

# THESIS

## USER-DRIVEN ROLE-PLAYING IN FINAL FANTASY XIV: IMMERSION, CREATIVE LABOR, AND PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING

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## ABSTRACT

### USER-DRIVEN ROLE-PLAYING IN FINAL FANTASY XIV: IMMERSION, CREATIVE LABOR, AND PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) give each user the starring role, drawing them into the game's story and world through their character avatar. Some, however, take role-playing (colloquially, "roleplaying" or "RP") further by constructing deep and complex narratives for their characters and pitting them against others in new and often spontaneous stories that emerge from collaborative efforts. This research looks at the RP community in the MMO *Final Fantasy XIV* in order to understand how and why RPer choose this form of play in a game already rich with activities. Specifically, I aim to shed light on the relationship between RP and psychosocial well-being. Drawing on perspectives from game studies, media fandom studies, and positive psychology, this research examines RP through a tripartite model of avenues towards well-being: play, flow, and sociality. A mixed-methods approach is used to gather ethnographic data through participant observation and interviews while also sampling broad patterns through a field survey. A cognitive anthropological "cultural models" consensus and consonance methodology allows for the culture of RP to be assessed in its capacity to reinforce and encourage positive experiences for its participants. Findings suggest that RP is a fulfilling activity because of its ability to enhance immersion and flow in the game world and the meaningful social connections that are forged through creative collaboration. However, RPer who are lonely or who become overinvested in the activity are more likely to have negative experiences if they cannot learn to play in an adaptive manner.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 A Wedding in Eorzea

The scene is tranquil, a serene peace hanging over the chapel like the sprawling branches of the giant trees that shade it. Dappled light filters through to fall warm and soft against the stonework plaza where a dozen guests wait, chatting idly, eyes scanning for the first sign of the bride's arrival at the venue. The chapel is nested deep in the woods with a mossy, brick-lined path that cuts through the brush and winding waterways, ending in an ornately wrought gate that marks the threshold of the property. It would be impossible to miss her entrance. Her soon-to-be wife, Malina, stands in the center of all those gathered, tense and distant, a palpable air of nerves and anticipation about her. I nearly escape her notice as I arrive—but only nearly.

“Might I ask who you are?”

The tone is impossible to read, but I do my best to reply casually, waving at the acknowledgement. “Name's Lolomo. I'm a guest of... Sinee? Ninee? Rinee! Rinee, I think. Pleasure.”

“Then I bid you welcome, Lolomo!” She smiles, apparently unvexed by the secondhand invitation—or by the fact that Rinee was not even in attendance herself.

There's a more pressing concern: the location of the other bride. Even the other guests have begun to discuss the matter.

“Should she not be here by now?” One wonders.

“She should...” Malina replies, eyes locked on the distant gate. The ceremony is supposed to start in a scant few bells.

Finally, the tension breaks—the awaited bride Dusk bursts through the doors behind us. Apparently, there was no grand entrance at all, but a last-minute scramble of preparations inside the venue proper.

“Hello everyone!” The vivid purple of her dress is complemented by dainty flowers fastened just beneath her feline ears. “Thank you for coming!”

Dusk’s voice wavers with nervous excitement as she explains her engrossment in making sure all the details were perfect for the waiting guests—she was so involved, in fact, that she didn’t realize she had just run out in her full wedding attire. Malina can only stare at first, quietly taking in the sight.

“Gods.” Her voice cracks. “You’re so beautiful.”

The rest of us are eager to agree. The two brides lead the way into the chapel, excitement in the air. There’s a sense of a long journey that has led to this point, two women who have faced the world and its dangers together and emerged all the stronger and all the closer from their trials. No one seems to mind that I’ve crashed the wedding—but then again, that’s just something that bards tend to do.



## 1.2 Finding the RP in MMORPGs



Figure 1: Waiting for the bride's arrival

The above scene took place in a video game—*Final Fantasy XIV*, or FFXIV, to be exact—and the narrative crafted from the event belies the chaotic process of its execution. Rather than the customary six to eight weeks, the invitation to the event was dropped into my character's inventory roughly twenty minutes before it was set to begin. Having never been to the location before, I hitched a ride with another guest, teleporting from the treacherous forest I had been journeying through to meet my bird-mounted chauffeur.

[FC] <Malina> warp to Hawthorne hut, most northmost part of map

[FC] <Ashi> east shroud

[FC] <Seveve> I'll meet you at the house then drive you over XD

[FC] <Lolomo> lol ok I'll be there at the house in a sec, thanks all

We rode out for miles (or malms, as they say in Eorzea) to reach the chapel, joining the restless milling of nearly a dozen other characters waiting at its steps. The conversations seemed equally unplanned, casual banter scattered amongst clusters of avatars all standing around, occasionally shifting through their idle standing animations. Actions and words filled the chat box in the corner of my screen as soon as my own character was in virtual hearing range.

D'nagi smiles at Seveve.

Seveve: "A-almost time."

Malina: "D'nagi! What a surprise!" She grinned. "I am glad you came. And might I ask who you are?" She looked to Lomomo.

D'nagi: "I'm a little under dressed, but it turns out I had time to spare."

T'alos: "Fawn, you look radiant tonight."

D'nagi smiles at Seveve.

Seveve: "Nagi i-if you came in a b-big fancy d-dress I would b-be surprised."

Lolomo startled at being called to, but quickly recovered with a merry wave. "Ah—! Name's Lolomo. I'm a guest of... Sinee? Ninee? Rinee! Rinee, I think. Pleasure."

Fawn: "do I? well you look pretty fancy yourself T'alos"

Malina: "Then I bid you welcome, Lolomo!" She smiled, and then looked to the gate, a bit concerned.

We waited together for the second bride's arrival, a passage of time that felt far longer than it was as the game's accelerated daytime cycle moved the whole area from night to morning. The transition was nothing worth commenting on, apparently, although the bride's absence was; clearly there was *some* selectiveness in the narrative here. Finally, Dusk made her grand entrance: a comically sudden and unceremonious appearance on the stairs as her player logged in.

Malina continues to watch the gate anxiously, looking more nervous as time passes.

T'alos: "Should she not be here by now?"

Malina: "She should..."

Dusk has logged in.

Bibido sneezes.

Seveve: “Uhh... W-well uhh.. No but uh. Carter here is g-going to take me t-to a dinner I think.”

Veera: “Bless”

Carter: ( pop from the sky all blesse the lords above amen! ))

D’nago: “The lady of the hour is here!”

Dusk exited from inside the hall. “Hello Everyone! T-thank you for coming!”

Despite the fumbled entrance, Dusk quickly recovered. Even as other characters began to comment on her arrival, she moved her character into place by the large chapel doors behind the group and began to run towards us—and then remembered that she had set her character to run instead of walk. She stopped abruptly, pausing to make the change, and then proceeded to greet us with a far daintier gait. With the anticipated arrival and subsequent welcome, it was finally time to move into the ceremony proper.

A lot of work went into creating this experience even with the air of eclectic chaos surrounding it. The nervous anticipation of such a monumental occasion was well-performed, the excited chatter of guests exactly the sort one might expect at a wedding attended in the flesh. Most interesting of all its aspects, however, is perhaps the fact that it need not have been such an experience at all. The Ceremony of Eternal Bonding is a lavish affair by the standards of *Final Fantasy XIV*, using the same mechanics behind the rest of the game’s cutscenes and quests to construct the full appearance of a wedding ceremony within the game. However, most of the event’s activities are scripted, and ultimately the rewards are rooted not in the emotions of the union, but the practicalities of it: players who bind their characters are able to teleport immediately to each other’s locations in this game world, and receive a bundle of unique items throughout the ceremony’s activities as well, making it an advantageous option for any duo of

players that find themselves working together often. Malina and Dusk's players were not intensive gaming partners, nor were they in any sort of romantic relationship outside of the game; their friendship grew from the interactions between their characters, and those interactions eventually blossomed into a romance befitting an eternal bond. They were roleplayers, as were the others in attendance, and their ability to craft such a personal and creative story together from the game they played is what sets them apart from the rest of the game's population.

### **1.3 *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn and Rebooted***

*Final Fantasy XIV* had something of a rocky start. Released originally in September of 2010, the anticipated fourteenth installment in the massively popular *Final Fantasy* series of RPGs and the second MMORPG in the lineup debuted to widespread disappointment and frustration. The game failed to compete with other MMORPGs and drew ire for its poor design and lukewarm execution of MMO fundamentals. Taking a desperate gamble to save the title, the studio Square Enix, brought on an entirely new team headed by game director and producer Naoki Yoshida. Yoshida and his team rewrote the game nearly from ground up, adding new mechanics, quests, and graphical changes.

Most drastic of all changes, however, was the game's story. The calamity of the game's initial launch sparked a calamity in the fictional world of Eorzea to match, a catastrophic destruction that began a new era in the game, its effect wrought upon the country in the form of permanent changes to the game world and an entirely new plot for players to follow. The interplay between story and world, then, has been present from the first live day of the new version, *A Realm Reborn*. This emphasis on the narrative and its impact on the setting—and the player's new place in all of it—would prove to be a choice that, amongst the myriad other user

experience improvements, would provide a fresh playground for roleplayers as the game's popularity and userbase began to thrive at last.

#### **1.4 A Role to Play**

The phenomenon of roleplaying has been around for some time; while often the term is associated with workplace scenario-testing and the “playing pretend” of childhood, there has been a documented tradition of adult creative roleplay as well (Williams et al 2011). Often the term is rendered as “role-playing” in literature and formal source texts; however, the use of “roleplaying” and “roleplayers” as a single word (or as its abbreviation, RP) is far more common colloquially within the community, hence its use in this project. Roleplaying—quite literally, the playing of a role—is a primary component of tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, which trace their histories back to the 1970s. In these games, players create a character and interact with a guided narrative through that character, facing trials and reaping rewards through their unique and fantastical strengths. TTRPGs would lend heavy inspiration to the growing world of electronic games, and the social, interactive nature would be seen first in the text-based fantasy worlds of MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and eventually in the sprawling, complex graphical worlds of today's MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online roleplaying games). In all of these games, the player creates a character, represented by a virtual avatar, and enters the world to interact with the environment and the story both. They play the game by playing the role of a denizen of the game world, and much of the gameplay in MMORPGs revolves around improving this character's appearance, combat prowess, and wealth through interactions with the game mechanics.

*Final Fantasy XIV* is a classic MMORPG in this respect. Its story casts the player as the hero of the land of Eorzea, and the twists and turns of the plot take the player through

increasingly difficult challenges that are rewarded through better items, more money, and expanded abilities. However, comparing this manner of roleplaying to that seen in early TTRPGs reveals something that has been lost: an *interaction* with the narrative being presented, a certain agency in the individual story of a player's character. For most MMORPG players, their avatar is a vessel for their own will, but for some these avatars represent characters with their own personalities, histories, and goals (Ducheneaut et al 2009). These players move beyond the rigid narrative presented to them in the game and work together collaboratively to generate new stories, pitting their characters against each other not in gameplay prowess but in conversation, in arguments, in confronting demons from their pasts and perhaps even in cultivating a close relationship to last well into the future, as Malina and Dusk did. That this manner of playing is deeply enjoyable for roleplayers is a near truism, but there is still a complexity to it that is worth deeper understanding. Why roleplay in a game with so much to do already? Why roleplay at all, when creative writing or even acting offer similar creative outlets? What makes roleplaying fun—so fun that entire communities have developed around sharing in the experience? This project set out to examine the motivations and practices behind such roleplaying activities in MMORPGs, focusing specifically on *Final Fantasy XIV*.

### **1.5 Playing, Engaging, Belonging: Social Creativity and Subjective Well-Being**

This research was borne, in part, from my own experiences with roleplaying communities while growing up. I began writing collaboratively with others online at the age of twelve through discussion forums, email, and various chat programs, and quickly picked up that there was a rich subculture surrounding the activity. For most of the people I roleplayed with, it seemed that the emphasis was always on fun—it was a hobby, after all, listed alongside other such pastimes as reading, writing, or watching television. However, there were always horror stories too, hints at a

darker side. People had to cut off contact with other roleplayers who began to grow possessive of their partnership. Something bad would happen to a character, and there would be scrutiny over whether outside conflict had seeped into the near-sacred space of the narrative. These issues have been noted by other researchers as well (Bowman 2013). Roleplaying is an enjoyable and fulfilling hobby for many people, but the experience of participating can be wrought with stress. What created the difference?

In order to understand the complexities of roleplaying as a social activity, I chose to look at the roleplaying community in the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XIV*. Studying roleplaying in MMOs offered key advantages: it guaranteed some level of commonality amongst the roleplayers as they all played within the same world, and the idea of roleplaying as a component of game immersion has been mentioned in gaming literature with some frequency (Bartle 1996; Yee 2006; Brown and Cairns 2004). Drawing from prior work done in gaming and subcultural studies, I approached the topic of roleplaying from a positive psychology perspective, exploring what aspects of roleplaying make it most mentally and emotionally fulfilling—and what aspects may be a detriment to this fulfillment. To understand how the culture of roleplaying communities related to these interests, I also integrated perspectives from psychological anthropology about cultural models and their impact on individual behavior and experience. This project had the following exploratory research interests:

R1: What does FFXIV offer to roleplayers as a medium to privilege it above other choices?

R2: What makes roleplaying enjoyable, and how does this enjoyment interact with well-being?

R3: What leads to negative experiences in roleplaying for some but not for others?

My research combined qualitative and quantitative techniques into a holistic mixed-methods approach, utilizing participant observation within these groups alongside interviews to gather qualitative data that would later inform the construction of a quantitative field survey. I spent approximately five months with roleplaying groups in the game, splitting my time across three free companies (formal player-organized social groups equivalent to guilds in other MMOs). In each group I had a unique character who would join in interactions with others and participate in RP events. From these observations and experiences I developed an interview protocol for person-centered interviews that addressed questions of involvement, immersion, culture, and mental health, aimed at understanding the multifaceted aspects of RP that seemed to make it appealing and engrossing. The interviews would then inform the construction of a field survey protocol that sought to collect demographic information as well as various measure of importance and experience related to the research interests.

Through this methodology and the subsequent analyses, I found that positive experiences with roleplaying were associated with healthy emotional connections to characters, investment in the context surrounding them, and good relationships with other roleplayers. Roleplaying provided multiple avenues towards “flourishing,” meaningful happiness, suggesting that it could work similar to folk therapy for some participants. The activity did carry a risk to it, seen most often in the overinvolved and the lonely. Overall, however, the most significant benefits to RP were the social interactions with other roleplayers, and the uniquely intimate bonds that roleplaying fostered between them. The utility of this research is in the basis it provides for exploring internet-based communal creativity, effective immersion in virtual worlds, and alternate styles of play in MMORPGs. It is my hope, too, that this project will contribute to



academic understanding of roleplaying as an activity and the workings of both its communities and participants.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 MMORPGs

#### 2.1.1 *The Virtual World*

To understand the actors, one must understand their stage. FFXIV is an MMORPG, which is itself a type of “virtual world”. Multiple definitions have been proposed to describe the virtual world as a concept, with Mark Bell attempting to synthesize the core attributes of these definitions into the following: “a synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers” (2008, 2). The history of the virtual world is deeply embedded in creativity; MUD (“Multi-User Dungeon”) is cited as the first true virtual world, a text-based world that drew conventions from fantasy literature such as the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, the tabletop game *Dungeons and Dragons*, and the early computer adventure games of the time (Bartle 2009). The early graphical MMORPGs *Meridian 59*, *Ultima Online*, and *EverQuest* all featured fantastical settings with magic and monsters as well, and this lineage of fiction-inspired virtual worlds would come to be exemplified in *World of Warcraft*, the most popular MMORPG in the modern market (2009, 12).

That these expansive virtual spaces should draw from popular literature is perhaps not surprising; as the media scholar Castronova points out, “a virtual world’s entire existence is predicated on the provision of good experiences for the user. It has to be better than reality” (2007, 43). However, the persistent, social, and interactive nature of virtual worlds also create new and unique avenues for human interaction and behavior, and it is these features that in turn have drawn researchers interested in the relationship between the real and the virtual. Social researchers have employed ethnographic field methods across all manner of virtual

environments, from the sandbox social world of *Second Life* to the expansive and game-heavy *World of Warcraft*, exploring topics as diverse as diaspora, embodiment, and digital economics (Boellstorff 2015; Nardi 2010; Pearce 2011; Taylor 2009). In attempting to understand the nature of roleplaying in these virtual world settings, however, three core issues in the field rise to particular prominence: identity, immersion, and sociality.

### *2.1.2 Paradox and Play in Virtual Identity*

The internet, and especially virtual worlds, provide an arena for identity presentation and experimentation that is unprecedented. Both Turkle and Bruckman noted this in their early research on MUDs (a genre of text-based virtual worlds that would arise from the original MUD framework), with Bruckman referring to such spaces as “identity workshops” (Bruckman 1996). Turkle’s assertion that MUDs allowed for “a construction of an identity that is so fluid and multiple that it strains the very limits of the notion” resonates with postmodern theories of identity formation that recognize the malleability of the self (Turkle 1996, 158). This “protean self”, named for the Greek god Proteus who could change his form at will, theorizes that the many-faceted pressures of modern life produce a fluid, ever-shifting self, a “continuous psychic re-creation” that negotiates and adapts situationally to different situations and stressors (Lifton 1999, 5).

Interest in the construction of the virtual self would continue in research on graphical worlds as well, exemplified in Ducheneaut et al’s exploration of avatar personalization in three different virtual worlds. Their findings suggest a trend towards avatars with traits the users find to be visually ideal, echoing some of Turkle’s early observations, with additional preference for characters that stand out (Ducheneaut et al 2009). However, this vast toolset for crafting and presenting identity online is tempered by what Nick Yee termed “the Proteus paradox”: despite

the apparent freedom, many users of virtual worlds will still tend to fall into presentations dictated by cultural stereotypes and standards of beauty from beyond the game world (Yee 2014). Turkle, too, noted that the experimentation made possible by virtual worlds rarely led to sweeping changes in identity outside of those worlds. Some informants were able to integrate new aspects of the identities they explored online in their offline selves, but for many, the virtual remained virtual, and for some the fun turned to distress as they became entangled in addictive, maladaptive behaviors that privileged their online MUD characters over a more cohesive sense of personal self (Turkle 1994 and 1996).

