

# **The New Virtual World Order**

Thesis By

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## Introduction:

Anthropologists have traditionally gone to remote places all around the globe to study cultures and share their knowledge and experiences with the world. With the birth of the Internet however, anthropologists need go no further than their desk to access millions of people and diverse communities and cultures. Digital Ethnography is a relatively new field in the social sciences that pushes the boundaries of anthropology beyond the traditional and opens new avenues to explore. There are thousands of thriving online communities that consist of millions of users actively participating in online activities through their computer. While this can include a wide range of actions such as using social media sites (Facebook, MySpace), posting comments on a forums (Yahoo Questions), or even placing bids on eBay, there has been one virtual venue that has really flourished - Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG).

A MMORPG is typically a game that requires internet connection and is accessed by hundreds, thousands, or even millions of users each month. The users interact with one another in a world (often 3d) generated by the game program through their computer or video game console. These worlds are often fantasy or science-fiction based, though some even attempt to mimic real life. Within these online worlds, a person is more often than not represented by an *avatar*, a visual representation of him or herself, that is custom-designed by the user selecting options such as skin tone, hair, clothing, and accessories. Once users have created their avatars, they are free to interact with the others in the world and attempt to

complete quests, join groups, explore, or sit back on their friend's virtual couch and watch a film. From this point forward, I will refer to MMORPGs as "virtual worlds".

Virtual worlds are on the verge of a new trend of offering more "sand box" environments, that is, virtual worlds in which the users can create, modify, and change certain elements of the virtual worlds themselves. This creates a setting where players are able to achieve a sense of modernity, a feature that has long been absent from virtual worlds. Through this, players can achieve a sense of agency. By analyzing multiple ethnographic studies and research on virtual worlds, and comparing it to work done by anthropologists such as Emile Durkheim (1984), Johan Huizinga (1970), and Sasha Newell (2012), I will demonstrate how virtual worlds are on the cusp of truly allowing their users to bring these worlds to life, acting freely and independently, casting off the shackles and deadening rules that have confined characters to date via "theme park" virtual worlds.

Fantasy based virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* remain very popular with subscribers in the tens of millions (Grubber 2015). The problem with these virtual worlds like this one however is that they are more of what has come to be called "theme park" virtual worlds. These are worlds strangling players with limitations, forcing players to complete certain tasks and requiring they be done a certain way, rule bound, as if part of a mechanical process. Compounding the problem, the players actions lack agency as there is no effect on the game world or other players. Once the main goals have been accomplished, there is little else to do in these virtual worlds aside from side attractions. I would even argue that these worlds create a deadening effect on the virtual world experience by being overly user friendly (easy), and removing the need for players to interact with one another. As virtual worlds have evolved,

they have become inclined to make themselves more approachable to those with busy life styles who can only participate a few hours a day. I myself have progressed through the *World of Warcraft* without having to type one word to another player. This leaves us with stagnant worlds, void of life.

*World of Warcraft* and other virtual worlds such as *Second Life* have been thoroughly explored and shown us that virtual worlds have much to reveal to us as anthropologists. They feature vibrant communities that consist of players constantly interacting with one another to develop virtual economies, government, and even religion. They provide an environment in which anyone can access from anywhere in the world and instantaneously begin interacting with another person who can also be from anywhere in the world, beginning a melding of cultural borders that then presents us with a new and unique cultural setting. These developments however are hindered by the rules and restrictions that are present in theme park virtual worlds, and thus only reflect a ghost of what they could reveal to us as scientists.

Sand box virtual worlds on the other hand offer a much more organic mode of play. Users have multiple avenues to approach a certain task, or can circumvent tasks altogether. This allows for a dynamic experience, and their choices can directly influence the game world and those participating in it around them. This degree of freedom allows players to pursue a sense of modernity which helps players embark on a self-transformation within virtual worlds and create deeper correlations between the virtual world and real world, enhancing what researchers can discern from and of them.

As stated by Webb Keane “Modernity exists at least as an idea and a conceptual orientation for actions, as what people who think they are modern (as well as those who are not, or soon will become, or never will be modern) think it is” (2002:68). He goes on to draw from Marshall Berman (1982) and Charles Taylor (1989) to draw up features of modernity. At the individual level, one must be granted the ability to express agency, inwardness, and freedom. The individual also needs a perspective on possibilities or self-creation that are available to all. The idea of self-change having a high value, and being aware of this value are also key (Keane 2002). These are all present in a sand box virtual world and accessible to all of the players.

A great way to begin approaching the differences between sand box and theme park virtual worlds is to turn to Durkheimian thought and using his terms of “mechanical solidarity” and “organic solidarity”. Durkheim described mechanical solidarity as a society in which cohesion stems from everyone being similar one another through work and beliefs, and were seen to be simpler societies. Organic solidarity on the other hand developed from specialization of work, which created cohesion through interdependence. This approach was seen as more advanced (Durkheim 1984). I will point out that I am framing this only in the context of virtual worlds, and not applying this dichotomy to all societies. Virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft*, *Rift*, *Lineage 2*, *TERA*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, *Everquest*, *Everquest 2*, *Neverwinter Nights*, *Guild Wars*, *Guild Wars 2*, *Star Trek Online*, and dozens, if not hundreds, more would all fall under the idea of society built around mechanical solidarity. Everyone in these virtual worlds is assigned the same goals, quests, backstories, and means of accomplishing them. In this sense, they are all connected through this in their virtual world

experience. While specializations exist within these worlds, they are no longer as relevant as they once were, and the end goals override any individuals wish or desire as they must be achieved first and foremost (as the worlds are designed this way). Therefore, I am equating theme park virtual worlds with mechanical solidarity. Sand box worlds on the other hand lift the restrictions and required goals and allow the user to proceed in a direction they would rather pursue. It is in these worlds where roles and professions can truly be unique and serve to create a greater interdependence between users as they require various services and goods to progress further into their own specialization. Since their progression and cohesion revolves around this interdependence, it would be akin to organic solidarity. Both experiences feature a division of labor, however it is much more pronounced in the sand box environment.

While Durkheim's dichotomy has been discredited as it labels societies primitive and advanced, I find it relevant in this context because these worlds are artificial and programmed to function in a particular way. Theme park worlds are meant to be more simple, and sand box worlds are meant to be more complex. These programmed features cannot be altered no matter how much those within this world act, and this is important to analyze. We can however then look at the users interactions with one another, and move toward an analysis similar to Marcel Mauss' *The Gift* (1990), and observe how player perception of reciprocity and contributions affect the game world. These are just two systems of thought that I will use to demonstrate the limitations and expansions both versions of these virtual worlds represent.

Since virtual worlds are largely built around the focus of "play", it is only natural to take into account Huizinga's works as well. In "sand box" worlds where players are free to build houses, farms, castles, ships, while also at the same time being able to destroy other's property

and hard work, we are met with challenges to our traditional concepts of play introduced by Huizinga such as “Play instilling order” and “play being voluntary”, and play “not imposed by moral duty”. Identifying these aspects of play, and comparing their relevance to theme park versus sand box virtual worlds leaves us with quite a different picture of one another. While in World of Warcraft players are largely prohibited from adversely effecting each other’s play, there is much more room for such actions in sand-box virtual worlds, resulting in a richer “play-community” as Huizinga would put it, and could even be identified as play with greater at stake resulting in more satisfaction from the virtual world. While the ideas of work and play have been challenged with virtual worlds like World of Warcraft (Dibbell 2006; Dibbell 2007; Rettburg 2008; Yee 2006), the new opportunities afforded in sand-box open worlds can raise entirely new forms of play within virtual worlds, work, and new questions. I credit this to the increased division of labor being implemented by the game developers, as users desire to pursue their own ideals and goals. In essence, players are finding the training-wheels removed, and are able to interact with each other much more organically, creating new opportunities to observe and explore.

With increased opportunities and interactions and further distinctions (or blurring) of work and play, we can begin to analyze the implications these developments will have on users in both virtual and real world process. Though Yee (2014) and others have pointed out that the people “we are” in these virtual worlds is often a reflection of ourselves and not a being set apart from themselves (also shown in Phillips 2013), and many examples exist that show these worlds are not a form of escape (though cases do exist), we cannot overlook that players in these virtual worlds do strive to demonstrate their ability within the virtual world. In these new

virtual worlds where a player can demonstrate their success because they can physically alter the virtual world and affect others play, these traits will be much easier to identify. Some virtual worlds also afford users official power over other players in the form of rank due to their accomplishments (*TERA, Elder Scrolls Online, Lineage 2, ArcheAge*).

In this respect we are in the territory of Newell's work with the *nouchi* in his book *The Modernity Bluff* (2012). Newell introduces us to the *nouchi* of Côte d'Ivoire and how the concept of "modernity" shapes not only their lives, but all of the world as a whole. In an attempt to appear modern the *nouchi* demonstrate, while they do not possess the means, that they have the knowledge to demonstrate success. This idea of success stems from the agency, freedom of choice, and individuality that is perceived to exist within modernity. This represents a correlation to users in virtual worlds as they can obtain a degree of power and fame within these virtual worlds and present themselves as successful and powerful, and even translate this virtual wealth into real world assets given the particular virtual world they are participating in. Both the *nouchi* and those in virtual worlds are undergoing a self-transformation in an attempt to be able to express themselves freely.

It is Newell's concept of the "Modernity Bluff" that really strikes a chord with what virtual worlds can represent to their players. Newell argues that modernity attains its value from its "authenticity", which is only discerned from the fact that others seek to copy or mimic it. In regard to the *nouchi*, this involved producing counterfeit documents (among other things) and selling them. Their skill and success was determined by just how authentic these documents could appear, while assuredly being fake. These counterfeits simulate the reality of the original thus creating a loop as authenticity seeks to separate itself only because the

counterfeits are imitating it, thus making them indistinguishable from one another because both are based on the existence of each other. The *nouchi* of Côte d'Ivoire utilize what is known as the "bluff" to show that they are modern as well. This can be viewed as a ritual in which the *nouchi* spend their accumulated wealth over the course of a year to purchase 'authentic' designer clothing, such as puma, nike, or other assorted popular western brands of clothing. They then embark on a public display of wealth where they treat themselves and their friends to a night out. The amount of empty bottles at their table is a testament to just how successful they are. The goal is to spend all of their money as luxuriously as possible. They are emulating wealth, showing that they know how to be successful and would be, if only they had the means. The bluff is appearing to be wealthy, when they are in fact poor and will immediately return to this standing the next morning, though they do accrue social currency and recognition for their performance.

In regard to virtual worlds it goes without question that players are attempting to simulate a reality, and they find themselves in a similar situation as the *nouchi*. They are utilizing the virtual world as a grounds for their own bluff, acquiring riches and presenting themselves in the form of an avatar as powerful and successful, pursuing modernity without even realizing it possibly. Authenticity of the experience is also at play here. Earlier I gave the example of going through *World of Warcraft* without having to talk to a single human being and being able to complete everything purposeful in the game. To do such a thing in the real world would be inconceivable, thus robbing these types of virtual worlds from meaningful authenticity. However in sand box virtual worlds, we are all but forced to interact with one another thanks to specialization and division of labor, and our actions themselves directly or

indirectly affect and/or influence other players. This sparks conversation, emotion, and activity, between living and breathing participants. Regardless of this being a virtual world, the player is undeniably affected by their play in a meaningful way. "It is in the successful con, when the floating signifier meets its mark, that meaning is sparked" (Newell 2012:255). What Newell is saying here is that a bluff becomes something tangible and thus real when it is completed successfully. In regard to virtual worlds the game developers are the ones laying the foundation for this con, and the players are the ones bringing it to life through their pursuit of modernity.

I chose to conduct my research using the newly released sand box themed virtual world *ArcheAge*. It is the first virtual world released in North America following this new trend of sand box environment, though it has been available in Korea for nearly two years as it was initially developed and released there. I will also show that this "new trend" of sand box virtual worlds is actually taking its cue from some of the original virtual worlds, and thus that this is not a new trend at all and more of a return to roots movement of what once made MMORPGs a fantastical experience that drew so much attention from users. *ArcheAge* has been highly anticipated as it has a host of features players have been hoping to see in today's current lineup of virtual worlds. These features include non-instanced player housing; the freedom to "progress" one's avatar how they choose; fewer class restrictions; and the availability of open world conflict with both player versus player and player versus environment combat. The end result is more agency for the player within the virtual world, and this is what carries the most weight in their desire for this new trend in MMORPG gaming. Players want their actions to matter, and the sand box virtual world environment affords them this opportunity.

