The Development of MMORPG Culture and The Guild

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ABSTRACT: This paper is a reflective study of the rise of massive numbers of online and multiplayer role play games, and of the ways in which these communities have arisen in the last two decades. Much of the driving of the activity is the fantasy world created by many popular writers in the middle twentieth century. But the players are now actively involved in these new worlds —ones which are and are not so close to our everyday worlds. This survey attempts to guide the bemused watcher, as well as to assist the 'player' to reflect on what is going on at the several levels of story, decision-making and of (preferred) habits.

MMORPG, a term coined by Richard Garriott (the creator of the Ultima Online game) in 1997, refers to massive multiplayer online role-playing games and their social communities, and it is closely linked to the broader MMO classification, referring simply to all massive multiplayer online games. As a group, MMORPGs and MMOs not only develop unique language features and jargon, but they also have their own social conventions and etiquettes, economic models and even shared community values, all of which have distinct differences from those of RL, or real life. When we enter them, we enter new worlds with its own structures and expectations—complete with a unique culture.

Origins

These games, and their associated subculture, or subcultures, have developed from original 'pen and paper' based games such as *Chainmail* (released in 1971) and its extension, *Dungeons & Dragons* (released in 1974)—and then the 'Choose Your Own Adventure' styled books that followed them.[1] It could be argued—and very strongly and validly—that

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[1]   The *Choose Your Own Adventure* books were a series originally released between 1979 and 1998 by Bantam Books. Readers of these books took on the role of the main character, and made choices that impacted upon the plot line based on the story and events within the books. Each book had multiple possible endings. They then arguably sparked interest in the *Fighting Fantasy* series of books by Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone and published by Puffin—which continued this theme but focussed on the use of dice to determine combat events and increasing the feel of being a role-playing game. The *Fighting Fantasy* series included 59 core titles and ran from 1982 until 1995.

other primary popular culture texts or groups that had a large impact on the early development and mindset of these groups would include the fictional writings of authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien, Anne Rice, John Norman, Margaret Weiss and Tracy Hickman.

From an electronic standpoint it is generally accepted that 'the ancestors of MMORPGS were text-based multiuser [...] MUDs'.[2] However, the present writer would extend that analysis to suggest that in addition to MUDs there was also very distinct contributions to the present format and culture of MMORPGs made by other electronic communities, including text based role-playing sites or chat rooms.

Within MUDs players were able to engage with their virtual fantasy environments by typing text based commands. In addition to the players, the virtual environments would be populated by a combination of hostile fantasy creatures (orcs, goblins, dragons, etc.) and supporting characters who would guide characters towards goals through multi-choice conversations or similar interactions. In most cases, players were able to select from a range of 'classes' or categories for their characters—such as wizards, paladins or assassins, and could create them based on a series of randomly generated ability statistics. Ultimately the purpose of a MUD was to engage in the interactive telling of stories, develop characters, and adventure on grand quests against monsters.

Tracing the heritage of MUDs back to our stated source points of games such as Dungeons and Dragons is relatively simple as it is well documented that:

> In 1980, Roy Traubshaw, a British fan of the fantasy role-playing board game Dungeons and Dragons, wrote an electronic version of that game during his final undergraduate year at Essex College. The following year, his classmate Richard Bartle took over the game, expanding the number of potential players and their options for action. He called the game MUD (for Multi-User Dungeons), and put it onto the Internet.[3]

In a second stream of electronic development towards our modern MMORPGs, we can take the view that a percentage of present day MMORPG subculture's jargon and etiquettes have in part been drawn from the combining of computer Gamer subculture—with the subculture developed within the various streamed role-play chat sites, particularly of the early and mid-nineties. Whilst MUDs continued throughout this period, it is arguable that the broader exposure of these sites, and their success in terms of user numbers and wider exposure for fantasy role-

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2   Castronova, Edward, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (University Of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 10.
3   Kelly, Kevin and Howard Reingold, 'The Dragon ate my Homework', *Wired*, 1(3) (July/August 1993), <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/1.03/muds.html> [accessed 23 July 2010].

playing communities to the broader web community, was quite influential in the building of the large MMORPG communities we see today. The Web Chat Broadcast System (for example, see <http://www.irsociety.com/wbs.html>), or WBS, servers were highly influential during that period, which in 1995 was 'attracting over 20 million hits per month, making it the largest chatting hub on the World Wide Web'.[4] The system that WBS used held such appeal due to early advances in a technology known as 'streaming' made by the now defunct web browser Netscape—which had been a staple of the WBS experience design.