Perhaps this ostensible paradox in the “effectiveness” of online identity experimentation is not a matter of paradox at all, but one of framing. The playfulness of online identity is recognized, especially in explicit game-oriented environments like MMOs, but it is the presumed effectual relationship between identity online and identity offline that is often privileged in literature. However, this playful aspect of self-expression in virtual worlds is an important detail. Ibarra and Petriglieri make a distinction between identity *work* and identity *play*, positing that “identity play aims to explore possible selves rather than to claim and be granted desired or ought selves... commitment, in play, is provisional” (2010, 18). Here the emphasis is on the act of play, rather than the goals of play. This resonates with De Mul’s proposed “ludic identity” as the way players in a game negotiate their identity throughout the game, “in search for new possibilities in order to increase the field of possible action” (2015, 260). Identity becomes an aspect of play itself rather than part of its goal, something that can be altered towards means rather than ends, and this seems a more sound basis to approach the activity of roleplaying from: as a form of play that focuses on identity. In conceptions of both identity play and ludic identity, however, there is the recognition that this exploratory, fun, and low-pressure playfulness requires

a space set apart from mundane reality—a virtual reality, in a sense (Ibarra and Petriglieri 2010; De Mul 2015). To speak of involvement in such a space is to speak of immersion.

### *2.1.3 Immersion and the Magic Circle*

The topic of immersion is another that goes back to the earliest days of research in virtual worlds. Bartle was the first to widely publish a “taxonomy” of player types, designating four broad categories of MUD player motivations: achievers, explorers, socializers, and killers (1996). While Bartle did not define immersion explicitly, his “explorers” were players most interested in interacting with the world of their games, grounding them in motivations directly related to the “space” their avatars inhabited. Bartle’s taxonomy would later be refined by Nick Yee’s research on gaming motivations in MMOs, where “immersion” emerged from detailed survey data as one piece of a five-factor model of motivation (2006). This concept of immersion was associated with the enjoyment of interacting with a fantastical world, of being someone else, and of the narratives of both the setting and one’s own character. In later analysis, Yee would simplify this into a three-factor model, in which immersion would come to absorb aspects of escapism as well (2007). Interestingly, Yee specifically highlighted roleplaying as a component of immersion, defining it as “creating a persona with a background story and interacting with other players to create an improvised story” (2007, 773).

Despite the prominence of immersion in gaming literature, it has proven difficult to operationalize across settings and experiences. This was the goal of Brown and Cairns, who used a grounded theory approach to describe three levels of immersion in games: engagement, engrossment, and total immersion (2004). Additionally, they laid out barriers between each type of immersion: engagement becomes engrossment when the game is designed in a way that influences the player’s emotional state, while engrossment transitions to total immersion with the

expansion of empathy and atmosphere, the “growth of attachment” and the “development of game construction” (2004, 1299). Increased immersion has been associated with greater enjoyment of a game, especially for players who are already motivated towards immersion-seeking (Weibel and Wissmath 2011). If roleplayers indeed fall naturally into this category, as Yee suggests, then the activity of roleplay may be conceptualized as an activity meant to deepen the immersive experience—to move from engagement to total immersion through increased empathy with their characters.

This model of deepening immersion, transitioning from one state to another, echoes the creation of a separate space for safe identity play. Game worlds, and especially persistent networked worlds such as those of MMOs, have sometimes been conceptualized as “magic circles”; this term is taken from Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*, a seminal work on the nature of play (Huizinga and Hull 1949). Salen et al would later use this general conception of play within a “third space” outside of normal life and apply it specifically to virtual worlds, highlighting the separation of virtual space from real space (2004). The magic circle as a description for virtual worlds has been criticized; while the worlds may be persistent by nature, there is a constant flux of involvement between them and the offline world, in contrast to the distinctly set-apart nature of the magic circle (Castronova 2005; Nardi 2010). However, the magic circle concept may find new utility with roleplay, a boundary not between the real and the virtual but instead between different degrees of immersion—or perhaps play, more aligned with Huizinga’s original mention of the term. Understanding how roleplayers as a group might succeed in creating such a space necessitates understanding the social nature of MMOs and the roleplaying communities they host.

#### 2.1.4 Sociality in MMOs

Celia Pearce referred to MMOs as “communities of play,” places where sociality revolved intrinsically about the various playful activities available to users (Pearce 2011). Indeed, it is this communal dimension that sets MMOs apart from single-player computer and video games, bringing together hundreds to thousands of players at a time within a single world. As opposed to more socially-oriented virtual worlds like *Second Life*, the distinctly ludic nature of MMOs shapes the interactions that take place within. Taylor and Jakobsson noted this in their experiences in *EverQuest*, where actions that undermined social cohesion, such as players “kill stealing” (killing an enemy before another player and reaping the rewards in their stead) or claiming loot (in-game rewards) for tasks they did not aid in, led to emergent social systems based on player reputation that came to “fill an important function in an environment where selfish or otherwise obtrusive acts threaten to spoil the everyday gaming experiences of the other participants” (Taylor and Jakobsson 2003, 5).

One system of social support they highlight is playing with friends or family members that have social ties outside of the game; this has proven to be a robust system of support, with Snodgrass et al finding that online play involving offline social networks can help mitigate the negative effects of intensive play (2011a). Another important social structure in many MMOs is the guild, a persistent group of players that band together into a single organization, often with mechanical benefits within the game for doing so. Some of these guilds are focused on the completion of teamwork-based game tasks such as raiding (large and complex group battles with high stakes and rewards) while others are primarily used for socializing; in both cases, these groups have proven valuable social resources, encouraging both positive casual social interaction as well as deep friendships in MMOs (Willaims et al, 2006). Cole and Griffiths found that over

70% of surveyed MMO players had made close friends within the game, and that nearly 40% felt more comfortable discussing sensitive issues with online friends (2007, 581-582). Kaye et al also revealed that engagement with an MMO community and social bonding in the game led to higher self-esteem and lower measures of loneliness (2017). Clearly, there are benefits to social activity in MMOs that go beyond the completion of game tasks.

In their assessment of the social life of guilds, Williams et al described those on designated roleplaying servers as “playing another game entirely”, with “guild life, social connections, player roles, and player behavior... all different on RP servers” (2006, 356). If roleplaying is taken as a special type of play in MMOs, and in particular as one that is primarily immersion-motivated, it seems logical that the social norms within the roleplaying community would look different from broader MMO culture. Indeed, in *Behind the Avatar*, perhaps the most detailed study on the MMO RP community to date, Williams et al found that although roleplayers made up a small minority of the MMO community they still valued social connections and relationships with other roleplayers (2011). While their research suggested that immersion was a primary motivator for roleplayers individually, it is of particular interest that the social aspect of roleplaying seemed to be the main source of negative experiences reported, “primarily related to stresses caused by other players violating group norms” (2011, 193). This suggests, aligned with the assertions of Williams and others, that roleplaying communities may be operating under a different set of group practices and norms than other MMO players. To understand how these communities are structured, it would be valuable to look at another type of communal, creative subculture.



## 2.2 Media Fandoms and Social Creativity

### 2.1.1 *The Study of Media Fandoms*

At first blush, the world of media fandom and the world of roleplay may seem to be disparate, but the creative, productive nature of both invites a useful comparison. While the study of virtual worlds offers an understanding of the *setting* of the roleplaying community being explored in this project, the study of media fandom provides a framework for understanding the activity of roleplay itself. The term “fandom” was originally used to describe the avid fans of sports and theatrical productions and their communal activities, but it would come to be associated with media beginning with the growing network of science fiction fans communicating with each other in the early to mid 1900s (Coppa 2006). Throughout the 80s and 90s, spurred on by the growing enthusiasm and activity in fandoms for media such as *Star Trek*, several early and groundbreaking studies into the nature of fandom would be released. Rather than the common public image of fans as fanatical, stagnant consumers, these studies showed a flourishing creativity within fandoms, where art, writing, music, and other such “fan labors” were created and shared freely amongst fans (Bacon-Smith 1992; Lewis 2002; Jenkins 2012). More, this research emphasized the influential role of women and minorities in fandom communities, where they often took central roles in this form of creative labor. These activities have always been deeply rooted in the social and interactive nature of fandoms, and the widespread availability of the internet has only increased the level of communication and circulation possible amongst fans internationally (Bennett 2014). Roleplaying is sometimes mentioned explicitly as a type of fan labor, and understanding the relationship between fan and media in turn creates an approach for understanding the relationship between MMO roleplayers and the fictional, fantastical worlds they inhabit.

### *2.1.2 Playful Poachers*

Henry Jenkins was the first to popularize the term “textual poachers” in relation to fandom, describing how “for fans, reading becomes a type of play, responsive only to its own loosely structured rules and generating its own types of pleasure” (1988, 86). Jenkins borrowed this terminology from Michel de Certeau, who characterized readers of texts as “nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write,” active participants in the narrative who snatched up what pieces were most meaningful to them (1984, 174). This textual poaching forms the basis of fan labor, providing the raw materials that are later reworked into new creative products, original in their construction but still undoubtedly and even proudly tied to their source material. While the phrasing of “poaching” has been criticized as an overly antagonistic, Paul Booth sees this description as accurate to the inherently restricted nature of fan engagement with media, a “sense of play as free movement within a more rigid structure” (2015, 16).

Much like the identity play that occurs in the safe “other place” of virtual worlds, the rigidity inherent in published media allow fans to “produce their own meanings within the prescribed structure of the text” (Booth 2010, 70). Jenkins found many examples of fans playing with expressions of themselves in their creations, exploring gender, sexuality, power, and politics using their favorite characters and settings as vehicles (Jenkins 1988; Jenkins 2012). Angela Thomas noted similarly playful identity explorations in collaborative fanfiction (fan writing) communities, noting how the young fans she spoke with both invested aspects of themselves in how they wrote their characters and also experimented with characteristics far different from their own experiences (2006, 2007). If MMOs offer the environment for such play, perhaps poaching could be said to offer the material for roleplayers to work from, plucked from the game’s narrative and world.

What, then, makes this type of interaction with the game story so preferable to standard gameplay? Marie-Laure Ryan has highlighted the challenges of narrative involvement in computer games, noting that “the narrative element of computer games is ... typically subordinated to the playing action” (2004, 350). The pleasure of play within a game is inherently tied to the “quest” for completion, the performance of tasks set out for players, while dramatic narrative elicits thrill and pleasure through the careful control of emotional reactions (1997). Designing an interactive environment that is capable of combining both forms of narrative enjoyment is a logistical challenge, but roleplaying seems to provide an avenue for doing just this through the reciprocal play that occurs between roleplayers. Engaging with the preferred aesthetics of the MMO, roleplayers are able to bring in elements of dramatic narrative such as themes or structured story beats while continuing to introduce less predictable challenges through the very process of their playful experimentation with their characters.

### *2.1.3 Emergent Narrative Transportation*

In media psychology, narrative transportation theory describes a process of audience involvement in media, “whereby their thoughts and attention are focused on the events occurring in it” (Tal-Or and Cohen 2010, 405). This has been compared to immersion, as both involve a sense of intense focus and becoming “lost” in a task. However, theories of transportation tend to emphasize the connection with stories and characters as opposed to spatial immersion (Van Laer et al, 2013). The transformative effects of transportation are of particular interest; Busselle and Bilandzic demonstrate that fictional stories are processed through a series of mental models in a way that engages both the focus and the empathy of the audience, leading to altered emotional states and even shifts in perspective during and after the story (2008).

Van Steenhuyse brings this concept of mental modeling into fanfiction as well, noting that when fans read, “they are transported to a universe that confirms a wide range of expectations, but also offers them something new” (2011, 6). Engaging with known and loved media through fan labor offers a new avenue for satisfying emotional involvement. Importantly, while the experience of transportation itself is considered a pleasurable state, the narratives need not be solely positive; audiences have long found tales of suffering, tragedy, and horror powerfully engaging and impactful as well (Green et al 2004). Transportation and immersion become entangled in MMOs, where narrative, play, and environment interact in complex ways to promote what Jenkins calls “emergent narratives,” stories that grow through the interactions of players with the game world (Jenkins 2004, 11). Klimmt et al assert that roleplayers enjoy transportation into the virtual world with more freedom than both average players and audiences of less interactive forms of media, describing the resulting alterations in empathy and perspective as “fully imaginative—constructive acts that solely result from the agents’ fantasy” (2009, 362). Like the fans who are able to involve themselves more deeply with their favorite media by crafting new meanings from its components, the creative nature of roleplay allows participants to extract new meaning, pleasure, and empathetic involvement through transportation into the emergent narratives of the MMOs they play.

#### *2.1.4 Affinity Spaces for Creative Labor*

While creativity has historically been thought of as something that is intrinsically—or internally—motivated, more recent models have recognized the importance of supportive social contexts in the encouragement of creative production (Amabile and Pillemer 2012). The social context of fan labor has been described in terms of a gift economy, where capital in the form of fan labor is circulated throughout the fandom in the service of community bonds rather than

economic gain (Mauss 2002; Fiske 1992). Hellekson further expands the nature of these “gifts” in her assessment of online fan culture by including more symbolic actions such feedback, “meta” discussion, and archival efforts; in her words, “writer and reader create a shared dialogue that results in a feedback loop of gift exchange... with the goal of creating and maintaining social solidarity” (2009, 115-116). Fan creativity is given value as social capital within fandom spaces—perhaps even a value that is not recognized outside of fandom spaces.

In roleplaying, it is not a single product or even act being exchanged, but rather a series of activities that are both productive and social at the same time. There may be individual goals involved, but the key feature of roleplay as a form of fan labor is that its reciprocity is inherent—the social context of roleplaying is entirely oriented around this communal shared activity. James Gee provides an interesting basis for understanding such an arrangement in his concept of “affinity spaces”, in which “people who may share little... affiliate around their common cause and the practices associated with espousing it” (2005, 229). Rather than emphasize the cultural economy of creative acts, the affinity space highlights the environment of learning and experimentation that interest-based sociality fosters. In Curwood et al’s research into online fandom affinity spaces, they found that this reciprocal system of creativity and feedback encouraged young creators to improve and provided them a sense of fulfillment in their endeavors (2013). Framing MMO roleplaying as an affinity space, in which creative labor is not just symbolic capital but a socially encouraged activity of fulfillment, allows for the psychological benefits of such communal creativity to come into primary focus.

## **2.3 Positive Psychology and Avenues for Happiness**

### *2.3.1 Positive Psychology*

The study of positive psychology is a relatively recent one, seeing the most development in the 90s as psychologists, led by Martin Seligman, began to pursue questions about what makes life worth living (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2014). It was born from a realization that the field of psychology, while making increasingly effective strides towards understanding and treating mental illness and unwellness, had focused relatively little on the positive aspects of mental health. Positive psychology focuses on “subjective well-being,” a term that glosses happiness, fulfillment, and other positive but complex terms, and the study of subjective well-being is as much theoretical as it is practical; with greater knowledge come greater efficacy in improvement (Argyle 2013, 2). Higher measures of subjective well-being have already been associated with better health outcomes and longevity (Hill and Turiano 2014; Cole et al 2015).

Positive psychology also provides a useful framework for understanding the positive and fulfilling, aspects of roleplaying. Seligman developed what was initially a tripartite model of a happy life, which he posited was a pleasant life (pursing positive and enjoyable emotions), a good life (optimally engaging with activities), and a meaningful life (finding purpose in affiliation with something larger than yourself) (2004, 262-263). He would later go on to expand this model, splitting the “meaningful life” into three more refined categories; this created his current PERMA model, short for the five elements of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (2012, 16-18). Jones et al explored how PERMA presents itself in video games, highlighting especially MMOs and their highly engaging, social natures (2014). They suggest that, if effectively pursued, these positive aspects of gaming could promote flourishing mental health, which they define as “a combination of feeling good and

functioning effectively” (2014, no page). It is Seligman’s model that will likewise provide the structure for exploring the avenues of fulfilling activity that roleplaying offers.

### 2.3.2 *Pleasant Enjoyment: Passionate Play*

The first of Seligman’s PERMA items is “positive emotion”, the momentary experiences of feelings such as joy, pleasure, or contentment. A pleasant life, or life of enjoyment, is one that contains a multitude of experiences with positive emotion—these types of experiences are sometimes called *hedonic* happiness (Seligman 2004). In MMO roleplay, two avenues of generating positive emotion have been explored: identity play and textual (or environmental) poaching. These activities utilize symbols that are meaningful to the individual—such as aspects of their own identity, or the parts of the game narrative they enjoy most—in a form of play that is inherently pleasurable and fun, tailored to the aesthetics and interests of each participant. Because of these personally meaningful characteristics, roleplaying is an activity that encourages passion.

Passion can be defined as “a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy” (Vallerand et al 2003, 757). A passion must be significant to a person’s life, something that they find enjoyable and engage in regularly. Engaging in a passionate activity has been associated with positive emotional experiences, feelings of personal improvement, and overall higher measurements of subjective well-being (Vallerand et al 2007; Mageau et al 2009). However, there is an important caveat to the positive effects of passion: it must be *harmonious* passion rather than *obsessive* passion. Vallerand and others distinguish the two types of passion by what “contingencies” are attached to each—harmonious passion has no contingencies and is pursued through personal choice and for personal satisfaction, while obsessive passion becomes overly involved with feelings of

acceptance, self-esteem, or uncontrolled pleasure and is pursued compulsively (2003). Both types of passion can be present in play; Wang and Chu examined the two passions in video game play, for example, and found obsessive passion increased the experience of negative emotions and risk for addiction (2007). To understand how specific types of play such as roleplaying encourage or discourage more harmonious or more obsessive passion, it becomes necessary to understand *why* play is an enjoyable experience.

### 2.3.3 Good Engagement: Immersive Flow

Csikszentmihalyi highlighted the need for more research on the enjoyable nature of play, stating simply that “regardless of whether it decreases anxiety or increases competence, play is fun” (2014, 136). For him, the answer came in the form of flow. Flow describes a state of complete and active engrossment in an activity, “the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement” (136). The key to flow is a feeling of being challenged and of making progress, such that the participant’s awareness is so narrowed in focus that it merges with the actions being taken (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2014). Flow is a pleasurable and desirable state of being because it is intrinsically motivated— it is fun in and of itself, as Csikszentmihalyi argues good play should be (Csikszentmihalyi 2014). Flow aligns conceptually with Seligman’s idea of engagement, and roleplaying in MMOs offers two well-matched vehicles for achieving this form of engagement: immersion and narrative transportation. Both of these states induce a narrowing of focus and a detachment from the “outside” world, and the freedom of action that roleplayers enjoy compared to those who play the game within its usual set of rules seems poised to encourage more harmonious passion than obsessive passion.