## Literature Review

### Playing Studying Video Games:

Although online virtual worlds have not existed for even half a century yet, they have garnered the attention of hundreds of researchers from a wide variety of fields. Since their inception as MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons<sup>1</sup>) in 1978 (Bartle 2004:4), online virtual worlds have continued to grow immensely in popularity and user count. One of the most memorable incidents that helped spur research interest occurred in 2005. In *World of Warcraft* there was a large creature that players could unite together and defeat in a closed instance. Referred by gamers as “Instanced”, this means that a unique space is created that only your group of players can interact with. These spaces often make up a dungeon<sup>2</sup> or raid<sup>3</sup>, which provide unique rewards and engagements to players, and stand apart from normal gameplay. In this particular instance however there was a bug in the games coding, and the players who left this instance after fighting the boss were leaving with something unintended, a virus. In the game this would be referred to as a “debuff”.<sup>4</sup> This particular debuff had two specific traits. It could spread from character to character, and it resulted in death. It took the creators of *World of Warcraft*, Blizzard, five days to figure out what was causing this bug to occur, as it was adversely affecting the play of their subscribers. What was a “bug” to the developers, was seen as a wonderful opportunity for research by epidemiologists and social scientists alike. It revealed how that virtual worlds provided an excellent environment in which to simulate how

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<sup>1</sup> **Multi-User Dungeon:** A text based virtual world able to be accessed by several users at once.

<sup>2</sup> **Dungeon:** An area designed for a small group of players, usually 4-6. Usually instanced.

<sup>3</sup> **Raid:** An area designed for a large group of players, from 10 to several hundred. Many virtual worlds feature “open world” and “instanced” raids.

<sup>4</sup> **Debuff:** A negative trait applied to ones avatar for a certain duration.

disease could spread throughout a population, and how people would respond to such an alarming situation (Vastag 2009).

Virtual worlds provide us with unique opportunities to gather data, as large numbers of users access these worlds, often crossing socio-cultural boundaries and include participants from traditionally under-represented groups. They also provide us with an environment where research can take place over a long period of time (Bainbridge 2007). This makes research in virtual worlds particularly attractive to anthropologists. Tom Boellstorff and Bonnie Nardi are two anthropologists who helped bring the subject to the general audience's attention. Boellstorff explored *Second Life* through his book *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2007) and Nardi explored *World of Warcraft* in her book *My Life as a Night Elf Priest* (2010). William Bainbridge also wrote a book on *World of Warcraft* titled *The Warcraft Civilization* (2010). Boellstorff asserts in his opening pages that these online worlds are truly representative of their own cultures, and thus must be explored in the same way that an anthropologist would explore any other culture. All three of the authors demonstrate through their participant observation within these virtual worlds that complicated systems of rules and regulations are in place that govern these cultures. There also exist entire religions, class/race struggles, gender issues, economies, government, and identity. These authors are able to gather all of this information in context relative to the actual game world and understand it as a whole to better understand the player's roles and goals within these virtual worlds. It is also by exploring all of this unique culture that they are then able to draw comparisons between these virtual worlds and real life which assist them in their analysis.

Nardi spent over three years doing participatory fieldwork in *World of Warcraft*. During this research, she designed multiple avatars on multiple servers and interacted largely with several player organizations (referred to as guilds). Most notably were the Scarlet Ravens and Terror Nova. Through these different guilds she was able to participate and learn the ways in which people interacted with the virtual world itself and each other within the virtual world. Nardi goes on to explain how she conducted her fieldwork, and give examples of her first-hand experience through her avatar, Innikka. "I developed a strong sensation that I had woken up inside an animated fairy tale. I was not just watching and listening though; I played a starring role" (Nardi 2010:8).

Throughout her study she relied on participant observation, interviews both virtual and in person, and observing people play the game in real life at internet cafes. She also had access to several undergraduate students to assist her in completing tasks such as interviewing, coding, and even translating. In her analysis Nardi found that the general reason people play *World of Warcraft* is due to their enjoyment derived from being consistently rewarded with more advanced levels and items as the game progresses. This was reinforced by the chance for random rewards that could occur at any time in the form of rare virtual items (Nardi 2010:39). Nardi investigates how participants in these online worlds divide their time between the virtual world and real life obligations, such as family and work. An interesting component of her findings was that online play could often be referred to as "work", since players had to log onto the virtual world to help their guild accomplish large scale missions known as raids. So, in a sense, they were moving from real-life work and transitioning into virtual work. However, it was still viewed as play (Nardi 2010:101). In fact, there is a lot of scholarly material illustrating that

players are “working”, rather than purely “playing” (Yee 2014; Castronova 2005; Rettberg 2008).

Starting with the question “what is play?” I turn to Johan Huizinga’s book, *Homo Ludens* (1950). He begins by giving us parameters such as play being voluntary, and explaining that when play is ordered to take place, it is “at best” an imitation of play (1950:7). Play also instills order (1950:10), and disregard for the rules breaks the “spell” and causes “real” life to resume. Play also leads to play-communities that are ongoing despite the end of play (1950:12). Satisfaction of play is often derived from something being at stake (1950:49), and people seek to be honored for their achievements (1950:68). Huizinga states that “Play is a civilizing force” (1950:75). He continues to demonstrate throughout the book how play exists in many of our cultural spheres such as in war, law, philosophy, poetry, and so on. He argues that our culture and civilizations have arisen the way they have due to the manner in which we conceive and practice play. Even though this book was written decades before video games, it still remains relevant with these basic outlines for play in virtual worlds. And all of these factors are featured prominently in sand box virtual worlds and help bring them to life.

By reaching the maximum level and donning the rarest gear possible, a player earns an elevated status within a virtual world’s community. This elite status, or honor (as Huizinga would identify it) is one way in which users can show their mastery of this form of play. Adorned in their best gear, a player can stroll through the streets and turn the virtual heads of everyone around them. In “Cyber Anthropology: Behind the Avatar” (2013) I speak to how an avatar can represent achievement just by the gear their avatar is seen with. My research was done in the virtual world *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, and one example I spoke of was rare

colored crystals that Jedis could use in their lightsabers<sup>5</sup>. MMOGs are filled with these status symbols. *World of Warcraft* gives players the ability to acquire mounts<sup>6</sup>. While early in the game's history these were prominent status symbols (Rettburg 2008), the ease in which one can obtain such a mount has been made so easy that every player is automatically provided one at a mere level of 10. Prior to this, it would have cost a huge gold investment and only players who had achieved level 40 were allowed to indulge in the luxury. So the status symbol went from simply owning a mount, to having to have a rare and unique one to use it as a symbol of achievement. This same trend has occurred in many MMOGs as game developers make the older content more easily accessible so that players can quickly catch up to the veterans. This creates a heavier burden on the veterans to represent their status as what they worked so hard to earn is easily acquired and even surpassed within a few levels every time a game expansion is released, and the game up to that point is altered to account for this. This demonstrates an excellent correlation with Newell's *The Modernity Bluff* (2012) as players are caught in the same cycle as the *nouchi* of acquiring the latest fashions for the sake of status and perpetually fueling the concept of modernity itself.

Players can only obtain the best armor and weapons, and thus their superior status through ownership of said items, through completing only the most difficult game content, referred to as "raids". These are the most difficult dungeons in the game, designed for players who are at the maximum level in the game. These raids require several groups (25 players in *World of Warcraft*) and yield the rarest and best gear obtainable in the game as rewards for

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<sup>5</sup> **Lightsaber:** A beam of plasma energy, stemming from a hilt and held in a containment field to act as a weapon, a sword generally. Also referred to as a 'laser sword'.

<sup>6</sup> **Mounts:** slang used to refer to animals you can "mount" and ride in games. The most general of which is a horse.

defeating the bosses <sup>7</sup>within. To achieve this, players often need to be a part of what is known as a “guild”. This is a group of players who all work together and often form play-communities that interact together in the virtual worlds as well as the real-world (another aspect of play addressed by Huizinga (1950)). It is not enough to merely have access to a guild with 25 players, as you may realize if you have ever attempted to get 25 people to arrive together at a specific time in a specific place. Not only do you need to have roughly three times that number (Yee 2014: 69) to account for unavailability or no shows, but you need the group to be dedicated and knowledgeable of the task at hand. To complete a raid, research, patience, and pure will is required as they can last from six to eight hours (Yee 2014), or more if you are particularly having difficulties yet insist on continuing. Other MMOGs have been known to have bosses that can last upwards of eighteen hours (Brennan 2009), and require a player play the game for well over a year before even being able to attempt the fight. Because of the intense nature of play style required to tackle these raids, guilds require not only structured management, but place obligations and expectations on the players who wish to take part in them.

Recalling Huizinga’s characteristics of play, we can quickly identify some issues when it comes to “playing” in these virtual worlds. One of the first characteristics mentioned is that play is voluntary (Huizinga 1950: 7). While this can apply to a large majority of the online interactions, when we begin to discuss guild activity and raiding, we see just how quickly play can become an “obligation” (Nardi 2010; Bainbridge 2008; Yee 2014; Rettburg 2012). In his chapter titled “The Labor of Fun” (2014), Yee quotes several responses to his Daedulas Project

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<sup>7</sup> **Bosses:** AI controlled characters that are much more difficult than others, requiring

surveys in which players from various MMOGs express their frustrations with the amount of work that is required to “play”.

“The toughest thing for me, about leading a guild was just showing up. I never wanted the job, but I felt obligated to maintain the guild I loved. I spent an average of 4 hours a day replying to ICQs and e-mails while attending alliance meetings in IRC [Internet Relay Chat] and writing up announcements for the website. This before I even logged in... which when I did, being a RP [role-playing] guild I was forced to attend every event and function I was invited to, to keep up community relations. Not to mention weekly guild and alliance meetings or any impromptu meetings that came up. Whatever time I had left was used up dealing with the inevitable daily guild issues... So I got maybe one to two hours a week for myself. [Ultima Online, male, 35]” (Yee 2014; 73)

Yee even identifies players actually referring to their play as a second job.

“After becoming a guild leader I found that I had taken on a second full time job. Creating a nice website was a pain and was time consuming. Then came trying to plan raids that people in our guild could all attend (too much variation in levels), trying to keep people interested, recruiting new people. It was way too much work. [Everquest, male, 31]” (Yee 2014; 73).

As mentioned previously, it can take a roster of 75 people or more to be able to tackle the game content that produces the best rewards. With having a roster of so many, not only do you have to worry about people showing up to the guild raiding events, but you also have to consider everyone’s status, feelings, concerns, and rewarding them for their efforts to avoid drama, arguments, or fights. Failure to do so can result in players abandoning the guild, and in worst case scenarios in the dismantling of a guild. All of these create obligations on the guild leaders and ironically diminish their “play” while at the same time represent the only manner in

which to access the highest levels of play as set forth by the game. So, are they working to play, or playing to work?

If this play is actually work, then it becomes a question of why do people still pursue it and spend dozens of hours a week in these virtual worlds. Yee (2014), Nardi (2010), Boellstorff (2008), Bainbridge (2008), Rettberg (2008), and Phillips (2013) all provide strong evidence that there is a great emphasis on the social interactions players are able to experience within these virtual worlds. Accompanying social interactions are our cultural conceptions about how to interact with one another, and how to play together. The goals in the game are laid out in a manner to reward the player incrementally for their efforts and to encourage continued gameplay. This follows along strongly with notions of labor as presented by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (2002). We are taught that our “hard work” will grant us rewards and help elevate our status, and that is what is truly important. In fact, these virtual worlds have done so well in instilling in us these ideals and practices, that they are earning themselves merit in the education sector, as supplemental methods for demonstrating task and team management, and concepts such as efficiency, specialization, and supply and demand (Barnett and Archambault 2010; McGonigal 2011).