Popular role-playing spaces such as Nia's Tavern and the Inn of The Weary Traveller—another aspect of the Tolkien-driven interest in the inn as a numinous place in story over the last fifty years or so—have had a high constant population of players. Within the WBS system, 'players' would take on the persona of a usually self created character—using a name, a still image and a short text base 'tag line' to describe themselves—and then 'enter' a chat-room's collectively pre-agreed imagined setting to role-play in text / 'meet' with characters who were controlled by other players. Notably, players would become deeply attached to their characters, often with large emotional investment as well as the obvious time investment. In a number of the rooms new players would need to graduate through a series of rites of passage to become accepted as part of the community and gain a larger number of people to play with. Those included not only the regularity of play but also developing a writing style and content that met with the game conventions and stylistic conventions of the group as a whole. Often this would come to include typing speeds.

Notably, whilst many aspects of the WBS role-playing community were based on what 'freeform' role-play, or role-play without a set system for building characters and content management, the game conventions themselves were very explicitly maintained by the community itself. Players needed to follow those 'rules' or sub-cultural norms for acceptable behaviour, and for any writing and interactions, in order to maintain their status as an accepted player who had access to a larger group of people to interact with inside those spaces. There were, however, a number of distinctly game system-based rooms where players were even expected to develop character sheets showing their character's statistics, and to interact based on agreed dice rolls where appropriate.

Players within those WBS rooms would often spend a great deal of time within this environment—up to many/ too many (?) hours each day.

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[4]   'Internet Users Flock to WebChat Broadcasting System; Site Now the Largest Chatting Hub on the World Wide Web', *Business Wire* (20 November 1995), <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0EIN/is_1995_Nov_20/ai_17769738/> [accessed 23 July 2010].

This was, perhaps, an early example of the 'post-modern' discussions about some MMORPG and MMO players experiencing a form of (insidious/creeping) addiction. The trend towards gamers involved with MMORPG and MMO style games developing an addiction to their game has been explored in many popular television shows, including *South Park*, *The Simpsons* and *CSI: Miami*.[5] The theme has also been the subject of scientific research in recent years with researchers from Nottingham Trent University in England, they suggesting

> that certain personality traits may be important in the acquisition, development, and maintenance of online gaming addiction' including 'neuroticism, sensation seeking, trait anxiety, state anxiety, and aggression'.[6]

Notably, MMORPG addiction is a theme that Felicia Day, the creator of The Guild, has faced herself and discussed during interviews—in regard to World of Warcraft.[7] (Notably The Guild also explores internet and MMORPG addiction within episodes in a variety of ways including the web-withdrawals suffered by Codex when her computer breaks in the episode Strange Allies and the arguments between Clara and her husband over the amount of time she spends playing with the guild in the episode Get it Back!—or even Vork stealing wifi access to log in whilst living in a bus whilst travelling on a self discovery trip during that same episode.)[8]

In some cases we might even be able to compare the writing of role-players at WBS to the often discussed fan-fiction phenomenon that has been linked with science fiction works such as Star Trek and Star Wars. WBS included a strong sub-community of players role-playing as Anne Rice characters, adapting their stories and expanding (initial) plots, as well as creating other self-devised Ricean characters to further those imaginings. Within a science fiction role-playing rooms as for Star Trek, AKA The Nexus Bar and The Star Wars Cantina, it was also possible to find a collection of Star Trek and Star Wars- inspired characters who

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[5]   See the *South Park* episode 'Make Love, Not Warcraft' (directed by Trey Parker, Season 10, Episode 8, first aired on October 4, 2006), *The Simpsons* episode 'Marge Gamer' (directed by Bob Anderson, Season 18, Episode number 395, first aired on April 22, 2007) and the *CSI: Miami* episode 'Urban Hellraisers' (directed by Matt Earl Beesley, Season 4, Episode 9, one first aired on November 21, 2005).

[6]   Mehwash Mehroof, Mark D. Griffiths, 'Gaming Addiction: The Role of Sensation Seeking, Self-Control, Neuroticism, Aggression, State Anxiety, and Trait Anxiety', *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 13:3 (June 2010), 313-316, (p. 313).

[7]   See 'The Guild: Interview with Felicia Day', *Daily Mahalo with Veronica Belmont* (11 March 2008) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQhX5O58R0w&feature=related> See 2:10 in the interview. Day states: 'I never saw my friends, or boyfriend, or actually saw anything but the chair and the monitor.' [accessed 29 July 2010].