However, it seems this may not be universally true. Gary Fine found in his study on tabletop roleplayers that many players experienced negative emotions such as anger, sadness,



and even lingering depression due to events that occurred within their games (2002). To differentiate flow from less positive types of engrossed states, a general model of dissociative experiences is useful. Dissociation describes the underlying mechanics of narrowing attention and loss of awareness of one's environment, and flow may be seen as a type of positive dissociation (Seligman and Kirmayer 2008). Dissociation is a normal part of cognition, manifesting in such activities as daydreaming, focus on a specific task, or "zoning out" while driving or performing routines (Butler, 2006). Other types of dissociation are less pleasurable and even harmful, such as the severe separation between aspects of self seen in Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Lynn posits that dissociation exists on a spectrum of adaptive to maladaptive practices, the effects of which are mediated by factors such as personality, context, and cultural norms (2005). Snodgrass et al found this danger of maladaptive dissociative experiences in their study on *World of Warcraft*; while many players described positive experiences of immersion, "players can become 'addicted' to such experiences of relaxation or satisfying positive stress," leading to overinvolvement and more negative emotional experiences (Snodgrass et al 2011b, 38). What factors, then, influence whether roleplayers are able to reach a state of flow rather than a less pleasant form of engagement? As a social activity, the best place to look for such factors may be the social contexts in which it is taking place.

#### *2.3.4 Meaningful Affiliation: Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment*

In Seligman's theory of authentic happiness, he emphasized the importance of a "meaningful life," which he described as "using your signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are" (2004, 263). Later, he would recognize three distinct factors in such a life: relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, the final components of his PERMA model (Seligman 2012). While each of these contributes individually to a more

nuanced concept of subjective well-being, their intrinsic connection to each other makes them worth discussing together; this is especially true when looking at the social aspects of the MMO roleplaying community. Taken collectively, these traits of meaning through affiliation are sometimes called *eudaimonia* (Seligman 2004). As shown previously, strong social support systems are an important part of MMOs, both for maintaining productive play and for forging interpersonal connections. These online friendships may function differently from those cultivated offline, but they can still offer powerful companionship, support, and intimacy (Amichai-Hamburger et al 2013). For roleplayers in these environments, the creation of a stable affinity space may be additionally significant in fostering the passionate creativity that seems a key aspect of the activity. Tsay-Vogel and Sanders highlighted the similar importance of interpersonal connection in fandom communities, saying that “individuals are seeking an outlet that allows them to make sense of life and the world... but they do so in a way that connects them to others” (2017, 11).

This search for meaning is one that has been seen in offline roleplaying as well. Elizabeth Fein wrote provocatively about the success of LARP (live action roleplaying) groups for youth with autism, where interpersonal relationships flourished as participants engaged with shared stories that reflected their inner struggles in fantastical ways (2015). To explain the positive aspects of this, she pointed to Obeyesekere’s “work of culture,” where “symbolic forms existing on the cultural level get created and recreated through the minds of people” (Obeyesekere 1990, xix). Obeyesekere saw the negotiation of inner conflict as occurring in relation to “public symbols,” units of cultural meaning, that were internalized and made private and meaningful for individuals (2014). This “symbolic healing” suggests that creating a meaningful narrative from symbols the “patient” identifies with allows for healing to take place within that narrative in a

cathartic, fulfilling way (Dow 1986). There are certainly echoes of this process in MMO roleplaying; in particular, the playfulness of identity in special, immersed “places” of communal narrative parallel Victor Turner’s concept of *communitas*, a special liminal space during rituals in which all participants are on equal social ground (2017). In roleplaying, this “healing” through symbols may not be directed, or even specifically sought as the goal—as MMO research earlier showed, identity play online does not often lead to drastic changes. Rather, this understanding of roleplaying highlights the meaning that is generated through the collective creation of a story, using symbols “poached” from a world and story already enjoyable to the individual. Like Turner’s *communitas*, these acts of creation are temporary sessions, liminal spaces in which participants can play at being someone else in a world full of personal meaning—and this liminal nature all keeps such play from spilling out in dangerous ways. In this manner, roleplaying seems to have a socially-enforced temporal safeguard against obsessive passion.

Unfortunately, this safeguard is not foolproof. In her study on conflict within roleplaying communities, Sarah Bowman describes the phenomenon of “bleed,” or “a person’s emotions, relationships, and physical state outside of the game affecting them in the game and visa versa” (2013, 16). While Bowman emphasizes that some amount of connection between a player and their character is only natural, bleed experiences are also at the heart of many tensions and conflicts within a roleplaying community; this was also noted by Williams et al in MMO roleplaying communities specifically (2011). This is one major part of a broader source of conflict: differing goals within the roleplaying community. Accomplishment is a key part of well-being, and the meaningful nature of roleplay previously discussed offers many possible avenues for seeking accomplishment: experimentation, media engagement, skill development, community belonging. In fact, these goals have been shown to be positively associated with less

stressful experiences in MMOs, compared to accomplishment-seeking embedded in gameplay elements like leveling, item collection, or competition (Ryan 2006; Snodgrass et al 2012). There are many ideal aspects of the structure of MMO roleplaying that are poised to generate highly enjoyable and fulfilling experiences, but if these ideals are not universally valued, then there may not be the social support in place to uphold them effectively for all participants. On the other hand, if these ideals *are* considered culturally significant by most of the population, it may be that those roleplayers who have negative or stressful experiences are in such a position because their motivations are at odds with the majority. Understanding how cultural beliefs and values impact the individual and their experiences—and how individuals influence the culture at large themselves—is the domain of cognitive anthropology.

## **2.4 Cognitive Anthropology**

### *2.4.1 Cognitive Anthropology*

Cognitive anthropology is a subfield of cultural anthropology that concerns itself with the relationship between society and thought—as D’Andrade succinctly describes, “how people in social groups conceive of and think about the objects and events which make up their world” (1995, 1). The nature of culture, and especially the nature of how culture and the individual relate, is a matter of considerable discussion in anthropology (De Munck 2000). The anthropologist Ward Goodenough proposed a definition for culture that attempts to highlight the connection between culture and cognition, describing it simply as “whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members... the form of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them” (1957, 167). This notion of mental “models” positions culture as a largely knowledge-based

phenomenon—and also offers a basis for understanding the reification, transmission, and even rejection of various cultural practices and concepts.

Mental models may be thought of as “simplified representations of the world” that allow for rapid processing and decision-making based on observations, shortcuts based on previously learned knowledge (Ross 2004, 168). Sometimes the term model is used interchangeably with the term schema, though the latter is also treated with a slightly more complex gloss—Stauss and Quinn describe them as “collections of elements that work together to process information” (1997, 49). Models and schemas that are collectively shared are called “cultural models” (or sometimes “cultural schemas”), and this concept is significant for research on intergroup variation because it provides a measurable framework for how culture is shared and transmitted between individuals. Understanding how roleplaying communities in MMOs value and disseminate cultural models related to the avenues of happiness discussed prior is possible through a methodology of cognitive anthropology known as cultural consensus.

#### *2.4.2 Culture as Consensus and Ideal Consonance*

The concept of culture as a consensus on shared models is implicit in the theorizing related to cultural models, but treating this consensus as something that can be successfully identified and measured through research is something that Romney, Weller, and Batchelder first pioneered in 1986. Their methodology relied on the use of “the pattern of agreement or consensus among informants to make inferences about their differential competence in knowledge of the shared information pool constituting culture” (1986, 316). Plainly, they proposed that a domain of cultural knowledge could be elicited by measuring how much informants within the culture agreed upon its characteristics. This method has an additional important benefit: it allows for the comparison of informants to the entire matrix of responses,

producing an individual measure of competence in the domain (Ross 2004). In this way, it is possible to use ethnographically-derived questions with informants to find how the ideal avenues of positive experience in MMO roleplay are shared as cultural knowledge.

However, there is more at play here: if the understanding of an “ideal roleplaying experience” is consensual along avenues of increased subjective well-being, what might explain the multitude of negative and distressing experiences reported? Dressler addresses this precise question with his notion of cultural consonance, “the degree to which individuals approximate, in their own lives, the prototypes for belief and behavior encoded in shared cultural models” (2016). Cultural consonance measures the ability of informants to behave in a manner aligned with what they perceive to be dominant cultural models, and Dressler has shown that failure to do so can have very real and negative consequences on health outcomes (2000; 2016; 2017). It would be expected, then, that the most negative experiences would be associated with those roleplayers who fail to play in consonance with the community’s shared model of ideal experience.

In fact, cultural consensus and cultural consonance methodologies have already been used in the study of MMO communities to better understand the nature of these types of subcultural shared models. Snodgrass et al have explored various consonance relationships in MMOs, finding, for example, that players who are less consonant with “real life” cultural models of success have a tendency towards more problematic or addictive playstyles, and that greater consonance with MMO models of success could contribute to play becoming compensatory (2011c; 2013; 2014). This may seem to set the precedent that those more consonant with a cultural model of an ideal roleplaying experience would be *more* poised to experience negative outcomes, but this relationship is not necessarily a direct one; Dengah has shown that high

consonance with subcultural models can correlate to higher measures of subjective well-being even compared to dominant models (2014). There may be a number of moderating or mediating variables at play, necessitating a deeper analysis of how positive and negative outcomes are manifesting for roleplayers in MMOs. Fortunately, Snodgrass and his team have utilized cultural consensus analysis to this end as well, generating culturally salient measurements of both positive and negative experiences tailored to players of MMOs (Snodgrass et al 2017). It is this collection of research, enriched by the theoretical perspectives from gaming studies, media fandom studies, and positive psychology, that will form the backbone of this project's methodology. Cultural consensus offers the means to construct a cultural model of an ideal MMO roleplaying experience and to understand how this model embodies avenues for increased subjective well-being, while cultural consonance provides a measure of "fit" to this model that can be assessed against the actual observed benefit or detriment of such avenues.

## CHAPTER 3: SETTING AND METHODS

### 3.1 Setting and Participants

As an international MMORPG, *Final Fantasy XIV* has several dozen servers that host identical versions of the game world, spread across the globe in regional datacenters. Unlike *World of Warcraft* and some other MMOs, FFXIV does not have officially sanctioned roleplaying servers; the roleplaying and non-roleplaying populations mingle in the same worlds. However, preliminary exploratory research into online communities dedicated to roleplaying in FFXIV revealed that a small number of servers have been communally and unofficially designated as roleplaying servers, and new or potential roleplayers are often directed by word of mouth to one of these in an effort to cultivate more centralized communities for the activity in-game. In the North American datacenter, the server Balmung is considered the most populous roleplaying community; unfortunately, Balmung is a “legacy server,” a remnant from the first iteration of FFXIV, and its massive population size has it most often closed off to new players. Thus, the second-largest unofficial roleplaying server in the NA datacenter, Mateus, was designated as the fieldsite for this research. Mateus itself is considered a populous and active server, and its subcultural reputation as a hotbed for roleplaying activity made it the ideal choice.

This project began with a preliminary period of familiarization with *Final Fantasy XIV* and its style of play. I spent several months, from August of 2018 to November of 2018, engaged in gameplay activities in FFXIV such as questing, leveling, and participating in group dungeons, in an effort to become familiar with the game’s mechanics, controls, and overall culture. Because roleplaying is an interaction with the game’s narrative and world, it was determined that completing the game’s primary storyline (collectively the “main scenario quests”, or MSQs)



would serve as an acceptable base of knowledge to work from. The MSQs function as a tour not only through the virtual landscape of Eorzea but also through the social and political landscape of its three main city-states: the coastal Limsa Lominsa, the woodlands of Gridania, and the desert jewel Ul'dah. The player character takes on the role of the Warrior of Light, a hero figure empowered by the primordial Mothercrystal to unite the city-states and fend off an invasion from the foreign Garlean Empire. This story is largely completed alone, guided by NPCs (non-player characters) and cinematic cutscenes, but throughout the tale are major peaks of action and conflict that necessitate the player teaming up with other players in order to complete a dungeon—or a “duty”, as they are called in FFXIV. It is this shared experience amongst all players that forms the backdrop for the social landscape of FFXIV and informs the narrative of the persistent world of Eorzea.

Throughout this period of exploratory play, roleplaying was encountered sporadically in the field and observed to occur in two primary contexts: “walk-up” roleplay initiated spontaneously between characters in the game world, and planned roleplaying events organized by free companies (the equivalent of “guilds” in other MMOs, sometimes abbreviated to FCs). Free companies sometimes advertise for new members using the in-game text chat, but a remarkable amount of communication regarding roleplaying in the game takes place in avenues outside of the game. The Hydaelyn Roleplayers Coalition is a forum dedicated to FFXIV RP discussion, and it was through this website that I learned of two Discord (a text, voice, and video chat program) servers specifically dedicated to RP on Mateus. These dedicated channels of communication allowed for an easier experience engaging the roleplaying community directly about the project and its goals, and several free company leaders reached out to generously offer temporary membership in their groups. Most fieldwork would take place within these three free

companies, supplemented by time spent in relevant Discord communities and continued explorations of the game world.

The primary fieldwork period lasted from early December of 2018 through April of 2019, with sporadic events attended through May and August as well. This fieldwork was undertaken with a mixed methods approach to data collection and analyzation, recognizing both qualitative and quantitative data as important components of social research. In service of this, a holistic methodology was used that included three core ethnographic techniques: participant observation, semistructured interviewing, and the distribution of a field survey.

### **3.2 Participant Observation**

In their handbook for virtual worlds research methods, Boellstorff and his coauthors describe participant observation as “embodied emplacement of the researching self in a fieldsite as a consequential social actor” (2012, 65). More plainly, participant observation is the primary methodology for gathering qualitative data in ethnographic fieldwork, involving both participation in and observation of activities within the chosen fieldsite. Positioning the researcher to be a present and active participant in the goings-on of a community fosters a richer understanding of its practices and fosters connections with its denizens. In this project, participant observation took place across several interconnected fieldsites; while unusual by classic ethnographic standards, the nature of virtual worlds and online communication allows for multimodal activity to occur within the same population with ease (2012). In some situations the emphasis was on observation, such as in watching interactions play out between roleplayers; in others, I participated directly in roleplaying activities and conversations.

Some of this participant observation took the form of self-guided interactions with roleplayers in the game world. The majority, however, took place in the context of free companies. As mentioned previously, several free companies were willing to accommodate my presence as a researcher, and ultimately I decided to participate in three different FCs. The reasoning behind this spread was as follows: each free company had a different population size, each hosted events on different days of the week, and each had its own unique thematic focus. This variety would work to ensure regular intervals of fieldwork and a broader look at different roleplaying experiences. It would also come to have the additional benefit of fieldsite security, as two of the three transitioned out of roleplaying within the scope of the fieldwork period. The three FCs were Empyreal Cavalcade (EC), Rhythmus Troupe (RT), and Azure Amoenus (AA).

Empyreal Cavalcade was the most intimate, its story one of a small group of travelers making their way across Eorzea for knowledge, and this quest played out once a week or so in a roleplaying session lasting a few hours; EC would also be the first to end its tale, eventually transitioning out of its roleplaying focus and into a simple group of friends coordinating gameplay together. Rhythmus Troupe was slightly larger with roughly two dozen members and fashioned itself as a collective of performing artists, putting on shows for the community roughly twice a month. RT would operate under this narrative for several months before becoming a linkshell— a specialized in-game chat network. As a linkshell, the FC no longer planned events or maintained a cohesive group story, but rather functioned as a channel of communication for organizing sporadic performances as the leaders' busy schedules allowed. The final free company, Azure Amoenus, proved to be the most resilient over time, hosting events two to three times per week throughout the period of fieldwork and beyond. AA billed itself as a mercenary group of morally gray alignment, where characters of all types and talents could find work and

support. It was also the largest of the three with around thirty to forty members on average, although there was a core population of around ten consistently active roleplayers who attended most events. There was little overlap in the populations of these FCs, and as such, each represented its own unique subset of the roleplaying community on Mateus.

In FFXIV, membership in a free company is restricted per character; thus, I created three different characters, one for each free company. This also allowed me to experiment with different types of characters, both in appearance and in personality. Ahzi'a was a male Miquo'te, a species of cat-eared humanoids, who joined EC in search of a purpose. Orbei was a female Au Ra, a dragon-like nomad, who took on a job with RT as a bodyguard for performers in an effort to escape her troubled life of crime. Lolomo was a female Lalafell, a diminutive humanoid bard, whose eternal wandering found her seeking temporary employ with AA. Each of these characters would participate in the roleplaying sessions organized by their respective free companies, and I took fieldnotes during these activities to document my observations, experiences, and feelings. These fieldnotes took the initial form of written jottings, "quickly rendered scribbles about actions and dialogue," that were later expanded into more detailed typed fieldnotes (Emerson et al 1995, 29). I supplemented these written notes with screen captures from the game as well, documenting both the text being rendered in the in-game chat and the visual positioning and movements of the avatars in the world throughout each scene. In addition to the fieldwork taking place within the game, I also spent time in each free company's dedicated Discord server, as well as the two general Mateus RP Discord servers, largely in an observational role in order to understand how the activities in FFXIV integrated with these external means of communication. In all, I estimate approximately 100 hours spent in active fieldwork across these different fieldsites.

### 3.3 Semistructured Interviews

Participant observation provided a rich experiential perspective on the roleplaying community in FFXIV, and the open-ended nature of this methodology allowed for an exploratory approach in the early stages of fieldwork. While this work was guided in part by the literature presented prior, in order to more directly collect data relevant to the project's hypotheses, a methodology of elicitation was necessary. Elicitation—or interviewing—involves prompting informants for specific types of information (Bernard et al 2016). Interviews can take multiple forms, from unstructured interviews without an established pattern of elicitation to structured interviews with a rigid protocol of prewritten questions. Nested in the middle ground of these two approaches is the semistructured interview. Semistructured interviews are flexible; while they rely on an interview protocol like those utilized by structured techniques, the interviewer can “modify the order and details of how topics are covered” (2016, 76). This fluidity means that the experience of interviewing can be tailored to specific informants—a person with a lot to say about one topic can be probed for further details, while another person with sparser responses to the same topic can be moved to the next. The interviews for this project were all semistructured, employing an interview protocol that was developed from the theory-driven interests of the literature in combination with the fieldnotes taken during participant observation. Questions centered around topics such as the nature of immersion, the relationship between player and character, the cultural practices and beliefs of the community, and mental health experiences in relation to roleplay.