This struggle of work versus play has also contributed to a decline in the vibrancy of virtual worlds as developers have sought to make the games require less work to achieve the same results with the introduction of features such as “Raid finder”. This approach has dulled the social interactions and nuances of play by removing risk, honor, and value of reward. This trend of making play more accessible has served to make the gameplay more repetitive, stale, and mechanical as much of it becomes automated. As everything is streamlined, the players

have no sense of agency. What makes sand box virtual worlds such a meaningful step forward is their variety of options, allowing players to pursue modernity which in turn brings these worlds to life. With multiple avenues to approach a goal like leveling or obtaining rare gear, players are returning to more voluntary play and able to seek greater reward. The organic nature of sand box virtual worlds brings back an element of risk, again enhancing play. The streamlined mechanical play of theme park worlds fall short in these aspects.

Addiction is also a prominent theme within these online worlds. It is openly recognized by players (though often referenced in humorous ways) and considered a real threat. Because of this, players tended to be rather accepting when people opted to quit and tackle real life by stepping away from the game (Nardi 2010:130). The idea that players are using virtual worlds as an “escape” still holds truth, as many participants in surveys I conducted used such language referring to their time spent in virtual worlds. Many also spoke of a Japanese show in which characters become stuck, unable to log out, in a virtual world and are forced to play it until it until they beat the final boss. The survey participants saw this as a desirable situation. I do believe that is to be taken with a bit of humor however, as it is also speaking to the high interest of the total immersion the VR (virtual reality) headsets allowed those characters within that show/game. Nardi also addressed the issue of gender within the *World of Warcraft*. She found the online community to be heavily dominated by men, and players had a tendency to address female avatars as males and express surprise when it was revealed a female avatar was indeed actually a female player (Nardi 2010:159).

Nardi's research gives us great insight as to why people play MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft*. All the activities and forms of behaviors that players featured in her study are also

present in other online worlds - largely due to the trend that players of these games at one time played *World of Warcraft*. *World of Warcraft* is a landmark MMORPG that influenced nearly every MMORPG that has come after it, and has heavily influenced gaming culture as a whole, as well as the players themselves (who bring the culture to life in each virtual world they visit) (Nardi 2010; Yee 2014; Bainbridge 2010).

Bainbridge's book *The Warcraft Civilization* (2010) is laid out in a format where the chapters are broken up by categories, each of which explores a different aspect within the game world of *World of Warcraft*. Bainbridge does this by opening each chapter with a story that takes place from the perspective of his avatar. The story is structured around a particular topic of the virtual world, such as religion, war, or economics, and then the story unfolds as his avatar carries out the particular duties associated with that part of the game. After the narrative in each chapter, he then describes what his character was actually doing, and correlates how it relates to the real world, such as analyzing the role religions plays within *World of Warcraft* versus religions practiced in the real world (Bainbridge 2010).

What this book shows us is a breakdown of the *World of Warcraft*, and how each component (religion, race, class, war, economy, etc) of the game holds a wealth of information, lore, and activities that can only be attributed to the organization of an entire civilization. This is emphasized as each of the chapters addresses each component individually. Everything is examined with cultural relativism, and helps provide us with a picture of not a virtual world, but a manner in which to view this world on its own terms as something that is present and actually exists. Bainbridge helps identify the specific realms that exist within the virtual worlds and see that there is much more depth than might be originally thought when dealing with a mere

"game". Everything is set up to function as it does in real life. As the players interact within these structured systems, they are become extremely valuable for determining how humans interact with and within these virtual worlds.

Boellstorff's *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008) represents a completely different atmosphere with the opportunities it provides its users and their overall objective. *Second Life* seeks to mimic many of the things we can do in real life. Users have the ability to create homes, shops, and even theme parks, as well as create anything they can think of to go inside of these places with the provided editing tools. Unlike *World of Warcraft* where your goal is to acquire the maximum level and high-quality equipment, in *Second Life* you can design your own small home or an entire shopping mall. Once you fill them with objects, you can then set items you created for sale to generate money, or use real life money to obtain virtual currency, or exchange virtual currency for real life money. After you've settled into the world, you can visit theme parks, shopping malls, nightclubs, and even space stations. You can put on your suit and attend your corporate business meeting being held on your company owned island, or head over to a church for daily mass. Because of its creativity and freedom, *Second Life* has seen great use and has hundreds of thousands of users that at one point stretched to several million (Boellstorff 2008).

The book gives deep insight into preconceived notions, theoretical practices, anthropological approaches, and a general definition of all the later plus a large amount of information on the game of *Second Life* itself. It offers a superb analysis on just what is "virtual" within this world, and what "virtual" actually means. Boellstorff presents the perspective that the *virtual* is much less a separate space, as we commonly perceive it to be. He argues rather

that the virtual is merely an alternate space, deeply grounded in our current space. A good explanation he gives is looking at just how far back virtual worlds have existed. He provides the telephone as an example. The telephone is a device that allows two or more people to communicate and interact with each other at the same time, despite their being in completely different physical spaces in the world. The telephone acts as a tool that creates a virtual space for the people on the line to engage each other. The people's participation in this virtual space is completely dependent on their actual space, and therefore they cannot be deemed separate. Like Nardi, Boellstorff relies heavily on participant observation and interviewing to obtain his data. He held virtual focus groups online by actually forming an in-game group (like a weekly book club meeting) and hosted it in his virtual home (called *Ethnographia*) where their discussions would revolve around the chosen topic for the meeting. While the focus groups were not as useful in his ethnographic fieldwork in Indonesia, he found it much more manageable to organize and have participants appear in the virtual world (Boellstorff 2008:78).

There is also plenty of literature that does not take an ethnographic approach, but approach virtual worlds from a different angle, such as a journalistic approach, and analyze and evaluate them and their effects. There is Julian Dibbell's *Play Money: Or How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot* (2006) which looks at the economics within virtual worlds and how transactions in virtual worlds can translate to real world value as players are willing to spend real currency for virtual assets. Some even make careers out of it. There is Nick Yee's book *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us – And How They Don't* (2014) that analyzes how we perceive ourselves in virtual worlds and how we develop our avatars and behave, using data collected from his Daedalus Project that collected

large amounts of survey data from online virtual world participants. Books like Edward Castronova's *Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun is Changing Reality* (2007) and Jane McGonigal's *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2011) both focus on how online play is structured in such a way that it could be valuable to adjusting real life practices to be more like games.

What one does not see in these texts however is that these virtual worlds are no longer like the descriptions given in these books. Entire concepts have been changed, and some virtual worlds they reference no longer exist (such as *Star Wars Galaxies*). One such major innovation, as previously mentioned, has been the introduction of "Raid Finder" in *World of Warcraft* (which many MMOs subsequently adopted). Nardi (2010) and Bainbridge (2010) have entire chapters dedicated to the intricacies and strategy behind raid events, and Nick Yee also often references them in his book *The Proteus Effect* (2014), yet the introduction of this system has removed many of the fine details involved in carrying out such events. Now within *World of Warcraft* for example, players merely have to hit a button to find themselves transported to a place in a group composed of 24 other strangers, and can complete the "extremely difficult" event without ever needing to communicate with another person. The art of socializing, forming bonds with players you can trust and becoming battered comrades in arms is mostly dead. This has not even been addressed in Yee's book which was published in 2014. This is just one example of the many shortcomings that exist in these theme park virtual worlds, void of organic and creative life. The research and current state of these virtual worlds can lead to misconceptions between them and sand box virtual worlds. The ground work laid out by research done by Nardi, Boelstorff, Bainbridge, and many others has given us excellent insight

into what virtual worlds represent, but the innovations leading us into what are now referred to as sand box virtual worlds present us with much more fertile ground as players actions serve to more directly bring these games to life, rather than simply playing a part in an elaborate play. It is the availability of the ability to pursue modernity in these environments that makes this type of virtual world so important to identify.

### MMORPG 101: The Basics.

Before we go more in-depth with what sand box virtual world is compared to what a theme park virtual world, now would be a good time to explain exactly how these worlds work. These worlds have their own lingo and acronyms that can differ greatly from our traditional language, even though they are both expressed in English. MMORPG stands for "Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game", however MMOG is often used as well, standing for "Massively Multiplayer Online Game". This is used because not all massively multiplayer online games are considered "Role-Playing" games, as there are a number of first-person shooter games and other variants that don't necessarily revolve around developing a character, *Planet Side* being an example. However more often than not you will find users of these virtual worlds asking "What MMOs do you play?" without any distinction being needed. These worlds are highly intricate and it is important to go over a few key aspects of them so as to provide a better understanding of the points being illustrated.

### Business

These online worlds generate income for their developers traditionally in the form of having their customers buy the game and also pay for a monthly subscription (*world of*

*Warcraft*). Some have adopted the model of selling the customers the game, but charging no monthly subscription and instead feature selling virtual currency/items for real currency (*Guild Wars 2*). Many MMOGs have adopted a “freemium” model, in which players can access the game for free, however if they pay a subscription fee they get extra benefits such as increased experience gains or access to exclusive content (*ArcheAge*). The game developers not only use this money to pay themselves and turn a profit, but also to reinvest into the game and develop new content which may be provided for free or at an additional cost. This is done in the form of “patches” which happen frequently to adjust the game, and occasionally as “Expansions” which are large scale updates to the game that drastically change it, or add new content such as additional quests, storylines, character classes, and races (elves, humans, dwarves, etc.). Players access these virtual worlds by booting up the game program on their computer, game console, or even cell phone. This program is dedicated to running only the game itself, and is referred to as the “client”. An “avatar” is a visual representation of a player in a virtual world. A player can only (legitimately) control his or her avatar by using the client. Some users develop modifications for the client that deliver it commands, and thus a computer program ends up controlling the avatar. These are referred to as “bots”, and are against the rules (Dibbell 2006:94) as determined by the game publisher and agreed to by the play in the “Terms of Service” agreement they must agree to before logging in.

The game creators encourage players to enter their virtual worlds by offering a variety of activities and entertainment. To be able to be a part of this entertainment there are prerequisites aside from the possible monthly subscription, such as leveling up, obtaining gear, and completing challenges. Not all players are able to devote the time necessary to these

ventures, and to stay competitive or to keep up with their friends, are willing to spend real life currency to gain virtual goods and advantages. This could be in the form of buying some in-game currency (commonly “gold”), to an entire game account with powerful avatars already developed. Sometimes this can be done within the rules of the game, but it also is done quite commonly outside of the games rules creating a “black market” of sorts. Virtual world’s economics are intertwined with real world economics (Dibbell 2006).

### Communication

Everything can be communicated through text within the virtual worlds. However, there are instances where it is difficult to type and control one’s avatar at the same time. To combat this, there are also third-party programs that players can utilize to communicate via voice, similar to a system like Skype. This is often called VoIP, or “voice over IP”. The popular ones are known as TeamSpeak, Ventrillo, and Mumble. Most players often combine using the two at once (voice and text), as not everyone in the virtual world can be on the same voice-chat as they are, or some would simply rather not speak as they see it as breaking immersion (Boellstorff 2008:113). These manners of communication also work in favor of researchers, as some games allow you to log all of the text chat automatically, and for those that don’t, the researcher can often at least copy/paste the text directly from the chat window. Programs for voice-communication also tend to offer a record option. Communication also brings up issues in regard to anonymity, gender, race, age, and many others but they are not important for our discussion.

While “role-playing” is in the genre’s name, not all players approach this the same way. At its most basic form, role-playing just reflects the fact you are creating a character and playing

the game with it, a mere piece in a board game as an analogy. Others take the role-playing aspect to heart, and create backstory for their characters and act them out (Phillips 2013). Their communication relies heavily on text, as they not only attempt to convey their words in a certain manner, but also look to “emote” their actions as their avatars cannot always perform the actions they wish them to. An example of this would be two players in a bar, one requests a drink, and the other responds “Sure thing! /fills a glass and slides it down the counter”. In this case the “/” designates that the words following it are an action rather than speech.

