustenance, and function of collective memory in these persistent virtual worlds.

Regarding the anthropology of mortuary ritual beyond the liminoid space of online RPGs, *Celebrations of Death* (1991 c1979) has been a defining text in this subfield since Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington first published it in 1979. Metcalf and Huntington situate their analysis in classical theory, leaning most heavily on the theories of Emile Durkheim and Arnold van Gennep, and then proceed to structure their book around Robert Hertz's (1960 c1907) "special case" method of examining secondary burial around the world (Metcalf and Huntington 1991 c1979:37). Metcalf and Huntington build on Hertz's research to examine, chapter by chapter, such things as the emotional reactions to death, symbolic associations, and mortuary rituals as rites of passage. One article that builds on the analytical framework proposed by Metcalf and Huntington which has likewise influenced my research and provided a model for interpreting my data is "Bereavement: an Incomplete Rite of Passage" (Hunter 2007). Hunter synthesizes Van Gennep's three stages with Hertz's three groups of functions for typical death-related ceremonies: ceremonies for the deceased, for the bereaved, and for the greater community (159). Taking examples of mortuary ritual from Hertz, Van Gennep, Metcalf and Huntington, and other scholars, she organizes the examples into a table which neatly compares mortuary rituals in regards to their stage as a rite of

passage and their function for the deceased, the bereaved, or the community. Hunter applies this analysis to American mortuary ritual to support her proposal that modern American bereavement practices are incomplete.

As I began my field research, I expected to find that the general purposes of PC mortuary rituals would approximate Hunter's findings for the greater community (allowing the community to renew/redefine social bonds) and appear similar for the bereaved (restoring the bereaved to a normal status), yet for the ceremonial function for the bereaved (in part) and the deceased (more dramatically) I expected to observe deviation based upon the nature of the character's transformation i.e. whether the death was serial or permanent (159, 162). For the dead, such a ceremony would not facilitate the movement from the realm of the living toward the realm of the dead unless it was specifically a permadeath ceremony. Assuming it was a raise or resurrection ritual, I hypothesized that it would facilitate movement in the opposite direction: from dead to living, spiritual to material, and communal to subjective.

My encounters with mortuary rites within a fantasy RPG setting have led me to draw from two other authors as primary comparative material. The first author is Philippe Aries (1974; 1981), whose overview of Western funerary practices gives me a context for understanding the lore which informs the ritual practices of most fantasy worlds and a basis for comparing virtual cultural practices to those most likely shared by game designers and players. Examples of this include the gathering of friends and family around the dying, formal funeral attire, burial on hallowed ground, ceremonial burial with grave goods to reflect the person's role when alive, cremation and other measures to prevent the dead from rising again, and individualized memorialization. The second author is Magdalena

Pancewicz (2013). Death humor is common in fantasy RPGs, and Pancewicz's article gives me a comparative context for interpreting death humor along with the cultural purposes behind such jesting. Among the purposes for death humor which she offers are: relief (tension reduction), sanction against those who break tradition (since death in jokes is generally traditional and any exceptions become the source of amusement), and to point out differences between what is declared and what really happens.

Hand-in-hand with the anthropology of death, at least where serial PC death is concerned, is an analysis of the cultural symbolism surrounding resurrection and rites of return. My primary reference for resurrection is Claudia Setzer (2001), who uses the "beliefs in resurrection" which she observed among Jewish informants to investigate recurring symbols of resurrection and to devise theoretical generalizations about resurrection beliefs beyond the Jewish community. Among her generalizations are that resurrection (1) condenses a worldview, (2) is imprecise and abstract (a condition which produces effective symbols within a community), (3) as a symbol it draws boundaries (such as illuminating the dichotomy between bodily limits and limitlessness), (4) constructs community, and (5) confers legitimacy on those who employ it. I will discuss all five of these generalizations in relation to virtual resurrection in "Chapter VII." Of these generalizations, the fifth offers a particularly relevant reversal in the virtual setting where resurrection is often seen to diminish the severity of death and therefore removes legitimacy from those who employ it, while the avoidance of resurrection roleplay confers legitimacy.

Given the ease of resurrection in most online RPGs, ritualized resurrection is perhaps better understood as a rite of return. Vincent Crapanzano (1992) writes about this type of disjunctive transition which "declares passage where there is in both ritual and everyday life

no passage whatsoever – only the *mark* of passage” (278). In roleplay situations which assume that the soul still lingers near to the body at the time of resurrection, there is likewise no passage taking place, merely the healing of the flesh. Nevertheless, marks remain, whether in the form of macabre graphics at the death site, the roleplay of memory loss or physical illness, or a scripted system for tracking the number of character deaths.

Given the unique nature of mortuary ritual and resurrection in online RPGs, this subject will receive extensive analysis in “Chapter VII.”

Undeath

Undead characters, also called the ‘living dead,’ are a rich subject of study for the liminal self. Inspired by the mythical premise that “the dead sometimes appear after death, thwarting the laws of nature,” undead are the profane counterpart to those characters who are guided from death to the stability of the afterlife or those who are resurrected and returned to life through hallowed means (Jakobsson 2011:283).

In the case of spectral undead, undeath can be seen as the incomplete performance of mortuary ritual, where the dead are separated from the living realm only to be caught in the transitional/liminal stage, never reaching the stage of aggregation where they are fully accepted into the realm of the dead. *Ghosts*²⁷ are a type of spectral undead. *Liches*,²⁸ making the transition by intent rather than accident, also fit in this category despite possessing a corporeal form. One of the perils of liminality is the limitless potential of this “in between” space, and undead vividly embody this peril. The ghost embodies limitless memory and

²⁷ Ghost/spirit (definition): [a type of spectral undead] characterized by his refusal to withdraw from the world when his time has come... he keeps on roaming about the world, being a nuisance to everybody (Jakobsson 2011:290). The ghost embodies limitless preservation of memory and the past.

²⁸ Lich (definition): Driven by ambition, some powerful spellcasters attempt to cheat death itself. Those who succeed become lichs (NWN wiki). Sustained by negative energy, the lich embodies limitless age, hedonism, and arcane power.

freedom of movement, while the lich – as a product of power and a voluntary victim of undeath – embodies the perils of limitless age and power to both self and society.

Just as spectral undead are the product of incomplete mortuary ritual, so cadaverous undead can be seen as the product of incomplete resurrection. Whether animated according to infection or necromantic power, cadaverous undead depart from the sleep of death without reaching aggregation into the living world. Cadaverous undead are walking corpses; and as with Turner's theories of liminality and the liminoid, the 'otherness' of their existence serves as a counterpoint to the cultures from which their existence has departed. *Vampires*²⁹ and *zombies*³⁰ are examples of cadaverous undead and will be discussed in greater detail below.

World of Warcraft is the site of most scholarly research regarding undeath in MMORPGs. Here, players are able to experience both spectral and cadaverous undeath. Players experience spectral undeath after their avatar dies. Following death, the avatar inhabits a 'ghost form' in the space between realms, at which point players may either resurrect in the graveyard with penalties or run back to their body to reclaim it; this is called a 'corpse run' (Klastrup 2007). Players may also experience cadaverous undeath through a playable race called the Forsaken. Jessica Langer (2008) writes about the 'otherness' of the Forsaken using the concept of 'abjectness.' Abjectness is "the place where meaning collapses... the negation of subjectivity" (99). Langer argues that undead creatures exist in a state of constant negation; their bodies are the opposite of life, skeletal and hollow, while

²⁹ Vampire (definition): an "overdetermined" body that condenses a constellation of culturally specific anxieties and desires into one super-saturated form... [The vampire is] more alive than we are... Vampires drink blood, come out only at night, can transform, are destroyed with a stake, etc. (Weinstock 2010:5). The vampire embodies limitless age, hedonism, and social power.

³⁰ Zombie (definition): [Zombies] present a scenario in which a contagious menace threatens to overtake the human body and remake it...by erasing sense and intentionality (Cameron 2012:80). They belong to a larger category of undead creatures...which are physically repulsive because their bodies are not how they should be: namely, they are incompatible with life (Langer 2008:99-100). Animated by viruses or negative energy, other types of cadaverous (and typically mindless) undead include skeletons, mummies, and the Risen.

their city creates pollution which transforms places of life into places of death (99-100). As Klastrup points out, the Forsaken are the “only race given the option to replete their energy level (“health”) by ‘cannibalizing’ (eating) dead corpses” (154). A fourth example of the Forsaken’s oppositional existence can be observed in their ideological relationship to life and death. “It is said that Humans wonder what will happen after they die,” Bainbridge (2010) writes from the perspective of his undead PC, “but we Undead wonder what happened before we died” (1). Bainbridge’s description of the Forsaken’s vision of death embodies the threat to meaning posed by serial PC death; it is “not a mystery but a grim reality they have personally experienced... an example of the fact that inhabitants of Azeroth do not need religious faith, nor do they speculate about distant deities, because daily they experience the supernatural directly” (74-75). The liminality of undeath frames specific cultural values of life, death, and the supernatural.

Inspiration for undead characters frequently stems from the gothic and survival horror genres of literature and film. These genres are separate from the fantasy settings of *Neverwinter Nights* and *Guild Wars 2*, which will be discussed further in “Chapter III,” but they still contribute quite a bit to the corpus of undead lore.

Gothic elements in online RPGs combine “sensational plots involving supernatural or macabre elements...often having a medieval theme or setting” with “irony and black humor” (Johnson and Sihvonen 2009:7). Examples of macabre elements and black humor abound in online RPGs for those who wish to seek them out, while the medieval lean of most fantasy RPGs (likewise to be addressed in “Chapter III”) makes medieval folklore readily accessible to interested players. Folkloric undeath has been analyzed and described by such authors as Paul Barber (1988), Armann Jakobsson (2011), and Mark Jenkins (2010).

Survival horror in video games departs from the “paralyzed gawking” of horror movies by transforming fear into a source of “aggressive agency,” placing comparatively powerless characters in a perilous environment and forcing them to fight for their survival through persistence, brutality, and cunning (Chien 2007:64). Both spectral and cadaverous undead are common in the realm of survival horror, although zombies hold a position of particular esteem as a symbol of both embodiment and the media which represents it (Cameron 2012). Allan Cameron illustrates how zombies in mediated culture have been used to define what is human, both within the dichotomy between embodiment/absence and in the struggle between communication/failure-to-communicate. In survival horror settings, roleplayers who play as or fight against zombies must navigate the challenges not only of survival and sustained embodiment but also the maintenance of those communication networks which bring humans together into cultural groups, the act of communication being the primary factor which makes us human and makes the zombies ‘other’. We can see in the case of zombies, as with Langer’s hypothesis, that it is opposition which defines undeath. Moreover, it is the oppositional nature of undeath which lets players reflexively explore and define what makes us human.

One final motivation for playing undeath which deserves mention here is popular culture’s infatuation with vampire characters, an infatuation which has spilled over into the online RPG landscape. “The vampire,” as Jeffrey Weinstock (2010) puts succinctly, “is an ‘overdetermined’ body that condenses a constellation of culturally specific anxieties and desires into one super-saturated form” (5). “Super-saturated” is the perfect adjective for describing the vampire’s appeal. From decade to decade and story to story, the specific anxieties and desire which the vampire embodies change; Dracula, for example, can be

interpreted as a story of racial xenophobia, while appropriate sexuality spans the spectrum of vampires and literature from Anne Rice *Vampire Chronicles* to Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (4-5). No matter which anxieties and desires the vampire is used to embody, the important thing about vampires is that they are exaggerated beings, "more alive than we are" despite their nature as cadaverous undead (4). For Ananya Mukherjea (2011), the exaggerated existence of vampires opens the door for a paradox of gentlemanly and modern feminist traits of an ideal lover which might be impossible to combine in anything less than one of these superhuman men, while for Terry Spaise (761), vampire necrophilia tends in the opposite direction, not toward romantic satisfaction but disjunction, the constant struggle of life "that is, or should be, our primary goal in life." These images of vampirism are enculturated globally at an early age, so players who choose to roleplay vampires do by stepping into a realm of mythos already rife with elevated tensions, anxieties, and desires, a marginal existence far from the communal stability which rites of passage are meant to sustain. Moreover, as a source of elevated 'crisis,' the vampire's impact can be seen beyond the character's personal story in ripples which affect server worlds and drive plots, stirring up trouble when rites are not promptly performed to reestablish the status quo. The oppositional role of the vampire, it seems, is opposition to cultural and emotional stability.

No matter which type of undead is being discussed, it is their position between stable roles and their opposition to those stable roles which defines them. Undead are produced through incomplete rites of passage, caught between separation and aggregation, and as such they are the most liminal of virtual beings. The inherent dangers of their oppositional role highlight the safety and stability which can be achieved through rites of passage.

Summary

For reasons discussed at the beginning of this chapter, I have organized the symbolic life course which a character follows from creation through retirement/permadeath according to the following themes: leveling up from initiation through retirement, marriage and sexuality, pregnancy and children, mortuary rites, and undeath. All of these rites of passage, I will argue, contribute to the establishment of meaning in a roleplay context and validate communal ties in one manner or another. Moreover, each rite of passage illustrates specific tensions carried over from 'real life' which players are able to address through the performance of these rites of passage in a mythic context. In the next chapter I will discuss my research methodology and elaborate on my choice of field sites, after which I will explore each of these rites of passage in separate chapters and present supporting evidence for the conclusion stated above.

III. Research Methodology

Server Name	Module Name	Players	Levels	PnP	Ping
Ama Island: amaworldnet	AmaA	45/64	1-30	Party	195
Avalon (CEP 2.4)	Avalon v575-CEP24	1/40	1-25	Full	122
Avalon - Cedar	Avalon_cedar	27/80	1-30	Full	119
Avalon - Cedar	Avalon_cedar	27/80	1-30	Full	119
Avalon - Cedar	Avalon_cedar	27/80	1-30	Full	119
ArgentumKegon	cityofdeath	2/64	1-40	Full	102
Beauvoir of the Beast 10	The Dark Idea	4/75	1-40	Full	113
Beyond Vines	Vines v5.00-2a	0/64	1-40	Full	106
Dungeons and Dragons 3.5 Online	CEP Nares Bonds of Blood 9_35_033a	4/60	1-40	Full	127
DR	DR	24/60	1-20	Full	113
Forgotten Realms - The Vast	The Vast - northwintnet	0/64	1-40	Full	101
Harmonport	HPLD2013_10_19	0/50	1-40	Full	117
Higher Ground (Roleplay 1)	Path of Ascension CEP Legends	1/60	1-40	Party	71
Land of Chas 2013	LAND OF CHAS	2/64	1-40	Party	256
Land of the Purple Dragon	LPD Production	0/32	1-40	Full	117
Original Thun	The Island of Thun v4.01	2/64	1-30	Party	102
Rose	Rose	0/60	1-40	Full	128
Rose of the Mist	Rose of the Mist	24/30	1-20	Full	200
Sadness's Retreat - Awakening	Nordack Awakening	0/40	1-40	Full	115
Shadows of Theron	SoT-143dHub	0/32	1-30	Full	109
Syl - Plane Legends	Syl	9/40	1-30	Full	111
Thay	Thay	16/30	1-20	Full	130
The Shattered Realm	The Shattered Realm_370	0/70	1-40	Full	117
The Trench Lash	Lobby	0/60	1-40	Full	105

Illustration 4

Name	Location	Contacts	Population
Darkhaven	America		Very High
Dragonbrand	America		Very High
Emery Bay	America		Very High
Northern Shiverpeaks	America		Very High
Kalmeg	America		Very High
Stormbluff Isle	America		Very High
Jade Quarry	America		Very High
Boris Pass	America		Very High
Blackgate	America		Very High
Maguuma	America		Very High
Amvil Rock	America		Very High
Ferguson's Crossing	America		Very High
Yak's Bend	America		Very High
Tarnished Coast	America	2	Very High

Illustration 5

Illustration 4: Neverwinter Nights server list.

Illustration 5: Guild Wars 2 server list.

“When you entered a private roleplay server...in Neverwinter Nights, it was much more apparent the type of people that you would be able to RP with. What the vibe was and such. In Guild Wars 2, I wasn't quite sure where to start, and honestly, I'm still not sure if it fits me.” (Interview informant)

In this chapter I will introduce my primary field sites, review my methods of data collection and analysis, and present a summary of my research results.

Field Sites

I began this project by selecting two roleplaying games to explore through comparative analysis. The first of these games was the online RPG *Neverwinter Nights*, released in 2002, and the second was the MMORPG *Guild Wars 2*, released in 2012. Several reasons guided my selection of these RPGs. First, in order to expand the breadth of data available for cyberethnographic analysis, I wanted to avoid popular sites of study such as *WoW* and *Everquest*, so I selected two RPGs which have thus far seen limited anthropological attention. Second, in hopes of accessing a wider potential sample

population, I selected games which do not charge subscription fees. Third, I looked for games which boast active roleplaying communities. Finally, I selected games which differ significantly in age in order to account for the variable of enculturation over time which would surely vary between a game of more than ten years and a game still in the relative throes of infancy.

Within these persistent virtual worlds, where geographic and cultural boundaries are demarcated differently than in the real world, servers can be treated comparatively to field sites. For my primary field sites, I selected one server from each game. Sample server lists are provided in *illustration 4* and *illustration 5*. Selecting my field site in *Guild Wars 2* was simple, as the game currently hosts only two roleplaying servers: *Piken Square* (European server) and *Tarnished Coast* (American server). To control for real world regional variation between both games, I selected *Tarnished Coast* (TC). Selecting a field site in *Neverwinter Nights* was more difficult. About a year ago, the corporation Gamespy discontinued their server lists for many games including *Neverwinter Nights* (Bioware SocialNetwork). *Neverwinter Nights* servers can still be accessed through direct connection, but direct connection requires knowledge of server IP addresses and at the start of my project I knew only one: the IP address for *Harrowport*, a server which I studied as part of an undergraduate project. Making the best of this resource, I began my preliminary fieldwork by logging into *Harrowport* and asking players there if they knew about any other active roleplaying servers. A retired administrator from *Harrowport* directed me to look into the server *Argentum Regio*. *Argentum Regio* has a steady player base with active DMs and ongoing server updates. These attributes aligned with my intentions for a primary field site in *Neverwinter Nights*. After a few months of research, I was fortunate enough to be introduced to a third party

server list for *Neverwinter Nights* hosted by yourserverlist.com (Malavir 2013). From this server list I was able to obtain the IP addresses for thirty-eight additional roleplaying servers, enabling me to compose a data table of basic demographic and policy statistics. In relation to this table, *Argentum Regio*'s maximum number of players is 64, which is less than one standard deviation above the mean (55.775); its maximum level is 40, which is less than one standard deviation below the mean (35.875); its policy on ERP is that players must keep erotic roleplay private through "tells" which aligns with 37.5% of total servers examined; and it is among 67.5% of servers which enforce at least a partial permadeath system.