In addition to this semistructured format, the protocol was tailored to create a “person-centered interview” experience. Person-centered interviewing is a methodology that uses “a combination of informant- and respondent-directed questions and probes” (Levy and Hollan

1998, 317). Interviewees can be framed as both informants of their culture and respondents of their personal experiences, and in person-centered interviewing, some questions are phrased to appeal to one of these characteristics (“Why do people roleplay?”) and some to the other (“Why do *you* roleplay?”). This variation ensures that interviewees are being treated as people with unique experiences and opinions rather than mere vessels of cultural information; too, it reveals where there may be discrepancies between what the interviewee perceives as the cultural understanding of a topic and their own personal understanding of or experience with the same topic. Finally, in addition to these person-centered, ethnographically-informed protocol questions, one question was included to elicit a list of characteristics that the interviewee associated with an “ideal roleplaying experience”. This was an unbounded free listing exercise, wherein the informant could list off as many traits as they wished to encapsulate what an ideal experience meant for them (Bernard and Gravlee 2014). These items would be compiled across interviews, and the ten most salient items would later be used in the field survey discussed in the next section (3.4).

Informants for these interviews were selected from the same fieldsites explored in participant observation, with some limitations; by the time of recruitment, both EC and RT had ceased regular roleplaying activities, limiting the number of active members in both the free companies and their respective Discord chats. Informants were chosen largely through convenience sampling, with some key figures in the communities approached directly (such as several FC leaders and active community members) and others volunteering in response to a message distributed in the RT, AA, and general Mateus RP Discord servers. These interviews were conducted entirely online, as none of the participants were within close geographic proximity. Each informant was given the option of interviewing over text chat or voice chat—in

both cases, the program of choice was Discord, as it offers both such capabilities and enjoys widespread use amongst the FFXIV roleplaying population. Six informants requested text-based interviews, which lasted two to three hours on average, while four opted for audio interviews that ran comparatively shorter at an hour average. The ages of these interviewees ranged from 19 to 32, and there was a skew towards male informants with seven males and three females. This group represented a broad range of experiences in the roleplaying community, from FC leaders to casual walk-up roleplayers. After sending each informant a cover letter explaining the project's goals and the interview procedure and obtaining either text or verbal consent, the interviews were recorded using OBS Studio. The interviews were transcribed using StartStop transcription software. These transcriptions were then imported into the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA for a theme analysis, in which themes—meaningful items or patterns of cultural significance—are “coded” onto selections of text in order to track their appearance and intersections in the data (Kuckartz 2007). Because this project was not focused on theme analysis, this process served to supplement the theory-guided or ethnographically emergent perspectives of the research rather than to generate new theories through analysis of the coded themes—that is, the coding utilized a priori themes relevant to the research interests (such as “immersion,” “identity play,” or “connection”). MAXQDA was also used to organize the responses to the “ideal roleplaying experience” free list question, so that salient items could be selected for inclusion in the field survey as part of a cultural consensus analysis.

### **3.4 Field Survey and Cultural Consensus/Consonance Analysis**

The field survey was designed based on the qualitative data gathered during participant observation and semistructured interviews, allowing these findings to direct the wording and type of questions included. For comparative purposes, the survey was designed such that both

roleplayers and non-roleplayers could complete it; both groups would receive the same questions about gaming motivations, mental health assessments, and demographic information. The roleplayers, however, would receive additional questions pertaining to their relationship with their characters, their positive and negative experiences, and their assessment of the cultural consensus items.

Nick Yee's 12-item gaming motivations scale was used to assess the distribution of achievement, immersion, and social motivations of play between roleplayers and non-roleplayers (2012). Mental health assessments included the mental health continuum short form (MHC-SF) for measuring emotional, psychological, and social well-being, and a 3-item version of the UCLA loneliness scale (Lamer et al 2011; Hughes et al 2004). To measure the positive and negative experiences of roleplayers, 10 questions from each category were selected from Snodgrass et al's 42-item scale for gaming involvement (2017). The selection of these items was informed by the theme analysis carried out on the interview transcripts as well as emergent themes from fieldnotes, selecting items that correlated with frequent themes in the qualitative data to ensure a culturally meaningful select despite the shortened scale. These items were also altered in wording slightly to better apply to roleplaying experiences specifically. The ethnographically-derived cultural consensus items were presented as a 5-point Likert scale, asking respondents to assess their importance to the perceived community ideal experience. In addition, these same items were presented for the respondent to rate against their own personal experiences so that a measure of cultural consonance could be derived.

This survey was distributed through both general Mateus RP Discords and the Hydaelyn Roleplayers Coalition, where the majority of roleplayer respondents were collected; it was also shared through the FFXIV Reddit and its associated Discord in an attempt to gather the



perspectives of non-roleplayers for comparative purposes. The survey garnered 142 valid responses total, with 80 non-roleplayers and 62 roleplayers represented. This data was exported into an Excel file and imported into the software Stata for statistical analysis. Cross tabulation and t-tests were conducted to report descriptive statistics and comparative differences between the roleplaying and non-roleplaying communities (StataCorp 2007). These tools provide frequency distributions for categorical variables as well as the means and standard deviations for continuous variables. Cultural consensus analysis was conducted using UCINET, which generates a correlation matrix between respondents to assess intergroup agreement on the items as well as individual “competence” with the group understanding of those items (Borgatti et al 2002; Romney et al 1986). Consonance was measured by taking the most highly rated consensus items and scaling their equivalents in the individual assessments, creating an average score of “fit” to the perceived importance of the consensus items (Dressler 2005). Finally, pairwise correlation analysis and linear regression were used to explore associations between various survey items and either positive or negative experiences in roleplaying, in order to find which variables were most associated with the encouragement or discouragement of “flourishing” experiences in RP. The results of these statistical analyses are reported in tandem with qualitative findings in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Portrait of a Roleplayer

In describing roleplaying as an activity, most respondents compared it to acting, recognizing the character as being a distinctly separate persona from the player. Comparisons to improv theatre in particular were prevalent—although there were major differences reported as well, largely related to the persistent nature of one's character even outside of the roleplaying scenes:

Usually I explain it as acting, in a way. I say that you're acting out a story but you get to choose your character, and you know how your character's gonna react. (R7)

I would say it's like—it's like performing, it's like doing your own little theatre in front of everyone else, except it's a completely improv theatre. But you get to know your character, you get to know what your character is, what their background is, who she or he or it or they are, and you get to build off of that. And then get to basically shove your character in with a bunch of other people that have done the same thing and see what happens. (R8)

"Whose Line is it Anyway, but you're your own host and audience, and you're allowed some time to think before you act." [...] Being at a keyboard rather on stage means you don't have the pressure to do something right now, right away. It's more relaxed, and at the same time it also gives you the ability to put more nuance and thought into your improv. I could never do improv on an actual stage. It would be too stressful for me, I think, but I'm perfectly happy with some Whose Line is it Anyway behind my keyboard. (R1)

I'd say it's a way of expressing creativity through writing with others. That you 'play' as a character, as if you were acting, and respond and react as that character to what another roleplayer's character does or says. (R4)

Others compared it to creative writing and more conventional types of storytelling, emphasizing how the activity builds up a larger narrative for the characters involved:

I'd say storytelling. You take an established world and setting, create a character within it, and then tell stories collaboratively with other people. (R6)

Role-playing for me is simply immersing yourself in a world or a story far from reality. A way of interact[ing] with other creative individuals in unique ways. A way of letting your imagination loose alongside others. (R5)

This acting-writing dichotomy is hardly a dichotomy in practice; rather, roleplaying itself seems to blend aspects of both. The unpredictable and often spontaneous events that occur within RP scenes requires participants to act on their feet—although, as R1 points out, the nature of online roleplay in particular mitigates some of the less pleasant pressures of acting on a physical stage without a script. At the same time, echoing the persistent nature of the virtual world they inhabit, the narratives of the characters have a permanence lasting far beyond the contents of any particular “scene”. A fight with one character might sully another character’s mood during their next interaction with an entirely different person; a betrayal suffered during a scene performed weeks ago may form the crux of a revenge plot that consumes the character’s narrative entirely for weeks to come. As one respondent points out, roleplaying is uniquely defined by this interaction-driven storytelling:

I believe what sets roleplay firmly apart from 'other' kinds of textual writing would be how it is rooted in being a social activity. You write with or for others for the purpose of them responding to your text with their own text. (R3)

The importance of this social aspect will be explored further in a later section (4.4). The act of roleplaying in FFXIV utilizes a distinct set of practices to create and perform in these “scenes”—a word that describes any unique instance of character interaction. Colloquially, actions and words that are attributed to the character are said to be IC (in-character) while those of the player are OOC (out-of-character). This becomes an important distinction during scenes, as there are often both IC and OOC forms of communication occurring simultaneously.

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Kho      was especially impressed by this dance, and seemed to pay close attention to Eva  hips.
Alex    : "You fella's do this often? My boss runs a caravan with some musically abled people.. Ya'll take extra's
on or is it yer own people only?"
Ulric   Settled back into his seat, offering Ro      a nod before raising a finger to his lips. The midnight wolf
settled onto the floor in a content heap once more.
Eva     : the melody continued, the loving call of the bard's voice however brought about a pleading nature in her
words, "♪♪ Listen, do you hear me! Listen, do you feel it? Listen, I'm calling you! Listen, you do know me? Listen, swing
and throw me! Listen, I'm calling you! ♪♪" By time the last word had left her lips, the music's mood changed somber
and quiet. The stage's main light would go dark as a few stray glimmers of aether began to permeate in the air.
[FC]<Eva      > NOW OR
[FC]<Or      > As low as it goes.
Eva     : as the notes would brought to life dimly lit wisps, one could swear whispers and murmurs were coming
from them. Such wonderment would be confirmed when ethereal like singing came from seemingly nowhere while the
bard on stage played her instrument. The tone, completely unlike the beginning of the song. "♪♪ You hardly know...you
hardly know...you hardly know...you hardly know," then a clear distinct voice could came differently, "Let's make them
scream... ♪♪"
Alex    looks back at the show and claps briefly.
Sah     : "...I'm gonna need to ask An      to explain all of this to me afterwards."
[FC]<Al      > we should hire somone for stage effects
[FC]<Miz     > good idea
Or      : "Every couple of weeks! We've been sticking to ourselves lately, but I wouldn't be opposed to the idea of
having some others on. Takes a lot of stress off of us every once in awhile."

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Figure 2: RP scene demonstrating multiple, simultaneous levels of communication

The Rythmus Troupe FC was focused on characters who were performers themselves, often dancers or singers, and they put on shows open to the community roughly twice a month. Organizing and promoting the events took substantial work, but the events themselves were also busy affairs; in order to orchestrate an enjoyable show, participants made use of the multiple types of in-game communication available to them. Figure 2 showcases part of one of these performances. While the audience chats amongst themselves using the /emote or /say commands, the members of the FC make use of the FC channel (unseen to all those who are not members) to coordinate dramatic effects, like the dimming of lights or the casting of spells for dazzling displays during special points in the song. The performance itself (pre-written, so as to better control its pacing) is performed using the /yell command, which allows it to be “heard” (in bright yellow font) across the entire area, effectively cutting through the “din” of simultaneous RP. This use of game features for RP purposes is one trait that sets roleplayers apart from the general gaming populace, although it is not the only thing.

Table 1: Descriptive Survey Statistics and Comparisons Between Groups

Variable	Total Sample	Roleplayer	Non-Roleplayer	P-value
N	142	62	80	
Gender				0.118
Male	77 (54.23%)	30 (48.39%)	47 (58.75%)	
Female	48 (33.8%)	22 (35.48%)	26 (32.50%)	
Other	10 (7.04%)	4 (6.45%)	6 (7.50%)	
Prefer not to say	7 (4.93%)	6 (9.68%)	1 (1.25%)	
Age, mean (SD)	26.96 (6.35)	28.64 (7.65)	25.66 (4.77)	0.0025
Server region				
NA	112 (78.87%)	61 (98.39%)	51 (63.75%)	
EU	27 (19.01%)	1 (1.61%)	26 (32.50%)	
JP	2 (1.41%)	0 (0%)	2 (2.5%)	
Hrs in FFXIV/wk, mean (SD)	26.17 (19.9)	25.64 (18.1)	26.58 (21.31)	0.39
Motivation scales, mean (SD)				
Achievement	3.22 (0.79)	2.96 (0.75)	3.42 (0.78)	0.0003
Social	3.87 (0.88)	4.17 (0.68)	3.6 (0.94)	0.0001
Immersion	3.99 (0.88)	4.47 (0.52)	3.61 (0.92)	0
Use of Voice Chat	83 (58.45%)	29 (46.77%)	54 (67.5%)	0.013

Survey results allowed for some comparisons to be made between the roleplaying community (N=62) and the general game population (N=80). Table 1 shows comparative statistics for both groups with p-values reported in the rightmost column. Given the identity-oriented construction of roleplaying characters, it is perhaps surprising that the gender distribution between the two groups is not statistically significant. Roleplayers tended to be slightly older on average, and reported mostly from NA region servers, with Mateus housing 66.13% of roleplaying respondents. There was little difference in the average hours each group spent in the game per week, suggesting that RP is not introducing additional playtime but is instead being used as a unique style of play in and of itself. Roleplayers experienced a slightly lower tendency toward achievement-oriented motivations and a significantly higher tendency towards immersion, supporting the hypothesis that roleplayers would prefer immersion-seeking actions in the game. Interestingly, roleplayers also ranked higher in social motivations as well.

Compared to the general game populations, roleplayers were more likely to be non-heterosexual (61.29% of roleplayers compared to 32.5% of non-roleplayers,  $p = 0.002$ ), which supports similar findings by Williams et al (2011). However, their finding of higher ethnic minority representation in the roleplaying community was not replicated here; in fact, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups in any demographic measure except for the self-reported socioeconomic ranking, wherein roleplayers tended to fall lower on the 10-point SES scale (5.46 compared to 5,  $p = 0.005$ ). Williams et al also found that *EverQuest II* roleplayers tended to use voice chat less than average gamers, which appeared to be true in FFXIV as well; only 46.77% of roleplayers reported using voice chat, compared to 67.5% of non-roleplayers ( $p = 0.013$ ). In contrast, roleplayers were also found to more often use text chat programs outside of the game itself, with 96.77% of roleplayers utilizing Discord or related programs (compared to 87.5%,  $p = 0.049$ ). This is aligned with my experiences in the field, where all three free companies used Discord to chat outside of the game, plan, and even do roleplaying related to their in-game characters; Discord also played host to several large Mateus-specific servers, where RPer could meet each other and plan character interactions for the future. The heavy lean on external text chat was noted by respondents as well:

Discord is kind of how the community stays afloat and together, because you go, “you know, I’m not going to know what’s going on Friday night unless I go into a Discord and look at the event list.” [...] It’s hard in-game to advertise like that in a way that everyone can see it, so it’s much easier to do that. (R7)

Ah, yeah, a lot of the planning for RP events and such happen in Discord, because it’s just an easier way to reach a broader audience. Because they don’t have to be logged into that character to see what’s going on, like if somebody can’t make it to an event they can also RP in Discord, in the RP channels. [...] It’s just an easier way to reach out to people and talk to more people who are interested in the same thing. (R9)

Discord functioned to centralize the roleplaying community in Mateus, providing a space for roleplayers to meet and talk with other roleplayers without having to log into the game; it

also allowed for players to advertise their FCs and organized events to the community and make requests for specific types of roleplay, such as a romance or an apprenticeship.

The assessment of mental health and happiness consisted of several measures, reported in Table 2 below. In order to measure overall subjective well-being as well as eudaimonic and hedonic happiness, the MHC-SF was assessed in three ways: the full 14-item scale of overall well-being; the emotional (hedonic), social, and psychological components assessed individually; and the social and psychological components combined into an 11-item approximation for “eudaimonia”. All scales showed an acceptable level of internal consistency with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of 0.72 or higher. On all measures of subjective well-being, roleplayers did not show significantly different averages from non-roleplayers; this may support roleplaying having no positive or negative net effect on wellbeing, but it could also indicate that roleplaying is serving a function equivalent to playing the game in its relationship to well-being. Roleplayers were also not significantly more lonely than non-roleplayers.

Table 2: Descriptive Survey Statistics and Comparisons Between Groups (Mental Health)

Variable	Total Sample	Roleplayer	Non-Roleplayer	p-value
N	142	62	80	
SWB-14, mean (SD)	3.6 (1.08)	3.54 (1.12)	3.65 (1.05)	0.2659
SWB-11, mean (SD)	3.48 (1.1)	3.43 (1.15)	3.52 (1.06)	0.3039
SWB-5 (social), mean (SD)	3.12 (1.1)	3.03 (1.14)	3.18 (1.07)	0.194
SWB-6 (psych), mean (SD)	3.79 (1.26)	3.76 (1.29)	3.8 (1.24)	0.4244
SWB-3 (hedonia), mean (SD)	4.05 (1.27)	3.95 (1.29)	4.13 (1.26)	0.1989
Loneliness, mean (SD)	1.96 (0.67)	2.01 (0.66)	1.93 (0.67)	0.2352
Mental health self-report	2.08 (1.27)	2.32 (1.21)	1.89 (1.29)	0.0209

This is not to suggest that no relationship exists between mental health and roleplaying. Survey respondents were asked to list any mental health conditions they had experienced, and roleplayers were found to be more likely to report multiple comorbid conditions (2.32 average

compared to 1.89 average reported conditions). The topic of mental health was also one that came up frequently in interviews, especially in relation to its use as an escape from negative and stressful feelings in life:

I used to roleplay on forums originally, as a way to distract myself from real life. [...] I had a difficult home life and upbringing, there was a lot of mental abuse I went through. Roleplaying was my way to escape from that for a little while. (R4)

Personally I would say it's kind of... like a release for me, for my anxiety and things, because I will get very bogged down in details about my life and just everything and it's helpful to put my mind somewhere else for a while and to kind of look at thing in someone else's perspective. (R7)

This relationship between mental health and the various aspects of roleplaying will be explored in detail throughout the rest of this chapter. Table 3 reports statistics about the roleplaying community and their experiences. Roleplayers spent an average of 10.19 hours roleplaying every week—but as the table shows, this average encompassed a wide range of variation. The average respondent also considered themselves on the higher end of involvement in roleplay.

Table 3: Descriptive Survey Statistics for Roleplayer Experiences

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Hours RPing/wk	10.19	8.96	0.75	50
RP Intensity	7.44	2.32	1	10
Positive RP Experience scale	3.98	0.65	1.2	5
Negative RP Experience scale	2.26	0.79	1	4.9
Consonance	3.80	0.76	1.25	5

The positive and negative experience scales had strong Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.82 and 0.84 respectively, indicating good reliability of measurement. In general, the experience of roleplaying in FFXIV was a strongly positive one, although negative experiences were not unrepresented. Recalling the theoretical framework of play, flow, and sociality as primary avenues towards happiness in roleplaying, the rest of this chapter details how the activity works



to encourage these positive experiences—and how each avenue relates to negative experiences as well.