[8]   The Guild, *Strange Allies* (Episode 2, Season 4 <http://www.watchtheguild.com/>) [accessed 29 November 2010]. The Guild, *Get it Back!* (Episode 4, Season 3, <http://www.watchtheguild.com/> [accessed 29 July 2010].

worked collectively to develop similar fan fiction based role-played stories.

In 1998, Infoseek purchased WBS, and it was, in turn, purchased by Disney/ABC. Those changes in ownership brought about a number of policy and management changes for WBS users, and then led to the WBS rooms being integrated into the larger Disney Go Network chat site. Those changes quickly saw the WBS role-playing community dissipated into a variety of other chat and role-playing online communities—as well as the creation of several new community sites specifically designed to cater to them including Ethereal Realms (http://www.ethereal-realms.org/), Illusionary Minds Chat (http://im-chat.com/) and the World Broadcasting System (http://www.worldbroadcastingsystem.com/).

And the Internet Relay Chat System

One of the other large text based chat systems that has fed into the modern culture of MMOs and MMORPGs is IRC (Internet Relay Chat). IRC played a role in the development of early online RPG communities—yet more for the computer savvy, and still operates with large numbers. Whilst IRC has included a large number of text based role-playing themes including several vampire and Gothic Horror rooms that have existed strongly for multiple years, and even the occasional room (or channel) inspired by the Weird Tales of writers such as H. P. Lovecraft, the predominant form of interactive storytelling based in role-play, upon IRC, would arguably be Gorean.

The primary reason to consider Gor and IRC within this context is the significant place that Gorean role-playing has taken within the influential MMO *SecondLife*. IRC was the arguably primary location for online Gorean role-play prior to *SecondLife*. IRC originated in 1988 when Jarkko 'WiZ' Oikarinen, of the University of Oulu (Finland), had created the first IRC client and server software.

Goreans role-play their existence upon a 'second earth' called 'Gor'. Gor and its culture are drawn from the series of twenty five science fiction novels by Professor John Norman, of the City University of New York, works that were published between 1967 and 1988. Norman continued the Gor series after a large hiatus, producing three more novels between 2001 and 2009. Norman's Gor series depicts what must be seen as a Nietzsche- like philosophy of a world with structures based upon skill, strength and ability—and include a detailed fantasy world complete with its own flora, fauna and (perhaps to an extent borrowed) cultures. Gor is also filled with Norman's doctrine of ethics about self-reliance and attitudes to work and to others. The novels also focus on gender roles, portraying women as naturally submissive to men. Most Gorean role-players focus in great detail upon the/ their gender roles.

But, the Responses to the Gorean Sub-Culture?

Much like WBS gamers, those on IRC take turns to 'post' sections of descriptive text about themselves, or their characters, based on an agreed setting and following/ conforming to a set of 'loose' conventions. This writing, whilst usually viewed in other ways, can also be seen as a form of fan writing, and their responses to the thrust of Norman's own science fiction works.

Most notably, Goreans tend to receive extremely negative responses from the media, an example being the recent 'Officers discover sex-slave cult' article published by the British Broadcasting Corporation—about a case where no charges were laid and all findings were that activities were legal and completely consensual.[9] This may be a factor in the choice of some of the individuals involved with the IRC and *SecondLife* Gorean subculture to experience it online rather than openly in mainstream society given the implications it could have for their public—and private —lives.

Excitement /Adventure as Opposed to Prurience

The present enormous success of MMORPGs and MMOs must also owe a debt to their forerunners such as Bioware's long running hit 2002 game, *Neverwinter Nights* (http://nwn.bioware.com/). Like the first MUD, *Neverwinter Nights* was also an adaptation of *Dungeons & Dragons*—it using the third edition of the rule set from that game in this instance, whilst allowing a great deal of user customization [i.e. modification within certain 'limits']. There were expansion packs released for *Neverwinter Nights* in 2003 and 2005 and the game won a number of prestigious awards, these including the 'Best Online Multiplayer' game and 'Best Role Playing Game' Game Critics Awards. Notably, *Neverwinter Nights* won Best Role Playing Game awards for three years in a row. *Neverwinter Nights* still maintains a strong, although admittedly much smaller, active community of players and amateur content developers to the time of writing.