An important feature of both *Neverwinter Nights* and *Guild Wars 2* is the prevalence of in-game lore. Lore refers to the history, beliefs, and practices of game-world cultural units (such as races, classes, nations, and factions) which have been established as canon inside the magic circle of the game. Lore is often inspired by cultural material from outside the magic circle, with certain motifs appearing more commonly than others. Initial lore is determined by the game's production company or server administration and may predispose participants toward certain values and behaviors. The historically-inspired settings of fantasy worlds are one way that lore influences values and behaviors. Socially contentious subjects like gender and sexuality are another way that lore influences values and behaviors. Hilde Corneliussen (2005; 2008) has demonstrated the role of lore and programming to define unequal gender expectations in games such as *WoW* and *Neverwinter Nights*, while games such as *Guild Wars 2* have challenged these traditional expectations through expressions like the pansexual (and gender flexible) Sylvari culture (Soesbee 2011). Once lore has been written or scripted for an online RPG, regardless of its inspiration, that lore answers first and foremost to itself.

Lore functions for virtual worlds in much the same capacity as myth functions for real world cultures according to Joseph Campbell: it opens the world “to the dimension of mystery,” illustrates the shape of the universe in a way that compliments the presence of mystery, supports and validates a specific social order, and teaches players “how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances” (Campbell and Moyers 1988:31). Online RPGs assume that a character’s actions will comply with established lore. Violation of lore – and therefore violation of the magic circle – is among the social faux pas attributed to Mary Sue characters as discussed in “Chapter I.” At the opposite end of the spectrum, good roleplayers consistently draw on inspiration from lore before looking outside the magic circle to real world cultures and experiences. Lore becomes explicitly manifest in the context of rites of passage, where shared values are validated across a diverse player base by consolidating lore and therefore reinforcing the mutually-endorsed ethos of the community.

Guild Wars 2 and *Neverwinter Nights* each contain enough lore to fill volumes – which they have, in both real world and game world forms – but I have endeavored to provide at least brief synopsis of the lore underlying each game in the subsections below.

Neverwinter Nights

As stated above, *Neverwinter Nights* runs according to the game mechanics of 3rd edition D&D. This RPG is specifically set within the *Forgotten Realms*, a high fantasy setting. High fantasy settings draw extensively from mythic archetypes. They are worlds of “swords and sorcery” which evoke the journey of a hero confronting darkness, settings where pain and suffering are evidence of being alive, trials are tests of personal substance, and slaying monsters corresponds symbolically with threshold crossing (Campbell and Moyers 1988). Campbell’s centers of mythological creativity – cathedral, castle, and cottage –

express important fantasy tropes regarding temple religion, monarchic rule, and the quaint-but-dangerous life of a small town villager. These tropes are particularly complementary to servers which base their lore on Western history, especially Norse and Celtic mythology, Roman warfare, and the European Medieval Period. One reason for this trend toward Classicalism and Medievalism in lore is the powerful influence of J.R.R. Tolkien – whose Middle Earth is reminiscent of Medieval Europe – on the fantasy genre of RPGs (Aupers 2007). Another reason, which online RPGs share in common with other types of roleplay such as LARPing and historic re-creation, is the opportunity to escape the alienation and impersonal warfare of the modern era by entering a fanciful world of Western history “as it *should have been*,” a world with a crisper sense of honor and community, heroism and villainy, self and other, than players experience in their daily lives (Lash 2009; Milspaw and Evans 2010; Pinder 2006). Despite indigenous residents and waves of immigration from all corners of the globe, American hegemony identifies the United States as the historic offspring of English colonization, while much of England’s ancestry is attributed to the comingling of Celtic, Germanic, and Roman cultural influences. Consequently, “history as it should have been” – interpreted through the lens of American game producers – emphasizes these Celtic, Germanic, and Roman influences, although recent games have admittedly expanded toward a more diverse representation of human cultures.

Sourcebooks for the *Forgotten Realms* setting have been published for *D&D* since the 1st edition of the game was released by Dave Arneson and E. Gary Gygax in the 1970s. More than two dozen *Forgotten Realms* sourcebooks have been released for the 3rd and 3.5 editions alone, detailing various aspects of the world and history. Of these, two good places to start are the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting 3rd Edition* (Greenwood, et al. 2001) and

the *Player's Guide to Faerun* (Baker, et al. 2004). *Forgotten Realms* lore centers on the continent of Faerun in the world of Toril, where magic abounds and deities walk among the living. Toril consists of many planes arranged in the shape of a tree. The Material Plane, the Plane of Shadow, and the Ethereal Plane coexist as the trunk of the tree, while the Inner Planes and Outer Planes constitute its branches and the Astral Plane surrounds them in a shapeless cloud (Baker, et al. 2004:139). Planar beings, magical beasts, and undead are all common sights within this landscape. In the recent history of Faerun as updated by *D&D 4th edition*, a Spellplague of wild magic has ravaged the cosmos as a result of the death of Mystra, goddess of magic. Many deities have died or left, while the Shade empire of Netheril and the Fey landscape of the Feywild have both reappeared on Toril, posing new threats and opening up new avenues for mystery and exploration (Cordell, et al. 2008:5).

Although the core *Neverwinter Nights* modules are designed for the *Forgotten Realms*, not all servers utilize this setting. For example, only 40% of the servers which I collected data from listed the Faerun pantheon as an explicit source of their deities, *Argentum Regio* falling among the other 60%. Among the 60% which do not use Faerun deities, some servers host deities which reflect alternative real world or RPG settings, while others host deities custom-made to fit server lore. Its religious system notwithstanding, *Argentum Regio* does exhibit certain characters in common with the *Forgotten Realms* setting. Like Faerun, the Material Plane of *Argentum Regio* intersects multiple adjacent planes such as the Feywild and the Plane of Darkness. *Argentum Regio* is similarly polytheistic and plagued by wild magic, populated by races such as half-dragons, lycanthropes, and vampires. The core races and classes of *Argentum Regio* are the same as the core races and classes of Faerun. When characters die in *Argentum Regio*, as with Faerun, their souls go to a place of limbo from

which they may be returned to the world through divine favor or via the casting of spells such as “raise dead” and “resurrection.” An important difference between the two worlds is that, unlike Faerun, humans cannot ascend to divine status in *Argentum Regio*; nor are the gods likely to be found traveling in their midst. Instead, humans are left to their own devices to face off against at times overpowering challenges. Another importance difference is the extent to which racial and national boundaries are developed. In Faerun, published lore dictates many of the common and not-so-common practices and values of characters according to the type of character being roleplayed and the city or region from whence they originate, while *Argentum Regio* is a world in development which purposely leaves gaps in the lore so that players can design the server collaboratively.

The largest city in *Argentum Regio* is the city of Dohral, yet most roleplay during the window of my research did not take place in the city itself but rather transpired around the rural Tivook Inn located a short distance down the road. The bottom floor of the Tivook Inn is a tavern; and as any connoisseur of fantasy video games will tell you, taverns hold a place of great importance in this setting. Taverns, like the games themselves, are recreational gathering sites, places where characters and players alike can relax and socially network after a long day of labor. At a tavern such as the Tivook Inn, adventuring characters from all corners of the server can congregate with minimal OOC orchestration. All it takes is a quick hop through a portal. Then, voila; tavern roleplay! Characters can enjoy rest and replenishment between jobs, exchange rumors, and organize parties with other adventurers to embark on future undertakings.

Argentum Regio’s server population on a normal day ranges between two and ten players, creating a personal atmosphere which made ingratiating myself into new roleplay

fairly easy. During my study, *Argentum Regio*'s DM staff actively progressed the server's lore through server-wide events, most of which related to one of two central conflicts: the first was an ongoing story of racial tension between humans and shapeshifters, while the second followed an evil entity's repeated attempts to escape from the Plane of Darkness and the impact of its corrupting influence on the adventurers sworn to stop it. Some of the more broadly known aspects of *Argentum Regio*'s lore can be found on their wiki page (*Argentum Regio* wiki) or forums (*ArgentumRegio* Forums), but the better part of server lore is intentionally left in obscurity so as to be discovered in character through synchronous roleplay. This obscurity also brings a welcome flexibility to the game, since DMs come and go over time – each bringing their own twist to server plots and each leaving new loose ends when they eventually depart.

Guild Wars 2

Tyria is the setting of *Guild Wars 2*. Unlike Faerun in the *Forgotten Realms*, Tyria has no official sourcebooks. Instead, players rely on a combination of the game's official wiki page (*Guild Wars 2* Official Wiki), the canon which has been compiled in the community forums (*Guild Wars 2* Roleplayers), and three works of fiction which were released in conjunction with *Guild Wars 2* to develop the landscape and history of Tyria as it has changed since original *Guild Wars* (Forbeck and Grubb 2010; King 2011; Soesbee 2013).

As with Faerun, Tyria is part of a greater multiverse. However, the multiverse known as *the Mists* is by comparison a moderate-to-low fantasy setting, and knowledge about the worlds outside of Tyria is limited. Tyria's history is one of constant warfare, instigated primarily by humans against the other races of the world (including other humans). The greatest of these racial conflicts and the central conflict of the original *Guild Wars* story is

between Humans and Charr, a race of monstrous cat-like humanoids. Humans in the game instigated the conflict when they drove the Charr out of Ascalon, but Charr stirred up the events of *Guild Wars* by reciprocally invading the territory now claimed by humans. The devastation from this racial conflict caused Orr, the Human city of the gods, to be lost beneath the sea by powerful magic, while war tore apart the Human kingdom of Ascalon. Faced with defeat, Ascalon's King Adelbern placed a dying curse on his own people, transforming them into ghosts to fight eternally against the Charr. More than two hundred years later, *Guild Wars 2* reveals that Ascalon is still haunted, while Orr has risen from the sea under the control of an undead Elder Dragon. The rising of the Elder Dragons brought new races to the fore of Tyria's culture and forced old enemies to align in a shaky truce against the immensely greater threat of the dragons.

As an MMORPG, average server population on *Guild Wars 2* is exponentially higher than average server population on the online RPG *Neverwinter Nights*. This made finding and initiating roleplay events more difficult in *Guild Wars 2* than *Neverwinter Nights* because roleplaying groups are already well-established and therefore less receptive to new members. With such a high number of game participants, these groups can afford to be discriminating in their membership, unlike in *Neverwinter Nights* where maintaining a steady player base is a constant concern of players and administrators alike. A couple of my *Guild Wars 2* informants shared similar frustrations. As I learned to navigate the social landscape of *Tarnished Coast*, I found that the best place to look for upcoming roleplaying events was on the community forum (Guild Wars 2 Roleplayers), while the best place to look for current roleplaying events was a tavern in the Human city of Divinity's Reach called the Maiden's Whisper. Understanding what I do now about tavern roleplay and the central importance of

taverns to fantasy video games, I admit that I probably would have had an easier time ingratiating myself into the roleplaying community if I had started by exploring the taverns of every major city. At the time of my study, however, I relied primarily on joining guilds and networking with other players asynchronously.

Methods of Data Collection

My data for this thesis has been collected through participant observation, surveys, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.

Participant Observation

The practice of participant observation assumes subjectivity, that the observer can never be completely or objectively removed from the events which they are observing. Bearing this perspective in mind, I designed my character for *Argentum Regio* to be someone who can blend into the background, who can participate in events without becoming a major instigator of roleplay. The resulting character, Destiny Crescentfall, is a half-elf ranger; she is friendly but quiet, nomadic in lifestyle as adventures commonly are, and a follower in social situations – letting me justify my passive participation in most roleplaying events. Because the server population is so small, I worried that announcing my intentions as a researcher would impact the conduct of others toward myself and my character, limiting my participant viewpoint. Furthermore, “ethnographer” refers to my real world identity, not my character identity, so to announce it in-game would violate the Real World vs. Game World separation. Consequently, I did not broadcast that I was on the server to do research, although I did obtain permission from the head administrator to use his server for my project and I openly spoke of my research to other players whenever we engaged in OOC discourse. In those circumstances when another player and I spoke OOC, often synchronously to IC

play, the boundaries of the magic circle had already been redefined so I could broach the subject without transgressing.

My character on *Tarnished Coast*, Moth Obria, is a bolder figure than Destiny; she needed to be, in order for me to write my way into roleplaying situations amidst the larger and more discriminating server population of an MMORPG. Moth is a human necromancer with a fascination toward all things buried – be they secrets or bodily remains. Her profession, an ethical one according to Tyria’s lore, allows me to explore player perspectives on corpses and resurrection within culturally accepted boundaries. I did not advertise my position as a researcher on *Tarnished Coast* either, but I did contact the game’s administrators to make sure that my research did not violate my user agreement and I obtained guild leader permission from each of the guilds I joined. As with *Argentum Regio*, I openly spoke of my research to other players whenever we engaged in OOC discourse.

In addition to roleplay, I used Moth, Destiny, and a few other less consequential characters to test death mechanics in their respective games and to travel the virtual landscapes in search of graveyards and memorials.

All participant observation took place via textual communication. Due to the mechanics of *Neverwinter Nights*, I was able to save chat logs from all but two of my participant observation sessions. In those two instances, a conflict of game settings on my computer’s hard-drive erased the logs before they could be stored. The saved chat logs constitute the better part of my field notes for *Argentum Regio* and provide an exhaustive body of text for discourse analysis. Methodology for discourse analysis in virtual worlds is discussed in “Chapter I.” Between June and November, I saved twenty-seven chat logs from *Argentum Regio*, as well as nine chat logs from *Harrowport* and fourteen chat logs from

various other servers. These chat logs are supplemented by the occasional screenshot or addendum in my field journal. Chat logs cannot be saved from *Guild Wars 2*, so I have documented my conversations on *Tarnished Coast* by taking numerous screenshots during roleplaying events then scribing the contents of those screenshots into text documents at later, more convenient times. The result of this practice is five event logs coupled with a sixth document for miscellaneous discourse.

Surveys

The *Tarnished Coast* community is so large that I did not have a convenient place to enter the field, so instead I began my research by networking using the community forums, posting two survey questions in the off-topic section. The first of these questions asked players to share what inspired their roleplay. A week later, the second question asked players to share their most emotional in-character moments. I saved the responses for document analysis. I also sent private messages to several of the respondents, hoping to build my list of in-game contacts. One respondent, whom I will refer to by the randomly generated name Eden³¹ to maintain confidentiality, became my primary informant on the server. Eden gave me my first interview on *Guild Wars 2* and helped me connect with eight of my nine other *Tarnished Coast* interviewees. Whenever I have had questions regarding roleplay events in the world, she has readily helped me out. More than the documents which these surveys provided me with, meeting Eden was the most rewarding result of my survey questions.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Using a template of interview questions which I adapted to my informants' responses to keep the style of the interviews conversational, I interviewed ten players from each of my

³¹ All names of players and player characters in this thesis have been randomly generated using the Seventh Sanctum Fantasy Name Generator (<http://www.seventh sanctum.com/generate.php?Genname=fantasynamex>).

two primary field sites. I also interviewed one player from *Harrowport* for anecdotal purposes. Written consent was obtained prior to each interview along with verification that the informants were at least eighteen years of age. In two additional instances, interviews were scheduled but not performed after the informants admitted that they were younger than eighteen. Interviews were completed interactively over various mediums including Skype, AIM, Yahoo, private forum chat, and email. All interview exchanges were completed through textual communication only (no voice or video chat was used). The questions listed in *figure 2* were used as the basis for each of the twenty-one interviews.

Figure 2: Semi-Structured Interview Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. List any/all online games which you currently roleplay on or have roleplayed on in the past. By your best estimation, for how long have you played the aforementioned RPGs? 2. Describe any memorable DM or player disappearances/absences. 3. Which of the following have you observed roleplayed: marriage, having children, passage from an apprentice/student/squire to master/teacher/knight status, retirement, death of an NPC, death of a PC, resurrection, undeath, undeath-to-living, or permadeath? 4. Describe how you roleplayed each of the life events listed above. 5. Has the retirement of a player or DM ever impacted one of your RP groups in a memorable manner? 6. What inspires your roleplay? 7. At what age, do you think, it is acceptable to make a child as a PC instead of an NPC? 8. How many weddings have you attended in ____ (name of RPG)? 9. How many funerals have you attended in ____ (name of RPG)? 10. What is the most number of times you have died in a single day's worth of adventure on either game? Comparatively, what would you say is the average? The least? 11. How do you roleplay respawn? 12. Have you ever encountered memorials in game to a dead PC, dead player, or retired/inactive player? 13. List any and all words or short phrases which come to mind when you think of death in online RPGs (profanity and abbreviations are both fine, I'll ask for clarification if necessary). 14. Regarding OOC rites of passage relating to the game, have you ever known anyone to marry in real life because of an RP relationship or likewise known any players who passed away whom you knew via RP? 15. Is there anything you would like to add about any of the topics we have broached today?

Figure 2: This template of semi-structured interview questions was adapted to my informants' responses in each individual interview to keep the style of the interviews conversational.

Document Analysis

Additional asynchronous data has been collected from roleplaying forums, websites, and wiki pages for both *Guild Wars 2* and *Neverwinter Nights*. While I have used some of

this asynchronous data for qualitative analysis, other data collected from *Neverwinter Nights* forums, websites, and wiki pages has been used to establish cultural norms to help compensate for the small sample size of individual server populations.

Methods of Data Analysis

Virtual discourse events, as discussed in “Chapter I,” are individual posts in one of the discourse channels (Salazar 2008). A roleplaying event is comprised of a related series of discourse events experienced synchronously in shared virtual space. The roleplaying and discourse events which I observed through participant observation have been sorted according to the subject of discourse. Events with multiple tags have been duplicated under each of these labels for convenient reference. Asynchronous documents have likewise been broken down and sorted according to a list of etic categories.

Interviews have been deconstructed according to the rites of passage to which each response pertains. Separate rites of passage have been isolated in separate text documents, which have been coded and organized into a digital codebook. After coding the documents, common terms in each document have been identified and counted in order to reinforce and supplement my observations of prevalent themes. From this data, I have constructed tables for assessment of sever statistics, short-answer interview responses, and the attributes of in-game memorials. The average of textual responses and the mean, variance, and standard deviation of numeric responses have been calculated where applicable.

Results

Comparative interview data from *Argentum Regio* (10 participants) and *Tarnished Coast* (10 participants) interviews is summarized in *figures 3* and *4*.