#### **4.2 The Bleeding Knife’s Edge: Play and its Perils**

The concept of identity play is predicated on its playfulness; it calls for a safe place to explore different aspects of identity without the expectation that those aspects are meant to be retained after play concludes (Ibarra and Petriglieri 2010). While the IC/OOC division in RP seems to encourage exactly this sort of temporary play, all interviewees described some type of connection between their identity and their character’s identity—the concept of “putting part of yourself into every character” was oft repeated:

I think the relationship between the player and the character ultimately depends on the player's motivation for roleplaying. Some are self-inserters, like I mentioned earlier. They are wanting to be something different and exciting and their character becomes a way for them to escape and become what they wish they were. Some are completely detached from their characters and treat them like plot fodder. I might be somewhere in the middle, because I do put a little bit of myself into my characters and I care about them, but I don't get so way confused that I forget it's fiction or start taking in character events personally. (R2)

Some people I believe prefer being someone completely new. Or some people prefer having their character being a representation of themselves in whatever fantasy setting they may find themselves into. However I do believe that no matter your character will always be, to some extent, an avatar of yourself. (R5)

I think for a lot of people their characters are really important to them. For me, I often refer to them as my 'children'. I feel happy when something good happens to them, and sad when something upsets them. It's a close 'bond', really. (R4)

I think it's a combination of something like an acting role, but also a personal extension of yourself. Even people who try to make their characters as unlike them as possible end up putting a bit of themselves in there, I believe, as there's still that desire you're exploring through it; what would happen if I were someone else. (R6)

The “play” aspect of roleplaying that was most often credited for its pleasurable nature, but the “role” aspect was not without its importance too. Respondent 3 noted that the

IC/OOC divide was not so black and white, as the investment of personal characteristics into a character created an important emotional bond with that character:

To others I do like saying I have a clear distinct separation between myself and the characters I create, but most of the characters I create I have noticed are always a part of a trait, a characteristic that I myself wish I either had or didn't have. [...] These are characters whose fundament is based upon my own emotions and thoughts and that I've poured countless hours into developing, and to see these characters grow and evolve alongside you is a truly personal and lovely feeling. (R3)

The exact technique of construction of a character was something that varied amongst participants. For some, their characters were very much like themselves, often with idealized or desired characteristics; for others, it was the traits most distant from their own experiences that were most appealing to experiment with:

The kind of characters I gravitate towards are your classical heroes, and that reflects upon my own interests growing up. Things like the knights of Charlemagne, King Arthur, and heroes in fiction like Lord of the Rings, Star Wars... I look for the character who's... I prefer the character who's the good guy, the character who has a neutral story arc. [...] The specific kind of characters I enjoy most are quote-unquote "paladins," the best of the good guys, the guy with unyielding ethics and morals who does what's right no matter how hard it is. (R10)

I put parts of myself in this character, but I also put things that, you know, maybe I'm too scared to explore in real life, you know. Like I'm very much a goody two-shoes, I don't like to break any rules, but my characters will break rules. So I get to experience those things in a safe environment. (R7)

This experimentation was not limited to personality traits; physical characteristics formed the building blocks of identity as well, customized through FFXIV's character creation tools. For Respondent 9, his desire to connect emotionally to his characters led him to play mostly female characters, as the associated mannerisms and behaviors better matched his perception of himself:

Most of the time I tend to make female characters because I think I play them a lot better than male characters. Because I mean, in my mind at least I'm not the most masculine guy, I don't go around like "oh I'm buff, I'm a dude". I'm emotional and reserved and it—I just think it fits like how I tend to think more, it's easier for me to play out. (R9)

While the playful nature of roleplay allowed for a wealth of experiences within the game, there were also times where the ability to be someone different acted as an expression of identities that players felt they wished to embody or experience but could not express “in real life”. This was especially true of sexuality, which several respondents highlighted as something they used as a supplement to or extension of their own lived experiences:

I was a quirky, weird kid who had a lack of any healthy friendships back in school, as well as that I found out in an early age that I am homosexual. Other settings and worlds became escapism for me, where I was free to be 'who I want' without feeling the repercussions or judgment for in the real world. From my own observation with RPing communities, this is a story I see shared more often than not. (R3)

Basically, growing up in a religious household, it gave me a safe place to explore my same sex attraction, and to play out what it might be like to have a relationship like that. Once I noticed myself doing that in most games, I realized I probably wasn't straight. (R6)

I guess with being gay, with Ota, it ends up being more of like, an exploratory into if I did have a gay relationship, how would that be, how would that... you know, because I've never actually been with a man and such, so it's an interesting thing. And like even with Lily being a lesbian, she ends up being something that I could—that I feel I could never be, because I wouldn't identify as female personally, for me, but as someone that could never experience that. (R8)

Roleplayers clearly created their characters with a diverse set of interests and goals in mind, but some loose patterns can be seen through the survey results. Survey respondents were asked to assess how strongly they preferred a character to be similar to them across multiple characteristics, with the results reported in Graph 1. Appearance-oriented items tended towards lower agreement, while more subjective characteristics, such as personality, gender, and sexuality leaned slightly more towards agreement. Personality in particular shows a preference for characters *somewhat* similar, resonating with the concept of some baseline level of similarity existing for most roleplayers. Of note too is the high number of responses indicating no

preference one way or the other; indicating an overall flexibility in character creation when it comes to specific traits.

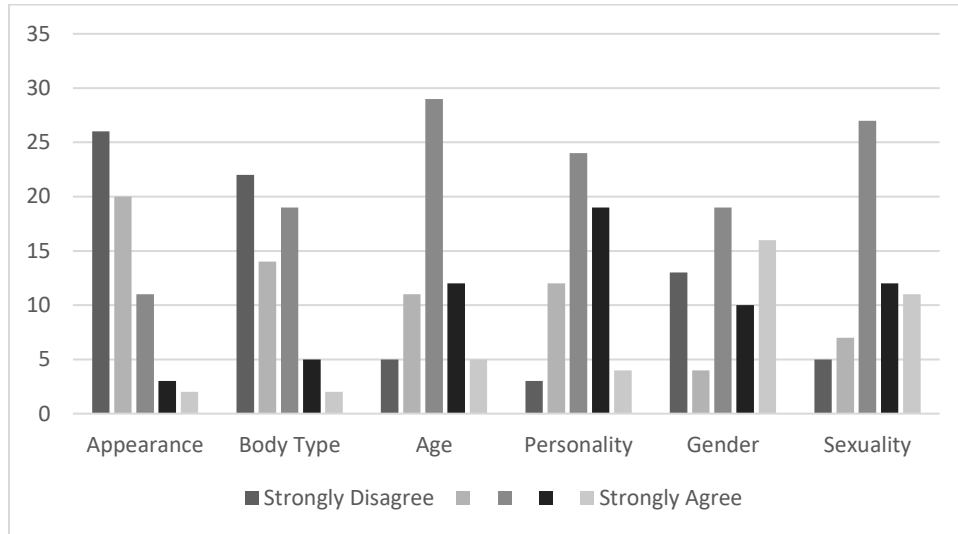


Figure 3: Character Similarity Preference Assessment Results

This core connection with the character is extremely important, as it is this connection that allows roleplayers to experience the positive emotions of their play. Roleplayers frequently talked about their excitement for the events their character got caught up in, and during scenes the OOC channels of communication would be sporadically filled with energetic commentary and reactions from players as things played out between characters. In Seligman’s theory of Flourishing, this would seem to align with the “positive emotions” of happiness, the momentary but pleasurable experiences of good feelings (2012). Respondent 9 noted the power of this emotional investment and its ability to be shared with others:

It’s like a separate storyline for the game, and when you get really invested in a drawn-out story like that, and when you start getting emotional and stuff happens to your character... like I’ve had people cry over things that I have happen to my characters sometimes, and it’s just a really nice feeling, knowing that people are as invested into my character as I am (R9)

Other respondents, however, recognized a certain amount of danger to this connection. Like walking the edge of a knife, the powerful emotions evoked through roleplaying could prove overwhelming in less positive ways:

Your character is not you, but you need to understand the character to know what they would do in the situation. This is what makes roleplaying not for everyone. It can be a very fine line to walk. I've heard of people who needed to step away from roleplaying for weeks on end because something bad happened to their character and it simply emotionally wrecked the player for a while. (R1)

Respondent 8 recounted an experience in which his character confronted his boyfriend about a dangerous mission, instigating an emotionally-charged scene that impacted him, as the player, more than he had anticipated:

I ended up having a sort of fight between my character and another person's character, and like, I knew that even going in, my character wasn't going to the argument. But my character didn't know that, Ota didn't know that, so he went on by himself, and he did it anyway. [...] So he ended up getting frustrated at the other character and in that moment, and in that agency, ended up... kind of like, feeling for myself, but I felt like—that I felt, you know, kind of annoyed and mad and such. So it's an interesting thing where you end up feeling the emotion of the character. (R8)

This was not an unknown phenomenon to roleplayers. In fact, Bowman et al addressed this very issue in their research on social conflict in roleplaying communities. Known as “bleed,” or sometimes specifically as “character bleed,” this struggle to maintain a clear boundary between a character's emotions and their player's emotions was cited by Bowman and others as a major source of interpersonal conflict in roleplaying communities on the whole (2013).

Respondents in FFXIV reported the same:

One thing though that is imperative that any good roleplayer will tell you is to maintain a divide between out-of-character (OoC) and in-character (IC). Too many people blur that line. The mark of a bad/inexperienced roleplayer is when they become personally offended by something one character says to their own. When actors go on a stage they don't get upset when the other person insults them. That's just the script. In this case though there is no script, so people can commonly try and attribute a character's bad

behavior to the player which is largely the reason for drama to happen within RP communities. (R1)

The ability to successfully separate player from character while maintaining the emotional connection necessary to enjoy the activity was treated as a skill that most people had to develop over time. Consistently this struggle was pinned on inexperience, age, or preexisting mental health conditions. Even when describing their own experiences, several respondents admitted to having difficulty maintaining the balance when they first began to participate in roleplaying:

I have had that happen. When I first started roleplaying my main girl character I very much equated her to myself, and that's why when my friend said how much she hated her, it sounded like she was saying she hated me. This character was—I wanted to be like her. I wasn't her, but I wanted to be like her, and so it hurt me emotionally. (R7)

When I was younger, I had a bad tendency to claim 'ownership' of the characters to such a degree where any harm done to them was a direct harm against me, and I would be a highly toxic person to RP with. More often than not back then, my personal investment into these stories were also so personal to the point where I would be genuinely hurt, depressed and angry if my character was not received as well as I wanted it to be. Because of my toxic relationship with my own creations, I had to take a big step back and re-evaluate what RPing meant for me. (R3)

Despite the “magic circle” nature of roleplay, the identity-focused type of play occurring within that special “space” makes it susceptible to maladaptive forms of emotional investment. Play is fun, and fun is a pleasurable experience, but the highly personal nature of roleplaying means that the same unpredictability that elicits such excitement from its participants can also elicit incredible distress when characters face conflict, harm, and unfortunate circumstance. Even with this risk widely recognized and experienced, all those interviewed were confident in saying that roleplaying had been a positive and valuable activity for them overall. For some, the “learning curve” of roleplaying in a healthy manner was a learning experience in and of itself, and the ability to leave the worst feelings with the character while still being able to experience

the elating ones was spoken of as a mark of maturity and prowess. These findings indicate that the “identity play” aspect of roleplaying is best understood in its broader context rather than as the core of the activity. One major facet of this broader context is the game world in which roleplayers engage with each other.

### **4.3 Immersive Experiences**

The topic of “immersion” is one that was familiar to roleplayers, and it came up as an important aspect of roleplaying unprompted. It was the frequent topic of jokes during fieldwork—players would humorously decry their “ruined immersion” when their avatars accidentally jumped or moved about while trying to enter chat commands, or when a reply meant for a public group accidentally ended up in FC chat instead, or when non-roleplayers would move through the game areas where scenes were playing out. The wedding scene illustrated in the first chapter reveals the precarious framing and construction of roleplaying scenes in an MMO, and the playful teasing about making and breaking immersion demonstrates that this complexity was widely recognized and even embraced. This is not surprising, given the strong domination of immersion-oriented motivations amongst surveyed roleplayers. Descriptions of what immersion meant to roleplayers in FFXIV emphasized intense focus, emotional feedback, and feelings of being present in the game:

Being able to “see yourself” in that world, as that character you're playing. The ability to feel emotions because of what is happening, and not just being blank. (R4)

I would say the ability to "lose yourself" in a game so to speak. Where you can focus entirely on the story without being distracted by something which does not seem to fit within the world. (R6)

I would define immersion as just... basically how well you can perceive yourself into the game, how well you can get drawn into the game and go like, “that’s a cool storyline that’s going on, I want to continue and follow it and find out where it leads.” (R8)

For me immersion simply put is to start playing in the morning and then when you look at the window you ask yourself. Wait...why is the moon out? It's losing yourself in the game you're playing. Enjoying it so much that time just flies away. Having an amazing time in a fictional world as if you were part of it. (R5)

The whole point of roleplaying is to get to pretend you're in the world, right? Well, immersion is just the feeling of actually being there. If you're trying to get into the headspace of your character to write well, having a total lack of immersion means you feel completely separated from the scene going on. You're not really feeling any emotion in what you type. Your "heart just isn't really in it", if you catch my drift. (R1)

There was widespread agreement that roleplaying itself was an immersive experience, or at least had the strong potential to become one if experienced ideally:

Roleplaying is definitely an immersive experience and it literally shoves you and your character into that world [...] You basically become that person, and I've even had moments where I've stood around talking to people for I don't know, hours on end, just talking as Ota to the other Free Company members about random stuff that they talk about. (R8)

It can be. You do emotionally identify with the characters, after all. Ideally though, it's gripping in the same way a good book or movie is. Not anxiety inducing in the way say, a toxic experience is. (R6)

Some respondents noted that immersion could be present in normal gameplay as well, citing the engrossing nature of intense raids or long hours of completing quests as immersive experiences. However, there was a marked difference perceived between these two types of immersion:

Well, the roleplay experience is a lot different because it's more of you're invested in the world and the story you're building with other people rather than what sort of content you're doing. (R9)

Mm, I think it's immersive in it's own way. [...] I personally don't feel like I 'am' the character, but I can feel happy when we clear something for the first time, and stressed or sad when we wipe. (R1)

This supports the proposal by Brown and Cairns that there are distinct "levels" of immersion defined by the barriers that must be overcome (2004). In their model, "engrossment" involved the emotional response to events in the game, but it was the experience of *empathy* with



one's character that formed one of the main boundaries to what they described as "total immersion". It seems that roleplaying provides an avenue to accessing this higher "level" of immersion through the emotional connection described in the previous section. Brown and Cairns also highlighted the importance of game design in facilitating immersion, which RPer's echoed in their appreciation of FFXIV. Repeated praises for the game included its high-quality virtual landscapes, the vast array of clothing options available, and especially the wide variety of emotes.

Emotes are commands typed into chat in order to make one's avatar move or pose in a specific way, and were a key component in the visual execution of roleplaying scenes in the game world; they are a mainstay of many MMOs, but in FFXIV their variety is truly impressive, and they offer animations for more subtle things such as waves, nods, and gasps of surprise—small details that allow for the character avatars to move in tandem with their actions being described. Figure 3 showcases a scene from one of Azure Amoenus's weekly fight club meetings, where members would write out elaborate combat routines and roll virtual dice (also included in the game) to determine whether their attacks and defense were successful. Here, two characters utilize persistent poses triggered through emotes to stage the final (nonlethal) blow from one participant to the other. For RPer's who had also roleplayed in other MMOs, this feature of FFXIV was considered a boon that only this game offered to such an extent.



Figure 4: RPer using emotes to play out their scene in the game world

Elements of the story and game world, too, were said to encourage roleplaying within FFXIV. The integration of the world's narrative into the environments and activities of the game were especially important:

The thing about roleplaying is that you already have a world built for you usually. It's something that you can get invested in before you even begin to think of roleplaying within it. In this case, it's the game world of Final Fantasy 14. The rules of the world are already laid out for you and you enjoy them. Roleplaying is essentially another way to explore and experience a world that you're already emotionally invested in. (R1)

FFXIV in particular with a constantly growing world, amazing creatures and deep lore makes for a wonderful playground for roleplayers. It helps develop unique adventures, and interesting characters. (R5)

XIV is great to roleplay in because they integrate lore into not only the MSQ but the side quests and job quests as well. In fact there's a lot of lore you'll just plain never know if you don't pay attention to the NPCs talking in the environment around you and the side quests and job quests. Base game play is immersive if you read everything, it grows your understanding of the world around you the deeper you get into the story. (R2)

This weaving of narrative into gameplay combined with the immersion-enhancing tools provided for players was the reason that some respondents chose FFXIV as their primary medium for roleplaying, despite having histories in other MMO RP communities such as those in

*World of Warcraft*, *Guild Wars 2*, or *Black Desert Online*. Despite offering no dedicated roleplaying server, and despite the reliance on external communities like those hosted on Discord to connect with other RPer in the game, there was a general sense in the community that Square Enix took roleplayers into account during game design. While the game’s narrative was cited as the initial spark of interest for several roleplayers, the role that the player assumed in that story rarely made its way into the narrative of individual characters:

People tend to avoid the main story because it limits how they would be able to play the character they want. It defeats the whole purpose, being given a structure. (R9)

There was enough story to become invested in, but not so much that it was without flexibility. Much as fans may write fanfiction by “poaching” some aspects of media and transforming them, roleplayers selected the aspects of the game worlds they enjoyed while playing far beyond the narrative limits of world-saving hero that all players shared by virtue of the game’s design. All of these boons allowed roleplayers to invest deeply in their characters and the scenes they took part in, as detailed in the previous section. 59.7% of surveyed roleplayers reported feeling “in the ‘zone’” usually or almost always during roleplaying, suggesting that roleplaying involves a high level of engagement. Play and engagement were highly associated with each other; as one roleplayer said succinctly:

Roleplaying is for the enjoyment of those who are participating. You're not trying to put on a grand show for some outside viewers to watch. (R1)

Seligman’s notion of engagement as a foundational aspect of happiness is deeply tied to Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow, describing a state of intense and satisfying focus on a specific task (2014). Csikszentmihalyi considered certain forms of play to be strong vehicles for flow due to their intrinsic rewards— play that involved some manner of challenge or skill improvement tended to produce greater and more satisfying experiences of flow. In roleplaying,

this key factor of a “challenge” came in the form of unpredictability offered by multiple participants in a shared story. One roleplayer described the difference between RP and creative writing by saying:

The fact that there's always someone out there to meet with new ideas, with a different way of thinking. I believe that's what makes it so appealing. When alone you are writing to establish a world. A story that you yourself are making. But when you are with other people roleplaying. Anything can happen.