Neverwinter Nights met with such considerable success for a number of reasons, not least because of the power of the NWScript programming language and the NWN Toolset that users could employ to build their own content. That content enabled users to create virtual worlds of the same scope as commercial MMORPGs—either individually or in groups ¬¬‒ and to host them on their own machines. The key difference between these and other MMORPGs, however, was that Neverwinter Nights servers, or persistent worlds (which are similar in concept to MUDs but

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9   'Officers discover sex-slave cult', *BBC News* (of/ for 19 May 2006)
          <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4996410.stm> [accessed 23 July 2010].

much more immersive), were free to enter—a restriction placed by Bioware due to copyright issues. Some of the more popular user created virtual worlds within the Neverwinter Nights subsect, such as Higher Ground (http://highergroundpoa.proboards.com/index.cgi), circumvented that clause by requesting—yet not requiring—that players donate money through PayPal to pay for server upkeep, as opposed to access to the game.

Within *Neverwinter Nights*, we soon began to see a distinct division appearing within the MMORPG subculture—with players fitting into two very separate groups (of which there were also many sub-groups): the role-players and the action players. The role-player group believed that character development and role-playing skill was the pinnacle of play, whilst the action players were arguing that conquering end to game battles is more important. Both of these standpoints could be seen as valid interpretations of the archetypal 'Frodo, you must take the ring to Mordor' [Tolkien-inspired] epic quest scenario, and yet both leading to very different kinds of character design and development. This conflict has continued into a number of more recent MMORPGs and it has become a distinct part of MMORPG culture.

From the standpoint of analysing the history of this subculture we can obviously draw a close link through MUDs and text role-play sites such as WBS and IRC to the role-player sub-community. The action player community however might be linked either to the 'hack and slash' side of some Dungeons & Dragons players or to more direct links to Gamer culture.

The widely used development tools, such as NWScript and the NWN Tool Set, soon also came to be supplemented with community– made building content tools, or plug-ins, such as Leto Script (the name of which arguably draws upon the image of 1337 speak), the NWNX server application which allowed user created *.dll files to be used to manipulate the game engine, and content—sharing projects such as CEP (the Community Expansion Pack).

Within the *Neverwinter Nights* community we saw a distinct development of the links between players expanding past the confines of the game. While, during MUDs and WBS styled gaming, there was a use of external instant messengers and email to coordinate play times, *Neverwinter Nights* sparked a wider use of communication tools to co-ordinate team play—one akin to that which researchers such as Katherine Bessière have recognised in later MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft—that 'players' reliance on others gives rise to robust communities, ones in which players transact their relationships through

their virtual characters—not only in the game itself—but also through instant messaging, web forums, e-mail, and voice—over IP networks'.[10]

The most notable jump off point however, from those first generation MMORPGs towards contemporary MMOs such as *World of Warcraft*, *SecondLife* and *Warhammer* Online, is the transition towards blended real world and virtual world economies—where the players pay subscription fees to play and they can purchase virtual goods or services with real world money. The first generation MMORPGs were fundamentally against that principle, with the *Neverwinter Nights* EULA even specifically stating that it would be a breach of licence for such transactions to take place.

And the Entrance into [Australasian] Tertiary Education

Neverwinter Nights also had an impact on the Tertiary Education Sector. The University of Alberta used *Neverwinter Nights* as a teaching tool for computer game design, with learners working within the persistent world toolset to complete major assignments. A similar approach was adopted by Macquarie University in Australia—which developed *Neverwinter Nights* modules into their INFO 111/MAS 111: Computer Games subject, whilst the University of Canterbury in New Zealand used it to produce interactive learning sessions for courses. The game was also used as a teaching tool in the United Kingdom, with institutions such as West Nottinghamshire College employed it as a tool to show IT designers how to use code within a game context.

Following this trend,

> Design students at Victoria University, in Wellington, [now] make films in an internet-based virtual world [MMO] called Second Life. They build virtual sets and direct virtual actors in front of virtual film crews.[11]

This use of *SecondLife*, arguably the most influential MMO currently, as an alternate or supplementary campus for tertiary learning, is widespread—with other examples of institutions using it including Harvard University, Sweden's Royal Institute of Technology and Japan's University of Aizu and New Zealand's SLENZ educational tools development project (based in *SecondLife*). *SecondLife* includes a wide range of social and subcultural groupings, including significant populations of avatars who are Goreans, Vampires, Steampunks and Nekos.

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10   Bessière, Katherine, A. Flemming Seay, and Sara Kiesler, 'The Ideal Elf: Identity
         Exploration in World of Warcraft', *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, 10:4, (August 2007),
         530-535 (p. 530).
11   'Virtual Varsities: NZ's Universities look to the Future', *Stuff.co.nz* (25 February 2008),
         <http://www.stuff.co.nz/technology/287718> [accessed 23 July 2010].