### Avatar

A player interacts with, and advances through, virtual worlds using an avatar. Every character within these worlds that is not controlled by a human being is referred to as a "NPC" which stands for "Non-Player Character". All of the beings in towns, all of the forest critters, and all of the things that can harm you or guide you through the game are NPC's. This is the key manner in which the game world interacts with its users, aside from providing just an environment. One's avatar is often put on a level scale starting at one, which is the lowest/weakest. They then progress towards the level cap<sup>8</sup> (which varies game to game) by completing "quests" (missions/tasks assigned to the player in the virtual world), and acquiring virtual items and currency. This level progression is measured by the amount of "experience" a character has. That is, for each quest completed, enemy killed, and other tasks completed you are awarded "experience points" aka "exp" or simply “xp”. Each level requires you to reach a certain amount of exp before advancing to the next level. Accruing this experience allows users access to certain equipment that not only changes the abilities of their avatars, but their

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<sup>8</sup> **Level-Cap:** Highest obtainable level within the game.

appearance as well. The more experience points one has within the world, the more advanced their avatar will appear. This is not to be confused with what we commonly refer to as “experience”, wherein we are skilled with a certain task, like writing, simply because we write lots of papers. Within the virtual worlds, experience is something quantifiable and measured by the game’s systems. A player may have years of experience within the game, however a character who has earned more experience points than his will be deemed more powerful.

This avatar represents the players themselves, and their “success” as a player can be measured through their characters level, achievements, and appearance. Most virtual worlds display a player’s level when you come across them, if a player is at or near the games level-cap, you can tell roughly how far they have progressed in the game. It would sort of be like being able to know someone’s age because it was displayed above their head, and with that age you would have certain expectations of how far along they should be in life by that point. Many virtual worlds also offer “achievements”, a concept that has appeared in gaming across the board, especially with the popularity of Xbox and Playstation gaming systems. Players earn achievements for completing certain tasks, the more difficult the task the more “achievement points” the task is worth, and you can often view another players achievements by going through their profile. This can be for killing a certain number of something, earning a certain interval of gold, or for accruing a certain amount of time played in the game. And one of the most obvious, the actual appearance of the avatar. Typically an avatar starts out with simple clothing on their back and perhaps a wooden weapon. By advancing through the games challenges, accruing items and wealth, they can obtain rare gear with unique appearances and attributes. A wonderful experiment in reciprocity was done by Nicklisch and Salz (2008) in

which they attempted to employ players in a task for them for in-game currency, and documented on how players expected to be reciprocated based on the appearance of Nicklisch and Salz's avatars. They did this with low, mid, and high level characters. As they hypothesized, players attributed the appearance and level of their avatar to a certain expectation of wealth, and wanted to be compensated more when they perceived their benefactor to be wealthier.

Appearance and success are more easily recognizable in some virtual worlds than others, as players may not know what the highest level of gear may look like. Developers are faced with the task of competing with themselves to come up with newer and better looking gear than they had in the past as they have to be continually developing new content. There are also things such as "world firsts", raid progression, land/castle ownership, and leaderboards. This all contributes to "status" within the virtual world that can have virtual and real world benefits, which will be addressed later.

## Groups

As the purpose of these online worlds is to interact with players, the players often form clubs/organizations that are referred to as "Guilds" or "Clans". This ensures easy communication with each other and a quick reference to see who's available to get together in the virtual world. While they serve a social aspect, they also tend to have a hierarchy structure with leaders, officers, and/or councils. This is especially true in large guilds that are focused on completing all activities within the virtual world and competing against other guilds. There are even guilds that require monthly dues as they "employ" guild officials and offer a service to their members in the form of inside information and guaranteed competitive results (WoWGoons 2013). Most virtual worlds feature what is referred to as "end-game", which is the

pinnacle of challenge and achievement within a virtual world, and usually must be tackled by an organized group to succeed and can take months to complete.

Players do not have to be organized into guilds or clans however. It is quite common you will bump into someone in the virtual world who happens to be heading the same direction as you or trying to complete the same quest. In that case, if the players so choose, they can form a “party”, which is a temporary arrangement recognized by the game as the players will be cooperating. This is shown by having the players’ names and status bars displayed on one’s screen, typically in the top left corner. Once their objectives are completed, they can part ways and simply leave the party or group. If one desires, they can opt to add each other to their “friends list”, which gives them an easy way to contact the player when they are online, much like the “contacts” screen on a cell phone.

### Race, Class, and Profession

It is important to note that "race" and "class" do not translate to how we perceive them when referring to human culture. *Race* can actually be thought of as *species* and transcends the culturally-created definition that is often used today. *Class* does not refer to an economic standing or cultural standing, but rather a *role* one fills within the game world. Examples of classes are *warriors*, *magicians*, *priests*, and *rogues*. Normally, race and class carry no weight in these online worlds except to determine which side you align with, if a world is faction based (Faction based is two or possibly three sides who are generally against each other; *World of Warcraft* features two factions- *The Alliance* and *The Horde*. Faction is determined by *race*, and either faction can feature any class). Professions are often attached to crafting, and are a way to earn supplemental income or obtain very high-end equipment in the game. Crafters require

resources, which also provide another set of professions players can pursue, as large parts of virtual worlds are driven by player economies. Crafters can be blacksmiths, leatherworkers, or alchemists, just to name a few examples. Gatherers can be miners, skimmers, or herbalists. All of these are professions which help fuel the life of the virtual worlds in which they are featured.

### The Games

Talking about virtual worlds in general, we are presented with a large variety of possibilities, settings, environments, and so on. To be more specific in this discussion, it is best to just focus on a couple prime examples. In this instance, we will use the ever popular *World of Warcraft* as our prime theme park environment example, and *ArcheAge* as our sand box environment example. Both of these virtual worlds I have extensive personal experience with.

*World of Warcraft* takes place largely in the fictional world of Azeroth (barring the other dimensions and worlds one can access). Its land's races consist of Humans, Dwarves, Night Elves, Gnomes, Worgen (Werewolves), and the Draenei (Alien Humanoids). These races formed an alliance (called the Alliance) and are opposed to Azeroth's other races which have also formed their own alliance (called the Horde) which is made up of Orcs, Tauren (Cow-like Humanoids), Blood Elves, Trolls, Goblins, and the Undead (It's complicated). There is also the neutral race of Pandarens (Panda Humanoids with heavy oriental influence), which after a brief introduction must choose to ally with one side or the other. Players embark on an epic story of war, treachery, plague, hope, and love in this fantasy setting by creating an avatar who belongs to one of these two factions. From level 1 to 100, they fight permanently attached to this faction, and that faction's goals and storyline.

When an avatar is created, it spawns<sup>9</sup> in a starter zone dedicated to that race. The player is guided through some introductory quests and given the backstory of their race, and eventually led to their race's capital city. They embark on quests that guide them from location to location based on their level, and are also able to pursue crafting professions as well as dungeon<sup>10</sup> activities. A player's ultimate goal is to reach the maximum level and begin end-game content, which is the part of the game that cannot be done unless you are maximum level and have already acquired a certain item level<sup>11</sup>.

While the two factions are in opposition to each other, depending on the server type<sup>12</sup> they may only be able to attack one another in designated Player-versus-Player (or PvP) matches and events. Players cannot attack other players in the same faction as them regardless of server type (outside of PvP mini-games). Through hard work and determination, players can accrue the best gear in the game through raiding<sup>13</sup>. They can pursue achievements, collect rare battle pets<sup>14</sup> and mounts, compete in PvP leaderboards<sup>15</sup>, and recently added "Garrisons" which act as a form of player housing, however it is instanced.

*Archeage* was just recently released and will be the primary example of a sand box virtual world. It takes place in a fantasy setting much like *World of Warcraft*, consisting of four

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<sup>9</sup> **Spawn:** Creation of an entity, term commonly used in gaming as "respawn" is often a feature, which is the recreation of an entity after a death.

<sup>10</sup> **Dungeons:** These are isolated zones within World of Warcraft that are full of difficult enemies and rare rewards. Typically must be tackled by a party of five players.

<sup>11</sup> **Item Level (aka iLvl):** The rating of your equipment. The better the equipment, the higher the item level.

<sup>12</sup> **Server Type:** Servers types commonly can be PvP, PvE, and RP types. PvP allows open combat, PvE restricts combat and instead focus on "player versus environment", and RP servers are Roleplaying servers meant for those dedicated to roleplaying to find like-minded players. RP servers often use PvE server rulesets.

<sup>13</sup> **Raiding:** Raids are content requiring large groups of players (25 in World of Warcraft) and offer the best rewards.

<sup>14</sup> **Battle Pets:** Similar to Pokemon, they are creatures used for mini game where you train and have your creature battle other players creatures in combat.

<sup>15</sup> **Leaderboards:** Public ranking of player's score, much like a "High Score" screen seen on an arcade machine.

races. Nuians (Western Humans), and Elves occupy the western continent of Nuia, while the Firran (Feline like humanoids) and Harani (Oriental based Humans) occupy the continent of Haranya. While initially these two groups represent their own factions and by default enemies, players have the ability to create their own factions later on in the game. Players embark on a story where their avatar serves an important role in the battle for good versus evil in the world. They start at level 1 and advance through level 50, however the story only progresses until roughly level 30 and the rest of the journey is done however the player wishes to fulfill it.

Following much the same formula as *World of Warcraft* and most other MMOs, the players are led through an introductory sequence where they learn of their avatars role in the world and how to operate their avatar within it. Unlike *World of Warcraft*, we also get to see the elements of sand-box virtual world here as these introductory quests explain to you what player housing and farming is, running trade-packs, and sailing the open seas. Players have the ability to claim land within the virtual world, and they can use this to build homes or set up farms to gather resources to either sell or use for progressing their professions, which in turn level up their avatar. Also unlike *World of Warcraft*, there are no server types. All servers have the same rule-sets<sup>16</sup> and present an equal playing field to players. *ArcheAge* does not have limits on who can PvP who. Even though *ArcheAge* starts with an initial two faction system much like *World of Warcraft*, in *ArcheAge* the players have the option to kill their own faction members. Players may opt to kill players on their side for several reasons. The player may be a member of a rival guild; they may be carrying a valuable trade pack that could get you the gold

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<sup>16</sup> **Rule-sets:** Server-wide rules that dictate what players can and cant due, largely associated with PvP, death, and loot options.

you need for that new bookcase for your house; or a player may simply be in the mood to kill another. In developing a taxonomy of player types, Bartle (1996) one of the four things people typically found pleasure in was ‘Imposition upon others.’

“Players use the tools provided by the game to cause distress to (or, in rare circumstances, to help) other players. Where permitted, this usually involves acquiring some weapon and applying it enthusiastically to the persona of another player in the game world.”

Players who kill without remorse in *ArcheAge* have the option of becoming a pirate, where they will be kicked from either faction and always appear as an enemy to other players. While traveling by sea, players are constantly on the lookout for hostile pirates.

Much like *World of Warcraft*, there are dungeons, quests, and raids available in *ArcheAge*. The difference is they aren’t necessarily required in *ArcheAge*. A player can reach level 50 by questing and doing dungeons, or they can plant crops or raise livestock and farm their way to level 50. They can run dungeons and raids for high end gear, or they can craft it themselves. If they don’t have the necessary crafting skills, then they can utilize trade runs and selling goods on the auction house until they can afford to buy the gear they need directly from the players that can craft it. It is these elements of choice and freedom that not only allow players to have more agency within this virtual world, but allows researchers to then ask “ok, why did they make that specific choice?”

**Theme-Park versus Sand-box: Distinction in Virtual World types**

A “sand box” virtual world isn’t something new, as they have existed in the past, but the distinction is becoming more prevalent. There has been a movement by video game developers to address their users growing desire to have agency in these virtual worlds, to be able to dynamically change not only their own experiences, but the experiences of those around them (Breslin 2012, Johnson 2013, Johanson 2013, Schubert 2011). *Everquest Next* and *Landmark* (Sony Online Entertainment), *ArcheAge* (Trion), and *Black Desert* (Pearl Abyss) are a few examples of lead publishers adapting to this change in the realm of online virtual worlds. There are also many crowd funded sand-box virtual worlds in the making such as *Shroud of the Avatar*, *Star Citizen*, *Life is Feudal*, *Shards Online*, *Crowfall*, and *Pantheon*. *Star Citizen* in fact holds the record for most funded crowd sourcing project at over \$55,000,000 (Mahardy 2014). And many existing virtual-worlds feature elements that are used in these sand-box virtual worlds such as *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, *Lineage 2*, and *Guild Wars 2* to name just a few. We can even look at *Minecraft* as having a major impact on this new trend. These sand-box virtual worlds all stand to present us with fertile ground in which researchers can delve deeper into understanding how virtual worlds affect the users entering into them, and how these experiences then affect the real-world (ex.- Gamification of business world and education (McGonigal 2011)). This movement also illustrates the importance of not only allowing humans to be creative, but the ability to share and experience it with the world. While Facebook and internet sites may allow us to share photos and videos, they do not afford us the opportunity to be in a virtual house built by someone in which we can freely roam and explore the artifacts within as if we were physically there. This is why virtual worlds are unique and provide us with more in-depth and meaningful experiences.