Figure 3 – Interview Data for Transitional Events						
Transitional Event	<i>Neverwinter Nights</i>		<i>Guild Wars 2</i>		Across Both Games	
	% Observed	% Roleplayed	% Observed	% Roleplayed	% Observed	% Roleplayed
Initiation	70	60	50	40	60	50
Retirement	60	20	40	30	50	25
Marriage	90	70	80	80	85	75
Pregnancy, Birth, and/or Parenthood	100	70	70	60	85	65
Resurrection	100	50	60	30	80	40
Permadeath	100	80	90	40	95	60
Undeath	100	60	60	50	80	55

Figure 3: Interview informants were asked to identify from a list which transitional events they had (a) observed and (b) personally roleplayed. The data from their responses is presented in this table.

Based on my sample population, the transition event observed during roleplay by the highest percentage of interviewees is permadeath, while the event roleplayed firsthand by the highest percentage of interviewees is marriage. The high percentage of observed permadeath reflects the communal impact of permadeath events, while the high percentage of roleplayed marriage reflects the more general social emphasis of online RPGs. Rites of passage validate communal ties and consolidate server lore, so it is important to note that all of the transition events listed above have been observed by at least 50% of interviewees with the exception of retirement in *Guild Wars 2*. In most of these cases, a larger percentage of the *Neverwinter Nights* interviewees have observed and roleplayed transitional events than the *Guild Wars 2* interviewees; the two exceptions are retirement and marriage roleplay, where a marginally higher percentage (1 participant) of *Guild Wars 2* interviewees have roleplayed the transitional event.

One viable explanation for the higher percentages of transitional roleplay among *Neverwinter Nights* interviewees is their ‘age’ according to the gamer’s lifecycle. As referenced above, Qiaolei’s (2008) study of the gamer’s lifecycle notes that players tend to express more focus on romance and social roleplay in the later stages of gaming. *Guild Wars 2* is still a young game, currently less than two years of age; moreover, when interviewees for both games were asked to report the total number of years during which they have roleplayed on online RPGs, the mean for my *Neverwinter Nights* interviewees was 7.6 years (with a lower boundary of 4 years), while the mean for my *Guild Wars 2* interviewees was 5.9 years (with a lower boundary of less than 1 year). Overall, interviewees from both games fall within the window of Qiaolei’s “involvement” stage, but *Guild Wars 2* interviewees average a couple of years younger in regards to roleplaying experience. Another viable explanation for the lower results from *Guild Wars 2* interviewees is a difference in roleplay culture between the two games.

As *figure 4* illustrates, frequency of transitional events paints a different picture of cultural difference between *Neverwinter Nights* and *Guild Wars 2* than the percentage of interviewees who experienced each event.

Figure 4 – Interview Data for Frequency of Transitional Events			
Transitional Event	Reported Frequency on <i>Neverwinter Nights</i> (Average)	Reported Frequency on <i>Guild Wars 2</i> (Average)	Reported Frequency Across Both Games
Marriage	3.45†	6.70	5.16†
Pregnancy, Birth, and/or Parenthood	2.50†*	3.60	3.19†*
Funeral (Permadeath)	1.00	1.88*	1.39*
Serial Death – Average per Event	1.63*	3.33*	2.53*
Serial Death – Highest per Event	11.22*	15.00*	13.00*

† denotes that an outlier has been excluded from data computations.

* denotes that one or more gaps have impacted the accuracy of data computations.

Figure 4: Interview informants were asked to estimate the total number of instances wherein they had either observed or roleplayed marriage, childbirth, and funerals. They were subsequently asked to estimate the average and highest number of times they had died in a single event. The data from their responses is presented in this table.

Although a lower percentage of *Guild Wars 2* interviewees reported roleplaying childbirth and permadeath compared to *Neverwinter Nights* interviewees, reported frequency of marriage, childbirth, and funeral roleplay averaged higher for *Guild Wars 2* than *Neverwinter Nights*, suggesting that transitional events are roleplayed more frequently in *Guild Wars 2* than *Neverwinter Nights* but among a selective portion of the server population. The significantly larger number of residents on *Guild Wars 2* could account for this disparity, as well as the more exclusive nature of the *Guild Wars 2* roleplaying community compared to *Neverwinter Nights*. This more exclusive quality was a challenge which I personally encountered, and discussed in the *Guild Wars 2* subsection above. Finally, on the subject of mortuary ritual, *figure 4* reflects both a higher frequency of funerals and serial PC death (which assumes resurrection) on *Guild Wars 2* than *Neverwinter Nights*, while averages from both games reinforce anecdotal perspectives regarding serial PC death – that characters can be expected to die at least once per event/in-game adventure, with an upper limit of more than ten deaths per event. One potential reason for this difference in frequency is the fact that death penalties and resurrection costs are generally steeper on *Neverwinter Nights* than *Guild Wars 2*. I will discuss other factors, including player perspectives about resurrection and permadeath, in “Chapter VII.”

Having briefly reviewed the statistical evidence for my research data, I will proceed in the following chapters to explore the embedded meanings of these rites of passage to the characters and players who perform them.

IV. Virtual Professions - Leveling up Indefinitely?



Illustration 6: Characters defeated in Guild Wars 2 may return to a waypoint or wait to be revived. These combat mechanics encourage cooperation and enable players to roleplay professional advancement while adventuring.

Snow falls in a steady bluster over the eclectic party of adventurers. The snow-covered road is blue by twilight, and still the powder thickens, burying the travelers' footprints mere moments after they are pressed. The road offers safer passage than the mountains, but it is a minute difference. Dangers from the dark slope of the cliffs have harried this group from the moment they ventured into the region, downing several of its members with every onslaught.

The aftermath of a particularly brutal skirmish finds the veteran soldier, Mourn Dragonseeker,³² crouched over a young woman, new to their company, bandaging the worst of her wounds. He helps her to her feet, then growls, "You gotta learn dodging, mouse."

Moth meets his gaze and says, "So it seems. I don't suppose you could teach me?"

³² The character name has been randomly generated using the Seventh Sanctum Fantasy Name Generator (<http://www.seventh sanctum.com/generate.php?Genname=fantasynamex>).

Dodging in *Guild Wars 2* is built into the design for virtual combat. Double tapping any movement key will allow a character to perform a dodge maneuver. This example of initiation roleplay comes from my first roleplaying event on *Guild Wars 2*. The purpose of the event was map completion, and I met Mourn Dragonseeker by way of being a “low level character,” completely underpowered against the caliber of enemies in that area. Mourn helped revive my character each time that she was downed in combat, which transpired every few minutes or so, and as a result our roleplay took on a mentor-apprentice dynamic. IC, Mourn taught Moth how to dodge and gave her tips for fighting intelligently, while OOC, Mourn’s player instructed me on the mechanics of the same subject so that I could participate in the event more successfully. Dodging for both my character and I became an experience of leveling up as a learning endeavor, a challenge of initiation (Bainbridge 2010:87).

This chapter will explore learning as one of several important symbols of initiation in virtual worlds, from an analytical perspective which interprets initiation as both an anomalous state and a short-term liminal event. I will compare initiation rites in *Neverwinter Nights* with initiation rites observed in *Guild Wars 2*. I will subsequently examine symbols of retirement in virtual worlds and conclude with a discussion of the overall picture which these transitional events collectively paint of virtual professions in online RPGs.

Initiation

Initiation as an Anomalous State

Low level characters suffer their share of what Robert Boostrom Jr. (2008) calls the stigma of the newbie player. After all, low level characters are inexperienced. They are uneducated. They fall easily in combat. They are marginal entities, not capable of interacting fully with the virtual environment. When I participated in the map completion

event mentioned above, both Moth and I were “newbies,” and it took Mourn’s interventions both IC and OOC to help us adjust to the normative expectations of the roleplaying event. Unfortunately, because dodging is but one skill out of many, mastering the mechanics of dodging did not redeem either me or Moth of our newbie statuses. Rather, it set us on a path of initiation as an anomalous state interrupted by a series of smaller rites of passage.

Newbie characters are marked for this state automatically when they enter the game. They bear the caul of being “low level characters.” The function of marking inexperienced characters as a separate portion of the server population, like the religious practices of purity and pollution described by Mary Douglas (1966) from whose research I have derived this subheading, is to “impose system on an inherently untidy experience” (4). Initiation over time is untidy. The frequent death of low level characters is especially untidy. The system imposed to create order amidst this untidiness is *leveling*.

The term “level” is used in online RPGs as both a noun and a verb. As a noun, “level” marks status. Low level is synonymous with limitation. Whether the player aspires to complete the world map, learn server lore, reach maximum level, develop a meaningful storyline, style their character to the height of in-game fashion, or any other game-related objective, having a low level character is limiting. Low level characters are limited in what they can do, where they can travel to, and what equipment they can use or wear. They are even limited in the rites of passage which they are able to perform. At lower levels, their life and death experiences are *nerfed*³³ – weakened or reduced in penalty, a term originally derived from *Ultima Online* in reference to squishy toy weapons – and in many cases they have not yet established the social connections which would enable them to perform social

³³ Nerf (definition): dumbing down, weakening, or reducing the difficulty of game content (Guild Wars 2 Official Wiki).

rituals such as retirement, marriage, and funerals. The verb “to level” means to increase in rank from one level to the next. As characters level up and increase their status, they steadily shirk their limitations, moving from the separation of their uninitiated state to aggregation among fully-developed characters. The distinction between low, mid, and high level characters is as messy and subjective as the process of initiation, but this status can generally be inferred based on situational limitations and in relation to the level of PCs and NPCs with whom the character interacts. The driving force behind the character’s movement from separation to aggregation is learning (Bainbridge 2010).

Learning is measured mechanically as characters gain experience for exploring new areas, completing quests, and defeating monsters, the result of which is leveling. Leveling demonstrates a character’s ability to overcome increasingly difficult obstacles. This performance of initiation as overcoming obstacles mirrors the hero’s journey of mythology. Malinowski (1935) has explained magical beliefs among the Trobriand islanders as a response to the knowledge that “certain evils, such as pests, blights, bush-pigs, drought or rain, cannot be overcome by human work however hard and consistent” (77). In online RPGs, as in myth, evil or uncontrollable forces which cannot be overcome by human work *can* be faced according to the mythic rules of the magic circle. Learning is also measured socially through initiation roleplay.

The *Argentum Regio* server in *Neverwinter Nights* is particularly well suited to studying initiation roleplay because it boasts many custom scripts which are difficult or impossible to understand without the support of more experienced players. Spellcasters and shapechangers, especially, require intensive instruction over time to transmit knowledge of these mechanics. Via participant observation, I had the opportunity to interact with both a

spellcaster apprenticed to another character and a shapeshifter who taught me how the skill of personal transmutation is generally imparted to aspiring shapeshifters. Both examples reinforce the interpretation of initiation as an educational, at times difficult journey over time. For the spellcaster, being an apprentice meant that she spent most of her time studying at Dohral's college or helping her master repair his inventions. For the shapeshifter, learning to change forms required a prerequisite of natural ability coupled with commitment to mastering the skill. "Only some people can learn," he informed my character, "and for some it can take years." Time and learning are expressed explicitly as symbols of the initiate's journey. Turner (1982) has emphasized the importance of ritual time as a defining feature of rites of passage (24), while Dixon (2008) identifies time as the most important commodity in video games (3). Here we can see that time and learning function together as codependent symbols of initiation in those contexts where initiation is played out virtually as a long-term transitional process.

In my key-word-in-context (KWIC) analysis of initiation responses from ten *Neverwinter Nights* interviews, the word "time" appears with the second highest frequency (second only to "character"). References to a "master/mentor/teacher" figure, character "level," "knowledge," and the process of "becoming" are also within the fifteen most common key words. My analysis of ten *Guild Wars 2* interviews likewise includes such terms as "time," "progress," "know," and "learn/teach/lesson" in the fifteen most common key words, with "learn/teach/lesson" appearing with the second highest frequency. Because *Neverwinter Nights* is an older game, it makes sense that players will have experienced a greater investment of time in initiation roleplays, while many *Guild Wars 2* characters have not committed quite as much time to initiation roleplays and therefore measure their progress

instead in terms of lessons learned. These differences aside, informants from both games offered stories of long-term apprenticeships which were characterized by IC and OOC learning, the type depending on the skill deficit being addressed.

I have argued that across all rites of passage, the performance of transitions exposes shared values and reinforces social ties among participating roleplayers. In this first example of initiation as an anomalous state, the mentor-apprentice relationship both fulfills the role of transmitting cultural values (socializing new players into appropriate mores of IC and OOC interaction) and creates bonds between new and veteran players. Yet the anomalous state of initiation – the stigma of the low level character – can also create social bonds between players outside of the mentor-apprentice relationship, as I will discuss below.

In *Neverwinter Nights*, it is common practice for experienced characters to give items and advice to low-level characters and even take them out on adventures to help them level up. Experienced players may also supplement IC events with OOC tidbits to help new players understand the bigger picture of what is going on. OOC interaction allows veteran players to support newbies even when it is not in their character's temperament to do so. Experienced players support newbies, both IC and OOC, so that the new players will continue to visit the server and contribute to the roleplaying community. This friendly attitude toward new players enabled me to participate in DM events which would otherwise have been far above my level.

In *Guild Wars 2*, support for low-level characters outside of mentor-apprentice roleplay primarily manifests as guided travel or reviving fallen characters. My first experience of guided travel occurred in the map completion event mentioned above, prior to my roleplay with Mourn. Another notable experience occurred on the peninsula of Orr.

Orr is a zone densely plagued by the undead Risen. Lore and informants alike reinforced the importance of Orr for my discussion of undeath in “Chapter VIII.” But after months of participant research, I faced a dilemma: Moth was only level 41, and Orr is a zone designed for level 70-80 characters. Running to that zone on my own proved impossible, despite my best efforts, since it required me to cross large stretches of hostile territory far above my level. After I recalled from *Neverwinter Nights* that social connections in online RPGs can overcome level limitations, I asked a level 80 friend of mine to escort me. He agreed, but it was still quite a challenging endeavor. My character was so far out of her element that she could be downed after a single strike, and every death damaged her armor so there were times when she had to fight without shirt or pants until I could reach an NPC for repairs. The amount of time I spent waiting to be revived was a combination of frustration and hilarity, especially during the lapses between repairs when Moth had to fight monsters in her underwear!

My friend and I were fortunate enough to encounter two other “high” level characters in Orr who sympathized with Moth’s inexperience and volunteered to help us out. *Guild Wars 2* game design reinforces pro-social behavior by awarding experience for raising fallen characters, as I was reminded when one of my helpers noted joyfully: “I’m getting so much [experience] from raising Moth!” What began as casual roleplay support from these two characters progressed until the four of us joined together as a party, and concluded when we exchanged OOC contact information before logging out.

Moth’s anomalous state of initiation deserves much of the credit for the roleplay which eventually forged social bonds between our four characters. Had I not been downed every minute and in need of constant support, the players would likely have passed us by

without interacting. Yet the cultural value of supporting the weak and/or inexperienced, in conjunction with the scripted incentive of bonus experience, prevailed, and I was rewarded with new social connections in addition to a successful adventure.

Initiation as a Short-Term Liminal Event

Opposed to the image of initiation as an anomalous state is initiation as a liminal event which “arbitrarily recognizes change,” a rite of passage which marks the participant’s successful passage from one stable identity to the next, usually through a symbolic process of death and renewal (Weckman 1970:65-70). The death in question may be the death of an old identity and the loss of features associated with that particular identity/level, or it may be – in this mythic landscape – the death of an NPC which symbolically marks the separation of old and new identities. Although I did not personally observe any short-term initiation events over the course of my field research, informants from both field sites shared examples of short-term liminal events in their interview responses.

One example from *Neverwinter Nights* relates to a shapeshifter who had participated in master-apprentice roleplay. Even after her mentor stepped back and left her to her own devices, Midnight maintained her identity as River’s³⁴ apprentice until players in a DM-run event nominated her to represent the server’s druidic faction for the negotiation of a treaty. The proceedings of this DM event separated the shapeshifter from her previous identity as River’s apprentice, burdened her transition with unanticipated responsibilities, and subsequently redefined her as the official ambassador of the druidic faction. Midnight’s transformation reflects not only Van Gennep’s stages of separation, transition, and

³⁴ These character names have been randomly generated using the Seventh Sanctum Fantasy Name Generator (<http://www.seventh sanctum.com/generate.php?Genname=fantasynamex>).

aggregation, but also the symbolic death and rebirth of character identity which Weckman attributes to initiation events.

Another example from *Guild Wars 2* is a necromancer who experienced multiple instances of initiation as a liminal event. In her first initiation event, she enacted the metaphor of death and rebirth by killing a non-player character (NPC) and using his corpse to fashion an undead blood fiend to formalize her new identity as a necromancer's apprentice.

Characters can also ascend the ranks of guilds through the completion of skill challenges in both *Neverwinter Nights* and *Guild Wars 2*. Ranks in a guild are titled, and the loss of one title followed by the acquisition of another is a process which mirrors the death and rebirth of character identity. Examples of skill challenges for one of my informants included reclaiming a brothel from a rival gang and handling diplomatic negotiations on behalf of the guild's leader. Social skill challenges fit within the leveling framework of video games, since players are already familiar with the process of gaining experience by overcoming obstacles and using those experience points to unlock new tiers of abilities.

While initiation as an anomalous state begins with the premise of separation, initiation as a short-term liminal event performs the separation of character identity incrementally, illustrating the death and renewal of identity from one status to the next. As the identity of a commoner dies, the identity of the apprentice is born, and as the identity of an apprentice dies, so the master is born. This rite of passage requires validation from the community and therefore consolidates social ties after separation in a manner similar to mortuary ritual, which will be discussed in "Chapter VII."

Retirement

Level progression in online RPGs is a finite process. Both *Neverwinter Nights* and *Guild Wars 2* have a maximum level to which characters may aspire. The current maximum level for *Guild Wars 2* is 80, although there is discussion about whether the level cap will be raised with future expansions (GreenNekoHaunt 2013). Maximum level on *Neverwinter Nights* varies by server, but the average is roughly 36 with an upper bound of 40. My field site *Argentum Regio* is one of the level 40 servers.

Reaching a character's maximum level does not necessitate retirement of that character. Maximum level characters may continue to participate in roleplay and server wide events, unburdened by any lower level limitations. However, there is a point in the gamers' lifecycle when a player may decide that they have exhausted all of the entertaining options for their character. The characters have achieved their goals, whatever those goals may be, and now to avoid stagnation the player may either kill off their character (a subject which will be discussed in "Chapter VII") or retire it.