One primary difference between IRC and *SecondLife* Gorean cultures is that the mechanics of *SecondLife*, as a fans, built visual 3D landscape with the ability for fans to write complex computer scripting to add interactive content to the virtual landscape—have allowed *SecondLife* Gor to develop a more complex culture, one that focuses firmly upon not only gender roles but also on various forms of combat and of war. *SecondLife* has become the widely preferred platform for tertiary educational institutions who move into MMOs; however, some of the latest developments in New Zealand eLearning are beginning to move instead towards the New Zealand -made platform, Small Worlds. The development of Open Grid may however change this trend once again.[12]

SecondLife Gorean Subculture, However, Has a Number of Distinct Differences to that/those of IRC.

Within *SecondLife* Gorean subculture has become somewhat 'mainstream' for the virtual world as 'several of the Gorean "player towns" have traffic figures competitive with the most popular camp chair and money ball venues'.[13] Generally the numbers of participants have been found to be roughly equal amongst those presenting as female and male, with a very high percentage of those females choosing the role of 'slave girl'. In this light *SecondLife* is providing a forum for members of alternate subcultures such as Steampunks, Goreans, vampire-inspired groups and Furrys to express their constructed individual personas slightly more openly.

A primary difference however, between the Gorean subculture on *SecondLife* when compared to IRC, revolves around the very nature of the *SecondLife* platform, and the way that it allows participants, or players, to interact. In addition to the ability to create deeply visual aspects of interactions—through the use of 3D avatars and environments—*SecondLife* includes built in features such as voice chat and an open computer scripting language (LSL) which enables players to create and trade content. This has led to the development of a real market, where things such as Gorean virtual clothing or Gorean animations for avatars can be bought and sold in Linden Dollars (which can be purchased with, and then exchanged back into real life currency). Connected to that is the notion that players are also developing scripted weapons, and combat systems, which have enabled some aspects of Gamer or action player subculture to begin fusing more tightly with the

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12   Open Grid is a system which will allow privately made virtual worlds—independent of Linden Labs—interoperable with SecondLife, including the ability for avatars to move between them.

13   Lardner, Frank, *Case Study of Gorean Culture in Second Life and RFC* (28 January 2006), <http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/246/99/85031/1.html> [accessed 23 July 2010].

role-play of Gorean subculture as well as allowing for those with entrepreneurial interests to a lesser extent. Arguably this could be seen to offer a more interactive and immersive (and perhaps addictive) experience to participants.

That level of blending between action player and role-player ideals is also present within other large scale MMORPGs and MMOs. The MMO market is continuing to grow at a rapid rate, and the head of Activision Blizzard Bobby Kotick, the makers of World of Warcraft, has come out in media releases with predictions that the new MMO they are currently developing will have an even broader appeal than their current title—a staggering prediction given that World of Warcraft currently has approximately eleven million players.[14] That optimistic outlook is also shared by many of *SecondLife* styled MMOs, with key players such as Linden Labs working towards the large OpenSim (or Open Simulator) project.

Further, A Debt to 'Folk History'?

The Guild, a comedy web series which was first released on YouTube on July 21st 2007 and draws heavily upon these folk history elements, and the jargon and conventions of the MMORPG Gamer subculture, and was developed by Felicia Day. Day also plays a lead role in *The Guild*, as the character Codex. Since then it has extended to include four seasons of webisodes which have been gathered on an official website for the series (http://www.watchtheguild.com/).

The Guild is comprised of six members, led by Vork (fighter), depicted as an unemployed middle-aged man, and with the stories told from the perspective of Codex (cleric)—a twenty-something socially inept woman. The other members include Clara (mage) who is shown to be a middle-aged woman who ignores her young children and can be quite provocative with men other than her husband, Zaboo (warlock) who moves out of home for the first time during the series, Bladezz (rogue), a male high school student, and Tinkerballa (ranger) who is depicted as an attractive yet cold-hearted female with a vicious tongue.

Grounded closely in Day's real life and online experiences, she explained her choice for the subject material in a well-documented interview by explaining that people 'always say the first thing you should do is write what you know. All of my life I've been a gamer, since I was

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[14]   See Joe Martin, 'Next Blizzard MMO to have more broad appeal', *bit-tech.net* (15 September 2009) <http://www.bit-tech.net/news/gaming/2009/09/15/next-blizzard-mmo-to-have-more-broad-appeal/1> [accessed 18 September 2009].

like six years old. And I just recently had come off of a bad addiction to *World of Warcraft*. So I wrote a half hour pilot.'[15]

In *The Guild*, the central characters are members of a guild called 'The Knights of Good' and, intertwined with various other plot lines, they participate in an ongoing struggle with a rival guild called 'The Axis of Anarchy'. The obvious 'bad guy' connotations to the name 'Axis of Anarchy' must not go unnoticed—with the most obvious source being former United States of America's President, George Bush, having labelled a number of his perceived enemies as the 'Axis of Evil' in a State of the Union address on the 29th of January 2002,—the other most obvious reference here being the 'Axis alliance' in the years of World War Two.

