

Virtual Identity as Practice

**Exploring the relationship between role-players and their characters in the
massively multiplayer online game *Star Wars Galaxies***

Thordis Sveinsdottir

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2008

**Department of Sociology
Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences
University of Surrey
United Kingdom**

This thesis is dedicated to Joseph and Ása

Abstract

The objective of this research is firstly, to evaluate claims that cyberspace, due to its inherent qualities, has had an unprecedented effect on how we construct, present and think about our collective and individual identities online and offline. Secondly, it will highlight how people use shared understandings of popular culture products in order to maintain social formations in cyberspace.

The research was carried out within the Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) *Star Wars Galaxies (SWG)* which allows players to play around in the surroundings that have been made familiar by the popular *Star Wars* films that have gained an iconic status in Western popular culture. The chosen research method was ethnography, which was conducted in the role-playing community of Freetown, which included participant observation, interviews with players and textual analysis of web-forum posts and other material, such as character biographies and storylines, written by the Freetown players.

This thesis explores the relationship MMOG players have with their characters and how they use resources, such as the game worlds and the content they provide, to craft and develop their characters. As MMOGs are designed for cooperative play, I explore the above relationship not only as formed through dialogue between a player and her character, but as practiced and negotiated between players within the socially dynamic settings of in-game communities. I will focus specifically on how players create their characters and how they maintain them through game play and communication with other players.

To interpret my ethnographic experience I rely on practice theory, which presents people as active agents operating within multiple social arenas, constantly recreating themselves as well as their surroundings through practice. Practice theory thus allows me to take into consideration the impact of other players, ideas of game play and the game environment on the characters.

The thesis highlights how cyberspace can no longer be conceived of as one unitary space where users, through unlimited agency and freedom, create and

maintain avatars as their virtual identities. I suggest that it would be fruitful to see cyberspace as consisting of multiple social spaces, which encapsulate different practices, resulting in situated use and understanding of avatars and virtual identity.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Chapter 1 – Introduction	
Introduction	11
Why study online role-playing?	14
Overview of the thesis	17
Chapter 2 – MMOGs: setting the scene	
Introduction	20
From table-top role playing to cyberspace	21
MMOGs: first steps	28
The <i>Star Wars</i> phenomenon	37
Chapter 3 – Literature Review	
Introduction	41
Identity in contemporary thought	43
Cyberspace, identity and community	48
Fantasy role-playing, digital games and MMOGs	57
Practice theory	68
Summary and discussion	72
Chapter 4 – Methodology	
Introduction	75

Why ethnography?	76
Participant observation	80
Online Interviews	102
The Freetown forums	108
Ethical Issues	112
Summary and Discussion	116
Chapter 5 – The Context of Freetown	
Introduction	117
Locating Freetown within the world of <i>SWG</i>	118
Doing it right – the regulation of content	130
Summary and Discussion	142
Chapter 6 – The Player – Character Relationship	
Introduction	147
Character creation, maintenance and contextualisation	148
Who are they? Players and characters in Freetown	163
Summary and Discussion	168
Chapter 7 – The Practice of Role-playing	
Introduction	175
Freetown and the others	176
Writing Freetown	182
Role-playing – a multifaceted practice	189

Summary and Discussion	195
-------------------------------	------------

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

Introduction	198
---------------------	------------

Virtual identity and the ontology of the Internet	199
--	------------

Reflections on practice theory	203
---------------------------------------	------------

Reflections on methodological conduct	209
--	------------

Where do we go from here?	212
----------------------------------	------------

Concluding remarks	213
---------------------------	------------

Appendices

Appendix A – New <i>SWG</i> Graphical User Interface	215
---	------------

Appendix B – My request to join the Freetown Community	216
---	------------

Appendix C – Extract of a role-playing session log	218
---	------------

Appendix D – Interview structure	220
---	------------

Appendix E – The Freetown OOC guidelines	223
---	------------

Bibliography	225
---------------------	------------

List of Figures

Figure 1: Screenshot of a MUD	25
--------------------------------------	-----------

Figure 2: Screenshot from <i>Ultima Online</i>	25
---	-----------

Figure 3:	Player's virtual representations in a MUD and <i>Ultima Online</i>	26
Figure 4:	Screenshot from the first stage of character creation in <i>SWG</i>	29
Figure 5:	Screenshot from <i>SWG</i>	31
Figure 6:	Vivianne	74
Figure 7:	Screenshot from a Freetown player	84
Figure 8:	Screenshot from character creation in <i>SWG</i>	87
Figure 9:	Table outlining the differences between 'emote fights' and game mechanic fights	95
Figure 10:	The Freetown forums	110
Figure 12:	Freetown forum post	192
Figure 13:	<i>MSN Messenger</i>	193
Figure 14:	The re-designed interface of <i>SWG</i>	215

Acknowledgements

The writing of this thesis has been a long process, which at times seemed never ending. So many brilliant people have helped me along the way in a variety of ways. Without them, I doubt I would have ever finished this project!

My supervisors Christine Hine and Nicola Green guided me through this process with endless amount of patience and offered invaluable guidance from start to finish. I want to thank you for always being there for me and especially for not being too surprised during some of our supervision meetings where I described mine and Vivianne's small victories within *Star Wars Galaxies*. You listened to my rants and read endless amount of text and always came back to me with helpful comments and directions. Thank you so much!

I must admit to lacking the words to express my gratitude to my husband Joseph who took me through the highs and lows of doing a PhD. Further to reading endless drafts, he took me on hunts, helped me level Vivianne up and offered invaluable insight into both the *Star Wars* Universe and *Star Wars Galaxies*. I can't imagine a better partner, friend and a gamer! I also want to thank my daughter Ása who always understood my work commitments and offered support whenever possible. This thesis is dedicated to you two, the most important people in my life.

I want to thank all the members of the community of Freetown for putting up with me, my never ending questions and initial inability to role-play. You all taught me to enjoy MMOGs in a completely new way, much to my surprise. You made my research so easy and so much fun, a far cry from the stereotype of dry academic work. Some of my best MMOGs times were a result of our play sessions and I hope I will see most of you soon in yet another MMOG adventure. You are all great role-players and have a great sense for storytelling and theatricality. I also want to thank you for asking after me and the process of my thesis on *MSN* and offering words of encouragement and support. I especially want to thank Andi – a.k.a. the pwner of everything – who acted as my very own personal cheerleader; thanks so much for making the writing up a much more fun process.

During my PhD I was so lucky to meet two very lovely ladies, fellow PhD students Lizzie Coates and Emma Froud (the little ones), who I now consider among my best friends due to their kindness, continuing support and wicked sense of humour. They helped me keep my sanity mostly intact throughout this harrowing process and together we shared a great amount of laughs, tears and ‘academic’ discussions of course. I especially want to thank Lizzie for taking the time to proof read my chapters and doing such a good job!

I also want to thank Helga Bjornsdottir, a friend and fellow PhD student from Iceland, with whom I engaged in very long phone conversations gossiping whilst discussing our progress and scholarly conduct. Helga was also always prepared to read the various drafts and listen to obscure theoretical wonderings of mine and in turn offered anthropological insight of the highest degree!

Last but not least I want to thank my parents for raising me well and having patience for my unconventional line of study. They, along with my sister and all my friends, have provided me with endless support in so many different ways during the last four years.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Introduction

'Imagine an entire 3D world online, complete with forests, cities and seas. Now imagine it populated with other people all across the world who gather in virtual rebel outposts and cantinas, gossiping about the most popular guild or comparing notes on the best hunting spots. Friends and foes from across the globe collaborate or compete with you, battling for your cause or doing their best to insure your demise. Imagine a place where you can be the brave hero, the planet rascal, or the village idiot, developing a reputation for yourself that is known from Peoria to Peking. Now imagine that you could come home from school or work, drop your bookbag and shoes on the ground, log in and enter that world any day, any time, anywhere. Welcome to the world of massively multiplayer online games.'

(Squire and Steinkuehler, 2006:1)

Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) feature persistent, online, graphical game worlds and are played by millions of people all over the world. These games, as the name suggests, offer the players the opportunity to play alongside hundreds or even thousands of other players in enormous game worlds that are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Within these worlds each player is represented by a character, an avatar through which the player can interact with other players, explore the game world, take part in battles, and engage in selling and buying of in-world items.

This thesis will explore the relationship MMOG players have with their characters and how they use resources such as the game worlds and the content they provide to craft and develop their characters. I will firstly focus on how players create their characters, and secondly how they maintain them through game play and communication with other players. As MMOGs are designed to encourage cooperative play (a point I will explain further in Chapter 2) and communication

between players is an integral part of the MMOG experience, I explore the above relationship not only as formed through dialogue between a player and her character, but as practiced and negotiated between players within the socially dynamic settings of in-game communities.

This thesis is grounded in research literature (reviewed in Chapter 3) that in many instances recognises the online representations that users create, such as avatars and login-names, as their virtual identities which they can shape at will. The basis of virtual identity theory was coined during the first years of the Internet and focuses, in many instances, on fluid, ever-changing representations made possible by online anonymity and lack of embodiment. As bodies were absent in cyberspace, users were found to experience new realms of freedom to re-create their virtual identities. This was seen to invite identity play and in many instances deception.

From the start of this research, I must admit that I had my doubts about the usefulness of assuming, *a priori*, the concept of virtual identity to explain the relationship between players and characters in MMOGs, as these games are in many ways radically different from other spaces in the Internet due to the structure and design of the game space. Consequently, the purpose of characters in MMOGs is unique and differs from avatars in other online settings. Therefore, I decided to focus on the practices of MMOG players and explore the player-character relationship as actualised in play and within player communities. The aim of the research is therefore to explore virtual identity as practised to offer an alternative view on users and their online lives. Although I do not dismiss earlier theories of virtual identities, I do agree with theorists such as Baym (2000) who proposes that we attempt to understand Internet users and their online personas in relation to online community practices and conventions.

As the leisure and entertainment industries are converging with new technologies, online contemporary popular culture worlds such as MMOGs, and the ways in which people inhabit and use them, presents us with some fairly new fields fit for social research. The ways in which people choose to represent themselves and congregate in other more established and well known online spheres, such as personal web pages, MUDs, Chat Rooms, IRC and mailing lists, have been theorised

extensively within various disciplines (see Rheingold, 1993; Spender, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Burkhalter, 2000; Hine, 2000). However, what we see now is that the possibilities of being on the Internet are endless, and new ways are consistently being developed out of and added to these original online communication sites. Since this early work explored identity and community online, there have been major changes in the ways that people can represent themselves and connect to others whilst online. Recent well known additions such as *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Second Life* as well as the various online game possibilities have established new forms of self presentation and networking, and as such provide us with multiple new platforms in which to explore online practices.

This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of online sites and the people who inhabit them, by exploring how players of MMOGs craft and maintain virtual personas and communities. The site in which this research was carried out is the MMOG *Star Wars Galaxies (SWG)* which allows players to enter and inhabit the surroundings that have been made familiar by the popular *Star Wars* films that have gained an iconic status in western popular culture. In *SWG* players can meet the characters from the films, take on missions, collect points, build their own houses and accumulate friends, wealth and belongings.

In this respect, *SWG* is a typical MMOG; however, not all users choose to play it in the same manner. For nine months I carried out ethnographic research in the virtual player community of Freetown¹. Freetown is at once a player run town and a role-playing community located on a remote planet within *SWG*. As I will explain in Chapter 2, there are various ways in which a MMOG can be played, and the Freetown community is founded around a play-style known as role-playing. The method of role-playing dates back to offline fantasy role-playing games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons* that were popular in the seventies and eighties, in which players act out the *roles* of characters in a fictional world. The Freetown players, further to playing *SWG* as the game in the manner it was designed and is loosely described above, also use it as a platform in which to role-play the characters' lives in extensive storylines they have written.

¹ All places, players and characters have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy.

By definition, Freetown is virtual community but the setting in which it is located is complex because it is set within a rule driven game world as well as within a world that is situated within the meta-narrative of the *Star Wars* universe. In addition, the players have chosen to play the game in a style that is, in some ways, derived from offline fantasy role-playing table-top games. During my research I observed the interplay between the practice of the players and the context within which it takes place and found it to display the variety of ways in which online life can be experienced, and how identities and communities are forged and maintained in virtual contexts.

Why study online role-playing?

The backdrop to this research is my interest in MMOGs, the players and their communities. I have been an avid player of MMOGs since 1998 and have conducted research in these environments for two degree dissertations, which has focused on various aspects of MMOG play (see Sveinsdottir, 1999 and Sveinsdottir, 2002). I have always been fascinated by how the players create and maintain their characters and communities. Therefore, I decided that in this research I would make that the focal point.

There are multiple ways of engaging in play in MMOGs and a few play styles have been identified and described by players as well as researchers, such as Taylor (2006) and Squire and Steinkuehler (2006). Due to this variety of player approaches, I was rather dubious of any attempt to generalise about MMOG players and their experiences and therefore decided to focus on role-players, because they are generally conceived of as differing significantly from other players in their approach to the game environment.

What I knew of role-players as I embarked on this research journey was that their use of the games differed from that of the rest of the players. Instead of using their characters to advance statistically according to in-game mechanics as most players do, role-players, much like actors in a play, take on the role of their characters and take them through player written storylines. To signify this split between the

player and the character, role-players have a marked division between out-of-character (OOC) and in-character (IC) play modes, which allegedly separates the speech and thought of the player from that of the character. I found this approach to the game world fascinating, and also saw the potential for interesting research data that could give an insight into how people think of and relate to their characters. The role-players' complex relationship with their characters, along with their production of story-lines and consumption of the game content is why I chose *Star Wars Galaxies* as the field for this research. In addition, the game's status as based on an iconic contemporary popular culture narrative interested me and I wanted to find out how the *Star Wars* narrative was used by players in their writing and actualising of both characters and storylines.

The objective of this research is firstly to evaluate claims that cyberspace, due to its inherent qualities, has had an unprecedented effect on how we construct, present and think about our collective and individual identities (see Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995; Stone, 2000). Secondly, it will also highlight how people consume and use the products of popular culture, in a variety of ways, to create and maintain individual and collective identities online. To reach the aforementioned objectives I have set out the following questions to guide me through the ethnography at hand:

- What role does the online have in shaping the way in which players structure their virtual identities and communities? Are there other contexts that are also important?
- How do players create and maintain characters online? What is the characters' role in shaping online experiences? Do the characters constitute the players' virtual identities, which they can shape at will?
- What role does the content that players consume, e.g. the *Star Wars* narrative, have in shaping their online experiences? What significance does the writing and actualizing their own content have for the players?

By answering these questions I hope to add to our understanding of virtual worlds and the people who frequent them. The Internet can be conceived of as many spheres and by conducting research in one field adds to our understanding of how it is experienced in use, what its role is in contemporary culture and how users understand its potential.

In order to answer the above questions I chose ethnography as a research method. Ethnography is ideally suited for this purpose due to its inherent flexibility and ability to take into account multiple sites and connections (see Marcus, 1995; Hine, 2000). This I found to be an appealing quality as play in MMOGs is a multifaceted experience and includes, in many instances, various modes of communication that lie outside of the actual games, such as Instant Messaging, voice-chat and discussion forums. I felt that ethnography would allow me to take all these contexts into consideration and also to explore the complex connections that lay, firstly, between the players themselves and secondly between players and the games they play. The ethnography included a nine month period of participant observation in the Freetown community, including as well interviews with players and textual analysis of forum posts and other material written by the Freetown players.

Due to my interest in the relationship between players and characters and how it was manifested through role-playing in praxis, I chose practice theory to interpret my ethnography. According to Ortner (1984) practice theory is diverse and contains many strands that have in common the focus on 'the relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on one hand, and some global entity, which we may call "the system", on the other' (Ortner, 1984: 148). In my use of practice theory I focus especially on the works of French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1977) in his work, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, maintains that 'practices can be accounted for only by relating the objective structure defining the social conditions of the production of the habitus which engendered them to the conditions in which the habitus is operating' (Bourdieu, 1977:78). His theory of practice thus focuses on the interrelatedness of actors, practices and the social arena within which these exist. Bourdieu, (1990) uses the concept of *habitus*, 'an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted' to explore human practice. (Bourdieu, 1990:95) Actors acquire their *habitus* through

practice and through interaction with others within specific fields, at the same time their habitus generates and organises their practices. *Habitus* is embodied knowledge that actors gather through interacting with each other and their environment and encapsulates ‘ways of talking, ways of moving, ways of making things’ (Jenkins, R, 1992: 75). As actors are part of their circumstances and embody the knowledge necessary for interaction they understand themselves in relation to these circumstances and each other. ‘Within them they have grown up, learning and acquiring a set of practical cultural competences, including a social identity’ (ibid: 70).

Much like ethnography as a method, I felt that practice theory allowed me to approach the subject holistically, i.e. to take into account the players, the game and their practices within it. I feel that this combination of theory and method allowed me to present a new understanding of the relationship between players and the characters they create and maintain within player communities and the online worlds of MMOGs. My objective was then to use my findings to speculate and reflect on the concept of virtual identity and its usefulness to analyse and understand our relationship with our online representations.

Overview of the thesis

This thesis is conventional in its structure in that it includes a literature review, a methodology chapter, analytical chapters and a final chapter in the form of a conclusion. I will here give a brief overview of the chapters to give an outline of what lays ahead and give an indication of how the research questions are approached.

In Chapter 2 I will outline the history behind MMOGs whose game systems draw influences from both tabletop role-playing games and Multi User Dungeons (MUDs)². I will describe a typical MMOG game system and how these games are played and used by players in a variety of ways. This chapter will draw both from my own experiences and that of empirical research within these game worlds. This

² Originally designed for online role-playing, MUDs are multi-user spaces that users can access over the Internet. The early MUDs were entirely textual and set up as rooms that users navigated between and socialised within through typed commands.

chapter also introduces both the *Star Wars* phenomenon and the game in which the ethnography took place, *Star Wars Galaxies*.

In Chapter 3, I review the literature on virtual identity and how it has often been seen as rooted first and foremost in the avatars and login-names created by users. As these representations of users' identities were seen to be easily sculpted and discarded, they were seen, by some authors, to represent the fluidity of our postmodern identities. The new technology of the Internet was seen to allow users to engage in identity play and deception as they were entirely anonymous and faceless in the vast online worlds of MUDs, chat rooms and mailing lists. I question how these theories apply when it comes to analysing social interaction within spaces such as MMOGs, and whether there is a need to review and add to these theories as the Internet comes of age and the social spaces within it become more varied.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the methodology that I employed in this research and I use it to both describe my ethnographic conduct and also to speculate on the usefulness of ethnography for research in virtual worlds. In Chapter 4, I introduce the Freetown community and detail the arrival and departure story, which has been the inevitable accompaniment of much of ethnographic writing (see Malinowski, 1922). I use this chapter to describe, analyse and justify the choices that I made during my research and also to introduce how I went about conducting ethnographic research in a game environment such as *SWG*. Chapter 4 also includes an introduction of Vivianne, my character and presence within the research field, and describes our progress as members of the Freetown community. I will detail my experiences with Vivianne and my thoughts on MMOG character creation for research purposes and conclude with a discussion on ethical issues in online research.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 form the main body of the ethnography and are organised around the themes I found prevalent throughout my analysis of the data, which took place throughout my stay in Freetown and also during my writing-up phase. Chapter 5 focuses on context and serves as the point of departure for a discussion on how characters, players, context and role-playing practices are linked. It will set the scene by introducing the idea of how the community of Freetown exists within

multiple contexts and how players use these contexts to situate and make sense of the characters and practices that are generated there.

Chapter 6 focuses on players and characters in more detail and explores in depth the practices of character creation and maintenance within the context of Freetown. I also describe and analyse the multiple purposes that characters take on during play. This chapter is written very much in a dialogue with the part of the literature review that focuses on virtual identity as theorised, especially by some of the first Internet researchers such as Rheingold (1993), Turkle (1995), Stone (2000) and attempts to describe how characters may be created and maintained for multiple purposes, and how this indicates that we may need to broaden our view of the link between identity and our virtual representations. In chapter 6 we will see the malleability of the characters of Freetown but also how both players and characters were limited by the role-playing practices, rules, conventions and the constant demands for contextualisation.

These speculations will be taken further in Chapter 7, where I focus especially on the practice of role-playing as carried out by the Freetown community. Furthermore I will reveal how the players use these practices such as content writing and story coordinating to maintain their community. In this chapter I will also describe how the practice of role-playing, as carried out in Freetown, presented me with an understanding of the player identity as fragmented due to how players used a variety of communication platforms to organise their play, such as the community's web-forum and *MSN Messenger*, as an accompaniment to playing *SWG*. I found that each of these platforms has built-in possibilities for self representation and I observed how the players adopted different dispositions depending through which medium they were communicating.

In Chapter 8 I conclude this thesis by drawing together the themes that surfaced in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. I furthermore reflect back upon the literature, which I reviewed in Chapter 3, in order to evaluate what contributions my research may have for our understanding of online existence. I also use this chapter to reflect on the methodology and theoretical framework of practice theory, and also to speculate on future research in this field.

Chapter 2

MMOGs: Setting the Scene

Introduction

As I loosely described in Chapter 1, MMOGs are vast online worlds within which players are represented with graphical avatars, generally known as characters. In this chapter I will explore these games, the characters and the players in more detail in order to set the scene for the Freetown ethnography. The aim of this chapter is to describe the conduct of MMOG play and set the scene for the forthcoming ethnography.

I will start by outlining the history behind the concept of MMOGs as it will provide us with an understanding of these games and what drives the people who play. As I will explain, tabletop role-playing games and later Multi User Dungeons (MUDs)³, which are the predecessors of MMOGs, aid the understanding of the MMOGs as game systems. I will then describe MMOGs and how they are played and used by players in a variety of ways. I will also describe how the games can be played in many ways resulting in a range of play-styles that have been identified by both scholars and players themselves. I will discuss these different approaches to the game play and focus specifically on the role-playing play-style.

Before I embark on describing the concept behind MMOGs and where it originated from, I feel that I must state that much of what follows in my description of MMOGs derives from my own experiences within these environments. As I will explain later, there are a multitude of MMOG titles out there, some of which I have played for a few months, and some only for a few play sessions. MMOGs do differ although they do share a broad design concept: each having their own story-world, conventions and terminology. The descriptions that follow are based on the games that I have played, the players that I have played with and also, to some extent, on

³ Originally designed for online role-playing, MUDs are multi-user spaces that users can access over the Internet. The early MUDs were entirely textual and set up as rooms that users navigated between and socialised within through typed commands.

other peoples' research literature that I have consulted. The concepts I use to describe MMOGs and their players might seem outdated by some, as new games are regularly produced which then go on to develop their own vernacular. The purpose of this section is, however, first and foremost to set the scene for those who may be unfamiliar with MMOGs and should serve as an introduction to these games and how they are played.

From table-top role-playing to cyberspace

'This boy had a stapled pamphlet laid out on the table in front of him, and he was slowly describing a landscape and scenario. The other players responded in turn, describing actions- exploring, opening doors, even fighting monsters. Every once in a while someone would roll some weird-shaped dice that would resolve some conflict. [...] There was no game board or little pieces to move around. If this game had rules or an immediate objective, they certainly didn't seem obvious. The players were simply talking about fighters, dragons, dwarves, elves, and magic.'

(King and Borland, 2003:13)

MMOGs provide players with open-ended game-play; that is, there is no one way to play the game. It cannot be finished in the same manner as many other computer games and there is no way of winning the game. It is up to each player to decide when he or she feels that the game has been exhausted, and players are known to play the same MMOG for a number of years and some may play more than one MMOG simultaneously. In this section I will trace the history leading up to the release of the first MMOG *Ultima Online*⁴, as the history and the links between these games, and table top role playing games, are very important when MMOG experiences, especially those of role-players, are explored and analysed.

The concept of MMOGs can be traced back to table-top fantasy role-playing games such as the one described in the quotation above. These games were played by small groups of players, mostly with the aid of dice, paper and pen. These games became very popular and it was estimated that the best known gaming system of this

⁴ Admittedly there were other MMOG spaces before *UO*, which launched in 1997. However, I refer here to it as being the first one as it is the first one to be sold to the general public and the first one to accumulate a massive player base (estimated 125,000 players before the launch of *Everquest*, which launched in 1999)

kind, *Dungeons and Dragons*, was played by four to five million people ‘in garages, basements and dorm rooms’ across the United States during the seventies and eighties (King and Borland, 2003:5). In these games the players take on roles of fictional fantasy characters and collectively follow or advance a storyline created by one member of the group. Generally, each character is created by means of its player choosing from options such as race, gender and profession and then throwing a dice to determine the characters attributes, which are commonly dexterity, health and intelligence.⁵ The numerical value of each attribute determines how likely the character is to succeed at what he/she does. For example, a character with high strength⁶ is more likely to be able to lift a heavy boulder than a character that is low in strength, and someone high in dexterity will be a more successful archer than someone who scores low on that attribute.

The players then adopt the role of their character and take action within the storylines. Whether these actions fail or succeed is based on dice throwing and a system of guidelines provided with each game set. For example, if the group finds itself within a dungeon and is met with a dragon, which they must slay to advance the storyline, the players take it in turn to take action against it. Dice throws, along with the written guidelines, will decide the outcome of the aforementioned encounter. As I explained before, each character has associated numerical values and in addition so do their weapons, armour and the monsters they may encounter. Each battle therefore needs to be calculated, based on these values, in order to determine the result.

The storylines are written and narrated by one of the group commonly referred to as Game Master⁷. The GM often writes the storyline beforehand and is the only one in the group who has full knowledge of what the adventure may entail for the rest of the characters. The combined actions of the characters and the narration of the GM carry the story forwards, and as the characters go through quests and missions they advance statistically by means of gathering experience points which the players can allocate in order to strengthen their abilities. This allows the characters to take on bigger challenges and gives them access to a wider range of skills. New characters are

⁵ The options available during the character creation phase vary between game systems.

⁶ ‘High’ refers to the numerical value assigned to attributes or skills

⁷ Sometimes also known as Dungeon Master (DM)

generally weak as they have not acquired the necessary skills and attributes; however, after having taken part in successful battles and missions they gain points which render them stronger and more capable of taking on bigger challenges within the game world.

The duration of each storyline (sometimes known as a campaign) can be anything from a few hours to a few months. The GM leads the group of players through the adventure by means of storytelling, where he or she describes landscape, towns, taverns, monsters and dungeons.⁸ The GM plans the tasks and encounters that lay ahead and controls the friends and foes that the group will meet with on their way through the storyline. In some instances it could be perceived that the players are in fact playing as a team against the GM. However, the differentiation between the role of the GM and the rest of the players depends on each player group.

These games are still played to this day and hundreds of game systems exist, providing players with a multitude of game worlds to play around in. Players can buy game systems such as *Dungeons & Dragons* but many choose to write their own campaigns and storylines, only using the rule-set and guidelines to determine the result of the games. Some players are also known for making up their own game system and story-worlds. After role-playing moved to the newly established Internet, player made worlds such as MUDS became increasingly popular, taking role-playing to a new level where participant numbers multiplied and the communication became computer mediated.

The first MUD universe was created in 1978: 'It was a networked multi-user game which allowed users to communicate with one another, to cooperate on adventures together, or fight against each other' (Reid, 1994: 10). MUDs were generally programmed as rooms through which users navigated via typed commands. Once a player entered a room, text would scroll up the screen describing the room and, advising the user on what direction to take, e.g. **the road splits up ahead, if you go east you will find town, if you go west you will go up into the mountains**. The

⁸ The landscape is of course based on the settings of the story world in question.

user could then type **go east** which would transfer the character to the village where other options would open up.

Reid (1994), who carried out extensive research within MUDs, claims that they can broadly be divided into two groups: adventure MUDs and social MUDs. The adventure MUDs she describes as the descendants of the pen & paper role-playing games where the players must 'contend with the internal reality of the game world' (Reid, 1994: 29). This means that the MUD was programmed as a story-world with a specific structure. In these worlds players need to take note that the characters will get hungry, tired and cold, which affects its ability to undertake a journey or a battle. The player may need to let the character rest for some time before setting off on yet another adventure and buy some food to keep its strength up. The story-world ranged from being medieval fantasy settings, futuristic science fiction settings or even a mixture of the two. The characters and the environment consisted of typed text scrolling up on the computer screen that users navigated and they communicated through typed text and interacted through the use of commands, such as **bow**, **smile** and **open door**.

In social MUDs there is no inherent reality that characters need to contend with and no game element present. The social MUDs, according to Reid (1994), 'provide a tireless mechanism for the exercise of the players' creativity, and for interaction between players.' (Reid, 1994: Chapter 2, part iii). Consequently the users entered these spaces with different purposes and expectations in mind. In social MUDs there is no need or possibility for characters to advance through levels such as in adventure MUDs and all characters hold equal powers in the MUD universe.

MUD

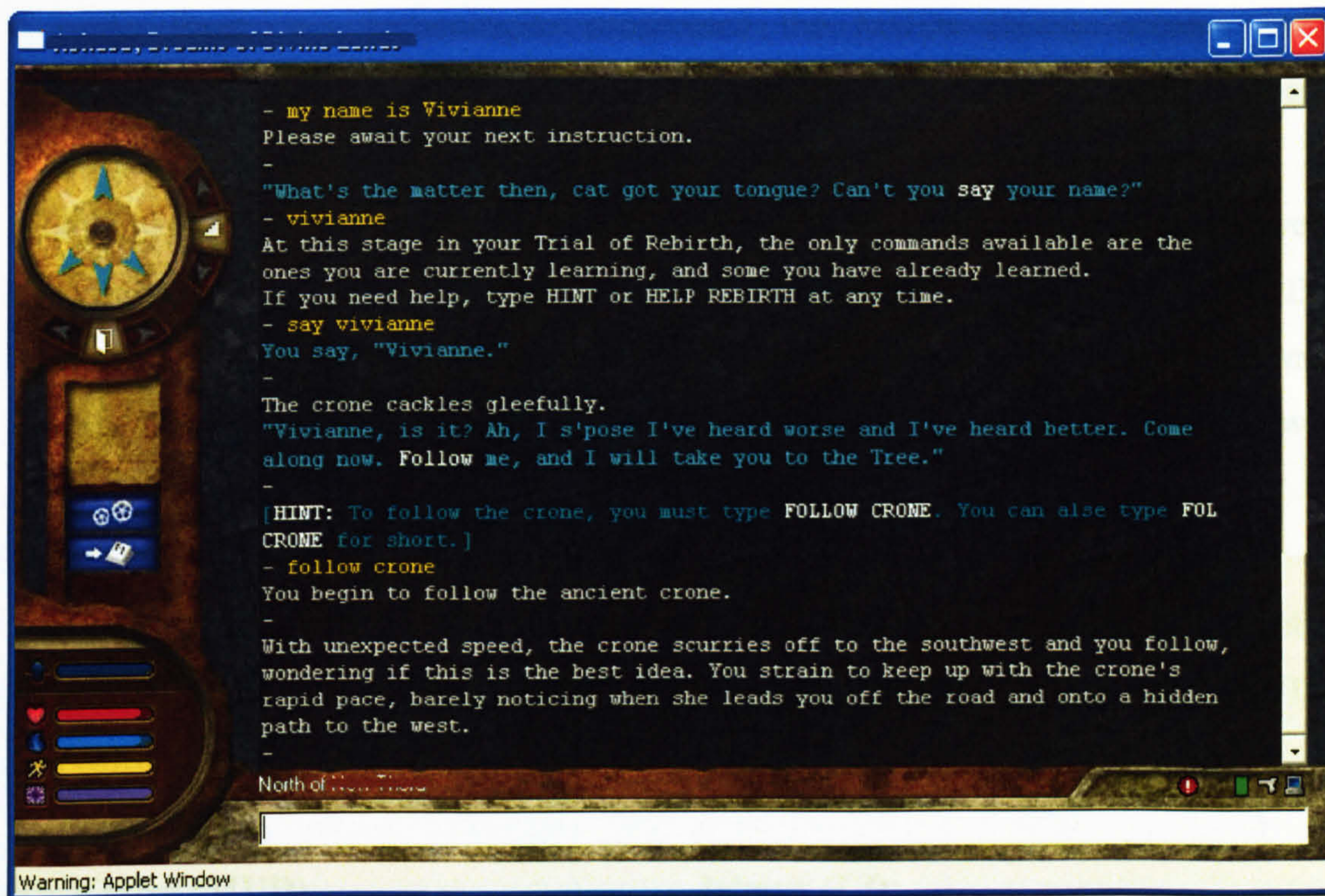


Figure 1: This is a fairly new MUD so it has a more graphical interface than many of its predecessors

UO



Figure 2: Screenshot from UO featuring a player character being attacked by three trolls at crossroads somewhere in Britannia.

As these new technologies progressed the MUDs slowly became more graphically advanced. In 1997, the first Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG⁹) saw the light of day, as *Ultima Online (UO)* was published. In *UO* the landscape that had before been text had become graphical. The players were now represented by human avatars, instead of textual descriptions like in the MUDs, and who now moved through the world of *Britannia* – a graphic landscape of towns, deserts, dungeons and mountains. *UO* provided players with a game world that was active 24/7 and allowed thousands of players to play together on each server.

Below is a character description from a MUD and a character paperdoll¹⁰ from *UO* demonstrating the big leap in graphic design that occurred between MUDS and MMOGs.

Sir Kaster (MUD)

Sir Kaster

Reiksguard Knight level 12

Race is Human

Kaster is a member of the Reiksguard Knight's Guild

Kaster's guild rank is Knight Hero

Kaster is from the Legatious family

The Legatious family symbol is:

a White Skull on a Plain Shield

The motto of the family is:

Strength and Honour!!!

Health: in excellent health

A tall dark Haired Man,

he can usually be found in the skaven nest

He looks at you, you can see arrogance and scorn in his eyes.

He appears to be sure of himself

he is above your stature...

he is mounted upon a jet black stallion named Storm

Jehova (UO)



Figure 3: Virtual representations from a MUD and UO

⁹Recently it is more common for players to refer to the games as MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games) and I shall do the same throughout this thesis.

¹⁰ The character paperdoll served as a control panel through which a player could access game controls.

Sir Kaster's character details could be accessed by his fellow players by typing in /view kaster, whilst in *UO* a character's paper doll could be opened up simply by double-clicking on the character.

The heritage from the tabletop role-playing games can be seen on both character descriptions as Sir Kaster is a level 12, which he has gained through gathering experience points in this particular environment. What we see is Jehovah's paper doll, which served the purpose of a control interface for the game. Jehova bears the title of grandmaster which meant back in *UO* that she had excelled at one or more professions by having 100% experience in each. This was the result of many play sessions where she was trained up in the various warrior skills in order to be able to take her to dangerous dungeons or engage in PvP¹¹ combat.

In *UO* all player characters were humans whose appearance could be customised by choosing gender, clothes, hairstyle, hair and skin colour. During the character creation phase, players customised appearance and distributed assigned points between skills and attributes. It was then up to the player to train the character so that he/she would be fit enough to travel through the dangerous lands of Britannia. The various Britannia towns, which were a starting point for new characters, were guarded and hence safe from outside threats. However, the further away from towns the characters ventured, the more dangerous the monsters and dungeons they would encounter. In the lands of Britannia they were also at risk from other players because in the beginning *UO* allowed almost unlimited player-versus-player (PvP) combat. Therefore, in order to fully explore all the possibilities Britannia had to offer, players needed to train their characters up to as high a level as possible in order for the character to be safe on its journeys.

UO became very popular¹² and was played by people who had different aims in mind as 'the open ended, social game started to attract people who normally steered clear of complex PC games, as well as hard-core gamers' (King and Borland, 2003:163). During my time in *UO*, it seemed that the role-playing play-style was

¹¹ PvP stands for Player vs Player combat or interaction. PvE stands for Player vs Environment and is used to describe when players interact with the game controlled entities, such as vendors and monsters.

¹² Active subscriptions reached 250,000 in January 2001. See <http://www.mmogchart.com> (Last accessed 26.04.2008)

used by a minority of players and it was my feeling that most role-playing communities tended to keep to themselves.

UO's game design, where players could either compete or work together, set the standard for the subsequent MMOGs. Generally, the player experience in MMOGs has involved, for most players, the training of their characters in order for them to advance in levels. When a character has just been created it has very limited abilities and very little currency which further restricts its possibilities within the game world. As it advances it can travel to more dangerous locations and take on more difficult missions and battle stronger enemies resulting in higher rewards – in both experience points and currency. With the in-game currency players can buy, for example, weapons, skills, spells, armour, housing and furniture for the character. The items are often crafted and sold by players and come in many different classes depending on the level of the crafter character and are consequently variably expensive. Most players are aware of this and by having items that are rare (these can be found as loot in many instances) and/or expensive, they display their standing within the game and also their commitment to it. I mention this here because it displays how competitive these games can be and it explains, to some extent, why players choose to spend their time in these worlds. However, despite the competitive elements of these games, players also need to work together because once united they can take on bigger challenges. For this purpose they form alliances and work collectively to achieve both individual and common goals resulting in a very sociable game experience. I will now go on to explore the sociability of MMOGs in order to provide the reader with some level of understanding of the MMOG experience.

MMOGs: first steps

The first step a player needs to make before embarking on an MMOG journey is to select a game, buy it and install the game client¹³ on his/her computer. As MMOGs are in constant development, the client is updated regularly; this is a process that takes a few minutes and allows the player to access the most up-to-date version of the game. Most MMOGs charge players a monthly subscription fee and after a player has set up the game client and paid the subscription fee she can log on to the

¹³ Client is a computer application which communicates with a remote server.

game world. However, before entering the world each player needs to create a character. The character creation choices vary between the games, but most have a choice of gender, race, profession/attributes and a modifiable physical appearance, as well as the allocation of skill points. Below is a screenshot of the body-modification window of the character creation phase in *SWG*.



Figure 4: On the menu to the right of the character, body and facial modifications can be carried out. The player can adjust the character's height, size of the torso and muscle mass.

The player also needs to choose a server on which they want to play. As servers are limited to the number of players they can host at any given time, most MMOGs are hosted on a number of servers, some of which may be situated in different continents and time zones. As most of the larger MMOGs are available for players worldwide, they most commonly have game servers set up in Europe, America and Asia. This offers better connection speed and allows players to log on and play with others from their own time zone and communicate via their native language.

After a character has been created the player is able to log on by which the character is transported into the virtual game world. Subsequently, the player is met with the graphical user interface (GUI), as well as a view of their character in a specific location. The interfaces vary between games but mostly they are set up as clickable buttons, some of which lead to extensive menus, while others simply have a specific function such as jumping, shooting or throwing a grenade.

The screenshot below displays the *SWG* interface as it was when I first started playing¹⁴. The user interface in *SWG* was highly customisable and windows and buttons could be moved around, added or hid from view. For example, after I had been playing *SWG* for a while and, especially after I started role-playing in Freetown, I altered the layout and had two chat windows open, assigning specific chat channels to each one.

¹⁴ The interface was later changed by the game designers. To see the updated version see Appendix A



Figure 5: In-game Screenshot from SWG

1.) The characters' status bars. The red line indicates the character's health, while the green bar represents the stamina. The blue bar represents the mind of the player. If any of the bars empty the character is incapacitated. 2.) Hot key/shortcut bars. Commands and special abilities can be placed in these frames that correspond with the keyboard's F – keys, for quick activation. 3.) The enemy's status bar. 4.) Menu shortcut bar, where a player can access options such as in-game email and friends lists. 5) Main chat window. The lower frame is where a player inserts text, which appears in the active chat window. The tabs represent various chat filters that allow players organise all the chat that is aimed at them. 6.) Secondary chat window. All tabs can be made into an extra chat window so that if players want to monitor special chat channels closely.

MMOG worlds

Most MMOGs present their players with immense worlds, which feature cities, small towns, deep dungeons, high plains and majestic mountains. Most often these worlds are inhabited by computer controlled entities, such as citizens, animals and monsters. While the common term for computer controlled citizens is non-player character (NPCs)¹⁵, the animals and monsters are commonly known as mobs. Groups of these creatures tend to spawn at specific points and by fighting them the characters gain skill, currency and loot. Players can converse with the NPCs through double clicking on them, which results in the option of taking part in a mission or quest handed out by each NPC. The reward for carrying out a mission successfully is experience points, items or in-game currency. Some missions players can take on single-handedly but others require a group and hence the assistance of other players. The missions can range from taking a letter from one NPC to another to going down to deep caves, fighting mobs along the way, to gather scientific samples for an NPC researcher in trouble. Before I go on to describe the social aspects of these groupings and missions, I will tackle the character creation in order to show how characters can present players with different ways to play the games.

Character Types

The character creation phase is different for each player as they may have different expectations and goals in mind for the game. Some players may try out a few professions before settling on one or a specific combination, while others simply create one and stay with it throughout their time there. The player may be interested to try out a few professions and skill sets for their character before settling on what character type works best for them. Most MMOGs allow players to have more than one character per server and many players tend to go for a mixture of action characters that are meant for combat and the so-called crafter characters which is a synonym for the profession choices that allow characters to create and sell items to other players, such as clothing, weapons, armour, housing and furniture. These characters can make their players a good amount of in-game currency. As with all

¹⁵ Non-player characters are computer controlled characters that players can converse with for a variety of reasons, as stated above.

characters they need training and the higher level they are the better quality the items they produce and these items can consequently be sold for a higher price. In many instances lower level characters are also unable to craft the more desirable items, such as high quality armour. Many players also choose to have one character of the healer profession, who are very useful in group battles as they can heal and in some instances revive the characters that lose their life during each battle. Some games also permit a combination of these skills in one character, i.e. crafting, healing and battle strength.

Most players are very aware of the abilities that come with each of the character professions and discussions about characters, professions and levelling are frequent on player discussion forums as well as in-game. Some players spend a lot of time setting up and trying out new skill sets for their characters and consequently spend much of their time levelling up and training for the miscellaneous skills. For other players, skill may not be as important as they might intend the game to be more of a socialising venture. However, most players do understand some aspect of the skill system and how the choices they make may impact on the overall game experience.

Player Groupings

Player groups, temporary and permanent, are part of MMOG play. In many instances, players need each other's assistance with larger scale missions and often cooperation can lead to in-game bonuses. There are a variety of ways for players to group up within MMOGs. The guild system is a typical MMOG feature. This allows the players to group together under one name and allows them to communicate through a guild chat channel. Members are labelled with the guild's name, which highlights their membership status to other players. Players tend to join a guild as they have the benefit of connecting players with each other. This means that the chance of having someone online to chat to in guild-chat or group up with increases greatly. Many guilds have a website with a chat forum where members come together to discuss the game as well as daily lives, further strengthening the ties they have with each other. It can be very beneficial for a new player to join a guild of more experienced gamers as they can transmit vital knowledge about the game and

are often generous to new players, supplying them with in-game currency, quality armour and weapons, for example. The more experienced players tend to help the new players to level up their characters and provide a friendly environment in which to ask questions and seek advice.

Aside from guilds, players often join temporary groups (also known as hunting parties) in order to take on a mission or two; these groups are often disbanded after the mission is completed. When added to a group, the members can communicate through a group chat channel and the game engine distributes the loot¹⁶ evenly between the members. As players group up they often look for characters with specific professions that they see as vital for the group's success. An ideal group may feature a character with a tank profession (someone who can take a great amount of damage from opponents and thus keep the characters that have less strength safe). Also, a character of a healer profession is necessary to keep members of the group in good health and revive those who lose their lives. Having a variety of magic casters that have a variety of useful spells at their disposal and archers that have the ability for long distance attacks and can pull¹⁷ single monsters/creature towards the group is also considered very useful. It is therefore not uncommon to see characters situated in a popular place, like a town square, shouting out messages about what character profession they need for a group venture. LFP/LFG¹⁸ are common abbreviations that are shouted out by characters indicating that they are looking for a group to join or looking for members to join a group they have set up. The number of players in any one group is most often limited to about 6-10 members, and players therefore make sure that these professions, who are often considered by players as necessary for each group, are included before setting off on a hunt.

Play Styles

Players can have more than one character and play on more than one server. Players approach the games differently and a number of play-styles have been

¹⁶ When an enemy (NPC or mob) is slain it can usually be looted by players. The loot is most often currency or items such as armour and weapons. The stronger the enemy the more valuable the loot is.

¹⁷ The monsters tend to group up and can be difficult to take on in large numbers. The ability to 'pull' one monster out of the group to battle it on its own can therefore be vital for the mission success.

¹⁸ LFG stands for Looking for Group while LFP stands for Looking for Party.

recognised by players and game researchers alike (see Castronova, 2005; Yee, 2006a and 2006b; Taylor, 2003 and 2006) and I will discuss these in more detail in Chapter 3 but will outline here the three most prominent groups within MMOGs: role-players, power-gamers and socialisers¹⁹. In my experience, players tend to throw these labels around frequently as they evaluate each other's approach to the game. However, these categories and the different game approaches they are based on make evident how players use a basic product such as a MMOG in a variety of ways.

Role-players

The role-players tend to be a distinct player group within MMOG worlds due to their choice to play the role of a character within the story world. Role playing is similar to taking on a role in a play, where the player steps into the character's shoes for a while and takes part in a storyline. While the narrative aspect of an MMOG may go unnoticed by many players, the role-players take a special interest in whatever mythos the story world may entail.²⁰ In their play, the role-players distinguish between in-character (IC) and out-of-character (OOC) utterances and actions. In many instances during role-play in MMOGs, the statistical advancement of the character is not relevant and there is no in-game reward, such as experience points or in-game currency, for role-playing as such (Taylor, 2006: 72). Role-playing entails a specific use of the game environment and most often the conventional game function is suspended as players play their characters through storylines. In this instance the game acts as a mere graphical and narrative shell within which the players construct their own content.

Power gamers

Another group which is prominent within MMOGs is power-gamers, whose approach to the game is drastically different to that of role-players. During play, power-gamers focus specifically on the game system aspect of each MMOG and on getting their desired results through efficiency, strategy and planning. T.L. Taylor

¹⁹ These terms tend to vary between games and have changed in use as time has passed

²⁰ On most occasions the MMOGs tend to be located within a story, which is explained when the player logs on. While some story worlds are simple, others may be more intricate and complex, allowing the players to delve deeply into it.