Such unpredictability was a source of excitement; being unable to guess what the other character or characters would do next maintained a sense of tension and focus during scenes, contributing to engagement. Respondent 1 described a number of provocative uncertainties and the wildly unanticipated consequences that could sometimes follow:

Say your character tries flirting with another (in this case, "they" will refer to the other player's character for just a bit). Are they going to reciprocate the flirting? Are they going to be outright offended from taking the compliment the wrong way? Are they going to be polite but turn down the advances? You have no idea in this case and when they react in a way different than you intended it makes you have to adjust on the fly away from what you had potentially planned. In my years of roleplaying I've seen dates turn into full fights because someone misspoke. I've seen a tavern brawl turn into everyone making merry. I've seen simple random meetings of characters turn to trade negotiations without any prior planning. It honestly makes things feel more organic and natural. (R1)

This specific type of challenge integrates ideas of flow with the empathetic characteristics of narrative transportation. Just as an engaged reader will feel their emotions stirred by the twists and turns of a good novel, roleplayers felt immersed in the game world through the collaborative narratives they built within it:

If you're scared something is going to happen to a character in a book then you get stressed. Since there's that element of the unknown when roleplaying as opposed to writing your own stories, you're kept guessing just like as if you were reading a novel and that can get stressful. I should add though that that's a good stress and completely healthy! (R1)

The “good stress” of this engagement contrasts the negative emotional bleed discussed earlier, despite seemingly deriving from the same source of investment. Notably, immersion was never called out for negative experiences explicitly the way emotional involvement was; while immersion could increase the emotional connection with one’s character and emerging story, it did not seem to have a direct impact on whether this connection would prove to be a happy or distressing experience. To better understand the relationship between play, flow, and positive emotion, it is vital to understand the social world of roleplaying, and how its denizens negotiate all of these facets of their hobby together.

#### **4.4 Social Worlds**

Recall that surveyed roleplayers also demonstrated a higher level of socially oriented gaming motivations than non-roleplayers. The social nature of roleplaying was mentioned as an important component of the hobby’s appeal, not only for the previously discussed element of surprise it offered, but also for the connections forged with other participants themselves:

It's more social, really. Because you write with others, a lot of the time you end up socialising with the other player in general, and often make friends.[...] Like with myself, I struggle to talk to people in real life, so a lot of the time my roleplay partners are my social interaction. Although, I believe people are also drawn in by the creativity of it.  
(R4)

Video games overall have largely been a social experience for me. I liked making connections with other players. Of course you can make friends by doing general gameplay such as doing dungeons and fighting bosses but until you start talking to them a lot it's really only superficial. On the surface this was simply another way to enjoy my favorite hobby and with others as well. When you roleplay with them though it's an instant connection that goes deeper than that basic superficial level. You're getting a feel for them through their writing style. People will sometimes say that someone's art is a window to their soul and that's largely true of writing as well. When you're creating roleplaying scenes with other people through your characters you're sharing a lot of yourself with them even without knowing a single thing about their real life. This quick connection with others really hooked me. It of course wasn't something that I could experience before I actually joined, but it was something I noticed very fast so I attribute

it to helping draw me in as much as it did rather than me stopping after just dipping my toes in. (R1)

As with the facilitation of immersion, FFXIV was often considered favorable to other MMOs for its comparatively kinder and more varied community. When asked to describe the general “culture” of roleplayers in FFXIV, respondents most often pointed to these two traits as defining characteristics:

Of the MMOs, I've played, this has been the most positive, least toxic community. It seems to have a lot of roleplayers, moreso than other games, and a lot of it just happened to be falling into a very pro-RP crowd! I'd say it's both insular and open. People tend to stick to their groups and little places where they feel safe, but at the same time people here seem more willing to take risks in RP. (R6)

People are very friendly. Over the years I have found all sorts of online roleplayers. Some nice...others not so much. But in FFXIV I have had the luck of finding many friendly welcoming people. Sure I've had some fights but that was all in character. (R5)

It depends on roleplay interests, I think. People kind of gravitate to those with shared attitudes and interests. I've had experiences with really immature, really toxic people, and I've also made friends I'm probably going to have out of character for a long time and am very close to. (R2)

Most emphasized that above all, the culture had significant internal variation, which made assessing a general “culture” difficult. In part, this was attributed to the ways in which communication was structured both within the game and without. In FFXIV itself, much roleplay took place either within the bounds of free companies or in specific, popular locations in the world, such as the Quicksand (a tavern in the Ul'dah staging area, easily accessible to low-level players). Outside of the game, Discord servers offered spaces for roleplayers to meet and plan together, spanning the breadth of RP interests; there were servers for specific game servers, specific in-game races, and for most free companies individually as well. As Respondent 6 noted, this created the sense of a community both “insular and open,” where most people could find their specific interests catered to in some fashion. This type of community resonates with

Gee's concept of an "affinity space," where participants otherwise loosely connected could bond over a broad shared interest (2005). This is significant for discussions of well-being in FFXIV RP; in contrast to more typical community structures, affinity spaces foster shared experiences of learning and experimentation, which aligns with the diverse but interconnected social clusters that respondents reported.

A few did note, however, some indications of hierarchical judgement within the community. This was most often expressed as a distaste or annoyance towards ERPers, or "erotic roleplayers," those whose play was mostly oriented around the emulation of sexual experiences through their characters. One respondent agreed that the way certain types of roleplaying were valued by the community bore loose resemblance to a sort of class system:

In a way, yes. It's like... the ERPers may be near the bottom and then kind of this... elitist band of roleplayers at the very, you know, quote-unquote "top". That's kind of how people view it, and everyone kind of wants to be in the middle or top middle. Like you want to have—you want to have good grammar and all this kind of stuff but you don't want to be so good that people don't want to RP with you, and you don't want to look down on them. (R7)

ERPers were a topic of contention for most respondents; while many had written scenes of an erotic nature themselves, and none would go so far as to say it had no place in the community, there was a general frustration with the population of roleplayers for whom that was the majority of their play. The fact that dedicated ERPers often seemed to privilege sexual gratification over cohesive narrative ran counter to the usual emphasis placed on becoming emotionally invested in one's character and plot. Despite being perceived as a minority within the community, there was also the concern that ERP was seen by non-roleplayers as representative of the entire community:

A lot of people tend to think a lot of roleplayers only do erotic roleplay, which... some of that's true. Like again, it's a small percentage of them, like with the people who are elitist

doing content, there's a very vocal minority, like all the people hanging around the Quicksands for erotic roleplay. It's not nearly as many people who are actually like, roleplaying to tell stories and develop their characters. (R9)

The discussion of ERP also revealed something about the behavioral expectations of roleplayers, even if such things were difficult to pin down explicitly. The negative stigma associated with this type of play highlighted the feeling that ERPers could be pushy and invasive in their efforts to seek out partners, behavior that ran counter to the otherwise friendly culture:

Mostly it's regarding the fact that some ERPers hang about in public RP hubs and have character profiles / outfits that are immersion breaking and clearly made for satisfying the owner's sexual wants. Some of these also contact and whisper people directly, often with incredibly loaded and clearly sexualized messages which can be incredibly creepy, for the most part. (R3)

This was something I experienced during fieldwork as well, receiving whispers (private messages) from players who found my characters attractive and asked to write against them in erotic roleplay, despite having never spoken to me previously. The comparisons to cat-calling made by a couple respondents seems apt. Despite the apparent distaste for ERPers, there was a reluctant acceptance of them as part of the community, perhaps aided by the insular multitude of other niches within the game. However, this structure did not preclude other forms of conflict within the community. Respondent 9 was a community leader and the owner of Rythmus Troupe, and reasoned that it was the interactive nature of roleplaying that actually instigated the frequent drama he dealt with:

A lot of people think RPer tend to be nicer? I'm not sure why because they also tend to get into a lot of drama that I tend to see as pointless but I think they're just more involved with the people—which makes sense, because they're all playing with other people, rather than people who are just doing content who just want to get their gear and don't care about the people. (R9)



He elaborated on this further to note that it was largely the manifestation of the same issues of emotional overinvestment discussed in 4.2, especially in relation to roleplaying romance between characters:

Being a community leader here, it's... it's really bad sometimes. It's worse than constant drama, it's people feeding off each other, it's—I don't understand it. Sometimes it's just stupid things that people shouldn't get angry about a lot of the time, and not being able to differentiate your character from yourself. [...] Some people, anyway, tend to get very latched on to whoever they're doing that kind of roleplay with. It's just... they can't differentiate between their character and themselves, and they think they're actually like... more romantically involved with this person, and that's where it tends to get really bad. (R9)

This was a common thread amongst discussions of roleplaying experiences; the powerful emotions evoked through roleplaying “bled” not only into one's own self, but sometimes into the relationship between roleplaying partners. For some, like Respondent 6, roleplaying began to take on a level of exclusivity reminiscent of a romantic partnership which she found increasingly uncomfortable:

I was actually pretty good friends with the first person I started RPing with. However, as I started roleplaying with other people, he tried to set limitations on what kind of relationships I could have with other characters, would lie about trying to get in touch with me but getting ignored for the free company, and just make numerous comments about how he was unhappy I was playing with other characters. (R6)

For Respondent 1, the intimate relationship between his character and the character of his main roleplaying partner became mirrored by his own growing feelings for that partner, which led to some distressing emotions despite his recognition and control of the issue:

Her character and my own are married in-character in the game. Over time I have developed OoC feelings for her. Well, when I notice one of her other characters getting into an IC relationship with someone else I get jealous. Clearly it's illogical and not healthy because not only are her and I not dating in real life, but my mind is conflating the character and her as one entity on some level. There's zero reason why I should feel upset from this separate character that doesn't involve my character or the one he's paired with, but it's there and it shows up now and then. Thankfully I have enough emotional

maturity to rationalize it out and tell myself to get over it but I can very easily see extreme problems happening (and indeed they have and I've seen it first hand) due to this blurring of lines for other people. (R1)

In most cases, this deepening connection was symmetrical, with roleplay forming the basis of a shared activity between increasingly close friends. Sometimes, it did develop into more serious relationships beyond the scope of the hobby, as one respondent recounted:

Basically, me and this person started RPing and we talked OOCly a lot too. We became really close friends, until we both realised we had developed an interest in each other. Well, our characters had been in a romantic relationship, so we decided to stop RPing them for the time being, to see how things developed, and if we felt the same. Lo and behold, we did, but we did need to separate IC and OOC stuff a lot to make sure and all. (R4)

It is unsurprising that such powerful interpersonal connections form between roleplaying partners in such an emotionally charged and enjoyable shared play experience. Certainly, not all those who roleplayed together fell into jealousy, or love, or even friendship. However, roleplayers were still unquestionably excited about their characters, eager to RP, and hopeful for finding others to write with who could share in that enthusiasm:

When you find someone else that has a style that matches yours it's an immediate friendship. Those are the people who you'll look forward to seeing before you log in and have a huge sprawling story between your character and their's over time. A lot of roleplayers will call those people a "main RP partner". I have one in Final Fantasy 14. She's kept a log of most of the RP we've done together and it's easily the length of a small book at this point. I've asked her just now for a current word count so I'll let you know what it's at when she responds. (R1)

He would later return to the topic to share that between just the two of them, they had written over a million words worth of narrative together. Another respondent talked about the surprising friendship that grew from the frequent interaction between his character and his character's boyfriend. Despite not setting out to become friends with the other player, he found himself doing just that over time:

Yeah Ota's boyfriend Keeoh... I think that's how you say it, he's [the player] someone that I've talked to even through Discord, through text messages, and even calls. And I just talk to him about, you know, our stuff, even just dumb things, but it's just something, here's just someone that I've met through roleplaying, that I've, you know, just enjoyed the person's company even outside of roleplaying. (R8)

Of the roleplayers surveyed, an impressive 79% said they made friends with fellow roleplayers often or almost always. The ability to share enthusiasm and investment in the story they created together provided a meaningful framework for the emotions they were experiencing—as well as a mutual outlet for the excitement they felt. This meaning is something that Seligman considered vital to true happiness, nesting positive emotions in a context in which they were of significance to something beyond the individual (2012). Such evocative and special relationships allowed roleplayers to flourish socially in ways they weren't always able to in other, less creative contexts:

I enjoy the creativity and the ability to be able to socialize without making myself awfully anxious. I've made some good friends through roleplaying. Without my friends made through RP, I'd be a lot more lonely. It's also still a good escape at times. (R4)

Clearly, sociality was at the heart of the experience of roleplay. It was through interaction that the identity play was allowed to be vested with so much emotion, and through collaboration that narratives remained fresh, exciting, and engaging. The structure of the roleplaying community in FFXIV allowed for a diverse body of interests to coexist, but certainly there seemed to be specific practices that were favored or valued higher by the culture. If this system of values reproduced the ideal conditions for positive and happy roleplaying, such as healthy relationships between players, characters, and other players, then the various negative experiences recounted may represent a conflict with these values.

## 4.5 Community Ideals and Avenues of Well-Being

Roleplayers were quick to note the general accepting attitude of their community in FFXIV, but in order to determine if the culture of roleplaying itself tended to encourage positive experiences or merely provide a space for them to occur, cultural consensus analysis was used. Cultural consensus analysis measures the level of respondent agreement on a set of items hypothesized to make up a specific domain of cultural knowledge. In order to determine a shared model of ideal roleplaying, interview respondents were asked to list characteristics they associated with an ideal, purely positive roleplaying experience. Using MAXQDA to code each of these items, the most salient (frequently occurring) codes were selected to form a 10-item questionnaire. Survey respondents were asked to rate each item along two measurements: 1) how important they believed the community found the item, and 2) how frequently they had experienced it in their own time in the community. The latter measurement will be discussed eminently; the results of the former are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for the “Ideal Roleplaying Experience” Consensus Model

Item	Not important at all	Somewhat unimportant	Neutral importance	Slightly important	Extremely important
Becoming friends	4.84	4.84	12.9	56.45	20.97
Communication	3.23	4.84	11.29	32.26	48.39
Feeling immersed	0	1.61	9.68	45.16	43.55
Emotional impact	6.45	17.74	19.35	30.65	25.81
Well-written story	1.61	4.84	19.35	35.48	38.71
Romantic content	16.13	24.19	27.42	22.58	9.68
Planned goals	22.58	30.65	27.42	12.9	6.45
Long-term story	6.45	3.23	27.42	37.1	25.81
Single/small group	4.84	4.84	16.13	45.16	29.03
Being in the "zone"	4.84	4.84	16.3	40.32	33.87

Using UCINET, a cultural consensus analysis was conducted to determine if these 10 items made up a shared cultural model of ideal roleplaying—that is, if these positive

characteristics were likely to be valued by the community at large as components of a good roleplaying experience. The analysis revealed an eigenratio of 2.62, which is shy of the generally accepted value of 3 or higher to assert consensus. The lack of cultural consensus in these items, despite their repetition during fieldwork and interviews, is not entirely surprising; the perception of the FFXIV roleplaying community was grounded, in part, in the perception of the game as a place with many fractured and coexisting subcommunities:

I personally believe that is what draws more people to it. The creative interaction. Though there are thousands of people out there roleplaying people could be drawn to different aspects of it. An escape from stress of the daily grind? The chance of making friends online? Many different things that could draw people in. (R5)

I think its hard to really consider a community wide feel. The RP community is more made up as mostly a bunch of small communities that live beside each other and sometimes interacting. [...] I think generally the RP community is mostly made up of people who are of the mindset to let people do what they wanna do, even if its not their cup of tea (like say people who break lore), because at the end of the day the community as a whole understands we don't have to be friends or even RP with each other person but also wants those people to find their own place and have fun in their own way. (as long as it doesn't hurt/affect others in a negative way). (Survey)

Although roleplayers may not want to participate in a certain kind of roleplay and may even make jokes about it, we also don't actively go out to disrupt others. A common somewhat-vulgar phrase (that I'm personally a fan of if I'm being honest) touted in the community is "different strokes for different folks". Your idea of fun may not be the same as theirs, but don't be that person that goes out of their own way to ruin someone else's fun. (R1)

Some of these items, while they may have had personal significance, did not seem to translate to a broad appeal. The idea of planning towards specific goals introduced a feeling of accomplishment, anticipation, and challenge for some—but for others, it ran counter to the element of surprise mentioned frequently:

Clear and planned goals to me ruins what makes RP especially great: the possibility that someone else's character can, without your control, completely 180 the direction you thought your character would go. (Survey)

Of all items, the inclusion of romance in RP stories saw the most perceived ambivalence, despite its high prevalence in individual experiences. 50% of survey respondents had written romantic stories often or almost always, but only 32.3% believed romantic RP contributed to an ideal experience. Given the high level of perilous emotional investment in such stories, this finding seems reasonable. As one survey respondent summarized:

People should be careful with romance RP, because if both players aren't clear on their IRL relationship then that can cause drama between them. Otherwise, it can be very interesting. (Survey)

Cultural consonance measures the average “fit” to a cultural model—that is, how well the average member of the culture is able to approximate the culture’s valued characteristics within a specific domain. The second assessment asked of respondents, rating the occurrence of each item in their personal experience in FFXIV, was intended to measure this consonance. Because of the lack of overall consensus, consonance was not measured against the full 10-item model; instead, only the items of highest agreement in the consensus analysis were scaled from the consonance responses. This follows a technique outlined by Dressler et al to measure how respondents assessed their experiences against the *perceived* model of ideal experiences (2005). Under this methodology, the items “planned goals” and “romance” were removed from the consonance measure for lack of agreement in the consensus measure; the remaining items were scaled to produce an average consonance score of 3.8, reported in Table 3 with the other descriptive statistics for roleplayers (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.82). To understand how consonance may be related to more positive or more negative experiences, this scale was integrated into a regression analysis.

Consonance was not the only variable whose correlation with positive or negative experiences was of interest to this research. Because of the way in which these consonance items

were framed, they could be treated as individual measures of specific experiential items as well. In an attempt to simplify how these experiences were measured, a principal component factor analysis (PCF) was conducted. PCF reduces the number of variables in a set by clustering variables that seem to measure statistically similar items into distinct “factors”. In this analysis, three factors were retained, which I have labeled “Investment” (including those items related to time, effort, and immersion), “Interaction” (made up of two items, friendship and communication), and “Romance” (consisting of a single item by the same name). Scaled as such, these factors represent three measures of three different types of experience. All factors demonstrated acceptable Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of 0.73 or higher.