Initiation and the Coming of Age Dimension in the Subculture

Within the MMORPG and MMO subculture, there are a series of initiation rites that people pass through in order to gain community acceptance. We could well compare these to the coming –of –age rituals of many societies, as they are certainly just as complex as a [real life/ anthropological] social construction for accepted behaviour. New comers to the 'tribe', or MMO, are often labelled as 'n00bs', or 'newbies'. In *The Guild* this theme is explored in a number of ways, and even transferred back upon the characters 'real life' interactions when the character Zaboo is told that he is in life a starting character, and has a lot of levelling up to do in reality in order to become a suitable real life partner for Codex.[16] The theme of the n00b was further explored in the episode Newbtastic where Mr Wiggly (Clara's husband) joined the Knights of Good and was unable to keep up with game play skill levels, or even understand basic MMORPG terms such as DPS.[17]

That coming of age theme has also been strong within other MMORPG inspired popular culture texts, such as the *World of Warcraft* Parody music video, 'Teach me how to Pwn'.[18] The lyrics for that track discuss, in detail, the theme of a community veteran who is very skilled in player-verses-player combat repeatedly killing newcomers whilst they

[15]   Day, Felicia, in Kevin Ohannessian, 'Felicia Day and The Guild's Path to Level 80 Digital Success', FactCompany.com <http://www.fastcompany.com/blog/kevin-ohannessian/not-quite-conversation/felicia-day-and-guilds-digital-success> [accessed 22 November 2010].

[16]   The Guild, *Block'd* (Episode 3, Season 2 <http://www.watchtheguild.com/>) [accessed 29 November 2010].

[17]   The Guild, *Newbtastic* (Episode 6, Season 3 <http://www.watchtheguild.com/>) [accessed 29 November 2010].

[18]   *Teach me how to Pwn*, featuring Neflian with Machinima (Universal Music) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzIo8EN1P1k> [accessed 22 November 2010].

beg for hints as to how to 'pwn'—or 'own' other players by defeating them and the game with ease.

Notably *The Guild* has inspired a number of fan—response texts, including the YouTube music offering, *I Wanna Be in Your Guild*.[19] Further to that theme, The Guild team then released an official YouTube music-video *Do You Wanna Date My Avatar*—which has further engaged with MMORPG and MMO subcultures and the online experience.[20] To date on the 19th of July 2010, *Do You Wanna Date My Avatar* had received 10,759,640 plays, in addition to being on sale in both MP3 and video formats through Amazon.com and iTunes.

A close analysis of the lyrics for *Do You Wanna Date My Avatar* reveals several key subcultural immersion phrases / themes, including the following phrases:

- At 0:42: 'Our love, our love will be in virtual space'.
- At 0:46: 'I'm craving to emote with you'. In MMO's such as *SecondLife* the term 'Emotes' often refers to erotic text posts that are made within the game by players, either due to a relationship, or when role-playing a provocative occupation.
- At 0:50: 'So many animations I can do'. Once again in *SecondLife*, for example, players can set up individual businesses to sell digital game enhancements or add-ons that they manufacture themselves. One of the biggest *SecondLife* businesses is a company called Xcite! , who amongst other things sell a very large range of additional animations of an intimate nature. (http://www.getxcite.com/)
- At 0:57: 'Come on, come on, share a potion with me'. This obviously refers to magical potions which can be found throughout MMORPGs and draw their RPG history back to Dungeons & Dragons, and back to the more orthodox earlier twentieth century 'fantasy' literature genre before that.
- At 1:18: 'I've got slots for what I hold in my hands'. This simply refers to common MMORPG game mechanics.
- At 1:22: 'Don't care what's in your character bank'. 'Banking' is a concept used within most MMORPGs and it can refer to either virtual currency or stored virtual items of significance. A theme within some MMORPG community discussions is of 'n00b' players who attach themselves to veteran players to simply acquire banked superior items or currency that would otherwise take much time or expense to gather.
- At 1:25: 'How 'bout, how 'bout, a little tank and spank?'. Spank is obviously a reference to BDSM—a semi-common theme amongst MMORPGs and MMOs—for instance see *SecondLife* or the Dominatrix themes in Drow oriented Neverwinter Nights servers. (Notably however many Neverwinter Nights servers are not Drow oriented). The word 'tank' refers to the warrior

19   Wylderyde, *I Wanna Be in Your Guild* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tc2hAliufAg> [accessed 23 July 2010].