(2003) studied the power-gaming play-style and refers to power-gamers as players who 'operate with a highly instrumental game-orientation' (Taylor, 2003:1). A power gamer knows the ins and outs of the game systems, such as how experience points are calculated, the statistics of weapons and armour and what skills or skill combinations are most likely for success. A power gamer may know all the monsters in the game, where they spawn, how much experience points they give and how much currency. As a result of their efficient approach to the game, power-gamers most often have an abundance of in-game currency and the highest quality weapons and armour. After having taken on the most difficult monsters in the game these players are often the owners of rare items that they have taken as loot after these encounters.

Socialisers

The third player type that I will introduce here is that of the socialiser, who uses the game environments mainly to socialize and network. This player type was first mentioned in Richard Bartle's (1996) work on player typology in MUDs. Socialisers do not display the focused determination of the power-gamers and choose to play the game without focusing on levelling their characters quickly and efficiently. These players are often guild-leaders and spend considerable time on community affairs such as maintaining the guild's webpage and discussion forums. They are often spokespersons for their guild and liaise with leaders of other guilds. Networking and socialising seems to be their primary goal within the game and they often have a vast list of in-game friends. To them, MMOG participation seems to be about forming and maintaining ties with other players and playing the game for leisure.

None of these player types are as straightforward as I have presented them here and many players show tendencies that would fit them within both the socialiser category and that of the power gamer. Also, many role-players do spend some of their time playing the game for experience points and many may excel at combat. I presented these three types here mainly to show how varied the player base of any one MMOG can be and how the game environment allows players to undertake a variety of activities.

What I have achieved in this brief description of MMOGs is a display of the social aspects of these games and how they are distinguished from other virtual spaces, due to the game element which, in turn, is largely derived from offline tabletop fantasy role-playing games. The various ways in which these games can be played is also cause for my interest in these game spaces because I believe they can offer an intriguing insight on to how people use online spaces to form relationships and communities. These practices have been the subject of countless academic studies, some of which date back to the first years of the Internet, and I will review some of these in the next chapter. However, I want to finish this chapter by introducing *Star Wars Galaxies*, as well as the *Star Wars* universe, in order to outline the field in which the ethnography takes place.

The Star Wars phenomenon

The MMOG *Star Wars Galaxies* (*SWG*), as the name suggests, takes place in the galaxy featured in the popular *Star Wars* film series. The first film, *Star Wars: A New Hope*, was released in 1977 as the fourth episode of the saga, and was quickly followed by *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983). The prequel episodes were produced 15 years later: *The Phantom Menace*, released in 1999; *Attack of the Clones* in 2002; and lastly *Revenge of the Sith* (2005).

The *Star Wars* universe, in addition to the *Star Wars* films and *SWG*, has spawned endless amounts of merchandise such as games (card games, console games, computer games, board games and role-playing game systems), toys, books, fanzines, fan sites, comics and cartoon TV series. This merchandise has further expanded the *Star Wars* universe, rendering it much bigger and more detailed than is featured in the films alone; this is referred to as *Star Wars: the extended universe*. However, these additions all take place in the foreground of the *Star Wars* film storyline, which makes up the official timeline for the *Star Wars* universe.

The main character in the first three films (episodes IV-VI) is a young man, Luke Skywalker, who discovers that the second-hand droid recently purchased by his family plays back a message from one Princess Leia, wherein she asks for help from an Obi-Wan Kenobi. At this time, the Princess, who is part of a rebel alliance, has

been taken as a prisoner by the evil Darth Vader who rules the Empire with the aid of his army of stormtroopers.

Upon receiving the message, Luke takes off in search of an old hermit, Ben Kenobi, who lives nearby and upon finding him discovers that Ben and Obi-Wan are one and the same. Obi-Wan tells Luke of the battle of the rebels against the ruling Empire and of the spiritual energy called "The Force". Throughout the first film, Luke slowly finds out that he is force sensitive and as a result has supernatural powers. Luke also discovers that himself, Obi-Wan and a character called Yoda, are the only three remaining Jedi knights in the Galaxy. The Jedi knights are an ancient order of knights who use the force to fight for justice and peace within the Galaxy but, according to history, they had all been hunted down and killed by Darth Vader.

Luke, Kenobi, and a mercenary named Han Solo join forces to rescue Princess Leia from the Empire's magnificent warship, the Death Star, controlled by Darth Vader. These characters and their struggles all take place in the foreground of complex political struggles for power over the Galaxy, and are the main subject of the original *Star Wars Trilogy* (episodes IV-VI). In the last film of the trilogy the audience finds out that Luke and Princess Leia are in fact twins who were separated at birth at the death of their mother and that their father is the evil lord Darth Vader, who was born Anakin Skywalker.

The Prologue (episodes I-III) features the history of Anakin Skywalker, from childhood when he first discovers his force sensitivity, and throughout his Jedi training. Due to sorrowful events in his life, his alliances start to shift from the light side of the Force to the dark side, which is associated with death and destruction. His Jedi trainer Obi-Wan Kenobi notices the change in his student and tries to fight it. Episode III, *Revenge of the Sith*, ends with their duel where Anakin is gravely wounded and greatly disfigured. He is revived and his body is reconstructed, consequently completing his transition into the evil Darth Vader.

What I have presented here is only a very brief synopsis of the film storylines, which are much more complicated and include many different planets, races and political entities. These are, however, much in the background but some are greatly

expanded upon in books and comics which feature some of the extended *Star Wars* Universe.

Star Wars Galaxies

In March 2000²¹, *Lucasarts*²², *Sony Online Entertainment (SOE)* and *Verant Interactive* announced the coming of the MMOG *Star Wars Online* (later *Star Wars Galaxies*). *SWG* was then launched in June 2003 and quickly became popular among MMOG players and *Star Wars* fans. It is difficult to provide an exact number of players of *SWG* as these numbers are not officially published or verified by SOE. However, according to an independent website, the subscription numbers were estimated at 170,000 subscriptions in May 2006²³.

The game world of *SWG* gives players the option to play in the galaxy where the *Star Wars* films take place and includes places and characters that were made famous in the films. Players can play as Jedi knights or Stormtroopers and meet with characters such as Darth Vader, Princess Leia and Luke Skywalker who are presented as NPCs within the game. Players can take part in the struggle between the Rebel Alliance and the Imperial Army, the two warring factions, which feature in the films. The production of *Star Wars Galaxies* allowed the fans of the films to actively partake in the *Star Wars* narrative and explore the places they had previously only been able to watch in the films. The game allows players the opportunity to visit 12 planets that feature beautifully designed landscapes, towns and cities, and between which the players can travel in space carriers. A later expansion to the game, *Jump to Lightspeed*, also allowed players to own spaceships and to partake in space battles and missions. The game, furthermore, featured the soundtrack to the films that further added on to the *Star Wars* feeling.

²¹See: <http://pc.ign.com/articles/076/076665p1.html>

²² The company of George Lucas, the writer, screenwriter and producer of the *Star Wars* films

²³ See on <http://www.mmogchart.com/> (Last accessed 26.04.2008). I can not guarantee the accuracy of this number and it is published here mainly to display how massively multi-player these games are. To further establish the popularity of this game genre, the most popular game of this type, *World of Warcraft* released in 2004, has a subscriber base of 8.5 million players based on numbers published by its developer in March 2007. See <http://blizzard.com/press/070307.shtml> (Last accessed 23.04.2008)

To some extent, *SWG* is a typical game of the MMOG genre. Players create characters and 'then enter the world and begin the process of gaining levels to progress through the game ..., with each new level comes new skills, powers and abilities' (Taylor, 2006:29) *SWG*, like other MMOGs offer the players a vast world to explore and opportunities to train their characters through in-game content such as quests and missions. However, what distinguishes *SWG* from other MMOGs is the link to the world of the *Star Wars* narrative. It is my hope that in the following chapters the *SWG* experience will become clearer to the reader as I explore the game, the environment and the community of Freetown.

What I have aimed to do in this chapter is to describe how these games work and how players use these games to communicate and cooperate during play. There are a variety of ways in which a player can take part in the MMOG adventure and I have outlined some of them here. I have also described how social these games are and how players group up and assist each other during play. This perception of cooperation seemed to me to be, in some ways, incongruent with much of earlier research on Internet users that presented cyberspace as populated with individuals experimenting with their identity who, in some instances, appeared to have no links with the other users around them. This incongruence fascinated me and from the onset of this research I was interested to examine the relationship between players and their characters as practiced within MMOG contexts, which by design encourage player cooperation. In particular I was interested in learning what effects cooperation, if any, had on player autonomy and agency when it came to creating and maintaining characters.

In this chapter I have traced the history of MMOGs and how they are played, providing the reader with a glimpse into the world of these games. The purpose of the next chapter is to provide the theoretical context in which the main argument of this thesis is grounded, wherein I will critically assess research literature which focuses on the Internet and the people who use it. The literature is important as it is inevitable that a thesis such as this one is written as a dialogue with preceding and present theories. The purpose of the following review is to establish whether additions to already established theories of virtual identity are needed and to evaluate what the approach applied in this research may have to offer.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

Introduction

As indicated, this thesis focuses on the player-character relationship as constructed within MMOGs. As we saw in Chapter 2 these games provide us with player driven virtual worlds that present to us one aspect of how people use the Internet in their daily lives. I chose to focus on the characters that players create in order to explore the concept of virtual identity. In order to do so it is vital to present as a background the theories that have been coined regarding how users present themselves online. The subject of virtual identity has been one of constant fascination since the dawn of the Internet, especially as researchers started to venture into some of the social spaces that users had set up online. As will become apparent, the Internet was seen by many to be a manifestation of postmodernity where traditional boundaries, such as 'self/other, real/virtual, nature/culture and truth/fiction' are transcended (Hine, 2000:12); identities are fluid and people form communities without ever meeting each other face-to-face (see Poster, 1995; Turkle, 1995). It will be made evident that the impact of the technology and the new methods of communication were deemed by some authors to influence specific forms of identities and communities, while others argued that in order to understand the Internet social processes and a wider cultural context needed to be taken into account (see Grint and Woolgar, 1997; Hine, 2000). I will present the nuances of these debates throughout my literature review in order to locate my research and justify my choice of methodology and theoretical framework.

As theoretical shifts associated with postmodernism have featured prominently in writings about cyberspace and identity, I will start by introducing and tracing these shifts in order to ground the following discussion. From there I will go on to explore theories concerning virtual identity and community. As more and more users logged on and visited online spaces, researchers observed that people seemed to engage in identity play, which seemingly allowed them to explore the multiple aspects of their identity through creating and maintaining their online personas (see Turkle, 1995;

Stone, 2000). Others however found these virtual representations to be stable and that people practiced honest self-representation within virtual communities (Baym, 2000:157).

Social formations in cyberspace were another prominent issue that drew the attention of many researchers that ventured online. Some highlighted how communication online was in essence much more limited than that conducted face-to-face. Consequently, speculations as to whether online social groups constituted communities in comparison to offline groups usually found the former lacking in terms of social cues or authenticity due to the method of communication. This characterised much of the earliest literature on online communities (see Sproull and Kiesler, 1986; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). However, others argued that these social formations should be researched as a subject in their own right without focusing simply on the means through which the members communicated, but to take into account how communities were established and maintained through common practices (Watson, 1997; Baym, 2000).

I believe that these varied accounts of online life present to us that there is reason to further our understanding of how people practice self-presentation and form communities in cyberspace, echoing the claim of Grint and Woolgar (1997) and Hine (2000), and propose that aside from looking at online social conduct as simply a product of technology, we take into account the wider cultural context within which the Internet and its users exists. Therefore as I reviewed literature in order to provide a theoretical background for this research I included literature based on empirical research in offline role-playing games and MMOGs, as I believe that the context within which the relationship between players and characters is practiced is highly relevant to our understanding of it. This discussion will form the later half of this chapter, where I outline how these games have been explored and understood as social phenomena.

In the last section of this chapter I will outline and explain the theoretical framework of practice theory, which I chose for this research. In order to avoid the *a priori* assumption that the concept of fluid virtual identity applies to the characters that players create in MMOGs, I wanted to explore how this relationship was manifested through practice and active participation in online game play. Practice

theory ‘emphasizes the relational interdependency of agent and world’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991:51) and I felt that by combining this theoretical outlook with ethnography, which is highly suitable to explore ‘what people actually *do* with the technology’ (Hine, 2000: 21), I add to our understanding of users and their online representations.

Identity in contemporary theory

‘Identities of all kinds are clearly forged through practical engagement in lives lived, and as such they have both individual and collective dimensions.’

(Moore, 1994:53)

‘One could look at the unfolding of social and cultural theory over the whole of the 20th century as a struggle over the role of the social being – the person, subject, actor, or agent – in society and history’

(Ortner, 2005:31)

Before embarking on exploring theories on virtual identity it is useful to understand where the notion of a flexible and multiple identity comes from, so this section serves the purpose of locating and grounding the idea of identity before discussing how it has been presented and understood in relation to online communication.

Stuart Hall (1996) maintains that ‘there has been a veritable discursive explosion in recent years around the concept of ‘identity’’ and refers to the debates within social sciences over how the view of a stable unified identity of modernity gradually gave way to the postmodern idea of identity as multiple, and fragmented (Hall, 1996: 1). In modern thought, identity was conceptualized as a stable fixed entity and as such also fully coherent. A person’s identity was seen as a core which emerged at birth and developed during her lifespan but at the same time remained essentially unchanged. This view of identity was rooted in Descartes’ theory of the mind/body dualism. The individual, located at the centre of the mind, was seen as ‘the starting point for all knowledge and action’ and human nature was seen to be ‘always and everywhere the same’ (Hall and Gieben: 1992: 22). Furthermore, the ‘Cartesian

subject' had its proper place within the world and was seen as a rational thinking being.

However, as western societies changed and moved towards modern capitalism and consequently class formations, the subject came to be seen as more 'located and 'placed' within these great supporting structures.' (Hall, 1992: 284) As a result the individual came to be seen as more social and was not seen as autonomous as before but was seen to be 'formed in relations to 'significant others', who mediated to the subject the values, meanings and symbols – the culture – of the worlds he/she inhabited.' (ibid: 275) Identity was still seen as an inner core but not as stable and fixed as before. This inner core engaged in constant dialogue with the outside world through which it was modified and formed. Thus identity was seen 'to bridge the gap between the inside and the outside – between the personal and the public worlds.' (ibid: 276). The idea of the postmodern subject whose identity is fragmented, fluid and ever-changing came through a gradual change in theoretical perspectives in the human sciences.

Craib (1998) maintains that '[t]he approaches labelled 'postmodern' actually fall into two mutually exclusive camps. In one postmodern world I constantly recreate myself according to my desires and the situations which I am placed and the in the other I am the product of the discourses in which I am situated.' (Craib, 1998: 6) I will explore these two 'camps' here in order to touch upon this complicated discussion, which identity in postmodernity inevitably is. I will, however, begin by tracing the shifts that took place from modernity to postmodernity in terms of how scholars viewed identity.

Amidst the conceptual shifts I mention above, social theorists started to doubt the unity and wholeness of identity. In a postmodern manner, which implies fluidity and change, Stuart Hall expresses this change in outlook and claims that '(t)he subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self'. (...) If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative of the self' about ourselves' (Hall, 1992: 277). These new viewpoints have sparked an abundance of social research in the last decades, which has established how people's identities are situated

within each context and how they are relational, multiple and often even contradictory (see Kondo, 1990). Studies of ethnicity have shown that what was once considered as clear cut collective identity of a group of people is much more a fluid entity based on complex relations between groups, where people can claim membership based on who they are in relation to others. (See Martinelli, 1983; Robins, 1996; Kaur and Kalra, 1996) 'There are situations where ethnicity is relatively unimportant, and then there are situations where it provides a decisive mechanism for exclusion and inclusion as well as clear guidelines for behaviour' (Eriksen, 1993: 62). Depending on context and situation, identities are made relevant or irrelevant in relation to others. Consequently, identities are seen to be a process and as such constantly under construction and never finalized (see Butler, 1990; Moore, 1994).

Identity as process has been tackled by the theoretical perspectives of both discourse and/or practice theories. I say and/or because as Hall (1992) points out 'all practices have a discursive aspect' (Hall, 1992: 291). I will only touch on these theories here but will discuss practice theory in more detail later in this chapter, as the chosen theoretical framework for this dissertation. The main thing to keep in mind is that I choose these two theoretical perspectives here to display how postmodern identity is seen as tied to the outside world, a point that will be revisited throughout the rest of the dissertation.

Foucauldian discourse theory looks for techniques of what is said, what can be said, by whom, and according to what rules. Discourse, according to Foucault (1972) is 'a group of statements insofar as they belong to the same discursive formation' (Foucault, 1972: 117). The statement is a functional unit of a discourse, which restrains and situates the speaker. Statements are never neutral, but have a role within a network of other statements. They are a part of knowledge and they act both to constrain and enable what we know and consequently how we perceive our position within discourses. An example of statements would be classifying mechanisms, maps, taxonomies and graphs. Institutions classify people based on statements such as tax forms, census categories and curriculum vitae, to name a few. People are classified to be 'at risk', to have 'learning difficulties', be schizophrenic and so forth. 'People learn to treat one another and themselves according to these categories.'

(Holland *et al*, 1998:24) These classifications have a certain place in history and behind them lies a certain knowledge shaped by institutional discourses.

Foucault thought of the human subject as the result of subjection. 'Subjection refers to particular, historically located, disciplinary processes and concepts which enable us to consider ourselves as individual subjects and which constrain us from thinking otherwise. These processes and concepts ('or techniques') are what allow the subject to 'tell the truth about itself.' (Foucault cited in McHoul and Grace, 1993: 3) 'Therefore they come before any views we might have about 'what we are'. In a phrase: changes of public ideas precede changes in individuals, not vice versa.' (ibid: 3). Foucault coined the term 'technologies of the self' which is, in short, 'deciphering who one is' within a historically situated discourse, i.e. 'the techniques that human beings use to understand themselves.'(Martin *et al* 1988:1) These technologies work as 'devices—mechanical or otherwise—which make possible the social construction of personal identity' (Foucault, 1988, cited in Aycock, p. 2).

What reads above is, of course, only a fragment of discourse theories and is mainly displayed here as an alternate viewpoint to practice theory. What it leaves us with, however, is the question of the individual's agency and to what point our practices affect our identities. The concept of agency refers to the individual's capacity to make choices and act as an active agent in his own life. Practice theory, focusing on the individual and agency, sees identity as created and maintained through practice within specific social contexts. One of the key theorists of practice theory was Pierre Bourdieu, who in his work *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972) aimed to construct a theory of social practice. Bourdieu (1972) sees social life as an arena, a composite of various fields, within which practices and struggle between agents take place. 'Each field, by virtue of its defining content, has a different logic and taken for granted structure' (Jenkins, 1992: 84). Practice theory, thus, recognises the myriad contexts of which the social world is composed. Also, it sees these fields impacting upon the identities of the agents, which are rooted in their *habitus*. 'The habitus is in essence embodied dispositions that are manifested through human practice and influenced by the field of interaction. Practice theory also identifies that human beings travel between different contexts throughout their lives and that their identity is recreated relative to context at any given time. It thus takes into account

how peoples' identities are relative to the context of social interaction. The field is seen to be a 'crucial mediating context wherein external factors – changing circumstances – are brought to bear upon individual practice and institutions' (ibid: 86). To sum up, practice theory recognises the interrelatedness of the agent, her practices and the social world.

Before going on to explore practice theory fully, in order to explain its suitability as a theoretical framework for this research, I will explore the literature on identity and community in cyberspace along with research on fantasy role-playing and online gaming. It is my hope that the exploration of the theories from this literature will highlight the suitability of practice theory for this research.

On both accounts I have provided rather concentrated abstracts of discourse and practice theories. They are of course much more complex and differ on many accounts, one of them being the role of human agency; that is, to what extent people act on or against the structures, discourses or fields, that surround them. Both theoretical schools provide useful frameworks to work with in research such as the one described in the following chapters. I was however interested in the practice of role-playing and the players' agency as they created and maintained characters within the Freetown community. I recognise that practices derive their meaning from and are performed within discourse but this research was aimed at the players themselves and how they create and manage their characters through active participation in role-playing. Undoubtedly, research into the discourses that players are surrounded by would be very interesting but would present a different research altogether. In this instance, I was interested in the practice of MMOG playing and how players actively create characters and maintain within specific social settings.

The purpose of this brief overview of identity theory since the Enlightenment has been to locate identity in contemporary social theory, as the discussion that follows on identity in online environment, as we shall see, bears the marks of the time in which it was situated. In the midst of the postmodern de-structuring of both self and identity, the Internet became an increasingly popular meeting place where people communicated through both avatars and login names and social scientists stood by and watched the multiple identities unfold on the screen.

Cyberspace, identity and community

'The Internet is a vast collection of computers linked to networks within larger networks spanning the globe - a huge anarchic, self-organising and relatively unpoliced system which allows unlimited access to the other people connected, and the information stored on public databases and computer sites...'

(Kitchin, 1998:3)

'For what is at stake in these technical innovations, I contend, is not simply an increased 'efficiency' of interchange, enabling new avenues of investment, increased productivity at work and new domains of leisure and consumption, but a broad and extensive change in the culture, in the way identities are structured.'

(Poster, 1995:79)

The purpose of this section is to locate cyberspace, identity and community within a selection of writings dating from the birth of the Internet, and CMC, up to our day. As we will see, postmodern ideas of identity as fluid and multiple feature heavily in literature on online identity, especially during the first years of Internet studies. For many, cyberspace itself presented an 'anything goes world' where people and machines, truth and fiction, self and other seem[ed] to merge in a glorious blurring of boundaries' (Hine, 2000: 7) As more people were drawn to the Internet, so too were academics who were interested in finding out about the newfound possibilities of being in a sphere where people appeared to roam in and out of virtual spaces shielded by anonymity and free from the shackles of embodied day-to-day existence.

Cyberspace: a new world?

'Who we are, what we know, and how we think, are all being changed as we move from a print-based society to a computer-based world. We are becoming different people'

(Spender, 1995: xiii).

'To summarize, cyberspace is a hyperreal technology of social saturation that dislocates space, time, and personal characteristics as variables of human interaction'

(Waskul and Douglass, 1997: 381).

In the nineties authors contemplated the effects of the new communication technologies on our collective lives, our psyches and our identities. They predicted that the effects would be enormous and as they embarked on a journey through an environment any science fiction writer would be proud of presenting, the name 'cyberspace' was given to this new locale. The term was borrowed from the cyberpunk science fiction novel *Neuromancer* published in 1984 by William Gibson. Cyberspace became the household term for the world residing within our computer screens, available to those who could log on to the network also known as the Internet. It was seen by some to host an alternate reality, where different, if any, rules applied (see Hayles, 1993; Turkle, 1995). Also, the Internet was seen by some to produce a threat to the well known boundaries and analytical categories that had been established in modernity, which increasingly seen to be under threat of dissolving (see Featherstone and Burrows, 1995).

As people logged on they found others they could communicate through typed text in various interaction spaces, such as Usenet, IRC and MUDs. All these spaces presented users with different environments and diverse ways of communicating with others. What these first social spaces had in common was that they were entirely text based; that is, users entered, navigated and presented themselves in these spaces as text. Usenet consists of subject categories called 'newsgroups' which are set up around various topics ranging from gardening to soap-operas. The communication on Usenet is asynchronous as users post messages on a server which is then distributed over to other servers for other users to read and reply to (see Anderson, 1996; Burkhalter, 1999).

IRC presents users with real-time communication on various chat channels, some of which are labelled by subject while others are general chat rooms where everyone can enter, under a username, and take part in the conversation. Unlike Usenet, the communication on IRC was synchronous, i.e. the text appeared to all on

the channel as it was typed in and they could then reply instantaneously (see Reid, 1991; Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Danet, 1996).

The MUDs (Multi User Dungeons/Domains) presented users with the real-time chat ability of the IRC but in addition some MUDs presented users with a pre-programmed environment presented via text as soon as they logged on. The MUDs were presented as rooms between which users navigated via typed commands. In some MUDs users could add on to the MUD by programming their own rooms while others were entirely pre-programmed and unchangeable. MUDs were to begin with online game spaces, as I explained in Chapter 2, but were later also designed as socialising spaces entirely without any gaming functions (see Reid, 1994; Turkle, 1995; Dibbell, 1999; Kendall, 2002)

What all these modes of communication have in common is that users enter them under the guise of a login/nick-name which becomes their representation in these new social spaces. Bechar-Israeli (1995) carried out research on IRC nicknames and found them to be crucial forms of self presentation in a space where usual identity cues such as age, sex and ethnicity are usually unobtainable. People were therefore free to create their own virtual identities through login names where they could highlight some cues while leaving others out, and even engage in identity play and deception. I will discuss these speculations in more detail later on where I dedicate a section to discussing the use of avatars and login-names in online spaces and how increased possibilities in self presentation were seen to invite users to play with their identity whilst online.

Other speculations regarding life online furthermore focused on the Internet as a place which hosted new types of community and communication (see Jones, 1995; Waskul and Douglass, 1997; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Internet researchers speculated about the presumed changes that computer mediated communication and the Internet would make to the role of time and space and to the presumably well established dualisms such as human/machine, real/virtual and self/other (see Stone, 2000; Poster 1995). The literature from the first years of Internet studies make an exhilarating read as in many instances the excitement over the new technology is combined with speculations about the end of modernity and actualisation of

postmodern ideas of eroding boundaries, flexibility and fluidity (Nguyen & Alexander, 1996; Springer, 1999).

Although I have presented here the more ‘visionary’ part of the literature, at the same time there were others who called for a more ‘down to earth’ approach to the Internet. Featherstone and Burrows (1995:8) at the time commented that ‘much of what has been claimed for cyberculture is overly utopian’. Robins (1995: 153), in a similar vein, claimed that the mythology of cyberspace had been preferred over its sociology, also criticising how the Internet had been torn out of the context of user’s daily lives and presented as an alternative reality. Similarly, Webster (1995) calls for empirical social research as ‘an alternative starting point’ to replace ‘social impact approaches’ which he claimed to be ‘hopelessly simplistic and positively misleading’ when dealing with the information society (Webster, 1995: 4-5). These differing views alert us to the fact that when dealing with cyberspace we are not dealing simply with one space, within which all use is identical. Usenet, IRC and MUDs presented users with various options of engaging with each other and each space developed a set of conventions regarding communication and ways of being. In addition, as the Internet has become more ubiquitous and technology has advanced, even more varied spheres of interaction have been constructed. Assuming beforehand that these may all share qualities that impact upon communities and identities would be simplifying the social processes that occur online along with the wider context that technology use takes place within.

Identity in Cyberspace

‘The technology of CMC [...] invites play with identity’

(Bechar-Israeli, 1995: 10).

The discussion of identity in cyberspace has often focused extensively on identity play, as researchers noted how in the textual communication in Usenet, IRC and MUDs that users represented themselves rather ‘poetically’ and some instances of identity deception came to the researchers’ attention (Stone, 2000). Like some of the early discourse of cyberspace, the discussion surrounding online identity, although nuanced, tended to become somewhat utopian. One of the key academic

texts to be published on online identity was Sherry Turkle's (1995) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, which was based on her research within social MUDs which she recognises as 'evocative objects for thinking about human identity and more generally about a set of ideas that have become to be known as post-modernism' (ibid: 17). Turkle's (1995) research was participatory and she furthermore conducted face-to-face interviews in which her respondents described to her how they managed to re-invent themselves, as they took on various identities online. The following words of one of Turkle's respondents, in my view, sum up nicely some of the ideas that were to circulate during the first Internet studies:

'you can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. ... You don't have to worry about the slot other people put you in as much. Its easier to change the way people perceive you because all they have got is what you show them....'

(Turkle, 1995: 185).

Turkle (1995) maintains that in the MUDs the idea of the postmodern, fluid and multiple identity is manifested and that the technology allows users to cycle through many identities as they discard some and create others. This is made possible by the anonymity inherent to the mode of communication, which also disembodies the users and allows them to create themselves anew. It was argued by some that the cues people normally use to understand and locate a person's identity, such as age, gender and ethnicity, were entirely missing. 'The absence of non-verbal and other social or material cues to identity frees participants to be other than "themselves", or more of themselves than they normally express' (Danet *et al.*:1997:6).

These findings were however subject to some debate and other researchers found that visual cues were existent in cyberspace, although differently than in real life. Donath (1999) points out that that people used email addresses and signature styles, available in Usenet posts, as ways of establishing their own identity while evaluating others. Burkhalter (1999) and Mitra (1997) also found both race and ethnicity to be highly relevant to online users' identities and not at all absent as had been argued by some previously. This indicates that many may take with them categories and identities from the offline world as but do not use anonymity and the

proposed freedom of cyberspace to make entirely new ones (Kendall, 2002). This further strengthened the notion that the offline and online were not two entirely separate spheres but some continuation was present between the two spaces. (see Wynn and Katz, 1997; Miller and Slater, 2000; Kendall, 2002).

Even though researchers witnessed in some instances how users played with their identity in online spheres, they also noticed that stability was often preferred as people formed ties between them and social structures akin to communities started to emerge. (see Reid, 1991; Baym, 2000) In order for virtual communities to emerge and stabilize users need to be able to establish trust in one another and in order for that to happen they need to be recognizable to each other through their avatars or login-names. This is also echoed by Bechar-Israeli (1995) who studied IRC communication and the 'design' of user login names and found that 'although IRC provides its participants with the freedom to play with identities, people usually prefer the social attributes of a permanent, recognized identity.' (Bechar-Israeli, 1995:4)

This realisation led researchers to acknowledging the multiplicity of sites found within the Internet and that the various spaces may develop different conventions and social processes that impact on how identities are created and maintained. 'The Internet [...] is going to mean very different things to different people. The technology is going to have very different cultural meanings in different contexts.' (Hine, 2000: 29) This point is also emphasised by Miller and Slater (2000) who claim that '(s)ocial thought has gained little by attempting to generalise about 'cyberspace', 'the Internet', 'virtuality'' (Miller and Slater, 2000:1) They, much like Hine (2000) and Grint and Woolgar (1997), call for a different approach, one that examines Internet use as situated and contextual. Internet use is bound to be different depending on the cultural context it is located within. Hine (2000) draws our attention to how the Internet is 'culturally created' in addition to being a culture in its own right. The first point is a very important one as it highlights how knowledge drawn from research in one online space, for example a discussion forum, may not necessarily fully apply in other circumstances, for example on *MySpace*. Although both spaces are found online does not make them identical, as the users realise their potential in entirely different ways.

Although the Internet, along with research on it, has come a long way, some aspects seem to be more or less unchanged. Even though the Internet consists of more communication options, users still need to create an online representation, whether in a form of a nickname or a graphical avatar, and more recently an online profile such as on *MySpace* and *Facebook*.

'Through avatars users embody themselves and make real their engagement with a virtual world. (...) Avatars, in fact, come to provide access points in the creation of identity and social life. The bodies people use in these spaces provide a means to live digitally - to fully inhabit the world. It is not just that users exist as just "mind", but instead construct their identities through avatar'

(Taylor, 2002: 41).

Avatars include a range of graphical representations ranging from images that users choose to represent themselves on online discussion forums to 3D characters in many online games that can gesture, dance and communicate through 'speech bubbles'. Some avatars are standard images, supplied by the software designer; others can be customised by the users and in some instances images can be downloaded from other contexts. Avatars can be human, animal, vegetable and basically whatever suits the users' ideas each time. However, as Taylor (2002) and Webb (2001) point out, many spaces have developed traditions and rules regarding avatars and their use so the choice may not be as unlimited as it first seems. Also, as these spaces vary in their design and technological limitations, some can support complicated avatar designs while for others their capacity is more limited.

Considering all the various spaces available online and the multitude of ways of being, it is dubious to conclude that the Internet has one effect when it comes to constructing and maintaining an online identity, as was proposed in the early days of Internet research. As we have seen, the Internet is now considered as situated – a multifaceted place created through use. As a result it would be logical to assume, and Taylor's (2002) and Webb's (2001) claims support this, that login names and avatars are also situated and only make sense in the contexts in which they are created and maintained. Many online spaces foster what became known as 'virtual communities'.

As people grouped together they seemed to form a communal understanding of what each space entailed which consequently impacted on how identity was realised and managed.

Virtual communities

'We are struck, as we use the Internet, by the sense that there are others out there like us. That sense is amplified by the coincidental increase, brought about by our consumption of other media, of the feeling that the world "out there" is growing ever stranger and is less likely to resemble us as time goes on. The Internet serendipitously brings to us, in our living rooms and offices, a sense of connectedness, but it is an aimless connectedness, a kind which reassures that between "us" and "them" there may be some common ground after all.'

(Jones, 1997:17)

As numbers of users online grew researchers paid their attentions to the social structures that emerged in cyberspace. Newsgroups, IRC channels and MUD spaces became popular venues for socialising, playing and debating and were quickly labelled 'virtual communities'. Howard Rheingold (1993) defines virtual communities as 'social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' (Rheingold, 1993: 17). This stressed the importance of looking at how people felt about their Internet stay and on that basis to evaluate whether an online group constituted a community.

Some debate arose, however, over whether this was a justified way of granting the label to online gatherings. As some pointed out, communities can only exist where its members share a physical space and meet each other face-to-face (see Postman, 1993). So the initial questions that academics posed were often basic speculations that focused on the nature of online communication, such as 'can people find community online in the Internet? Can relationships between people who never see, smell, touch, or hear each other be supportive and intimate?' (Wellman and Gulia, 1999:167). For the purpose of being granted the term community, virtual gatherings were in some instances seen as too loose and the ties between the members

not strong enough, as people could potentially leave anytime at the 'click of the mouse'. Furthermore, it was assumed that most of the members would never meet face-to-face in 'the real world'. What became apparent, however, was that people who frequented these virtual gatherings saw them as communities and in many instances they proved to be very important to their members. Watson (1997) discusses these debates and with a reference to his study of an online music fan community outlines these debates and wonders what implications it may have if we assign the 'community' label to such groups. Watson (1997) furthermore argues that the group-specific meanings that are formed through interaction between the members are the basis of the community in question. This view was also put forward by Baym (1995, 2000) based on her research of an online soap-opera fan community which became a part of a new way to think of online communities – as shared practices. Researchers thus started to focus on the users' use of language such as inside jokes and abbreviations, along with shared knowledge that indicated how members make themselves known and understood by each other (Reid, 1995).

This however did not attend to the question of physical presence and the ability to maintain that something akin to a community exists in a space where people will in all likelihood never meet face-to-face. Watson (1997), in this respect, refers to Anderson's (1983) work where he brings forth the notion that a great majority of what we term as communities, including nations, are in fact imagined by their members. They are imagined 'because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (...) Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but in the style they are imagined' (Anderson, 1983: 6). This allowed the focus to shift from a definition which focuses on a group who exists in a shared physical space to that of a group whose members, on the basis of their relationship, imagine themselves as a community. 'Most significant are the emergence of group-specific forms of expression, identities, relationships and normative conventions.' (Baym, 1998:38)

Virtual communities use communal narratives and conventions to express who belongs to the community and who does not. In her research on an online soap opera fan community, Baym (1998) suggests that by looking at the community as an online

one, then too much emphasis is placed on the nature of the medium; if the community is seen as an audience community, the focus on the text they enjoy becomes too prominent. Instead, she proposes that we see this particular community as a community of practice which 'orients us to the participants' routinized yet dynamic patterns of action.' (ibid: 197) Thus by focusing on what virtual communities actually do instead of focusing on the fact that they exist online, they begin to emerge more clearly and we can begin to see them as coherent groupings which develop and utilise specific mechanisms for maintenance and social cohesion.

As we have seen throughout, it is considered important to remember that the Internet exists within in a wider cultural and social context and therefore it is important to refrain from making assumptions about online conduct solely based on the medium it is located within. Communal practices are seen by many to be the basis of virtual communities who make up the spaces within which virtual identities are imagined, created, practiced and maintained. On this basis I will now turn to review literature based on research that has been carried out in gaming environments similar to Freetown, in order to provide a wider backdrop to which my ethnography refers to and also to introduce and explore the qualities of online game spaces.

Fantasy role-playing, digital games and MMOGs

Offline fantasy role-playing games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, are considered to be the predecessors of MUDs and later MMOGs. Therefore, in order to fully understand MMOGs as contexts for character creation and maintenance, I feel it is necessary to know their past and how they originated

I will, firstly, start by explaining the concept of fantasy role-playing games and will then turn to exploring the work of G. A. Fine (1983), who studied fantasy role-playing games with a view to understand the gaming conduct and the links between players' identities and characters they created. Fine's (1983) research is an excellent example of thorough work and he provides interesting insights into the worlds of fantasy role-playing, which I will draw from as I analyse my ethnography of the Freetown community.

Secondly, I will explore the academic research that has been carried out within MMOGs in order to ground my own work and to see where additions can be made to the already established literature. I will especially focus on researchers who have approached MMOGs as social spaces, first and foremost, as I believe that the social nature of MMOGs is a very important feature which needs to be kept in mind as the relationship between players and characters are studied.

Fantasy role-playing games

There is a variety of role-playing games available, which can broadly be divided into three main groups depending on the medium through which they take place: tabletop role-playing, live action and online role-playing games such as MUDs and MMOGs. In 'tabletop' role-playing games, players take on the role of a character designed in part by themselves and partly according to gaming rules and traditions. There are countless role-playing systems but generally tabletop role-playing games involve players adopting the role of characters, which they take through a storyline that is created and lead by one of the group, the game master. In some instances the story and the advancement of each character is noted on a character sheet, which also holds a biography and the statistics of the character.²⁴ Many tabletop role-playing games are played according to thick manuals, which hold information on everything relevant to the game context and the characters. As an example, a role-playing manual could hold statistical information on weapons, armour, character race and profession. They also hold information on the world in which the stories are set and possible storylines. Players, when creating a character, need to choose for it a gender, race and class and then throw dice for the points that will make up its intelligence, dexterity and strength. Although each game has a different trait system, they are mostly built up in the same way. The game master usually creates a storyline beforehand and guides the rest of the players through it by narrating the landscape, creatures and other characters that the players run into on their journey.

In live action role-playing games the participants physically act out some or all of their characters' actions. LARP groups vary in their application of rules, costumes

²⁴ This is perhaps not true in all instances as each group varies in how they organise their play.

and the degree to which actions are acted out. LARP groups can range from including a few members to large scale events that hundreds of role-players attend.²⁵

Heliö (2004) defines role-playing games as ‘games, which consist of strategic and simulation-based actions in a fictitious world, where structures of conflict are strongly both encouraged and supported by the design of the game, i.e. the game master and/or the game system’(Heliö, 2004:66). Fine (1978) describes the pastime of fantasy role playing as ‘a social world, luxurious in imagination and filled with mysterious delights. This is a world of distant keeps, regal castles, glistening starships, fierce hippogriffs, rainbow dragons, and fiery jewels.’ (Fine, 1983: 72). What both Heliö (2004) and Fine (1983) highlight here is that role-playing takes part within what seems like an alternate world which is a part of the game but also acts as a shell around it. These fantasy worlds are created by the players and seem to only be restricted by their imagination and the role-playing gaming rules. Fine (1983) furthermore categorises role-playing communities as ‘leisure subcultures’ and claims that as such they are unlikely to ‘eclipse other subcultures that the person accepts.’ (ibid.: 237) His approach thus displays the activity as separate from other contexts of the players’ daily lives.

To analyse his ethnographic experience, Fine (1983) utilises Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis to approach the role-playing experience. According to Goffman (1974), frame analysis addresses not ‘the structure of social life but the structure of experience individuals have at any moment of their social lives.’ (Goffman, 1974: 13). To Fine (1983) frame analysis provides an ideal approach as the games are to him ‘a bounded set of social conventions [that are] set apart from the everyday world’ (Fine, 1983:182-183). Instead of seeing the practice of fantasy role-playing as an activity that takes place within the boundaries of the story-world, Fine (1983) further breaks it down into three frames: the primary framework, gaming framework, and fantasy framework. This approach is based on the assumption that the fantasy gamers ‘implicitly agree to “bracket” the world outside the game’ (ibid.: 183). According to Fine (1983), the players’ selves operate differently within each of the frames,

²⁵ The Gathering is held annually and is the largest LARP event in the UK. (<http://www.lorientrust.com/realworld/events/gathering.htm>)

dependent on whether they are being the character or the player. He does however admit that the players move between frames and identities very rapidly which suggests that the selves could be simultaneously activated and calls for frame analysis to examine in-depth the effects of simultaneously activated selves (ibid: chapter 6)

Even though Fine (1983) maintains that role-playing is a strictly bounded activity, he does acknowledge that most of the players have extensive historical knowledge in common as well as interest in science fiction and fantasy literature. Both the players and the game masters use this knowledge as they 'transform cultural elements' in their role-playing and use 'contradictory information' to create their characters (ibid: 2). The game masters need knowledge in order to be able to build the fantasy worlds and create their histories. The players need information to be able to develop their characters so that they may function convincingly within the game setting. The shared information is thus vital for the game to make sense to both players and game masters. 'It is not that the groups *have* culture, rather they *use* culture to imbue the events in their world with meaning and to create newly meaningful events.' (ibid: 238, italics in original).

It is clear that role-playing games and their players do not exist in a cultural vacuum, and it seems that the boundaries Fine (1983) recognises are more permeable and fluctuating than his approach seems to suggest. Also, the effect of the game context (rules and system) and the other players and their characters is unclear. Although Fine touches on the subject he does not examine it any further but focuses mainly on how players identify with the characters they create and how the character's identity is inherently linked to that of the player (ibid: 216).

What Fine's (1983) study offers is a good insight into the world of fantasy role-playing games and his approach is an interesting attempt to unveil the relationship between a player and his/her fictional character. By using frame analysis he attempts to analyse the various phases that role-players inevitably go through as they are either the player or the character and whether they are in game or talking about the game (IC or OOC). He identifies the weakness of frame analysis to tackle the issue of 'simultaneously activated selves', which is a very interesting issue that, in praxis,

online role-players seem to have solved in some way with the clearly visible division between IC and OOC speech and gestures²⁶.

I will leave these speculations for now, while I explore the research literature on digital games and more specifically MMOGs, but will return to them in my discussion of practice theory where I will evaluate how it could be useful to tackle this issue.

Digital games and MMOGs

In chapter 2 I described the MMOG experience to set the scene for the reader. Here I will move towards more analytical literature and will focus on research that has been carried out within these environments in order to ground my own research and evaluate where it can add to the already existing literature. I will focus mainly on the social nature of MMOGs and speculate, whether studying role-players in the manner I have proposed to do will help us understand MMOG players and their relationship with the characters they play. To start off this discussion I will outline schools of thought on digital games' research in order to demonstrate how games have recently been approached as both a social and cultural phenomena. I will also draw on studies of fan cultures and virtual communities.

Bryce and Rutter (2006) state that academic interest in digital games dates back to papers published in the 1980s that e.g. considered the use of copyright in the digital games industry (Hemnes, 1982) and the use of recreational programming to encourage the social integration of people with learning disabilities (Sedlak *et al*, 1982). They furthermore indicate that academic interest in this medium has increased, and base their claim on the significant rise in numbers of peer reviewed papers published on digital games during the period 2000-2004. (Bryce and Rutter, 2006: 2) Since the 1980s digital games have been studied by a variety of academic approaches, such as 'film and television theory, semiotics, performance theory, game studies, literary theory, computer science, ludology, media theory, narratology, aesthetics and art theory, psychology, theories of simulacra, and others' (Wolf and Perron: 2003:2).

²⁶ As I explained in Chapter 2, role-players in MMOGs have devised ways of separating between IC and OOC speech and gestures. They do so by either assigning separate chat channels to each category or place double brackets, (()), around OOC speech to separate it from IC utterances.

It is therefore evident that games are considered as multifaceted phenomenon which deserves an interdisciplinary approach to deepen our understanding of them and their role within contemporary culture.

Three key themes, which continually resurface in digital games research literature, are identified by Bryce and Rutter (2006) as firstly, the continuing discussion concerning the relationship between gender and gaming (see also Cassell and Jenkins, 1998; Krotoski, 2004), secondly the debate concerning whether digital games cause violence and aggressive behaviour (for overview of literature on violence and games see Williams, D, 2003; Bryce and Rutter, 2006: chapter 12) and thirdly possible use of digital games within education (see Dumbleton and Kirriemuir, 2006). These debates, in addition to research on other aspects of digital games have drawn our attention to the wider socio-cultural context in which games exist. Also, recent research has pointed out that majority of gaming is carried out in social contexts such as with family and friends, as well as with strangers in networked multiplayer games such as MUDs and MMOGs (see Turkle, 1995; Castronova, 2005; Taylor, 2006)

MMOGs have been theorised as social spaces by researchers such as Castronova (2005), Taylor (2006) and, Steinkuehler and Williams (2006). What has also been unveiled is how much of the sociability of these spaces is driven by game design, which encourages cooperation with the aim of completing goals, either individual or collective. The establishing of player reputation and status within MMOGs has been shown to be one of the driving forces behind MMOG play and, depends both on statistics of the character and quality of items owned, as well as characteristics of the player herself, e.g. being a good team player, generous and so forth (see Castronova, 2005 and Taylor, 2006). As with other online communities, MMOGs are seen to provide rich communication and a feeling of community based on shared language, norms and culture. What Castronova (2005) and Taylor (2004) furthermore point out is the tendency of MMOG play to extend outside of the actual game software itself and point to instances of players buying online items for real life currency, player conventions in real life, legal proceedings which aim to unravel the issue of ownership of items and currency.

Since the launch and apparent success of *Ultima Online (UO)* over a hundred MMOG titles have launched and many more are in development²⁷ and now millions of people²⁸ worldwide play MMOGs on a daily basis. According to Yee (2006a) the average player is around 27 years old and plays for about 23 hours a week. (Yee, 2006a: 194). These findings, based on data gathered from online surveys, are interesting as they indicate the average player to be somewhat older than general discourse on video games indicates. Furthermore, the average playtime may seem high, especially to non-players, which gives a clear indication of how important MMOGs have become to those who play, a point which has been further discussed by MMOG researchers such as Castronova (2005) and Taylor (2006).