This shift from “theme-park” to “sand-box” illustrates the importance of human individuality, creativity, and the means by which we pursue them in a space that is commonly thought to thrive on anonymity and hollow entertainment. Therefore, it is paramount that we acknowledge this shift and move away from focusing research on theme-park virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft* and turn our attention towards these sand box virtual worlds. We are constantly being afforded more opportunities to progress and change due to technology. In understanding the correlations between virtual and real world interactions, we are provided greater insight into what it means to be human. Therefore it is imperative that we keep up with trends in virtual worlds, less we be stuck in the past studying what was, rather than what is.

### Features of Sand-box Virtual Worlds

Because virtual worlds with a “sand-box” theme allow players more agency, we can get a better understanding of human interactions within virtual worlds and how these affect real-world interactions as well. In order to do this however specific distinctions are required. Rather, in what ways do sand-box virtual worlds offer opportunities for agency that theme-park virtual worlds do not.

Sand-box worlds afford us this opportunity by utilizing significant features such as:

- Open world<sup>17</sup> Conflict: Conflict is commonly referred to as “PVP” aka “Player versus Player”, and consist of players fighting for resources, land, or simple murderous intent.

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<sup>17</sup> **Open World:** This is when virtual worlds feature events that happen in the same environment for all players. Consider a buffet at a restaurant that anyone can have access to at any moment. The opposite method commonly used is “instances”, where players can only interact with a pre-determined group within an environment only accessible to them; think of a private banquet room reservation.

-Open world housing: Some virtual worlds feature the ability for players to own and decorate their own houses that they can then invite other players to see. Again, a feature that is largely done using “instances” (as this affords limitless amounts of player housing), sand-box virtual worlds feature the ability for players to build houses within the open world environment either at will or within designated areas. The problem with this is that this creates a finite amount of land available. Interestingly though, this then turns land into a valued commodity.

-Several Routes to progress: Normally Progress is measured through an avatar’s “level”. This is a number that increases as the player gains more “Experience points” within the virtual world at increasing intervals. This is largely achieved through killing “NPCs” (non-player characters) and completing quests. Sand-box virtual worlds afford players more options to increase their level, such as crafting, exploring, trading, and other activities.

Open world conflict is significant because it intensifies every interaction players can have with one another. A great example is a player carrying a pack of valuable goods comes across another player. The approaching player can choose to give a friendly wave and carry on about their business, offer to aid the lone traveler, or attack him and try and take the valuables for themselves. The defending player has to make the decision to preemptively strike this stranger to defend his goods, run, or try and strike a bargain to ensure a mutually beneficial outcome. This differs from “theme-park” virtual worlds as they often feature environments that have limited PVP interactions, such as players only being able to attack players from a pre-determined enemy faction, or by not allowing PVP period. In these circumstances, if you had two players from the same faction come across each other, there would be no need to stop and

consider one another's presence, thus robbing the players of significant encounters with one another. The other human player may as well be nothing more than another NPC.

Open world housing represents another impactful feature, especially meaningful as it contributes in other aspects of the virtual worlds. Theme-park virtual worlds may offer "instanced" housing, which means you have to be invited to another player's home and be teleported to that area to see it. It exists separate from the world that the game-play actually takes place in. Open world housing on the other hand leaves homes out in the open, always viewable, approachable, and if the front door is left ajar, enterable by any player whether they be friend or foe. You own an actual piece of the world that everyone travels through every day. This makes home ownership a more prominent status symbol than it would otherwise be in "instances", as everyone can view them. This leads players to pursue filling their homes with unique furniture and decorations, to mark their success and exploits within the virtual world. Several tiers of housing is often offered, the larger housing being more expensive and requiring more materials and commitment. Some virtual worlds further build upon this by allowing players to form their own castles and kingdoms which grant a whole new level of rank, power, and ideas of "success" within virtual worlds as these are much more limited but desired by many. While castles are so rare and unique they are beyond value (and while one player gets to be named Lord, it requires an entire guild to maintain and defend a castle), houses are not and the finite availability of land in open worlds makes them a valuable commodity. First and foremost it creates two groups of people, Land owners and Non-Land owners. The circumstances can vary greatly virtual world to virtual world, so now I must put this in the context of the subject of my research which is *ArcheAge*. Within *Archeage*, Land Owners must

upkeep their land (which can be houses or farms) by paying taxes. These taxes increase the more properties they own. Land is of great value in *ArcheAge* not only because it allows a player to express themselves in this virtual world through home ownership and display, but also because farms are essential for producing goods within this virtual world, and without one a player is at a great disadvantage. Thus some plots sell for what can be equated to \$200 US currency equivalent value (This calculation is made based on current land sale prices (up to 1000gold), which can theoretically be obtained using the game's "cash shop"<sup>18</sup> to purchase Apex<sup>19</sup> which can then be sold to players for in-game gold, the current rate being roughly 50gold for 1 Apex at the time of writing this). The value of a plot depends largely on its size and location. That price is for just one size above the minimum. Location variables come into play such as proximity to valuable trade routes, PvP zones, and climate of that zone (some zones feature bonuses for growing certain crops on farms). As land is finite, non-land owners have to wait to accrue enough gold to afford land (which is difficult because they lack the farm space to grow resources to acquire gold quickly), or wait for a land owner to fail to pay their taxes and grab land once the game system makes it automatically available again. So in short, open world housing creates Status Symbols for players to express themselves and their virtual success, creates classes of land owners and non-land owners, and thus greatly impacts the economy through virtual and non-virtual means.

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<sup>18</sup> **Cash Shop:** An in-game store that offers virtual goods in exchange for credits, which are purchased with real money or, in the case of *ArcheAge*, Apex.

<sup>19</sup> **Apex:** A unique token in *ArcheAge* that players can purchase for real currency, and then sell/trade to players within the game for virtual goods. Players can then use the Apex token to receive digital credits for use in the cash shop. It is unique as it means not all players have to invest real currency to utilize the cash shop.

Traditionally in a MMORPG virtual world you are introduced to the world and guided through a series of quests, which reward you with experience points. Accrue enough experience points, and your avatars “level” goes up. Think of it as ascending through grade school, the higher your grade, the more experience and knowledge you have (or at least are perceived to have). Just as with school, the higher the “level” or “grade”, more is expected of you to reach the next one. In regard to virtual worlds, this means larger and larger amounts of experience points required, and this can range from escalating to merely level 20, 50, or even 100+ depending on which virtual world (Older virtual worlds tend to have higher level caps<sup>20</sup> as they release expansions and higher level content to expand on the gameplay). With this trend of “sand box” virtual worlds, some developers are also doing away with the idea of levels altogether, and applying new skill based systems (*Life is Feudal*, *Shroud of the Avatar*, *Everquest Next*). Others are keeping the tried and true “level” system, as it is a proven method looking to psychology, game studies, and the concept of *flow* (McGonigal 2011; Csíkszentmihályi 1975), however altering the manner in which you can increase your level as to offer more variety, and thus freedom and choice to the players who have come to tire of the “grind<sup>21</sup>” associated with leveling<sup>22</sup>. Again looking to *ArcheAge* as a primary example, players can raise their leveling through the classic method of completing quests and slaying NPC’s, or they can embark on a wide variety of activities such as farming, crafting, fishing, sailing, and more. While the ability to do such actions in a game is nothing new, the removal of separation between leveling what are commonly called professions in the game and having your avatar gain experience for doing

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<sup>20</sup> **Level Cap:** Maximum level you can obtain in the game.

<sup>21</sup> **Grind:** Repetitive (often dull) activities necessary to progress ones experience.

<sup>22</sup> **Leveling:** The act of gaining experience and progressing our avatar.

these tasks allows them to “level up”, or progress, in whatever manner they see fit. This freedom of choice for progressing the player’s avatar is one of the key areas where the value in these sand-box virtual worlds is seen.

Best yet, all of these features intertwine to create an environment that truly revolves around dynamic player interactions with each other. Many of the progression tasks are too difficult to handle alone. Non-land owners have to rely on land-owners for assistance in producing crops and raising funds. The ability to steal and kill other players in the game causes players to carefully consider their routes and encourages them to make friends and have traveling buddies. *ArcheAge* in particular also features a crime system, where if players commit too many crimes they can be sent to trial in which they are judged by a jury of their peers and can be sent to prison for a certain amount of time based on their previous crimes and convictions. And sticking with the “sand-box” theme, players sent to jail have the option to break out and become pirates. Not only do these sand-box environments promote more freedom of choice and agency, but human interactions as well.

It is because of this unique environment that sand box virtual worlds offer that I believe they will be the key to leading us to research that shows emotionally involved player interactions that have profound impacts on how we perceive virtual worlds, and thus serve to impact our actual lives as well. The fact that within these virtual worlds we can see division of labor, class struggles, desire for agency, economics, political organization, and even a system of law demonstrate how the virtual and the real are connected and intertwined. Because of the freedom of choice and agency that these sandbox virtual worlds represent, I believe they will be quickly accepted and promoted by the player base, and thus create a dominant trend by

game developers to keep creating these type of virtual worlds. These will grant researchers much more fertile ground to conduct their studies instead of focusing on past virtual worlds that garnered attention due to sheer popularity. While studies done in virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* have produced fascinating results, it is time we moved beyond that and look at just how deep virtual worlds can truly reflect us as human beings when we are actually allowed agency within these virtual worlds.

## Methods

In conducting my research, participant observation, interviewing, and surveying served as my primary tools. Choosing *Archeage* as my primary research site, I became heavily involved in the community for over a year. I spoke with players in the forums, monitored rumors and predictions, and also conducted some preliminary and post-release surveys to gather an idea of what players valued most in MMOs. It was through these means that I was able to gather information on player's experiences, goals, and ambitions. Taking this information, I compared it with data taken from players of other virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft*, *Final Fantasy XIV*, *RIFT*, and *TERA* gathered through surveys, and also utilized data composed of past participant observations, interviews, and surveys gathered from my past ethnographic studies in the virtual worlds of *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, and *Guild Wars 2*.

### Participant Observation

My journey into the actual virtual world of *ArcheAge* (that is, the 3D game world as opposed to just forums and websites relaying information about it) began in early March of

2014. The game had officially been launched in Korea and Russia, but was still in closed alpha<sup>23</sup> testing for North America as localization<sup>24</sup> was taking place. As I had been watching the development of this MMORPG for years, I (as well as thousands of others) were quite anxious about this news. I scoured the forums for a guild to join, as this would give me access to a dedicated group of players with pre-existing knowledge about the game who were equally as excited about it as I was. I found myself a new home in the guild Mischievous, who were a dozen or so players who had played multiple MMOs together, including the Korean version of *ArcheAge*.

I sent an e-mail to the CEO of Trion Worlds, the North American publisher for *ArcheAge* detailing my research goals and interest in using *ArcheAge* as a prime example in it. He granted me an alpha access key, giving me the ability to play the game before the general populace. While this was quite amazing, I found myself unable to take full advantage of it due to a heavy course load. A month later Trion offered “Founder’s Package”, which would grant players alpha access, among other benefits, if they paid \$150. There were also \$100 and \$50 packages that allowed beta access, and few benefits. This allowed a large influx of players to finally get their first taste of *ArcheAge*. Mischievous, looking to keep itself out of the spotlight, joined another guild which was one of the largest on the server. This ended up giving Mischievous a large pool of recruits for the launch of game, and great insight to the inner workings of the game as they were able to determine what changes were made during localization and how they changed

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<sup>23</sup> **Alpha:** A testing phase that is usually restricted to a limited number of in-house participants to test the basic functions of the game.