20   The Guild, *Do You Wanna Date My Avatar* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urNyg1ftMIU&feature=related> [accessed 23 July 2010].

character types within MMORPGs who take on the 'tank' role—which involves engaging enemy combatants in close combat without taking any, or very much, damage themselves—so that their party's (or guild's) arcane casters and archers can be kept safe from the enemy while they unleash more devastating attacks.

- At 1:37: 'Pick a time, send a tell to me'. A 'tell' is a private message that can be sent within an MMORPG or an MMO that in most cases only the intended recipient can see. Notably, however, this is not always the case—an example being that the creators of the Higher Ground Neverwinter Nights server have released a special package of *.dll files and NWSCRIPT, called SimTools, that collectively allow game co-ordinators to read the tells sent to all players if that option is selected by the server administrator.

- At 1:40: 'Just pay, just pay a small subscription fee'. *World of Warcraft* includes monthly subscriptions, as does *SecondLife* premium accounts. Many MMOs and MMORPGs also sell virtual powers, virtual space or virtual items. In the case of Neverwinter Nights nothing is sold by server owners, however many do ask for donations to pay for the upkeep or rent of their computer hardware.

- At 1:58: 'Single White Human, Looking for group'. 'LFG', or looking for group is a call often made by players within MMORPGs when players are trying to find other players to go on 'raids' with. A 'raid', or 'run', is an in game adventure episode where players will band together to attack a particular group of computer controlled enemies—usually including a Boss, or superior and named enemy leader. Raids are where most players obtain virtual wealth.

- At 1:59: 'My stats so high, don't be out of the loop'. MMORPG characters, and RPG characters in games ranging from *Dungeons and Dragons* to *Vampire the Masquerade*, are created as a set of stats, or numerical scores in different ability areas.

- At 2:01: 'Got an uber-leet staff that you can equip'. Leet, short for elite, and uber are both terms used within broader Gamer to describe extremely powerful virtual items or skilled play. The staff is then presumably a highly magical staff.

- At 2:05: 'Im a pixel-based fantasy, a man whose stoic. I hack and slash. Who the heck's more heroic?'. This section of the lyrics refers to a long running, and imaginably unresolvable, debate within the MMORPG subculture about the worth of two opposed subsections of the subculture—the RPers (or role-players) and the Action players—which was discussed above.

- At 2:23: 'You'll touch my plus 5 to dexterity vest'. The plus rating refers to the magical power level of an item—in this case it would be a vest that made the player greatly more agile. This system has existed throughout the history and spectrum of MMORPGs and is drawn from *Dungeons & Dragons*.

In addition to those references the track also draws upon broader web culture in a number of ways including referring to setting up meetings by using Twitter (http://twitter.com/) and engaging in common online themes.

Notably the music for *Do You Wanna Date My Avatar* was co-written by Felicia Day and Jed Whedon, and then the music video was directed

by Jed Whedon. Jed Whedon is the brother of Joss Whedon—who created the related vampire TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, and the cult space western series, *Firefly*.

And So to Music Videos

The level of success experienced with *Do You Wanna Date My Avatar* led to The Guild releasing more music videos—*A Christmas Raid Carol* and *Game On: A Bollywood Themed Gamer's Anthem*.[21] Felicia Day and the *Do You Wanna Date My Avatar* track have also inspired particular content within other MMORPG subculture music videos—most notably *I Play W.O.W* by Jace Hall. Jace Hall is the Chief Executive Officer of Monolith Productions Inc. and is best known as an American television, film and video game producer. In his track *I Play W.O.W* Hall refers to *The Guild* and *Do You Wanna Date My Avatar* with the lines:

> Tell you, get off of my channel! Go learn your class n00b! Or better yet go play Rock Band with that sad guitar. And no, I don't want to date your stupid Avatar, I'm getting busy clocking kills in every single way. My Guild's legit, come on man this ain't Felicia Day.[22]

Notably there are a growing number of people, and/or groups, producing these kinds of interactions with MMORPGs now, and the genre of WoW Parody (*World of Warcraft*) has become quite popular on YouTube. In general terms the genre tends to explore a wide range of experiences that are collectively shared by MMORPG players—such as the conflicts between guilds or factions and the regular theme of role-players wanting to explore Shakespearian (*Romeo and Juliet*) 'forbidden' relationships between members of those opposing factions—a classic example being the track *I Kissed an Orc* (and I liked it)—which draws upon Katy Perry's *I Kissed a Girl*.[23] Notably this theme is also explored in The Guild, where in Episode One of Season Four Codex (Felicia Day) wrestles with telling her guild mates about having dated and slept with Fawkes—the leader of her rival guild the Axis of Anarchy.[24]

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21   The Guild, *A Christmas Raid Carol* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q21iitT0VL4 &feature=channel>; The Guild, *Game On: A Bollywood Themed Gamer's Anthem* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMrN3Rh55uM&annotation_id=annotation_727135 &feature=iv> [accessed 31 August 2010].