As MMOGs are the descendants of MUDs they have strong ties to table top role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* where a game master would lead a group of players through a storyline filled with dangers and adventure. The players would need to work together as a team in order to navigate through the storyline successfully. Thus by design MMOGs prominently feature tasks that players need to solve in collaboration with each other. Most MMOGs offer a variety of character classes that are, more often than not, designed to complement each other as players work together in a group. Most MMOGs, for example, have some sort of a healer profession that keeps the group healthy and alive through their healing powers, as well as a so-called 'tank' profession, designed to be at the forefront of the group and to take most of the damage from enemies the groups may face. 'All roles have strengths and weaknesses, and a successful group is one where all members take full advantage of their own strengths while mitigating the vulnerabilities of their teammates.' (Yee, 2006a:29)

MMOGs feature open ended game play; there is no one finishing point in the game and there is no way of winning it. The players themselves decide when they have used the game to its full potential. There are many ways to play MMOGs and players have miscellaneous goals based on which they choose a role within the game (Castronova, 2005). The earliest player typification was coined by Richard Bartle

²⁷ A list of MMOGs can be found at <http://www.mmorpg.com/gamelist.cfm/gameId/0>

²⁸ See a chart on MMOGCHART.COM (<http://www.mmogchart.com/Chart4.html>) which displays total MMOG subscriptions from 1997 to present.

(1996), a UK based MUD pioneer and researcher. He drew the attention to the various ways in which players engaged with the MUDs and each other. From that information he forged four archetypes of MUD players: achievers, explorers, socialisers and killers. According to Bartle (1996), 'The achievers' as the name indicates are focused on 'achievement within the game context' in the sense that they 'give themselves game-related goals, and vigorously set out to achieve them.' The explorers focus on exploring the game and 'try and find out as much as they can about the virtual world'. The socialisers, according to Bartle (1996) 'use the game's communicative facilities, and apply the role-playing that these engender, as a context in which to converse (and otherwise interact) with their fellow players' while the killers 'use the tools provided by the game to cause distress to (or, in rare circumstances, to help) other players' (Bartle, 1996: 2-3).

Bartle (1996) claims that players can move between the types and also be a mixture of two or more player types and on the Internet players can take 'The Bartle Test'²⁹ in order to find out what player type/s they belong to. These player types have been referred to by game researchers as well as game developers to explore the different approaches players take towards the game environments. Players of MMOGS also have their own typology, which can differ between games but some are well known such as griefer³⁰, power gamer, PK³¹ and carebear³². Much like the Bartle typology these categories are very flexible, situated and are very often thrown around as insults between players as arguments arise. T.L. Taylor (2003) has explored the power gamer play style and refers to power gamers as 'participants who operate with a highly instrumental game-orientation.' (Taylor, 2003: 1) The power gamers are generally known, by players, as those who try and master aspects of the game in question. They have intricate knowledge of the statistics of characters, abilities, weapons and armour. They know the most efficient way of levelling characters and where the best loot drops are. They set themselves goals and work towards them

²⁹ The Bartle Test was based on Richard Bartle's work, which is cited above and was designed by Erwin Andreasen. It can be found on various websites, one of which is <http://www.guildcafe.com/bartle.php>

³⁰ 'Griefers' are seen to intentionally cause other players grief by various means, ranging from verbal insults to causing a characters' death, sometimes repeatedly.

³¹ PK stands for player-killer and is used to describe those players who engage in attacking and killing other players' characters.

³² 'Care bears' is a term that describes those who mainly want to use the game to socialise.

strategically. Role-players on the other hand are known for their interest in the narrative aspect of the game world, which they add to by writing content in the form of storylines and plots for their characters: 'They game through developing characters, alliances and plots (though it should be noted that there is no formal mechanism in the game for rewarding this activity and it has little part in actual levelling)' (ibid: 3).

In establishing MMOGs as social spaces and 'forums for communication' Castronova (2005) points out that players are 'always looking for ways to group up' (Castronova, 2005: 63) One way of grouping up is through the guild system and when a player joins a guild a guild 'tag' is added to the character name indicating to other players her guild affiliation. 'Membership in a guild offers players admission into a broader social network' (Taylor, 2006: 43). Guilds vary in size and management, some will evaluate players before granting them membership, while others are open for all to join if they so wish. Some will ask for members over a certain age and some will only accept members that current members will vouch for: 'The members depend on one another's strengths and exploits for their own individual success in the game by cultivating as shared reputation, sharing riches, and engaging in joint activities of mutual benefit' (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006: 14). Many guilds are 'themed' guilds which are formed with a certain purpose in mind, such as catering for a certain play-style, e.g. PK guilds and role-playing guilds, or profession-specific guilds such as entertainment guilds. In *SWG* there are, furthermore, 'story specific' guilds such as rebel and imperial guilds that players could join.

While some MMOGs are worlds in their own right, i.e. where the game world and back-story is designed for the particular game, others are based on familiar narratives derived from films, books or other games. *Star Wars Galaxies* is one of a few MMOGS which are based on worlds that have been made familiar to us through other media, others being *The Matrix Online* and *Lord of the Rings Online*. Klastrup & Tosca (2004) coin the term 'transmedial worlds' to describe these familiar worlds and define them as 'abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms.'(Klastrup & Tosca, 2004:1) In their work Klastrup & Tosca (2004) furthermore coin the term 'cyberworlds' which are defined as 'computer-mediated, networked and spatially navigable multi-user environments. 'Cyberworlds' contain

the possibility to interact in real time with other users and to actively interact with and influence the world itself.' (ibid: 5) When the characteristics of cyberworlds are used to actualize 'transmedial worlds' it allows the users and fans of the particular world to experience it from within. After the release of *SWG*, *Star Wars* fans no longer need to make do with watching the *Star Wars* Saga unfold on the screen, as it is now possible for them to partake collectively in the adventure by playing *SWG*. As a 'transmedial cyberworld', *SWG* allows players to operate within a context that is already familiar to them and all the users share to some extent knowledge of the *Star Wars* Universe. As will be explored in the subsequent chapters, in the case of Freetown this shared knowledge is then used to create further content in the form of storylines that are commonly grounded in the *Star Wars* Universe.

Klastrup & Tosca (2004) touch on a very important point here and that is the role of fandom, which has also been seen as vital component in the creation and successful maintenance of online communities. Fandom has been theorised extensively within the social sciences, cultural studies and media studies and I want to take the opportunity to touch on theories about the role of fandom in contemporary social life, as I believe it may include helpful points that allow us to better understand how players in 'transmedial cyberworlds' create and maintain their communities.

Fiske (1998) maintains that while meaning systems and materials that cultures are made of are produced by the cultural industries, the creation of culture out of these materials is a process that is performed by the consumers/users. This view is echoed in other studies of audiences where members of the audience are seen as active in working with media content in a variety of ways (Radway, 1987; Brown, 1994). Perhaps the most active audience are fan communities, which have come into being surrounding particular media content. Jenkins (1992) maintains that fans constitute particular interpretive communities with their 'distinctive reading protocols and structures of meaning.' In each case, fans are drawing on materials from the dominant media and employing them in ways that serve their own interests and facilitate their own pleasures' (Jenkins, H, 1992: 210-214). Fans are at the same time consumers and producers of content and being a member of a fan community provides people with shared identity and feeling of belonging.

Research by Baym (1998) and Watson (1997) suggests that online communities use communal narratives and conventions to establish who belongs to the community and who does not. Baym (1998) carried out qualitative research in a soap-opera fan community where she found that collective interpretations of soap opera content, in which the community engaged, was the practice that the community was formed around and furthermore served to strengthen the ties between members and hence the community as a whole. Baym (1998) argues that

'an on-line community's "style" is shaped by a range of pre existing structures, including external contexts, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes and participant characteristics. In ongoing communicative interaction, participants strategically appropriate and exploit the resources and rules those structures offer. The result is a dynamic set of systematic social meanings that enables participants to imagine themselves as a community.'

(Baym, 1998:38)

By recognizing these social meanings and by focusing on what the communities actually *do* instead of something that we imagine they *are* we can get a clearer view of what being a member of the communities in questions means to people and how they construct their identities within them.

The notion of community as formed around and maintained through shared practices is one Castronova (2005) attributes to MMOGs as he claims that they provide players with rich player communities based on shared language, culture and norms. As Taylor (2006) points out, most members are at one point or other members of player groupings, suggesting that the social element of play is very important and should not be underestimated when issues of identity and community are considered. As I pondered over how I could best include these connections between the individual and the social in my analysis, I decided to utilise practice theory to interpret my ethnographic experience in the Freetown community. By doing so I am hoping that its qualities, i.e. the focus on the individual and significant practices within context, will allow me to add to the previous literature on virtual community and identity that

in some ways neglects these important connections. I believe that in attempting to understand the relationship between players and their characters we need to take into account the contexts within which it is created and maintained, namely the social spaces of MMOGs. I will now assess practice theory and will at the end of this chapter outline my intentions and the suitability of practice theory for analysing the ethnography of a virtual community such as Freetown.

Practice theory

'Briefly, a theory of social practice emphasizes the relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing. It emphasizes the inherently socially negotiated character of meaning and the interested concerned character of the thought and action of persons-in-activity. This view also claims that learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world.'

(Lave & Wenger, 1991:51)

In this part I will introduce practice theory and my reasons for choosing it for the analysis of my research data. Lave & Wenger (1991) give a good summary of practice theory above and they highlight well its key points, for example that it takes into account 'the relational interdependency of agent and world'. By paying attention to players and the context they find themselves within, as they create and maintain their characters and communities, I believe I have the ability to add to the current literature that seems to include some theoretical limitations. Fine (1983) identifies some of these limitations in his use of frame analysis, which seems too bounded to fully grasp the relationship between a player and his/her character.

Also, as it has been established that the Internet can no longer be understood as one unitary place; it is clear that theories that were developed in the first years of the Internet may not be entirely applicable when it comes to answering questions we may have about life in online spheres such as MMOGs. Online spaces are no longer just text but provide users with a multitude of ways of presenting their virtual identity through photos, videos, music and avatars. Spaces such as MMOGs, *MySpace*,

YouTube, Facebook and Second Life. have established that cyberspace encompasses multiple and diverse ways of presenting oneself and connecting with others. Consequently I propose that to assume one identity theory for the entire Internet, where avatars are seen as the online projections of users' identities and which are fluid and multiple, is too narrow. With such a limited focus we risk losing sight of the nuances that undoubtedly accompany the use of each online sphere.

I will start by outlining practice theory and its main contributors and then go on to explore how the use of practice theory to understand the relationship players and characters in a community such as Freetown may contribute to the current literature on life in online worlds.

According to Ortner (1984) practice theory is 'a symbol, in the name of which a variety of theories and methods are being developed' (Ortner, 1984: 127). It sees identities created through practice by active agents, and the context in which the practice takes place is also seen to impact on this process. To explore practice theory before explaining its usefulness as a theoretical framework for this particular research I will start by outlining 'the theory of practice' as presented by Pierre Bourdieu (1977) in which he uses the concepts habitus', 'field' and 'symbolic capital' to approach and theorise about how identity construction is inevitably dependent on context as well as the agency of the individual.

Bourdieu (1977) maintains that knowledge is practical, and

'[M]astery of the symbolism of social interaction. ... This practical knowledge, based on the continuous decoding of the perceived - but not consciously noticed - ... continuously carries out the checks and corrections intended to ensure the adjustment of practices and expressions to the reactions and expectations of the other agents. It functions like a self-regulating device programmed to redefine courses of action in accordance with information received on the reception of information transmitted and on the effects produced by that information'

(Bourdieu, 1977:10-11)

We, as agents, are the embodiment of this practical knowledge - it is our 'habitus'. We act and react, knowingly and unknowingly, according to written and unwritten rules that exist in each context of social interaction. Whether we react appropriately or not is based on our 'habitus' and on the 'field' in which the encounter takes place. This draws our attention to the relationship between agent, the social and practices through which the agent and world are constantly being created through.

There are 'codes of conduct' in every society 'preserved by the group memory [who] are themselves the product of a small batch of schemes enabling agents to generate an infinity of practices adapted to endlessly changing situations, without those schemes ever being constituted as explicit principles' (ibid: 16). The members of a community know what is fitting the occasion and what is not. These rules are not always explicit, nor do they lie outside the world that surrounds us. They are a part of us and produce our 'habitus'. 'Habitus' is a concept used by Bourdieu and encapsulates, in short, the dispositions of the agent, which in turn explains his/her practice. Habitus is seen as what 'generate[s] and organize[s] practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them' (Bourdieu, 1990:53). The habitus produces and regulates practice according to the rules, which are based on the context or the 'field' as Bourdieu terms it. A field in Bourdieu's view is a social arena within which struggles over specific resources (cultural and symbolic capital) take place: 'Each field, by virtue of its defining content, has a different logic and taken-for-granted structure of necessity and relevance which is both the product and producer of the habitus which is specific and appropriate to the field' (Jenkins, R, 1992:85). The fields are not separate, but 'relatively autonomous for the relationship any field has to any other fields [...] is refracted by the mode of cultural production specific to the field' (Holland *et al*, 1998: 58).

Practice theory sees identity and self as created and maintained in practice; what you do defines who you are. Holland *et al*. (1998) maintain that 'identities are improvised - in the flow of activity within specific social situations - from the cultural resources at hand' (Holland *et al*, 1998: 4). They coin the term 'figured

worlds' to describe these social situations which 'rest upon people's abilities to form and be formed in collectively realized "as if" realms. ... People have the propensity to be drawn to, recruited for, and formed in these worlds, and to become active in and passionate about them. ... People's identities and agency are formed dialectically and dialogically in these "as if" worlds' (ibid.: 49). Whether we call them 'figured worlds' or 'fields' it is clear that practice theory sees identities as outcomes of active participation within these contexts. Furthermore the context itself is recreated and maintained through practice. As people participate in these contexts 'communities of practice' come into being. Lave & Wenger (1991) explored the notion of 'communities of practice' in relation to learning and define them as 'a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger: 1991:98). Baym (2000) later used this term in her research in an online soap opera community and found it to be useful as it focuses our attention on what the members actually *do*, instead of seeing them as something that we presume they *are*, based on their mode of communication. Baym (2000) maintains that 'the key to understanding online and audience communities is to focus on the communicative patterns of participants rather than on the media through and in response to which members coalesce' (Baym, 2000: 5).

In order to participate in a MMOG, the players need to negotiate aspects of their play with each other, as they form either permanent or temporary groups. In order to understand how characters are created, maintained and how they relate to the players, I feel we need to take into account the context in which the players act. Klastrup and Tosca (2004) point to how *SWG* is inevitably connected with a wider context of entertainment and leisure encapsulated in the extended narrative of the *Star Wars* universe. Furthermore, research on fan communities (see Jenkins, 1992; Fiske, 1998, and Baym, 2000), both online and offline, points towards how important the texts are in providing members with a sense of belonging through their common interpretive practices. Practice theory allows me to take into account the influence of these contexts, as well as how the players act within them. This allows me to approach Freetown not only as a virtual community but a community of practice, and consequently explore how these practices influence the character and community creation and maintenance.

Summary and discussion

The purpose of this chapter was to frame the ethnography of Freetown and identify theories and concepts which could contribute to my analysis. At the beginning of the chapter I outlined how identity has been perceived in postmodern times as fluid and relative to context of social interaction at any given time (see Hall, 1996). Once people started taking part in communication online the idea of the fluid identity was highlighted in literature concerning identity play and the nature of online communication was seen to impact heavily upon this process. The online was seen as separate from the offline where different rules applied. However, as an antidote to these theories there were voices that claimed that the Internet was just one part of our daily lives, which demanded our attention not as a separate sphere but as a multiple context wherein social processes flourished in many different ways. This highlights the need to revisit the study of virtual identity, where it is examined in the context where it is created and maintained within the virtual community.

Baym (2000) proposes this shift and that the focus should be placed on online localised gatherings, as it can no longer be maintained that cyberspace is one place where the same rules apply with regard to community and identity structuring. It has been suggested that in order to understand virtual experiences it is more helpful to regard cyberspace as composed of multiple sites where group specific conventions have been developed by members with regard to community, identity and communication. The combination of ethnography as a research method (further explored in Chapter 4) and practice theory as my theoretical framework allows me to explore players and their characters along with the context in which they are situated.

I chose to explore identity within a role-playing community, which is set within the MMOG *Star Wars Galaxies*. In MMOGs the players carefully train their characters, establish and maintain their reputation and that does indicate that constantly swapping identities to try out new ones would be very counterproductive. So it seems that the very concept of MMOGs does limit the players' agency in terms of identity reconstruction. Furthermore some of the more recent ones have roots in other popular culture phenomenon such as films (*Matrix Online* and *Star Wars Galaxies*) and literature (*Middle Earth Online*). So as the players enter these

environments they are already part of a larger ongoing narrative that they may need to fit into.

As such the virtual worlds we encounter today are not necessarily unknown to us and we may enter them with other intentions than experimenting with identity play and identity swapping (Turkle, 1995). Our characters, as the play-styles indicate, may be created for a variety of reasons, such as what purpose we see them serve in a gaming environment. Also, in light of how cooperative and sociable MMOGs are, it will be difficult for us to “be whoever we want to be” as we need to take into consideration the players we play with and the gaming context of each MMOG we enter.

To contribute to our understanding of virtual identity as experienced in game worlds such as *SWG*, which is largely based on collaboration and communication between players, I chose practice theory as it focuses on identity as created and maintained through practice in each context. This allows me to explore players, characters and their practices within the context of *SWG*, which includes player communities, MMOG rules and conventions and last but not least the extended familiar narrative of the *Star Wars* universe.

My findings from the Freetown ethnography form the main body of this thesis and are the subject of Chapters 5, 6 and 7. However, I feel that it is vital to start by describing my methodology and introduce the Freetown community and my character Vivianne who was my representation in the field. I will furthermore use the next chapter to discuss the research method of ethnography, how it is suited to conducting research in virtual worlds and to describe my ethnographic journey through *SWG*.

Chapter 4

Methodology



Figure 6: Vivianne

Introduction

In the last chapter I explored theories concerning virtual spaces and how their authors have explained the relationship between users and their virtual representations. We saw how understandings of virtual environments have shifted from scholars focusing on proposed broad effects of the 'virtual' on identity and community, to focusing on localised social formations that can be found online and taking into account the practices which users engage in when attempting to understand their online experiences.

In this chapter I will discuss and present ethnography as the methodology I selected for this research. I will start by outlining the qualities of ethnography and speculate on its inherent benefits when it comes to conducting research in online communities. I will then turn to more descriptive aspects of this chapter as I will recount my field experience. This will include an introduction of Vivianne, my character and presence in the field, and I will describe our progress as members of the Freetown community. A discussion of my interview conduct will then follow and I describe how useful online interviewing can be in research such as this. I will furthermore explain how online instant messaging programs, such as *MSN Messenger* which I used in this instance, as a tool for interviewing can also help to integrate the researcher into the field.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, it is common for player communities in MMOGs to have a website and discussion forums where players can discuss the games and other issues with each other. The Freetown community was no exception, and I spent considerable time reading up on various issues on their web forums. As the forums were used frequently as part of the role-playing practices, as member of the community I also needed to participate in forum discussions. Due to how relevant the forums were to the practices of the players I decided to include them in the ethnography. I will describe and assess how I used the Freetown discussion forums and the content that players posted there for analysis, and how the method of ethnography made it possible to include this material.

Before concluding with a discussion on virtual ethnography and its usefulness for a research such as this one, I will discuss ethical issues which are inevitably a part of any social research and describe how I tackled them during the process of the ethnography.

Why ethnography?

'In its most characteristic form [ethnography] involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research.' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:1)

The purpose (and genius) of anthropological ethnography is surely that it takes people seriously: it attempts to reveal complexity, not gratuitously, but because people and the lives they create, and the social and cultural conditions within which they create them, are enormously complex. (Cohen, 2000:6)

As became apparent in Chapter 3, identity is a thoroughly scrutinised subject within the social sciences. Within certain fields of contemporary theory, as we saw in Chapter 3, it is understood as a fluid entity, created and re-created by people depending on context and also in relation to others. When trying to understand people's thoughts and practices within online gaming communities I felt that it was imperative to have a flexible research method that aims for holism in describing and analysing social phenomena. I also felt that as I presented the findings my respondents' voices should be heard along with my own as I explore my experience of what the concept of 'virtual identity' means in an MMOG environment. In my view the research method that allows for all of this to happen is the method of ethnography.

Ethnography falls within the qualitative research paradigm and was originally the defining research method of anthropology. It dates back to the turn of the twentieth century when anthropologists attempted, by staying for an extended time in faraway lands, to gain a holistic understanding of the 'natives' way of life (see Boas, 1911; Malinowski, 1922). The first ethnographers believed that by spending

time 'in the field' they would be able to gain the same level of cultural understanding as the people they were studying, and at the same time occupying the role of a researcher. The ethnographic approach has changed along with the social sciences for the last century and undergone scrutiny and criticism from varied angles (see Fabian, 1983; Marcus, 1994). However, ethnography remains a prevalent research method and is now used by academic researchers within a variety of disciplines such as media, nursing and business studies. As ethnography is used in more diverse settings the approach has also changed from focusing on a distant community's way of life to include other forms of research, for example to tackling specific topics or groups, e.g. youth culture and popular music (Bennett, 2000), Alcoholics Anonymous (Holland et al, 1998) and black single fathers (Coles, 2002). Also, the ethnographers of our times, in many instances, carry out research within their own societies instead of travelling to 'exotic' locations. Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) define ethnography as a 'set of methods', aiming to collect whatever data is available on the research subject. For this research I chose the 'set of methods' most often employed by ethnographers, that is, participant observation, interviewing and document analysis.

The inherent flexibility of ethnography makes it an appealing choice for research online as the nature of online interaction is very fluid and multifaceted. This flexibility makes ethnography well capable of dealing with the complexity of 'multiple sites' (Marcus 1995) and networks 'consisting of nodes, but also a set of connections between the nodes' (Wittel, 2000: paragraph 5). Marcus (1995) claims that with postmodernism the ethnographical focus has shifted from 'single sites and local situations' to the 'circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space.' (Marcus, 1995: 96) He furthermore claims that 'multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations' and urges the ethnographer to 'follow the people' (ibid: 106). From knowing MMOGs before I started the research I knew that in all likelihood the ethnography would extend outside of the actual game-space of *SWG* to websites and instant messaging programs. These additional modes of communication need to be included in the study if a deep understanding of the phenomenon of online role-playing is to be reached (Isabella, 2007). Therefore I felt that this quality of ethnography would benefit the research in many ways and allow me to include connections and links that I would stumble upon. I felt this choice made me more capable of 'following the people' to

observe and take part in their practices. By choosing ethnography I felt I could shy away from presuming boundaries at the start of the research, and rather aim to explore them through the course of the ethnography, a quality highlighted by Hine (2000).

Using the methods of participant observation to study cyberspace extends back to the 1990's when researchers began to explore online social formations (see Rheingold, 1993; Reid, 1995; Baym, 2000). Considering the origins of ethnography it is obvious that it was designed and theorised for use in face-to-face interaction between a researcher and his/her subjects, and most often involved travelling to 'the field'. Conducting virtual ethnography mostly does not involve face-to-face communication, in the traditional sense, or travel as 'visiting the Internet focuses on experiential rather than physical displacement (Hine, 2000: 45). Playing *SWG* as well as locating, accessing and playing in Freetown involved this 'experiential displacement' mostly rooted in the fact that I 'arrived' there as a researcher, which involves more of a sense of travel to me than when I have logged on to MMOGs as a 'regular player'. It involved introductory posts, a lengthy character creation phase and considerations and measures that I would normally not take if I were playing for leisure purposes. In past research as well as this one I have found that assuming the stance of a researcher as I have entered MMOG communities involves adopting a different stance than if I was a general player, in order to gain oversight over the social processes taking place at each time. However in this research, as it involved the practice of role-playing which demands, at times, deep immersion I found myself having to modify this distance and sometimes this became problematic for me during the course of the ethnography. This was mostly due to unforeseen events during the actualisation of storylines and also due to the character, Vivianne, which I created for the purpose of the research. I will revisit and explain these points later on in the chapter where I discuss my participant observation and research experiences.

The concerns as to whether the lack of face-to-face interaction puts at jeopardy the credibility of the virtual ethnography and the validity of findings have been highlighted by a number of scholars, for example Correll (1995), Turkle (1995) and Wittel (2000). Both Correll (1995) and Turkle (1995) arranged to meet with their respondents face-to-face in addition to their online meetings in order to verify what they had been told about the respondents' offline lives. I would maintain that the lack

of face-to-face interaction in many virtual communities is a defining quality of being in online spaces and needs to be taken into account by researchers as they enter these spheres. I agree with Hine (2000) when she claims that 'to instigate face-to-face meetings in this situation would place the ethnographer in an asymmetric position, using more varied and different means of communication to understand informants than are used by the informants themselves.' (Hine, 2000:48)

I unexpectedly had the chance to meet up with two of the Freetown players as I was travelling to their hometown for other purposes. During a session I mentioned this and I decided to ask them if they would like to meet up, which they agreed to instantly. I asked them if I could ask them a few questions for my research and bring a tape-recorder, which they agreed to. That interview was loosely structured and more like a chat about role-playing in general, *SWG* and the Freetown community. While interviewing the two players supplied me with valuable information on the aforementioned subjects I feel, in hindsight, that it did not give me an added feeling of credibility or increased my belief about the accuracy of the information they had provided me with previously when I only knew them online. As my focus is on players and their characters, I felt that in order to find out about the subject at hand I would have to use the communication methods employed by the Freetown community. I had no real 'need' to confirm information about the players' real life identities; for me it was enough to know that they were members of the Freetown community and finding that out was rather straightforward. I would however like to stress that different research topics need different approaches and in some instances it may be necessary for Internet researchers to meet their respondents 'in the flesh', for example if the research topic or method of analysis requires such information.

All things considered I feel that using ethnography for the purpose and aims that are set out in Chapter 1 was an appropriate choice with regard to my research questions and my theoretical framework of practice theory. The practice of online role-playing is both a multifaceted and fluid phenomenon and requires a flexible approach that can adapt to changing circumstances. As I entered Freetown I was not sure what I would be faced with and during its course the research took some unexpected turns. However, due to the method's inherent adaptability I am confident that I managed to gain good understanding of the role-playing as a practice and

consequently Freetown as a community. The participant observation allowed me to experience character creation and maintenance from a different angle than I was used to and I am certain that it provided me with added insight into how the relationship between characters and players is actively maintained through practice.

I will now outline the sets of methods I used, including participant observation, interviews and document analysis, as I describe my ethnography of the Freetown community.

Participant observation

'[S]ocial science observation is fundamentally about understanding the routine rather than what appears to be exciting. Indeed, the good observer finds excitement in the most everyday, mundane kinds of activities.'

(Silverman, 1993: 30)

Engaging in participant observation, as Silverman (1993) points out, includes taking note of the most mundane everyday activities. It furthermore entails the researcher being alert at all times and constantly analysing what is going on around her. I will thus use this chapter to illustrate the most mundane activities of an MMOG player starting to play a new game before I set off to explore and describe my experiences of participant observation within the Freetown community. This will include descriptions of how I came to find and access Freetown, as well as introduce my online research identity, Vivianne. She plays a key role in this ethnography as she is the one who allowed me to partake in Freetown activities as well as introduced me to how online identities are designed with multiple purposes in mind, a key theme that runs throughout this dissertation. This theme will be revisited throughout the following chapters but I introduce this idea here before going on to describe the online interviews and the document analysis which I carried out as part of the ethnography of Freetown.

First steps

I am a fairly confident MMOG player, having played a few titles that have been published since *UO*. I had however not played a game set in a world such as the *Star Wars* universe, where most things you encounter in game are in some way a reference to the films and the extended universe. Not intimately knowing the ins and outs of the *Star Wars* universe was not a hindrance as I started playing *SWG* and was familiarising myself with the controls and training my character; I however felt the lack of knowledge to be limiting as the ethnography developed as I sometimes failed to understand the references and storylines of other players. I therefore decided to watch all the *Star Wars* films to help with the quality of my role-play and my integration into the community of Freetown. I thereby extended the field of research, so to speak, to include offline as well as online entertainment entities. How fluid and multiple the field is and how it reaches into offline parts of life as well as online, will become apparent further on in this chapter when I talk about online interviewing as well as in the following chapters.

After a decision has been made on what MMOG a player wants to play and the game software has been purchased (in the case of *SWG* for £39.99) it needs to be installed on the computer as a client that will communicate with the game server, on which the multiplayer element is actualised. A monthly subscription³³ to the game must be paid for before players are able to log on and enter the virtual worlds. So the first steps include setting up an online account by supplying personal details along with a credit card number. As I have done all this a few times before, this process is rather straightforward. The installing and initial setup of these games is most often a 'user friendly' process that prospective players should sail through without any complication. They should, however, make sure that their computer is up to running a game of this size, as they tend to be heavy in terms of processing. If the computer is not powerful enough to run the game or the connection speed of the Internet connection is not sufficiently fast, it will result in a very unsatisfying gaming experience as each new frame may take too long to load up. Consequently it is very

³³ Most often the monthly subscription fee to any one MMOG ranges from £10-£15. In some instances the game software and subscription is free. This applies mostly to smaller scale MMOGs. Also, recent MMOGs such as *GuildWars* charge the player only for the game software but not for subscription.

difficult to move the character around and you may miss significant events taking place on screen, such as battles and conversations.

Starting a new MMOG includes learning on many levels, as the prospective player needs to learn how to navigate a new world, a new interface and a new storyline (see Steinkuehler, 2004; Galarneau, 2006; Taylor, 2006). Furthermore, the controls tend to vary between games so the first sessions include, for me at least, a lot of 'running into walls' and communicating difficulties as the player learns how to use chat channels. The 'newbie'³⁴ period that inevitably follows logging on to a new game generally extends over the first few sessions while the new player is finding her feet in the new world. I have the fortune of living with another MMOG enthusiast and that can be very helpful during these first stages as one needs to figure out the skill system and one's chosen profession. The skill system in *SWG*, at the time that I started my research, was more complex than I had encountered before as it allowed players to mix and match skills within each profession. However, during my stay there it underwent gradual simplification and significant changes were made by the game designers. Changes to the game system are common in MMOGs, and consequently players may be learning to play the game throughout their stay there.

As explained in Chapter 2, MMOGs are designed for open-ended game-play. There are no strict 'game rules', only what is made possible and impossible by the game software and furthermore there are no winners or losers. There is, however, an abundance of 'social rules' that most players pick up as they go along and if they have played other MMOGs before they are mostly fully fledged in MMOG etiquette, although there may be slight variations to each game. The games have no one aim or a common goal for all the players to work towards. Every player may have their own agenda, whether it is to have a high level character, a good crafter that makes you money, a good circle of friends or plenty of possessions in the form of clothes and decorated houses. Most characters are created with an aim in mind which can be seen, among other things, in the profession chosen for each particular character. Many players put a lot of thought into designing their character in accordance with what they want out of the game experience (see Taylor, 2006:13).

³⁴ The term 'newbie' is used to refer to new players who are still finding their feet within the game. 'Noob' is a derivative of this term and both are also frequently thrown around by players as insults.

The gaming concept behind each and every MMOG is similar, with regard to character creation and skill development wherein the player creates a character and trains her up by taking on various in-game tasks, such as missions and quests. In some games the skills can also be bought for in-game currency. Players can either take on these tasks on their own or as part of the temporary or more permanent groupings that I introduced in Chapter 2. Each MMOG game world is different with regard to storyline but they all have in common that within them ‘players are largely free to do as they please – slay over grown butterflies, siege cities, barter goods in town, or scalp raw materials off the local flora and fauna.’ (Squire and Steinkuehler, 2006: 2)

I purchased my copy of *SWG* from the local game store and installed it on my computer and after going through the process outlined above I logged on for the first time. I did not know much about *SWG* as a game beforehand but was sure I would be to be met with a similar environment as in my previous MMOGs. As I entered the world as Vivianne I started out in the training facility, a brief quest where you learn how to navigate and use the main controls of the character. In *SWG* you can change your view from first person view, i.e. see the world through her eyes to third person view which enables you to look down on Vivianne and the area around her. You can also zoom in and out and rotate the viewpoint to look around. The default view is to look at the character from behind, from afar and a little above so you can see its immediate surroundings, which has the benefit of being aware of any dangers lurking in the vicinity.

Once you log on you are met with the gaming interface. ‘Looking around the screen you notice a number of controls and information sources. In a mouse-based interface, these will be buttons and clickable windows.’ (Castronova, 2005: 35) As I described in Chapter 2 (page 30), in *SWG* you have your ‘stats bars’, a radial map, a chat window with customizable tabs, and ‘hot key bars’ then you have a button to access your inventory, game options and in-game mail. In *SWG* the interface is highly customizable as most of these controls and buttons can be moved around and chat windows can be multiplied to accommodate the various chat channels that players can access. The interface setup can thus vary greatly between players as I

found out when I asked the players of Freetown to send me a screenshot of their interface.



Figure 7: The graphical user interface, as setup by one of Freetown's inhabitants. This player has separated IC chat from OOC chat by assigning each to two different windows. The window that includes orange text is the Freetown OOC Chat channel, while the large chat window is the spatial OOC chat.

Entering a new MMOG, I find, is always bewildering because as I start out I have no real goal but to find out how to operate in the world and 'level up' my character. The following is a summary from my field notes that I wrote down during my first play sessions that I feel describe well how confusing the first steps were:

"Vivianne takes her first steps into the world of *SWG*, goes through the new player tutorial and enters the world with a helper droid at her side, a replica of the R2D2 droid from the Star Wars films, which can assign her profession quests and helps out to begin with. Because I chose to be a medic, the droid suggests that I visit the local hospital and tend to the wounds of those whose visit

and thus gather experience points to reach the next skill level, which results in making me a better healer. I stand around the hospital for a while increasingly confused because I have four icons on my screen, all intended for healing in some way or another. Two that heal or tend damage, and two that heal or tend wounds. What is the difference?!? And what is this HAM that everyone is talking about?!?

I soon find out that HAM is an acronym that stands for the three life bars, Health, Action, Mind and if any part of those bars goes black, then that bit is a 'wound', if it goes white it is 'damage'. I apparently can only heal wounds in a hospital or at a camp. Damage I can heal wherever and whenever. I also find out that I need to craft stimpacks to heal both wounds and damage because if I don't have those I use a big fraction of my Mind.

At the hospital I start chatting to people and listening in on conversations and I soon find that familiar MMOG feeling as I start meeting the various MMOG archetypes: The one that is begging for something, money, armour etc. The nice player, who gives you advice, chats and gives you medical stuff. The "teenager" who asks if you are really a woman, then asks you to strip and then the flirty one which gives you credits (space age money) and calls you honey."

(Fieldnotes, 22.06.2004)

This first experience is unique to each player and here I describe the first steps of someone who decides to play as a medic. If I had chosen another profession this learning curve would have been somewhat different and resulted in a different character altogether and most likely a different ethnographic experience (see Taylor, 2006, chapter 1). I must admit that I do have difficulty in pinpointing the exact effects Vivianne had, but will outline these in the concluding discussion to this

dissertation and will touch on this influence throughout the remainder of the dissertation.

Vivianne

'As is always the case with shared virtual environments, how you choose to represent yourself has meaningful implications psychologically and socially'

(Taylor, 2006: 12)

Taylor's (2006) view on character creation echoes what I maintained at the end of the previous section. The way Vivianne was created and how I role-played her, i.e. her reactions to events and the people she met had effects on storylines and in turn storylines had effect on her, some of which I had not foreseen. The process of role-playing Vivianne and watching her transform before me made me realise that I had limited control over how Vivianne turned out. There are of course guidelines and rules in role-playing, some of which are featured on the Freetown forums, which maintain that only the player has control over their characters and decides what happens to them. But as I found out, these guidelines mainly applied to major life changing events, such as character death. The minor changes that happened gradually as she was integrated into a community greatly affected the relationship between me and Vivianne. At times I felt that I was little in control over what happened to her, which resulted in completely new insights into how the identities that we create for participation in online environments sometimes may not be entirely ours. This will become evident as I now trace Vivianne's story from the character creation phase and throughout her stay in Freetown. This is furthermore a point that will be revisited throughout the remainder of the dissertation.

Before starting the game, players need to create a character that will represent them in the world they are about to enter. As a player of MMOGs this was something I had done before and mostly breezed through as I created either 'research tools' or characters for leisure purposes. However, this time around it was different. As I logged on to *SWG* I encountered the most advanced character customization options that I have encountered in a MMOG so far, where the options make it possible to

create a unique character by modifying facial features, height, weight, skin colour, hair styles, hair colour, eye colour.



Figure 8: Screenshot of facial modifications.

1.) On this slide bar you can assign the character freckles. 2.) By moving this bar you decide whether your character should have eyeshadow or not. 3) By clicking this button you can switch to full body size and alter the character's body. 4.) This is the active menu where you decide on eyeshadow, lip colour and freckles (make-up is only available to females of certain races). 5) By clicking this button you get access to a menu that allows you to modify the shape of the nose and eyes. 6.) By clicking face you get access to a menu that allows you to alter the shape of the chin, jaw and cheeks. 7.) These are the colour palettes that allow you to pick a colour for the characters makeup.

As in other MMOGs, the player also chooses a name, gender, race and a profession. 'Not knowing what the world will be like, it's hard to know what kind of person to be.' (Castronova, 2005: 32) What I knew was that I was about to enter the world of *Star Wars*, a world I was not intimately familiar with. That, however, was not my main concern. The fact that I would have to role-play in a MMOG environment was what worried me and resulted in the longest character building session that I have gone through before entering a new MMOG world. The result was

a tall, white, red-haired human female of medium build called Vivianne. For facial modifications I recruited the help of my partner in order for her to resemble myself as much as possible. I was very aware of her prospective role in the ethnography so, in short, I tried to replicate myself. This meticulous approach to character creation was my preparation for research, role-playing as well as my perceived role in the game:

- I tried, through character creation, to increase my credibility as a researcher to my respondents. My aim was for honesty and authentic appearance and thus Vivianne was created as an image of me.
- I aimed to increase the credibility of the research as a whole, which was an attempt to fend off some of the criticisms of virtual ethnography as being less valid, as it is often conducted without face-to-face interaction. In short I wanted to provide what resembled an 'authentic' character that would be my 'face' in the field.
- Trying to create a character that felt close to me was my way of trying to minimize the chance of failure to role-play so I chose the role most familiar to me, that is, myself. This was in part done to minimize my impact on the field of research so a low key natural character was what I opted for.
- In most MMOG groupings medics are very useful as they heal other members of the team during group combat. I wanted to make sure that Vivianne would be useful for the community that I was about to enter and as such would be invited on guild hunts. My aim was that by being useful would increase my presence among the players.

As I had plans for Vivianne to be a social researcher in game I put a lot of thought in designing her and her biography. The characters I have used before have more been tools that enabled me to participate and carry out research and I never paid any particular attention to them as I designed them. They were mainly devices that enabled me to be there and to interact with other players. As I designed Vivianne I

was aware that this might change, bearing in mind that I intended to role-play her. So initially she was designed partly as a tool, partly a replica of me and partly a character in her own right. These parts that formed the whole of Vivianne would remain more or less prominent during play in Freetown and remained fluid throughout the ethnography. Watching Vivianne change throughout the course of the ethnography made me aware of how characters can be created for various purposes and how these purposes and subsequently the characters can change. These fluid and multiple purposes and roles that are assigned to characters and the changes they go through during role-play will form the main basis of chapter 6 where I discuss players, characters and their identities.

Before I started playing *SWG* and during my first play sessions there I browsed through endless amounts of PA³⁵ forums and focused especially on role-playing forums in order to predict what kind of experience might be around the corner. That is where I learned that I needed to write Vivianne a biography, something that explains who she is and her journey to the place that she ends up in, i.e. the role-playing community. Again Vivianne was created and this time through narrative that would explain her 'persona'. I had loosely structured Vivianne a biography before finding Freetown and decided that Vivianne, like me, was a researcher taking interviews with people for a research project. What I had in mind was to try and take a few interviews in-character in order to see how players/characters would perform in such circumstances. I was also hoping that by having a role within the community and the chance to chat to characters in private, Vivianne would quickly become well integrated into the community. I will come back to this in more detail in the part that focuses specifically on the interviews.

Upon arrival in Freetown I structured the biography around the town in order to explain why Vivianne came to town:

“Vivianne grew up on a research centre on the icy planet of Hoth. Like her parents she decided to become a pathologist and is well underway with her studies. Recently though,

³⁵ Player Association is a more recent term for what was called a guild in the earlier MMOGs.

she has found social sciences to be more interesting and after being approached by the Bureau of Ethnicity and Socialization to do a research project on Naina, she left Hoth to pursue this new career. She has set up a research centre in the Town of Freetown and travels around the planet to find respondents for her research. She is in the process of collecting life stories of the inhabitants of Naina as a way of studying socialisations processes on this planet that is known for being the refuge of people that do not wish to be found. All information Vivianne gathers is confidential and is kept well away from the prying eyes of the Empire.”

In order to situate Vivianne correctly within the Star Wars narrative I had to ask for guidance from my partner who told me the story of the planet that Freetown was situated on and explained that it was neither entirely rebel or imperial, as it was controlled by a criminal element and I should probably bear in mind whether Vivianne was in any way connected to that organisation in case she was asked. So I needed to brush up on my Star Wars knowledge to be prepared for questions regarding Vivianne’s background and intentions. All this work was carried out in the hope that Vivianne would seem like an authentic researcher but not a spy, something I anticipated could create difficulties during role-playing.

As said before I had little idea where Vivianne would end up and what characters she would encounter during her research. But what would surprise me the most about Vivianne is the changes she went through as a character that were entirely beyond my control. These changes were mostly due to storylines that she took part in that would leave a permanent mark on her and it was these changes I had to come to terms with in order to properly stay in character.

Aside from her biography Vivianne came to Freetown a *tabula rasa*, as I was not sure who she was despite having prepared for her creation. Most importantly I had no idea what community she would find herself in and what characters she would encounter. As many of my fellow players would refer to in the interviews, the

character is unknown to you until you play it for a while and some characters may never settle with you. Thus most of Vivianne's personality came into being through interaction with other members of Freetown; only the bare foundation of her personality was laid by me in her biography.

Regardless of all the preparation I went through, as I created Vivianne there were issues that I would encounter that I could never have predicted, even though I see myself to be a veteran MMOG player. This reveals how even though a researcher feels she knows her field there will always be surprises and preparation can only take you thus far (see Van Maanen, 1988; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The most problematic issues would arise during 'emotional role-play' where two or more characters share intimate moments, often of a romantic nature. Having created Vivianne so close to me, as I explained above, would in these situations prove very difficult as I had problems separating between me and her. I therefore chose to remain distant from such relationships. This was a problem that I suspect would not have become an issue if I had created a character that was radically different from me. This issue of distancing will come up again during my discussion of identity in Chapter 6 where I discuss the unforeseen changes that characters go through and how storylines inflict permanent marks on characters as well as players.

As can be seen in this section, the character creation process, i.e. from creation and throughout the character's lifespan, is far from straightforward and as described above can take many unsuspecting turns along the way. Creating and role-playing Vivianne not only made me able to join the game but also made it possible for me to experience firsthand how the identities you create are malleable and how their development is not entirely up to yourself. At times I felt that Vivianne had simply outgrown all purposes that I had set out for her at the beginning of the ethnography. Once during her stay in Freetown I prepared a storyline where she was to disappear for a while and I started up a new character for a few play sessions, as I had no idea how to play Vivianne under the circumstances that had arisen in Freetown. I will return to this discussion in Chapter 6 where I discuss the relationship between the player and her character in more detail. Although this discussion could fit in here as well I believe it is better suited for the discussion and speculations I engage in Chapter 6. I would however like to stress yet again how Vivianne was not simply a

research tool but also a source of information and discovery on character construction and maintenance in online communities.

After creating Vivianne and training her up for a while I set out to find a role-playing community that would allow me to stay and conduct my ethnographic research. As a server is not such a big community, the role-playing communities are easily located and in the first days of looking around I had learned of at least three PAs that engaged in role-playing. Freetown was the first one I contacted and stayed with throughout the ethnography. I had planned to stay with more communities than Freetown. However, due to conflicts that erupted between the different communities, I stayed with Freetown during the whole of the ethnography as I felt that the trust that I had established within Freetown could have been jeopardised had I chosen to move between the communities.

Staying in Freetown gave me a chance to study the community in greater detail than otherwise would have been possible and made it possible for me to observe changes in the community that I would have otherwise have missed. In hindsight it was also beneficial to see how the storylines unfolded over time and how new characters were introduced and deleted during my stay there. My stay in Freetown was a source of constant discovery and information, which result in very rich data and consequently a good understanding of how the identities that we create online can be experienced as more than just 'aspects of the self' and furthermore how identity and community are connected.

Entering Freetown:

'To do fieldwork apparently requires some of the instincts of an exile, for the fieldworker typically arrives at the place of study without much of an introduction and knowing few people, if any. Fieldworkers, it seems, learn to move among strangers while holding themselves in readiness for episodes of embarrassment, affection, misfortune, partial or vague revelation, deceit, confusion, isolation, warmth, adventure, fear, concealment, pleasure, surprise, insult and always possible deportation.'

(Van Maanen, 1988: 2)

The range of emotions that Van Maanen (1988) lists above accurately describe what goes on during fieldwork in my experience, especially in the first stages as the researcher is finding her feet in the field.

As I enter 'the field' I always have this strange mixture of excitement and ambivalence, mostly to do with how little I knew of what lay ahead of me. There is an abundance of literature on how to enter the field, negotiate access and how to leave the field. Since every field is different these guidelines can only take the prospective researcher so far; the rest is a matter of individual choices that are made throughout the ethnographic affair.