<sup>24</sup> **Localization:** Translating and adapting a games story, concepts, and ideologies to make them more approachable in another culture.

gameplay, if at all. As there were only two servers, a lot of the top guilds quickly became familiar with one another, and friends and enemies were made.

The game officially launched September 16<sup>th</sup> 2014, however those who had purchased the “founder’s packages” were given a three day head start (meaning they could access the servers starting September 13<sup>th</sup>). In preparation for this, Mischievous had organized leveling parties. Groups of two to eight players who would progress through the game together for maximum efficiency to hit the top level the fastest and acquire land and other valuable resources. They were determined to be the top guild, and to conquer any competition. Thanks to their organizational skills, I was able to acquire some prime real estate within 20 minutes of the servers going up. Within the first three days (which was the head start period), all of the available land within the server had been taken, causing it to become a prime commodity, and creating a huge uproar from non-land owners. This coupled with crashing servers, insufficient server capacities<sup>25</sup>, long queue<sup>26</sup> times, and rampant cheating<sup>27</sup> and bots<sup>28</sup> which both leveled up characters and acted as gold sellers<sup>29</sup>, created an extremely rocky launch for the game.

I mention these issues the game had because it created an intense negative reaction to the game and its developers and upset players made sure to litter the forums with their discontent. Many players demanded refunds as the game advertised promises that were not

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<sup>25</sup> **Capacity:** Servers have a set maximum amount of players who can be logged on at one time.

<sup>26</sup> **Queue:** Once a server hits it’s capacity, a queue is formed where players are allowed to enter the game once other players log out, in the order in which they entered said queue.

<sup>27</sup> **Cheating:** Within the context of this game, cheating refers to exploits such as using programs to steal land, duplicate valuable items, and gain unfair advantages through holes in the security of the programing.

<sup>28</sup> **Bots:** Automated characters run by programmed scripts for the purpose of progressing a character or selling gold.

<sup>29</sup> **Gold Seller:** A character (usually a bot) that advertises websites to buy in-game currency for real life currency. This is strictly forbidden in the rules, however occurs at an alarming rate and can be difficult to police.

possible. “Claim and own a piece of Erenor by placing farms and houses!” (Archeage 2014) is what was advertised to people who purchased patron<sup>30</sup> status, however it failed to mention there was no land left to claim. This was clearly the most upsetting issue as battles constantly flared on the forums between land owner and non-land owners. Land owners complained that non-land owners felt entitled and weren’t willing to work towards it. Non-land owners complained that land owners acquired their land merely because they forked out real cash and land barons made it impossible for anyone to buy their own land.

“The people with land can make more money than those without land, so week one a 16x16 is worth 300g. I save to 300g, week 2 it's 600g. I save to 600g, now it's 1200g. The problem is even worse when you think about people starting the game in a month, 6 months, or even a year from now. The possibility of those people ever getting land is basically zero.” (Archeage player on the official forums).

While the early concern among players seemed to be a delay in progression or being trapped in a constant game of catch up, as the above quote suggests, there were also cries of being deemed “second class citizens” as land ownership became a status symbol, however this was not a surprise as my general survey of MMO players had shown that nearly two-thirds of players considered expressing themselves one of their most important aspect of MMOs. The combination of land ownership in *ArcheAge* being the ultimate form of expression and also being a limited resource was going to inevitably lead to this conflict.

Thanks to Mischievous though, I was on the side of having plenty. Not only did I get land to build my house, I also acquired several small and large plots in which to grow farms. They were a key factor in producing resources to use for crafting and trading packs which could earn

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<sup>30</sup> **Patron:** Someone who is subscribed to the game.

you gold in the game. By having these farms I could level faster and amass more gold than non-land owners in a shorter period of time. My house was nothing but a visual display of my in-game economic success. In it I could place custom portraits of images I could upload into the game, various levels of furniture, and trophies collected throughout the game such as bobble-head collections or tentacles from the Kraken world boss. I merely had the smallest size home. A one room building on a plot designated as a 16x16. If put into real world terms, the room may have been considered a 20'x20' room at most. Players could acquire townhouses, farm houses, and even mansions going up to plot sizes of 44x44 and consisting of two or three stories. As this required not only an immense time commitment, but also owning land plots that large, it was all but out of my reach. As a guild however, we were able to obtain a large plot of land to build a house for our Guild as a whole. With the housing, you could set who was allowed to enter it, who could interact with the objects inside of it, and who could remove and add items. Our guild house stood as a testament to our accomplishments, power, and wealth. However, any guild could obtain such a trivial thing, and many did. Even individual players eventually built houses like our guild house or even larger. Mischievous had no plans of stopping there however.

Mischievous quickly made a name for itself on the server. There were many top guilds, but none had the raw fighting power of Mischievous. Fighting power was important in the world of *ArcheAge* for it featured open world combat. That meant that anyone could attack you in certain areas and this could greatly hinder your progress. Some guilds had sought to increase their power by amassing as many recruits as they possibly could, the before mentioned Goon Squad being one of them. As all players in a guild had the name of said guild displayed with their avatars name in plain view, even if you were alone this could be enough to deter someone

from attacking you if they knew the power of your guild. And to the opposite effect, this could make you a target if your guild was unpopular. Mischievous focused on staying at around 100 members strong, but continually strengthening that core group of players. They worked on quickly getting everyone to level 50, and then producing guild trade ships so they could run inter-continental trade runs to boost their crafting abilities. While Goon Squad had well over 500 members, when the two groups would clash in battle Goon Squad would find itself defeated, as 10 well equipped Mischievous members could cut through five times their number as their enemies were often not as high a level, not equipped as well, and not organized. Many guilds were referred to as “Zerg”<sup>31</sup> guilds, Mischievous being one of them (but this was a byproduct of their organization and dedication of their members), and the practice of simply gathering as many bodies as possible gave the impression that your guild had no true skill or talent. The guilds using the “zerg” strategy had to have such high numbers of people in their guild because out of those 600 recruits, only a small percentage was actually going to show up to a fight. The fact that so many Mischievous members would show up to every battle merely gave the impression that they had several hundred members like Goon Squad, when in reality they only had around 100. It was through these open world skirmishes that Mischievous was able to prove its skill and dedication to the art of war and earned server wide recognition.

This recognition is what makes *ArcheAge* unique compared to the other virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft*. In *World of Warcraft* you could compete in PvP through arenas, and even kill players of the opposing faction in the open world (but not your own), but as the other

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<sup>31</sup> **Zerg:** A term used to denote a strategy of gathering as many people as possible and attacking in mass in hopes that the sheer amount of assaulters could overcome an opponent’s organization and skill.

faction could not communicate with you, and your actions had no effect on your own faction, it had no real lasting effect on the virtual world experience. In *ArcheAge* however, combat was largely done out in the open. Guilds were able to easily identify one another, attack each other, and guilds of the opposing faction could learn the language of your faction and then communicate with your faction. This, also driven by the fact that players were participating in this world purely for the PvP aspects helped create an environment in which diplomacy actually mattered. This helped enrich the players experience and create unique occurrences within the virtual world.

One of the main sources of income was creating trade packs and then moving them from one territory to another to exchange them for gold. These packs could be picked up by other players, and your character would dropped them if you died or your wagon you were using to transport them was destroyed. This of course made thievery/piracy a real possibility and threat. Players also found another way to exploit their fellow players however. *ArcheAge* featured collision<sup>32</sup> mechanics, and some particularly rude players were not afraid to utilize them to their benefit. They would gather at areas (usually bridges) on their tractors and block the path. This would make it impossible, or extremely difficult for players to pass through the area. They often did this at prime trade times that were dictated by “peace timers” between the PvP zones which made combat impossible for a certain duration of time (otherwise players would simply kill them, destroy their carts and carry on their way). They would then demand payment from the players, and only let those who paid a toll pass by. As this was a clear form of

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<sup>32</sup> **Collision:** Player characters and vehicles actually occupy the space they are present in, and cannot pass through a space another player is occupying. Many MMOs do not feature collision as it allows for “griefing” other players.

griefing<sup>33</sup>, only guilds who did not fear their guilds reputation being damaged would conduct such operations. They would also have to be a guild that could withstand retaliation from the guilds they were upsetting. Often Goon Squad would conduct those “toll road” operations. Mischievous was often granted free passage, as the consequences for upsetting the guild were known to all those in the server.

Mischievous didn't just offer a looming threat over their faction, but also a strong and fierce ally if the conditions were right. While combat could be done against one's own faction, the bigger fights (and rewards) were to be had out at sea against the rival faction. Just as Mischievous was a dominate power on their continent, the opposing continent also had strong guilds, guilds the weaker ones could not possibly defeat. Alas, even Mischievous could find itself quickly outmatched by these opposing faction guilds, so enemies became friends. Trade runs done to the other continent, or the central island known as Friedrich Island yielded items you could only get by doing such trades, and were pivotal to advancing in the game as a guild. We could find ourselves setting sail with people we had just killed a few hours ago. It could be a situation of them helping us or us helping them. Despite being at odds on our own continent, it was still preferable to help those of our faction than allow those of the other faction to gain an advantage in overall strength. Some guilds find other ways to co-exist with enemies abroad.

Mischievous itself was originally allied with the opposing factions leading guild the Crows. A strategy hatched from before the server ever launched. Within a couple weeks however, we found ourselves at odds as there were constant skirmishes and arguments taking

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<sup>33</sup> **Griefing:** Intentionally disrupting another person's play in a negative way.

place between the two guilds, and the alliance was called off and the two strongest guilds in the server became rivals. Goon Squad had been experiencing difficulty getting to Friedrich Island without running into the Crows patrolling the sea. At this point Mischievous had set its priorities in other areas and was not as open to aiding other guilds in this endeavor. So Goon Squad struck a deal with the Crows, and agreed to pay them gold in exchange for safe passage. Once Mischievous learned of this arrangement, they quickly became upset and launched many attacks against the Goon Squad for their crime of aiding the enemy and being subservient to the opposing faction. They weren't the only ones to make arrangements with the Crows however. Mischievous had an agreement in place with the Crows pertaining to the world boss the Kraken. A gigantic beast that required several galleons (large ships with cannons) and several dozen players to take it on, the players not only had to worry about the NPC as their enemy, but for hostile players that could at any moment sail up and attack them from behind. For weeks, Mischivious and the Crows both kept players assigned to be on lookout, where they would sit for hours with their avatar logged in floating in the water close by the Kraken, keeping an eye out for any other guild that may attempt to kill the Kraken. If a guild did show up, they would sound the alarm and their guild would immediately drop what they were doing and arrive in force. As this happened over and over, the two guilds made an agreement. They would take alternating turns killing the beast, so they could both advance, equally, rather than waste dozens of hours in attempts that would more than likely fail and leave no one advancing.

Being a part of all of these events was a thrilling experience. When someone would cross me I'd be able to simply say "Don't you realize what guild I'm in?" and hostile players would leave me alone. While dozens of players were blockaded by Goon Squad, I was allowed

to pass because of the name I bore. Out at sea, we would launch surprise attacks, several times capturing entire enemy Galleons and then destroying them so that they would have to expend time and resources to rebuild them. As I was often on the frontlines, more than once I found myself in glorious combat striking down the leader of the Crows. It was these interactions allowed by open world combat that created such amazing and diverse experiences between players. Economics, politics, and power directly influences the players and shaping their environments. A living, breathing world brought to life by the players where any day could bring a new event that could bring riches or catastrophe. These are options simply not possible in a virtual world like *World of Warcraft*, where everything is largely guided on-rails, and whose formula doesn't allow for deviation from the set path.