Players retire characters for an assortment of reasons. Sometimes retirement is final, the conclusion of a story. This type of retirement is true retirement. As one informant shared with me, "It's a good way to simply pull [the character] out of a picture without having them killed for the sake of no longer wanting to play them." When such characters stop being enjoyable to play, the function of RPGs as games is no longer being met, yet loose ends are detrimental to roleplaying as the performance of communal myth; true retirement is a socially established answer to the bored player's dilemma. Loose ends created by the disappearance of another player or DM deeply involved in that character's plot may also be resolved through true retirement. This justification, that character retirement is a preferable solution to permadeath, appears more frequently in my *Guild Wars 2* interviews than my

Neverwinter Nights interviews, although in the latter case it is still presented as a valid means to resolve storylines before leaving a server. The prevalence of the “conclusion of story” rationale appears in my KWIC analysis for both games through common terms like “end,” “death,” and “leaving.” Because community response to “retirement from play” parallels community response to permadeath in many respects, more will be said about community response to retirement in “Chapter VII.”

While true retirement signifies the discontinuation of play, retirement can also be *performed* in order to explore other avenues of roleplay or as a consequence of injury or aging. In these cases, separation does not end the character’s storyline but merely their current identity.

One lens for the performance of retirement is aging. A *Neverwinter Nights* informant told me about a character whose aging was instigated by his roleplay connection to child characters on the server. Because of his “close connection to the children being aged, the player was forced to age the character to keep things natural.” As the character got older, he retired from his previous professional capacity of an assassin and shifted his involvement with combat events to one of defense, rather than offense. Control of aging in this regard adds to the plausibility of the narrative. A world comprised entirely of young adults who never age or die is unrealistic; it is inhuman. Suffering and aging are two of the experiences which make us human and are therefore invaluable when telling a “satisfying story.” Additionally, control of aging relates back to Malinowski’s (1935; 1948) theory of magical worlds – that magic allows participants to exert influence over otherwise uncontrollable forces. Control of aging in fantasy RPGs allows players to make sense of their own aging

experiences, to establish agency in the face of this natural force, and to overcome uncertainties of what they can expect from the years to follow.

In such situations where retirement is performed and does not signify the discontinuation of play, the character remains active within the roleplay community from the altered capacity of a retiree. The continuation of roleplay after character retirement is the form of character retirement which most closely approximates real life retirement. I have referred to Mark Luborsky (1994) for symbols of retirement, whose study reveals specific trends among retired persons: they prioritize talking about their special projects over existential concerns, they choose labor over the prescription to relax, and they desire leaving a mark which endures after death. Luborsky suggests that these behaviors reflect the American “work ethic” which, drawing from Puritan beliefs, sacralizes busy behavior, even at a stage in life which is supposed to offer a reprieve from labor. Retired characters on the *Tarnished Coast* and *Argentum Regio* reflect all of these trends in one form or another.

On *Neverwinter Nights*, the retired adventurer’s role is a sagely one; their labor is to weave stories and relay advice to the younger generation, leaving behind knowledge as their mark from beyond the grave. Playing “old” characters appears more important among this sample population. Being the older of the two games by over a decade, *Neverwinter Nights* has afforded characters ample opportunity to age synchronously with server time, while the 3:1 ratio of *Guild Wars 2* time and the game’s overall youth suggest that characters on this game are less likely to have reached the point in their life cycle where they would justify performing old age. On *Guild Wars 2*, roleplaying “marriage” as retirement appears to be the more important practice. The labor of married characters is to protect their spouses, have

children, and raise those children; their offspring is their mark which will endure from beyond the grave.

Special projects pose an enlightening category of phenomena for performing retirement. Special projects of retired characters which were observed or reported to me include opening an orphanage, owning a theater, adopting a child, and arranging for new guild leadership. Similar to Luborsky's observations about the American work ethic, special projects reflect the player's desire to remain busy with "work" tasks, even in the leisure sphere of video games. Special projects also open up new storylines for the character to pursue, storylines which begin after the death of the characters' previous professional identities. The significance of new goals and storylines was well addressed by one of my informants, who told me, "a character without a purpose easily becomes a chat room bot, or prone to do nothing but get itself involved in silly relationships and ERP." A "chat room bot" behaves in an automated, repetitive manner; it does not grow, change, or *learn*. Learning over time, as discussed previously, is an essential aspect of the RPG character's mythic journey, while the challenges of silly relationships and ERP will be discussed in "Chapter V." Suffice to say that the goals of special project protect the roleplaying community against threats to meaningful storytelling including but not limited to automated behavior and ERP.

Discussion

To reiterate my statement from the beginning of the *Retirement* section, leveling is a finite process. Characters begin as incomplete persons and experience initiation as learning over time. These characters learn cultural mores and professional skills from other player characters, developing concurrently along social and mechanical means. Eventually,

characters reach a point where apprenticeship becomes mastery, where mastery becomes ability plateau, and players must decide what to do next with their characters: to kill them, to retire them from play and tie up their storylines, or to retire them while keeping them active in the world, directing the character's story in a new direction with new goals to safeguard the meaningful quality of roleplay. It is when no new goals have been devised for characters that performed retirement is likely to carry over into true retirement or permadeath. Both true retirement and permadeath let players resolve their stories and tie up loose ends.

As rites of passage, the performances of initiation and retirement in online RPGs reveal patterns of belief and behavior regarding work, careers, social relations, and aging among participating players. The capitalist work model is both reflected and critiqued in online RPGs, where characters can control all stages of the production process. Community values of kindness and mutual support, especially for those with less experience, are reinforced by ritualized gifting of items to new players and by *Guild Wars 2* game mechanics. The aging/leveling of characters through initiation follows the process of learning to overcome increasingly difficult obstacles, while retirement tackles "aging" itself as an obstacle outside of normal human control.

Although character retirement is admittedly the least common rite of passage covered in this thesis, it *does* happen, and it follows in the wake of initiation rites in a symbolically meaningful context as illustrated above.

V. Virtual Romance – White Gowns and Erotic Roleplay



Illustration 7: Guild Wars characters exchange rings during an in-game wedding ceremony.

Friends of the bride and groom gather together for the outdoor wedding of Lord Gust Steelhunter and Lady Tempest Star.³⁵ Both bride and groom are outfitted in ensembles suited to the occasion, the groom dressed in sapphire cloth and the bride in a gown of shimmering white.

The bride giggles as her groom repeats the priestess's vows and slips a ring onto her finger. Then it is her turn. As Lord Gust removes his sapphire glove, tossing it to a friend of theirs, Tempest blushes and accepts his bare hand into hers, repeating the priestess's words as she places the ring on his finger. "The circle is a symbol meaning 'never-ending.' This ring is a symbol of my love never ending."

After the exchange of rings, the priestess turns to the guests in attendance. "What Lyssa-blessed has joined, let no man put asunder. You have witnessed an act of unconditional love today, please keep this couple in prayers and well-wishes. I now give you Lord Steelhunter and Lady Tempest Steelhunter. Lord Steelhunter, please kiss your bride."

³⁵ These character names has been randomly generated using the Seventh Sanctum Fantasy Name Generator (<http://www.seventh sanctum.com/generate.php?Genname=fantasynameex>).

This example of a marriage roleplaying event was shared with me by one of my *Guild Wars 2* interviewees. The wedding of Lord and Lady Steelhunter represents a category of virtual weddings reported to me as the “normal wedding.” The “normal wedding” in virtual worlds resembles the modern “white wedding” with certain details modified to match the server’s lore. Server lore, as explained in “Chapter III,” refers to the history, beliefs, and practices of game-world cultural units which have been established as canon inside the magic circle of the game. The exchange of rings, the supporting presence of both best man and maid of honor, and the sealing of the wedding contract with a kiss are all samples of Western marital practice which have been appropriated into the *Guild Wars 2* wedding ceremony, while the most common wedding detail modified to match server lore is the patron deity of the ritual. Settings based on fantasy lore are generally polytheistic, as demonstrated by the fact that 90% (36/40) of the *Neverwinter Nights* servers I looked at included a pantheon of deities in their official lore, while in the official lore of *Guild Wars 2* Humans follow one or more of the Six Gods and the Norn pay homage to various animal spirits (of the remaining playable races, the Charr shun religion, the Sylvari worship the Pale Tree from which they are born, and the Asura believe in an Eternal Alchemy which connects all beings including the Human gods). Polytheistic settings allow players to personalize their religious experiences to the beliefs and interests of their characters, matching the traits of each character to a chosen deity’s portfolio. Marks of favor or disfavor by the divines make these fictional religions tangible, balancing intimacy and discipline (Feltmate 2010). For virtual wedding rituals, the patron deity is usually the patron deity of the bride or groom or a deity whose portfolio includes love, lust, or beauty. In *Guild Wars 2*, the goddesses who often preside over wedding ceremonies are Dwayna, goddess of healing, air, warmth, and light; and Lyssa,

dual-faced goddess of beauty, water, and illusion (Guild Wars 2 Official Wiki). In the example at the beginning of this chapter, the couple selected Lyssa as the patron deity of their otherwise “normal” ceremony.

While many virtual weddings follow the white wedding model discussed above, others perform deviant weddings whose very rebellion both expresses social tensions within the roleplaying culture system and simultaneously reinforces that system. In the following chapter, I will explore both types of weddings as well as the interpretations which my research has elicited.

Performing the Virtual Wedding

Descriptions of “normal weddings” ring similarly across both games. Consider the following quotes, the first from *Neverwinter Nights* and the second from *Guild Wars 2*.

1. “The marriage event took place with the typical pews, an arch, white bridegrooms dress and black tuxedo for the man (despite being supposedly set in medieval times) and with friends of both characters attending with gifts.”
2. “Every wedding I've attended, though most have been Human, pretty much are the same premise. Walking up to an altar, having a minister hold the ceremony, bridesmaids, best man, etc. with a reception to follow.”

Common words used by my informants to describe these wedding elements included “average,” “normal,” “run-of-the-mill,” “same,” “standard,” “textbook,” and “typical.” In addition to the religious setting presided over by a priest or priestess, and the social function of community attendance at the wedding, a more exhaustive list of symbolic practices associated with the white wedding include: “wedding rings, cakes, gowns, flowers, honeymoons, and gift giving” (Penner 2004). Some of these practices translate more readily into the fantasy RPG setting due to lore or game mechanics, and some are simply more popular than others. For example, both

games include customizable outfits and objects which can be exchanged as gifts or rings. Gifting of items is a practice which consolidates community ties both inside and outside of ritual circumstances, as I addressed in “Chapter IV” regarding initiation, so it came as no surprise to find that gifting is regularly practiced in virtual weddings. Moreover, in *Guild Wars 2*, gowns are an especially important symbol of passage because obtaining them requires both labor and a show of commitment. One of my interviewees roleplayed her character as a wedding planner whose tasks included running prospective brides through the Twilight Arbor dungeon 8-9 times in order to earn the necessary tokens for purchasing the style of gown that was popular for *Guild Wars 2* weddings. Tokens are special items which certain vendors accept in place of normal currency, while dungeons are optional areas separate from normal PvE where character parties face more difficult monsters in exchange for better experience and loot. Speaking from firsthand experience, dungeons are onerous affairs! Characters die frequently and need to *rebuff*,³⁶ combat is chaotic, the game often lags, and the boons available from dungeons rarely balance out the sheer chore of so much grinding. A player needs a *good* reason to complete the same dungeon 8-9 times. Evidently, for many virtual brides, marriage is sufficient reason to put forth the necessary effort.

In addition to gowns, gifts, and rings, elements such as vows and guests exist purely within the social domain and can therefore be employed in any setting. Vows reinforce the serious nature of the wedding as opposed to the silliness of ERP, while guests validate the communal impact of the marriage. Decorations, cakes, and other non-equipment props fall on the less popular or mechanically feasible end of the spectrum. Although the *Neverwinter Nights* toolset does allow DMs to more easily manipulate all aspects of the wedding site including cakes and flowers, this is a tedious process which requires planning and DM support; not all players

³⁶ Rebuff (definition): to reapply buffs, or temporary boosts to character attributes or combat abilities (MMORPG Terms Defined).

use decorations, but those that do are demonstrating a greater show of commitment than those whose marriages are more spontaneous. In *Guild Wars 2*, adding decorations to a wedding is not difficult but mechanically impossible, since the game has fixed décor which cannot be manipulated by players, while catering is a more feasible practice due to the variety of food and drink items in the game.

Aside from the “normal wedding” discussed above, there is a second type of virtual wedding which employs practices that have developed uniquely to these settings as part of their server lore. Race and profession are the two primary factors which determine how a lore-based wedding should appear. To cite a racial example from *Guild Wars 2*, lore written by the game’s producers dictates that Norn weddings should include a demonstration of the worthiness of bride and groom. This is generally done through storytelling which embellishes on the accomplishments of each. I attended one such wedding, and stories told on behalf of the bride and groom occupied most of the ceremony.

Norn wedding ritual offers interesting implications for the type of characters who can acceptably be wed. As discussed in regards to retirement in “Chapter IV,” rites of passage are not performed for every character. Rites of passage reinforce meaningful character storylines, but to acceptably participate in such passage a character should already reflect some amount of investment from the player. Demonstrating the worthiness of bride and groom expects that both characters have shared roleplay experiences with other players which are worth speaking of.

Another overarching feature of lore is the use of inns and taverns for social networking, as embodied in events like the wedding reception. The importance of tavern roleplay is discussed in “Chapter III,” but in regards to virtual weddings it should simply be noted that the use of a formal reception hall has largely been replaced by tavern roleplay. While the ceremony is the most meaningful part of the wedding ritual, the tavern reception is reportedly the most

enjoyable part of it. When rites of passage are made more enjoyable for the participants, they attract validation from a greater portion of the community.

A third type of virtual wedding is the deviant wedding. Victor Turner (1982) has stated that meaningful reversals or “the inversion of normal reality” during the liminal stage of rites of passage serve to separate the participant from everyday life and reinforce the social structure to which they will be reassimilated at the end of the liminal period (26), while Max Gluckman (1963) has argued that rituals of rebellion in South-East Africa express cultural tensions within the social structure of a culture and therefore validate that culture even through their deviation. Deviant weddings within the liminoid space of virtual worlds align with both description of reversal and rebellion. Among the deviant weddings which my interviewees shared with me were a wedding between two insane characters that held a priest at gunpoint to perform the ceremony, an elopement on the roof of a keep where the bride wore a black dress to show that she was living in sin, an actress’s marriage to her gay best friend, and two examples of polygamy. Tensions regarding violence and crime are expressed in the first example, sexuality in the second example, and alternative sexual identities in the third and fourth examples. Nevertheless, all of these cases serve to illuminate, rather than blur, the boundaries of appropriate marital behavior as evidenced by the subjective interpretations offered by my informants.

Interpreting the Virtual Wedding

While the previous section presents marriage from the perspective of its participants, this section will discuss theoretical interpretations of virtual marriage within Borneman’s framework of “analytics of sexuality” and “symbolics of blood.”

Analytics of Sexuality

Gender and sexuality are constrained by a combination of mechanical and cultural factors in online virtual worlds. The constraints begin with character creation, when the

player must choose a gender for their character. Although narrative standards can be more flexible and vary from character to character, the game mechanics themselves are rigid, permitting only one of two choices: male or female. Body builds on both games demonstrate biological dimorphism between genders. Biological dimorphism is most visible in stature, armor design, and various levels of avatar nudity. *Guild Wars 2* avatars can undress down to their gendered undergarments, while some *Neverwinter Nights* servers go one step further by allowing characters to undress to a condition of anatomically correct nakedness complete with nipples for female avatars and penises for males. Naked, anatomically accurate clothing models were honestly one of the most surprising things I encountered in any OOC zone, because they did not seem to abide the PG13 requirements of that server. In addition to nakedness, both games include emote commands to make avatars perform scripted social actions such as dancing or blowing kisses. One consequence of the /dance command in *Guild Wars 2* is the phenomena of “naked dance parties,” carried over from original *Guild Wars* (Etheridge 2006:98). Another consequence on *Neverwinter Nights* is the straddling command sequence of *prone* *hugs* *sits*, which I inadvertently discovered during my second day of field work when another character offered to give mine a back massage and, before I knew it, she was removing my character’s blouse. Any platonic interpretations of this gesture were dispelled by that character’s flirtatious dialogue and behavior. It was a cautionary start to my research, to say the least, exposing me firsthand to the risks of unwelcome ERP.

As demonstrated by the situation above and described in “Chapter II,” sexuality poses a challenge to online roleplaying communities. *Neverwinter Nights* servers address this challenge by making an explicit distinction between roleplay and social servers, the latter

being the appropriate place for ERP. Roleplay servers control sexual behavior through adult content ratings (37.5% of the servers which examined required roleplay to remain at or below a PG13 rating), instructions to limit adult content to private messaging (37.5%), and punishment for rule breakers on a varied scale from forced pregnancy to banning. On *Guild Wars 2* there are no explicitly recognized ERP servers, causing the *Tarnished Coast* to occupy an even more precarious position among roleplayers who fear that the *Tarnished Coast* server, being a more socially-g geared server than the only other roleplaying server *Piken Square*, will become the *Moonguard* equivalent on *Guild Wars 2*. *Moonguard* is a *World of Warcraft* server known for its intense ERP. Interviewees from *Tarnished Coast* insist that the comparison with *Moonguard* is unfounded and ERP on the server is minimal, but I can state from my experience as a participant observer that this is not entirely the case. While spending time in the Maiden's Whisper, a tavern in the Human's capital city, I had the opportunity to observe naked dance parties, borderline bestiality between a Human and Charr, homosexuality, prostitution, jokes about necrophilia, and a discussion which attributed the power of necromancers to the practice of anal sex. Nor is *Tarnished Coast* alone in this tenuous position, as demonstrated by my aforementioned example from *Argentum Regio* and warnings I was given to avoid specific players who are known to spend the better part of their time pursuing ERP relationships.

The meaningful implications of marriage, as I have argued previously, rescue social roleplay from the threat of ERP. Love in particular gives social roleplay value separate from sexuality. Where ERP is frowned upon, love is tolerated and even encouraged as a driving factor in social narratives. Love, as David Schneider (1968) argues, is the bridge between kinship as substance and kinship as a code of conduct, symbolizing unity, identity, and

togetherness (52). Love forges connections between not only spouses but friends, family, and community. In the context of troubadour Europe which informs fantasy lore, love is considered more spiritual than physical, bigger than any death or pain, the meaning and “high point” of life (Campbell and Moyers 1988:192). Such a sentiment is expressed in the marriage event at the beginning of this chapter, when the priestess declares the marriage of Lord and Lady Steelhunter to be a union of true love. The social networking significance of marriage events is reflected in my KWIC analysis of both games through words such as “love,” “people,” “child,” and “friend.”