The story of arriving at a field and leaving are always a part of the ethnographic encounter and here I will make no exception. I will outline how I entered Freetown and how I prepared by constructing an online researcher as well as a gamer identity. As I approach people in cyberspace, for research purposes, I am aware of the physical distance that remains between me and my respondents. I have thus taken certain measures that aim to bridge this gap in order to establish trust in the research relationship. If handled with care this distance should not, in any way, become problematic for the research as a whole. Much of the same applies in online and offline research, 'the same skills of knowing how to listen to an informant, learning the proper way to behave and so on are as valuable online as offline (Guimarães, 2005: 151) Through researching MMOGs I have devised methods to establish trust between me and my respondents and will now outline the measures I have taken as I approach gamers in the attempt to gain access to their communities.

'The researcher must judge what sort of impression he or she wishes to create, and manage appearances accordingly. ...The construction of a working identity may be facilitated in some circumstances if the ethnographer can exploit relevant skills or knowledge he or she already possesses.'

(Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995:87)

What I felt was important was to establish both a gamer's as well as a researcher's identity and I have found, in my earlier research, (see Sveinsdottir, 1999 and Sveinsdottir, 2003) that the sooner I established this identity the better. Firstly, I

hope that it eradicates any uncertainties my respondents may have about me or my research and secondly it gives me confidence in knowing that I have taken certain measures to ensure that issues of credibility and authenticity will not arise later on in the research process. I therefore made sure that my intentions were made obvious from the start of the research and in case any questions surface I supplied my respondents with information about me as well as contact details.

In my online research I have mostly dealt with people through the Internet and most of them I have never met in face to face. For the purpose of establishing the two aforementioned identities during this research, I set up a website which I referred to in all my communication with the Freetown community. On this website I gave a short overview of my research topic and earlier research I had conducted. The webpage furthermore featured links to my supervisors' web pages, the sociology department's website and other game research sites. The webpage also included PDF copies of my MA dissertation and two other academic texts that I had written. I also created a banner for the website that featured images of all my MMOG characters as part of establishing the gamer side of my identity.

Shortly after I had setup this website the University of Surrey set up a doctoral research page with a list of PhD students and their research interests, including me, which I linked to as well. This further validated my claim to being an online researcher and showed that I am, without a doubt, connected to the University of Surrey. Once the site was up and running I included a link to it in all my correspondence with respondents in the hope that they would access my site if they had any doubts about me or the research.

In online game research I have found it vital to establish a gamer identity. So when I communicate with my respondents I referred to other games I had played which I both found to be an excellent icebreaker and established that I was not completely new to games which I feel puts me on their level. I do all this to be perceived as a fellow gamer as I find that this causes the least disruption on my behalf. I feel that if I did not present my gamer experience that players would feel obliged to take me by the hand and protect me in-game, which is something I have witnessed happening to a few newcomers who are learning to play MMOGs. What I

have also noticed is impatience and annoyance with those who ask too many questions and are 'too new' to MMOGs. Players value the time they spend within these environments and during my research I have tried to make sure that my research never compromises other players' enjoyment of the game. I have also noticed that as players perceive the time they spend in their MMOGs to be precious and this is confirmed by Yee (2006b) who found that 'a substantial portion of users derived experiences in these virtual environments that are more satisfying and rewarding than their real-life experiences (Yee, 2006b:29).

For this research I learned how to play the game before I embarked on a search for a role-playing community. This furthermore involved me training Vivianne up in her medic profession. I wanted to make sure that I had a 'strong' character – that is I made sure that she was fit to hold her own weight in combat as I did not want to be a burden to the groups that I would be a member of. In some instances players can become impatient and annoyed if they have to drag around a newbie who is constantly dying or needs great assistance from other members. What I found out as the ethnography progressed was that Vivianne might as well have been a completely untrained character for the purpose of role-playing, as combat in Freetown consisted almost entirely of 'emote fights', especially when low level characters were involved and there was only one instance of a 'group' hunt during role-play that I took part in during my stay in Freetown. The term 'emote fight' is used when typed descriptions of combat actions are preferred over letting the game engine calculate the damage between characters.

Emote Fight

'[Chat] Chin-Dao says angrily, "be sure I am off this town with the next shuttle"

[Chat] (worried) Reva'lin stands up and draws her stun pistol, stunning Lin-me flat out.

...
[Chat] Chin-Dao says angrily, "((how long I am stunned?))"

Fight with Game Mechanics

[System] Cemesis misses
[System] Cemesis hits F'rlek 313 pts
[System] Cemesis hits F'rlek 551 pts
[System] Cemesis hits F'rlek 376 pts
[System] Cemesis hits F'rlek 376 pts
[System] F'rlek hits Cemesis 423 pts
[System] Cemesis hits F'rlek 520 pts

Figure 9: Emote Fights and Game Mechanic Fights

This is how fights would look in the logs; however on screen during emote fights the characters do not move whereas during game mechanic fights the characters shoot from pistols or move as in hand-to-hand combat. The typed descriptions during emote fights are fabricated by the players and as such have no statistical effect like in the game mechanic fights.

Examples like this show, again, how 'foreshadowed problems' and preconceived ideas can prove to be entirely off track, even though a researcher feels familiar with the field in question. However, the knock that these preconceptions of mine received during my stay in Freetown became a great source of discovery as they highlighted to me how the Freetown players use the game environment as a shell as they play out their own content, rather than using the game system during their role-play. So, as it can be argued that too much preparation and too many preconceived ideas can hinder rather than help in research, I feel that in this instance the surprise of discovering how many ways a game can be played drew my attention to issues I may otherwise not have noticed.

On the other hand I do realise that being new to a game may have its advantages as you bond with players on a different level and hear their thoughts on the game environments as they teach you how to be a player. For the purpose of this research I, however, felt that learning how to role-play would be challenging enough which is why I chose to enter Freetown as a fully experienced player and character. Role-playing would, however, prove to be an entirely 'different kettle of fish' and took me, in many instances, by surprise. Finding the delicate balance of when to be 'new' in social research is a tricky undertaking. I however feel that, whatever stance a researcher takes, being aware of how it may affect the outcome and especially being alert to when issues are omitted, or overlooked, is the best way of ensuring a thorough research approach.

I had played *SWG* for two months before choosing and settling into a role-playing community. It took me a while to figure out the server community and locate the role-playing communities. I browsed the available role-playing guild forums and chose to contact Freetown after observing what I thought to be an active and friendly community. Consequently I contacted the mayoress of Freetown, Sapphire, and asked

for permission to both join the community as a player and undertake my research there. I contacted Sapphire, after a brief introduction via in-game email, and sent her a request to join the Freetown community as a role-player and a researcher.³⁶ Sapphire posted my request on the Freetown web forums and furthermore set up a poll where players could vote whether they wanted the Freetown community to be a part of this research or not. All those who voted, 10 players in all, voted yes so I decided to settle in with the community and placed Vivianne's house within the town border. My research request and the poll remained on the forums throughout my stay and I made sure to 'up'³⁷ the topic on the forums regularly in order for it to stay near the top of the forum, so that it would not escape new players' attention.

When I logged on for the first time as a member of Freetown I joined the OOC community chat channel and greeted players OOC before making my way to meet them IC. During my research, most nights of the week, there was someone online in Freetown available for role-playing or chatting. One night a week was designated role-playing night, where the intention was to get as many players as possible online for role-playing. This plot night was set aside for major plots and events while during other days of the week smaller ongoing plots unravelled as every night there was one or more player online. It was on a role-playing night that I first made my way to the Freetown cantina to meet the community. That night I was introduced to some of the players who were to become the people that I played with for the next nine months.

“As this is my first role-playing event I am stressed as I am about to leave my house in Freetown and walk over to the cantina where the events mostly seem to take place. I get a few tips from my partner who has been to a few role-playing events and he says that as I enter the cantina I should walk NOT run as that is more believable. Running is the default speed of which the characters move; if you want them to walk you need to press shift along with your

³⁶ A copy of the request can be found in Appendix B

³⁷ This can be done by simply posting a 'reply' to the subject which makes the thread in question move up the list to the top of the forum.

mouse button to slow the character down. I decide to dress up for the event and choose a dress that I had just bought in the bazaar and put my armour (what Viv always wears) in her bag.

As I enter the cantina I decide that my safest option (as I am nervous of having to role-play) is to sit down with Sapphire, the mayor of Haven, Anime and Fury because Sapphire is the only one I know as I have had some correspondence with her because of building permissions for my hospital. There are two groups sitting at the cantina at this time. Us ladies, and then a group of males sitting and standing around another table. The conversations blend together as the utterances in the public sphere appear in the log in the sequence they are typed.”

(Field notes, 29.06.2005)

Vivianne and I spent the first play sessions mainly sitting back, observing and trying to figure out the ties between the players and the characters and to learn their stories along with the story of the Freetown community. I was nervous and shy for the first month as I tried to figure out the role-playing play style and adapt to it. As a result Vivianne did not integrate into the community quickly, firstly because she did not have a role within it and because she was very quiet and not very forthcoming. This is when I found for the first time that perhaps playing a role so close to myself had not been such a good idea.

The opportunity to integrate Vivianne into the community came one role-playing night when she needed to use her medical knowledge, something that I had hinted at in her introduction, to save an inhabitant of the town. Subsequently she was offered a post at the town's medical centre which set off a storyline for Vivianne that I had in no way anticipated. As a result she took part in an increasing amount of storylines which resulted in me becoming more confident as a role-player which again resulted in her becoming more confident as a resident of the town. Having to perform medical role-playing was something I had not expected to have to do and this development in Vivianne's character came as a surprise to me and showed me that

even though you plan your character at creation and her storylines, the interaction with other players and characters can change that in the blink of an eye. These changes can both open up new possibilities that you had not thought of or limit your options in terms of what happens to your character. This was a subject that frequently came up during interviews as well as during role-play in game. I will explore these issues in detail in Chapter 6.

In *SWG* I had the option of logging all role-playing sessions from start to finish. I logged all sessions with a few exceptions where I sometimes forgot to turn the log on and sometimes there were technical difficulties that prevented me from doing so. I logged 73 play sessions, which lasted anywhere between 1-5 hours, during my stay in Freetown.

Due to the program logging all of the chat channels I had to go through every log and “clean it up” and take out spam from the “selling” channel as well as chatter from outside of the Freetown community. I also took out game mechanic text such as the statistics of fights, which could become long. In the beginning of my fieldwork these logs were really helpful as I could go over the play session afterwards and see what was going on as, at times, I tended to miss messages and actions due to how quickly the text scrolled up the screen.

After cleaning the logs up I printed them out and could read them over and over again in search of themes and recurring subjects. The logs contained everything that happened during each session, all conversations and actions that Vivianne and I took part in.³⁸ As well as logging I kept a notebook by my side where I noted down interesting developments and questions I had in mind as I went along. I must admit to forgetting about my notebook during times where the role-playing became hectic and immersion became deep.

I made every effort to make note of the role-playing as it happened and fortunately the ability to log³⁹ each session made the work very easy as it logged all

³⁸ A printout section of one log can be found in Appendix C

³⁹ Typing `/log` saves a text document on the computer harddrive, which includes all communication of the gaming session.

utterances as they were typed. Thanks to this ability I was able to print out each session for analysis and did not have to rely on my notes, which were at times inconsistent as can happen once a researcher is fully immersed in participation. These logs give a consistent overview of everything that went on during my stay in Freetown, of course from the viewpoint of Vivianne, i.e. conversations and actions that she took part in.

Demographics of Freetown

During my time in Freetown the community consisted of 17 players who had between them 56 characters. On most nights there would be between 5-10 players online, and these were mostly members of the core group of the community and then a few of the more occasional players. The core group included longstanding members of the community, some of which were also founders of the community. Six of these players were story-coordinators⁴⁰ within the community and their characters, in many instances, served particular functions within the town, such as the elected mayoress and her husband who was head of the Imperial presence in town. There was also a covert representative from the Rebel Alliance⁴¹ and a head officer of the town security similar to a police force. Other players' characters were in many instances linked to some of these characters either through employment, such as town security staff, town medics, or Rebel Alliance members. It was also common that characters were linked as old friends, relatives and occasionally through love affairs and relationships.

The players I interviewed were between 16 and 46, three of the players were female and 13 players were male. Age and gender were self-confessed by players during the interviews. In some instances age and gender were later further 'confirmed' through chats in-game or forum posts, where members posted photos of themselves and declared their age, often in '*it is my birthday*' posts where players would alert the other members that it was their birthday and would then state their

⁴⁰ Story-coordinators was a group of players who organised the player written content that was actualised within the Freetown community.

⁴¹ Freetown, according to the town narrative was a 'neutral' town, i.e. neither controlled by Imperials nor Rebels. Subsequently members of both factions were present within the borders of Freetown and the tension between the two was often used as basis for storylines and role-playing.

age. I did not ask the players what their profession was but this information was discussed in chats and on forums and I found out that there were a few students among players and then people who worked within the IT and computer industry.

A few months after my research had come to a close the Freetown players decided to meet up offline and six members turned up and spent a weekend together socializing. After returning back home photos of the meeting were posted on the forums for those who could not attend. Until then I believe that the majority of the player's communication had been online. However there were some exceptions like Alice and Frank, the players of the mayoress and her husband (and a few other characters), who were in a long term relationship and Dominic and Nathan who had got to know each other through LARPing⁴² before and one other case of an ex-couple, Vincent and Emily, who also role-played in Freetown, although they were among the players who role-played more infrequently.

The number of players during each role-playing session fluctuated but most nights some players could be found role-playing in the town cantina. There were multiple storylines active at any one point, some which included most of the community and others more personal that involved 2-3 characters. I will discuss this in more detail in Chapters 5-7 as I present my ethnography of the Freetown community.

Leaving Freetown

'[T]here are many examples of mutual friendships that develop over the course of prolonged fieldwork, and several instances of these surviving beyond the research.'

(Coffey, 1999:42)

After doing research with the Freetown community for nine months I decided, based on the data I had collected, that it was time to call it a day so I could move on to revising and analysing the data I had gathered during my time there. I, however, was reluctant to leave the community as I had made good friends there and intended

⁴² Live Action Role-Playing

to play *Star Wars Galaxies* for pastime purposes. So once again I took to the forums and thanked the community for having me and asked if I could stay on as a general player and of course still honour the confidentiality agreement I had made with all players during the interviews. I maintained that if anyone had any problems with me staying I would leave, as I do realise that some people may confide in a researcher with the hope that she will be out of their life within a short while. I received no negative comments on my request to stay; in fact people were glad to hear that I was not leaving and asked me to stay on so I did. However, about a month or two later the Freetown community dissolved and players went on to other games. This was mostly to do with changes that were made to *SWG*'s game engine, resulting in many of the Freetown players quitting the game. However the players of Freetown regularly kept in contact through both the web forums and *MSN*, which revealed how important applications like these, as well as how players use them, are in maintaining the feeling of community among MMOG players.⁴³

I am still in contact with most of the Freetown players and on occasion we have played other games together so in a way I am not entirely positive that I have left the field completely. Vivianne still exists within the realm of *SWG* as I am still subscribed to the game, but I have not played as her in a few months at the time this is written.

Online Interviews

'There are many things that in even an off-line interview we must take at the interviewee's word'

(Taylor, 1999:7)

Computer mediated communication is generally seen as very limited as it consists mainly of typed text between people who do not share the same physical space. Thus, at first glance, it may seem contradictory to employ online interviewing during ethnographic research which typically is seen as dwelling in the field in close contact with the respondents over a prolonged period of time. However, as Joinson (2005) points out, the 'loss of visual cues need not be accompanied by concurrent

⁴³ At the time this is written the Freetown community has broken up and most of the players have left *SWG* for other MMOGs. A part of the Freetown community has come together in another MMOG.

reduction in the 'socialness' of interaction ... and observational research has shown that Internet-based communication can be characterized as highly socialized' (Joinson, 2005:22) Also, as was established in much of the work cited in Chapter 3, online communities are thriving as people form strong relationships online through the various communication channels, suggesting that online communication does indeed have something to offer more than raw text. As will become apparent in this section, my decision to conduct online interviewing via Microsoft's *MSN Messenger*, a widely used Instant Messaging (IM) program, not only provided me with good quality data but also strengthened my relationships with members of the Freetown community due to the function of the IM program as a communication technology. I want to echo Hine's (2005) claim that in order for online research methods to work the researchers need to 'become skilled at making and sustaining relationships online. Just as in face-to-face interactions, researchers need to both draw on their existing social abilities and develop new talents. [...] They have to find ways of immersing themselves in life as it is lived online, and as it connects through into offline social spheres.' (Hine, 2005:18) By using a technology, *MSN Messenger*, that all respondents were accustomed to using on a daily basis, having constructed my gamer/researcher identity and by keeping the interviews fairly loosely structured I believe I was able to create a relaxed 'atmosphere' during the interviews which resulted in very rich data. I, however, realise that online interviews where none of this is present are in great danger of producing very meagre data, just as can happen in offline interviews.

I originally asked each player for an interview by using the personal message feature on the web forums. On all occasions my wish was granted and the respondent in question and I added each other to our *MSN* contact lists. My plan was interview each player twice, the first one at the beginning of the ethnography and the second one nearer to the end. This was in order to interview them firstly while I was new in the community and was intended to generally chat about role-playing, MMOGs and character creation⁴⁴. I anticipated that during the second interview that as I was more integrated into the community, I could ask more specific questions about their characters, about the community and also about issues raised in the first interview that

⁴⁴ A list of interview questions can be found in Appendix D

I had not fully comprehended. The aim was to get a good overview of the whole experience of role-playing and situate myself in the first one as a researcher that comes to the field without knowledge of the phenomenon and in the second as more of an insider where I could be on the player's level.

On a few occasions I could not go ahead with a second interview due to difficulty finding time, some players having quit the game, and towards the end of my stay in Freetown the community had started to fall apart and people were online in-game less and less so I refrained from asking for interviews at that stage. All in all I gathered 28 formal interviews that were taken over *MSN*. The interviews were, as noted above, loosely structured with broad open questions that allowed players some freedom in chatting about role-playing and the Freetown community. I have found during earlier research that this is the best policy to adopt when it comes to interviewing online via typed text. Interviewing in this manner is radically different from interviewing face to face and there is greater danger in IM interviews that the respondents give short answers that make analysis difficult. I have however found that open questions where players can control the interview up to a point to be better suited as most players are very chatty about their hobbies such as MMOGs but each player has a subject that they are passionate about and once you discover that the interview is much easier and text flows from the respondents at a greater rate and in greater quantity. This does not mean that I let respondents completely control the interview, but that this was merely a means to getting them typing so you can pose in the questions that you want answers to. Many respondents also assume that you will ask them yes and no questions for statistical analysis, so the start of some interviews may include some stilted answers, and as such open ended questions can be very useful to help the respondents relax.

Furthermore I have found being a longstanding MMOG player to be helpful and I do make that known to players. I feel that this gives me the status of an insider as it gives me an understanding of their references to other games. Most of the players have played other MMOGs on the market and many make comparisons between them. Having played other MMOGs allowed me to acquire the necessary 'cultural capital' for research such as this, as I understood references to other games and the players' points of view. I however do realise the danger of becoming too

much of an insider and I felt that on occasion I had to remind myself what my purpose in *SWG* was, first and foremost. At times I felt that I was gradually losing perspective, which ran the risk of me losing the ability to analyse the data as objectively as possible. At moments like these I felt that discussing my research with either my supervisors or my fellow PhD students helped, as their questions and speculations helped me to clarify my objectives and take up my stance as a researcher again.

Online interviews, in the manner that I conducted them, had some unforeseen benefits merely to do with my use of the technology of the software that I used. I made the decision of adding the Freetown players to my own personal *MSN messenger* list, the one that I log on to every day. This decision was one of the steps I took in order to try to establish credibility and authenticity to my respondents. This was my way of offering some mutual self-disclosure, which is necessary as you establish the basis of qualitative interview relationship, both online and offline (Kivits, 2005: 40). In my former research I had always set up a separate contact list for members of the player communities which I would only log on to during play. However, I found in doing so that I cut my respondents off from contacting me during other times, as well as separating myself from the player communities wherein the players usually exchange their IM details and chat on a daily basis outside of the game. I wanted to be available to the players in case they wanted to contact me regarding my research or just for a chat. I felt that since I was asking for some of their time I could at least offer some of mine in return. This decision resulted in the extension of the research field into my daily life and outside of the game in new ways. I started regularly chatting to the players outside of *SWG*. Even now after I have left the field, and most of the Freetown players have moved on to other games, I still chat to them, some frequently. Also, by having them on my contact list I could contact them whenever I had a question to ask or a subject to clarify and they were always willing to chat, so this led to a few 'mini interviews' being conducted. I made sure to ask for permission to use our chats for my research when it was fitting as I did not want my respondents to think that they were constantly 'under surveillance'. Using the technology in the same manner as the rest of the Freetown community integrated me into the community more quickly and fully. It however meant that the boundaries between my research and my daily life were blurred and distance between me and my

respondents became less than in other MMOG research I have conducted. I regard this way of conducting interviews to be a fruitful way of gathering data online but do realise that it could be potentially problematic depending on the subject and field of each research.

At the beginning of each interview I made sure to tell each respondent that the interview was confidential and that I might use quotations from it in my dissertation and in which case both their personal identity as well as that of their characters would be obscured with the use of pseudonyms. To begin with I would ask for age, gender and location. I interviewed 3 women and 13 men between the ages of 16 to 46. Of course it is always a gamble when doing online interviewing as to whether people are who they say they are (see Paccagnella, 1997). I am however fairly confident that the players were truthful about these facts as they were confirmed time and time again over *MSN*, during play and on the forums. I however admit that I cannot be absolutely certain about the real life age and gender of my respondents.

I started each individual interview by stating that everything that a respondent told me during the interview would be confidential but if I did choose to cite the interview in any written material they would be given a pseudonym. Then I asked whether this was acceptable to them and in every instance I got an agreement from the respondent. Each interview lasted between 1 and 3 hours and was saved and then printed out for analysis.

All in all I am content with the data I got from my online interviews but I do realise that to some this manner of conducting an interview may seem limiting due to the qualities of typed text versus spoken language. It is however a manner of communication that I am used to and the same can be said for the majority of players who play online games and therefore they are comfortable with expressing themselves in this way, resulting in rich interview data.

In-character interviews

As Vivianne was presented to the Freetown community as a social researcher I thought it would be an interesting experiment that she would conduct interviews IC.

These interviews became 5 in total. I had no idea how this would turn out and thought of them as mere devices of exploration, i.e. I had no idea what to expect and did not know if they would be useful in any way. The initial ideas for these interviews were as follows:

1. Explore what these circumstances would involve and how players would manage the characters' identities during the experience.
2. To get time to get to know the characters for Vivianne – get some 'one-on-one time'.
3. To role-play as researcher – is it the same as being a researcher in real life?
4. To get to the biography of the characters that was not readily available.

As I write this I am ambivalent toward this experience and have doubts about its usefulness in terms of determining if the data I retrieved from these interviews says anything relevant to my research subject. These interviews however were a great help once I decided to write a storyline for Vivianne, something I felt I needed to do to capture in full the experience of role-playing, i.e. playing the role of a researcher to its fullest potential. I used the interviews in such a way that I could make it out that someone with ill intentions was interested in these interviews as means to find a long lost enemy.

The potential weaknesses of this methodological experiment aside, my respondents maintained that they had enjoyed the experience and one claimed that it had given him a space to fill in the gaps of his character's biography which had been, until then, a loosely constructed story.

With regard to the questions I set out above, I noticed that the participants would treat the interviews as just another role-playing event and answered the questions without fault. I managed to extract a little information about the characters that I had not known before and Vivianne became closer to some of them as a result of these interviews. With regard to question 3, I can say that it made me realise how

holistic the undertaking of social research is from the starting point when research questions are formed, throughout literature reviewing and the data collection and period of analysis, until the written findings are presented.

As, said before, I was not entirely sure what type of data I would collect from this conduct. These interviews, however, provided me with information about role-playing and the importance of context, which supported my analysis of the Freetown role-playing that I discuss in detail in Chapters 5-8. As the interviews were carried out without a story to support them they failed to 'make sense' for the other players and also for Vivianne. I had not prepared the storyline thoroughly beforehand on the forums and thus it lacked any frame of reference for the other members. In hindsight I also realised that I had not 'story-coordinated' the role-playing by uttering additional information OOC either through private tells or on *MSN Messenger* as I later found out was customary during storylines. All in all the interviews were carried out without being fully contextualized within a narrative that would in some way add something to the role-playing experience of the other players. They were simply a random event that the players took part in that ran its course as soon as they stepped outside Vivianne's research facility.

Another interesting lesson I learned from this endeavour was that role-playing as an observing social researcher is not much fun, as role-playing is about active participation so staying on the sidelines is not likely to get you into any good storylines, thus limiting your interaction with the other players and characters. Therefore I jumped at the offer of Vivianne becoming one of the town's medics and from there her character development took off to a much greater degree.

The Freetown forums

'Ethnographic work in virtual environments generally means much more than simply spending time in that world. Full participation also likely requires an engagement with a range of different media users are working with. The web, bulletin boards, file libraries, and the like make up a vibrant part of many communities and can be considered a central component of the ethnographic terrain.'

(Taylor, 1999: 9)

Many MMOG player communities have web discussion forums where players can discuss the game and whatever their hearts desire. The Freetown community had a website which served this purpose and as my ethnography unfolded I also noticed how the forums were used in inventive ways to support the in-game role-playing. In my former MMOG research I have used player forums as sources of data as they present a different view of the players as they reflect on their game play and issues concerning the games and the player community. I therefore made sure to sign on to the forums from the start of my ethnography and kept a close eye on unfolding discussions and contributed to them as fitting to my character, which mainly involved typing in medical notes on the patients that visited the medical centre.

The Freetown forum, being a role-playing forum, was divided into IC, OOC and SC forums. The IC forum consisted mainly of forums where players could post IC information on their character in the forms of short stories or “rumours” pertaining to the medical centre, rebel, imperial and local law enforcement and holonet⁴⁵ news.

The OOC part of the forums held information boards, private discussions of the Freetown community which was inaccessible to those who stood outside the community, and then the SC team had a few forums where they discussed up and coming plots and discussed rule-changes and other things relevant to story coordinating and regulation of the community. The SC forums were closed for access to all but the SC team, however I was kindly granted access to it so I could watch the SC work in action.

⁴⁵ In the Star Wars universe, the Holonet served as a galactic communications grid. The Holonet section on the forums was used by players as a galactic news channel, providing information on events throughout the galaxy.

Star Wars Galaxies, In Character

Forum	Topics	Posts	Last Post
Events, Rumours and Whisperings. Post or see upcoming events, hear the latest rumour on streets of Haven in SWG Moderator: Decision	59	109	Sat Jan 20, 2007 3:00 am Decision
The Marketplace Sell and buy your goods here, read recruitment fliers from companies, gangs and other organisations, both legitimate and illegal	25	64	Fri Jan 05, 2007 2:36 am Decision
Holonet IC Chat Channel and holo news broadcasts Moderator: Decision	15	18	Sat Jan 20, 2007 3:18 am Decision
Medcenter Charts and records of all medical cases.	23	43	Mon Feb 20, 2006 10:48 pm Decision
Mayor & Council Partly OOC partly IC board for the Mayor & Council Moderators: Decision , Mayoral Staff	62	166	Mon Jan 08, 2007 2:40 pm Decision
Imperial Imperial news, business and databank Moderator: Decision	7	9	Fri Feb 03, 2006 8:13 pm Decision
Rebel Rebel news, business and databank Moderator: Decision	9	24	Sat Mar 04, 2006 12:43 am Decision

Star Wars Galaxies, Out of Character

Forum	Topics	Posts	Last Post
Information for Citizens Helpful information for Everyone Moderators: Decision , Mayoral Staff	27	77	Wed Jan 10, 2007 12:36 pm Decision
SWG-Related Chat Anything to do with Star Wars Galaxies that needs to be said OOC - put it here! Have Fun! Moderator: Decision	68	382	Thu Mar 15, 2007 1:50 pm Decision
Citizen Polls Private Polls for Haven Citizens only Moderators: Decision , Mayoral Staff	2	6	Sat Feb 03, 2007 11:03 am Decision
Citizens Private Discussion an area for Haven citizens to discuss important issues relating to the town in privacy Moderators: Decision , Mayoral Staff	10	112	Tue Apr 10, 2007 7:41 pm Decision
Star Wars Galaxies Stories Stories of role playing events you have partaken in or based within the Star Wars universe. Moderator: Decision	27	80	Wed Apr 12, 2006 6:33 pm Decision
Blacklist This forum is used to post the names of noncitizens that has proven unable to abide by the rules of Haven , and therefore has forfeited the right to RP with Haven citizens Moderator: Decision	2	5	Fri Jun 10, 2005 10:29 am Decision
SC general discussion For things that don't fit in either the dispute or plot discussion sections. Also web admin section Moderators: Decision , Mayoral Staff , Mayoral Staff	36	153	Sat Dec 30, 2006 5:33 pm Decision
SC plot discussion Plot Discussion between members of the SC team Moderators: Decision , Mayoral Staff	29	70	Wed Dec 20, 2006 12:44 pm Decision
SC Dispute and Player Issues Discussion SC section for dealing with player disputes and/or problem players Moderators: Decision , Mayoral Staff	17	91	Wed Apr 26, 2005 4:12 pm Decision

Figure 10: The Freetown Forums

For the purpose of analysis I printed out the majority of threads on the forums, which later became really helpful as the forum setup was changed to include other games, so most of the old threads were deleted. The forum posts were very helpful in getting to know the community and the history of the characters and players. There were many posts from members who had already left the game once I started. Aside from analysis, I used the boards like any other player would, taking part in discussions and posting little rumours with regard to Vivianne's storyline. I took me a while to figure out how the boards were used, especially with regard to storyline and plotting, but after building a storyline of my own with the help of the story coordination team I learned how useful and important these little posts could be especially for other players to understand the actions of the character in question. It differed between players how they used the boards. Some wrote long elaborate stories about their characters, others used the holonet news service to transmit inter-galactic news relevant to storylines and others made do with small rumours to invoke curiosity in the rest of the community. As I analysed the forum posts by reading them firstly in groups by forum and then tried to get an overall picture of themes I noticed that a great majority of storylines featured threats from outside the community and featured parts of characters' lives away from the Freetown town and community. Thus the forums were a great source of data as it featured the theory behind the praxis – i.e. the way things should be instead of how they turned out during role-playing. I will further elaborate on this point in the following chapters.

By using the forums to build my own storyline it became obvious to me what players meant when they said that it was best to write everything loosely because it would all change once it was in the hand of the other players. This is also when I found out what constituted a good storyline, i.e. something that engaged other players and provoked their characters' curiosity and thus pulled them into the story. I would maintain here that the web forums became an essential part of the role-playing experience and also important for the community building and maintenance. Aside from discussions about *SWG* or role-playing, the players discussed matters to do with everyday life and swapped information on games and other entertainment, such as music, TV and films. Using the forums also made me realise how similar Freetown is to other online community forums, that I have come to know through personal experience, e.g. other gaming communities, general discussion forum for Icelandic

parents and music fandom communities, in the way they are organised and used by the members. As other forums, the Freetown forums include the posts where members post photos of themselves, where they discuss their favourite music and the thread where they post additional contact information such as ICQ numbers or *MSN* login names in order to extend the community outside the game. Members also share their websites, *YouTube*, *MySpace* pages and 'blogs' with each other.

The forums proved to be a good source of information on the community of Freetown. Not only did they hold information of past storylines and character biographies but they also gave an insight into how virtual communities work and what means they use to enforce belonging. Only by using the forums as a player and by fully engaging in discussions could I begin to see the Freetown community as a whole and understand that not only was it a *SWG* community but furthermore a virtual community that would prove to extend to other games. Therefore I would maintain here that in addition to the forums providing me with written material for textual analysis, my use of them gave me further ethnographic insights.

My analysis of the forums was not a separate phase in the ethnography but an ongoing process as new threads were continually added to the discussion. I printed out the threads at the beginning of the ethnography, when I knew little of the community and the act of role-playing and continued to read them over throughout my stay there constantly looking for emerging themes. The themes I found to be most prevalent on the forums as well as in the whole of the ethnography will form the basis of the chapters that follow.

Ethical issues

'In conclusion, researchers should be actively concerned to avoid causing harm to researched populations as a result of their research, in cyberspace as elsewhere'

(Herring, 1996: 166)

Ethical issues in online research, especially that of covert non-participant observation, have been a hotly debated topic since 1999 (Sanders, 2005:71). As communication online to a great extent is carried out in public sphere of the Internet,

the ability for researchers to 'lurk'⁴⁶ and gather information unobserved is greatly enhanced. In some instances in online research, such as Sanders' (2005) study on online sex workers, due to the nature of the field or subject in question, the 'lurking' approach proved to be helpful as it seemed less likely to affect the very relations that she was trying to observe, i.e. between sex workers and their customers. The covert approach can be beneficial in research such as above where illicit or secretive activity is being studied. The same may apply to groups that are hard to engage, due to a variety of circumstances. However, this does pose some ethical problems, as members of virtual communities may feel their privacy has been invaded (Hine, 2000:23). The appropriate approach to doing research online is difficult to establish in a concrete manner as each online space is different from the next. In this section I will describe and explain the reason for the measures I took in order to conduct an ethically sound ethnography. These included my attempt to ensure that my intentions were explicit from the start, that my impact on the community was minimal, as well as my aim to protect my respondents' privacy.

For my research I decided from the outset that it would be conducted fully overtly and I spent considerable time in forming ways of presenting myself as an authentic researcher and gamer. I decided that my real life identity and my intentions within Freetown were clear from the start in order to establish trust in my relationship with the Freetown players. I also hoped that this would encourage my respondents to reciprocate with willingness to relay information about themselves and their role-play to me. I achieved this by posting the research information and my contact details on their forums. Throughout the ethnography I made sure that the post stayed near the top of the forum by 'upping' it regularly in case new players joined the community and were therefore not aware of my intentions there.

I had previously conducted similar research on two occasions⁴⁷ in this manner and in between research projects played a variety of MMOGs as a 'regular player'. As I felt no difference in either game-play or how other players presented themselves

⁴⁶ 'Lurking' is a term used to describe and act such as reading online discussions such as on forums but not contributing to the discussion. Therefore the presence of the lurker is not known to those who engage in the communication.

⁴⁷ Research, conducted in Ultima Online 1998-1999, for my BA dissertation in Anthropology from the University of Iceland and research conducted in Shadowbane 2002 for my MA dissertation in Media, Communication and Technology from Brunel University.

to me, whether I was a fellow gamer or overtly conducting research, I decided to continue to conduct my research out in the open. The impact of the researcher on the field in question is of course always difficult to measure and as Hammersley & Atkinson (1995) point out, we can never escape the social world in order to study it, but we can minimize our influence and monitor it (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 17-18). I actively aimed to limit my effect on the community of Freetown by keeping my research mostly out of the game; for example, I refrained from asking questions in-game unless I felt that it was necessary for my immediate understanding of circumstances. I opted instead for taking notes whilst in game and asking the relevant players later on, sometimes during an interview or in a short chat on *MSN Messenger*. I did this firstly to make sure that the enjoyment of the other players and their immersion into the storylines was never jeopardized, which I feared would be the case if I asked too many questions while we were playing and I felt it rude to constantly keep spamming players with questions. Secondly I felt that by assuming a gamer identity first and foremost, I managed to keep the research out of the players' minds, thus hoping that it would lessen their feeling of 'being observed' while role-playing. I hoped that this would lessen my impact on the community and the player practices. Whether I succeeded or not, is of course difficult to evaluate, but I gathered from the players' comments that I had done fairly well, as many of them claimed to mostly forget about my researcher status during my stay in Freetown.

On the forums I took part in only the discussions that were relevant to my play in the Freetown community. That involved posting information about Vivianne, her past and background information for her storylines. Also, as it was custom for medical staff to write medical case notes on the forums, I did so under Vivianne's name. I refrained from taking part in most other discussions that had to do with running of the community or debates over role-playing conduct as I felt that it was not my place to interfere in community issues in such a manner. In a way I was 'partially lurking' on the forums and used the forum posts as data for my research but did not actively post questions or start discussion threads for the purpose of information gathering as I felt that it would be asymmetric to the other members' use of the forums.

With regard to the interviews, I made it explicit to each player that all information they supplied me with was confidential. I also made it clear that if I were to use extracts from their interviews in my thesis I would supply them with a pseudonym. All the players I interviewed were happy with these conditions. I kept the interviews out of the game and never discussed them with the players; this included not revealing to them who had been interviewed and when. As I mentioned in the beginning of the thesis I supplied all of my respondents, their characters, the server, planet and town with pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of the community and its members. Although character names can be seen as pseudonyms in themselves, I agree with Hine (2000) as she maintains that 'to do otherwise would be to treat online identities as if they did not matter to participants, whereas in many settings they patently do matter' (Hine, 2000:24). Furthermore, it is easy to look characters up and locate them in game as well as on the *SWG* community forums if the player has been active there under the same character name. I therefore wanted to make sure that the privacy of the players was well protected. As Freetown is a small community, however, I suspect that those involved might recognise each other despite the pseudonyms I gave each and every one of the players and characters. In a research dealing with sensitive information or vulnerable groups this would pose a methodological problem which could be solved by removing all indicators of the respondents' identity, from their answers. I however feel that as my research deals with a leisure activity such as role-playing that such level of interference was not necessary. There were times when I was asked simply not to publish certain information and I have honoured that in all instances.

My aim was, during my stay with the Freetown community, to perform an ethically sound research. I tried to make sure that all the players were aware of my intentions and provided them with pseudonyms to protect their privacy as well as the community's. I tried to limit my effects on the community and to cause as little disturbance as possible in order not to jeopardize the other players' enjoyment of the game. The players I interviewed were aware that their words might be quoted in this thesis and they all gave me their permission to do so. Many of the Freetown players are still on my *MSN Messenger* contact list and they often ask how my thesis is coming along. To those who are still patiently waiting to read the finished product, I have promised that it will be available for them.

Summary and discussion

This chapter, along with Chapter 2 serves the purpose of introducing MMOGs as settings for sociological study and describes how I became a *SWG* role-player. I have furthermore described and critically examined the methodological conduct of the Freetown ethnography. At the start of the chapter I explained and defended my choice of methodology and introduced ethnography as suitable for tackling the subject at hand. After describing how I entered the virtual world of *SWG* I introduced Vivianne, who was my representation in the field through which I experienced the Freetown community. I described, my stay with the Freetown community along with describing the undertaking of online interviewing and the web forum document analysis.

The following chapters will illustrate my findings from the Freetown research, which emerged through my application of the set of methods described above. In an ethnographic manner I chose to let the players speak for themselves so the following chapters will paint a picture of the experience of being a member of an online role-playing community.

Chapter 5

The Field of Freetown

Introduction

This chapter is the first of three analytical chapters which are based on my ethnography of the Freetown community and outlines the contexts within which the Freetown players locate themselves as they role-play within *SWG*. The idea of the contextualisation of characters and role-playing practices was a prevalent theme that I noticed throughout my stay in Freetown. What I found was that the players saw the characters as influenced by various outside influences, rules and conventions, which governed both player and character agency when it came to role-playing.

This chapter will serve as the point of departure for discussion on how characters, players, context and role-playing practices are linked. It will set the scene by introducing the idea of how the community of Freetown exists within multiple contexts and how players use these contexts to situate and make sense of the characters and practices that are generated there. As Freetown is located 'online' it is tempting to write it off as simply another virtual community where anonymity allows people to play with their multiple, fragmented identities, and express them through the characters they create. At first glance this seems to be exactly what the players of Freetown are doing during their role-play. However, as we take a closer look at role-playing as practiced within the Freetown community, we begin to see how the practices, characters and players are constantly being contextualised within what is akin to Bourdieu's (1993) fields or Holland's (1998) 'figured worlds' that I introduced in Chapter 3. In this chapter I will apply these concepts to the Freetown community in order to find out how practice theory can help with making sense of an activity such as role-playing in a MMOG, whether it is in any way problematic and what we stand to gain from it.

In the first part I will introduce Freetown by situating it within the online game world of *SWG* and also introduce the community. I will then go on to depict Freetown as a virtual community and look at how the players perceive the online nature of their

activities and communication. I will then go on to discuss other perceived contexts within which players and characters are situated. To conclude this chapter I will discuss how we can understand a community such as Freetown with the help of practice theory and evaluate whether the ethnography of Freetown has anything new to offer to our understanding of community building and user practices in online spaces.

Locating Freetown within the world of *SWG*

Situated on the Roamer server of *SWG*, Freetown is at once a player run town⁴⁸, a guild (player-association) and a role-playing community, located on one of the more remote planets⁴⁹ in the galaxy. The town is situated far away from the hustle and bustle of the planet's only star-port⁵⁰ rendering it secluded and isolated from the rest of the planet community. In addition to player owned houses, Freetown has within its borders, a city hall, shopping mall, medical centre, town square, shuttle-port⁵¹, theatre, cantina, nightclub and basically all other facilities needed for a small town community. This town setting is where a majority of the role-playing takes place and the town cantina, along with the medical centre, plays a central role in the storylines and plots written and actualised by players.

In addition to being the name of the town, which is visible on the planet map, Freetown is also the name of the player association (guild) in which some of the inhabitants are members. Not all inhabitants of Freetown are members of the Freetown guild because some members choose membership in other guilds and divide their playtime between role-playing in Freetown and 'general game playing'⁵² with their other guilds. Thirdly, Freetown is the name of the role-playing community which

⁴⁸ Characters can construct and decorate a variety of buildings in *SWG*, including houses, cantinas, medical centers and city halls. When buildings are grouped together they can be organized into player run cities. As cities grow in population, they become eligible to add services and facilities such as vehicle repair garages, shuttle-ports, cantinas and town decorations. Player cities are visible on the planet maps alongside the larger default game controlled cities.

⁴⁹ There are currently 11 planets in the galaxy that are accessible to players through means of space travel

⁵⁰ Each planet in *SWG* has one or more star-ports which serve as access points in inter galactic travel where player owned and game-controlled spaceships, transporting characters, land and take off.

⁵¹ Shuttle-ports do not allow for inter-galactic travel, unlike starports, but only travel within the planet on which it is situated.

⁵² I use 'game playing' here as a synonym for play styles other than role-playing

resides within the town of Freetown. Members of the Freetown role-playing community do not necessarily own a house in Freetown nor are they members of the Freetown guild. I came to notice that what makes someone a member of the role-playing community is their commitment to its goal, i.e. wanting to role-play in *SWG*, and those who most frequently involved themselves in role-playing became core members of the community. Player characters need to be frequently involved in plots and storylines in order to have stories of their own and become a part of the town's 'mythos' and the main characters in town had long interwoven stories that were frequently referred to during play. The players involved have specifically founded the town and community in order to engage in role-playing, and those who join must agree to play the role of their character in keeping with specific role-playing guidelines⁵³. These three contexts, the guild, the town and the role-playing community, all of which bear the name of Freetown, make up the field within which the majority of the player interaction took place. I highlight these different contexts here to draw attention to and outline the ethnographic field in which the research was carried out. When the players spoke of Freetown they were mostly referring to the town and the role-playing community, which often seemed one and the same. The players rarely discussed Freetown as a guild, which I feel can be explained by the guild function that does serve very little purpose for role-playing practices. However I had a feeling, based on conversations with story coordinators, that they preferred that players joined the guild when they joined the role-playing community, although that was never made explicitly clear during play or on the forums.

Communication

Communication between players in Freetown was conducted through typed text that appears in the chat window(s) in the order they are typed. The *SWG* chat options include: multiple chat channels,⁵⁴ such as spatial chat, which includes the chat of all players/characters within a certain radius; group chat whose communication is accessible only to members of a group; private tells, which allow players to send private messages to each other and guild chat, which is open only to

⁵³ The Freetown role-playing guidelines can be found in Appendix E

⁵⁴ Most MMOGs offer players the option of filtering their communication by assigning it to the various chat channels.

members of each guild. The chat windows in have the option of being divided into tabs to which chat channels can be assigned. That way only the channels that are assigned to the tab which is selected are visible at each given time. For example, if a player has assigned to one tab the chat channels 'group chat', 'private tells' and 'guild chat', messages typed into these channels appear in the order they are typed. Each chat channel has different coloured text to make it easier for players to differentiate between the channels, e.g. 'private tells' appear as yellow text and 'group chat' as light blue. Many players also have multiple chat windows open and divide chat channels between them. Players can also set up their own chat channels for specific purposes, e.g. the story-coordinators in Freetown had set up a chat channel that was only open to them. This allowed them to organise the role-play without the other players knowing the ins and outs of the plots.