The first couple of months Mischievous had one ultimate goal in mind. *ArcheAge* featured the ability for players to own castles and be lords over entire territories. However, just like land, these were limited. In fact, there was only four. The game developers intentionally cut off access to this area for a couple months so that no one guild could rush and take them before everyone was equipped for it. Thus they announced they would open it post-launch so everyone would have a fair shot. After the two months had passed, they announced they would be launching a new patch for the game that would open access to the castle lands, providing the opportunity for four guild leaders to become lords, and opening up much more land to occupy. The leaders of Mischievous kept very quiet about their plans, only disclosing a couple days before the launch what groups we would be in. We all met up in an area and waited for the servers to go down. When they would go back up, the land would be open and we had to immediately be ready to log in and go. This was an all hands on deck situation and disobedience

and laziness would not be tolerated. Once a territory was taken, it could only be taken by another guild if they successfully conquered the castle of whatever guild had won the territory to begin with, and this could only be attempted once every two weeks. This initial capturing of a territory and castle was a onetime event, and the winner would be able to accrue a fortune in taxes from the imminent land rush that would occur as players were desperate for land.

We all sat in our teamspeak channel, anxious for the servers to go up. We were pre-divided into our groups, as each group had a separate mission we weren't quite sure about. I was part of the assault force. My job was to follow commands and kill anyone who did not wear the Mischievous guild name. In order to claim a castle territory, you had to gather specific stones and craft a pack and then use it on a lodestone, and if you completed this you would be granted the territory and the castle space. There were four vast territories, and we didn't even know which one we were going for. Only the Officers did. They didn't want to risk other guilds finding out our target and grieving us. The servers went up, and the mad clicking to login to the servers began. I popped in and was immediately thrown a party invite. I swam to shore, got on my horse, and began running with the 50 other players in our group. We were given our first directive, group up and defend the entrance to the caves that held the stones our crafters needed to collect. The 50 of us held the area, but against little resistance. The second group of 50 players consisted of miners, crafters, and a few body guards. We were given the order to head into the cave and clear out all enemy players so that our second group could have a monopoly on gathering. We did as we were told, and then our third group (which I didn't even know we had) reported of difficulty in combat and we were ordered back to the cave entrance. With both assault teams combined, I realized we had 150 players all logged on and participating

in this event. And we were just one guild. At this point the Crows were furiously pressing against us, attempting to break through our lines and gain access to the caves. Their spawn was inconveniently at the entrance of this cave, while ours was a bit of a distance to the West, so we dove back deeper into the cave and took our stand. "Here they come!" was shouted over our headsets from our leading officer, and it was an understatement. We stood at around 50 strong with our suffered casualties, our fallen comrades blocked off from rejoining us as they stood on the opposite side of the cave now. Having a very high-end PC, I found myself stunned as it struggled to render the scene on my monitor. It was not only the Crows, but dozens of guilds all from that faction. They had united to drive us out, and there were hundreds of them. We fought the best we could, but sometimes a zerg is just too powerful. We respawned and regrouped, now roughly 100 strong again. We had lost the battle, but they were too late and the war was set to end in our favor.

The order came in "Ok, now we keep them here". Our mission was to now trap them in this cave. Our miners had finished gathering the stones and had left to go and craft the necessary items, so now it became a game of simply stalling the enemy. We mounted on our horses, and on our officer's command set out as one unit. Running through the cave we came to that massive blob of bodies, but with our numbers doubled, the outcome was much different this time. No longer needing to secure the cave and the mines below, we were able to concentrate our strength and once again obtain the upper hand. After a short period, word came in and we were in possession of the item we needed to capture a territory. Our target was finally revealed to us, and we made haste to it by land. As we arrived to the shores our second group arrived by sea. "Everyone surround the leader! Kill anything that isn't

Mischievous!” Our leader had the item on his back and was surrounded by several dozen of us. The others had fanned out and formed a perimeter. A few moments later, the territory was ours. We were the first guild on the server to obtain a territory and become lords. After a quick celebration, the order came in “Ok, now let’s stop the Crows from getting a castle”.

This was a remarkable experience, again born out of human economics, politics, and power. Sure, this kind of experience could be scripted and programmed into a game, but then it wouldn’t be an organic experience. This was players battling, supporting, loving, and hating other players. Players affecting one another’s play with high stakes and consequences for failure. Players actually changing the way the world would be viewed, equipped with agency. Players creating a reality and bringing the virtual to life.

## Interviews

During my participant observation I had access to a wide array of players to interview. I also had some people from my surveys who had expressed an interest in becoming more involved in my research and volunteered for interviews. These were done online using voice chat programs such as Teamspeak and Skype. I found the results of the surveys were often echoed in the interviews, and players expanded on them. Most of these interviews were done with players of *ArcheAge*, however not all. This made sure the results were only being procured from a certain subsect.

The first and most obvious question was of course “Why do you play MMOs?” As in my prior research (Phillips 2013), the social aspect was a common response. The next most common answer seemed to revolve around the game-type itself, how it offers a unique challenge different from other games such as shooters. As one player put it:

“I play MMOs cause as I mentioned, it’s fun to see a novice spell caster being barely able to lit a candle, then over the course of his career, can call upon the stars and makes them to fall down on his enemies, or to summon a superior Demon to do your bidding. I prefer to Level up and see my character improve, than to be stuck at the top level, feeling nothing moves. If there was a game with a 1000 levels, increasing in power and new skills, I bet I would accept the challenge.”

This response points to the type of progression and environment that the MMO virtual worlds create. It supports the discussions of *flow* that McGonigal (2011) provides in her book based off the psychology of Csikszentmihályi (1975), and is a clear motivator as seen in the works of Bainbridge (2007) and Nardi (2010).

Tying these two common responses given by those I interviewed, I pressed the issue, asking simply “why?” What made progression with your peers fun, especially as you neared the end of the challenges. The answers I received from members of Mischievous were quite clear, and not unexpected. As one officer of the guild put it, “To show we are the best. To climb the mountain and be king of the hill. To be gods.” Mischievous was very PvP oriented, and they were best able to show their success in the game by crushing their enemies and conquering castles. And when they weren’t engaged in battle, it was about acquiring more land and decorating their homes with unique and rare items. The same officer stated

“I’m not going to sugarcoat it, you guys should feel privileged to play with us. We are the best, and you get to walk around wearing the name ‘Mischievous’. That’s power we fought hard for and earned. We have to maintain our image.”

The officer shared this thought after becoming upset that some guild members weren’t taking the new gear requirements the guild had instated (they were requiring guild mates to obtain a certain minimum quality of gear (iLvl), as to keep the guild fighting power and image optimal).

I conducted interviews with the previously quoted officer, and the leader and co-leader of Mischievous. While many expressed the importance of being able to show their success in the virtual world by means of their property, none were quite as adamant as the Mischievous higher ups. Kermit was the guild leader, Rose the co-leader, and Freddy one of the top officers. I inquired why being the best was so important to them, and reiterated my past questions to get more in-depth answers from them.

Rose was the first one I spoke with as she was often readily available and loved to converse. She talked of how the core<sup>34</sup> of the guild had been playing together for nearly a decade, and they always had a drive to be the best they could be.

“Ya see, for me, I work with *children’s book publishing company*, so I often sit behind a desk and don’t do much. I’m paying bills, student loan debt, and trying to support my family so there isn’t much else. It can be a bit dull and void of social interaction. However when I’m online, I get to interact with an amazing group of people who are all united and dedicated to a cause. Online I get to be a leader, and show to the other people in the servers that we can be successful and amazing. It’s sort of like a creative outlet, except it’s through our skills and success. Oh, I also get to upload and display my art in our guild house, that’s really cool!”

Here, Rose is expressing how *ArcheAge*, and MMOs in general, give her the opportunity to not only be socially stimulated and entertained, but to also feel a sense of accomplishment. Of course that feeling of success isn’t something only a sandbox MMO like *ArcheAge* can produce, so I prodded further asking why Mischievous moved to *ArcheAge*, and what made it unique.

“Ya know, I’m sure its because of the way in which AA allows you to do it, well for me at least. In TERA we did dominate in PVP and make a bit of a name for ourselves, but it was

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<sup>34</sup> **Core:** Group of players who remain with a guild as it goes from one game to the next, together.

much harder. There wasn't land, there wasn't trade runs, there wasn't housing, and there wasn't castles. Sure, we could fight people and obtain the best gear in the game, but no one would really notice, they didn't HAVE to notice. You or your group could just do your own thing and ignore most everyone else. Just like WoW and SWTOR and most other games out there. In AA, they have to notice. We can make them notice. Our actions matter because they affect them."

Rose was reference the unique features in *ArcheAge* that gave her and her guild mates agency within that virtual world. She was not the only one that found great value in being able to show her success through demonstration.

Kermit, leader of the Mischievous guild, was the driving force behind many of the actions of the guild. He had the final say on the game plans, the strategy, when and where to act, and who was friend and foe. Rose had volunteered the information about her day job, however Kermit was not so forthcoming. When I attempted to casually inquire, he dodged the question and began talking about the guild. I didn't press the issue and instead allowed him to proceed with his thoughts on MMOs.

"We desire to be the best in anything we do. We owe it to our guild to provide them with as much fun and action as possible. To do this, we also need everyone to work together and contribute. In games like Perfect World and TERA, that simply meant running dungeons, hitting the max level, and acquiring the best gear. After that, we would focus on PvP and expect everyone to be experts in their class and that was it. We're semi-casual, semi-hardcore, but we also expect you to not be an idiot. This became especially important in *Arche Age* where we needed people to farm, literally for once, carry out trade runs, people to obtain and sail merchant ships, people to obtain and sail galleons, and most importantly, people to fight. Everyone had an important role to play, and now people could specialize and contribute in their own way as long as they stayed geared with the rest of us."

Here Kermit is discussing the difference in the roles players have to take on in a sand-box virtual world like *ArcheAge* as opposed to a theme-park virtual world where all players had similar roles. I asked him if being a guild leader in a sandbox virtual world was a different experience than being a guild leader in a theme-park one.

“Drama. There’s a lot more drama. Granted, every guild eventually has drama, and we have quite a few more members in Arche Age than we did in the past. Some people complain of “clicks” within the guild, and not getting help when they need it, but when you’re this size that is to be expected. There’s so many ways for players to go about what they want to do that we can be rather hands off and let them self manage as long as they meet gear requirements and attend events like Kraken or sieges. But these are all minor things. The real drama comes from people running their mouths when they shouldn’t. Griefing others and causing fights. And I don’t mean within the guild. Every member of Mischievous represents the guild and in an environment where anyone can be friend or foe, that is something to be crucially aware of.”

As soon as you log into teamspeak you are presented with the rules for the guild, our allies list, and our KoS (Kill on Sight) list. In line with what Kermit was describing above, these are meant to ensure members of Mischievous know how to behave and how to treat other guilds. Those on our KoS list are those that have wronged us in the past and are to be shown no quarter. Our allies are to be treated with respect and are people we can rely on if in need, or should lend our support if they are in need. As for anyone else, the general rules of not griefing other players, conducting yourself in a respectful and polite manner, and not cheating (using exploits or bots) were always in play. As *ArcheAge* was a living, breathing world thanks to players controlling most of the interactions, there could be grave consequences to mistakenly killing the wrong person. Imagine killing the son of a King in the real world. Just as it would be here, in the virtual world those wronged bring swift retribution. Dealing with guilds this large, sometimes mishaps

occurred. Sometimes they were meant to be instigations, sometimes they were just that, a mishap. Guild mates demanding action be taken on their behalf for being mistreated by other guild mates or another guild; Officers and the guild leaders having to gather information and decide if it was miscommunication or an act of war; Players like myself who would refuse to engage enemies on the KoS list since I was on good terms with them (I was neighbors with someone in the virtual world who happened to be in a guild with two people from my home town and thus we behaved civil towards each other despite our guild affiliations). Again, this is the human element taking the main stage in the sandbox virtual world environment, leaving us with fascinating interactions to observe and analyze.

The officer I interviewed was called Freddy. Freddy shared with me that his job was tech support and that he looked to virtual worlds as sort of an escape. Somewhere he could be something more significant than some guy on the other end of a telephone call, and also aware of the Irony that both his real world and virtual world communications were done through a headset. "At work, I am often disrespected and thought of as stupid by angry customers, but online I'm a hero, leading the charge, fighting alongside and against REAL people." I asked him what made MMOs better for this than other cooperative computer games available.

"MMOs provide us with persistent worlds. They are always on and can be accessed any time which makes them more real... AA is amazing because I can own a piece of the world, and display my success to everyone. We can return from a mission or just relax in my townhouse, where I have on display my rare bobbleheads, kraken trophies, and expensive furniture. In here I can show I'm important and accomplished. In tech support, not so much."