To determine which variables would be most useful in a regression analysis, a preliminary pairwise correlation analysis was conducted on all variables measured via the survey data, including demographics, motivations, and all five subjective well-being scales. This analysis measured the individual correlations between each variable and the two variables of interest, positive experience and negative experience; measures that were found to be correlated at a minimum significance level of 0.05 with either variable were retained. The “baseline” model for each of two regressions—one using positive experience as the outcome variable and the other using negative experience—consisted of those control variables that self-contained, i.e. those that did not necessitate multiple models to measure multiple components within the variable. Subsequent models tested the addition of the remaining variables against this baseline in order to reveal any interactions within variables. The positive and negative regression model sets are reported in Table 5 and Table 6, respectively.

Table 5: Regression Models (Positive Experience)

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Social	0.0854 (0.0902)	0.0743 (0.0785)	0.0745 (0.0787)	0.0831 (0.0879)	0.0710 (0.0750)	0.0811 (0.0857)	0.0542 (0.0572)
Immersion	0.0521 (0.0417)	0.0364 (0.0292)	0.0295 (0.0236)	0.0322 (0.0258)	0.0323 (0.0259)	0.116 (0.0932)	0.115 (0.0922)
RP Involvement	0.0441 (0.158)	0.0372 (0.134)	0.0345 (0.124)	0.0353 (0.126)	0.0359 (0.129)	0.0227 (0.0813)	0.0320 (0.115)
Consonance	0.507*** (0.592)	0.489*** (0.571)	0.484*** (0.565)	0.477*** (0.557)	0.493*** (0.575)	1.025*** (1.197)	0.347*** (0.405)
SWB-14 (Total)		0.0771 (0.133)					
SWB-11 (Eud)			0.105* (0.187)				
SWB-5 (Social)				0.105* (0.185)			
SWB-6 (Psych)					0.0836* (0.166)		
Investment						-0.540** (-0.656)	
Interaction							0.170* (0.272)
Constant	1.140*	1.101*	1.085*	1.099*	1.087*	1.015*	1.026*
Observations	62	62	62	62	62	62	62
R-squared	0.497	0.512	0.528	0.527	0.521	0.548	0.528

Normalized beta coefficients in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

The results above suggest that despite the lack of consensus found in the community model for an ideal roleplaying experience, the high-agreement consonance scale was in fact still a strong predictor for positive experience in roleplaying; that is, individuals with higher consonance to their perceived ideals in the community would be expected to have higher assessments of positivity. Interestingly, the “investment” variable displayed statistically significant *negative* correlation, suggesting that higher overall investment in the hobby can predict lower positive experiences. The model including investment also explained the highest level of variation at 54.8%. Somewhat surprising is the lower relevance of various subjective well-being measurements, with social and eudaimonic well-being weakly associated with positive outcomes but not at a statistically significant level.



Table 6: Regression Models (Negative Experience)

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Loneliness	0.549*** (0.459)	0.469*** (0.392)	0.480*** (0.402)	0.482*** (0.403)	0.445*** (0.372)	0.529*** (0.442)
Mental Health	0.110 (0.169)	0.0825 (0.127)	0.0893 (0.137)	0.0751 (0.115)	0.0748 (0.115)	0.110 (0.168)
SWB-14 (Total)		-0.125 (-0.177)				
SWB-11 (Eud)			-0.105 (-0.153)			
SWB-3 (Hedonia)				-0.118 (-0.193)		
SWB-6 (Psych)					-0.138* (-0.225)	
Investment						0.224** (0.223)
Constant	0.902***	1.570***	1.447***	1.585***	1.714***	0.133
Observations	62	62	62	62	62	62
R-squared	0.275	0.299	0.293	0.305	0.313	0.324

Normalized beta coefficients in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

In modeling the relationship between negative experiences and various correlated variables, loneliness stands out as a significant predictor. This aligns with qualitative data suggesting that negative experiences are often the result of preexisting personal issues that cause roleplayers to engage with the activity in maladaptive ways, giving some indication of the direction of this correlation:

Personally I feel when I have seen this the most, when people take their characters way too seriously, is when they have nothing else going on. They don't have a job, they don't have school, they're just unemployed, sitting at home all day, and therefor to them that *is* their life because they have nothing else to do. (R7)

When I first wanted to roleplay and stuff like that, I actually had problems with myself, and more problems of self esteem issues and other not as healthy things, issues and such. And so that form of escapism kind of like, generally really helped me cope with wanting to, you know, just escape from my thoughts and feelings and become something else and someone else. (R8)

Aligning with the positive regression results, investment was associated with increased negativity as well. Heavily invested roleplayers were more likely to also experience more negative aspects of roleplaying. While many of the items that made up the involvement scale were individually considered quite enjoyable, the overarching tendency towards investment seemed to reach a point of undesirable overinvolvement. This was also echoed in the words of respondents, with a few describing moments of having to “step back” or “let it go”. The massive time and energy investment and its toll on their mental health was cited by the two leaders of Rythmus Troupe as the primary reason for dissolving the free company:

Sometimes we put so much of ourselves into these things and we have to realize, you know, that it's a small part and it's not everything. You know Sernel and I, when we were running this guild and everything, it was just... it was a big toll on us, you know. We weren't having fun anymore [...] So that's why we had to make that decision, and it was very hard for both of us, both of us cried for days. (R7)

Yeah, it can be really stressful when you're planning big events and stuff. Like that was a big part of the reason why we transferred the FC into a linkshell, because with school we didn't have the time to plan events like that anymore because a lot, *a lot* of planning went into all of that, and it's... there was never a time where we weren't worrying about how the event was going to go. (R9)

These two regression models reveal valuable associations between different factors of the roleplaying experience and its positive or negative leaning. This is not to say they are complete—note especially that the strongest negative model, Model 6, still only explained 32.4% of the variation seen. These findings somewhat support the notion that high-consonance individuals will have more positive experiences, but this claim must be taken with the knowledge that the ten items assessed through this research did not in and of themselves suggest an underlying model inclusive of them. Quantitative and qualitative data both support the notion that higher levels of loneliness are associated with negative experiences, but there is little indication of the mechanism by which roleplayers are able to overcome this maladaptive style of

play. For many, the change came with time, with changing life circumstance, and sometimes with professional mental health resources, and there was a sense that these issues tended to be overcome *for* roleplay rather than *through* roleplay:

Nowadays, it does not affect much at all as I've found other ways to handle it, but it is clear that the fundament of my characters are still based around those times where I was far more sensitive.

*(Researcher: It sounds a little like a balancing act-- like investing some of yourself into it, but not too much, maybe.)*

Actually the opposite; now with less struggles, I actually can invest more into it and have a far more healthier relationship with my creations and others characters than I used to. (R3)

However, the effect of roleplay on well-being, while not represented in statistical significance, was certainly present in personal significance for some respondents. The engaging, fun nature of roleplaying was a cathartic release for many, often called an “escape” from the problems within one’s own life, and this could prove a beneficial outlet:

Because of my OCD, I would just constantly run in circles with problems [...] it’s now an outlet for me because when I do get into the circles where I’m just thinking about something, I’m thinking about something, I have to put it to the side and do something else, and RP helps me to do something else. You know, go into someone else’s head and think about their perspective, and I come back to my own life, my own perspective, and that problem doesn’t seem as bad. I can actually work through it. (R7)

RP has affected it negatively at start where RPing used to be my only solace to escape from my troubles, but there was actually a 1 year running RP set I was doing with one other person that actually helped me out quite a lot mentally because my insecurities and anxieties were reflected by my character, and his character was actively working through them with my char. (R3)

Despite the risks, and despite the intrinsic sources of stress that bloom in such a high-investment and social activity, there were clear reasons that roleplayers stuck with the hobby. The fun, creative, and meaningful connections and narratives that emerged from roleplaying were cherished experiences that seemed, for most people, to far outweigh the bad. One

respondent summarized this significance in assessing his own time in the FFXIV roleplaying community:

100% positive. It has opened my mind up to my more creative side, and has given me a refuge when I needed it the most. Though not all my experiences have been good, I can't imagine my life even without having RPed. I've made genuinely good friendships, and I've written stories that have made me cry and laugh, and those aren't things I'd consider a given to everything you do. I love it, and I know that as I grow older, I'll always stick to doing it. (R3)

There is no clear and ideal path to a positive and fulfilling roleplaying experience, but this chapter has provided insight into how the various key characteristics of RP in FFXIV create avenues for both good and bad involvement. As an exploratory look into what makes roleplay both fun and fulfilling, this research highlights the emotionally stirring play, the engrossing immersion in a beloved game world, and the creatively-motivated social connections as the most enjoyable aspects. At the same time, the high involvement encouraged could lead to distressing styles of play, which was something that often took time to find a balance in. The roleplaying community seemed to allow for this not by enforcing a strict system of behavior, but rather by providing the room for exploration and growth within many varied subcommunities.

#### **4.6 Study Limitations**

This research was limited most by its exploratory nature. While some findings were able to engage with the findings of previous literature, the connection between subjective well-being, positive roleplaying experiences, and this specific roleplaying subculture in FFXIV were pursued via broad goals without strict hypotheses. While this yielded a wealth of perspectives on many aspects of the roleplaying experience in FFXIV, it made it difficult to provide concrete statements on the exact manner in which aspects of this experience mediate or moderate

outcomes in well-being. However, this same exploratory nature lays the foundations for potential future research endeavors.

A related limitation is the reliance on measures of correlation; because the project was undertaken with few initial assumptions about the relationship between well-being and roleplaying, more specific measurements that may have shed light on the direction of such relationships were not included. This is exemplified in the statistical association between loneliness and negative roleplaying experiences; the quantitative data cannot determine which variable “causes” the other, but qualitative fieldwork seems to suggest that the loneliness (as well as other various sources of mental distress) was what caused individuals to engage with roleplaying in an unhealthy manner. Similarly, questions and measurements that would have expanded understanding of how roleplayers learned (or were taught) to overcome the maladaptive tendencies were not included, as the research goals were focused on how the culture of roleplaying itself may encourage or discourage such tendencies.

Finally, while the sample size was acceptable for statistical analysis to occur and the fieldwork sites were varied enough to tap into the many perspectives on roleplaying presented in this chapter, the roleplaying community was much larger even within the bounds of FFXIV. Most of the project’s sampling was done through convenience or snowball sampling, which may be biasing certain results. Too, it must be noted that that the results described here should be considered within the strict context of roleplaying on Mateus in FFXIV, with an emphasis on free company-based roleplaying groups and events. As respondents often pointed out, FFXIV was a fundamentally different roleplaying environment than other MMOs, and there are characteristics of the game and community that make it difficult to extend assertions made about this culture to other mediums, games, or even servers.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Final Discussion



Figure 5: The ceremony closes

With Dusk's arrival, the remainder of her wedding carries on with no more than the expected fanfare. The murmurs of conversation turn to the beauty of the brides and the milestone this represents in their relationship... but even as we assemble for pictures after its conclusion, the narrative remains in motion. One of the guests, Kairi, recently objected to another company member's appeal for help in killing an adversary from their past, and her shaken faith in the group's morals leaves her lost in thought throughout the proceedings. Days later she would leave the company over the disagreement, a scene that was played out with much the same informality as the wedding. Unfortunately, the effects would be quite different; for the player whose character originally asked for assistance, Kairi's objections seemed intentionally disruptive, sewing strife within the community that eventually had to be addressed out-of-character by the

group leadership. Character emotions ran high in both the wedding and the resignation, but the emotions of the *players* in each highlights the complexity of the roleplaying experience.

MMORPGs provide a wide array of activities to keep players interested and playing long-term, but these vast worlds also play host to a population that creates its own type of fun. Roleplaying has taken many forms, from LARP to text-based forum RP to tabletop games, but MMO roleplayers are a unique population, using the virtual environments, avatars, and various communicative channels provided by their game of choice to stage involved and immersive scenes with characters they create elaborate narratives for. In *Final Fantasy XIV*, roleplayers have found a particularly welcome home, and the active community there provided an invaluable opportunity for exploring why roleplaying has such potent appeal to so many.

Striving to explain the “fun” of a hobby may seem of limited utility, but as Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, and others have demonstrated, pleasurable experiences form the basis of happiness, and *meaningful* pleasure in particular is the key to lasting and impactful happiness. This research has taken an exploratory approach to understanding the facets of roleplay that contribute most to this pleasurable experience, using perspectives drawn from virtual world studies, media fandom studies, positive psychology, and psychological anthropology. Using Seligman’s theory of authentic happiness and his PERMA model that expanded upon that theory, roleplaying was examined through three broad lenses of well-being experience: emotions, engagement, and sociality.

For roleplayers, intense emotional experiences emerged from their unique form of identity play. Similar to observations of fans writing fanfiction, exploring aspects of themselves either real or desired through their favored media characters and settings, roleplayers crafted their own characters and filled out their stories richly through interactions with others. Different

roleplayers found meaning in different types of relationships with these characters; for some it was a clear extension of their own characteristics, while for others it was an opportunity to explore behavior and thoughts quite unlike any they experienced in their daily lives. In all cases, this connection to the character moving about and making decisions in the world of FFXIV evoked strong and often highly enjoyable emotions, especially excitement. However, this very same connection also had the tendency to transfer less desirable emotions from character to player, such as anger, stress, and jealousy. This was often attributed to the use of roleplaying to fill a void in one's life, or to compensate for affection or interaction lacking outside of the game; similar to discussions of problematic gaming habits, it seemed that certain people were especially vulnerable to this overinvestment. In order to maximize the pleasurable aspects of play and minimize the negative effects of character empathy, roleplayers had to learn how to contextualize the emotions they experienced during play and "leave" the less pleasant emotions with their character. This process has interesting and potentially valuable implications for the difference between adaptive and maladaptive use of roleplaying.

Roleplaying also offered an engaging, engrossing style of play in FFXIV markedly different from that experienced by the general populace of the game. Whereas the MMO presented avenues for engagement in the form of questing, collecting, and challenging cooperative play, roleplaying provided a novel challenge in the form of unpredictable group-crafted narratives. FFXIV was praised in particular for what seemed to be a roleplay-friendly design philosophy, with a wealth of character outfits, emote animations, and high customization of player housing allowing roleplayers to step into their preferred roles more easily. It has long been the case that roleplayers were strongly associated with immersion-seeking playstyles, but this research provides a more detailed understanding of the relationship between immersion and



roleplay. There was a certain “sweet spot” described by roleplayers, in which a game’s lore and main story were intriguing enough to draw them in but loose enough that their imaginations could run rampant with possibilities—and these possibilities found themselves woven into the narratives of players’ characters, such that the players were able to engage with the game ideas they found most inspiring in a very direct and personal way. Combining the immersive properties of a richly detailed virtual world with the emotional investment of narrative transportation and the anticipation of unexpected directions in a collaborative project created the ideal conditions for roleplayers to experience a flow state during their interactions. This feeling of deep and satisfying engagement with the game kept roleplayers logging on long after they had reached the maximum level for their character, a dedication to FFXIV that demonstrates the value of immersion-oriented features in MMOs.

Key to the enthralling nature of roleplaying was its social aspects, present on nearly all levels of the activity. It was through interactions with other roleplayers that character narratives were built and experienced, and through interactions that roleplaying was kept consistently spontaneous and even challenging compared to traditional forms of solo writing. In FFXIV, the roleplaying community was organized in a manner reminiscent of an affinity space, where the shared interest in roleplaying brought players together into centralized spaces but only loosely structured the way these spaces were used. Roleplayers were encouraged to seek out partners or groups relevant to their interests, and outside forms of communications such as Discord servers made these interactions possible outside of the game, leading to major hubs of roleplay chat that subsequently branched off into many niche subcommunities. This vast range of interests represented acted as a buffer against conflict, despite conflict seeming to arise often due to the high emotional investment in the activity discussed earlier. A roleplayer who found themselves

in conflict with a partner or group need not leave the entire community in order to disengage; the multitude of options available meant that an ill-matched participant could sever contact and seek out new roleplayers with minimal disruption to the overall community.

This “live and let live” attitude is similar to that seen in fandoms, where the overarching media of interest loosely binds otherwise disparate and unique individuals who may have vastly different preferences for how they engage with that media. It is unsurprising, then, that there was not consensus to be found on the definition of an “ideal” roleplaying experience, despite agreement on most suggested items—the ideal for any particular roleplayer may be quite different from another, as the most meaningful aspect of roleplaying for each player could be substantially different. However, there did seem to be some perception of what the community as a whole would deem most ideal, and those whose experiences better matched such a perception seemed to have a more positive time roleplaying. This seems to suggest that the culture of roleplaying, while perhaps defined by its internal variability, does contain shared concepts of what makes roleplaying “fun”. These concepts seemed to deal with the satisfaction of high investment in the hobby (including the investment of emotion, time, and effort) and in the enjoyment of interaction (including meaningful communication with other roleplayers). Of interest is the observation that this consonance with perceived community ideals seemed purely additive in nature. That is, roleplayers who better fit this perception would be expected to have more positive experiences, but those who were less able to approximate their perception of ideas were expected to have less positive experience and *not* more negative experiences.

Of even greater interest, however, is that when these concepts of “investment” and “interaction” are separated from each other, it is the former that was associated with higher negative experiences. This underscores the importance of social interaction on the personal level,

an importance emphasized by roleplayers themselves, many of whom had found close and long-term friendships through their shared creativity. Meaning could be found in roleplaying through one's connection to their character and one's investment in the world in which they played, but the most impactful outcome of roleplaying was the happiness derived from being able to share this meaning with someone else—or even with a group of others. Roleplaying was not only acting as a proxy or a mediator in social interactions but was forming the basis of an entirely unique *form* of interaction, one in which passion, excitement, and satisfaction could be experienced through the collaborative creation of a story meaningful to all parties involved.

Roleplaying in FFXIV offers a look into both the pleasures and perils of shared forms of creativity, and the impact that both can have on the lives of players. As an accessible and fun outlet that encourages and challenges its participants to think, write, and interact, roleplaying seems poised to become a powerful source of fulfillment, especially when conducted through a medium as appealing and wide-reaching as MMORPGs. This research has set out to broaden understandings of the emotional, psychological, and social mechanisms behind roleplaying as an activity, especially in the virtual world, as well as the ways in which these mechanisms can act as avenues for either positive or negative experiences. It is my hope that research will continue on this unique hobby and its impacts on subjective well-being, such that its most beneficial characteristics can be recognized and even encouraged in future endeavors.