Referring back to *figure 1*, let me point out that progress along the meaningful axis does not necessitate progress along the pleasurable axis. Complaints of boredom during weddings were expressed by interviewees from both games. In one example, the *Neverwinter Nights* marriage is described as “a dull, boring affair except for bride and groom... There's hardly anything to do for everybody else, so in the end, you end up with about one third of the original numbers, or worse: they stop paying attention,” while in another example the *Guild Wars 2* marriage is described as “too many players standing around in a disorganized fashion and constantly filling my chat log up with pointless emotes that take away from what the event is supposed to be about - two characters getting wed!” Marriage is not the only rite of passage which has been called boring or tedious by a fraction of my informants. Yet the fact that such a popularly performed event is considered boring by several of its practitioners underscores a deeper purpose for marriage roleplay than simple entertainment. That purpose is the support of meaningful experiences in defense against ERP and in validation of communal bonds.

Symbolics of Blood

While the analytics of sexuality interpret marriage as a creative force, the symbolics of blood interpret marriage as a conclusive force. Marriage is the breaking of social bonds and the death of individual identities. While the single character's supreme duties are to gods, allies, and factional allegiances, those duties are superseded for the married character by duty to their significant other. When viewed from this perspective which values blood and death over semen and life, marriage become a funeral of sorts – the groom dresses in mourning black while the grieving bride is sent away from her natal family with gifts like grave goods to support her journey into another life, leaving her loved ones behind. Within this framework of analysis, it is appropriate to note that the word “end” shows up as a common key word for marriage responses among *Guild Wars 2* interviewees.

Marriages can end roleplay because the players have chosen to retire characters to their “happily ever after” conclusion, or marriages can end roleplay when one of the spouses disappears, causing stagnation for the other character's storyline. One of my *Neverwinter Nights* interviewees, a player and DM who personally roleplayed marriage on *Argentum Regio*, estimates that as many as 40% of players use marriage as their excuse to retire their characters; “after all, if their player character is now a mother/father/husband/wife, they won't be putting themselves at risk as much.” In addition to retirement stories, several informants from both games have reported instances where the disappearance of a spouse forced them to either retire their character prematurely or pursue other avenues for feasible story progression such as divorce, infidelity, or mortuary ritual.

Divorce and infidelity signify the end of the relationship as opposed to the end of either character. In one example which I observed, after a character's spouse on *Argentum Regio* became inactive, that character roleplayed marital problems to justify his gradual

movement towards romantic involvement with a different character on the server. Other players sympathized with his predicament and supported the progression of his character's storyline rather than condemning him for playing unfaithfully. In another example, a DM was able to use tensions between a character and his ex-wife (performed by an NPC) to progress the world plot.

Mortuary ritual is a more severe avenue for overcoming spousal disappearance, where the relationship is terminated along with the absent spouse. Mortuary ritual avoids the ethical complications of divorce or infidelity. At the *Guild Wars 2* wedding I attended, one of the guests showed up with a new woman on his arm and the only explanation he gave for his absent wife was that "she died." Another *Neverwinter Nights* interviewee used a DM event to kill off his inactive lover so that his character's personal storyline could continue.

Kinship offers an interesting reversal to this vision of marriages as endings. A conclusive feature of kinship in traditional marriage ceremonies is the act of giving away children to begin their own nuclear families outside of their natal households. This act severs ties to the natal households in lieu of forging new ties between spouses and their children. In online RPGs, however, family members are often created specifically *for* the wedding. In *Neverwinter Nights*, control of family members is typically ceded to a DM who manipulates important family members as NPC avatars; in *Guild Wars 2*, family members are typically played by other players on the server. These *Guild Wars 2* family members may be made specifically for the roleplay event by friends of the participating players. The natal connection between the characters is therefore forged at the moment of separation, and developed more intensively *after* the marriage event. The result is a natal relationship which is created by the marriage event rather than severed by it. Furthermore, to create familial

characters, players who have already used all available character slots must pay real money to purchase room for an additional character. Player willingness to sacrifice real world money to an event which is meaningful to someone else and may be boring to them is yet another example of marriage events fulfilling the purpose of a socially binding practice.

Discussion

Uncontrolled sexual roleplay in virtual worlds threatens the stability of cultural norms and for many players undermines the meaningful experience of roleplaying. Through a combination of conscriptions regarding gender/sexuality and the finality of marriage, virtual marriage events are able to navigate the liminality posed by social roleplay in a manner which reinforces cultural values and transforms the raw chaos of human sexual potential into the controlled structure of a socially endorsed, love-based institution. Even when participants in the wedding ceremony find the marriage event tedious to attend, their supportive presence validates the wedding as a meaningful rite of passage and affirms the stabilizing influence of marital scripture over the dangerous terrain of erotic roleplay.

VI. Virtual Children – Avatar Pregnancy and the Ethics of Young PCs



***Illustration 8:** A married couple in Neverwinter Nights roleplays living together in a den outside of the city with their seven NPC children.*

When Riada set out to collect Harrowport lore about the region’s greatest heroes, she did not expect to be invited home by two of its most legendary figures. Yet that is exactly where she finds herself, welcomed into the private den of shapeshifters Bedlam and Seraphim³⁷ to enjoy a dish of homemade apple pie while the couple shares with her their legacy of love, adventure, and new beginnings.

“The children are probably asleep downstairs,” Seraphim explains as soon as they enter the den. She retreats to the kitchen to put together a tray of apple pie, cookies, and fresh water for the three adults to share while Riada explores the top floor of the cave.

“After you look around up here I’ll wake them up so you can meet them.”

Seraphim’s player informed me via OOC private messages during this roleplay that she and Bedlam intended to make their children as playable NPCs, though at the moment they mostly roleplayed the children via emotes. This approach to parental roleplay is a

³⁷ These character names has been randomly generated using the Seventh Sanctum Fantasy Name Generator (<http://www.seventh sanctum.com/generate.php?Gennname=fantasynamex>).

common one in online RPGs, as my interview data from both games corroborates. There are several reasons for confining child roleplay to emotes, which I introduced in “Chapter II.” The two dominant reasons are game mechanics and social pressure. Mechanically, game design in both *Guild Wars 2* and *Neverwinter Nights* makes it challenging to create a pregnant or adolescent avatar. Socially, it is easier to roleplay young children through emotes than to tackle the cultural biases and ethical quandaries which are connected with child characters in the high fantasy setting.

Because these ethical quandaries arise in the context of ERP and pregnancy, continuing through childbirth, adolescence, and upward until the character comes of age as a playable adult, the spectrum of rites of passage which fall within this scope of time will be covered collectively in this chapter. I will begin by discussing the social challenges of parent-child roleplay, in conjunction with themes from previous chapters, and conclude by exploring the implications of ritualized reversals of reproduction as virtual rites of passage.

Challenges of Parent-Child Roleplay

The first social challenge of parent-child roleplaying is the performance of sexuality which is analyzed in “Chapter V.” Other challenges include the passage of time, environmental dangers intrinsic to the high fantasy setting, and sharing ownership of child characters as intellectual property.

Passage of time

The complexity of coordinating time in virtual worlds is explored in “Chapter I.” Players come together from multiple time zones, and standardized server time may align with only one of these time zones or none of them. The synchronization of real time with standard time is a problem which figures particularly into roleplay concerning the progression of

pregnancy or the aging of children. Among a normal party of adults, the passage of in-game time over weeks, months, even years can be generalized through a combination of consensus and common sense. One of my interviewees mentioned how, in asynchronous forum roleplay, a breakfast at an inn which should only take a few hours might require several real days to roleplay. In *Neverwinter Nights*, 1 in-game day on the server clock corresponds to 48 real minutes, so characters can and do synchronously suffer this same problem – the sun may rise and set several times over the course of a single breakfast conversation. In such instances, players use external knowledge to estimate how long a breakfast, hunting trip, or quest into an adjacent plane might realistically take. Even *Guild Wars 2*, which has a closer temporal ratio of 1 in-game day to 8 real hours (or 3 in-game days to 1 real day), suffers from this problem of synchronization to some extent. It helps that this type of time does not correspond directly with the character's life course. *In normal circumstances* like these, when stories do not align perfectly with standard server time, it does not pose much of a problem. Effective roleplayers must already be capable of navigating temporal factors like time zones, conflicting schedules, and lag in persistent virtual worlds. Unfortunately, time generalizations cannot be applied as neatly to pregnancy or child aging, where changes accrue too dramatically and too quickly for unspoken consensus. KWIC analysis identified “time” as an important key word across both sets of interviews, while interviewees expressed the tendency for pregnancy and child roleplays to miss the mark with appropriate duration either by lasting too long or by passing too quickly depending upon the wishes of the player. Most often, the latter proved to be the case, since pregnancy and parenthood limit how the parental character can behave. Pregnancy and parenting restrict characters from adventure or tavern roleplaying, which are the most common situations for play and socializing in fantasy

RPGs. Many players will manipulate the duration of pregnancy or parenthood to accelerate their storylines in order to return to adventure and tavern roleplaying as quickly as possible, sometimes going so far as to send their children to be raised on other planes where time moves at a more rapid rate and children can reach adulthood in a matter of days or weeks.

Environmental dangers

Adventure and tavern roleplaying are symbols of the third social challenge for pregnancy and parental roleplay which is the challenge of environmental dangers. Mothers who adventure while pregnant risk miscarriage or otherwise deter from the believability of the story. Parents who spend their time adventuring or in taverns risk accusations of neglect and likewise deter from the believability of the story. The common thread here is that parent-child roleplaying in conjunction with adventure-tavern roleplaying challenges the ‘believability of the story.’

The tensions provoked by pregnancy and parenthood beg the question: why is a meaningful narrative so important? *Neverwinter Nights* and *Guild Wars 2* are games, after all; so why can’t players just do whatever they deem fun? A first reason is that engagement in fictional narratives requires the “willing suspension of disbelief,” and character actions which detract from suspension of disbelief reduce engagement (Aupers 2007:1). A second reason is that roleplaying is collaborative storytelling; for the product of roleplay to be considered a satisfying story, it must resonate with the realities of the human heart. As one informant expressed to me, “roleplay where you can touch how people feel in real life is so much more compelling than going out and killing a dragon that no one has ever seen in real life.” A good roleplay, like a powerful myth, must reflect essentially human values no matter how fantastic the circumstances. It must be *meaningful*. Real parents cannot leave young

children alone at home to go drinking at a bar every night, at least according to the values of modern America, so virtual parents who do so are less compelling in the best of circumstances, to say nothing of their ethical alignment. And if we assume that neglectful parenting is bad, adventuring while pregnant or caring for young children is definitely worse! A mythic theme of fantasy RPGs is that “at the darkest moment comes the light” (Campbell and Moyers 1988:39). Through a combination of lore and game design, these games evoke an atmosphere of “darkest moments” for characters to overcome by populating the world with violent monsters and treacherous villains. Characters level up and complete their heroic destinies by confronting these vestiges of darkness. Yet before a character may come of age by learning to overcome these dark forces, they should first enjoy a period of innocence. By this logic, the fantasy environment – which is intended to be dangerous for adults – is too perilous for innocent children or their caretakers.

It is in regards to this third challenge that both childbirth and resurrection (which I will address in “Chapter VII”) occupy a nebulous position as rites of passage. Although performance of childbirth gives meaning to virtual sexuality, that meaning comes at a cost – a cost which is measured in character limitations. If the cost is not met, and if parents do not abide by expectations of restraint during the extended passage of time from fetus to adult, then parents and children alike are stuck in a state of liminality where their uncertain relationship with the multifold dangers of the fantasy environment can threaten the believability of the story.

The point at which a child is ready to depart from innocence to face the perils of violence and sexuality which litter the fantasy landscape depends on the informant. Coming of age is socially marked; the specific point in the life cycle when a character becomes

acceptable to play is a matter of personal opinion which varies from player to player. Some interviewees suggested that newborn infants can conceivably be made as playable characters, albeit boring ones, because “all it's going to bloody do is cry.” Other interviewees suggested that characters should be no younger than 18. Among *Neverwinter Nights* responses, the average estimate for minimum character age fell between 12 and 13 years. *Guild Wars 2* responses were less specific, but estimations targeted an age somewhere in the teens.

Influential factors for determining age of initiation into adulthood include the psychological trauma of interacting with a dangerous world, the necessity of attending school in the earlier years of life, the believability of child adventurers testing their skills against powerful enemies, and of course the legal issues which surround the performance of violence toward children and pedophilia as discussed in “Chapter II.”

Sharing intellectual property

Assuming a child reaches the social age of maturity, the fourth and subsequent challenge is a matter of OOC control. In other words: who gets to play the child character? It takes trust to share control of a virtual child, which is the intellectual property of both parents. And trust can be difficult to extend in the liminoid setting of persistent virtual worlds where players may disappear without warning, ending the child's story with their disappearance. Given the emotional investment which it takes to share intellectual property with others, the job of roleplaying children on *Neverwinter Nights* generally falls to one or both of the parental players who already have a stake in the character's future. Interestingly, although parents play children on *Guild Wars 2* as well, the *Tarnished Coast* exhibits another curious phenomenon where players use asynchronous roleplaying forums to network with other community members and find players interested in controlling their family members.

‘House roleplay,’ or guild roleplay which tracks kinship through noble houses, is popular on the *Tarnished Coast* server; this social endorsement of kinship is likely a large contributor to the higher proliferation of family members which are entrusted to other players on *Guild Wars 2* compared with *Neverwinter Nights*.

Interpretations of Parent-Child Roleplay

No single lens of interpretation can reveal all of the embedded meanings of a cultural event. For this reason, I have attempted in each chapter to present multiple lenses of symbolic analysis. Regarding parent-child roleplaying, perspectives which interpret the rite of passage as either a concluding force or as tool for making sexuality meaningful align with arguments from “Chapter V.” In this section, I will briefly explore a third angle of interpretation: parent-child roleplaying as a ritual of reversal.

Rituals of Reversal

I mentioned in “Chapter V” that deviant weddings as inversions of normal reality can in fact serve to reinforce the social structure from which they deviate, following the theoretical frameworks of Victor Turner (1982) and Max Gluckman (1963). Deviant pregnancies offer another set of examples regarding reversal as a culturally stabilizing force.

When players perform reversals of normal pregnancy, children, or parenthood, they offer embedded critiques regarding one or more of the challenges listed above. In one *Neverwinter Nights* case, an interviewee shared with me a story of a demon baby which his character fathered. The roleplay event involved kicking the newborn off a cliff “since even as a baby [it] had the same intelligence and personality” as the demon inside its father. In another case from *Guild Wars 2*, an interviewee shared a second story of a demon baby whose birth consisted of eating itself free from its mother’s womb. The *Guild Wars 2* interviewee concluded her story by stating, “Needless to say, that was the last time I ever wished to witness an in character birth,

ever.” Both deviant births portray pregnancy and childbirth from a negative perspective, demonstrating the potential harm which can result from conceiving children in such a dangerous setting. The players from these two examples restored social order by terminating the symbols of deviance – by avoiding childbirth henceforth in the latter example, and by kicking the child off a cliff in the prior example. Other reversals which I encountered included a young girl who became a ghost as a result of neglectful parenting, a half-orc who offended parents by offering their babies weapons to better fare against the world’s perils, and lycanthrope NPCs which were scripted to follow around and *sniff* player characters of the same species after those player characters went into heat as part of a yearly mating quest. Many of these reversals are performed in a humorous fashion, but the underlying tone of the jests – as with mortuary humor, as I will discuss in “Chapter VII” – is “sanction against those who break tradition,” or specifically sanction against players who think to produce children amidst great environmental dangers (Pancewicz 2013).

The majority of reversals which I have encountered are in reaction to environmental dangers. Through stories of demonic and undead children, the players demonstrate the presence of darkness where there should be innocence. Through stories of infants kicked off of cliffs and children armed with axes before their first name day, the players demonstrate an emphasis on destruction in a domain where there should be an emphasis on creation. This reversal can be interpreted as a reprimand against pregnancy roleplay as well as a warning about the perils of trying to bring child characters into the dangerous environment of fantasy RPGs.

A final type of reversal worth noting is the use of silence to establish or consolidate meaning in circumstances where a performed rite of passage would challenge the meaningfulness of the narrative. This behavior is exemplified by one informant’s experience with a player who preferred to roleplay child characters: “A lot of roleplayers, when finding out her character is

only 9 years old, don't want to roleplay with her anymore. She was even denied acceptance into a guild because of her in-character age.” Instead of addressing the challenges posed by a child character directly, the players in this example addressed her problematic existence through a conscious avoidance of roleplay. They ignored her. They employed silence as a tool to separate her from them and to deny her any influence over their individual storylines. This use of silence was unspoken; it was neither discussed beforehand nor explicitly endorsed; yet it was shared among “a lot of roleplayers” in the community. For these community members, the property of silence as a tool for defending meaning was understood tacitly as an element of RPG culture.

Such reversals as illustrated above – where it is the conspicuous absence of rite-of-passage roleplay which unites players and supports the meaning of the story – will be expanded upon in the *Resurrection* section of “Chapter VII.”

Discussion

Following in the aftermath of virtual sexuality, the performance of pregnancy and childbirth continues the legacy of social controversy that ERP initiates. In addition to game mechanics, social challenges posed by pregnancy and parental roleplaying include managing the passage of time in relation to the life course, protecting offspring against a dangerous environment, and sharing intellectual property with other players. Interpretations of reproductive roleplay vary from situation to situation, but lenses of interpretation which have proven relevant to my research material include childbirth as closure, pregnancy as a meaningful consequence of erotic roleplay, and parent-child roleplaying as a stage for rites of reversal. One overarching value among fantasy roleplayers which these lenses illuminate is that, while initiation and retirement rites are performed as lessons for coping with the evil and uncontrollable elements of a dangerous world, coping with darkness should be a challenge for adults. Children should not be submitted to violence, death, or sexuality; their

innocence should be protected until they are socially marked for coming of age. This value identifies *who* participants believe should be playing these games as much as it identifies *what age* of characters should be played.

All of the aforementioned perspectives regarding reproductive rites respond in some capacity to social pressures and, when performed successfully, contribute to the meaningful experience of social roleplaying.

VII. Virtual Mortuary Rites – “Grab the corpse and let’s go!”



Illustration 9

***Illustration 9:** The majority of Neverwinter Nights servers (77.5%) which I have examined send characters to a spirit realm after death, a liminal space separated from life where the character resides until they are either resurrected or permanently killed.*

The stench of troglodytes is heavy in the air. Monstrous corpses lay strewn about, and in their midst lies one which is slightly less monstrous. Destiny stands guard over her fallen friend, a loyal ally despite his gnoll heritage,³⁸ and does not notice her own injuries as she ponders how to drag the heavy, armor-clad gnoll back to town where a priest might yet be able to save him. His pulse has stopped but his body is still warm, and so long as his body remains warm there is a chance that a spell can raise him.