22   Hall, Jace, in *I Play W.O.W* (3:05), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltM5jHIJFw4 [accessed 30 August 2010]– on which it had 3,249,862 downloads.

23   Sharm, *I Kissed an Orc* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HME0qPX3mUg> [accessed 29 November 2010].

24   The Guild, *Epic Guilt* (Episode 1, Season 4 <http://www.watchtheguild.com/>) [accessed 23 July 2010].

Other tracks within this genre, of which a representative example might be *Don't Trust a Rogue* by 3Oh!3, explore the roles and expectations associated with different character archetypes found within MMORPGs, and the way that they those characters interact with both other characters and their player communities.[25]

And the Place of All This in Relation to 'Orthodox' Folklore or Traditional Anthropology?

From the given and familiar context of folklore studies, or of that for anthropology, the re-occurring theme of fan writing within the MMORPG context—focussed on fantastically or mythologically based texts, and on the place held by *Dungeons & Dragons* (a game that largely draws upon on mythology and mythic history)—all this is particularly interesting, since it opens a second strand of thought relating to the reinterpretation of traditional lore through player-collaborative and inter-active modern 'story telling'. Arguably, too, it is a process that has empowered a significant number of present day people to engage with story/mythological elements—and like patterns—to an extent that, most likely, they would not have otherwise.

MMORPG culture and the way players interact also clearly deserve further close consideration as a valid independent subcultural pattern and so a group/ groups functioning in a clear pattern/ discernible ritual that is a product of / a reaction to existing systems that the players have been born into/ situated in as at this point of time in the early 21st century—for as Felicia Day commented,

> even now people don't really understand how […] much it overtakes peoples lives and how much it is a part of peoples lives—in a healthy way as well.[26]

<div align="center">*   *</div>

<div align="center">*Glossary*</div>

DPS: Damage per second. The usual way of referring to the rate of damage done by characters over time. It is usually used to refer to high damage output characters.

guild: An online guild, in the context of an MMORPG, is a grouping of players who work together to achieve collective

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[25]   3Oh!3, *Don't Trust a Rogue* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7tkZCzt4b8> [accessed 20 November 2010].

[26]   Day, Felicia, in 'The Guild: Interview with Felicia Day', *Daily Mahalo with Veronica Belmont* (at 2:46).

goals—those usually being their becoming more powerful compared to other guilds and individual players or mastering some particular element of the game.

MMO: 'Massive Multiplayer Online' Game.

MMORPG: 'Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game'—a term coined by Richard Garriott (the creator of the Ultima Online game) in 1997. Examples of these include *Neverwinter Nights* and *World of Warcraft*.

MUD: Literally 'Multi-User Dungeon', or a virtual fantasy adventure game, one capable of being played by communities of users at the same time—who could (all) interact with each other.

Neko: Neko means 'cat' in Japanese. In *SecondLife* there is a large Neko population—the Nekos are essentially humanoid cat people, but in most cases they just wear cat ears, tails and boots whilst behaving and moving in a feline-inspired way.

n00b: A new player to the MMORPG or MMO who has not yet completed a right of passage to be accepted into the ranks of 'regular' or accepted players within that particular community.

pwn: The term pwn is 1337, or leetspeak, and is used instead of the word 'own'. It refers to beating, usually to the degree of humiliation, your rivals.

raid: A 'raid', or 'run', is an in game adventure episode where players will band together to attack a particular group of computer controlled enemies—usually including a Boss, or superior and named enemy leader. Raids are where most players obtain virtual wealth.

RL: real life, as differentiated from 'online' interactions.

Steampunk: Steampunk is a science fiction sub-genre that incorporates traditional elements of literary fantasy with a vision of a largely steam powered 19th Century Victorian Britain. Coupled with this the genre includes gadgets that would seem to be drawn from the works of such [early SF- type] writers such as Jules Verne (1828-1905).[27]

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[27]   His major science fiction novels were published from 1864 to 1875, they famously including *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869-70) and *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873).