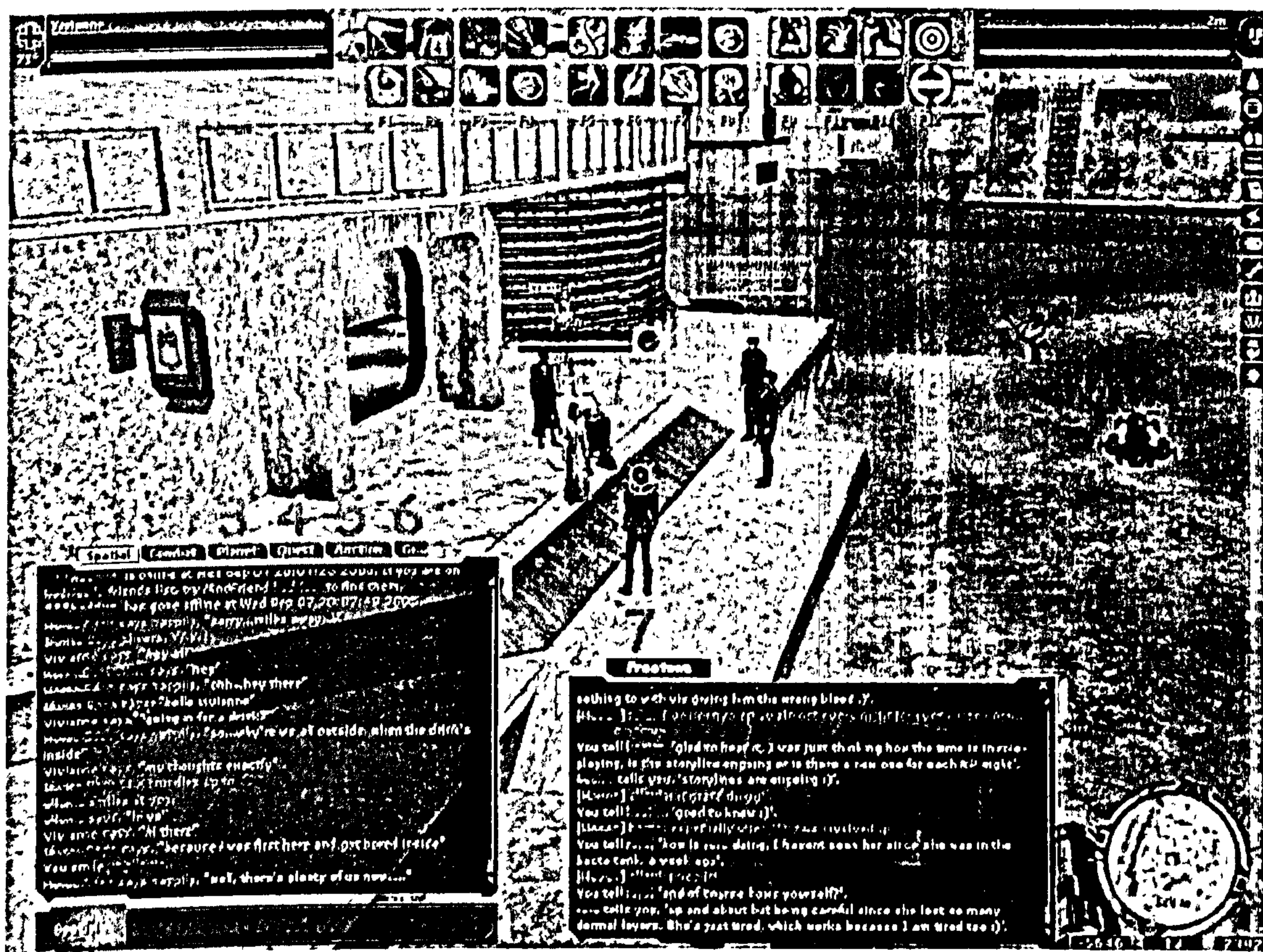


Figure 11: Chat Channels in SWG

- 1.) Spatial Chat is all chat within a certain radius, aside from private messages. In Freetown this channel was used for IC chat. The name of the speaker is in green and the utterance is in white.
- 2.) The combat channel logs all combat encounters in form of statistics of each blow and what special combat skills are used in an encounter.
- 3.) Planet. A chat channel, which allows you to broadcast your messages to all players on the same planet.
- 4.) Quest. Holds information on the status and progress on your chosen quests.
- 5.) Auction. A channel where players who craft and sell items can advertise their merchandise.
- 6.) Group messaging can be used by players as

members of each guild. The chat windows in have the option of being divided into tabs to which chat channels can be assigned. That way only the channels that are assigned to the tab which is selected are visible at each given time. For example, if a player has assigned to one tab the chat channels ‘group chat’, ‘private tells’ and ‘guild chat’, messages typed into these channels appear in the order they are typed. Each chat channel has different coloured text to make it easier for players to differentiate between the channels, e.g. ‘private tells’ appear as yellow text and ‘group chat’ as light blue. Many players also have multiple chat windows open and divide chat channels between them. Players can also set up their own chat channels for specific purposes, e.g. the story-coordinators in Freetown had set up a chat channel that was only open to them. This allowed them to organise the role-play without the other players knowing the ins and outs of the plots.



Figure 11: Chat Channels in SWG

- 1.) Spatial Chat is all chat within a certain radius, aside from private messages. In Freetown this channel was used for IC chat. The name of the speaker is in green and the utterance is in white.
- 2.) The combat channel logs all combat encounters in form of statistics of each blow and what special combat skills are used in an encounter.
- 3.) Planet. A chat channel, which allows you to broadcast your messages to all players on the same planet.
- 4.) Quest. Holds information on the status and progress on your chosen quests.
- 5.) Auction. A channel where players who craft and sell items can advertise their merchandise.
- 6.) Group messaging can be used by players as

they form groups to take on missions and quests. 7.) Secondary chat window, which has been given the name Freetown and displays the town's OOC channel (orange text), along with private messages (white text)

The chat channels allow for players to communicate with each other wherever they are situated in the game world, even to those who are situated on other servers. If you have other players' characters on your screen, you can read everything they say from a speech bubble that appears over the character's head, or you can read their message in the 'spatial chat' which covers all conversation within a certain radius. Freetown has a few chat channels where members of Freetown can communicate both IC (in-character) and OOC (out of character). The main Freetown chat channel is used for OOC chat, where players chat about the game, the role-playing and everyday life while they (role) play. In Freetown it is customary as soon as a player logs in to *SWG* to greet the rest of the Freetown community in OOC chat:

```
[Freetown] vivianne: hello Freetown
[Freetown] kia: hey viv
[Freetown] fury: hi viv
[Freetown] verik: lo viv
[Freetown] vivianne: what are you all up to?
[Freetown] carelo: lo viv
[Freetown] sapphire: Hey Viv
[Freetown] carelo: rping - some of us
[Freetown] vivianne: in the cantina?
[Freetown] carelo: just outside
[Freetown] vivianne: goody- omw55"
(Freetown chat, 02.12.2005)
```

The Freetown chat channel was created by the players and was strictly intended for OOC chat, whereas during role-playing spatial chat is strictly IC. However, if players wish to utter something OOC in spatial chat during role-play, they will do so within double brackets ((...)) to signal that the utterance is to be considered as OOC.

Communication between the Freetown players also extends outside of *SWG* as the players also communicate via instant messaging on *MSN Messenger* and on discussion forums which are located on the community's website. The forums are organised into IC and OOC sections that mainly serve the purpose of information sharing between players. The web forums are where players post their storylines and background information about characters with the aim of informing both players and

⁵⁵ Abbreviation for 'On My Way'

characters about what is happening in the town and in the characters lives. The forums are also used for organising the role-play and feature posts from story coordinators about upcoming events. The forums also feature a 'rumours section' and a 'Freetown stories' section, for example. While the 'rumours section' is IC knowledge⁵⁶ it serves the role of transmitting anecdotes and 'gossip' to the citizens of Freetown, thus adding detail and information to a character's background or a storyline that would be difficult to transmit through role-playing due to limits of realism⁵⁷ and time⁵⁸. For example, a character may not tell you that she is being hunted by bounty hunters but will act strangely and the information on the forums should help players so that they can make their characters ask the right questions in order to find this out. This approach is favoured by the Freetown players as they believe it adds realism to the situation and as we will see later on the realism of the role-playing is a highly valued. The Freetown 'stories section' is OOC, where players can post stories about their characters' lives which give the other players insight into a character's background and the life he or she leads away from the public arena of Freetown. This may be information that on some occasions is common knowledge i.e., characters will know this after knowing each other for a while but the conversations that would relay this information have not been role-played out properly, most often due to lack of time.

Freetown is not the only role-playing community on the server and on a few occasions, during my stay there, there was collaboration between the different groups, in that they participated in each other's events, but mostly the inhabitants of Freetown seemed to play by themselves. When asked about the differences between the communities, the Freetown players explained this according to different types of content, different approaches to role-playing or personal clashes between players. On occasion there seemed to be friction between the communities which seemed to stem

⁵⁶ IC knowledge is knowledge that the character holds about his/her world and other characters within it. OOC knowledge is that of the player, and role-players strive to keep the two separate for the sake of realism and balance. An example could be where both character and player know that a Jedi knight is on the loose in the town. The player knows who the Jedi Knight is by virtue of discussions with story coordinators and the Jedi knight's player. However the character is unaware of which character it is and must find out by realistic means, e.g. conversations with other characters or some investigations.

⁵⁷ Applies to what would be considered realistic communication and behaviour. For example it was not considered realistic that characters recited their past to everyone they met, because that is not how people act in reality. Therefore players were urged to post anecdotes and gossip about their characters past on the IC boards on the forums.

⁵⁸ In order to drive storylines forwards, long conversations involving introductions and recital of past references were generally avoided.

mostly from debates over these approaches to role-playing, especially regarding the issues of realism, player interpretation and the consequences of character actions.

Membership of Freetown changed somewhat throughout my stay there, however the members that I came to know and role-played with on a regular basis constituted about 17 players with 56 characters. Within Freetown there was a core group of players who role-played most nights of the week and their characters had vital roles within the town community, including the mayoress, the town doctor and the local law enforcement. A few members of this core group were also story coordinators and the most frequent posters on the forums. The story coordinators wrote out the grand storylines and plots that involved most of the community, and also oversaw the regulation and organization of other player written content. They asked that when the other players in Freetown write a storyline that it was submitted to them for review before it was actualised in play. According to the head story coordinator this was to make sure that the plot in question did not contradict or infringe upon other plots that were active at the time. In addition to coordinating and writing storylines for the community, the story coordinators also regulated the role-playing and made sure that all content fits the Freetown role-playing agenda, the *Star Wars* extended storyline and the narrative context of *SWG*. The story coordinator team had a section on the forums which was inaccessible to other players where they discussed plots and storylines as well as organising the role-playing and other practical things regarding the Freetown community. The team also communicated via *MSN Messenger* before and during play. Story coordinators and players alike also use the in game chat channels to regulate and monitor the role-playing throughout each session either via 'private tells' or the 'group chat' function which allows them to chat OOC about the progress and management of the plot. This organisation of affairs within the Freetown community gradually became clear to me as I browsed the forums, where guidelines on OOC conduct were available⁵⁹.

The player written content was usually based around a character, a group of characters or the whole town community. There are three main types of content: storylines, plots and events. The storylines are often loosely drawn up and open

⁵⁹ OOC guidelines from the Freetown forums can be found in appendix E

ended, and they can run for some time involving one or more players. Plots are usually only active for one night and involve most of the community. The aftermath of a plot can however turn into a storyline, but the players' aim to finish each plot in one session. Events are also limited to one night only and can include parties or quiz nights at the cantina. Player written content is the backbone of the community and features on many levels as players engage in and discuss role-playing.

As can be seen from this brief description of the Freetown community, it seems, at first glance, to simply be a virtual community where the great majority of the communication between members takes place on the Internet. However this description only begins to scratch the surface of the complicated collection of contexts that I perceived Freetown to be composed of during my stay there. I will now go on to explore these contexts by a mixture of description and analysis and will resurface at the end of this chapter with a holistic understanding of the Freetown community as a complex field within which role-playing practices take place.

Understanding Freetown

The key to understanding Freetown, instead of seeing it as simply an online community, is to see it as a collection of contexts that draw influences from both the online and the offline. Above, I loosely introduced Freetown by describing what at first glance seems to be a regular online game community. However, as my ethnography progressed I began to understand that seeing Freetown as an online gathering of people was in no way sufficient for understanding the community and the players, as well as the characters that were created, maintained and discarded there. As I came to notice, the perceived essence of the online, i.e. fluidity, flexibility and anonymity, as introduced to us by the first theorists of cyberspace (see Rheingold, 1993; Poster, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Stone 2000) was often seen by players as problematic as opposed to liberating. This seemed mostly to do with their idea of what role-playing entails, which was rooted in their former experience of role-playing in offline contexts. I will address this matter in more detail in this section as well as discussing how players attempted to reconcile these differences through regulation of role-playing. Understanding the perceived problem of the online and the consequent regulation of role-playing I feel is key to understanding the community of Freetown

and the characters that are created there. Consequently the purpose of the following discussion is to set the scene for the rest of the ethnography.

Role-playing in cyberspace – problems of the virtual

What sets the Freetown community apart from most MMOG player associations is the players' decision to role-play within the game context. This means that players take on the roles of their characters and act them out within and according to the *Star Wars* saga. While they do so, the game function⁶⁰ of *SWG* is temporarily suspended, in that players no longer discuss levels, experience points, missions and credits as they would during 'general play', but furnish their characters with personalities based on their origins, life stories and roles within the Freetown community. As the players participate in role-play, they are asked to adhere to the guidelines of IC and OOC play, as well as a variety of rules that come from the offline role-playing tradition.

As I explored in Chapter 2, role-playing is a pastime that was initially carried out in small groups that shared a physical space, either in table top role-playing or live action role-playing. As players face challenges that their characters must come together to solve, the role-playing becomes an intimate affair, as highlighted by Fine (1983). Also, tabletop role-playing groups tend to be small and in many instances the players know each other well. I found out that the majority of the Freetown players have a background in tabletop role-playing and some of them also play live action role-playing games, and the influences from these two leisure activities became apparent to me during my stay in Freetown. A few players mentioned that they felt it was a challenge to take role-playing to a MMOG setting where thousands of players play together. This was mostly seen to be due to problems that the Freetown players assigned to the inherent anonymity of online communication and a perceived distance between the players.

When I asked the players about the experiential differences between online and offline role-playing, the issues most of them mentioned were the integration of

⁶⁰ I use "game function" here to refer to the "general" way of playing an MMOG, i.e. as a game where players advance their characters, group up with friends for hunts, taking on quests and missions. Basically all tasks that the game software awards players for doing.

new players, and the management and regulation of the practice of role-playing. To my surprise, none of them noted differences in character creation or levels of immersion. I had, in all honesty, anticipated hearing about how role-playing in cyberspace was easier due to the freedom and anonymity embedded in the method of communication, and how the graphical environments made immersion easier. However, what I came to find was that the problems the players perceived were of a more practical nature.

The subject of the online seemed to crop up whenever problems arose between players and I noticed that they felt that the nature of the online communication hampered the achievement of a swift solution, and sometimes made the problems between players even more complicated due to a perceived distance between them, as well as the textuality of the communication. Players also had problems with the anonymity that came with new players and took measures to quickly integrate them into the community.

Alice: Offline it is usually someone that someone else knows.. it's a bit easier because you know they are their friends... but online...erm.... it can be a little bit hard because you might just suddenly get this person that turns up and claims that they want to role-play... because people cant get into a group but .. it can be a bit hard when you get a person turning up that says " I have been sent here by Vader" and its like " no... you haven't (laughs)

...
Alice: offline its easier in terms of social aspects because you really do know people and then it is easier to bring them into it.... To go back to Nathan [a Freetown player]... he brought a player in because he knows the guy... this guy called Carelo

Alice: Yeah.. he is a GM... and he knows role-playing and because Nathan knows him it will be far more easier to integrate him than if it was just some random person that turned up and decides that he wants to try this role-playing thing or join the community.. it would be so much harder because you don't know them... and you don't have the physical cues on how they react to things and you cant judge them and how they react to things..."

(Alice, interview)

As previously mentioned, offline role-playing groups tend to be small gatherings of people who already have ties in real life. These groups can exist for

years and whenever a new member joins they are usually vouched for by someone who is already member of the group. This can also be the case in MMOG communities, but often new players apply for guild membership without knowing any of the existing members beforehand, as Alice mentions above. This is seen to pose problems for the community as the new player is perceived as an 'unknown size' and his or her intentions are unclear. As such this perception of online anonymity seems to increase the community's ambivalence towards new players. The fact that Freetown is a role-playing community seemed to amplify further this problem because, as I gradually found out, the Freetown players role-played according to rather strict guidelines and codes of conduct. As Alice highlights above, players may turn up that want to try 'this role-playing thing' without having any previous experience, which can cause disturbance during role-playing sessions. The players seemed to value greatly the uninterrupted flow of a storyline and seemed very reluctant to carry out so-called 'rollbacks'⁶¹ in order to rectify a story that has developed in to a wrong direction, due to a variety of reasons. Instead the players tried to make sure that everything went according to plan, by keeping a close eye on the process of storylines and other players' actions. In chat and on the forums the players frequently stressed the importance that common sense was used at all times and that everybody made sure that their play adhered to the overall storyline of *Star Wars*. Also, players reminded each other that all role-play should be 'realistic' and that any consequences to their actions should be thought out to minimise the risk of corrupting storylines.

What I found during my stay in Freetown is that the role-playing of storylines is perceived as a fragile undertaking, and players were in constant negotiation between themselves whilst simultaneously attempting to contextualise actions and characters 'correctly' within contexts, such as perceived realism, the *Star Wars* narrative and role-playing conventions. The Freetown community reacted to this perceived fragility by handing out guides to all new players and regulating the role-playing as well as the written content that the players submitted. This feeling of role-playing as something that had to be practiced in a specific manner also led to

⁶¹ A rollback, in role-playing terms, means that when an action needs to be cancelled for a variety of reasons, the storyline is 'rolled back' in time and role-play is recommenced again in the storyline just before the action was carried out.

extensive regulation of the role-playing and consequently of players, characters and the community as a whole. What follows is an extract from the Freetown community guidelines that can be found on the Freetown web forums:

No behaviour that is traditionally seen as "griefing" (i.e. harassment, spamming, OOC abuse or persistent OOC whining)
...
Be friendly in OOC, even if you have a problem with someone, no fighting, if it is a real problem come speak to the mayor OOC.

Try to keep any information you learn OOC as OOC info and not transfer it to IC knowledge. This includes what colour people con to you (just because you see them purple doesn't mean everyone knows IC that they are a rebel or an Imp)

(Frank, head story coordinator. Freetown Web Forums)⁶²

Some of the guidelines, such as the one that refers to griefing, refer to a general concern among MMOG players about what has become known as grief play, where some players are seen as deliberately causing distress to others. (see Taylor, 2006: 35 and Castronova, 2005:72). What distinguishes the role-playing communities from the rest; however, are the extensive guidelines that apply to game play IC, content writing and OOC knowledge. I will revisit this discussion of the Freetown rules throughout the dissertation as I explore the issues of community and character maintenance.

A further perceived problem relating to the integration of new players in Freetown is the fear that the player may be too young or inexperienced, and therefore lacking in the social skills necessary for being a member of an online community. These are all skills that are perceived to come with age and also with time spent on the Internet, and especially within MMOGs. Including players that are not skilled is seen as a serious risk to the more established players' enjoyment of the game and the

⁶² The whole list of OOC guidelines can be found in Appendix E

role-playing in general. Also, the anonymity which comes with the online territory is seen to pose certain problems by the Freetown players.

Robert says:

actually insults from players to players on P&P⁶³ are EXTREMELY rare while in mmorpgs they are very common...

Robert says:

for a simple reason : people are well protected behind their screens, so they can be very courageous at calling other people names, but doing it in front of a person of flesh is another story

Robert says:

*flesh"

(Robert, *MSN Interview*)

To the Freetown players, the online-ness of their play is noticed when a problems arise with other players. Instead of viewing anonymity as a source of liberation (in terms of character creation and identity play), players tended to see it as problematic and in fact many saw anonymity as being the root cause of why many MMOG players tend to be rude and dismissive. Furthermore, the online nature of the community of Freetown is seen as problematic in the way that there is a certain distance between the members which makes the communication more complicated. Most members commented on how they felt that disputes were more difficult to handle over the Internet than face to face:

Gabriel says:

the main idea of the storyline was for Nark to be captured and replaced and then Nairk's friends try free him and remove the imposter Nark was supposed to die within 2 weeks to a month of his creation

Gabriel says:

that didn't happen, Out of character, there was a schism in freetown over an incident where someone said something and it was taken completely wrong.

Gabriel says:

that sort of thing happens unfortunately, especially when dealing with text only conversation, the flavour and the real meaning can be lost

(Gabriel, *MSN interview*)

These views on 'loss of meaning' and misunderstandings due to the method of communication was something that was echoed by other players that I interviewed. The Freetown players seem to be very aware of how quickly disputes can escalate in cyberspace, and their response seems to be to regulate the integration of new players

⁶³ P&P is short for pen and paper role-playing which is another term used to describe table top role-playing games.

as well as both the act of role-playing and writing of player content. Issues with regulation and community cohesion came up frequently in my interviews with players, on the forums and in-game during role-play. During interviews, players did put the difficulties down to an essence of the online community, i.e. players not sharing the same physical space and also due to different views on what role-playing entails.

The regulation of content was mostly carried out by the SC team who asked to see all storylines written by other players in the town. The regulating manifests itself in both the explicit writing of rules and regulations, and furthermore in the monitoring of the content: both the manner in which it is written and role-played. To me it seemed that the purpose of this regulation was first and foremost carried out to strengthen the community and to defend it against disruptions from the outside, as well as from the consequences of careless content writing that could lead to unforeseen dramatic event such as a character's death, for example. What became gradually clear to me was that the fate of each character and its position in each storyline very much affected the players' enjoyment of the role-playing and something as severe as a character's death would exclude the player from playing within Freetown. This very much affected the role-playing practices of Freetown as I will describe throughout.

Doing it right – the regulation of content

The regulation of the role-playing and the abundance of rules and guidelines that I found to apply cannot only be traced to the online nature of the Freetown community. Rather, it seemed to be linked to the multiple contexts in which players find themselves as they engage in role-play in Freetown. The most obvious regulation can be found in the request that all player written content is to be submitted to a story coordinator before it is used for role-play. However, regulation and management is to be found throughout the practice of role-play and as a new player I quickly found out what was seen as appropriate and what was not. This I found out gradually by simply taking part in role-playing events, as players discuss and debate each others' actions in-game as well as on the forums. What I found was that the player created content

was the backbone of the community and as players created and acted out content they situated themselves, the content they write as well as the characters they create, within these multiple contexts.

My aim with this section is to explore these contexts in more detail in order to better understand the practice of role-playing, and consequently, the characters that are created for that purpose. I will thus analyse and describe the Freetown contexts here and broadly divide them into two parts: firstly, contexts that players create through writing storylines, and secondly, those contexts such as the *Star Wars* narrative and realism, which players feel have impact on their play.

Player created content – enforcing belonging

Thordis says:

that brings me to the story coordination... I noticed you have a few storycoordinators, what is their role?

Alice says:

what we are MEANT to do, is take the plots people want to happy and facilitate that by pointing them at the right people and trying to manipulate things. What happens in reality is we write the majority of the main plot and act like games masters.

Thordis says:

do you SCs work together on those plots or do you divide them between you or..?

Alice says:

what we normally do it write out a plot synopsis and post it in our part of the forum (its hidden from view). If an SC wants full control of the plot they may only write a tiny synopsis and not reveal much at all, or they might write alot and then any SC will get involved in it and add to it'

(Alice, *MSN* interview)

Players are variably aware of each others' storylines and character backgrounds. The web forums serve as an information exchange in this respect, where storylines and background information about characters are posted with the aim of informing both players and characters on what is happening in the town and in the characters lives. The forums feature, among others, a 'rumours section' and a 'Freetown stories' section. While the 'rumours section' is IC knowledge it serves the role of transmitting anecdotes and 'gossip' to the citizens of Freetown, thus adding detail and information, also known as 'fluff', to a character's background or storyline. The 'fluff' would otherwise be difficult to transmit through practical role-playing due to limits of realism and time, i.e. conversations between characters should be convincing but not aim to transmit as much information as possible. 'The Freetown

stories' section is OOC where players can post stories about their characters lives which give the other players insight into a character's background and the life he or she leads away from the public arena of Freetown. This option seemed to be used especially for when a character went away for a while in order to account for events that took place in his/her life during these expeditions.

The story coordinator's team asked that all player written content be submitted to a story coordinator before it was put into action. After reading through the interviews, especially those with the story coordinators, it seemed to me that this regulation served the purpose of maintaining social cohesion in the community of Freetown. By making sure that plots had been thought through and were in keeping with the Freetown rules, role-playing conduct and the Star Wars narrative, the players felt that the risk of an unfortunate turn of events was minimised.

'if, for example, a plot would ultimately lead to a character's death, another player's that is, we would sit down and discuss such a situation with the person wanting to run the plot and help them to rework their plot to avoid such a result or supply a npc played by a SC to take the ultimate fall. Te SCs can pick out a potential problem which the originator never saw most of the time'

(Frank, *MSN* interview)

Story coordinators take great care in managing the role-playing in Freetown and are aware of how conflict and the unforeseen consequences of storylines can damage the community spirit. They therefore suggest when a plot is organized that 'NPCs'⁶⁴ are used for most 'bad guy' roles that are featured in storylines. For example, the character Cemesis was often used for brief appearances to represent bounty hunters or scoundrels in the various storylines. On some occasions, new characters were created specifically for this purpose and then deleted. This was done to avoid rendering a player character un-playable as a consequence of his or her actions and was especially important when each player had only one character per server.⁶⁵ Having your character landed in jail or killed could become very difficult as it prevented the player from participating in role-playing events within the town. This ambivalence towards in-character conflict became very apparent when a player

⁶⁴ NPC is an MMOG term used to refer to Non-Player Characters, i.e. computer controlled characters. Here it is used to refer to when player characters take on other roles for the purpose of a certain storyline.

⁶⁵ This was later changed and now all players have two characters per server

suggested on the forums that the 'Galactic Civil War' should be used more as background for purpose of role-playing in Freetown. Most of the other inhabitants did not warm to the idea and it was never actualized. The following post displays the reluctance of the Freetown players and was submitted by a player, Alice, as a response to these suggestions:

'The major problem is, how do you roleplay with people when you are a rebel or imperial if you know that a few days ago they where trying to kill you? It makes things difficult. Its alright when its all subtle and politics, but all out war is hard to managed.'

(Alice , forum post)

Due to these issues of realism and consequences, which Alice highlights above, conflicts in Freetown are mostly subtle and confined to scuffles in the cantina or verbal conflicts. Furthermore, many plots are also written to feature a threat that comes from outside the town – such as an earthquake, acid rain and a deadly virus outbreak, something that the inhabitants can take on as a team and solve together. Fights are mostly role-played through typed descriptions as I described in Chapter 4. Players tend to favour this method in role-playing as the characters can vary greatly in combat levels.⁶⁶ The results of fights are often decided on beforehand for the purpose of the storyline or agreed on by the players who take part. If needed, story coordinators are called in to determine the results of the fight:

'Thordis says:

how is the result of the emote fights worked out?

Gabriel says:

it depends upon the situation, sometimes we know before hand that a fight will turn out a certain way. Like in the ship. the SC's decided that it was going to be the "small" characters that would win the fight.

⁶⁶ The combat levels that are assigned by the computer software are based on the experience of any given character. Role-players tend to dismiss these levels in their role-play. However, if a non role-played fight is started between two characters the computer makes sure that the higher level character always incapacitates the lower level one quickly. However according to character backgrounds the lower level character could actually be a better fighter and thus fights between characters were most often role-played.

(...)

Gabriel says:

most of the fights are generally sorted out through common sense.

Gabriel says:

there can of course be disagreements on who is the better fighter etc, and players are encouraged to contact the SC's to help in such situations, but it rarely comes up'

(Mark, *MSN* interview)

In this manner, the game mechanics are circumvented for the purpose of controlling the results so that storylines can be steered in the desired direction. Consequently, players feel they are in control of what happens and undesirable outcomes of character communications are kept to a minimum. Despite all this regulation, misunderstandings do happen and the ones I witnessed did seem to have an affect on the players' enjoyment of the role-play. Also, in the history of the Freetown community, which I gradually came to know, there are instances where players had left the community due to disagreements and discontent⁶⁷.

The content that players produce and consume seemed to me to be the cornerstone of the Freetown community. It is, in essence, a shared knowledge that creates a feeling of belonging, and as such it accentuates the qualities of Freetown as a role-playing community. Storylines are used to bring the players/characters closer together and in addition to being an entertainment for players they also have an agenda, as Cemesis, the head story coordinator, highlights in a forum post about a proposed plot:

'The plot is designed to take out the usual suspects in the plots, and give a chance to the lower level characters to plan a major part in helping the town out. AKA people like Karl, Nir'vil, revkwo etc'

(Cemesis, SC forum post)

⁶⁷ I will describe one such event in Chapter 6 where I discuss how players respond to these events and how they are managed.

The characters that Cemesis mentions here are characters that were new and, as a result, had a low profile in the Freetown community and also were the ones that attended role-playing less frequently. This particular plot ran during one session but resulted in a long running storyline for one of the characters mentioned there. So, it seems that the story coordinators' attempt to integrate these players worked out and the player in question started attending the role-playing much more frequently after this particular plot. Players admitted to favouring plots which involve as many inhabitants as possible and they seemed to prefer to work together as a team. Being involved in a plot also results in increased communication between the players as they discuss the advancement of the plot during role-playing and as a result the community is strengthened OOC as it is IC.

The Freetown role-playing is a heavily regulated affair; however, none of the rules are gaming rules in the strictest sense as most of them are merely codes of IC and OOC conduct. Players perceive role-playing to be a communal act, and as such they realise the need for a strong resilient community to which players are committed. The regulation of the role-playing that takes place in Freetown is mostly about strengthening the community and making sure that conflicts do not arise as it is felt that these could have a devastating effect on the community. For this purpose, the Freetown community has developed practices and processes that are unique to that particular community. These practices, as well as the content they produce and consume, results in setting Freetown apart from the rest of the server community and provide them with a sense of belonging.

Role-playing in *SWG* includes paying attention to how stories and characters are related to the bigger context that is the *Star Wars* universe, and players discuss this subject and their various levels of knowledge of the *Star Wars* narrative as they plan content and role-playing. The next section will focus on this specifically, as well as reveal the players' ideas about the realism of situations and the consequences of characters' actions.

'Use the force': The Star Wars narrative and the issue of realism

In addition to the player written and created contexts, there are contexts that players view as monolithic but at the same time as open to debate and interpretation. These contexts include the *Star Wars* narrative and also what I choose to call 'the contexts of realism'; that is, on the one hand realism within the *Star Wars* universe, and on the other, 'common sense realism'. To explain and open the discussion about these contexts, it is useful to have a quick look at a debate that displays these three contexts clearly and is illustrative of how players refer to and situate themselves within certain contexts as they solve problems that come up during role-play. I will outline this debate, which I choose to call 'the Jedi debate', and quickly describe these contexts before going on to discuss them in greater detail as well as discussing the implications these contexts have for character creation and maintenance.

"Gabriel says:

I'm very much into trying to ensure that nothing from the actual star wars films and books is gone against.

Gabriel says:

As an example if I had my way , no one would have the chance to be a Jedi within the borders of Freetown. In this timeframe....the Jedi are extinct and there's nowhere to learn the arts from."

(Gabriel, MSN interview)

One of the roles of the story coordinator team is to ensure that player written content is in line with the *Star Wars* narrative as well as with the Freetown rules. Writing a character and role-playing within the *Star Wars* narrative can sometimes be problematic because levels of *Star Wars* knowledge and interpretations of the narrative and the universe vary among players. The 'Jedi debate' is one issue that the role-players of Freetown discussed frequently among themselves and had apparently led to one player leaving the town shortly before I joined the community.

As *SWG* takes place at a certain time in the *Star Wars* official timeline, where all but two Jedi knights have been killed by the empire, it is highly debatable, in many players' view, whether Jedi knights should be available to players as a character

profession. Many players, however, do choose to play as Jedi knights but for role-players, playing a Jedi knight IC poses several problems.

Firstly, the Freetown players take issue with the '*Star Wars* realism' of the situation because, at the time, according to the *Star Wars* story, there are only supposed to be two Jedi knights alive in the whole galaxy. Secondly, if some Jedi knights had escaped 'the Jedi purge'⁶⁸, to have them spotted within the town border could have consequences for the whole community because news would spread fast and the Empire's armed forces would come looking for them. A third reason concerned the Jedi knights' signature weapon, the light-sabre⁶⁹, which is known for cutting through solid material with little resistance and as such would have devastating consequences in a combat. The following extract from a forum post manages to encapsulate all three contexts in a debate about an incident where a Jedi character, called Eva, unveiled herself in the Freetown cantina and attacked one of the inhabitants with a light sabre in an attempt to save the community from destruction. The incident resulted in a rollback where the storyline was basically rewound until the point before the light sabre came out and the player of Eva was asked to find alternate means of combat. The forum thread was started up immediately after the play session and many players felt the need to contribute to the debate:

i'm sorry it had to resort to a rollback, but to be fair, the Lightsaber did mess a few things up, yes they were used in the corporate sector after the removal of the Jedi, but there would be a huge difference between that of a trained Knight and somebody using a sabre. If you used a Lightsaber on Verik, a) you would of cut off a limb, b) accidental detonation of the thermal detonator would of likely happened and c)Eva would have been discovered and become an exile.

(Henry, Freetown forum post)

⁶⁸ Refers to a time in the *Star Wars* storyline where all Jedi knights were hunted down and killed by the Empire.

⁶⁹ Lightsaber is the token weapon of Jedi Knights.

The discussion thread on the forums where this incident was discussed became a very long one in comparison to other threads on the forum, wherein players debated the Jedi situation along with the decision to rollback, which is generally not taken lightly in role-playing as players see it as too much of an interference with the flow of the story. I was present on the role-playing night in question and it became clear to me how players constantly need to negotiate their characters and role-playing practices with others present and how many aspects of these are not entirely theirs to decide.

“Thordis says:

do you use your star wars knowledge much when role-playing or story coordinating?

John says:

I try to... Having the Star Wars wikipedia on favourites helps too

John says:

Having Nark around helps a lot too

John says:

Nark is like an encyclopaedia at times”

(John, *MSN* Interview)

Freetown is by most accounts a player written context; the town has a particular history, and along with it so do the main characters whose stories are interwoven with the town’s history. However, as Freetown is situated within the *Star Wars* universe, the stories bear the mark of being written for that specific context. While some players base their content loosely on the *Star Wars* universe, others delve more deeply into the universe to find substance for their stories. References to the Star Wars Extended Universe (SWEU) are used by players to gain credibility for their own stories, and to do that in a ‘convincing’ manner players try and make sure actions and characters are situated ‘correctly’ within these contexts. As levels of knowledge of the SWEU vary between players, they call upon the most knowledgeable players to lend a hand and act as judges if player disputes arise.

When stories are situated within the *Star Wars* narrative, as a rule of thumb players are asked not to engage in what is sometimes called ‘god-modding’; that is, in the power of imagination to let the character become very powerful and/or connected to one of the main characters in the *Star Wars* saga. To the players of Freetown this has mainly to do with issues of realism, as well as viewing this conduct as bad role-playing, and is mainly associated with people new to role-playing or young

inexperienced players. There seems to be a fine line that players should not cross as they situate their characters within the *Star Wars* narrative.

“Gabriel says:

nothing worse for us a story coordinators to craft a finely tuned storyline only to have someone say "I have orders from Lord Vader himself" and ruining the whole thing completely

...

Gabriel says:

Vader is a busy man, he's hunting down his son in the current time frame, he's trying to destroy the rebellion Vader is highly unlikely to give orders to a private of the imperial armed forces to countermand something happening in a town he's likely never even heard of..."

(Gabriel, *MSN* interview)

Further to adhering to the realism of the *Star Wars* Universe, the players often debate issues to do with what I choose to call ‘common sense realism’ where they discuss the possibility of a situation in relation to common sense. For example, the post below reveals how some acts that were carried out in a role-playing storyline the previous night defy common sense logic:

And how does Verik leap to his feet while wearing 60-100lbs of armour with a leg that osjari near twisted off in the fsd building half an hour to an hour previously?

(Nathan, forum post 22.12.2005)

Even though *SWG* takes place within a fantasy setting, players do stress that there are limits to the powers of the imagination and role-playing. Every action has consequences and if a character has been injured, the player must adhere to the laws of realism and play the character accordingly. Reality is seen to put a strain on characters and the actions of one character can have unforeseen consequences for other people’s characters. Even though the interaction takes place in cyberspace, where allegedly imagination can run riot, the players are adamant that there is still the reality of each situation to contend with. Players recognise that without rules and constrictions there is little challenge in role-playing, i.e. if there was an omnipotent character it would be impossible to role-play against that character as he/she could predict and outsmart your every move. Players are aware of this and, as said before, try and monitor any attempts at ‘god modding’ and also keep a close eye on the reality

of each situation. The next section deals particularly with consequences and describes how the Freetown players need to negotiate their role-playing practices in order to contend with the realistic consequences of their characters' actions.

Consequences

The issue of consequences was one that often came up during my stay in Freetown, and players often discussed amongst themselves what realistic consequences characters' actions might have for others, themselves, as well as the wider community. Being unaware of the consequences of one's actions is predominantly attributed to new players who are unaccustomed to the role-playing play style, but admittedly this can also happen to experienced role-players as well. An example of this would be the 'Jedi incident' that I mentioned earlier on in this chapter. This action resulted in the only rollback I saw, due to the fact that, at this time point in the *Star Wars* narrative, the Jedi knights were being hunted down by the Empire. The consequences that this action would then have been, according to the rules of realism, that Freetown would have been swamped with imperial officers and furthermore it would have had dire consequences for the governing forces of the town.

Not always are the consequences as large scale as predicted in the Jedi example, sometimes decisions taken at the spur of the moment can have unforeseen consequences for other player's characters and storylines.

“Thordis says:

how did she/he die?

Sarah says:

she committed suicide, and it wasn't decided upon. at the time i didnt pay much attention to how actions on my own character would harm others. ive since learned a lot, mostly due to that

Thordis says:

how did it harm others?

Sarah says:

i killed off my character on the spur of the moment, and it was in the company of her friends. due to this several of them saw it as their own fault in character

Thordis says:

aaah I see, so it did affect them indefinitely?

Sarah says:

i believe so, one of the other characters died about one month afterwards so i wasn't able to judge how long it would have

affected her. the other main one dealt with it better, being a stronger person
Thordis says:
I see”

(Sarah, *MSN* interview)

As Sarah points out above, she failed to think through a plot action where her character committed suicide among friends, and puts that thoughtlessness down to being new to the role-playing play style at the time. After Sarah’s character’s suicide the remaining characters would then have had to role-play the grief, sadness and confusion after witnessing Sarah’s character’s suicide. This ‘type’ of role-playing can be very straining for role-players and I heard on more than one occasion (and experienced firsthand) how difficult it is to play an unhappy character for a considerable length of time. Thinking through what effect one’s character’s actions have on storylines and other characters and players is seen as a symbol of a good and mature approach to role-playing and takes both practice and skill.

At one point the SC team proposed to introduce the equivalent of dice rolling to bring more uncertainty to the consequences of the characters actions. So if a player decided that his or her character would respond in a certain manner, the story coordinator asked the player in question to pick a number and from there it would be decided how serious the consequences were.

“Thordis says:
I noticed the other day that you asked people to send you a tell with a certain number... what was that about?
Frank says:
officially, when that is done it is to decide whether someone saves against something or not. It takes the place of a dice roll really. It also allows the player to know you are not making arbitrary decisions against or for their characters.”

(Frank, *MSN* interview)

However, this was used very infrequently although some of the players admitted to using dice on occasion to determine the consequences for their characters and claimed it gave the role-playing a more realistic feel of chance and uncertainty. I came across this on one occasion when Vivianne was performing surgery in the medical centre on a character that had been wounded severely in combat. As she was ‘finishing up’ the player told me that he had a set number of minutes for the surgery

and if it had run past that he would have had the character die on the operation table as it would have been realistic, based on the severity of his injuries. Fortunately, for Vivianne, and me, the patient survived and I am not sure whether the player would have followed through with his decision to kill off his character but what I know is that to be a good role-player I would have had to role-play Vivianne's reaction to his death, which would have made a permanent mark on her personality, something that I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

I will now move on to discuss the various contexts I have outlined here and explore the theoretical implications of my findings as I try to find them a place within the literature that I cited in Chapter 3.

Summary and discussion

In this chapter I aimed to set the scene for the rest of the ethnography and also introduce the settings in which players and characters find themselves as they play both IC and OOC within Freetown.

As I explored in Chapter 3, the Internet is now understood to be a complex space, which includes a wide variety of communities built around numerous communication practices and platforms. Freetown is one of these communities; it was founded for a certain purpose and its players use a variety of methods to organise their play; some lie within the computer program of *SWG*, while others, such as *MSN Messenger* and web forums, lie outside of the game but are intrinsic to the whole experience of role-playing within the community. In addition to these various communication platforms, there is an abundance of contexts within which the role-playing takes place.

The practice of role-playing, including player written content and character maintenance, is heavily regulated both directly by story-coordinators as well as through demands for the contextualisation of characters and player written content. The field of Freetown is, as I explored at the beginning of the chapter, composed of multiple contexts. Each has their own logic and they provide a frame of reference for the players so they can deem whether the role-playing carried is 'correct' according to

the Freetown standards. I specifically highlighted the contexts of the *Star Wars* narrative and those of realism and consequence. The players navigate between these contexts and negotiate their content and actions of their characters according to the Freetown rules and conventions. In Freetown, players' agency is at all times being negotiated and limited by the contexts mentioned above, by other players and their storylines and last but not least by a perceived 'Freetown way of doing things'. The players who try and exercise the limitless freedom that is on offer in cyber-worlds are corrected and pointed towards this specific way of role-playing. This applies also to the consumption of the *Star Wars* narrative, as we saw from Gabriel's comment on how Freetown role-play is according to the narrative displayed in the films and, as we shall see later on, the community had developed other ways of using it 'appropriately' in their role-playing practices. As I will explore in the next chapter, further to this being a regulation tool, it also served as means for the Freetown players to build boundaries that separate them from other role-playing communities on the same server. This consequently installs players with a sense of belonging as they partake in these community specific practices.

As I applied practice theory to my ethnographic experiences of Freetown I noticed how useful the concept of 'fields' was in understanding the act of role-playing and how the players organised their characters and other practices. Both concepts display how agents and practices take place and are situated within specific loosely drawn spheres, which in turn give meaning to the aforementioned practices. In the remainder of this chapter I will focus on these concepts, especially of that of Bourdieu's (1993) 'field' and how it can be used to add to our understanding of virtual identity and life online. What I also found was that by applying practice theory to virtual existence I found a new way of understanding the concept of fields.

Practice theory draws our attention to how contextual and situated social practices are (see Bourdieu, 1993/1977; Ortner, 1984; Holland 1998). In this chapter I have focused on the contexts within which the players of Freetown locate themselves as they engage in role-play and described how these contexts influenced their practices. We saw earlier how players move between contexts which all form the field of Freetown. These can be seen as separate, although connected, inconsistent, or at times contradictory. They are, however, all linked by the players' decision to role-

play according to perceived Freetown standard, i.e. their practices. As the players move between the contexts, they manage and negotiate their characters accordingly. These contexts are often referred to during play and are used by players to control and make sense of the role-playing practices. Players are asked to pay attention to realism and consequence in their content writing and character creation to ensure a good role-playing experience for all. For example, an all powerful character is frowned upon as it defies the rules of realism and the Freetown understanding of the storyline of the *Star Wars*. The players' agency is thus limited to creating and role-playing characters that fit within these contexts and, as I will describe in the next chapter, the community itself and the player written storylines. A character's personality and development needs to make sense within these role-playing contexts where consistency, consequence, realism and reputation are keys to a successful participation in the community and their role-play. Paying attention to these contexts by contextualising the characters and other content is seen as the 'correct' way of doing things because, according to the players, it ensures a balanced and a regulated approach to role-playing.

By using practice theory and the concept of Bourdieu's (1993/1977) 'fields', I was able to recognise the role-playing as practiced within more contexts than simply online, which helped me to examine the role-playing as a practice in its own right rather than seeing it as a specifically online conduct. As I explained earlier, the Freetown players were mostly experienced Internet users and MMOG players, and the online-ness of their play was rarely noted. It was only when I asked about it specifically that it came to light that many players view aspects of the online as problematic for the community. Had I chosen to focus on Freetown as a virtual community I would have risked exploring matters mostly irrelevant to players and in all likelihood I would have missed the richness of the practices that were involved in role-playing and furthermore how these practices allowed me a new insight to the player/character relationship. This will be further explored in the next chapter where I discuss characters as practiced within the contexts that I have identified and analysed here.

Before venturing on I would, however, like to address how using practice theory to analyse online communication has allowed me a deeper understanding of

fields as they are presented in the practice theory of Bourdieu (1977/1993). As I described in Chapter 3, Bourdieu (1977/1993) sees any field as a social sphere where struggles over specific resources or stakes (cultural capital, economic capital, symbolic capital and social capital) takes place. What I came to notice during my stay in Freetown was how I had a difficulty of applying the concept of struggle over resources to the practices and communications that took place within each context. For that purpose, the practices seemed aimed at keeping the players content and the community strong and healthy. Admittedly, there were explicit arguments and disagreements between players but mostly, as I have explained here in his chapter, players seemed to realise their need for each other and therefore strove to keep the peace. There were no obvious resources at stake within Freetown, and so I found that the concepts of 'capital' and 'power struggle' to be difficult to apply to my experiences there. This led me to ponder the very essence of fields and how different levels of commitment to a field and what it entails must affect the practices and the communication within it. Players enter the Freetown community by choice, it is a field of leisure and entertainment and is therefore not as necessary as many other fields that the players venture into in their daily lives. This is not to say that MMOGs and virtual communities are not important to those who use them, but I make this point so as to highlight how fields can differ, and as a result, so can the practices that they invoke and are maintained by. If players find that they are not satisfied with what the community has to offer, they can easily leave and join up with other players, as we shall see in the next chapter, they often do. It is therefore, in many instances, unlikely that they are willing to engage in longwinded struggles over certain stakes or capital. By using virtual existence in this manner to reflect back on the concept of fields takes me back to the first years of Internet literature where scholars discussed virtual communities and how fragile they were due to lack of many user's commitment. Users can simply 'log off' and that option should not be underestimated when it comes to analysing virtual communities such as Freetown. Saying this I do not want to imply that life in Freetown was one happy harmony and arguments did occasionally flare up but these were mostly settled fairly quickly through debates and reconciliations on the forums and players seemed content with having to compromise on issues concerning their role-play in order to be able to play within the Freetown community.

As I described above and will revisit throughout the thesis, it appeared to me that the players realised how much more beneficial it was for them to work together, and thus the role-playing practices were regulated, and used for regulation, in the manner I have described throughout this chapter. It would therefore seem that in some instances that fields can become fields of cooperation rather than struggle, depending on what is at stake within them. I will revisit this point in the final chapter of the thesis where I will discuss in greater detail the use of practice theory for the analysis of virtual identity and community.