Her prayers are answered when Flora Wanderlust,³⁹ a well-known and powerful cleric-class character, finds the pair of them in the nick of time.

“Oh Tome,” Flora murmurs, “The innkeeper told me of trouble.” Without reacting further to the gruesome scene in front of her, Flora casts a spell to bring Tome, the kind-hearted gnoll, back to life.

³⁸ Troglodytes and gnolls are two types of monstrous humanoids which, as NPCs acting on server lore, will attack and kill adventurers. Tome’s player elected to play this character as a “friendly” (as opposed to “hostile”) gnoll.

³⁹ These character names have been randomly generated using the Seventh Sanctum Fantasy Name Generator (<http://www.seventh sanctum.com/generate.php?Gennname=fantasynamex>).

Tome blinks as consciousness returns to him. The first words out of his mouth are a tearful exclamation, “FEY LADY!” He hugs Flora, who returns the embrace, then allows her to guide him and Destiny back to the safety of Tivook’s Inn.

This resurrection event illustrates the casual approach to serial death which is common in online RPGs. Tome is raised from the clutches of death with virtually no penalty. The player uses emotes to describe his lingering body heat, but the resurrection itself is performed quickly and without remark. The only cost which Tome and I pay is a loss of play time – Dixon’s primary commodity of virtual worlds – as we wait for Flora to respond to our OOC request for help (Dixon 2008). Such is the nature of serial character death and resurrection in many fantasy RPG settings. As one interviewee described to me, “resurrection seems very weak as far as roleplay goes. It really cheapens the experience of what death means and how much of a miracle a resurrection would be. If a character dies in one of these settings it’s simply, ‘Okay, grab the corpse and let’s go.’” While resurrection is cheap but convenient, permadeath – though unpopular and inconvenient for many players – is attributed to more meaningful storytelling. To quote another interviewee, permadeath is “a necessary evil; like evil itself, necessary. Without the 'real threat of death,' adventuring becomes more like sight-seeing.” This interpretation of death mechanics aligns with Clifford Geertz’ (1973) conception of “deep play” in regards to Balinese cock fighting. With deep play, Geertz argues: the higher the stakes are, the greater the immaterial values which are affixed to the play activity (432-33). Likewise, regarding serial and permanent character death in RPGs, the higher the stakes, the more meaningful the story. Real world stakes

which may be applied to virtual permadeath play, in addition to the character itself, include the investment of time, emotion, and in some cases real world currency.

Permadeath and resurrection events start in the same place – with the death of a character, which initiates Van Gennep’s stage of separation. After death, virtual mortuary rites navigate liminality along one of two paths toward aggregation, the first ending with resurrection among the living and the second ending with permadeath among the deceased.

I have organized this chapter to imitate the mortuary journey of an online RPG character following the symbolic and at times cyclical stages of separation, liminality, and aggregation. I will begin by examining the event of separation, symbols of separation, and the factors which influence whether a character will be directed toward a path of resurrection or a path of permadeath. Next I will look at the liminal experiences of player, character, and community, along with the liminal spaces which they occupy during the time between separation and aggregation. I will discuss permadeath roleplaying in connection to a more traditional vision of mortuary ritual, and resurrection as both a rite of return and reversal. I will conclude this chapter by examining memorialization as a virtual symbol of aggregation.

Separation

Separation begins with character death. As one of my *Guild Wars 2* informants shared with me, it is the rule of high level PvE that “you WILL die.” Your character will die and it will die frequently, probably more than once per event. Estimates given during *Neverwinter Nights* interviews averaged 1.625 deaths per adventure with an estimated maximum of 11.22 deaths per adventure, while *Guild Wars 2* estimates averaged 3.33 deaths per adventure with an estimated maximum of 15 deaths per adventure (see *figure 4*). Moreover, *Guild Wars 2* includes commands which let you calculate your total number of

deaths (/deaths) and total duration of time played (/age) on any given character, so for my participant experience I can verifiably state that in 75 hours of game play on *Guild Wars 2* – including non-adventuring time spent roleplaying in cities or collecting screenshots of in-game memorials – my main character Moth died 148 times. This averages to roughly 1.97 deaths per hour. As an even more poignant example, the informant who taught me how to use these commands had died 2,322 times on his main character by the occasion of our interview and 71 times on his alternate.

The extreme death counts given above depict PvE deaths, caused by dangers in the virtual environment. Characters die to monsters, to traps, to falls from steep heights. My most memorable *Neverwinter Nights* death was to a shrub, while one of my interviewees once died to a pair of enchanted boots. Serial death in PvE lore reflects a combination of Western attitudes toward nature and mythic concepts of monster slaying. As a reflection of Western attitudes toward nature, PvE resembles Sherry Ortner's (1999; 2006) vision of the "nature \leftrightarrow culture" conflict in Western ideology where agents of culture seek to dominate nature in a struggle for what is at times spiritual and at times sexual transcendence. PCs dominate nature by defeating monsters and claiming the monsters' loot (personal treasures) for themselves. Some PCs are more discriminate than others of what they classify as a monster or less aggressive in their relationship toward nature, but the general pattern of monster slaying is consistent across all classes, races, and regions. Characters act out the nature \leftrightarrow culture conflict because it is familiar, because it is built into game design, and because – like Ortner's mountaineering – it "is difficult, dangerous, challenging; it makes the self sharper, tougher, more honest, more real" (1999:37). However, the obstacles of PvE are not exclusively "natural." PvE refers to all challenges written into the program of the game,

including social and moral challenges. A better model of PvE can be understood through a reconfigured version of this conflict as scripts \leftrightarrow roleplaying, where the “nature” of the game consists of all scripted or program-generated elements and “culture” refers to all player-generated elements.

Although some servers are stricter than others about PvE deaths, the general rule of PvE is that characters killed by “environmental” dangers are allowed to pursue the path of resurrection assuming they are willing to pay the cost of resurrection in time, wealth, or experience. In *Guild Wars 2* adventure roleplaying, this type of death is considered a knockdown unless stated otherwise, labeling defeated characters as unconscious rather than dead. The knockdown interpretation is used in *Neverwinter Nights* also, but less universally.

Deaths caused by other players or DM/guild events are comparatively more serious than PvE deaths. In *Neverwinter Nights*, PvP policies are stricter than PvE, varying from server to server. Examples of PvP penalties include a longer wait time, the nullification of respawn as an avenue of resurrection, and permadeath. Death during a DM event is also more probable than PvE to result in permadeath. Permadeaths assigned by DMs – the forced and premature conclusions of character stories – are explained as “consequences of player actions.” Punishable player actions range from roleplaying a character in foolish or malicious ways which challenge the communal narrative to OOC actions which threaten the roleplaying community. Permadeath is the primary means by which DMs enforce the rules of the magic circle. The only punishment for players that is more severe than permadeath is banning, which enacts the social death of the player as opposed to the virtual death of the character. In *Guild Wars 2*, defeat during PvP or a guild event is a matter of player

interpretation, but it is common courtesy for the defeated character to accept either injury or permadeath as the consequence of their defeat.

In addition to game mechanics and player interpretation, dice occupy an interesting position of authority over the outcome of mortuary rites in online RPGs. In “Chapter II” I introduced the role of dice in *D&D* as a “source of formal structure for an otherwise *very* flexible game” (Fine 1983:7). The flexibility of the game offers characters almost unlimited agency, allowing them to attempt just about anything within the scope of player creativity. Structured agency is what makes RPGs uniquely suited to modern myth making. Dice are part of the structured side of this roleplaying equation. Dice are limitation. Dice are destiny. Players roll dice to determine the success or failure of their attempted actions. These dice rolls decide important elements of the character’s story progression.

Neverwinter Nights is based on *D&D 3.0* and consequentially employs an electronic version of *D&D*’s dice system. In addition to scripted rolls for PvE, *Neverwinter Nights* characters carry OOC dice bags to account for elements of roleplayed probability, covering everything the player wishes for their character to do from skills like “spot” and “listen” which provide details about the world around them to “saving throws” which determine life or death. One interviewee permanently killed her character as the result of a failed dice role during roleplay to become a lich (a type of undead described in “Chapter VIII”), while another permanently killed her character as a result of a failed saving throw to survive a poisoned arrow which she put herself in front of to protect a friend. Both of these permadeaths were player chosen, not DM assigned. The players chose the actions which resulted in dice rolls and likewise chose to accept the result of those rolls as character destiny, regardless of the results.

Unlike *Neverwinter Nights*, dice are not built mechanically into *Guild Wars 2*.

However, the popularity of dice as arbiters of fate in the face of otherwise unlimited agency can be observed in the voluntary use of unaffiliated dice websites such as *rolz.org* by *Guild Wars 2* players to determine the outcome of PvP combat. At *rolz.org*, combatants make opposed percent rolls for attack and defense until enough damage is accrued to determine a winner. The consequences of defeat are left to player discretion, but the social standard for defeat via critical hit is permadeath.

Whether a character is directed toward resurrection or permadeath, the initial (scripted) marks of separation are the same. In both games, character bodies collapse to the ground and a death menu appears on the defeated player's screen. The death menu for *Guild Wars 2* (see *illustration 6*) shows the amount of healing the character needs as a blood red bar with the words "you are defeated" written in white and the option "return to waypoint" written in smaller text below it. The death menu for *Neverwinter Nights* differs between servers but generally appears as a black box with the title "you are dead" written in white and a choice of four options: (1) load game, (2) exit game, (3) respawn, and (4) wait for help. The colors of both death menus; bold hues of red, white, and black; contrast with the natural tones of the environment. Red, white, and black are the trinity of ritual hues associated with rites of passage, first proposed by Turner (1967), which Metcalf and Huntington (1991 c1979) use as the starting point of their discussion of mortuary symbols (63). These colors symbolize the separation into ritual space and evoke real world connotations of life and death transitions due to their visual similarities with blood, bone, unconsciousness, and necrosis.

Alongside color, stillness is another important symbol of separation. Virtual worlds are engaging because they are dynamic. Players can move their avatars and adjust their

viewing angles, traveling across vast and vivid landscapes. They can fight monsters and solve puzzles. They can peruse item inventories, look at their character sheets, and read maps. But in death, this movement ceases. The avatar is frozen in the position of death. The player has no challenges to overcome, no game to play, no other place in the world to look at than the site of their character's corpse. In *Guild Wars 2*, the player at least retains the freedom to type in the chat window and navigate other menus from their static position, but in most *Neverwinter Nights* servers these key commands are frozen as well. Stillness symbolizes death, and the imposed stillness of character death reinforces separation from ordinary play.

Liminality

The death menus for both *Guild Wars 2* and *Neverwinter Nights* give players the choices to wait for help, respawn, or exit the game. Waiting for help confines players to a period of liminality and reversal where an interactive world becomes a static one, where the player is removed from the fast pace of the game to the tedium of waiting, and where even the most powerful characters are exposed in utter helplessness to the mercy of others. Liminality for the deceased is paralleled by liminality for the bereaved and the community. Passage for the bereaved may require finding the body of the deceased, retrieving it, endeavoring to heal it, or accepting the permanent loss of that individual.

Waiting for help is the extent of mechanical liminality in *Guild Wars 2*, in which roleplay of mortuary rites to resurrect or permanently kill the character must take place either synchronously during the "wait for help" stage or asynchronously after the player has respawned or exited the game. *Neverwinter Nights* contributes an additional level of mechanical liminality and marked liminal space which is the "spirit realm" as a playable

environment. 77.5% of the *Neverwinter Nights* servers which I studied send players to some kind of spirit realm after death (see *illustration 9*). Of these servers, 41.9% of the spirit realms are modeled after the Fugue Realm from *D&D's Forgotten Realms* setting. The generic spirit realm is a misty place where characters go to speak to an NPC guardian about their options for returning to the world of the living. NPC guardians give different options depending upon the scripts of each server. Some spirit guardians offer the option to respawn at a cost of gold and/or experience. Other spirit guardians do not. Some offer to permanently delete or retire the deceased character. Others do not. Some spirit realms are bland locations with no other markers than the guardian NPC. Other spirit realms boast notice boards, in-character libraries of books to read, and even an out-of-character lounge to entertain the liminal player or character during their mortuary transition. The choices which a character makes inside the spirit realm and the choices which their allies make in the world of the living facilitate the character's movement toward either resurrection or permadeath. Actions which complete the character's transition toward either resurrection or permadeath will be discussed in the following section.

Aggregation

As noted previously, serial PC death diverts into one of two mortuary paths: resurrection and permadeath. The stages of separation and liminality are similar for these two paths, but aggregation is navigated differently. For that reason, mortuary rites of resurrection and permadeath will be discussed separately in the subsections below.

Resurrection

In the quote regarding serial character death in the introduction to this chapter, the statement “grab the corpse and let's go” refers to the practice of “corpse carry” (also called

“corpse drag”), where allies pick up their fallen companion as a corpse item and deliver that corpse item to a temple priest who can perform the resurrection. 20% of the *Neverwinter Nights* servers which I examined listed “corpse carry” among their resurrection mechanics. Other avenues of return on *Neverwinter Nights* include respawn, raise dead/resurrection spells (as seen above), and DM intervention. Respawn is a mechanical choice, but the roleplay interpretation of character respawn tends to treat it as either divine intervention, a “restart button” where players pretend that the death event never happened, or being knocked out and revived by NPC allies. Characters raised by raise dead spells are generally roleplayed as unconscious or freshly dead (while the spirit is still lingering close to the body). Compared to raise dead, resurrection and true resurrection spells have a farther reach for pulling spirits back from beyond the pale. DM intervention is situational; it can manifest anywhere from purely OOC assistance (where the character reaction resembles respawn) to a dramatic resurrection event. Penalties for resurrection vary from server to server but include wait time, loss of wealth, loss of experience, experience debt (reduced experience gain until the debt is repaid), item loss, alignment shift (shifting the character’s alignment along a scale of good-evil depending upon the manner of revival), mechanical resurrection sickness (temporary reduction of ability scores), roleplayed resurrection sickness (nausea, injury, and etcetera), and character amnesia. Of these, only roleplayed resurrection sickness and amnesia are up to player discretion.

By comparison, downed characters in *Guild Wars 2* have far fewer avenues of return to choose from. They can either respawn at their choice of waypoints given a small loss of coin or they can wait to let other characters roleplay their healing/resurrection. Resurrection roleplaying on *Guild Wars 2* has included medical resuscitation, lending life force to stabilize

a mortally injured ally, blood rituals to augment magical healing, and necromantic efforts to retrieve deceased spirits from their afterlife in the Mists.

Across both games, resurrection roleplaying abides by a couple of overarching trends to keep the experience of death meaningful. The first trend is a modification of death's interpretation so that a downed character is not dead at all but rather unconsciousness or injured. Broken armor, medical attention, resurrection sickness, and injuries which endure for days after the death event all reduce the physical severity of the death event into a "near death crisis" and intensify the social impact of death as a game mechanic. Collectively, illness and injury are marks of return; they are symbols of IC consequences to parallel the minimal consequences built into game mechanics and to justify the player's reintegration into the community after the disjunctive experience of defeat. Moreover, they are material marks rather than spiritual ones, carefully constructed to toe the line of mortality while leaving the gravity of death intact.

The second trend is a symbolic reversal of performed rites of passage as tools of meaning; it is the cultural boycott of resurrection roleplay. Characters respawn and pretend the death event never happened, or after resurrection they suffer amnesia and do not remember what led them to be raised. By ignoring PvE resurrection both IC and OOC, players disempower it, protecting their storylines from the cheapening impact which resurrection would otherwise inflict. From this perspective, a lack of resurrection roleplaying as portrayed by the opening scene of this chapter speaks more with its silence than its narration. The lack of narration related to resurrection stands out because roleplayers are generally notorious for emoting minute details of their appearance, circumstances, or

behavior. For example, consider the following discourse events, the first from *Neverwinter Nights* and the second from *Guild Wars 2*:

1. Brand Grimguard: *She'd reach over for her hood then, calmly undoing it. The instant it comes down, she removes the straps that hold her cloak in place, and all of a sudden, a previous pair of wings kept hidden behind it unfold, displaying their massive wingspan, its feathery tips marred with crimson, the immaculate white tarnished by the color of blood.*
2. Opera Griffonfinder⁴⁰ smiles as she watches the costumed folk gather round. She nibbles on the candied apple every now and then, wincing at the cut on her lip.

Each of these discourse events were posted as a single unit of text into the respective game's chat window. Note the many details they include. When roleplayers breeze through a significant event like resurrection without any such description, the neglect is intentional. Players neglect to describe resurrection in order to maintain the severity of death as a subject of discourse in a setting where death is far too easily devalued – “a joke,” as one informant called it, “like 1 ups in Mario.” The video game *Mario* gives players extra lives in the form of “1 up” mushrooms. The player's comparison between resurrection and “1 ups” reflects tension between the mechanical side of fantasy RPGs where character death is temporary, a penalty for failure, and the narrative side of fantasy RPGs where character death is or ought to be permanent, an unavoidable and deeply meaningful aspect of the human experience.

To revisit Setzer's (2001) attributes of resurrection in real world cultures, resurrection: (1) condenses a worldview, (2) is imprecise and abstract (a condition which produces effective symbols within a community), (3) as a symbol it draws boundaries (such

⁴⁰ These character names have been randomly generated using the Seventh Sanctum Fantasy Name Generator (<http://www.seventh sanctum.com/generate.php?Gennname=fantasynamex>).

as illuminating the dichotomy between bodily limits and limitlessness), (4) constructs community, and (5) confers legitimacy on those who employ it. Resurrection roleplaying in virtual worlds condenses a worldview which argues that death is devalued by game mechanics and should not be further devalued by meaningless and repeated resurrections. It is imprecise and abstract, varying from context to context. It draws boundaries between types of deaths such as PvE and PvP; between living characters, dead characters, and undead characters caught in the space in between; and it illuminates the uncertain boundaries between magic and realism, injury and fatality, player preference and natural consequence. The necessity of resurrection constructs community, but not necessarily the roleplay itself. Rather, as the trend of boycotting resurrection exemplifies, it is the avoidance of resurrection roleplay which unites community members and confers legitimacy on those who employ it.