## **5.2 Direction of Future Research**

The findings presented here offer a valuable basis for continued research into the relationship between subjective well-being and roleplaying. Armed with a greater understanding of the structure of roleplaying communities in FFXIV, future research might focus on better understanding the mechanism by which new roleplayers are taught or integrated into existing

groups. As most roleplayers treated the ability to navigate the complex emotional involvement with their character and with other roleplayers as something of a learning process, it would be useful to probe further into how this learning is facilitated or challenged by the others in the community. Too, the interaction of roleplaying with specific conditions, such as social anxiety or autism, could reveal how the avenues towards positive experiences explored here impact those conditions and potentially lead to adaptive improvements or outlets. Roleplaying is undoubtedly an enjoyable experience for many, and a more focused research interest with a larger sample and a deeper ethnography could help further the promising suggestions in these findings that such enjoyment can provide avenues for positive personal growth—and perhaps even hone such findings into an understanding of social creativity with clinically therapeutic utility as well.

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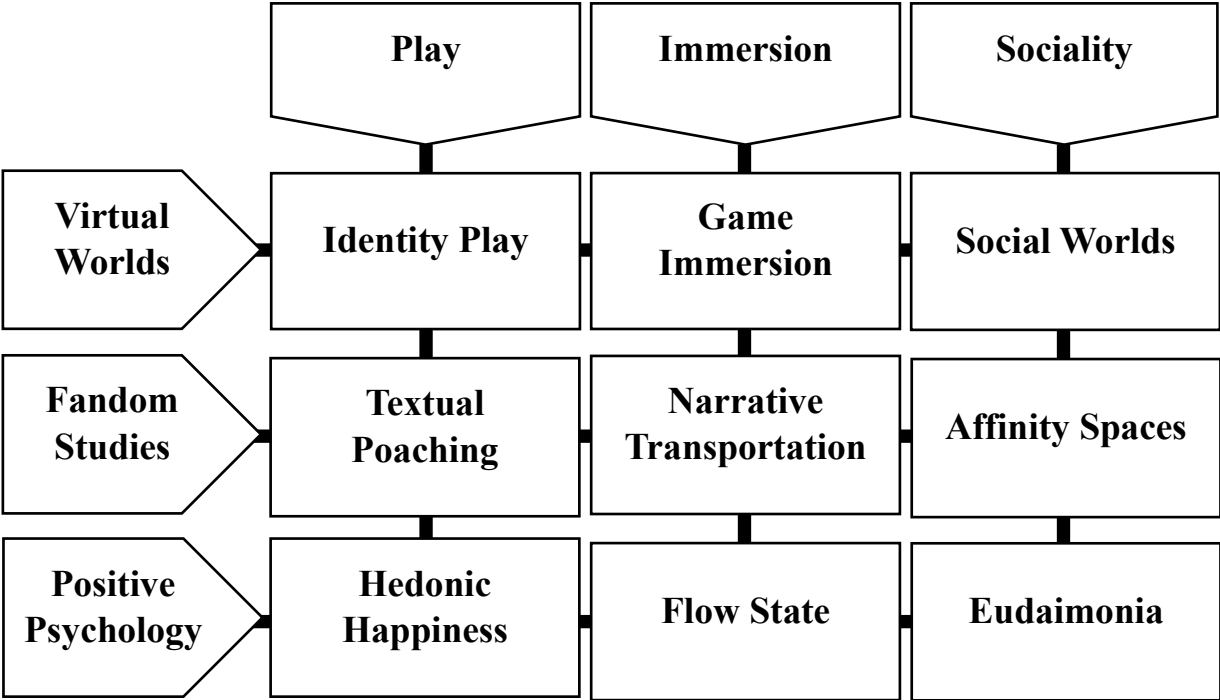
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APPENDIX A: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK VISUALIZATION



## APPENDIX B: SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### *Personal Narrative*

1. All participants will be given a pseudonym when the interview is transcribed to protect their identity and privacy. If you have a specific pseudonym that you would like used, please share it now.
2. How old are you?
3. What is your gender? Which pronouns would you like for me to use?
4. Can you talk about how you got involved in roleplaying?
5. How long have you played FFXIV? Can you talk about how you got involved in the game? (If not already discussed above)

### *Roleplaying Overview and Character Identity*

1. How would you explain what “roleplay” is to someone unfamiliar with it?
2. What makes roleplaying different from other types of creative writing?
3. Are there different types of roleplaying?
4. What do you think draws people to roleplaying?
5. Why do you roleplay? (If not already discussed above)
6. Can you briefly describe your process for creating a roleplaying character?
7. How would you describe the relationship between a roleplayer and their character?
8. Do you tend to gravitate towards creating certain types of characters (i.e. a specific type of personality, gender, etc)?
  - a. (If yes) What do you find appealing about this particular “type”?
  - b. (If no) Is there a reason for the variety?
9. In FFXIV specifically, how many characters have you created for roleplaying?

### *FFXIV and Immersion*

1. What about FFXIV do you think makes it an appealing game to roleplay in?
2. Are there specific features or game mechanics of FFXIV that you feel aid or encourage roleplaying within the game?
3. Do you feel that the developers of the game prioritize roleplayers?
4. What are the downsides or challenges to roleplaying in FFXIV?
  - a. If you have roleplayed in other MMOs, how would you compare them?
  - b. If you have roleplayed in other mediums besides MMOs, how would you compare them?
5. How closely do you follow the story presented in the game while roleplaying?
  - a. Is there a general consensus on how much you can change about the setting or story of the game in roleplaying?
  - b. What would you consider your own limit on how much can be altered before it becomes unacceptable?
6. The word “immersion” is used often when talking about video games, especially MMOs. What does “immersion” mean to you?
7. Would you describe roleplaying as an immersive experience? Why or why not?

8. Would you describe other in-game activities, like questing, PVP, or duty finder, as immersive? Why or why not?
9. Do you ever roleplay during these other activities?
10. On average, how many hours per week would you estimate you are playing FFXIV? How many of these hours would you estimate is time spent roleplaying?

### *Community and Culture*

1. How would you describe the “culture” of roleplaying in FFXIV?
2. What is your sense of the demographics of the roleplaying community in FFXIV?
3. Do you feel there is a difference between roleplaying communities on different servers?
4. How do you think the roleplaying community interacts with the non-roleplayers?
5. What are the biggest problems in the roleplaying community?
6. What are some stereotypes you have seen about roleplayers? Have you ever felt that you were treated differently as a roleplayer because of these?
7. Are you a member of any roleplaying-related linkshells or free companies?
  - a. (If yes) Can you describe how these work for roleplaying?
  - b. (If no) What is your perception of how those functions are used for roleplaying?
8. Are you a member of any roleplaying-related communities outside of FFXIV, such as forums or Discord chatrooms?
  - a. (If yes) Can you describe how these work for roleplaying?
  - b. (If no) What is your perception of how those communities are used for roleplaying?
9. How do you meet other FFXIV roleplayers? (If not covered above) How can you identify them in the game?
10. Are there certain areas of the game world where roleplayers tend to gather? Why?

### *Mental Health, Stress, and Positive and Negative Experiences*

1. In the past or present, have you suffered from mental health issues?
2. To the extent that you are comfortable, please briefly discuss your experiences with these issues, and any steps you may have taken to address them.
3. Do you feel that roleplaying affects or is affected by these issues? If so, to the extent that you are comfortable, please describe how.
4. Is roleplaying ever stressful? If so, why? How do you deal with the stress?
5. Would you describe your overall experience with FFXIV roleplay to be more positive or more negative? What has contributed to this?
6. Can you describe a particularly positive FFXIV roleplay experience you have had? How did this impact you?
7. Can you describe a particularly negative FFXIV roleplay experience you have had? How did this impact you?

### *Closing Questions*

1. Think of what an ideal roleplaying experience would be for you. Can you list some traits, whether they be for the participants, the setting, the narrative, etc that would contribute to that ideal experience?
2. Is there anything you believe the researcher should know about FFXIV or roleplay that hasn't been covered?

3. Is there anything you believe the researcher should know about your own personal experiences that might be important to what has been discussed?
4. Do you have any questions for me about the research project, the interview, or any other concerns regarding your participation in this study?

APPENDIX 3: FIELD SURVEY PROTOCOL

FFXIV Gaming Experience

*Please rate how important each of the following game play elements is to you when play FFXIV.*

- |  |   |   |   |   |   |                     |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---------------------|
| 1. Becoming powerful   |   |   |   |   |   |                     |
| Not at all important   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Extremely important |
| 2. Acquiring rare items                                      |   |   |   |   |   |                     |
| Not at all important   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Extremely important |
| 3. Optimizing your character as much as possible             |   |   |   |   |   |                     |
| Not at all important   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Extremely important |
| 4. Competing with other players                              |   |   |   |   |   |                     |
| Not at all important   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Extremely important |
| 5. Chatting with other players                               |   |   |   |   |   |                     |
| Not at all important   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Extremely important |
| 6. Being part of a free company or linkshell                 |   |   |   |   |   |                     |
| Not at all important   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Extremely important |
| 7. Grouping with other players                               |   |   |   |   |   |                     |
| Not at all important   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Extremely important |
| 8. Keeping in touch with your friends                        |   |   |   |   |   |                     |
| Not at all important   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Extremely important |
| 9. Learning about stories and lore of the world              |   |   |   |   |   |                     |
| Not at all important   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Extremely important |
| 10. Feeling immersed in the world                            |   |   |   |   |   |                     |
| Not at all important   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Extremely important |
| 11. Exploring the world just for the sake of exploring it    |   |   |   |   |   |                     |
| Not at all important   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Extremely important |
| 12. Creating background story and history for your character |   |   |   |   |   |                     |
| Not at all important   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Extremely important |

Do you consider yourself a roleplayer in FFXIV?

*Part of this study aims to compare the experiences of roleplayers and non-roleplayers in FFXIV. There are some questions that are only applicable to roleplayers. Please select one of the two options to be directed to the appropriate section of questions for your experience.*

- Yes
- No

Experiences with RP

How intensively are you involved in FFXIV roleplaying?

Casual            1—2—3—4—5—6—7—8—9—10            Very Intensive

I prefer to play characters that are:

- |                                 |   |   |   |   |   |                |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|
| 1. Similar to me in personality |   |   |   |   |   |                |
| Strongly Disagree               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Agree |
| 2. Similar to me in appearance  |   |   |   |   |   |                |
| Strongly Disagree               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Agree |
| 3. Similar to my body type      |   |   |   |   |   |                |
| Strongly Disagree               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Agree |
| 4. The same gender as me        |   |   |   |   |   |                |
| Strongly Disagree               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Agree |
| 5. The same sexuality as me     |   |   |   |   |   |                |
| Strongly Disagree               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Agree |
| 6. Close to my age              |   |   |   |   |   |                |
| Strongly Disagree               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Agree |

Positive Aspects of RP

*Use the following scale to indicate how much you agree that each of these items applies to your roleplaying experience in FFXIV.*

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |                |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|
| 1. I look forward to when I'll roleplay next with anticipation and enthusiasm.  |   |   |   |   |   |                |
| Strongly Disagree   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Agree |
| 2. I find that roleplaying helps me relieve frustrations and improve my mood.   |   |   |   |   |   |                |
| Strongly Disagree   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Agree |
| 3. I experience positive rushes of adrenaline and energy when I roleplay, especially when writing a high-intensity scene. |   |   |   |   |   |                |
| Strongly Disagree   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Agree |



4. I find that roleplaying takes my mind off of problems I'm facing in my life.

Strongly Disagree    1    2    3    4    5    Strongly Agree

5. I put effort into improving my writing in order to grow and evolve as a roleplayer.

Strongly Disagree    1    2    3    4    5    Strongly Agree

6. I experience an easy and sometimes instant connection with other roleplayers.

Strongly Disagree    1    2    3    4    5    Strongly Agree

7. I enjoy the sense of belonging that comes with being a part of a community of roleplayers.

Strongly Disagree    1    2    3    4    5    Strongly Agree

8. I don't worry about how my character's actions and words might be perceived by others because roleplaying provides safer opportunities for exploring emotions.

Strongly Disagree    1    2    3    4    5    Strongly Agree

9. I form strong bonds with other roleplayers, feeling that I can rely on them and are willing to offer them help.

Strongly Disagree    1    2    3    4    5    Strongly Agree

10. I feel satisfaction in sticking with a roleplay story until it is completed, even though this might entail a lot of hard work.

Strongly Disagree    1    2    3    4    5    Strongly Agree

#### Negative Aspects of RP

*Use the following scale to indicate how much you agree that each of these items applies to your roleplaying experience in FFXIV.*

1. I feel frustrated and disappointed and get in a bad mood when a scene doesn't play out well.

Strongly Disagree    1    2    3    4    5    Strongly Agree

2. I feel mentally and even physically drained after long and intense roleplaying sessions.

Strongly Disagree    1    2    3    4    5    Strongly Agree

3. I get fidgety and irritable when I can't roleplay.

Strongly Disagree    1    2    3    4    5    Strongly Agree

4. I get obsessed in a bad way about an RP, even feeling like the RP is taking over my life.

Strongly Disagree    1    2    3    4    5    Strongly Agree

5. I use roleplaying to avoid challenges in my life rather than deal with them directly.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

6. I roleplay so much that I find myself isolated and lonely.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

7. I get too caught up in other roleplayers' opinions, perspectives, and demands.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

8. I keep roleplaying even when I think other roleplayers are producing a “toxic” rather than supportive community.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

9. I get annoyed and angry when roleplayers don't take responsibility for their character's words and actions.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

10. I experience roleplaying more like a draining job than something I love.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

#### Experiences with RP, continued

Think about the FFXIV RP community you have participated in most heavily. How important are the following items to creating what that community considers an "ideal" roleplaying experience?

1. Becoming friends with the people they are writing with.

Not important at all    1       2       3       4       5       Extremely important

2. Feeling there is strong and open communication with writing partner(s) outside of the RP.

Not important at all    1       2       3       4       5       Extremely important

3. Feeling immersed in the game's world through one's avatar.

Not important at all    1       2       3       4       5       Extremely important

4. Feeling that what happens to the characters is having an emotional impact on the players.

Not important at all    1       2       3       4       5       Extremely important

5. Creating a story that is well-written, like a piece of literature.

Not important at all    1       2       3       4       5       Extremely important

6. Having some sort of romance, or romantic themes, as part of the RPs.

Not important at all    1       2       3       4       5       Extremely important

7. Having clear and planned goals about what will happen next in the RP.

Not important at all 1 2 3 4 5 Extremely important

8. Writing a story that continues long-term, for at least a few months.

Not important at all 1 2 3 4 5 Extremely important

9. Roleplaying with a single person, or a small group of people, consistently.

Not important at all 1 2 3 4 5 Extremely important

10. Feeling in the "zone", able to focus entirely on the RP for hours at a time.

Not important at all 1 2 3 4 5 Extremely important

In your own personal experience, how frequently have you experienced the following items?

1. Becoming friends with the people I am writing with.

Hardly ever 1 2 3 4 5 Almost always

2. Feeling there is strong and open communication with my partner(s) outside of the RP.

Hardly ever 1 2 3 4 5 Almost always

3. Feeling immersed in the game's world through my character's avatar.

Hardly ever 1 2 3 4 5 Almost always

4. Feeling that what happens to my character is impacting me emotionally.

Hardly ever 1 2 3 4 5 Almost always

5. Creating a story with someone that is well-written, like a piece of literature.

Hardly ever 1 2 3 4 5 Almost always

6. Having some sort of romance, or romantic themes, as part of my RPs.

Hardly ever 1 2 3 4 5 Almost always

7. Having clear and planned goals with my partner(s) about what will happen next in the RP.

Hardly ever 1 2 3 4 5 Almost always

8. Writing a story that continues long-term, for at least a few months.

Hardly ever 1 2 3 4 5 Almost always

9. Roleplaying with a single person, or a small group of people, consistently.

Hardly ever 1 2 3 4 5 Almost always

10. Feeling in the "zone", able to focus entirely on the RP for hours at a time.

Hardly ever 1 2 3 4 5 Almost always

### Well-Being Assessment

During the past month, how often did you feel...

1. happy

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

2. interested in life

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

3. satisfied with life

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

4. that you had something important to contribute to society

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

5. that you belonged to a community (like a social group, your school, or your neighborhood)

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

6. that our society is becoming a better place for people like you

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

7. that people are basically good

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

8. that the way our society works made sense to you

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

9. that you liked most parts of your personality

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

10. good at managing the responsibilities of your daily life

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

11. that you had warm and trusting relationships with others

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

12. that you had experiences that challenged you to grow and become a better person

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

13. confident to think or express your own ideas and opinions

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

14. that your life has a sense of direction or meaning to it

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Every day

How often do you feel that you lack companionship?

Hardly ever    1        2        3        Often

How often do you feel left out of events and activities?

Hardly ever    1        2        3        Often

How often do you feel isolated from others?

Hardly ever    1        2        3        Often

In the past or present, have you experienced any of the following? Check all that apply.

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Bipolar Disorder
- Substance Addiction
- Behavioral Addiction
- ADD/ADHD
- Learning disability
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD, including Asperger's Syndrome)
- Other

#### Game Play and Demographics

Which server would you consider your "main" server in FFXIV?

- Balmung (NA)
- Gilgamesh (NA)
- Mateus (NA)
- Omega (EU)
- Other

In general, how many hours a week do you spend playing FFXIV?

In general, how many hours a week do you spend roleplaying in FFXIV?

Which of the following technologies of communication do you use during or in relation to your time in FFXIV? Check all that apply.

- In-game chat functions
- External text chat (e.g. Discord)
- External voice chat (e.g. Discord, Ventrilo, Mumble)
- Discussion boards (e.g. forums, Enjin, Reddit)
- Other

What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary/third gender
- Prefer not to say

- Other

Do you identify as transgender?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

What is your sexual orientation?

- Straight/Heterosexual
- Gay or Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Prefer not to say
- Other

What is your age?

Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

- Yes
- No

How would you describe yourself? Check all that apply.

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other

What is your religious affiliation?

- No religious preference
- Atheism
- Protestant Christian
- Catholic Christian
- Judaism
- Islam
- Hinduism
- Buddhism

What is your current marital status?

- Married
- Divorced or separated (formerly married)
- In committed relationship (but not married)
- Single

What is your highest level of educational attainment?

- Less than high school

- Some high school
- High school diploma
- Some college
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Some post-grad study
- Master's degree
- PhD
- Other

Are you currently a student?

- Yes
- No

What is your current status of employment?

- Employed (Full Time)
- Employed (Part Time)
- Unemployed
- Other

Think of the following image as representing where people stand socially in your country. How would you describe the position of you and/or your family on this scale?

*If the image is unavailable, instead envision a ladder with ten (10) rungs, with 1 at the bottom and 10 at the top. At the top of the ladder are the people who are the best off, those who have the most money, most education, and best jobs. At the bottom are the people who are the worst off, those who have the least money, least education, worst jobs, or no job.*

Worst off

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—8—9—10

Best off