What I have aimed to do in this chapter is to explore the multiple contexts in which the players and characters of Freetown play. I have furthermore described the group specific understandings and practices that the community has adopted and how some of them are used to preserve the community and maintain it. What I will do in the subsequent chapter is to focus on the characters in greater detail and how they are created and maintained within these contexts that I have outlined here.

Chapter 6

The Player - Character Relationship

Introduction

In the last chapter I presented Freetown as a field situated within, and consisting of, multiple contexts that originate from a myriad of often contesting influences such as players' ideas of realism, the Star Wars narrative, and player written content. The practices which the role-players engage in, in many instances, seem to serve the purpose of regulating, and thus maintaining, the community and the field itself. In this chapter I will focus on the players and the characters that are situated within Freetown and explore in depth the practices of character creation and maintenance.

My aim in this thesis, as I presented in Chapter 1, is to explore the player/character relationship and furthermore whether I can use the Freetown ethnography analysed through the lens of practice theory to add to our understanding of virtual identity. As we saw in Chapter 5, Freetown is a multifaceted field and, in order to understand the players and their characters, the online/offline division has been too strictly drawn in the existing literature which does not capture the essence of an activity such as role-playing. Through situating the character and the player on either side of the divide, and by examining the characters as simply online manifestations of the players' identity, we fall short of exploring how players think of their characters and how they maintain them over time in the company of other players.

Before I begin, I must admit to being confused about the concept of virtual identity and how to use it when it came to understanding the relationships between players and their characters. In much Internet research, as I reviewed in Chapter 3, the avatars we create have been seen as our identities and while we remain "logged on", there are other rules that apply; there is no body attached (in the traditional sense) and no cues we normally use to categorise and evaluate each other, such as ethnicity, gender and age. Consequently, these identities are supposedly more malleable than

our real life identities, we can have many and re-create and discard them at will (see Turkle, 1995; Stone, 2000). As I started to role-play in Freetown, this confused me because the characters there were very situated, both within the community and the *Star Wars* Saga. Therefore, I had problems with seeing them as projections of the players' identities. The characters of Freetown are malleable, as we shall see; however, their fluidity was limited by the role-playing practices, rules, conventions and the demands for contextualisation. I will divide the chapter into two sections. In the first one I will describe and analyse how characters are created and contextualised within Freetown. In the second section I will focus on the relationship between the characters and their players. I will then close this chapter by referring back to the above-mentioned themes and then explore how the characters can be understood in a variety of ways and how important it is, in order to gain full understanding, to view them within the contexts they are created and maintained.

Character creation, integration and contextualisation

When I first entered Freetown, I was unaware of the multiple contexts which Freetown is composed of. During my first role-playing nights I did, on occasion, trip over the fluid boundaries that lay between the contexts. My stumbling mostly had to do with my lack of knowledge and understanding of the *Star Wars* Saga. An example of this would be the occasions where I had to make a decision on where Vivianne would stand on certain issues, e.g. where did she stand in the Galactic Civil War and was she a rebel sympathiser or loyal to the empire? Mostly I made these decisions rather quickly and did not foresee the consequences that these decisions had and as a result Vivianne as a character developed in ways I had not anticipated. Also, I was unaware of, once I had made the choice, how that would affect Vivianne and her actions. I knew loosely about what being a rebel meant but the inner workings of the rebel movement were a mystery to me and consequently I was at a bit of a loss when it came to role-playing a rebel character. The Freetown players were very helpful in correcting me and pointing me towards the right way to do things.

What surprised me the most, however, was how quickly Vivianne changed from what I had intended with her initial biography, and how her story within the

Freetown community, which in hindsight, was littered with twists and turns that I could never have foreseen. At times, as I explained in Chapter 4, I felt as if I was a mere spectator to her life. This feeling of lack of control over characters' destinies was something that was echoed by other players in Freetown. This, in many ways, as we shall see, does affect the character creation and maintenance and consequently the relationship between the character and the player.

In this section I will discuss character creation as experienced by the players of Freetown. What I will refer here to as 'the character creation phase' is the in-game process wherein the player assembles the physical appearance and the skills of the character before logging on with it for the first time. As I touched on in Chapter 5, most players have a loose idea of what 'type' of character they want to play. Mostly it is a combination of how the character will play according to game mechanics, i.e. profession and skill, and their intended role within the Freetown community. Often players have loosely thought out what purpose the character will serve within the game and at times who they will be within the Freetown context. However, as we shall see, characters are created with a variety of purposes in mind, which affects how long players spend on this part of the game. The character creation phase is only the beginning of a long process and many characters change completely once they become integrated and contextualised within Freetown.

Characters as drafts – multiple purposes

As I created Vivianne, I thought that the biography I wrote for her would serve a greater purpose in her life to come. However, I found that most of the Freetown players write very loose biographies that are flexible and can thus be extended, which is seen by the Freetowners as necessary for successful role-playing. Having too rigid views on who your character is and writing a detailed, inflexible character biography can present a problem, as it may exclude a character from being used in a storyline. The characters should, I found out quickly, be flexible enough to be able to adapt to evolving storylines and the needs of the community. If I, for example, had been adamant that Vivianne was only a social researcher and had no medical experience whatsoever, it would have been very difficult to find use for her in storylines. But as I had left some hints towards her medical knowledge, she was useful to the community

and could take part in whatever storyline came her way. This idea is explained very clearly by Paul in the following interview excerpt, as he explained to me the optimum way of creating a character fit for role-playing:

“Thordis says:

what would be your tips to a newbie role-player on how best to create a character good for role-playing?

Paul says:

Start lightly at first.

Paul says:

don't go writing an epic background straight away as you may find you're stuck with a character you aren't really happy with.

Paul says:

best to start with something simple. A name and place of birth is enough. you can generally dodge any more in depth questions until you have gotten your feet and feel comfortable.”

(Paul , *MSN* interview)

Paul's words were echoed by all the other players I interviewed and shows how attuned they are to the idea of their characters changing, and how they realize that it is not entirely theirs from the onset. However, I must add here that most of the role-players that I met in Freetown had a history of role-playing in both online and offline contexts and, from what I gathered, they seemed to be very accustomed to creating characters in this manner. Mostly, the Freetown players seem to have their character loosely outlined in terms of personality before they start the game and then through practices, contextualisation and active participation in town events they begin to emerge as fully fledged characters. In other words the characters seem to take shape depending on the people they meet and the situations they find themselves in. Below is an interview extract from one of my first interviews with Frank and I must admit that at the time the answer made little sense to me but after playing Vivianne for a while I could relate to what he was saying and this seemed to apply also to other characters I met during my stay in Freetown:

Thordis says:

have you used Cemesis for any other role-playing than in SWG ?

Frank says:

no, even if I did it wouldn't be the same character. The actual flavour of the character, game mechanics aside, would be totally different when taken out of the environment and the people associated with him. The character is more defined by the social aspects of his play and his interaction with the other characters.

Frank says:

...the more he is played and exposed to different situations the way he reacts tends to change gradually. He is definitely a more rounded character than when I first started playing him.

(Frank, *MSN* interview)

The established Freetown players seemed to be aware of the contexts they are faced with as they introduce a new character and how it will affect them. Thus, they tend to see the character as a process and are fully aware of how it may change. Mostly, players are positive toward these changes but there are, however, additional rules with regard to character ownership and player agency that I will discuss in more detail later on.

All but one of the Freetown players I spoke to had been playing with the community for a while. One player joined the community shortly after I became a member. This was an experienced role-player who had played both live action role-play and tabletop role-playing games. He was introduced to the community by an already established player. Being an experienced role-player he chose to enter as a man who had complete amnesia following a spaceship crash, whose only clue to his former life was a name of a character in Freetown and her location. This choice of character made it very easy to integrate him into the community, as the biography was so loose it could be stretched when necessary to fit events that provided material for following storylines. In this manner, the players seem to be very willing to give up some of their control over the characters when it means that they will fit in better with the community. At times the players did not seem to be creating characters merely for individual enjoyment, i.e. being whoever they had always wanted to be, but rather to be someone that Freetown needed in order to become a stronger community. I will discuss this point further throughout the chapter. I feel it makes evident the very important point that characters can be viewed as communal and, in some respects, as practices in themselves.

The purpose of characters

Even though players maintain that their characters are created more as loose drafts than fully fledged personalities, they do most often have a purpose in mind for them as they go through the character creation phase. I met with characters that were created for a specific storyline and then discarded after it had run its course. Players were known to create characters for other players, such as a boyfriends or relatives, and some were created due to perceived community need. Even though some characters are initially created for temporary purposes, at times, due to the story-lines, they live on and their purpose changes.

'Thordis says:

how many characters do you have at the moment?

Nahan says:

4 at the moment, though only 3 are mine

Nathan says:

Fury Istek who i created 1 year and 2 weeks ago

Kinis who i created 18 months ago. she wasn't meant to be an rp character, but has grown into one

Arian' ... this is an npc for sapphire [other player]

Cheung Ing Kan is a psychiatrist i'm looking to get settled into

Thordis says:

when you say settled into... what does that mean?

Nathan says:

looking for more long term active play.

Nathan says:

Arian is temporary and Kinisis just for crafting and not roleplaying

Nathan says:

Orion who i recently had killed in a plot line, I didn't settle into ... the character just didn't feel quite right to me'

(Nathan, *MSN* interview)

What Nathan's reply reveals is that characters can be created for a variety of reasons and, as I explained earlier, their participation in storylines can lead to a complete change whereby those who were initially designed for long term play are killed off while other temporary characters live on. This does seem to indicate that most characters are created largely as *tabula rasa*, but during my interviews I noticed how many players did have rigid ideas on who they were creating and why. Players used a variety of ways to get an idea of a characters personality and relied on aspects such as the chosen race⁷⁰, status within the Star Wars Saga (imperial or rebel), gender

⁷⁰ The Star Wars universe is home to many distinct races. However, not all are available to play in *SWG*. Each race available to players of *SWG* has a brief description on the characteristics of its members. Further information is also available on Star Wars websites and in Star Wars game manuals.

or profession or a certain perceived personality type.

Thordis says:

and Kia... what made you create a female character for that one?

Frank says:

She came in as we had too many wishy washy imperials and we needed a much stricter tougher imperial type. The reason that she was a female served two purposes. The first being that women can be much scarier when being evil and two as she is an imperial in a position of power and a woman she must be a cut above the rest.

(Frank, *MSN* interview)

What these examples all reveal is how community and context specific these Freetown characters are. Even though they are created by their players, at times they seem like community property. Players frequently introduced new characters, and in many instances they were created for the community in the manner that Frank describes above. As with the regulatory practices that I pointed out in the last chapter, which served to strengthen the community, these characters were also created for the same purpose – to create interesting content for the community and thus maintain it through eventful role-playing. As Frank mentions above, the character in question was created because he felt that the community needed a character of this type. Most of the practices that the Freetown players engage in thus seem to be, in one way or another, aimed at keeping the community healthy and happy.

What discussions of character creation also highlighted to me were the various purposes that characters are created for and how quickly they can be discarded. In many instances players kept to one main character and created others that were more short-lived. This indicates to me that characters may have more complicated ties to a player's virtual identity than how earlier literature, reviewed in Chapter 3, has suggested: a thread I will take up again and discuss in more detail in the last section of this chapter. I will now turn to discussing how characters fare once they are inside Freetown in order to get a holistic idea of what the relationship between a player and his/her characters entails.

Living in Freetown – Character integration and development

Consistency, credibility and consequence are three key concepts that I found to be in players' minds during role-playing and during all the discussions on role-playing that

took place on the community forum. Throughout the remainder of the chapter I will discuss these concepts and explore how they are used to organise the role-playing practices and character maintenance within Freetown.

Being consistent IC is considered by role-players to be a sign of good role-playing because it ensures the flow of the storyline and the development of the character. For example, if you have at one time displayed allegiance to the rebel cause, then your character should remain as such, unless the shift is explained or in some instances justified by a storyline or an explanation. Further to being consistent during role-playing there are many rules and codes of conduct that you need to learn regarding how characters should act once they have entered the community as well as how they should interact with others.

Once a character has been created, it is introduced to the community most likely by simply turning up at the cantina or the medical centre one night. Some characters turn up with a little introduction or a warning from the player whilst others simply turn up and take part in the ongoing storyline. From there onwards it is a case of getting the character integrated, and as I found with Vivianne this process can take a while. The more experienced role-players are aware of this and try and make sure that characters are integrated into the community as quickly as possible. Most often the new characters were introduced as the friends or family members of those who already lived in Freetown; this provided them with familiarity which got them integrated very quickly. Again, this displays how useful it can be to have an obscure character background, as there is always room for characters from the past such as friends and family members, should a character need a quick introduction to the town community. The following is an extract from an interview with John who had recently created a new character and was working on getting it integrated into the community:

“John says:

I had the same thing with Zohr'za. He was a VERY rough sketch when he turned up

Thordis says:

how did you "fine tune" him,,, if so to speak?

John says:

well, I'm not wholly responsible for Zohr'za...the thing with him being Cemecis' brother, for example...Sapphire said how much the two characters looked alike, so I said to Cemecis..is he or isn't he? You decide...they did . And a lot of the fine tuning came

from improvised roleplay....his fondness for women for example....

John says:

that came from the first day he was in town...there were a lot of women in the cantina that night...he commented on it being the reason Jercis was in town and proceeded to try and chat up as many as possible..."

(John, *MSN* interview)

Zohr'za was new at this point in time, and had arrived in Freetown as a friend of a longstanding member of the community. The character was then further integrated into the community when, during one role-playing session, the mayoress discovered that he was the long lost brother of her husband who was one of the main characters in Freetown. This turn of events further allowed the players of the characters involved to create a variety of content related to this event, some of which introduced other members of the fragmented family. Those characters were mostly temporary but Zohr'za quickly became one of the main characters in Freetown.

Once characters have entered Freetown and are somewhat integrated, they begin to take an increasingly active part in the community's storylines and events. The role-playing, as I have explained, is a much regulated affair and unsurprisingly there are a few rules regarding the characters as well. The first rule I will address here and the one that was stressed by all players was regarding character ownership which states that the character is always the player's property. Any 'life changing events' that are anticipated as a consequence of other players' plots and storylines need to be run by the owner of the character beforehand. This was one of the rules that players would debate fiercely and if broken during play would inspire long threads on the forums. What constitutes a life changing event however varies greatly and each situation was mostly dealt with on an individual basis. The rule of thumb seemed to be that if you feel that someone is interfering with your character's life and you are not comfortable with these changes you have the right to refuse.

Thordis says:

would you ever go OOC in-game to stop a plot in the making ?

Frank says:

only in very rare cases. So far, however, it has never come to that. The main reason that I would have to act in such a way would be when another person's plot would kill another player's character (without that player's agreement)

Thordis says:

so if I wanted to write a plot would I need to seek agreement from the other character's players if I intended on involving them in the plot or...?

Frank says:

depends. If your plot included inventing things about another player's character, like say their family are not really their natural family, then yes. If the plot involved mugging them, or taking them prisoner, then no. Basically, if the plot is personal to them and their background then you have to ask permission. If the plot just involves them in events that could conceivably just happen to them

Frank says:

then the answer is no

(Frank, *MSN* interview)

Frank was one of the story-coordinators in Freetown and if an issue arose between players that they were unable to solve between them, they often sought the advice of the story-coordinators who would intervene and attempt to solve it in a manner that left all parties content. To illustrate how these issues might arise, I will publish a game log that portrays the players' communication during a time where player ownership became an issue. This incident, due to a variety of factors, resulted in the role-playing being suspended while the situation was resolved. This short communication log also shows how players' actions are always contextualised and how players negotiate their practices and the contexts between them.

What follows is the communication between the players after the Jedi incident in the cantina, which I discussed in Chapter 5. As the Jedi in question revealed her powers she attacked another character and severed his hand with her Lightsaber in order to save the town from a massive explosion. As we can see from the communication between the players, this act was seen as entirely unacceptable on many levels. Below is an extract from the event that took place that night and displays the players' reactions to the actions of the Jedi. The Jedi character's name is Eva and the character affected is Verik.

[Public]⁷¹ Eerin says, "((NO LIGHTSABERS!))⁷²"
[Freetown] Verik: well that was bullshit.
[Freetown] Maerki: Uh, isnt there a Lightsaber detection grid? if so it's gone off in the cantina like wild fire
[Public] Eva says calmly, "((It's my decision)) "
[Freetown] Verik: no it bloody well is not Eva
[Freetown] Verik: you just fucking sliced Verik, its not your fucking decision.
[Freetown] Eerin: lightsaber alarm has just gone off... everyone in the cantina is now dead
[Public] Jercis says, "What just happened?"
[Private] Verik tells you, 'can i get a res please?'⁷³.
[Freetown] Verik: Eva pulled out her lightsaber.
[Freetown] Maerki: and now Eva is an exposed Jedi, and thus will be hunted down and killed
[Freetown] Fury: sounds like an ic mess and a half
[Public] Jercis says, "((so are we paused?))"
[Public] Kin says, "((i think so))"
[Freetown] Maerki: So in otherwords, Eva is dead
[Freetown] Eva: so... when you say so.... I still have my sabre and force run and many buildings
[Freetown] Maerki: Let's put it like this Eva, you're now an exile, with many witnesses and a sliced up Verik
[Freetown] Eva: I did not kill him
[Freetown] Verik: yes you bloody well did
[Freetown] Eva: only disarmed him
[Freetown] Kin: looked like you sliced him up real good
[Freetown] Maerki: you can't return to Haven as you're now an exposed Jedi
[Freetown] Niva: a saber slices, thats what a saber does
[Freetown] Niva: its not like any other weapon..
[Freetown] Anime: and mutilation without consent is against freetown rules

(In-game log, 21.12.2005)

The player of Eva maintains that taking this action is his (the double brackets mean that the player, a male, is speaking) decision, thus referring to his ownership of the character of Eva. However, in doing so, as the player of Verik points out, inflicts life changes on his character that he is not willing to accept.

What this communication log displays very clearly is how players try to be

⁷¹ [Freetown] is the designated Freetown OOC chat channel while [Public] displays those messages uttered in the space around the character, [Private] stands for private messages that are sent between two players and are not visible to those around them.

⁷² Double brackets mean that that this utterance is OOC, that is, this is the player speaking not the character.

⁷³ This is a private tell where the player of Verik asks me for 'a res'. As Vivianne was a medical character of a high level she had the ability to 'resurrect' incapacitated characters.

constantly aware of consistency, consequence and credibility of each given situation. This event, if allowed to go unnoticed, could cause problems for the town and especially for Eva who would have to go undercover and thus the character would be unusable in future Freetown role-play. This would mean that for some length of time the player of Eva would be largely excluded from playing with the community.

What also happened during this short scene is that when Eva attacked Verik the game mechanism kicked in, i.e. the fight was not role-played so the attack left the Verik incapacitated. Strictly speaking, Verik should be dead at this point; however as a character death is something that needs to be agreed to first by the player in question, this action was ruled as invalid. I used Viviannes's 'resurrection' skill to bring Verik back and the situation was resolved with the use of a 'rollback'.

As some players further point out, with reference to the *Star Wars* realism of the situation, the Lightsaber causes problems as it is a very powerful weapon and in all likelihood would have been caught by the cantina Lightsaber detection grid as soon as the Jedi knight entered the premises. As I said earlier, this event resulted in a rollback and the situation was resolved in a different manner where the Jedi knight did not reveal her powers and Verik got out with minor injuries.

The following morning, a forum thread was started where the player of Eva apologised for his rash decision and explained that he had been very tired and therefore not thinking clearly about the consequences that his actions caused. The thread became a long one, where discussions of player ownership, the Jedi issues, rules and conventions were debated back and forth by players. I will touch on this debate later in the chapter, whereby I discuss the Jedi issue further with regard to player agency and community cohesion.

Public arguments like these were not common during role-play in Freetown and players seemed to keep in mind what consequences their character actions had for other characters and their players. All players expect their characters to change in unforeseen ways and most players maintain that they welcome the fact that the character's future is unknown to them. However, most players did seem to have some boundaries, as Dominic told me about in his interview:

'Thordis says:

has anything happened to Carelo so far that has had an impact on his bio, that you were not happy with?

Dominic says:

Not at all. There's been a couple of difficult ones to talk round. The hair keeps coming up, but then that's my fault for picking it I suppose. The suggestion that Carelo might be gay was a tough one. It definitely caught me off guard - and I doubt I'd have been able to pull off a convincing role if we had gone that route.'

(Dominic, *MSN* interview)

The player of Carelo was a very experienced tabletop and LARP player, and had told me earlier in the interview how he liked to improvise and took pride in attempting to role-play whatever changes his characters went through, even though his approval was not sought beforehand. He did, however, express concern over the possibility that he might have to play a gay male character, which, as he states, was something he doubted he could do convincingly. By this and my own experience, I gather that most players have some boundaries they are hesitant to break with their characters. So, it became clear that players do at some point take a stand against changes that are inflicted on the characters, indicating that they see the characters' identities as close to their own identity. However in other instances in other instances they decide to be adaptable, for the sake of consistency and good role-playing.

I found that players were constantly negotiating these issues amongst themselves both during role-play as well as in posts on the forums. I cannot present a simple clear cut rule of how these changes were negotiated as it seemed random and highly dependent on the storyline, the character involved and on the nature of the change. At times the players seemed protective of their characters, while in other instances they risked their life and limbs to progress a good storyline. What this illustrates, again, is the complicated relationship the players have with their characters and how the community along with the player written content can play a vital role in deciding a character's fate. Before tackling this relationship in the later half of this chapter, I want to first address some of the social aspects of the characters and the restrictions that I found to be present in the community that seemed, once again, to serve the purpose of ensuring player enjoyment and, consequently, community cohesion

Character restrictions

The role-players are aware of how social and communal the practice of role-playing is and try to include as many of the members as possible in their events and storylines. Although there are no explicit rules concerning character creation and development, the players tend to frown upon very flamboyant characters as they have a tendency to take centre stage in storylines and through that overshadow the rest of the community.

Alice: 'Do you know... I think it is a Star Wars thing...to be honest... everybody wants to be the hero... everybody wants to be Luke Skywalker...but you cant really do that because when you have a hero... then everybody else becomes a sidekick to that hero... and it causes problems...'

(Alice, Interview)

Nathan says:

...too many heros make a bad rp unit.

(Nathan, MSN interview)

As recounted before, role-playing is a collective undertaking of a group but, as Alice and Nathan point out, problems can arise when one character becomes too prominent within the community. I also heard the term 'plot hijacking' used about this particular phenomenon which refers to when one character takes over a plot which originally was about a different character. This can happen when a player decides to take very risky action that results in steering the plot in a completely different direction, and consequently that character takes the limelight. During my stay in Freetown there was an instance where issues surrounding plot hijacking arose, resulting in one player being asked by the story coordinators to tone two of his characters down. These characters were both very impulsive, which at times led to pre-written storylines developing into either rescue missions or longwinded remonstrations, carried out to prevent these characters becoming a danger to themselves or others. At the time the player did take well to the guidance of the story coordinators, however this issue did re-surface and then the player defended his characters, their actions and his decision to role-playing as he saw as convincing in view of their personalities and past experiences. I will revisit this case later on in the

chapter, as I discuss the relationship between a player and his/her characters. For now this example will serve as an indication of how characters are often regulated in order to make sure that all players are included equally in the role-playing.

The Jedi knight characters were perhaps the most regulated characters in the Freetown community, due to reasons I have outlined before. In short, the SC team as well as other players in Freetown had problems with IC Jedi characters, i.e. those characters which were role-played as Jedi knights. The arguments against the Jedi characters were mostly twofold: firstly, regarding the historical inaccuracies as Jedi Knights were supposed to be extinct at this particular time in the *Star Wars* universe, and secondly, in relation to the Jedi weapon, the lightsaber. At the time I joined Freetown there were no Jedi in the town, to my or Vivianne's knowledge, and the community seemed to have come to an agreement on the rules and guidelines regarding Jedi in Freetown. This, however, changed gradually during my stay there⁷⁴ as Gabriel pointed out during one of his interviews:

Gabriel says:

...unfortunately, SOE disagree with me, and it's getting to the point where every other player has a Jedi character

Thordis says:

yeah they are getting quite many

Gabriel says:

yep.. and it's forcing us to have to make rules to moderate them, which we'd hoped we'd never have to do.

Gabriel says:

as an example the lightsaber, if you watch all the films it's a deadly weapon, it'll slice through anything

Gabriel says:

that's something that is almost impossible to deal with as story coordinators

Gabriel says:

there is no way to fudge⁷⁵ damage done by a lightsaber, you get into a fight with someone and if you're very lucky, you'll live but highly likely with a couple of limbs missing

(Gabriel, *MSN* interview)

⁷⁴ The increase in Jedi numbers within Freetown was due to some in-game changes whereby Sony Online Entertainment (SOE), the company that designed and ran *SWG*, allowed players to have two characters per server and allowed Jedi as a starting profession. Before the changes players were only allowed one character per server and in order to get a Jedi character, players had to invest great amount of playtime and resources in training their character up in the correct manner in order for it to gain the status of a Jedi Knight.

⁷⁵ To fudge is here used to refer to a story coordinator's powers to change slightly what happens in a storyline. If a character is shot, the story coordinator can make the decision that it was only lightly injured but not fatally.

The reasons that Gabriel mentions here to support his view on the Jedi issue were echoed throughout most of the interviews and also through debates on the forums. Shortly before I arrived in Freetown a player had left the community due to the Jedi restrictions and I read up on the debate on the forums, which included the reasoning I have outlined before. However, the player in question argued that since this was *Star Wars*, the Jedi knights were an integral part of the narrative and consequently the role-playing. The player no longer role-played with the community but made a brief appearance on the forums during the debate concerning the Jedi incident in the cantina that I discussed previously.

Oh Eva.... if you are a Jedi, stay out of Freetown affairs. (as a Jedi)
thats the lesson i learned.

Freetown is its own world with detection grids and whatever, it
don't include Jedi.

(which is weird since this is starwars)
anyway.

just what i think about Jedi and Freetown relations, im not here to
offend anyone

(Lilyanne, Freetown Forums)

The Freetown players did not take well to that input into the discussion and this player was asked to stay out of Freetown affairs as he no longer played the game nor was a member of the community. I will come back to using this example when I discuss, in Chapter 7, how role-playing practices are used to draw boundaries around the Freetown community.

Force sensitive characters, including Inquisitors⁷⁶ and Jedi knights, appeared more frequently in Freetown towards the end my stay there. These were however mostly role-played as Jedi outlaw in hiding who kept quiet about their special powers. Consequently, the knowledge of them was mostly kept as OOC, i.e. the players were aware of them, but mostly the characters were blissfully unaware, aside from a few

⁷⁶ Inquisitors are dark side force-sensitive agents of the Empire. They do not feature in the films but are characters that feature in books about the SWEU.

unexplainable incidents that took place around town.

I have described in this section is how characters are, in many ways, managed by the community and how limited the agency of the player often is, with respect to character creation and development. Freetown is certainly not the place to be “whoever you have always wanted to be” but more “be whoever the community needs you to be”. Freetown is a community, which is maintained with the same practices it was founded around, i.e. the role-playing. These are both points of discussion that I will delve into more deeply in the final section of this chapter, where I provide a holistic understanding of the characters and players as they go about their daily life within Freetown. However, to do so I will first explore the relationship between the player and the character as it appeared to me during my stay in Freetown.

Who are they? Players and characters in Freetown

In this section I want to explore the question of who the characters are that I encountered in Freetown, and what their connection is with the players that create and maintain them. Admittedly, the characters originate from the player and are considered as their property. However, as I have described, the characters do undergo significant changes as a result of storylines and/or other players’ actions. This led to players speaking of their characters, at times, as if they had their own identities and agency. However, as we shall see, character’s actions were also, understandably, those of the player.

What this section will highlight is how important it is to study the characters within the context of the field and as part of the practices, with which they are created and maintained. My overall impression of the player-character relationship based on what I observed, and on my own relationship with Vivianne, is that the connection between player and character can differ significantly depending on context. While at times I saw the characters as an extension of the player, at other times I viewed the characters as persons in their own right. The same seemed to apply to other players and what we can observe from the interview extract below is how players speak of their characters and themselves as players and shift between the two as they discuss storylines and role-playing:

Thordis says:

how do you pick the characters that will be involved in your storyline?

Stephen says:

I do not 'pick' - only in special cases. So is the lovestory between Fury and Eva a result of gameplay and was never planned

Thordis says:

how did that come into being... was it a result of an ongoing storyline or...?

Stephen says:

no... it was somehow strange... we started to play very often together... and the two toons came closer and closer... finally ending in a relationship that's pretty complicated because both of them are very strong characters

...

Thordis says:

yours and Fury's story sounds very sweet

Stephen says:

believe me it's right now pretty complicated... Eva has a broken heart and knows not how to hold Fury...

Stephen says:

it's because the two strong characters... Eva has due to her lack of experience in relationships no clue what to do... and Fury feels trapped by her and wants time to think the thing over - because all happened much too fast

Stephen says:

after Eva made a proposal on sunday the whole story has become pretty worse and I don't know if the two will see a happy end (hoping for it)

Thordis says:

eep... sorry to hear that as you play it out... do you talk to the player of Fury about how it should go ... or is it just improvised

Stephen says:

I talked to him that I want a happy end - the answer is 'we will see' - that makes the whole thing interesting I guess - but as I said - right now I have no hope for it

Stephen says:

and of course it's good so - in a love story between two toons⁷⁷ the things should go by improvisation

(Stephen, *MSN Interview*)

The love story between Eva and Fury (two prominent characters in Freetown) did not have a happy ending, but what this interview extract displays very well is how players switch between talking about improvisation, character agency and how they themselves, as well as other players, affect the progress of storylines. Players tended to distance themselves from their characters as can be seen above when Stephen refers to them as 'toons' and explains how the two characters had become closer as a result of the players starting to role-playing together frequently. Stephen's story furthermore displays how storylines can develop in unforeseen ways and players sometimes feel

⁷⁷ Some players refer to their characters as 'toons', deriving from the word cartoon.

they are mere audience rather than participants. Improvisation and controlled outcomes of storylines were subjects that were negotiated between players on a regular basis. As much of these discussions were had in private it is difficult to evaluate in which circumstances players took control and when they decided to lay back and see what happened. In Eva and Fury's story it seems as though the player of Fury held most of the power, even though it seems to have been improvised. However, many storylines seemed to be constructed as specific narrative situations, as Gabriel mentions below, that were originally only loosely structured in order to provide a framework in which the players could role-play.

Thordis says:

we were talking about Eerin's and Niva's storyline earlier

Thordis says:

and it makes me wonder how storylines are generally constructed....

Gabriel says:

when it comes to personal character storylines, it's generally improvised sometimes, like with Arian, there's a plot point added like Ex boyfriend shows up

and then it's left up to the characters to sort their way through it without any "ending" or idea of where the plot will go

(Gabriel, *MSN* interview)

Many of these situations seemed familiar, such as the one that Gabriel mentions above and during my stay in Freetown we had a "virus outbreak", "earthquake" and "a coup d'etat". The players are then supposed to navigate through these scenarios through role-playing of their characters, much like a session of table top role-playing. The storylines were, however, managed differently and while the more personal storylines were controlled by their creator, the larger plots, such as the earthquake and the virus outbreak, were played through with the aid of a story coordinator. In the next chapter I will describe the process of story-coordinating, where I discuss the practice of role-playing in more detail.

The complex relationship players have with their characters was hinted at during role-playing and in my interviews, as players told me about their characters they would move quickly between speaking of their characters in third and first person:

Vincent says:
 Well as the L5r⁷⁸ version of kin is a samurai she was originally designed to have the honour and manners of the pnp⁷⁹ version that slowly fell away
 Vincent says:
 Well then she became what everyone sees her as now
 Thordis says:
 what is that?
 Vincent says:
 a black uniform
 Thordis says:
 how did it come to that?
 Vincent says:
 just kinda happend through storylines
 Vincent says:
 since then shes not been very well liked by umm anyone
 Thordis says:
 is that intentional or is that something that happened through rp as well?
 Vincent says:
 it just kinda happend. I don't like being shunned"
 (Vincent, *MSN* interview)

This manner of speaking about characters was commonplace and I found that when I spoke about Vivianne I sometimes used her name and sometimes said I. I have witnessed this way of speaking with most MMOG players I have played with regardless of the play style they have chosen. Therefore, I am not sure what to make of these slippages analytically. However, what I found interesting was how the status of the characters within the town or within the storyline seemed to affect the players directly, indicating that the IC/OOC division was not as clear-cut as it is made out to be in role-playing rules and conventions. Players told me during interviews how they dislike playing upset, sad or agitated characters over a long period of time. They admitted that having to do so from time to time comes with the practice of role-playing, but noted that doing so for very long was very stressful and affected their enjoyment of the game.

I had the 'pleasure' of an experiencing this at one point with Vivianne when, during a storyline, her close friend was cast in prison, although innocent, and became as a result very mentally ill. As the town doctor, Vivianne, performed prison visits to administer medicine and provide the prisoner with a shoulder to cry on. This storyline carried on for some time and I must admit that playing Vivianne under these circumstances was very exhausting. What I also found was that Vivianne had

⁷⁸ L5r stands for Lord of the Five Rings which is a pen and paper role-playing game

⁷⁹ Pnp stands for pen and paper role-playing

accumulated too much 'baggage' for my liking and I had no idea how to role-play her through this storyline. Thus, I took the opportunity and played out a short storyline where Vivianne went away, and in the meantime created another character called Katla in an attempt to start with a clean slate. This character never became anything as I never got comfortable playing her, so it was not long until Vivianne returned from her travels and found that life in Freetown was much calmer and stress free as the storyline in question had run its course. I learned through communications on forums and through private messages during play, that other players found this time stressful as well. I believe the issue was resolved between the SC team and the player involved whose character seemed to be at the centre most of the events that led to this discomfort.

Players do empathise with their characters and will defend them from banter and insults from other players. Players also sided with their characters whenever there was discussion or debate about character action on the forums:

Nina has become close to deletion recently also - sticking someone with claustrophobia and a well-founded fear of imprisonment into a jail cell wasn't exactly all that sensible - and merely for a slap in the face following an argument?

(Dominic, Freetown forums)

The player of Nina is here defending her actions in recent storylines and grounds his reasoning in her past. The thread in question was started as the player became concerned about how to play his characters in forthcoming storylines, because he felt that the security forces in Freetown had turned against them making their life in Freetown very difficult. This player expressed similar feelings that I had about Vivianne, i.e. that they had accumulated too much baggage, rendering them almost unplayable. The player did, however, not want to change course as he felt it would break the rule of consistency and consequently 'break' the characters. This particular thread became long and many players offered their insights into the dilemma. The debate did turn out to become about players and play-style rather than characters in the end, as can be seen on Alice's contribution to the debate.

Dominic, you are a great player with interesting (if very obscure) ideas and don't want to lose you, but a sane character would be nice. What I am saying, you have at least one sane charector, your wookie is lovley and Ser scares the crap out of me, but in a good way.

(Alice, Freetown Forums)

At most times the division between IC and OOC seems straightforward, however if an argument over character actions arises, the boundary becomes very blurry and often players need to explain whether they are speaking from the point of view of the character or their own. This often led to misunderstandings, especially on the forums when a discussion such as the one above was started. Players did seem to try their best to steer arguments so they would not become personal. However, as the players and characters are of course intrinsically linked, any criticism of a character's actions could be seen as criticism of the player's decisions and subsequently their play-style. This highlighted to me how characters are intrinsically linked to a player's identity, as having characters that do not adhere to the rules and codes of convention that have been developed in the Freetown community does say something about you as a player. However, considering what I discussed in the first sections of this chapter, it seems that characters can also be removed from the player and almost become like the property of the community. I will dedicate the last section of this chapter to explaining how I used practice theory to understand these seeming contradictions and incongruities. Furthermore, I will draw together the themes that I have described here in order to present a holistic understanding of how characters, players and context are connected.

Summary and discussion

I have dedicated this chapter to describing how characters are created and maintained in Freetown. In this last section I want to draw together the themes that have surfaced and discuss what contribution my findings may have for the literature concerning virtual identity and participation in online environments. To reduce avatars/characters to tools to engage in identity play and deception would be to miss the multiplicity of roles they take on as we enter the various online environments.

The contexts for which they are created, the purpose and the practice they take part in must be taken into account as we try to understand how people use new technologies such as the Internet to communicate with each other.

As I described in Chapter 5, the Freetown role-playing practices are carried out within a multitude of contexts. In this chapter I made clear how players create characters for a variety of purposes. While some were only created with temporary play in mind, e.g. for a single storyline, others were a player's main character and consequently a long standing inhabitant of the town. All characters are not created equal and consequently have different relationships with their player and the rest of the community. I would maintain that the creation and maintenance of characters are one of the practices, like story-coordinating and writing of content, and as such that have a part to play in the player's 'player identity'. I will discuss the idea of a 'player identity' below, but in essence this is how a player understands him/herself while in-game and how others see him/her as a player. As I introduced in Chapters 2, players of MMOGs identify and classify themselves and each other according to play style (for example: 'power gamer', role-player or 'socialiser'). These labels consequently become a part of their identity but, understandably, this identity only makes sense during play. In Freetown, being a good player is measured by your practices in town and your characters are the main manifestations of your identity. Players create and maintain them in certain ways that are agreed upon by the community and by doing so they show others that they are players who are committed to the community and understand its rules and conventions.

As I outlined in Chapter 3, postmodernity sees identity as a process and practice theorists maintain that it is constantly being created and maintained through practices, by active agents, within certain social contexts ('fields' or 'figured worlds'). By seeing Freetown as a field within which these practices take place, we can shift the focus away from the 'online-ness' of the communication in order to deepen our understanding of the relationship between the players and their characters. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, Baym (2000) suggested this way of studying online communities and outlined the benefits of looking beyond the method of communication, i.e. the Internet, in order to get a clear view of what people actually did as members of online communities. I will maintain here that by seeing Freetown

as a 'community of practice' we will gain a better understanding of the social processes at hand than if we focused solely on them as a 'virtual community' through highlighting their method of communication. I will discuss this point further by the end of Chapter 7, once I have described how players take part in role-playing practices and organise their play.

Adopting the abovementioned standpoint, I felt, liberated me somewhat from the term 'virtual identity' which carries with it a lot of baggage, mostly dating to the first years of Internet research where login-names and avatars were seen as aspects of the users' identities that were projected into cyberspace. These identities were seen as entirely malleable and people allegedly entered cyberspace in order to become 'whoever they had always wanted to be'. In the case of Freetown, where players are openly playing fictional personalities in the Star Wars universe, the idea of them being their 'virtual identities' makes little sense. I found it more fruitful to see these characters as practices, which in conjunction with participation in the community, establish the players' identities.

By using practice theory to interpret my ethnographic experience allowed me to explore firstly, how active participation in the community practices furnishes each player with an understanding of him/herself as an MMOG role-player and secondly, how players evaluate each others' contribution to the role-playing and consequently their player identity.

In Chapter 3, I introduced Fine's (1983) research on fantasy role-playing and his use of Goffman's frame analysis to understand the phenomenon at hand. Fine (1983) seems to have faced a similar conundrum, as he tried to figure out when the player was being a player and when he/she was being the character and what connection was between the two. Fine noted that players tended to move rapidly between the frames he had identified and at times were active in more than one frame at a time where, as a result, 'simultaneously activated selves' occurred. (Fine, 1983: 204) This is an intriguing subject and I doubt whether there is one concrete final answer that allows us to categorize exactly where a player ends and a character begins.

What I noticed is that the player/character relationship is ever-changing. Earlier on we saw how players jump between speaking from the characters' point of view to speaking about it in the third person. I maintain here that, at times, this is just done at random but it however displays how players are constantly contextualising their characters and their practices. During play, the Freetown players were very careful to adhere to the role-playing convention of IC and OOC. However, when examining the practice of role-playing, I felt that the IC/OOC division was of little use analytically and as such it did not help to clarify the complex relationship between players and their characters. As I observed how characters were created, discarded and contextualised within Freetown, I began to see them in some ways as one of the practices that were necessary for the role-playing, such as content writing and story-coordinating.

What I established in the last chapter was that Freetown is a community that is founded and maintained by certain practices and group specific norms and conventions, one of which is the way in which you create and maintain characters through role-playing. In that way the characters can be seen to be one of the practices through which players create an identity within Freetown. So, even short term characters do have some impact on a player's identity as they give insight into what kind of role-player he/she is. Other things that furnish a player's identity are the actions of his/her character, the content he/she writes and his/her knowledge of the *Star Wars* universe. Rather than seeing it as one character equalling a user's virtual identity, as seemed to be the way in which Turkle's (1995) respondents spoke of their avatars, I would maintain that the characters as well as other practices that players engage in within the field of Freetown, make up a player identity. With that in mind, it would seem that attempting to separate the player from the character is rather difficult because characters would no longer seem to be entities in their own right but rather practices that the player engages in within the multiple contexts of Freetown.

With regard to the virtuality of a player's identity as expressed through the characters, the idea of the online/offline boundary, also seemed to offer me very little analytical help when faced with the role-playing that I observed in Freetown. Admittedly, Freetown is situated in cyberspace and players could potentially use the freedom of cyberspace to engage in identity play, as became well known through the

work of Turkle (1995) and Stone (2000), for example. However, the Freetown players choose in many instances to create characters that would fit in with the community and help to maintain it. Those who attempt to express the alleged freedom of cyberspace and create unconventional characters are quickly asked to restrain them, as role-playing is seen as a communal act within which there is no place for one person stealing the limelight. From creation, it seems that characters are constantly being contextualised and regulated. As I gradually found out, the regulation seems to derive from the players' ideas about community maintenance. As we will see in the next chapter, the history of role-playing communities on this server is one of communities dividing due to disagreement. Thus, the Freetown players recognise how fragile virtual communities can be and how quickly arguments can escalate and contribute to members leaving the community. Therefore, as we have seen, many of the practices that Freetown players engage in ensure that the community is kept content.

At times I felt that characters had identities and agency of their own, especially after my experiences with Vivianne. As I described in Chapter 4, she was created close to me but then, due to the storylines that she took part in and the characters she met along the way, she seemed to develop into a character in her own right. This is first and foremost due to the role-playing conventions of consequence, contextualisation and consistency. In order to uphold these principles the players need to keep in mind how a character would react based upon its personality and past. Players, especially the more serious role-players, were unwilling to sway away from how the character would realistically behave in certain situations as, to them, it would be considered bad role-playing.

The practices, contexts and characters we have got to know throughout Chapter 5 and 6 aim to maintain Freetown, the very field in which they are situated. As in real life, cyberspace does contain a multitude of fields of interaction, such as Freetown, and as we enter them we do present ourselves so as to fit the occasion. Bourdieu (1990) recognised this and used the term 'habitus', which encapsulates who we are within each field and displays our knowledge of the field. The 'habitus' organises and is adjusted by the practices that are inherent to each field we enter. As such, I found that the concept of 'habitus' was helpful in filling the gaps that the idea of a virtual identity left me with. Instead of seeing a character as the finite virtual

identity, I could explore it as a practice that was inherent to each player's 'habitus'. Bourdieu (1990) claims that the 'habitus is constructed in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions'. (Bourdieu, 1990:52) In Freetown, the player 'habitus' is oriented towards taking part in role-playing and through that practice it develops in conjunction with the field. In this case the characters are practical as they are what enable the players to take part, and they are also used by players to signify what contribution they will make to the field, i.e. through participation they reveal how the player understands and presents him/herself as a player. As the field of interaction changes, for example when players use other online communication platforms, the habitus, as a contextual entity, may shift and change. Therefore, I choose here to speak of a player identity which is rooted in the player's 'habitus' rather than a virtual identity, as it is clear that as users move between different platforms online, their habitus changes and consequently their understanding and presentation of themselves.

I do recognise that the lack of embodiment and physical cues do provide people with ample space to reinvent themselves as they log on. However, I found that the idea of virtual identity, which we create as soon as we step over the boundary online/offline, actually offers a very limited understanding of the players and characters in Freetown, as it does not take into consideration the contexts in which these are created and maintained. The contexts that the Freetown players have created, adapted and re-worked in their role-playing are far more influential on the characters that are created and maintained there than the fact that the practices take part online. The characters seem to be one of the practices that the community is formed around and they, as well as most practices that the Freetown players engage in, aim to maintain a healthy and happy community. During those practices, the players are furnished with player identities that are a result of their participation in the role-playing where they get to display their allegiance to the community through the very practices it is founded around. Consequently, I would rather talk of characters as fragments of the player identity rather than focus on them as his/her virtual identity that is activated as soon as he/she crosses the boundary that lies between real life and cyberspace.

As I will establish in the next chapter, most Freetown players use a variety of

Internet communication platforms to organise and carry out their role-play. These methods of communication ask of the players that they create and maintain other methods of presence than just their characters, as they are located outside the game environment, on *MSN Messenger* and the community's web-forums. By the end of Chapter 7 I hope to have presented the reader with a holistic understanding of the practice of role-playing and the identity with which it furnishes the Freetown players.

Chapter 7

The Practice of Role-Playing

Introduction

In the last two chapters I explored the notion of how Freetown can be understood as a community of practice and how the characters can be understood as one of the practices by which the community is formed and maintained. In this chapter, I will firstly focus on the practice of role-playing as carried out and organised by the community, and then secondly on how the players use practices such as content writing and story coordinating to maintain the community. Thirdly, I will describe how the practice of role-playing, as carried out in Freetown, presented me with an understanding of the player identity as fragmented because of the players' use of a variety of communication platforms as they organised their play, such as the community's web-forum and *MSN Messenger*. Each of these platforms has different possibilities for self representation and I observed how the players adopted different positions depending through which medium they were communicating. At any given time players could be browsing the forums, chatting on *MSN Messenger* while they were in-game and I felt as I adopted this way of playing I got to know each player on many different levels, depending on which method of communicating we were using. I coined the phrase 'combined presence' as an attempt to explain how the players appeared to me as I chatted to them and role-played in SWG.