An interesting parallel is apparent between the use of silence and the player's age according to the gamer's life cycle. "Younger" players are more likely to perform resurrection roleplay, while "older" players are more likely to treat character death as unconsciousness or injury, to avoid resurrection roleplaying, or to accept permadeath as a reasonable alternative to respawn. Susan Rasmussen's (1997) study of aging among the Tuareg in Africa identifies "becoming old" as a process of cultivating reserve. Likewise, in online RPGs, "older players" are made through the cultivation of situation-specific reserve. There are rarely explicit rules forbidding the performance of resurrection roleplay. Instead, older players learn from tacit cultural mores to practice reserve in situations such as childbirth and resurrection where performance of the event could threaten the meaning or believability of the narrative.

Silence like stillness can be interpreted as a symbol of death. Yet in the context of resurrection roleplaying, the value of silence goes well beyond this. Silence becomes a source of value amidst life and death, as it is silence and not performance which confers legitimacy and moves storylines toward the meaningful end of the roleplaying spectrum.

Permadeath

According to Jennifer Hunter (2007), the target audience of mortuary ritual divides into three categories: the deceased, the bereaved, and the community (160). While resurrection roleplay – and just as potently, the lack of roleplay – is primarily focused on the player, even as it combines player choice with community validation, permadeath roleplay is primarily focused on the bereaved and the community. Funerals are not likely to be held for little known characters, nor are memorials likely to be constructed. The mortuary ritual of permadeath is a way for the community to consolidate itself after the loss of an important character and to recognize the impact which that character has made on other characters and more broadly on server lore.

Referring to *figure 3* and *figure 4* from “Chapter III,” interview data suggests that permadeath is more commonly observed and roleplayed on *Neverwinter Nights* than *Guild Wars 2*, while a higher average of funerals has been experienced in *Guild Wars 2*.

One factor which contributes to this discrepancy is game mechanics. The programming of *Neverwinter Nights* allows roleplayers far more freedom for world customization and subsequently memorialization than the programming of *Guild Wars 2*. Because players cannot honor the deceased character with an in-game memorial, they are more predisposed to honor them with a funeral as an in-game event.

Another factor which contributes to this discrepancy is the condition of permadeath as either a voluntary or involuntary consequence. Interviewees from both games offered mixed opinions on permadeath. On the one hand, permadeath is deep play. The threat of permadeath makes storylines more meaningful than serial death. On the other hand, no-one wants to permanently kill characters before they are ready to do so. Permadeath as an involuntary consequence is more of an issue on *Neverwinter Nights*, where 67.5% of servers studied implement some kind of permadeath system and on many of these servers permadeath is not purely by player choice; instead, permadeath may be assigned to a character as a result of their actions or as a result of DM opinion. Unfair DM rulings as the reason for permadeath are a complaint which was expressed exclusively by my *Neverwinter Nights* informants. On *Guild Wars 2*, where permadeath is ultimately a matter of player choice, the subject receives more positive attention, specifically as a tool for developing the storylines of other characters in the community. This more positive outlook on permadeath spills over to a more positive outlook on funeral roleplay. In both cases permadeath events create ripples in the community, but in *Neverwinter Nights* it is experienced more often as a meaningful ending, a somber reminder that actions have consequences, while in *Guild Wars 2* it is experienced more often as a rich opportunity for both endings and new beginnings as some storylines are concluded and others are pushed forward.

The humor which pervades a portion of *Guild Wars 2* funerals and memorials exemplifies this lighter vision of mortuary ritual. Regarding funerals, my interviewees shared one example of a middle finger statue as a funeral gift to man whose mindset in life was “f*** the law,” and another example of a woman who kissed a fellow mourner to make her stop crying, causing the player of the deceased character to laugh so hard that he snorted.

Regarding epitaphs, I collected screenshots of as many memorials as I could find in either game and organized them according to theme. One theme which stands out to me is mortuary humor. I observed mortuary humor in both games, but it appears more common in *Guild Wars 2* as documented in *figure 5*.

Figure 5		
Variable	<i>Neverwinter Nights</i>	<i>Guild Wars 2</i>
Total Epitaphs	27	195
Quantity of Humorous Epitaphs	4	38
% of Humorous Epitaphs	14.81%	19.49%

Figure 5: I compiled a list of epitaphs found in *Neverwinter Nights* and *Guild Wars 2*. Statistics for humorous epitaphs are presented here.

Mocking death is not unique to virtual worlds. Nevertheless, the quality of humor is a subjective measure, so in the name of consistency my conditions for identifying epitaphs as humorous followed Pancewicz's (2013) purposes for mortuary humor: relief (tension reduction), sanction against those who break tradition (since death in jokes is generally traditional and any exceptions become the source of amusement), and to point out differences between what is declared and what really happens.

Differences between what is declared and what really happens were the first epitaphs which I identified. An example of a humorous epitaph which falls into this category is the *Guild Wars 2* gravestone for Milton Carson, age 40, which reads:

Beloved Husband

When he was sober

In this example, "beloved husband" is the declared sentiment of love and loss which gravestones typically express. It is likewise the first line which the player reads. The

subsequent qualification “when he was sober” expresses the reality of a potentially volatile situation, where the death of an alcoholic husband might bring as much socially inappropriate relief as socially appropriate grief. The humor of this epitaph stems from the way the second line is opposed to the sentiment which precedes it.

Sanctions against those who break tradition manifest primarily regarding manner of death. Some of these sanctions take the form of adventurer’s last words, some of them are expressed in silly couplets, and some make brief statements which infer an ironic manner of death. An example of a humorous epitaph which falls into this category is the *Guild Wars 2* gravestone for Rhett Heron, age 31, which reads:

Shaemoor's first and last

Peace ambassador to the centaurs

To understand the humor of this epitaph, the player must know that centaurs are members of a violent, monstrous race in the game which kill Humans and other races mercilessly. Human tradition dictates that centaurs should be killed, not befriended. This epitaph implies that Rhett was the first person foolish enough to approach centaurs as an ambassador of peace, and he died for it. The epitaph is a humorous sanction against characters which might unwisely consider diplomatic negotiations with the centaurs.

Although both of the aforementioned examples could be interpreted as tension relieving in addition to their other qualifiers, a third category of humorous epitaphs is uniquely silly in its handling of death, serving no other apparent purpose than to lighten the mood for those who read it. An example of a humorous epitaph which falls into this category is the *Neverwinter Nights* gravestone for Lester Mard, age unknown, which reads:

He was young

He was fair

But the Goblins

Took his hair

Goblins are a regular threat in fantasy RPGs. The combination of the epitaph's rhyme scheme and macabrely unexpected conclusion transforms a too-common manner of NPC and serial PC death into something which both players and characters can laugh at.

Gravestones are a pervasive form of virtual memorialization, but they are not the only form. In addition to gravestones, other types of in-game memorials include statues, monuments, NPCs, and books containing server lore about the deceased character. All of these cultural artifacts give characters a point of reference for honoring and remembering the deceased character, as I experienced firsthand on *Argentum Regio* when a DM event brought my character's adventuring party into the Plane of Darkness. While in that alternate plane, we encountered an unmarked dome which was summarily described to my character as a memorial to man who died protecting a group of his allies against the evil which resided in that plane. No words were recorded on the dome, but its presence provoked one of the party's veteran characters to re-explain and therefore reanimate the memories of that character's sacrifice.

In *Guild Wars 2*, where player character memorials exist via roleplay only, the forums offer an asynchronous avenue for memorializing dead or retired characters, especially when information about in-game funerals is posted there for long-term preservation.

Discussion

Roleplaying mortuary ritual is a fascinating notion, especially given the unique manifestation which death takes in *Neverwinter Nights* and *Guild Wars 2*. Here, resurrection can be dismissed among the most trivial of ritualized behavior in high fantasy settings, while permadeath can be lauded for the depth which it brings character storylines and the anchor which it creates between dynamic character identities and a more static body of server lore. I have previously referenced the statement that performing fictionalized history allows participants to experience “history as it should have been,” a valorized alternative to the ethical tensions and alienation of modernity (Pinder 2006:45). Through virtual mortuary ritual, a different paradigm shift is apparent. Whereas “the endless shying away from confrontation with mortality is undeniably a marked feature of American culture,” the significance which my informants have placed on virtual mortuary ritual in conjunction with the multifold perils of this dangerous fantasy landscape support a desire for direct confrontation with mortality by online roleplayers (Metcalf and Huntington 1991 c1979:201). “Organized magic always appears within those domains of human activity where experience has demonstrated to man his pragmatic impotence,” Malinowski argues regarding tribal magic and religion; likewise, roleplayers cope with their impotence in the face of real world death by confronting it directly in the mythic worlds of online RPGs where the values, interpretations, and even outcomes of mortuary ritual are vulnerable to their own magical power and discretion (Malinowski 1935:239).

This chapter on virtual mortuary ritual is the result of the research questions which initially drove my thesis project. Knowing the unique manifestation of death in online RPGs, I set out with the intention of looking specifically at mortuary ritual in regard to two hypotheses: (1) in opposition to van Gennep’s argument that mortuary rites are primarily

concerned with separation of the dead *from* the world of the living, mortuary rites in virtual worlds would be primarily concerned with aggregation of the dead *into* the world of the living, and (2) despite Crapanzano's proposition that rites of transition are primarily disjunctive, rites of transition (specifically mortuary rites) in virtual worlds would be primarily conjunctive (concerned with overcoming separation and unifying characters in a community). The data which I uncovered led me to expand my thesis to include other common rites of passage, but mortuary rites have retained my favor as the most poignant aspect of virtual rites of passage for analysis.

Field data supports both of the aforementioned hypotheses. Rites of resurrection, even when the resurrection is purposefully not roleplayed, serve to reintegrate the deceased player into a narratively meaningful community. Mortuary humor unifies the community by releasing tensions while sanctioning players against the flippant treatment of deathly peril. Permadeath rites allow the player to continue influencing the storylines of other characters even after death, creating artifacts of memory which enable the deceased or retired character to endure as a member of the community in lore if not in actuality. And because separation is a condition of entrance into the virtual world, rites of passage including mortuary ritual do not function to enforce separation but instead function as tools for overcoming casual or independent play to unite roleplayers in a social network for the collaborative construction of a meaningful narrative. It is around this axial conclusion that my thesis has grown to its present form.

VIII. Virtual Undeath – Roleplaying the Liminal Persona



Illustration 10: Necromancy is a respectable profession in Guild Wars 2. Necromancers are able to summon undead minions to their aid such as the bone minion pictured above.

Moth is pleased by Bane Direblood's⁴¹ invitation to join their adventuring company, but still she hesitates. "Are you sure? There are many who have found my choice of companions..." Her gaze roams over the undead surrounding her, "undesirable."

Baffled by her remark, Bane reminds Moth that necromancy is a respectable professional and that the Risen of Zhaitan, animated corpses which serve an evil dragon, are not the same as her minions.

When Moth still appears skeptical, Bane takes offense at it. "I think you have me confused with a naïve bookah, Sister Moth. I am fully aware of your profession and your god. I understand necromancing. It's not a dark and mysterious art."

Having explored several examples of successfully performed rites of passage in the preceding chapters, including mortuary ritual, it is time to examine undeath as a model of incomplete mortuary ritual. As introduced in "Chapter II," undead characters exist in a state

⁴¹ This character name has been randomly generated using the Seventh Sanctum Fantasy Name Generator (<http://www.seventh sanctum.com/generate.php?Genname=fantasynamex>).

of liminality – they have experienced separation from the worlds of the living and the dead, yet aggregation remains a distant dream for them. Undead characters inhabit the margin between stable identities, in the ritualized space which leads from life to death and death to life, trapped in a state of partial resurrection or partial permadeath depending upon their type of undeath. Different types of undead embody different cultural meanings, but overall as liminal personae the ‘otherness’ of their existence serves as a counterpoint to the cultural values from which their existence has departed, cultural opposition being the defining feature of undeath.

I will begin this chapter by analyzing the liminal identity of undead characters and what it means to exist in the space between life and death. I will reinforce this analysis by discussing the more common types of undead which I encountered in my field research and are supported by KWIC analysis: lich, vampire, spirit, and animated corpse (zombie/minion). This analysis will examine symbols affixed by players to each of these undead types. I will conclude the chapter by using the necromancer class and secondary mortuary ritual events (completing the transition from undead to living or from undead to permanently dead) to compare how both games navigate meaning and sociality regarding undeath.

The Liminality of Undeath

Rites of passage reinforce cultural boundaries. That is, the stage of separation departs from and the stage of aggregation returns to the stability of cultural boundaries; however, the stage of liminality offers a rare window of boundlessness within which many otherwise impossible things become possible. Undeath occurs within this stage of liminality; it is a balancing act which embraces the possibility of boundlessness and hedges it between the boundaries of specific undead typologies. Many aspects of existence become limitless to the

undead persona – limitless age, limitless power, and limitless hedonism among them. These limitless domains which make undead characters appealing are the same domains which make players wary of undead characters, for such limitlessness directly opposes cultural values and stability. Through the undead categories of lich, vampire, spirit, and animated corpse, I will identify specific manifestations of limitlessness and how that limitlessness is received by other members of the roleplaying community.

Lich

A lich is a specific type of magic user, generally a necromancer, who has successfully separated themselves from the world of the living while avoiding permadeath through the sustaining power of negative energy. Because lichdom is achieved through incomplete passage *toward* permadeath, not *away* from it, liches are more closely related to spectral undead than cadaverous undead. However, unlike ghosts, liches have a physical form and can interact freely with the physical world. Liches occur in both *Guild Wars 2* and *Neverwinter Nights*, yet characters must achieve a high level in either game before they can become a lich. In this regard, power begets power, since characters must strive for great power in life in order to obtain it in unlife. Moreover, because the movement of lich characters approaches the pole of death rather than the pole of life, liches do not need to struggle for survival in the same capacity as partially resurrected characters like vampires or animated corpses; nor do they exhibit the traditional weaknesses of cadaverous undead like sunlight or decay.

For lich characters, limitless age, power, and hedonism are interwoven. Limitless age allows lich characters more time to study magic and accrue magical power. But the older a character gets, especially when that character is resistant to all traditional forms of

dissolution, the more the character loses touch with concepts of life, death, and cultural norms. The condition of limitless age liberates lichens from social pressures, allowing them to act impulsively on their hedonistic desires without any care for consequences or public opinion. For this reason, the limitless age of lichens is their most dangerous social attribute, more so than their power. Limitless age is so dangerous because, by transcending cultural and ethical norms, lichens threaten the boundaries of stable cultural identity. By thriving as limitless beings, lichens challenge everything that is limiting – including rites of passage and the social mores which such rituals reinforce.

Yet there is a flipside to the function of lichens as symbols of limitlessness, and that is the response from the community. By vilifying lichens, as many *Neverwinter Nights* servers do, roleplaying communities denounce boundlessness in favor of stable cultural boundaries.

Vampire

Vampires are a popular type of cadaverous undead, the product of incomplete resurrection rather than incomplete permadeath. Their incomplete transition toward life grants them access to many of the same limitless opportunities which lichens enjoy but with more bodily limitations regarding diet and the threat of destruction. Vampire lore varies by server and by individual players, but a large amount of this lore focuses on how to undo the condition of partial resurrection and return vampires to a state of permadeath. Depending on the server, you may need to stake the vampire, cut off its head, follow its spirit back to its coffin, kill it in its coffin, and/or cremate it. In *Argentum Regio*, cremation is the preferred form of mortuary ritual for all dead characters because it prevents them from rising again as vampires or animated corpses.

While lichens threaten social stability by becoming culture-free beings, vampires threaten stability by becoming culture-saturated beings, “more alive than we are” (Weinstock 2010:4). Rather than focusing on magical power as lichens do, vampires use their limitless age to develop seemingly boundless sociocultural power and enjoy seemingly limitless hedonism. Vampires manipulate other people face-to-face and manipulate organizations behind the scenes. Their carnal desires run deeply and can be indulged without the necessity of consent. They are attractive, charismatic, and supernaturally beguiling. They threaten social order through their efforts to control it and their embodied representation of unrestrained indulgence.

And of course, as embodiments of culturally-specific anxieties, vampires take on interesting points of contention in fantasy RPGs. One common complaint about vampires is how powerful they are. This complaint expresses an anxiety toward characters which break the fairness of the game. Another interesting complaint is that vampires in *Neverwinter Nights* “[play] into the ‘we’re people too and deserve rights’ sort of thing. Not very many chaotic evil sorts.” This complaint reveals an expectation of a simpler, more mythic worldview in the virtual landscape where heroes are good and monsters are evil. On top of that, it expresses a uniquely contemporaneous anxiety toward the dissolution of rigid moral categories and toward the principal of universal human rights, two subjects which receive quite a bit of media attention in our era yet would not have warranted such concern in the medieval setting of these games.

Spirit

Both spirits and lichens are products of incomplete transition from life to permadeath, but the difference between them is that lichens become undead by pursuing undeath while

spirits become undead by clinging to the life they left behind. Liches embody a limitless future, while spirits embody a limitless preservation of memory and the past. In *Guild Wars 2*, the ghosts of Ascalon repeat their last day of life over and over and attack anyone whom they see as a threat to Ascalon, even though the kingdom was destroyed more than two hundred years before the current day. As incorporeal creatures, spirits occupy limitless space in addition to limitless memory. They can pass through material and planar boundaries, lingering in the world of the dead or haunting the world of the living. However, the spirit's attachment to the past makes it weaker than lichs or vampires. Attachment is the source of a spirit's unlife, it is their defining attribute, and that comes with an equally defining weakness. Just as spirits can be bound to the place or cause of their death, so they can also be bound through necromantic ritual to specific people or objects. Interviewees from *Neverwinter Nights* shared examples of spirits which were bound not only to gravesites but also to artifacts such as a magic bow or orb, while interviewees from *Guild Wars 2* shared examples of spirits bound to other characters.

Spirits symbolically oppose the practice of memorialization. While memorialization keeps the past alive in a meaningful way, spirits transform the past into a burden on others. They talk about the lives they lost instead of developing new storylines, and they cause emotional distress for the characters they haunt. In the latter case, the very tension which spirits evoke can effectively drive characters in the opposite direction, away from the accomplishments and hardships of the past toward new, meaningful developments in their personal narratives.