I will start this chapter by exploring Freetown and the community's links with the other role-playing groups on the server. These relationships and the players' view on them show clearly how the Freetown players established a collective identity through practice, which was formed relative to the other communities on the server and how they formed the community around collective reading and actualising practices.

Freetown and 'the others'

In this section I will focus on the Freetown community and its connections with the other role-playing groups on the server. To fully understand the community it is imperative to know where it originated from, and thus I will begin by tracing the history behind the origin of Freetown which ties in with that of other role-playing communities on the *Roamer* server.

I heard a few variations of the story about how Freetown was founded as a splinter group from an already existing role playing community. The history of role-playing communities on the Roamer server was complicated and seemed to include frequent disagreements which lead to the break down of communities. The Freetown split happened due to a disagreement over a specific role-playing incident, which then resulted in a fraction of the community leaving to found a new guild and a player city on a different planet. In my interviews, I noticed that there were a few versions of the story regarding the founding of Freetown, depending on where the player in question came from, i.e. whether he/she was a founding member or had joined later on. What was evident and was echoed in most of the interviews was that the players saw the Freetown community as formed around a specific role-playing concept that distinguished them from the rest of the role-playing communities on the server. In hindsight, most players viewed their past experiences within the various role-playing communities as being inadequate in one way or another, in terms of role-playing practice. All the players, however, agreed that they were content in Freetown and the role-playing that was carried out there was suited to their ideas of how it should be carried out. Gabriel, one of the founding members of Freetown, explained to me the reason for the split, which gives an indication of how Freetown was founded:

Gabriel says:

... some of Newtown's citizens, including myself left to form a new city

Thordis says:

how did that happen?

Gabriel says:

long story really. but basis is, as Freetown still does now, we believe in there being consequences for a person's actions....

(Gabriel, *MSN* interview)

The concept of consequence surfaces here yet again and the Freetown players brought it up frequently when comparing their role-play to that of the other communities. For example, Freetown put a ban on IC cloning in their rules, after they had formed the community. IC cloning had apparently been allowed in the former community and that entailed that characters could die IC but be brought back as clones and put back in to play. The Freetown players who told me about this felt that this practice would make players ignore the consequences of their actions, which would lead the role-playing to become less realistic. They felt that if a character could be brought back immediately after death the implications would be that players would be less careful when taking drastic action during play, as the ultimate consequence had been removed, i.e. a character's IC death. Due to this, all character IC deaths were treated as final in Freetown and after death the character was to be removed from the town permanently. During my stay in Freetown a few characters lost their lives but they were all characters that had been created with short term play in mind. The more prominent characters were often seriously injured but were cared for in the medical centre until recovery.

During the interviews many of the players used the word 'we' when discussing role-playing. To me, this indicated that they saw the community as being unanimous about the role-playing they engaged in. Furthermore, many stressed that the community consisted of players who shared collective ideas and opinions on how role-playing should be practiced. The Freetown players especially compared themselves to the community of Othertown, which was active around the same time that I spent with the community. Othertown and Freetown shared a history and many of the players had, at one point or another, been members of the same community. Due to a variety of reasons, that players would tell me during interviews, there seemed to be an air of hostility between the two communities and argument frequently erupted on the communities' web-forums. The Freetown players maintained that the communities engaged in entirely different styles of role-playing, as Sarah told me during her interview:

“Thordis says:

would you say that the role-playing communities are different?

Sarah says:

very much so. they differ in many ways that may seem minor to people unfamiliar to roleplay, but is very important to some of the geekier sorts . one of these was the separation between spiritual plots and gritty/bloody ones. freetown moved for spiritual ones but othertown would have nothing to do with them

(Sarah , *MSN* interview)

As the players discussed the difference between the two communities, they frequently referred to this difference in content production, which Sarah mentions above. To the Freetown players Othertown was seen to provide an entirely different role-playing environment due to their choice of content. Their plots were seen as being violent as well as featuring sexual encounters between characters, corruption and drug abuse. The Freetown community had on the other hand moved towards to ‘softer’ content that some of the players likened to ‘soap opera’, with a blend of action and dramatic plots. One Freetown player claimed that the while the content of Freetown would be rated ‘PG’, Othertown’s role-playing would be rated 18, referring to the manner in which films are rated for young audiences.

The Freetown players also perceived differences in the ways in which the *Star Wars* saga was used during role-play and content creation. The Freetown community seemed mostly unanimous about how the *Star Wars* universe should be interpreted and integrated into their plots and storylines. When I asked the players whether they knew if this applied to the other role-playing communities they stressed that Othertown was carrying out role-playing that did not adhere adequately to the *Star Wars* narrative:

Thordis says:

so are they [Othertown] very strict on the star wars element then?

Robert says:

actually they pretend to

Robert says:

but i have read their rules and 60-70% of it are inaccurate concerning the SW universe...

(Robert, *MSN* interview)

Gabriel says:

... we're playing it from the film standpoint...

(Gabriel, *MSN* interview)

Adherence to the narrative and realism of the *Star Wars* universe, as we saw in Chapter 5, is seen as very important by the players of the Freetown community. The players of Othertown were seen to be less precise with their *Star Wars* references and in some players' mind it seemed to clearly spell out the differences between Freetown and Othertown as role-playing communities. As Gabriel maintains above, the Freetown players based their role-play on the films, whereas Othertown was seen to be very liberal in adapting their content to the *Star Wars* universe. Their content was seen as being too shady as they allowed swearing, sex and drugs, which was seen, by the Freetown players, not to be in line with the spirit of *Star Wars* as displayed in the films.

The communities also seemed to differ in their approach to community governance. The Freetown players saw the Othertown hierarchy and rule set as too dominating and as a result the quality of the role-playing was seen to suffer.

Alice: Othertown has a much stricter regime than Freetown... they have a very long...they have a very long rules list... like three pages long... we have one.... We tend to rely on players sense...

(Alice, Interview)

The Freetown players prided themselves in having only a loosely structured governance entity and no one player was seen to be in charge. The story coordinators generally claimed to prefer a *laissez-faire* approach when it came to controlling plots and player actions and told me that they preferred that players took active part in the governance of the community. During the interviews the story-coordinators frequently referred to the using their players' 'common sense' during their play, which seemed to me to entail that they adhered to the Freetown guidelines of how to conduct role-playing. The issue of community governance was rarely discussed to my knowledge but when asked the Freetown players compared themselves to Othertown, indicating to me that the Freetown players' collective identity was in part formed relative to that of Othertown, in an 'us and them' manner.

In addition to drawing boundaries between Freetown and Othertown, the players seemed to have had strong opinions on who could legitimately comment on

discussions on the community's web-forums. This became very clear to me, during the Jedi discussions, when a former member posted his opinion on the Jedi rules in Freetown. Below is one of the replies he received from the Freetown members:

...

And finally lilyanne...if you wanna disrespect the community without actually understanding it, without actually playing in it and without actually playing SWG full stop... then look to the top right corner of your window...see the button with the cross on it? click it!

(Nathan, Freetown Forums)

As can be seen from the above post, the Freetown players did not appreciate when players from outside the community attempted to partake in discussions on the forums, especially if the subject had to do with the community itself or its practices. In Chapter 5, I mentioned a player who suggested that the *Galactic Civil War* should be used to a greater extent in storylines. This player was one that had just started playing SWG again after a long break and had before been a member of Freetown. Throughout the discussion that followed his suggestions it seemed to me that the Freetown players did not appreciate 'a newcomer' interfering in what they felt was an issue that was relevant to active community members.

As I said at the beginning of this section, the Freetown community was originally formed by a splinter group from another community. The breakdown of the community was a result of a disagreement that erupted over a certain player run event. When I asked further about the role-playing communities and their history on the server it seemed to be one of disagreement and splinter groups, as presented to me by most of those I interviewed:

Frank: The city [Firsttown] had a lot of problems initially... a lot of people were considering leaving to join Othertown

(...)

Salim'kr himself was..... on a power trip himself... which is why Othertown ended up disintegrating about eight months after it was foundedand then joined Newtown... which was another offshoot of Firsttown and

Alice: They were a very early offshoot though...

(Frank and Alice, Interview)

The history was rather complex and most of the Freetown players seemed to have been members of one or more of these role-playing groups before founding or joining Freetown. Aside from ascertaining this history through player interviews I also learned a lot about the various communities and how they were connected by reading their web forums, where the players discussed and debated the conduct of role-playing. As many players from Freetown had access rights to the other communities' forums, I noticed rather quickly common it was for players to highlight the differences between the communities. Despite this, there were a few instances where the communities did role-play together, most often in the way of offering each other help with storylines by playing NPCs. However this all changed quickly following an incident⁸⁰ that took place during role-play, which then escalated into a serious argument on the Othertown forums. Consequently, some of the Freetown members were banned from posting there and following this outburst the communities seemed to keep to themselves mostly during play.

Considering the communities' origins it is not entirely surprising that the players' communication was at times strained, as most of the players knew each other and had decided to go their separate ways. I felt that players were constantly drawing boundaries, explicitly and implicitly, around the community of Freetown, both through highlighting the communities' differences and by pointing out who was fit to comment on community issues, for example on the forums. I also felt that there was a definite purpose with these boundaries, and that was to provide a sustained feeling of a unanimous and content community. As the Freetown players compared themselves to Othertown, they at the same time produced an image for themselves of a strong unanimous community which carried out good role-playing. This feeling of agreement over the rules, governance, the content and the use of the *Star Wars* saga, provided players with a sense of belonging through collective interpretive practices. It was indicated by players that by being a member of the Freetown community it meant that you are a specific type of role-player, who values good quality role-play. In this respect the Freetown community bears some resemblance to the fan community in which Baym (2000) conducted her research. She found that the members 'positioned themselves as highly similar to one another, and in general terms, as highly attractive'

⁸⁰ I can not go into details here about this specific incident due to a confidentiality agreement.

and through these processes a group identity was constructed and maintained (Baym, 2000: 114). Baym (2000) furthermore found that through the writing of forum posts, as the established members made references to shared knowledge, which strengthened their feeling of belonging, other readers were reminded of their status as outsiders. These shared practices and understandings produced a feeling of a 'within-group' similarity and made the group feel like a community (ibid: 115). Furthermore, common readings of media content in order to create a feeling of belonging are well known in fan communities (see Jenkins, 1992: Fiske, 1998) and it seemed to me that the reading of the *Star Wars* narrative was used in many ways by the Freetown players to explicitly mark who was a member of that community and who was not.

I would maintain that evoking a feeling of belonging and community cohesion in the manner that Baym (2000) describes and I witnessed in Freetown, is instrumental in ensuring that players are content and thus remain active members of the community. In my discussions with players they frequently referred to how arguments can escalate quickly and in some instances contribute to communities breaking up. Due to this my perception is that the Freetown players keep a close eye on community affairs in order to make sure that every member feels content, and thus minimize the risk of damaging arguments. As we have seen throughout, the Freetown players do seem to organise their role-playing in the manner of maintaining the community, and in the next section I will focus on how this affects how the players write and organise their storylines and events.

Writing Freetown

We saw in the last section how the Freetown members drew boundaries around their community based on perceived differences between them and other role-players on the server. I furthermore maintained that these activities were instrumental in instilling a sense of belonging in the players. In this section I will focus on the player written content and how the players used it to strengthen the ties between players and consequently the community as a whole. Firstly, I will describe the types of content that players wrote and the process of story-coordinating. Secondly, I will

describe how the content was designed and actualised in specific ways to strengthen the community.

I want to begin by quoting one of the Freetown players, and how he experienced the constant flow of storylines that ran in Freetown during our time there. This was in many ways the same way I felt when I started role-playing in Freetown and the flow of multiple storylines at times confused me. However, I felt that the feeling of confusion decreased gradually as I became more attuned to the community, the practices and the other players. At first I also did not realise how important it was to keep an eye on the forums, where storylines were introduced and little hints given as to what was happening in characters' lives.

Henry says:

Well i've had minimal experience with table top games, but the experience i have on the computer game is that it's in some way's like watching a soap on tv, there's multiple storylines which run at the same time and key events happen and minor events happen, etc...

(Henry, *MSN* interview)

The content that was role-played in Freetown was broadly divided up into storylines, plots and events. Storylines tended to be open-ended and long running, involving one or more characters. Each player may have a storyline involving his/her characters and in addition there are storylines that involve the whole of the town community. Individual storylines are mostly organised by the player in question, while larger ones tend to be coordinated by one or more players or story-coordinators. Plots are mostly short storylines, meant to run for one night only and were often managed by a player or a story coordinator. The plots tended to simply include whatever characters were in town on the night in question. The aftermath of a plot did in some instances turn into a longer running storyline for those who were involved in the night. Events were, as the name suggests, parties and quiz nights at the cantina and ran for one night only. This distinction between the three types of content was rather blurry as most of the storylines were interconnected and linked to plots and events in a variety of ways.

Most of the players I interviewed had at one time or another contributed some content for others to partake in, in addition to having a loose storyline thought out for

their character/s. The story-coordinators were however those who seemed to contribute most of the content for the whole community:

Thordis says:

that brings me to the story coordination... I noticed you have a few story coordinators, what is their role?

...

Alice says:

If someone has a plot involving the rebellion, we'd highlight it to the chief rebels in town and see what they thought, or if we were feeling evil, just spring it on them when they weren't looking. Mostly it's just trying to make sure people get involved by giving different people snippets of something and praying that they actually get together to solve it

(Alice, *MSN* interview)

As Alice explains, in addition to writing and coordinating content, the story coordinators also attempt to get the players involved in the story. In some instances, a player came up with an idea and then submitted it to the story-coordinators for organising and planning. Further to overseeing the writing of content, the story-coordinators led the players through the storylines as they were actualised, by giving out hints and helpful advice. This was seen to help with advancing the plots towards a desired outcome. For example, in the virus plot that I mentioned in Chapter 5, the desired outcome was that the Freetown medical staff would eventually find a cure for the virus, before any fatalities occurred. However, so the plot would play out in a few sessions, the story-coordinator threw in a few surprises, such as the information that the virus was too advanced for the medical facilities in Freetown, which prompted some inter-planetary travelling for one of the medics as he searched for a diagnosis and cure. Players were at all times encouraged to use their initiative; however they must acknowledge that their characters have limited knowledge. The knowledge regarding the storyline is held by the story-coordinators, and before players take drastic actions they must consult with a story-coordinator first in order to clarify the results of this action. This aspect of the story coordination is hidden from view in Freetown as the story-coordinators choose to confer in their designated chat channel, where they discuss the advancement of the plot in question. Furthermore, the players often use private tells to communicate information regarding role-playing and storylines. During play and as a plot is active, the players of the most relevant

characters were often invited into a group⁸¹ by a story coordinator where they used the group-chat function to discuss and direct the plot as it progressed.

During the storyline of the deadly virus outbreak, as the player of a doctor who served the role of a diagnostician and healer I was added to one such group. Below is an extract from the chat log which exhibits this side of the story-coordination and also how players consult story-coordinators for information about the plot. The following conversation takes place in the medical centre where other residents of the town were being tested for the virus and features communication between Nark (the story-coordinator) and Verik (the chief medical staff) where Nark decides firstly, who is infected and secondly, what the symptoms are and relays that information to us:

```
[GroupChat] nark: Viv and and verik are
infected. the amounts are minute in the blood
stream, but it's there. Trivis looks to be
clean
```

```
[GroupChat] verik: well you better tell us the
sypmtoms if im not going to be finding a cure
for this sharpish
```

```
[GroupChat] nark: first most obvious symptom is
weightloss
```

```
[GroupChat] nark: then slowing of reflexes,
problems with speech and motor function.
```

```
[GroupChat] verik: stage 3?
```

```
[GroupChat] nark: as nark is the furthest along
so far... I'll keep it there :P
```

(*SWG* game log)

We were further narrated through the plot by Nark who decided which other residents were infected and the progress of their symptoms. In analysing blood samples of the residents the medical staff were given instructions from the story coordinators on what was found in the blood culture and whether attempts at healing were successful. In this manner, the story coordinators guided the narrative in a

⁸¹ A common function in MMOGs, players can group up when going hunting or taking on collective missions. When two or more players group up they can use a chat function called group chat, which allows them to communicate among themselves without others around hearing. Furthermore the grouping up allows the computer software to calculate skill points and organise the distribution of loot correctly among the members. During role-play it was only used for the group chat function.

desirable direction by making decisions about every event that drove the storyline forwards. This made the storyline run smoothly and along the intended course, as the story-coordinator kept a close eye on players in order to keep surprise actions under control.

At the beginning of this section, where Alice outlines the duties of a story-coordinator, she explains how they try to get players involved. The other story coordinators echoed this and one mentioned that having good plot 'hooks' to pull players into the storyline is essential for the purpose of coordinating. For example, a character may be sent a parcel containing something relevant to the story. The hope is that this will prompt the player to investigate this further and thus be pulled into the story. An example of this would be the night where Vivianne was offered the role of medic in the Freetown community. The story-coordinator in question, who was aware of Vivianne's medical experience, used that knowledge in order to pull her into a storyline by asking her to attend to a wounded character. Consequent to this action Vivianne achieved a new status within the community and furthermore a role to play in that particular storyline. I described in Chapter 4 how this act integrated me into the community to a much greater degree, so it seems that story-coordinators can be aware of how increased participation will make a new or an inexperienced player a better integrated member of the community.

Players and story-coordinators alike expressed their preference for plots that included the whole community and attempted to write plots that were suited for that purpose. This was not always successful, as Frank told me during his interview:

Frank says:

I did find personally that last night's plot in which several people in town could not go to the ship⁸² was a bit anti climatic for those left in town.

Frank says:

... large plots that cover all the characters in town are good....

(Frank, *MSN* Interview)

The aftermath of this plot was discussed on the web-forums, and those players who were left in town expressed some frustrations of having to wait in the town

⁸² This particular plot involved a story-line that in part took part aboard a player's space ship. The number of players on space ships was limited by the game software to 8.

cantina for the others to return. This did cause a little friction in the community and which displayed to me how important it is for the players to feel included in storylines and how the feeling of being left out did make some players feel insecure and excluded.

I was granted access to the story-coordination section of the forums and saw there how plots were created and how the story coordinators planned to include as many of the players as possible in the forthcoming storylines. Successful storylines did seem to serve their purpose in keeping the members happy and it was often expressed how their feeling was that the community was strengthened as the players collectively took on the challenges that were thrown at them by the story-coordinators. In this respect, the measure of a storyline seemed to be how well it served this purpose, and on occasion after a good role-playing night there was often a thank you post on the forums to whoever wrote and planned the night. Comments such as this one were frequently posted on the forums:

'I really want to say thank you again to all of my fellow players and the SC. The last evening was very thrilling and exciting. I know that we had really a hard time down in the nightclub and finally the end was very dramatic. But I also think that it was a good possibility to bring the citizens of Freetown closer to each other.'

(Stephen, Freetown forum post)

Here Stephen indicates that the practice of role-playing a good storyline will bring the members closer together and strengthen the community. As players claimed to favour content that would involve as many inhabitants as possible, many also expressed a liking for playing out their own character's storyline which was often carried out through what one player called 'emotional role-play'. Emotional role-play was carried out away from the public arena and would often include the character in question and a lover or a close group of friends. As these were private affairs, it was difficult for me to establish in what manner these were carried out or what they

entailed. As I learned of these rather late in my research, I somehow never asked players properly about this conduct. One player made references to 'cyber-sex' as being a great part of these intimate sessions but I have no data to validate this claim. During the later stages of my ethnography in Freetown, sessions involving a smaller number of players were thought to be taking over in Freetown, and one player wrote on the forums and asked that these sessions were kept in balance with the grander storylines to boost the community spirit. Many players agreed and an attempt was made to rectify this situation with the creation of new plots and storylines. Also players were asked to make themselves known on the Freetown OOC forum when they logged on for role-play and let others know what their intentions were and invite them to join in if that was applicable to the storyline.

As the players recognise the community feelings evoked by content they are also aware of how storylines can upset the balance in the community. Therefore they actively limited storylines that feature too much open animosity between characters. I witnessed myself how delicate this balance is when a storyline that featured one character in particular became very hard to manage due to the animosity between that character and a few other characters in the town. Consequently, this eventually became an issue between the relevant players and the effects of this content were felt throughout the community. This resulted in a long thread on the Freetown forums where players discussed the future of the characters and consequently that of the player within Freetown. I referred to this debate in Chapter 6 where I argued that players do side with their characters and defend their decisions to role-play in a certain manner. For the player, Dominic, this became an issue of his identity as a role-player, where he felt that he would be compromising on the quality of his role-playing if he were to change course with his characters as it would be very unrealistic for a personality to change so suddenly. In the views of the other players who partook in this debate, these characters were perceived as a threat to the community and the collective practices around which Freetown was built.

This revealed to me how delicate the community balance is and how easily it can be upset. It also displayed to me the significance of player identity in role-playing practices, and it seemed very important to players to be considered good role-players. In most cases the quality of role-play seemed to be re-iterated in communication

between players through communal practices. Also, role-playing 'the Freetown way' seemed in most instances to imply the right way of role-playing for most of the players. However, when it came to choosing between the welfare of the community and a player's right to role-play as he saw fit, it seemed that the interests of the community outweighed that of the player. Keeping the Freetown community strong through role-playing seemed to me to be a primary goal, and the players used the resources at their disposal, i.e. the role-playing conventions and the content writing as instruments, to reach it.

As we have seen throughout, the players use a multitude of ways to organize and carry out their role-play. As they play, they move between the contexts that I mentioned in chapter 5, but also between platforms of interaction such as *SWG*, the web forums and *MSN Messenger*. In the next session I will focus on role-playing as a multifaceted practice that involves communication on all these platforms and includes players taking up a variety of stances, which combined make up a player identity.

Role-playing: A Multifaceted practice

What I want to focus on now is how the practice of role-playing involves online communication through a variety of channels, and how players manifested themselves differently on each of the platforms. During my ethnography I experienced each player as a presence that combined all these manifestations within them. Thus I will maintain here, in the manner of practice theory, that a player identity as I got to know it was fragmented and constructed through active participation and practice within specific contexts.

In *SWG*, whilst role-playing, the players frequently discussed the progress of storylines through the various chat channels available in-game, as well as on *MSN Messenger*. It is therefore obvious that the IC and OOC aspects of the role-play take place simultaneously. As an example, a player may be engrossed in a storyline, playing his/her character, whilst story-coordinating and consequently using spatial chat, OOC chat, the SC chat, private messaging and group chat concurrently. Furthermore, the same player may be engaged in an *MSN* conversation outside of

SWG, where the progress of a storylines was frequently discussed. These various applications and the communication patterns that are employed include different practices and means of self-presentation. Thus the players' identity construction seems to take place in many contexts simultaneously.

Thordis says:

when you play *SWG*... are you always in sc mode or do you sometimes just roleplay along?

Frank says:

Most of the time I am just roleplaying along and will only SC when it is needed. Obviously during really big plots I need to do more SC than rp

(Frank, *MSN* interview)

As players communicate in-game they are simultaneously players and characters (IC/OOC), and in addition some are story-coordinators as well. The players tend to assume different methods of communication depending on the context they are situated in, i.e. forums, IC, OOC, in-game chat channels or *MSN Messenger*. Although the apparent fragmentation and multiplicity may seem confusing, it is the role-playing practices and the field of Freetown that ties these pieces together to create a feeling of a unified player identity. As I communicated with players in this manner, I thought of the term 'combined presence' to describe how I experienced knowing players through these various communication platforms. This 'combined presence' manifested itself in how players used these channels to organise or take part in role-play, and so consequently I got to know these people first and foremost as players. The context we communicated within was one of game-play so most of our interaction revolved around play in one form or another. As my ethnography progressed and since leaving Freetown I have however got to know more about the Freetown players' daily lives and consequently other aspects of their identity as they tell me about their jobs or the progress of their studies, their preferences in music and other entertainment. These are all aspects of their identities that are relative to and more prominent in other fields in their lives. I will come back to discussing and clarifying this point at the end of this chapter.

All these different platforms were seen as useful tools for the planning and adding to the practice of role-playing that went on in *SWG*. The forums were used to plan the role-playing, as well as for discussion and regulation, and were also used for the establishment of background information for plots and characters. On the forums,

each of the players was represented by a login name (most often the same name as a player's main character), a small graphical avatar, and additionally most players had their own forum signatures⁸³. Communication on the forums is in many ways different from the one that takes place in-game and on *MSN Messenger*, as it is asynchronous, i.e. players write posts and leave them on the forum and may need to wait a while for a reply. In some cases the forums are used as bulletin boards, i.e. to present the other players with information and reply is not necessarily anticipated.

Players used the forums in a variety of ways and while some posted frequently others were rather silent. The forums were divided into IC and OOC sections, where players either posted as characters (IC) or as players (OOC). The forums were mostly used for information sharing; the local law enforcement authority had a section in the IC forums where prisoner files were kept along with an arrest log and statements of prisoners. The Medical centre also had a board in the IC section where the staff posted patient records and internal communication between medical staff. These sections were valuable sources of information, especially for those who had not been present on the role-playing nights in question as they could gain information and thus keep their knowledge of town affairs up to date.

It is hard to describe with any accuracy what and how players used the forums without resulting to long lists, so I maintain here that from what I gathered they were first and foremost used for transmitting information to keep all players updated on the situation in Freetown. As players were sometimes logged on at different hours, the storylines progressed without all players being present. As it would be very time consuming to start each night with an update to those present, the forums were useful for keeping all members up-to-date on the situation in the town.

To illustrate how a player is represented on the forums I have included here a post of mine where my avatar and signature can be seen. Below my chosen picture, the date in which I joined can be seen along with the number of posts I had posted and then my country of residence.

⁸³ Forum avatars and signatures are common features on Internet discussion forums. Participants use these two features along with their login-names to represent them in the web forum community in question.

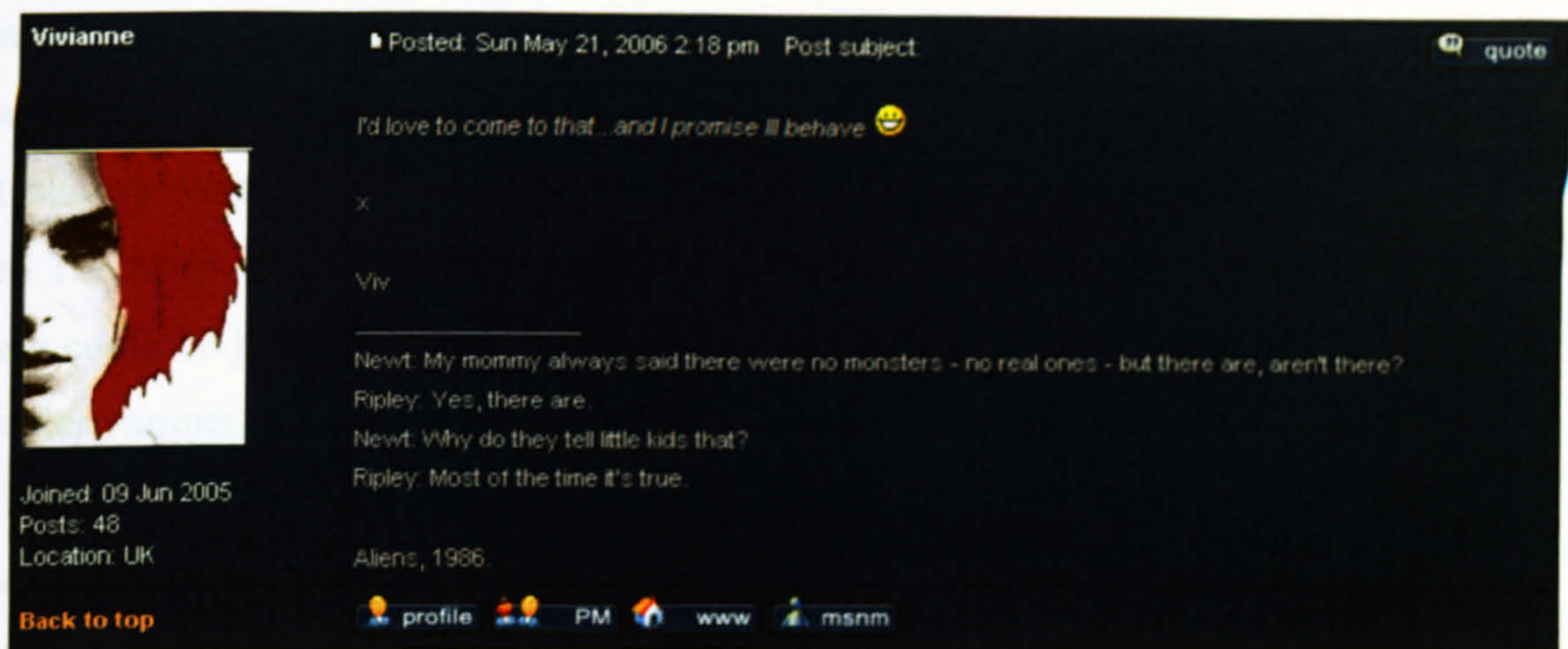


Figure 12: Screenshot of a Freetown forum post

In addition to discussions about role-playing, there was one section on the forums in which players could post discussions unrelated to *SWG*. In that part of the forum, players discussed music, films, other games and posted links to websites they had found interesting in one way or another. So, in essence, the forums strengthened the community both IC and OOC and provided a valuable frame of reference for the role-playing that took place in-game.

The posts on the forums further furnished the players' identities, as they commented on issues regarding community governance, ongoing plots and posted written material of their own. Reading the forums gave me a further insight into how the players experienced *SWG* and the role-playing. As some players came across as 'off the cuff' role-players, others liked a more rule-bound approach to role-playing and these preferences became apparent to me by reading their posts. The forums would have made very little sense to me without *SWG* and equally the forums seemed to be an integral part of the organising and planning of storylines as players were free to post their thoughts and half-baked ideas for storylines for others to read and comment on. The forum also served the purpose of providing a common platform for discussion where all players could offer their opinions on a variety of issues and as such they were important for evoking a feeling of community that extended beyond the game.

After asking each player for an interview I subsequently added them to my *MSN Messenger* contact list. Each player I asked had an active *MSN Messenger*

account which indicates how common this mode of communication is, and consequently how adept the players are in using it. What I gradually found was that most players were already connected to each other in this manner and shortly after I joined Freetown players were asked to post their *MSN Messenger* so that all the players could be joined together in this manner. The players appeared on my contact list under various nicknames, not necessarily the character names. Most people have a collection of the various people on their *MSN Messenger* lists so your SWG character name may not necessarily be the one that people know you under. *MSN Messenger* seemed to be used for general chatting outside of play, sometimes players grouped up on *MSN Messenger* before play commenced, and to contact those who were not in-game about events that were happening during story-lines. I also know that players used *MSN Messenger* to consult with story-coordinators in an attempt to solve issues that had come up during play.



Figure 13: MSN Messenger

Above is a screenshot of my *MSN Messenger* contact list and it displays the various self-presentation options it has to offer. Firstly, a person can alter their nickname as often as they please, when this screenshot is taken mine is simply Thordis, but during the first months of my ethnography it was Vivianne. Secondly, this version of *MSN Messenger* allows users to add a profile picture to represent them. Mine at that time was an avatar of a red-haired lady from one of my favourite film, *Run Lola Run*. Thirdly, users can link up their *MSN Messenger* with Windows Media Player, which allows users to display to their friends what music they are listening to; in this case I was listening to a song by the rock band Green Day, *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*. If people choose not to display their music they can enter a text of their choice in the frame, which is then displayed next to their nickname. A few of the people on this contact list have chosen to do so, for example one of the Freetown players has entered 'Moody blue too!' in their text of choice, perhaps to indicate his/her state of mind. *MSN Messenger* thus offers users a variety of ways to present themselves through merely logging on and as I found out, people struck up a conversation over a particular choice of song or over the message that was entered in my free text box and after while I started to do the same.

As I said earlier, the Freetown players are connected with *MSN Messenger* and use it for daily chat as well as for the organisation of role-playing. It is difficult to exactly evaluate how players use the *MSN Messenger*, other than from my experience from using the program to interview and chat with them. As I explained in Chapter 4, I made the decision to add the players to my own personal *MSN Messenger*, to which I sign in every day. This resulted in varied communication between me and the other players, where they would contact me throughout the day to ask how my research was going and one player and I got into interesting discussions about music, as I asked him about an artist he was listening to. Being connected to *MSN Messenger* helped me to get to know the players in more contexts than just within *SWG* and I could see how it helped with binding the community together as players have more means of contacting each other than just in-game. Those players who work at a computer during the day often had their *MSN Messenger* active and were therefore accessible for a chat throughout the day. This gave ample opportunity for discussing play and planning of up-coming events even though people are not logged on to the game.

Both *MSN Messenger* and the web-forums allow the game space and the community to be extended outside of *SWG*. Also, it allowed for more frequent communication between the players and thus seemed to strengthen the community. These spaces also provided players with various ways of representing themselves along with introducing to their fellow players everyday aspects such as leisure and entertainment preferences along with family and work situations. All this information gave me a more holistic idea of each Freetown member and all these different fractions came together to form the 'combined presence' that I introduced earlier. However, as our practices and the contexts within which they took place was an MMOG, I came to know the members first and foremost as players of this particular game.

Summary and discussion

In this chapter, I explored the practice of role-playing and how various communication platforms outside of *SWG* are used to organise play and strengthen the community. Furthermore, I described how practices such as the writing of content and story-coordinating were used to keep the players content in order to keep them as active members of the community. In addition, I described how boundary construction was also used for this purpose and to enforce a belonging amongst the players of Freetown. Thus the role-playing, further to being the practice that the community is centred around, is instrumental in strengthening the community and keeping it functioning. To use the words of Baym (1998), the role-playing and the conventions and regulations that the players have developed are the means that 'enable them to imagine themselves as a virtual community' (Baym, 1998:38). Freetown as a community can not be separated from the practices and the participating players. To use the words of Baym (1998) again, 'an on-line communities "style" is shaped by a range of pre-existing structures, including external contexts, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes and participant characteristics' (ibid: 38). Community is more than a group of people; it exists within a particular time and space and within myriad contexts. The Freetown community is formed around specific practices and these practices are used to

regulate and maintain the community, and as such they impact upon the identities of its participating members.

In Chapter 3, I explored how communities of practice had been theorised by focusing on what they 'actually do', as Baym (2000) suggests. In the case of Freetown the practices are centred around role-play and, as we have seen, they are interwoven with every aspect of the community and the communication it is built upon. By focusing on the practices that were carried out within Freetown I managed to see how they use their characters for a variety of purposes and how we can see their creation and maintenance as just another practice around which the community is centred. To use the words of Lave and Wenger (1991), we can understand Freetown as 'a set of relations between persons, activity and world' (1991: 98). By exploring the various communication platforms that role-playing is conducted on, I was also able to recognise that the player identities were not just formed in relation to the characters but a range of practices and activities that the players engaged in.

In the last section of this chapter I described how the practice of role-playing takes place and is actualised through a variety of communication channels, some of which lie outside of *SWG*. The Freetown players use all these means of communicating to organise and actualise their role-playing. This results in each player having a fragmented player identity because each interaction platform offers different ways of self-representation. Furthermore, the players adopt various positions depending on whether they are on the forums, in-game IC or OOC or on *MSN Messenger*. To me the identities of the players I got to know were combinations of all these representations. Consequently, I maintain in a postmodern fashion that identity is as fragmented online as it is offline and is subject to just as much restriction and limitation, depending on which online context we find ourselves. This leads me to agree with the claims of Hine (2000) about the Internet as consisting of multiple locations which are mostly constructed and understood through use. Cyberspace is not one undivided space with one set of rules and therefore to further the discussion of virtual identity and online practices we need to take each context as it comes and pay attention to localised manifestations of identity and community construction.

As I stated in Chapter 1, the online possibilities of being have multiplied within the last few year with new technologies and the convergence of media forms along with other forms of entertainment. Consequently the ontology of our contemporary cyberspace is entirely different from that of the first text based cyberspace that was only available to the select few. What I feel that the ethnography of Freetown and my use of practice theory have highlighted is how the use of the Internet and online communication methods is situated and how by focusing on what people do once they 'log on' we can gain a deep understanding of how people experience these the range of possibilities that the Internet has to offer through its use.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Introduction

In the last three chapters I have presented my findings from the Freetown ethnography and based on these reflected on theories of virtual identity and community. In this chapter I will tie together the themes that surfaced in the previous three chapters in order to present a conclusion and an evaluation of what contributions my research may have for our understanding of how users manage their online existence, with regard to their virtual identities and community creation and maintenance.

Further to being a conclusion, this chapter will also serve as my reflection on the ethnography and the theoretical framework that I used to analyse my findings. After discussing my main findings I will reflect on my use of practice theory and contemplate the claim that Freetown can be defined as a community of practice and that the characters that I met there are themselves practices that are a part of the 'player identity' of each member. I will draw on the main concepts of Pierre Bourdieu's (1977/1993) 'theory of practice', *habitus*, *cultural capital* and *field* and apply them to my findings in order to establish firstly the suitability of practice theory for a research such as this one and secondly use my findings to reflect back on practice theory and speculate whether it can tell us something about any limitations that this approach may have.

In the third section of this chapter I will discuss the methodology of ethnography and my application of it for this research. Also, I will highlight any methodological issues that I feel, on hindsight, I should have tackled differently and any additions that I would include if I was commencing this research now. I will also discuss issues concerning the validity of a small scale research such as the Freetown ethnography and whether I feel it can, due to its relatively small scale, contribute to our ongoing knowledge production about online worlds. To conclude I will identify

what issues I feel warrant further inquiry and discuss possible paths for future research of the Internet and online gaming.

‘Virtual identity’ and ontology of the Internet

As I suspected from the onset, and made clear in the introduction to this thesis, I found the concept of ‘virtual identity’, as it was coined by some authors of the first Internet research literature, problematic to work with as it had been formed in different circumstances than what I found to be present in MMOGs. After having carried out the Freetown ethnography, which draws our attention to a different understanding of identity in virtual settings, I feel that these speculations raise two issues that I want to discuss in this section: firstly, about the ontology of the Internet when taking into consideration the changes it has undergone in the last years and secondly, speculations about the concept of virtual identity and its usefulness for analysing online interaction.

It is clear that the Internet has changed dramatically over the past decades and while the number of users has multiplied so have the possibilities for which it can be used. In view of this I would claim that it would be a simplification to suggest that a theory of virtual identity, which assumes the limitless agency and freedom of users, would suffice to understand the many different ways of online self representation. I however do not wish to suggest that the concept is completely invalid but perhaps to draw attention to how its use may disguise a great variety of different practices and ideas. When online, users do still have the option to present themselves as truthfully or as ‘poetically’ as they would like and I am sure that identity play will always be a part of this method of communication, where one can represent oneself through means of text and graphical avatars. However, it would be a great sweeping statement to assume that these qualities present us with the entire ‘truth’ of how identity is presented and understood in online communication. Just as offline, when we are on the Internet we travel through a variety of spheres, all of which present us with a different way of engaging with others. Therefore I would suggest that when thinking and theorising about identity in virtual surroundings, the qualities of each sphere be taken into account to better make sense of the practises that take place within them.

To understand the relationship between players and their characters, I felt that I could only fully gain an understanding of it as part of the myriad contexts that exist within the field of Freetown. As players constantly contextualised their character and practices, it became apparent to me that attempting to understand the players and their characters without taking these contexts into account would provide me only with a very limited understanding of the subject at hand. While Freetown is by definition a virtual community, it is also a MMOG player association, a story driven world and a role-player town. All of these understandings of what Freetown is are accompanied by a variety of shared understandings and conventions, which players constantly negotiate between each other during play. When all this is considered, it becomes evident to me that by focusing on the 'online-ness' of Freetown presents us only a partial understanding of the community, the players and their characters. Therefore I feel that by adopting Baym's (1995) stance and focusing on what the players actually *do* once they are online, instead of assuming *a priori* what online communication entails, the ethnography of Freetown highlights that online as well as offline our practices and the social contexts they take place within are important parts in our identity construction.

As Hine (2000) and Miller & Slater (2000) draw our attention to, it is important to not only see the Internet as one place that lies unchangeable in time and space, but to realise that within it there is a multitude of places, most of which are constructed and understood through use. Playing an MMOG, setting up a profile on *MySpace* and chatting on *MSN Messenger*, are all activities that take place online but they however involve three different fields of interaction where users negotiate their virtual representations in very context specific ways. In Freetown, by using practice theory, I was able to pinpoint how group and context specific use manifested itself in the construction of a 'player identity', i.e. how they understand themselves as players. Writing storylines, creating and maintaining characters, discussing role-playing on the forums and debating the *Star Wars* universe were all practices in which the Freetown players partook in and through this participation the players could express and understand their own 'player identity'. The player identity was constructed through active participation in Freetown events, through play, and the various communication platforms that the players used to organise their play.

As we saw in Chapter 3, the manifestation of a virtual identity has been seen by many Internet researchers as whatever textual/graphical representation a user creates and maintains, as he/she enters and inhabits an online social domain. As these can be created and discarded at will, the focus shifted towards studying these entities as temporal and multiple identities that users could shape at will. Cyberspace was seen as the place where people logged on and engaged in identity play and deception. Furthermore the essence of cyberspace, i.e. anonymity and lack of 'normal' identity cues, was seen to invite users to engage in identity play where they could try to become whoever they had always wanted to be (see Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Turkle, 1995).

As I outlined in the introduction chapter, the early claims about avatars and login-names baffled me somewhat when I tried to apply them to players and characters in MMOGs, as I had come to know characters, much like instruments, created by players to reach certain ends within the game. As players 'levelled' their characters they often saw them as ongoing projects, i.e. a game within the game. Due to this I always had a difficulty in seeing a character as a player's virtual identity as players seemed to be entirely separate from their characters. Furthermore, as the identity was described as 'virtual' indicated to me that it was perceived as entirely different to and separate from our 'real life identity'. This was in keeping with the ideas, which at the time saw cyberspace as a space that was entirely separated from our real lives and where different rules applied when it came to self-representation and communication. The virtual identity that I had come to know, through the first Internet research literature, is heavily associated with the users' unlimited agency as they experiment with their identity in a place where, at times, there seemed to be little or no limits to self-representation. I have no doubt that in some instances this was the case in social MUDs, as they seem to have been fairly unstructured open spaces, which presented users with entirely different means of creating and maintaining avatars/login-names. Taking into account how different the first MUDs are from the MMOGs that we can access today, with their heavily structured game-worlds, it is reasonable to assume that theories coined about existence in the MUDs do need some adjustment when applied to that in MMOGs.

As I explored in Chapter 2, MMOGs, by design, are very cooperative and social. Players are constantly communicating and grouping up to take on collective challenges. Having a strong network of players around is thus highly beneficial. In order to maintain such a network players try and establish reputations for themselves and consequently they need to maintain a stable player identity. As a result, frequent character swapping is highly counterproductive. Also, constantly creating new characters and then training them to a higher level can be extremely time-consuming. If we look towards Freetown, we saw in Chapter 6 how the creation and maintenance of a character was in many ways regulated by the community. Characters should not be too flamboyant and should be flexible enough to be able to adjust to twists and turns that storylines might take. Furthermore, they were subjected to both the limitations of realism and the *Star Wars* universe. All this resulted in a feeling of a very limited player agency when it came to making decisions regarding their characters. It is therefore very clear, in my mind, that MMOGs and especially Freetown have developed context specific ideas about what characters should be and how they are to be used within the game environment.

I argued in Chapter 6 that the character creation and maintenance can thus be understood as part of group specific practices that Freetown is founded around and maintained by. These group specific practices are then used to draw boundaries around the community and instil a feeling of belonging among the members. Baym (1998) refers to how online communities use an array of resources to allow their members to 'imagine themselves as a community' (Baym, 1998:38). As we have seen throughout Chapters 5, 6, and 7, the Freetown members use a variety of methods to preserve and protect their community and invoke a sense of belonging with the players; the conventions regarding character creation and maintenance is one of them. In the case of Freetown the players are encouraged to create characters in a specific manner, which at times do seem inflexible but do serve the purpose of making sure that no one character/player overshadows the rest of the community or leads the community into problematic situations.

I will discuss these ideas further in the next section where I will focus on my use of practice theory as a theoretical framework for the Freetown ethnography and present my final thoughts on the advantages of using this approach as well as

reflecting back and speculate whether the case of Freetown can tell us something about practice theory and possible shortcomings of that approach.

Reflections on practice theory

What I felt, from the onset of this research, was that the main benefit of practice theory is how it focuses on community as grounded in joint practices of its members. MMOGs, by design, entail constant active participation and communication from players in which the collective play is grounded. As my focus was on the player/character relationship I was interested in finding out how that was constructed and maintained through these collective practices. Lave and Wenger (1991) claim that the 'theory of social practice emphasizes the relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing.' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:51) I found this to be particularly relevant in the case of Freetown as the community, players, characters and the practice of role-playing, were very all interconnected and highly dependent on each other. Therefore, in trying to understand players and characters, I felt needed to apprehend the contexts within which they were situated and the practices through which their relationship was manifested.

Before outlining, in more detail, why I see practice theory as useful for the analysis of online interaction I want to first discuss the main concepts of field, capital and habitus and their relevance to the case of Freetown.

Field and capital

Freetown presents us with a little corner of cyberspace where people have come together and formed a community in the pre-designed virtual space of *SWG*. Further to using the space as the game it was intended as, the Freetown players chose to use it as a narrative shell, which encapsulates their role-playing practices. The Freetown players set up a community that was built around and maintained through collective practice of role-playing. As we saw in Chapter 5, Freetown is a complex field, situated within and comprised by multiple contexts, which are used by players to make sense of and regulate the role-playing practices of each other. Within each

context there were explicit and inexplicit codes of conduct that players negotiated and reworked between them during play. The collective knowledge and understanding of contexts and what they entailed provided the Freetown players with a shared identity and a sense of belonging and furnished the player with a *habitus*, which was specific to the field of Freetown. Through observing how the players drew their boundaries I was able to understand Freetown as first and foremost a field of social interaction and the relationship between players and characters as very context specific.