Animated Corpse

Animated corpses take different forms depending on the game and server. In *Neverwinter Nights*, most animated corpses are zombies or skeletons. In *Guild Wars 2*, there is an important distinction between corpses returned to life by one of the Elder Dragons (specifically Zhaitan's Risen and Jormag's Icebrood) and corpses animated by necromantic means. The important thing about animated corpses is that – more than any other type of undeath – animated corpses represent the conflict between embodiment and absence. The rationalization behind ethical animation of corpses in *Guild Wars 2* is that they are essentially golems crafted out of once-living material; they do not contain a soul to disturb or profane, and in the case of necromantic minions they do not even resemble their once-living forms so they do not profane the memory of the deceased among living community members. When Zhaitan and Jormag (two of the Elder dragons) take over dead Humans or Norn as their servants and send them against their loved ones, this type of animated corpse becomes a profane creature, both because the soul is being corrupted along with the body and because the creature still wears the deceased's face, two qualities which challenge the separation between embodiment and absence. Animated corpses on *Neverwinter Nights* are associated primarily with this negative vision of undeath, where the undead creature still wears the deceased's face and subsequently profanes the memory of the deceased among living community members. As one informant described it to me, “nobody likes to have to ‘put Uncle Joe down again’.” On the *Argentum Regio* server, characters suffer negative alignment shifts every time they disrupt a fresh grave or animate a corpse. In both games animated corpses are a common type of PvE adversary because the “absence” of identity among this type of undead reduces moral questions about whether or not they should be

killed and justifies their inevitable respawn, the logic being that undead are defeated in battle but not destroyed.

A symbolic reversal associated with animated corpses is the use of fog or darkness spells to obscure visibility during attacks by undead adversaries. Obscured visibility inverts the binary opposition of embodiment and absence, where instead of embodiment being the illusion which veils the true absence of life, darkness becomes the illusion of absence which veils the embodiment of peril in a cadaverous form.

The Sociality of Undeath

Social aspects of undeath have been introduced in the previous sections, but at this point I would like to review the more general reception of undeath in both games through the lenses of necromancy and secondary mortuary ritual.

Necromancy

Wizards in *Neverwinter Nights* draw magick from nine different spell schools, one of which is necromancy. The necromancy spell school includes negative energy spells and spells to animate the dead. Animation of corpses is discussed above and bears a negative stigma in most fantasy RPG settings. A few players approach necromancy in a more neutral light, viewing it as a tool like any other; a way to let your ancestors protect you, to deal damage in the most mercifully quick way possible, or to make good use out of corpses which would otherwise be doing nothing but rotting in the ground; but those are the exceptions and not the rule.

Guild Wars 2 presents an interesting contrast to the “high fantasy” vision of necromancy which is seen in *Neverwinter Nights*. In the *Guild Wars 2* world of Tyria, necromancy is connected to the practice of medical science. Necromancers study corpses in

order to understand life and to better maintain the balance of life and death. Not all necromancers on the *Tarnished Coast* are benevolent, of course; some are driven by power and ambition, particularly those who pursue necromancy as a path to lichdom; but my interviewees gave several positive examples alongside the negative ones. One interviewee mentioned a necromancer who uses blood magick to heal people, while another spoke of a necromantic doctor who keeps up with necromancy for its “practical applications.” My experiences playing a necromancer as a participant observer, exemplified in the scene at the beginning of this chapter, reinforce this vision of necromancy as a respectable and morally ethical profession in *Guild Wars 2*.

Secondary Mortuary Ritual

Undead characters are the product of incomplete mortuary ritual, existing in a state of liminality between life and death. Similar to the subjects of secondary burial which Hertz (1960 c1907) examines, undead characters require a second mortuary event in order to complete their journey from undeath to permadeath or undeath to resurrected life. Players who design undead characters do not typically want to lose the benefits of limitlessness presented earlier in this chapter, but sometimes undeath is inflicted involuntarily (vampires and zombies can spread their conditions via bite) and the player wants their character to be returned completely to life. At other times story progression leads a character away from perpetual undeath. Secondary mortuary rituals for killing undead characters vary from type to type. The process is especially complicated for vampires and liches. Vampires often need to be destroyed in their coffin for permanent death to take effect, while liches bind their souls to special objects called phylacteries which must be destroyed before the lich can be permanently killed. Resurrection from undeath is equally complicated, but it is possible.

The scripts for *Argentum Regio* allow a group of spellcasters to return a vampire to life with permadeath as the risk upon failure. I have interacted with one character in my field site that was resurrected this way. Through the consent of DMs and other players, characters can also roleplay elaborate rituals for overcoming undeath, as two of my *Guild Wars 2* informants shared with me.

The necessary difficulty of secondary mortuary practice stems from the fact that undead characters already threaten the standard values and practices of virtual world cultures. Assuming ordinary resurrection is a threat to meaningful roleplay, resurrection from undeath is an even greater threat. Players and server administrators must therefore make it exceedingly difficult to remove the condition of undeath, using tedium as the only true punishment in virtual worlds to make secondary mortuary ritual particularly tedious so as to safeguard the community against a proliferation of undead characters.

Discussion

Within the rites of passage framework, undeath is problematic because it abandons the participant of mortuary ritual in the nebulous stage of liminality between life and death. Liminal characters exist outside of moral boundaries and cultural behavior standards. In many ways, they are limitless. The oppositional nature of undead characters is part of what makes them so intriguing, because it serves as a lens to illuminate specific cultural anxieties along with the very limits which make roleplay meaningful. Through selective vilification and endorsement of undead characters and practices (necromancy), virtual worlds are able to express support for whichever limits the community of active roleplayers finds most significant.

IX. Conclusion

“What each must seek in his life never was, on land or sea. It is to be something out of his own unique potentiality for experience, something that never has been and never could have been experienced by anyone else.” (Campbell and Moyers 1988:151)

I have examined the symbolic life course of characters in online RPGs by looking at performed rites of passage, beginning with initiation into virtual professions and culminating with the complete and incomplete performance of mortuary ritual. In this final chapter I will discuss the implications of my study with emphasis on virtual mortuary practices.

Myth, Meaning, and Mystery in Persistent Virtual Worlds

A question I have heard many times over the course of my study, even more than “why virtual worlds?” as I addressed in “Chapter I” is: “*why* mortuary ritual?” I gave this question a lot of thought as my research unfolded. Why, I wondered, is death such a potent and pervasive symbol in fantasy RPGs? And why does the symbol of resurrection evoke so much discomfort? Comparing virtual mortuary ritual to other rites of passage unveils patterns of belief and behavior which give me a context for understanding my observations about permadeath, resurrection, and undeath. The two most evident patterns are: 1) strengthening community bonds among roleplayers and 2) making roleplay meaningful.

The first pattern I observed is the function of rites of passage to strengthen community bonds among participating roleplayers. This follows a shared pattern among roleplaying groups such as D&D, LARP and SCA to seek in the leisure sphere an alternative to modern social alienation. In the case of initiation rites, other characters are responsible for

educating and socializing new characters into the tacit and explicit rules of the magic circle. In the case of memorialization, other characters carry on the memory of the deceased. As both symbolic endings and beginnings, marriage and funeral events allow characters to celebrate previously forged social connections and to network with one another for the establishment of new connections.

Some of these rites of passage are less entertaining than others, yet players perform them anyway, as evidenced by the fact that all of the aforementioned rites of passage have been observed by at least 50% of my informants (see *figure 3*). Players attend these events, whether they consider them fun or boring, because the events are more than social obligations – they are social opportunities. When players gather together for rituals which do not directly amuse them or impact their characters, which in fact detract from achievement oriented gameplay, they do so because they care for one another, because they are gratified by helping fellow roleplayers progress their stories, and because they leave with something more meaningful than enjoyment or experience points.

Systematic reserve toward rites of passage which challenge the solidarity of server lore is another way that transition roleplay unites community members. Reserve is displayed in the performance of silence, especially in response to parent-child and resurrection roleplaying. The refusal or reluctance to recognize events which threaten the performance of meaning unites players who share this practice among an “older” symbolic age category, at the same time that it safeguards the meaningful nature of the narrative.

The second pattern which I observed is the function of rites of passage to create and maintain meaning. Virtual rites of passage perpetuate meaning by aligning character storylines with server lore which players participate in creating; and lore, for its own part,

defines the mythic parameters of the virtual narrative. Rites of initiation at the beginning of the character's life measure that character's acquisition of lore through learning over time, rites of marriage and retirement after successful initiation contribute to the transmission of lore, and memorialization at the end of the character's life transform the character from an agent of lore to an artifact of it. In this regard, mortuary ritual is particularly important because it preserves dynamic roleplay among the more permanent body of server lore.

Rites of reversal which rebel against cultural standards likewise contribute to the establishment of meaning. They do so by highlighting community values and giving sanction against the very deviations which they perform. Deviant weddings employ the structure of marriage to express tensions about what makes a meaningful marriage in video games, deviant pregnancies demonstrate the potential harm of roleplaying children in dangerous mythic settings, and undead – deviant by their very liminality – embody specific cultural tensions based upon their potentially limitless age, power, and hedonism.

So, again: *why mortuary ritual?* Mortuary ritual regarding permadeath ensures the preservation of community bonds at the most dramatic point of separation in the game – when valued characters must be removed permanently from the established network of meaning. At this point, characters are not merely transitioning from one life state to another – they are transitioning from avatars to ancestors, from dynamic agents of lore to static constructs of it. Meanwhile, mortuary ritual regarding resurrection – especially the performance of reserve toward resurrection – ensures the preservation of meaning in a context where the meaning of life and death is regularly challenged by the game mechanics of serial character death. Reserve toward resurrection protects the proper sobriety of permadeath. Analysis of permadeath therefore lends insight into lesser endings such as

retirement and marriage, while analysis of resurrection lends insight into reserve toward sexual and reproductive roleplay. Finally, the incomplete performance of either mortuary ritual produces undead characters which embody meaningful tensions among members of the roleplaying community, whose deviant existence lends insight into tensions which are expressed by other deviant rites of passage.

The defining theme of my research results, as demonstrated above, is “meaning.” Mortuary ritual makes the performance of death personally and socially *meaningful*. It takes a world of fantastic experiences and distills from that world an essentially human essence. It evokes frustration; it evokes laughter; it evokes tears; it touches the hearts of players and characters alike. And by ending a character’s progression, freezing them in the moment of their death, it anchors that character’s experiences to server lore.

Permadeath mortuary ritual bridges physical and transcendent matters in a more intimate way than other rites of passage; in doing so, it becomes deeply vested in mythic meaning. As the performance of myth, mortuary ritual defines the boundaries between life and death. It defines the mysteries which lie beyond death. And it defines for the participating players what it means to be human no matter how fantastic the circumstances.

In this capacity of performed myth, my study of virtual mortuary ritual speaks to more than collaborative storytelling and ritual performance in the liminoid space of the internet. It speaks to the construction of modern myths. Just as Claude Levi-Strauss (1979) identifies mythic thought in post-Renaissance novels and music, and Lee Drummond (1996) identifies new myths in the American film industry, so do virtual rites of passage such as mortuary ritual enact modern myths in the roleplaying contexts of *Neverwinter Nights* and *Guild Wars 2*. Moreover, online RPGs offer players a quality of *structured agency* in myth

production which film, novels, music, and other media industries lack. This agency redefines myth production by allowing the same individuals to be both consumers and producers of modern myths in a similar capacity to oral storytelling, LARP, and historic re-creation, with the added anonymity of virtual embodiment.

From Liminality to Aggregation – Avenues for Future Research

I have looked at rites of passage as they are performed within the liminoid space of online RPGs and interpreted these rites of passage through a combination of referential material and player insight. However, as Julian Dibbell observed in MUDs, the meaning of virtual behavior cannot truly be grasped in isolation, either from within the magic circle or without (1998). I foresee future research into virtual rites of passage bridging this divide, comparing character performance with elements of player identity such as age, nationality, gender, sexual preference, marital status, economic status, profession, and religious orientation. A long-term study of characters and their players could illuminate not only the ways in which real life contributes to virtual ritual performance but also the ways in which virtual ritual performance circles back and contributes to real life. I foresee future research connecting virtual performance to the folkloric concept of ostension. Finally, I foresee future research branching beyond *Argentum Regio* and *Tarnished Coast* to encompass other servers and online RPGs in order to develop a more substantial body of comparative material. Research into other games and servers would enable deeper analysis of patterned rather than server-specific behavior, which would contribute to the anthropological understanding of rites of passage as they are performed in the leisure or liminoid sphere.

To restate the memorable words of Tom Boellstorff (2008), the human being has always been a virtual being (5). Humans have always interpreted real experiences through

symbolic understanding. This truth applies to roleplaying events in persistent virtual worlds as much as any other framed phenomena. The greatest lesson which I have derived from my research is that the essential human qualities of ritual are not changed by its performance in virtual space, merely the technologies which bind the magic circle. Consequently, as the lives of our informants become increasingly interwoven with new technologies, so we, the anthropologists, must accommodate this shift by following our informants into these new field sites of meaningful cultural experience.

Glossary

Asynchronous communication: [communication where] participants need not be on-line at the same time, and can collect and respond to messages at a time which is personally convenient... (Fox and Roberts 1999)(645, brackets mine for clarification).

Avatar: the virtual embodiment of persons... used in many online worlds... a position from which the self encounters the virtual (Boellstorff 2008:128-29).

Emote: a symbol or phrase, used in chat or in online games, such as the common *glee* or /slap, that represents an action or emotion. In some MMORPG's, emotes correspond to scripted animations of the character (Webster's Online Dictionary).

Erotic roleplay (ERP): social interaction between at least two persons who are exchanging real time digital messages in order to become sexually aroused and satisfied, with the condition that sexual or romantic activity must be contextualized within deeper narratives (Brown 2012:262).

Gamemaster/Dungeon Master (GM/DM): often described by players as "God-like," the DM occupies a supreme status: he or she creates the worlds, plots, and scripts that become a make-believe setting for the game itself, plays the roles of "non-player-characters," orchestrates encounters with hostile creatures... and so on (Waskul 2006)(20). A GM in [online] games is either an experienced volunteer player or an employee who enforces the game rules, banishing spammers, player killers and cheaters (Webster's Online Dictionary).

Ghost/spirit: [a type of spectral undead] characterized by his refusal to withdraw from the world when his time has come... he keeps on roaming about the world, being a nuisance to everybody (Jakobsson 2011:290). The ghost embodies limitless preservation of memory and the past.

Griefing: purposefully engaging in activities to disrupt the gaming experience of other players (Bakioglu 2009). A common type of griefing is player-killing.

Grinding/farming: playing time spent doing repetitive tasks within a game to unlock a particular game item or to build the experience needed to progress smoothly through the game. Grinding most commonly involves killing the same set of opponents over and over in order to gain experience points or gold (Janssen).

Historic re-creation: [the attempt] to re-create life, not as it was but as it *should have been* during [historic] times (Pinder 2006)(45). Unlike other “reenactment” groups... the personas chosen are not actual, historic persons... Rather, individuals choose a fictional “persona” of someone who *could* have lived in a particular time and place (Lash 2009)(32).

In character (IC): speech and actions performed as if spoken or done by a character, much like an actor in a play (Ciechanowski 2008).

Lich: Driven by ambition, some powerful spellcasters attempt to cheat death itself. Those who succeed become lichs (NWN wiki). Sustained by negative energy, the lich embodies limitless age and power.

Live action roleplaying (LARPing): built on the model of improvisational theater and historical reenactment... [it] combines theatrical fantasy story building with character driven plots in a communally created narrative... where a weak hero/avatar gains power and influence...interacts safely with inverted, dark forces, and enacts heroic quests [through the physical actions and descriptions of the player] (Milspaw and Evans 2010)(214).

Lore: knowledge gained through study or experience (Merriam-Webster). In fantasy RPGs, lore refers to the history, beliefs, and practices of game-world cultural units (such as races,

classes, nations, and factions) which have been established as canon inside the magic circle of the game.

Massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs): any story-driven online video game in which a player, taking on the persona of a character in a virtual or fantasy world, interacts with a large number of other players (Dictionary.com). MMORPGs have larger server populations than regular online RPGs.

Nerf: dumbing down, weakening, or reducing the difficulty of game content (Guild Wars 2 Official Wiki).

Non-player character (NPC): artificial intelligent “non-player” characters; a character in a role-playing game or video game who is controlled by the gamemaster or computer, rather than by a player (Bainbridge 2007)(2) (Webster’s Online Dictionary).

Online roleplaying games (RPGs): games based on the fantasy genre [which] have evolved into full-fledged virtual worlds (Aupers 2007)(1).

Out of character (OOC): anything that a player says or does that is not spoken or done in-character, such as asking a rules question (Ciechanowski 2008).

Permadeath: the permanent destruction of an avatar (Klastrup 2007:4).

Persistent virtual worlds: persistent, predominantly synchronous networks of people, represented as avatars, which exist in shared virtual environments that are perceived either through textual description or sensory experience and are facilitated by networked computers to enable people to participate from different physical locations.

Player character (PC): any character that is played by a player, not the GM, enacting a fantasy self (Ciechanowski 2008; McBirney 2004)(415).

Player vs. Environment (PvE): combat and activities in the game which are not focused on competing against other players to succeed (GW2 Official Wiki). It is the solo and cooperative play of game mechanics and story completion.

Player vs. Player (PvP): conflict with other players. A specific type of PvP which transpires between characters as opposed to players is called Character vs. Character (CvC).

Rebuff: to reapply buffs, or temporary boosts to character attributes or combat abilities (MMORPG Terms Defined).

Roleplay event: social material being given an ‘episode’ status: for example, a bank transaction, a meeting between friends, an argument between lovers. The seeming coherence and unity of an event is thus detached from the stream of ongoing social life (Yardley-Matwiejczuk 1997)(1).

Roleplaying: to experiment with or experience (a situation or viewpoint) by... [assuming] the attitudes, actions, and discourse of (another), especially in a make-believe situation (Dictionary.com).

Server time: standardized time according to an in-game clock which allows “people who are in different locations [to] use it as a point of reference for coordinating events” (Ceallach 2014).

Servers: different types of “realms” on which a player-character can engage in the game’s world (Bates 2009)(109).

Synchronous Communication: [communication where] “common time” allows for mass group activities and other coordinated social activities...[and] an awareness of space, distance and co-existence of other participants found in real life spaces giving a sense of environment (Bell 2008:3, brackets mine).

Tabletop roleplaying games: a type of gameplay system that involves collaboration between a small group of players and a gamemaster through face-to-face social activity with the purpose of creating a narrative experience (Cover 2010)(168). These games are also called pen-and-paper RPGs.

Vampire: an “overdetermined” body that condenses a constellation of culturally specific anxieties and desires into one super-saturated form... [The vampire is] more alive than we are... Vampires drink blood, come out only at night, can transform, are destroyed with a stake, etc. (Weinstock 2010:5). The vampire embodies limitless age, hedonism, and social power.

Zombie: [Zombies] present a scenario in which a contagious menace threatens to overtake the human body and remake it...by erasing sense and intentionality (Cameron 2012:80).

They belong to a larger category of undead creatures...which are physically repulsive because their bodies are not how they should be: namely, they are incompatible with life (Langer 2008:99-100). Animated by viruses or negative energy, other types of cadaverous (and typically mindless) undead include skeletons, mummies, and the Risen.

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