The concept of a field draws our attention to the collective practices that are undertaken within it, the agents situated there and their common understandings of what the field entails. Bourdieu, views the field as ‘a social arena within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them.’ (Jenkins, R. 1992: 85) As I explored in Chapter 5, the most important stakes, judging by how often players referred to it, was the maintenance of the community. This led me to contemplate how some fields, where the maintenance of the field itself would be a primary goal, cooperation, rather than struggles would become a defining quality of the interaction between the agents situated within it.

As I described in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, there were frequent struggles between the inhabitants of Freetown, however they appeared to be dealt with fairly quickly as players admitted to realising the damage that a longstanding debate could do to the community. The struggles that I witnessed were mostly brief and mostly players seemed to be willing to compromise and I believe that this tendency owes something to the nature of online communication. As I pointed out in Chapter 5, it is easy for players to leave the community to join another one and, in fact, judging by the history of the role-playing communities, this happened frequently. The players were very aware of this possibility and attempted to solve and manage struggles and debates carefully as I witnessed on the forums and in-game. This led me to think about the difference between fields that we enter throughout our lives. Whilst in some fields stakes are perceived to be high and consequently lead to a fierce competition, in other fields agents enter by choice, rather than dire need, and feel they can easily leave. In the latter, where the trouble of engaging in struggles is seen as greater than the reason to stay, it is more desirable to just leave. These speculations pull us back to the early notion, that virtual community is not as strong as that in real life because online it is

easy just to log off and never be seen again (see Watson, 1997). As a consequence it would be fair to draw the conclusion that members of virtual communities feel the need to engage in certain practices to ensure the longevity of the field in question, and this is precisely what the Freetown players appeared to be doing during their play. If this is true of other virtual communities or whether this is simply a characteristic of fields that have to do with leisure, i.e. those who are not perceived as high importance, I cannot conclude. However I think this is an interesting notion that in some instances practices work toward maintaining a field and as a result agents within it may cooperate more than they struggle in order to maintain the field in question.

Habitus

In Bourdieu's practice theory the habitus is seen as what 'generate[s] and organize[s] practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them' (Bourdieu, 1990:53). The habitus consists of each agent's embodied knowledge of the field and the practices that are undertaken within it and regulates their practices. In Chapter 3, I explored the concept further and used in Chapter 6 to make sense of the player/character relationship where I claimed that instead of seeing a character as a virtual identity it would make more sense to see it as a one part of a 'player identity', grounded in a player's habitus.

When thinking of the players' virtual identities it seemed to me to be a fair assumption that each player might have more than one way of presenting themselves online, each of which was dependent on the context within which they found themselves. The 'player identity' would thus only make sense within a gaming context, where the practices in question, which are relevant to the process of identity construction, were relevant. Although I must admit not having focused especially on other online practices of the Freetown players, as I explained in chapter 7, I got to know other aspects of their lives, mostly the aspects of leisure and popular culture consumption which were highlighted on the forums and through chats in-game and on *MSN messenger*. An example to further illustrate this would be the player and music fan, John, who I referred to in Chapter 7. One of his interests, aside from MMOG

play, was music and he seemed to use the Internet in a variety of ways to enjoy and explore music and we frequently discussed bands, swapped mp3 files and links to *YouTube* videos which featured our favourite songs. I never enquired in any detail about the online aspects of his music fandom but I imagine that to other music fans that he communicated with online that John represented himself differently than in SWG, as the field of interaction and the cultural capital required is entirely different and hence his identity.

My decision for using the concept of a 'player identity' rather than that of virtual identity, as I recounted in Chapter 6, was that the latter is rather loaded with a certain understanding what virtuality means and in many instances its connotations are unlimited agency, identity play and frequent character swapping. As these ideas are rooted in the first years of Internet research where they were perhaps more applicable, I found that they did not apply in a context such as Freetown. This was mainly rooted in how regulated and structured the role-playing is and how most practices, in one way or another, seem to be negotiated between the players, therefore limiting individual player agency. The 'player identity' is thus constructed and understood through interaction between the players. Becoming a Freetown player means acquiring knowledge of the rules and conventions of the community. Being a Freetown player means engaging in practices in a specific manner and players agree on certain conventions and codes of conduct. This knowledge and the role-playing practices were also important for the collective identity of the community. This became especially apparent when players spoke of other role-playing communities on the server, as we noticed in Chapter 7. The players drew rather strict boundaries between the communities and justified them with perceived differences in role-playing conduct. This provided the Freetown players with a sense of belonging and through specific use of role-play and written content, the community was strengthened.

Community of practice

Lave & Wenger (1991) explored the notion of 'communities of practice' in relation to learning and define them as 'a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of

practice.' (Lave & Wenger: 1991:98) As I recounted in Chapter 3, Baym (1998) used this concept in her research on online soap-opera fan community and found that 'not all online selves are fantasy beings and that not all online communities are constructed as places to be alternative people' (Baym, 2000:202). Baym (2000) here refers back to the virtual identity theories of academics such as Turkle (1995) and highlights both how situated Internet use is and how different online communities can be. Baym's (2000) soap opera community, the Freetown community, as well as many other online communities have in common that users are represented by login names, avatars or characters. These entities are very malleable and can be used at will and therefore it is not surprising if we focus exclusively on these representations and these possibilities that we come to the conclusion that having this freedom means that people use it. Baym's (2000) research as well as my research of the Freetown community exhibits in these contexts of use that these representations are used in a specific way. Thus, using practice theory to analyse ethnographic data from online communities allows us to shift the focus from the individuals and the perceived possibilities of virtual identity, to how characters and login names are used for other purposes, such as maintenance of the community as we saw in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Many of the practices I found present in Freetown aimed, in one way or another, at maintaining the community of Freetown. The players realise that they need a strong community to enjoy the role-playing, as it is a communal practice. During an interview one of the players remarked that 'role-playing alone does not make any sense'. Consequently they have developed ways to deal with the effects of 'the online' by regulating the practice of role-playing and making sure that all players, especially new ones, were involved in plots and storylines throughout. The story-coordinator team furthermore made sure that characters were equally involved in the role-playing by writing plots that included all inhabitants in the town. The plots often featured a threat from outside of town and thus the characters could take on 'the challenge' as a team. This kept the players interested and committed to the community practices. The role-playing that the community was founded around thus became instrumental in keeping the community strong and healthy.

Online communities can be fragile and some seem to break down easily, as we saw in Chapter 7 when I outlined the brief history of role-playing communities on the

Roamer server. Virtual communities are essentially founded around communications; if they break down so does the community. For ongoing communication, and subsequently the development of trust and integrity, the members need to express their commitment by being active and taking part in community practices. The Freetown players are aware of this and thus take every measure to enforce belonging by including players in the content and furthermore by regulating the content as well as role-playing practices, as we saw in Chapters 5 and 6. The regulation served the purpose of controlling conflict, assuring that the *Star Wars* narrative was honoured in keeping with the Freetown standards and making sure that storylines ran their intended course.

Freetown is a good example of a community of practice, as it is founded around the concept of role-playing. The players' ideas of what role-playing entails influences their practices in order to carry out 'successful' role-playing. The players know that they need to be united in their understanding of what their practices should include. Further to the practices being what the community is formed around, they are also modified and actively used to ensure a successful maintenance of the group. Character creation and maintenance is one aspect of these practices and both processes adhere to explicit and implicit codes of conduct that all players are introduced to when they become members. They are furthermore explicitly actualised in role-playing practices throughout the players stay in Freetown.

Although Freetown existed within the Star Wars Universe which they players already knew, and in some instances were fans of, I would not say it was a fan community such as the one Baym's (2000) research took part within. All players were aware of the Star Wars narrative; however their knowledge and interest in it varied greatly between players. If we look towards literature on fan cultures such as Jenkins, H. (1992) and Baym (2000), it is clear that the Freetown community shares some of the characteristics, such as reliance on shared interpretive practices in their community maintenance. The presence of the Star Wars narrative provided the players with an opportunity to enforce belonging through shared interpretation. As I pointed out in Chapter 7, they pointed out on more than one occasion that they were playing it 'from the film standpoint'. The players in Freetown chose to understand

and use the Star Wars narrative in particular ways in their play, through which they set themselves apart from other communities on the servers.

To conclude this section, before I reflect on the methodological part of the research, I want to draw together the points that have surfaced here that highlight how practice theory is suitable for analysis of online communities. Firstly, it allowed me, as I focused on players and characters, to take into account the context in which they operate and consequently gain an insight into character creation and maintenance as a communal practice. This allowed me to move away from the concept of the 'virtual identity' which was coined in the first years of the Internet, which I feel was ill suited to grasp the whole of the relationship in question. Secondly, practice theory drew my attention to how the Freetown community was organised and maintained through the very practice it was founded around, i.e. role-playing. Thirdly, by applying practice theory to a research such as the Freetown ethnography, it drew my attention to how fields, as presented in the practice theory of Bourdieu (1977/1990/1993), may sometimes be constructed and maintained through co-operation rather than struggle. This draws attention to how fields differ in how important they are to the members that 'attend' them. While some hold great significance for people, others they may enter by choice for leisure purposes and some may be easily left. Last but not least, practice theory allowed me to see a process, once believed to be very individual, i.e. the relationship between player and a character, as dependent on the context it takes place within

Reflections on methodological conduct

In this section I will critically reflect on the methodology that I applied during this research and especially focus on the challenges the field in question, Freetown, presented me with. I will also discuss Vivianne and how my use of her gave me insight into the world of role-playing and also how I felt that she, and consequently I, at times, became too immersed in the Freetown story-world. I will end this section on discussing the methodological limitations to my research and what I would do differently if I was starting this research now knowing what I know now.

As I recounted in Chapter 4, I chose the method of ethnography for the inherent flexibility and its ability to include multiple sites in the research process. In this respect I felt that ethnography served me well and allowed me to incorporate the forums and the players' *MSN Messenger* usage in the field of research. Ethnography, furthermore, allowed me to 'follow the people', which proved to be a very important quality as role-playing in MMOGs turned out to be different from what I imagined when I first entered the Freetown community, as I explained in Chapter 4.

The main challenge I faced throughout the ethnography was to maintain distance between myself and the research subject, something I felt was necessary for me to maintain an objective perspective on the Freetown community. MMOGs invite immersion into the gaming environment through game design that focuses on cooperation/competition with other players. I felt that by role-playing I was pulled even further into the game with the added option of partaking in the actualisation of exciting and immersive storylines. I have frequently mentioned the ways in which the Freetown players strengthen their community by various means, with the aim of providing players with a sense of belonging and a collective group identity. They write content for all to enjoy and as the group takes on challenges, it ties the community and the players tighter together as we saw in Chapter 7. I was no exception from that rule and at times I must admit to being too much of a player and too little of a researcher. I suppose this could be seen as a flaw in the research methodology and I suppose this is an inherent risk in doing participant observation in a virtual community, as there is nothing to set you apart from the other member, unless you explicitly label yourself as a researcher. This could be achieved for example by choosing a login name that underlines this status or by conducting very explicit research by frequently asking questions. The researcher can thus control to a degree how visible he/she is during the ethnography.

In Chapter 4 I raised the abovementioned issue of how varying levels of the ethnographer's visibility can be used to suit the field in question and the subject at hand. Although I claim to have acted entirely overtly in my role as a researcher, I acted somewhat covertly as in I relied on the forgetfulness of my respondents by remaining mostly silent about my research in-game and on the forums. As I explained

in Chapter 4, I furthermore explained how I believe this helped me to integrate more successfully into the Freetown community.

In the months that have passed since the Freetown ethnography I have identified some research conduct that, were I to carry out similar research again, I would address differently. I have also, through my analysis, identified other ways of gathering data which I did not think of at the time. What I felt at times to be missing was an opportunity to view the role-play from the other players' point of view and I realise now that I could have asked for a few logs from each player's play sessions in order to see how they organise their play and what their communication entails. Also, I feel that could have asked for information on their other online conduct in order to get a holistic sense of how they use the Internet and what part their MMOG participation played in their overall net use. I do not know how the players would have responded to this request of mine but I feel that the data that I could have gathered by this means would have been very relevant and valuable as it would put the MMOG play into a larger context.

Conducting research in other role-playing communities in order to compare and contrast what I found in Freetown was something I contemplated; however, as I explained in Chapter 4, I made the decision of not attempting this on the Roamer server due to strained relations between the various role-playing communities. This was an issue that, on hindsight, I feel may have been solved by simply taking up role-playing on another server; if I was organising research at this point in time I would have approached two communities on different servers. I feel that it would have been interesting to see how different role-playing communities organise and carry out their play, especially with regard to the Star Wars narrative, which I found very interesting in the case of Freetown.

Ethnography's ability to generalise from its findings has frequently been called into question (see Hammersley, 1992: ch.5) and to a degree my wish to include another community in my research reflects concerns of this nature: in doing so I would feel, in some ways, that my research would seem more convincing should I wish to generalise from my findings about the nature of virtual communities. On the other hand, the claim that each virtual community is distinctive, due to their

differences in practices, topic and focus, which I have outlined throughout the thesis, would make my attempt troublesome. This is a conundrum that I have, as of yet, not entirely clarified for myself and can offer not final statement on. I will however come back to this discussion in the next section where I discuss the contribution of this thesis to the body of knowledge about MMOGs, virtual identity and communities in cyberspace.

Where do we go from here?

In its broadest sense this thesis has aimed to add to the body of knowledge about people's conduct in virtual settings. This ethnography does not provide us with one finite truth that applies to all those who venture into cyberspace and decide to create a virtual character for themselves. The Freetown community is but one of countless virtual communities that can be found in the various spheres on the Internet and as such can cast a light on one aspect of a vast area, namely the complex relationship that users have with their virtual representations.

As recounted throughout the thesis, the Internet is nowadays conceptualised as multiple sites, which are realised through situated use (Hine, 2000; Miller and Slater, 2000). As I have described throughout, Freetown is realised through the common understanding and practices of its members. It is also a community that exists within a specific context, in both space and time, and unavoidably the ethnography carried out within it does as well. In view of this I will not maintain that this ethnography has a great possibility for generalisation, ethnographies seldom do (Hammersley, 1992: chapter 5), but I will maintain that it offers a glimpse into the conduct of a group that existed in one corner of cyberspace. Miller and Slater maintain (2000) 'social thought has gained little by attempting to generalize about 'cyberspace', 'the Internet', 'virtuality'' and offer instead the option of situated ethnographies on which 'bigger generalizations and abstractions' can be built (Miller and Slater, 2000:1). The Freetown ethnography does provide an insight into the practices and organisation of a small online community and thus adds to our knowledge of conduct in online spaces and furthermore social conduct in MMOGs.

As I explained in the in the introduction chapter, I was dubious of any attempts to generalise about player experiences in MMOGs due to the variety of games out there and also because players have been shown to play the games very differently from each other. Role-players in Freetown might therefore differ significantly from those who engage in 'power gaming' within the same game. However, the Freetown ethnography, in addition to other MMOG research (see Taylor, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2005; Castronova, 2006; Yee, 2006a and 2006b), draws our attention to how these game spaces, much like the Internet, are realised through the use of its players. There is no one way of playing an MMOG and I suspect that apart from the various play-styles there is an abundance of regional variations to how these games are played and understood. Interesting research is being carried out into online game play as enjoyed by groups in various locations (see Zhou and Kolko, 2005; Chia-Yuan 2007) and I believe that studies that focus on situated gaming and use of new technologies can further add to our knowledge of these ubiquitous practices.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2 most MMOGs are available to players the world over and many run on servers, which are language specific. Miller and Slater's (2000) research on the Internet in Trinidad revealed how situated Internet use is and provided us with insight into how it is used in a context which differs from the Western culture, which research is usually located within. In a similar vein I would maintain that research into MMOGs along with other online spaces, such as *MySpace*, *YouTube* and *Facebook*, within countries around the world would make a very interesting addition in that it would provide valuable knowledge on how new media is used and conceived of within different cultural contexts.

Concluding remarks

My aim with this research was firstly to cast a light on the relationship MMOG players have with their characters and secondly to theorise about how this type of games affects the aforementioned connection. It is my hope that I have managed to address both these issues and furthermore described how fascinating MMOG play can be, in both a scholarly and leisurely respect. As these games are

now being played by millions of people all around the world they are establishing themselves to be a major part of contemporary popular culture. As such they deserve our attention and it is my hope that the good research work that has been carried out within these spheres will continue and this thesis is my contribution to that effect.

Appendix A

The re-designed interface of *SWG*



Figure 14: The re-designed interface of *SWG*

On the whole the interface was simplified and allowed for a greater modification from players. This player has taken the opportunity to hide most of the menus and makes do with a minimum amount of chat windows. The layout of the hot-key bars was also changed, however the function remained the same. At this time the character is not in a group so the statistic bars of his group mates are not on screen.

Appendix B

My request to join the community of Freetown*

[:: View topic](#)

part of a PHd Study

Page 1 of 2



Memberlist



Usergroups



Profile



Search

The time now is Thu Jun 30, 2005 10:01 am



FAQ



You have no new messages



Log out [Vivianne]

part of a PHd Study

[new topic](#)

[post reply](#)

[Forum Index ->](#)

[Citizens Private Discussion](#)

[View previous topic](#) :: [View next topic](#)

Are you fine having read the mail?

- yes
- No
- Maybe
- Undecided
- I need more info

[View Results](#)

Author

Sapphire

Story Co-Ordinator

SC



Joined: 04 Mar 2005
Posts: 245
Location:

Message

Posted: Wed Jun 08, 2005 10:50 pm Post subject: part of a PHd Study

>

> Hello

>

> I believe ... told you about me earlier tonight. As you are the mayor of ... there is something I want to ask you. To make a long story short I am doing research for a PhD at the University of Surrey (Sociology). The research focuses on role-playing in online and offline game contexts. I have been playing SWG for a while as Vivianne an aspiring doctor, but am about to start my actual research and I am looking for a role-playing community that would allow me to carry out a participant observation. I will also be carrying out interviews later on in the research process. So I was wondering if the community of ... would be willing to take part in my research?

>

> I am a veteran MMOG player and researcher. I have played UO, DAoC, ShadowBane and SWG and have carried out research within two of these games. In my research so far I have carried out participant observation within guilds and interviewed its members outside the game, either face to face or on IM programs.

>

> My approach to the gaming environment is subtle and I have made sure that my research never

30/06/2005

compromises the player's enjoyment of the game.

- > The way that I have normally done this in the past is to post on the guilds/communities message board stating my intentions for all the members to see, so everyone is aware of them. If people have any comments or questions I am more than happy to answer them.
- >
- > I understand that , as a role-playing community, has rules regarding IC and OOC communication and I would adhere to them 100% and would not under any circumstances discuss my research in an IC context (as a matter of fact I rarely discuss my research in-game unless someone asks).
- > In my former research I have just played and enjoyed the game as any other player and my respondents say that they forget after a while that I am doing research.
- >
- > All participants, respondants, servers and towns will be given pseudonyms in order to protect the players privacy. I will also make sure to exclude information about any members that wish to not to be included in the research.
- >
- > If you have any questions you can send me an email in game or at t.sveinsdottir@surrey.ac.uk
- >
- > you can find information about this research at
- > http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/doctoral_research.htm under my name
- >
- > you can find information on my former research at
- > <http://www.spider-woman.net>
- >
- > Best wishes
- >
- > Thordis Sveinsdottir (Vivianne)

(worried) must be all be so damn melodramatic?
 You faint.
 says, "aww crap..." in Shyriwook.

AV base: Sakura No Hime



[profile](#) [PM](#) [www](#)

[Back to top](#)

Display posts from previous:

[new topic](#)

[post reply](#)

[Forum Index ->](#)

[Citizens Private Discussion](#)

All times are GMT

Page 1 of 1

[Watch this topic for replies](#)

Jump to:

You can post new topics in this forum
 You can reply to topics in this forum
 You can edit your posts in this forum
 You can delete your posts in this forum
 You can vote in polls in this forum



Powered by phpBB © 2001, 2002 phpBB Group • Forum style designed by PixelSlot

30/06/2005

*My request was initially an in game email to Sapphire, the mayoress of Freetown, which she then posted on the Freetown forums with a poll where the players could vote on whether I should be allowed to conduct my research within the community. At the time I printed a screenshot of the post and present here a scan rather than a screenshot as the forums were wiped clean after the players quit SWG.

Appendix C

Extract of game log

Following is an abstract of a game log that I saved from one of my first role-playing sessions in the Freetown community. The /log command saved conversations and messages on all chat channels, even on the auction channel, which I rarely had open due to constant spamming of messages, advertising items for sale. After logging each session I went through the log and 'cleaned it up' by removing all spam messages, such as from the auction channel and combat statistics from the combat channel. The entries are not time stamped but my estimate is that the game log presented here presents only a 3-5 minutes of play.

```
[Public] I.S. says, "arms looking better"
[Public] K.C. turns around slightly startled.
[Public] A.T. says, "hi"
[Public] I.A. groans loudly at A.T..
[Public] K.G. says, "hi"
[Public] K.C. says, "Yes, i suppose so" in Zabrak.
[Public] K.C. says, "I was able to pay for a synthetic arm graft" in
Zabrak.
[Public] A.T. says, "whats up?"
[Public] I.S. says, "hows it functioning?" in Zabrak.
[Public] K.G. says, "just taking I.A. here home"
[Public] A.T. pouts at XP-38 Landspeeder.
[Public] A.T. says, "i think you better check your speeder..."
[Public] A.T. says, "keeping weird noise"
[Public] R.G.says, "So, what field of medicine are you involved in?"
[Public] K.C. says, "It still has a few glitches, i recently, had it
damaged so i need to see the doctors again" in Zabrak.
[Freetown] [Freetown] A.T.: V here? W?
[Public] K.G. says, "sounds okay to me"
[Public] A.T. says, "hmmm"
[Public] A.T. says, "if you say so"
[Public] K.G. smiles at A.T..
[Public] A.T. shrugs helplessly at K.G..
[Public] K.G. says, "thanks for your concern"
[Auction] al: . ABD Shop at Corellia -207 -5579
[Auction] al: . Skilltapes: Rifle speed 4 CA, Pistol Acc 6 AA,
Medical exp 4 CA, Food exp 4 CA, Armor exp 5 CA and more
skilltapes for crafters and combatants
[Auction] al: . R.I.S. Armors: Helmets, Chestplates and Leggings
800k each, also taking orders for custom colored parts or full sets,
send me a mail and ill get back to you
[Auction] al: . Special Weapons: Many gorax and krayt enhanced
weapons with good dmg and low SAC for all ranged professions
[Auction] al: . Artisan foods: 180 Bofa treat, 172 Blob candy,
70/40 crispic, all 50k per crate
[Public] A.T. smiles at K.G..
[Public] I.S. says, "you free tommorow night?" in Zabrak.
[Public] K.C. rubs a small healing wound on his left cheek.
```


[Public] A.T. says, "safe ride then"
[Public] K.G. smiles at A.T..
[Public] K.G. says, "thanks"
[Public] K.G. says, "enjoy your evening"
[Public] K.C. says, "Yes, i'm in Freetown for a few days" in Zabrak.
[Public] A.T. waves.
[Public] Vivianne says, "sorry was daydreaming a bit"
[Public] A.T. says, "hmmm"
[Public] A.T. says, "yeah..."
[Public] A.T. says, "i guess"
[Public] R.G.smiles at you.
[Public] I.S. whispers, "i'll call you, got something you may find interesting" in Zabrak.
[Freetown] [Freetown] iakoi: Jedi go invisible?
[Public] K.G. says, "Get in Iakoy"
[Freetown] [Freetown] A.T.: its mindtrick, yes they can
[Public] R.G.says, "not at all. as I was saying, what field of medicine are you in?"
[Public] K.C. looks confused.
[Freetown] [Freetown] rare: and its very annoying :p
[Freetown] [Freetown] A.T.: hehe
[Freetown] [Freetown] A.T.: thats why i like it
[Public] Vivianne says, "I am actually still in training, but pathology is what I am interested in"
[Public] Vivianne says, "my family owns a research centre on Hoth"

Appendix D

Interview structure

Interview I

General

Before we start I want to tell you that everything you tell me is confidential, I may choose to quote this interview in my thesis, if I do so I will give you and your character a pseudonym. Is this OK by you?

Can I ask first about your age and gender

SGW and other games

For how long have you been playing *SWG*?

have you played any other mmogs before *SWG*?

Did you role-play in those as well?

have you role-played in any other contexts?

what games did you role-play?

Character

Has *XXXX* been a character in any of those other games or is he especially made for *SWG*?

tell me about him/her...

Did you write him/her a biography before you started *SWG*?

What is his/her biography like?

Has his biography changed in any way after you have been playing him for a while?

What advice would you give to a role-playing newbie if she was looking to write a character biography / a character to role-play as?

Do you think a character can tell you something about the player who plays him/her?

Role-playing

Why did you choose to role-play in *SWG*?

How come you joined Freetown?

Have you been a member of any other role-playing communities in *SWG*?

Do you role-play at all times?

What are the instances where you do not role-play and why?

Storylines

Do you write your own storylines or do you mainly take part in the ones written by the SC team?

What, in your mind, is a good storyline?

Interview II

RP – general

So, what do you think about the role-playing in Freetown at the moment?

Do you like the storylines?

Have you created any storylines of your own?

Have you run them on your own or had any help from the SC team?

What are your views on integrating jedi into the role-playing?

What about the GCW?

Role-playing of fights and battles?

Role-playing in JTL?

Rp vs game mechanics?

What do you think about all the new characters joining Haven?

Alternate Characters

How many accounts do you have active?

How many characters do you play?

What were your reasons for creating an alternate character?

Who are your alternate characters?

Could you tell me about them?

Do you have a long term plan for them?

Why twins? And artists? And the psychiatrist is brill

If a man – why did you choose to create a female character?

Is it different to role-play as a woman than as a man?

If a woman – do you have a male character? Why/why not?

NGE – life before and after NGE changes

What do you think about the NGE changes?

Do you think it has had any effect in Haven?

Has it had any effect on your role-playing?

What effect has it had on *SWG* as a game in your opinion?

Story Coordinators

Why are NPCs recruited in certain roles?

Do you use The GCW in your story-writing?

Appendix E

The Freetown OOC guidelines

These were sent out in email to all new members of the community and a copy was also posted on the forums.

"OOO Rules Mail

please keep hold of this email, so you can send it to any new citizens you meet who haven't read / agreed to these laws.

Greetings Freetown citizen

Here is a list of OOC for Freetown, you must agree to all these laws before becoming one of our citizens. From now on this will be referred to OOC as the Freetown city players agreement.

I'll start with the most important, the OOC laws, these must NOT be broken!! EVER!

You must stay IC in area / spatial chat, also no smilies or abbreviations (i.e. lol, brb or l33t sp34k) emotes like /lol are okay in context

If you use OOC chat in area / spatial please put ((...)) or [...] around it.

Citizens must accept all duels that are lead up to with role-play from other Freetown citizens. We would also encourage you to accept role-played duels from non citizens that do not appear on the list of players proven untrustworthy (Blacklist found on forum). All refused duel situations must be properly role-played out, whether it be running away or some other appropriate action which indicates why the duel was not accepted. If these rules are abused by either party then they should be reported in private to the appropriate authority (i.e., The Mayor, The Sheriff or Guild Leader). It is not appropriate to bring it to the forum or OOC channel (see OOC rule 6)

Deathblows MUST be agreed upon prior to the fight. Cloning is illegal

in this time line and therefore does not exist IC. If you die you are taken to ICU (clone centre) and given medical treatment. Death of a character can only be decided upon by the player who owns it.

Log onto the Freetown OOC chat channel every time you play, this makes it a lot easier for people to contact you. If you do not know how to do this, ask.

No behaviour that is traditionally seen as "griefing" (i.e. harassment, spamming, OOC abuse or persistent OOC whining)

Please check the Freetown city forums at least once a week (http://www.*****.com)

Be friendly in OOC, even if you have a problem with someone, no fighting, if it is a real problem come speak to the mayor OOC.

Try to keep any information you learn OOC as OOC info and not transfer it to IC knowledge. This includes what colour people con to you (just because you see them purple doesn't mean everyone knows IC that they are a rebel or an Imp)

The following is a list of things that are and are not IC information:

- a. Guild tags and faction symbols are NOT IC info
- b. Overt status is IC info.

The IC laws are available separately

These are the rules of Freetown atm, they may be altered depending on need.

please keep hold of this for reference, and remember, by becoming a Freetown citizen, you have agreed to all these rules, breaking them is a bannable offense (in the case of the OOC ones or for refusing to role-play your punishment for the IC ones.)"

Bibliography

Anderson, B. 1983 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Anderson, J. 1996 Not for the faint of heart: contemplations on Usenet. In L. Cherny and E. R. Weise (eds.) *Wired Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace*, Washington: Seal Press

Aycock, A. 1995 Technologies of the self: Foucault and Internet discourse. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 11(2)

Available at: <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol1/issue2/aycock.html> (Accessed, 18.06.2006)

Bartle, R. 1996 Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: players who suit MUDs. *Journal of MUD Research*. Available at, <http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/hcds.htm> (Accessed 19.01.2007)

Baym, N. 1998 The Emergence of On-Line Community. In S.G. Jones (ed.) *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*. Thousand Oaks: Sage. pp. 138-163

Baym, N. K. 2000 *Tune In, Log On : Soaps, Fandom and Online Community*. Thousand Oaks: Sage .

Bechar-Israeli, H. 1995 From <Bonehead> to <cLoNehEAd>: nicknames, play, and identity on Internet Relay Chat. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 1(2)

Available at: <http://www.ascusc.org/jmcm/vol1/issue2/bechar.html> (Accessed, 11.06.2003)

Bennett, A. 2000 *Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity and Place*. Basingstoke: Macmillan

Boas, F. 1965 [1911] *The Mind of Primitive Man*. London: Collier Macmillan

Bourdieu, P. 1977 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1990 *The Logic of Practice*. (translation by Richard Nice) Cambridge: Polity Press

Bourdieu, P. 1993 *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. London: Polity Press.

Brown, M. E. 1994 *Soap Opera and Women's talk: The Pleasure of Resistance*. Thousand Oaks: Sage

Bruckman, A. 1992 *Identity workshop: emergent social and psychological phenomena in text-based virtual reality*.

Available at: <http://www.static.cc.gatech.edu/~asb/papers/old-papers.html>
(Accessed, 19.04.2007)

Bryce, J. and Rutter, J. 2006 *An Introduction to Understanding Digital Games*. In J. Bryce and J. Rutter (eds) 2006 *Understanding Digital Games*. London: Sage

Burkhalter, B. 1999 Reading race online: discovering racial identity in Usenet discussions. In M.A. Smith and P. Kollock (eds.) *Communities in Cyberspace*. London Routledge. pp. 60-75

Butler, J. 1990 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge

Cassell, J. and Jenkins, H (eds) 1998 *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and computer games*. MA: MIT Press

Castronova, E. 2005 *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Chia-Yuan, H. 2007 *Video games in context: An ethnographic study of situated*

meaning-making practices of Asian immigrant adolescents in New York City. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference: Situated Play* Available at: <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/07312.06116.pdf> (Accessed, 12.01.2008)

Coffey, A. 1999 *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity* London: Sage

Cohen, A.P. 2000 Discriminating relations: identity, boundary and authenticity. In A. P. Cohen (ed.) *Signifying Identities: Anthropological perspectives on boundaries and contested values*. London: Routledge. pp. 1-16

Coles, R.L. 2002 Black single fathers: choosing to parent full time. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 31(4) pp. 411-439.

Correll, S. 1995 The ethnography of an electronic bar: The Lesbian Café. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 24(3) pp. 270-298.

Craib, I. 1998, *Experiencing Identity*. London: SAGE Publications

Danet, B., Ruedenberg-Wright, L. & Rosenbaum-Tamari, Y. 1997, "HMMM...Where is That Smoke Coming From?": Writing, Play and Performance on Internet Relay Chat. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (2)4. Available at: <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol2/issue4/danet.html> (Accessed 13.11.2003)

Danet, B. 1996 Text as mask: gender and identity on the Internet. Available at <http://atar.msec.huji.ac.il/~msdanet/mask.html> (Accessed, 31.01.2005)

Dibbell, J. 1999, *My Tiny Life*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.

Donath, J. S. 1999 *Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community*. In M.A. Smith and P. Kollock (eds.) *Communities in Cyberspace*. London: Routledge. pp. 29-59

Dumbleton, T. and Kirriemuir, J. 2006 Digital Games and Education. In J. Bryce and J. Rutter (eds) 2006 *Understanding Digital Games*. London: Sage

Eriksen, T. H. 1993 *Ethnicity & Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press

Fabian, J. 1983 *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Featherstone, M. and Burrows, R. 1995 Cultures of technological embodiment: an introduction. In M. Featherstone and R. Burrows (eds.) *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*. London: Sage. pp. 1-20

Fine, G.A. 1983 *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Fiske, J. 1998 The popular economy. In Storey, J. (ed.) *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd. pp.504-522

Foucault, M. 1972 *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Tavistock Publications

Galarneau, L. 2005 Spontaneous communities of Learning: Learning Ecosystems in Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming Environments. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play*. Available at <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06278.10422.pdf> (Accessed 10.12.2206)

Gibson, W. 1984 *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace

Goffman, E. 1974 *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Harmondsworth: Penguin

Grint, K. and Woolgar, S. 1997 *The Machine at Work: Technology, Work and Organization*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Guimarães, M.J. L. 2005 Doing anthropology in cyberspace. In C.Hine (ed.) *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. Oxford: Berg. pp. 141-156
- Hayles, N.K. 1993 The Seductions of cyberspace. In D. Trend (ed.) 2002 *Reading Digital Culture*. New York: Routledge pp. 305-321
- Hall, S. 1992 The question of cultural identity. In S. Hall, D. Held and T. McGrew (eds.) *Modernity and Its Futures*. Cambridge: Polity Press (in association with the Open University). pp. 273-326
- Hall, S. 1996 Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity? In S. Hall and P. du Gay (eds.) *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Routledge. pp. 1-17
- Hall, S. and Gieben, B. 1992 *Formations of Modernity*. Cambridge : Polity Press (in association with the Open University)
- Hammersley, M. 1992 *What's wrong with ethnography? : methodological explorations*. London: Routledge
- Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. 1995 *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Heliö, S. 2004 Role-playing: a narrative experience and mindset. In M. Montola. & J. Stenros (eds.) *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*. Helsinki: Ropecon ry
Available at: <http://www.ropecon.fi/brap/brap.pdf> (Accessed 28.01.2006)
- Hemnes, T.M.S. 1982 The adaptation of copyright law to video games. *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 131 pp.171-233
- Herring, S. 1996 Linguistic and critical analysis of computer-mediated communication: some ethical and scholarly considerations. *The Information Society* 12(2). pp. 153-168
- Hine, C. 2000 *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage

Hine, C. 2005 Research relationships and online relationships: introduction. In C. Hine (ed.) *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. Oxford: Berg. pp. 17-21

Holland, D; Lachicotte, W; Skinner, D; Cain, C. 1998 *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Isabella, S. (2007) Ethnography of Online Role-Playing Games: The Role of Virtual and Real Contest in the Construction of the Field. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum Qualitative Social Research* [On-line Journal], 8(3). Available at <http://qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-07/07-3-36-e.htm> (Accessed, 24.03.2008)

Jenkins, H. 1992 'Strangers no more we sing': filking and social construction of the science fiction fan community. In L. Lewis (ed.) *Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. London: Routledge. pp. 208-236

Jenkins, R. 1992 *Pierre Bourdieu*. London: Routledge

Joinson, A.M. 2005 Internet behaviour and the design of virtual methods. In C. Hine (ed.) *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. Oxford: Berg. pp. 21-34

Jones, S. G. 1995 Understanding community in the information age. In S.G. Jones (ed.) *Cybersociety: Computer-mediated Communication and Community*. Thousand Oaks: Sage. pp. 10-35

Jones, S. G. 1997 The Internet and its Social Landscape. In S. G. Jones (ed.) *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*. London: Sage. pp 7-35

Jones, S. G. 1998 Information, Internet and community: notes toward an understanding of community in the information age. In S. G. Jones(ed.) *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*. Thousand Oaks: Sage. pp. 1-34

Kaur, R. and Kalra, V.S. 1996 *New Paths for South Asian Identity and Creativity*. In S. Sharma, J. Hutnyk and A. Sharma (eds) *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*. London: Zed Books.

Kendall, L. 2002 *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online*. Berkley: University of California Press.

King, B. and Borland, J. 2003 *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture from Geek to Chic*. California: McGraw-Hill/Osborne

Kitchin, R. 1998, *Cyberspace: The World in the Wires*. Chichester: Wiley

Kivits, J. 2005 Online interviewing and the research relationship. In C.Hine (ed.) *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. Oxford: Berg. pp. 35-49

Klastrup, L. & Tosca (2004) *Transmedial Worlds - Rethinking Cyberworld Design*. In *Proceedings International Conference on Cyberworlds 2004*. IEEE Computer Society, Los Alamitos, California.

Available at: http://www.itu.dk/people/klastrup/klastruptosca_transworlds.pdf

(Accessed 28.01.2006)

Kondo, D. K. 1990 *Crafting Selves: power, gender and discourses of identity in a Japanese workplace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Krotoski, A. 2004 *Chicks and Joysticks: An exploration of women and gaming*.

ELSPA white paper. Available at:

http://www.elspa.com/assets/files/c/chicksandjoysticksanexplorationofwomenandgaming_176.pdf (Accessed, 16.10.2008)

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. 1991 *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lawley, E.L. 1994 *The sociology of culture in computer mediated communication: an initial exploration*. Available at <http://www.itcs.com/elawley/bourdieu.html>

(Accessed, 19.11.2001)

MacHoul, A. and Grace, W. 1993 *A Foucault Primer: Discourse, Power and the Subject* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press

Malinowski, B. 1961 [1922] *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Illinois: Waveland Press.

Marcus, G.E. 1995 Ethnography in/of the world system: the emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95-117

Martin, L. H. 1988. *Technologies of the Self*. In L.H. Martin *et al* (eds.) *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. London: Tavistock. pp. 16-49. Available at: <http://www.thefoucauldian.co.uk/tself.htm> (Accessed, 05.05.2004)

Martinelli, P.C. 1983 *Beneath the Surface: Ethnic Communities in Phoenix, Arizona*. In McCready, W (ed.) *Culture, Ethnicity and Identity: Current Issues in Research*. New York: Academic Press

Miller, D. & Slater, D. 2000 *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg

Mitra, A. 1997 Virtual Commonality: looking for India on the Internet. In S.G. Jones (ed.) *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*. London: Sage. Pp. 55-79

Moore, H. L. 1994 *A Passion for Difference*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Nguyen, D.T. and Alexander, J. 1996 The coming of cyberspacetime and the end of the polity. In R. Shields (ed.) *Cultures of the Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*. London: Sage. pp. 99-124

O'Brien, J. 1999, "Writing in the Body: gender (re)production in online interaction. In M. A. Smith & P. Kollock (eds.) *Communities in Cyberspace*. London: Routledge. pp. 76-106

Ortner, S. B. 1984 Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 26(1) pp. 126- 166

Ortner, S.B. 2005 Subjectivity and cultural critique. *Anthropological Theory* 5(1) pp. 31-52.

Paccagnella, L. 1997 Getting the seats of your pants dirty: strategies for ethnographic research on virtual communities. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 3 (1) Available at: <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol3/issue1/paccagnella.html> (Accessed, 21.10.2007)

Poster, M. 1995 Postmodern virtualities. In M. Featherstone and R. Burrows (eds.) *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*. London: Sage. pp. 79-98

Postman, N. 1993 *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. New York: Vintage Books.

Radway, J. 1984 *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina

Reid, E. 1991 *Electropolis: Communication and Community on Internet Relay Chat*. Available at: <http://www.aluluei.com/electropolis.htm> (Accessed, 09.07.2004)

Reid, E. 1994 *Cultural Formations in Text-Based Virtual Realities*. MA Thesis, University of Melbourne. Available at: <http://www.aluluei.com/cult-form.htm> (Accessed, 09.07.2004)

Rheingold, H. 1993 *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading MA: Addison-Wesley

Robins, K. 1995 Cyberspace and the world we live in. In M. Featherstone and R. Burrows (eds.) *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*. London: Sage. pp. 135-156

Robins, K. 1996 Interrupting identities: Turkey/Europe. In S. Hall and P. du Gay (eds.) *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Routledge. pp. 61-87

Sanders, T. 2005 Researching the online sex work community. In C. Hine (ed.) *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. Oxford: Berg. pp. 67-80

Sedlak, R.A., Doyle, M and Schloss, P (1982) Video games- a training and generalization demonstration with severely retarded adolescents. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Development Disabilities*, 17: pp 332-6

Silverman, D. 1993 *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction*. London: Sage

Spender, D. 1995 *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace*. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press

Springer, C. 1999 The pleasure of the interface. In J. Wolmark (ed.) *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. pp. 34-54

Sproull, L. and Kiesler, S. 1986 Reducing social context cues: electronic mail in organizational communication. *Management Science* 32(11) pp. 1492-1512

Squire, K. D and Steinkuehler, C. A. 2006 *Generating CyberCulture/s: The Case of Star Wars Galaxies*. (Chapter Submission for *Cyberlines: Languages and cultures of the Internet* (2nd ed))

Available at: <http://website.education.wisc.edu/steinkuehler/mmogresearch.html>
(Accessed: 28.06.2006)

Steinkuehler, C. A. 2004 *Learning in Massively Multiplayer Online Games*. Available at: <http://website.education.wisc.edu/steinkuehler/mmogresearch.html>
(Accessed, 28.6.2006)

Steinkuehler, C. A. 2005 The new third place: massively multiplayer online gaming in American youth culture. *Tidskrift for Lararutbildning och Forskning*. 2005(3) pp. 16-33.

Steinkuehler, C. A. & Williams, D. 2006 Where *everybody knows your (screen) name: online games as "third places"*.

Available at: <http://website.education.wisc.edu/steinkuehler/mmogresearch.html>

(Accessed, 28.6.2006)

Stone, A.R. 2000 Will the real body please stand up? Boundary stories about virtual cultures. In D. Bell and B.M. Kennedy (eds.) *The Cybercultures Reader*. London: Routledge. pp. 504-528

Sveinsdottir, T. 1999 *Pipe Dreams: Ethnography of a Virtual Community*. BA dissertation. University of Iceland.

Sveinsdottir, T. 2002 *Understanding the Game: Views on Player Killing in MMORPG Communities*. MA Dissertation. Brunel University.

Taylor, T. L. 1999 Life in virtual worlds: plural existence, multimodalities, and other online research challenges. *American Behavioural Scientist*. 43(3) pp. 436-449.

Taylor, T. L. 2002 Living digitally: embodiment in virtual worlds. In R. Schroeder (ed.) *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments* London: Springer-Verlag. pp. 40- 62

Taylor, T. L. 2003 Power gamers just want to have fun?: instrumental play in a MMOG In M. Copier and J. Raessens (eds.) *Level Up, Digra Conference Proceedings*. Utrecht: University of Utrecht. Available at: <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/05163.32071> (Accessed 13.04.2005)

Taylor, T. L. 2006 *Play Between Worlds*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press

Turkle, S. 1995 *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. London: Weidenfield and Nicolson

Van Maanen, J. 1988 *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Waskul, D. & Douglass, M. 1997 Cyberself: The Emergence of Self in On-Line Chat. *The Information Society* 13(4) pp. 375-397.

Watson, N. 1997 Why we argue about virtual community: a case study of the Phish.net fan community. In S. G. Jones (ed.) *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*. London: Sage. pp. 102-132.

Webb, S. 2001 Avatar culture: narrative, power and identity in virtual world environments. *Information, Communication & Society* 4(4) pp.560-594

Webster, F. 1995 *Theories of the Information Society*. London: Routledge.

Wellman, B. & Gulia, M. 1999 Virtual communities as communities: net surfers don't ride alone. In M. A. Smith. & P. Kollock (eds.) *Communities in Cyberspace*, London: Routledge. pp. 167-194

Williams, D. 2003 The Video Game Lightning Rod: Constructions of new media technology 1970-2000. *Information, Communication and Society*. 6:4 pp 523-550

Wittel, A. (2000) Ethnography on the move: From field to net to Internet. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum Qualitative Social Research* [On-line Journal], 1(1). Available at <http://qualitative-research.net/fqs> (Accessed, 24.03.2008)

Wolf, M.J. and Perron, B. 2003 Introduction. In M. J. Wolf and B. Perron (eds) 2003 *The Video Game Theory Reader*. London: Routledge

Wynn, E. and Katz, J.E. 1997 Hyperbole over cyberspace: self-presentation and social boundaries in Internet home pages and discourses. *The Information Society* 13: pp. 297-327.

Yee, N. 2006[a] The Psychology of Massively Multi-User Online Role-Playing Games: Motivations, Emotional Investment, Relationships and Problematic Usage. In R. Schroeder & A. Axelsson (eds.) *Avatars at Work and Play: Collaboration and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*. London: Springer-Verlag. pp. 187-207.

Yee, N. 2006[b] The demographics, motivations and derived experiences of users of massively multi-user online graphical environments. *PRESENCE: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* no. 15, pp. 309-329. Available at: <http://www.nickyee.com/pubs/Yee%20%20MMORPG%20Demographics%202006.pdf> (Accessed 19.10.2006)

Zhou, Q. and Kolko, B. 2005. The localization of digital games: a case study in China. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play*. Available at <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06278.54527.pdf> (Accessed 10.12.2006)

Websites consulted

Blizzard Entertainment 2007 *Subscription numbers for World of Warcraft* – Press release. Available at <http://blizzard.com/us/press/070307.html> (Accessed April 2008)

Guildcafe 2008 *Bartle Test of Gamer Psychology*. Available at <http://www.guildcafe.com/bartle.php> (Accessed February 2008)

The Lorient Trust 2008 Available at: <http://www.lorientrust.com/realworld/events/gathering.htm> (Accessed February 2008)

Woodcock, B.S. 2002-2008. *MMOGCHART.COM – Charting the future of the MMOG industry*. Available at <http://www.mmogchart.com> (Last Accessed April 2008)