During the interview, Freddy eluded to common themes present in other interviews and surveys. The online world allowed him to present himself as something desirable whereas real life did not. The virtual world also provided it in a format he could afford, as many people cited funds as being a reason they look to virtual worlds for amusement, adventure, and exploration.

Going back to Newell's book, these interviews with members of *Mischievous* revealed how well they and the game developers were creating their own bluff. This environment provides them with the tools in which to "con(vince)" others into believing their value within this world due to their actions and interactions within it. This is the essence of bring the virtual world to life.

Not everyone I interviewed was from the *ArcheAge* community. One person I interviewed, whom we'll refer to as Ally, had briefly tried *ArcheAge*, but found herself sticking to two other MMOs. She illustrated the important point that not all MMOs are even remotely similar. Not because of their content, but because of the environment the players form around the content.

"WoW caters to a large crowd of people. I feel like WoW is incredibly inviting and very forgiving. I really love that it offers a wealth of things to do between raiding, PvP, RP, etc. The community, however is pretty fierce, they're not the most loving crew for certain.

Final Fantasy XIV I think offers things to a different crew. I mean, between the more realistic graphics, the intense amount of cutscenes and the very, very limited PvP environment (which barely exists), you're not going to find the same crowd typically playing both of these games."

She spoke about her disappointing experience with *ArcheAge* briefly, citing how the world felt static because of the bland NPCs who just stood there, and how all the avatars looked alike. Ally's perspective provides valuable insight into how the environment created by the virtual world can affect the players themselves, and how they interact with one another.

### Survey

I conducted two main surveys throughout my participant observation within the virtual worlds. The first I conducted across multiple MMOs to gather a general idea of what players expected from MMOs and why they played them. This survey reached 1000 respondents. I conducted a second survey dedicated to *ArcheAge* players going a bit more in-depth as I did with my interviews, finding out what in particular makes the experiences in *ArcheAge* valuable to the players.

The first survey was distributed by posting in the forums of the various virtual worlds. I used *World of Warcraft*, *TERA*, *Final Fantasy XIV*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, and *ArcheAge*. The survey was a mix of choosing among preselected answers and typing in your own. I collected some general data such as gender and age, but also general occupation description as to get a general idea of the survey takers without collecting too much personal data. It then dove into the gaming and MMO related questions such as general gaming experience, why do you play MMOs, what MMOs have you played, desired features in an MMO, what you do upon first entering an MMO, and what would your dream MMO allow you to do.

Sharing this survey in the forums also allowed the users to give quick feedback about the survey within the thread I had posted. I quickly responded to some critics of my first question asking for the 'sex' of a player, as the players made the case that they felt what type

of gender they identified as was more significant. 23% of my respondents identified as female while 77% identified as male. This is in line with research done by Nardi (2010) and Boellstorff (2006) as well. As for age, 35% claimed to be 18-24, 43% to be 25-34, and 35+ consisted of 22%. Professionals consisted of 37% of the sample, while hourly employees were 19%. Both student and unemployed were made up of 22% each. This option allowed space for comments, and there were several who made an effort to note they were a stay at home parent, disabled, or unemployed but looking.

When inquiring if they had prior gaming experience before MMOs, nearly all replied yes with their experiences (many also noted their MMO experiences despite the question being framed to exclude that). Many recalled their exact age, some starting at 3 and many falling within childhood years. There were a dozen respondents who had no prior gaming experience, 8 of them being females. 5 of them cited their boyfriends getting them into MMOs and gaming. I also questioned why they played MMOs, and the first 3 responses sum up a great deal of the responses-

“I like interacting with other people from around the world. I don't have the means to travel that much thanks to my low income.”

“I like the social outlet and am otherwise stuck in a small town so it's cheap entertainment rather than driving an hour away for anything that costs more to do.”

“They provide hours of entertainment which is often cheaper than alternatives (e.g. renting a movie, buying new games, going to a gym etc.) “

There were also many references to enjoying the challenge games present, using it as a means to relax, and as one respondent put it “real life sucks”.

In trying to get a grasp of the respondent's virtual world experiences, I asked them to select from a list of 33 popular virtual worlds that have/do exist. I also left a comment section in case I had forgotten some major ones (which I had). The top five were- 63% of them had played *World of Warcraft*; 63% had played *Final Fantasy XIV*; 43% had played *Guild Wars 2*; 41% had played *Star Wars: The Old Republic*; and 40% had played *ArcheAge*. I then had asked of them what features they look for in an MMO, providing 13 options, again leaving a comment box for additional input. PvE content was by far the most desired at 88%. Socializing and Exploration followed next at 72% and 71% respectively. Avatar customization followed at 65%, and graphics at 61%. One of the response options I was really curious about was player housing, which came in at 46%. In the additional comments, many referenced a strong desire for Story and Immersion from their virtual worlds.

When asking what their initial goal was when they enter a new virtual world, I left it completely open to user comment, and found an overwhelming response of reaching max level. Many cited various reasons for this, but most had the understanding that if they acquired the maximum level, they would then be able to enjoy the more interesting aspects of the game. Exploring and going through the story were distant but prominent runner ups. The final question I posed to them in this survey was what would they be able to do in their dream MMO. Again, this was an open comment section and I found answers all over the place, however I did cobble together some trends. "Be a part of, or fight for player made factions as a civilian, common soldier, or a commander. Be a part of a virtual world where our actions truly matter and have real consequences." This

was actually a pretty common response, though exact phrasing always differed (one player put "Become Electric Jesus"). Players cited a desire to be required to form groups, societies even to carry out their duties with specialization and purpose. One responded:

"Live in a real breathing world where every profession was just specialised enough that they became something of a niche. Those who enjoyed gathering would gather. They would help the crafters, who in turn would help the fighters. Each role would be played by people who enjoyed doing that section of the game above others, as opposed to the current MMO landscape that seems to prefer the "Make everything so easy that everyone can do it" approach."

Another responded:

"I would be able to build and manage a city, with a standing army (guild members). Form my own sort of virtual nation and make a mark on that gaming world in that way (help new players get oriented, work with veteran players to tackle endgame content)..."

There was also a lot of reference to VRMMORPG, that is, virtual reality massively multiplayer online role playing game. Naturally these don't exist in the real world, but they have been portrayed in Japanese culture through manga and anime which has made its way across the world. At the particular time of this survey, Sword Art Online was a very popular anime that featured players becoming stuck in a MMO and having to live in that virtual world until they beat the game and could log out. This forced players to work together and some to specialize in traits such as blacksmithing or info gathering to help in the concentrated effort of making it through the dungeons to beat the game. It also featured characters who relished in the idea of being stuck in a virtual life and either carried out relationships and normal lives in the virtual world, or some individuals who chose to adopt darker paths and kill other players within the virtual world. A major

part of the plot of Sword Art Online was if you died in the virtual world, you died in real life. This gave every player purpose and value. A very attractive idea to those looking for a richer virtual world.

The second survey I conducted was among only *ArcheAge* players, and only received 100 responses. It was short and to the point, asking questions such as why people play *ArcheAge*, if they own land (and if not, why), do they see land ownership as a status symbol, if they enjoy displaying their success within *ArcheAge* (and why), and what do they value most in a sand-box environment MMO.

In regard to why they play *ArcheAge* many cited reasons I have already listed here. The freedom of the PvP interactions definitely showing to be prominent.

“After WoW I never could get into another MMO. Archeage was the first one to pull me in because of it's amazing community and world pvp. The pvp was amazing. I loved being able to group up and kill anyone anywhere. Including same faction. This is what makes guild and community so important. If you weren't in an alliance then you were a possible target. This made it exciting to quest/play the game.”

The freedom of PvP was also uniquely effected by the Jury system present in the game, which gave players the option to be a pirate and enhance their desire to embrace gameplay that would normally be considered destructive or trolling.

“versatility in game play, I can farm or pvp or dungeon at my leisure, pvp aspects create interesting social dynamics, and I play with awesome people”

In regard to owning land, 88% of respondents did in fact own land. There was a secondary question ask “why” if they had selected no, and players responded with

either they no longer wanted to pay for it (which can be done with real life currency or in-game), or they had stopped playing the game, and even though it's a free-to-play game you will lose your land automatically after two weeks.

Asking if the players saw land ownership as a status symbol produced interesting results. 56% had selected no, while 44% has selected yes. One look at the forums however clearly displayed a conflict between land owners and non-land owners, a fervent class struggle revolving around players being categorized whether or not they owned land, and attitudes being generalized about both camps. I did not ask for clarification due to the following question.

In asking players if they enjoyed displaying their success in *ArcheAge*, the results came exactly split. 50% answered yes and 50% answered no. I did follow this question up with asking "why" regardless of their response. Many cited as "for funsies" or giving them a sense of accomplishment for displaying their success.

"I have really enjoyed what it took to get those things, whether it was a gift from a kind guildmate, or something i spent hours working toward or something my little group of friends worked together to get. I'm proud of these things"

Those that did not see it as something important noted they just played the game for fun, or that they were not the type that needed to prove themselves. "Just a game. success is relative. pixels are pixels."

The final question was simply asking what they valued most in a sand-box environment MMO. Again, the freedom of choice rang enthusiastically as the overwhelming response.

“The freedom to do what I want and play the character I want. Almost every MMO tries to pigeon hole you into "you picked class x therefore you are a tank" which isn't much fun, neither is every day being "ok back to quests" ..... so I guess the really answer is simply: Choice”

“I love being able to do anything in this world”

“Not being forced to follow some developer's idea of what I must do to make my play time meaningful.”

These three responses from three different individuals show the emphasis of players valuing the freedom of choice, free from pre-programmed limitations or developers forcing them to progress in a certain way, herding the players like cattle. The open environment and freedom of choice is what makes sand-box virtual worlds desirable to their player base.

## Analysis

Earlier I had laid out the concepts of theme-park virtual worlds and sand-park virtual worlds in terms of mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. Through my interactions in my methods I believe I have shown this to be quite true, and it all plays into fulfilling a sense of immersion for the players that enhances their gameplay. This immersion is enriched by the complex interactions present with organic solidarity, giving them something much deeper than the mechanical solidarity simplicity that many main stream virtual worlds have been utilizing of late. Earlier I also mentioned a comparison with the *nouchi* presented in Newells book, and with the interviews and surveys now laid out we can discuss this more thoroughly.

Richard Bartle shared a similar bleak view of the current status of virtual worlds in his 2013 paper “The Decline of MMOs”. He discusses the causes referring to development costs, clones<sup>35</sup>, player expectations, and lack of understanding design. Of particular interest he also discusses player type imbalance and lack of immersion. In regard to player imbalance, he looks at how revenue models and end-game (he refers to as “elder game”) affect the retention rate of certain types of players, and how catering to one group excludes the other, and as they are interdependent, both will end up abandoning the virtual world.

He identifies the player types as Achievers, Explorers, Socializers, and Killers (Bartle 1996), and illustrates how each compliments the other and plays off one another, even if they are seemingly counter intuitive. As we have seen with our exploration with *ArcheAge*, we have the areas for these players carved out within its expansive world. Each one’s actions not only allows the existence of the others, but encourages it. Those socializers tending their farms need the achievers buying their goods so they can continue to grow more crops. The achievers need the explorers to show them new or hidden routes to accomplish difficult tasks. The explorers need killers to keep a certain level of thrill and anxiety to their journeys. And the killers need everyone, as without other types, they have no targets.

In *ArcheAge*, socializers can thrive in their own homes, inviting their friends to their very own living room. Achievers can do the same thing, hanging their trophies on the wall and sharing combat stories. The explorers can sail the open seas and dive for sunken treasure, and the unique pirate system allows Killers to indulge in their wicked ways by not only providing

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<sup>35</sup> **Clones:** Many MMOs are so similar to one another, they are often referred to as clones. “WoW Clone” is often used, as so many developers have copied the aspects of World of Warcraft in hopes of duplicating its success.

them with targets they can kill regardless of what faction they are on, but also providing incentive in doing so as their target can be carrying trade goods. What point would there be in being a pirate if you couldn't collect booty? Something sorely lacking from many virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft* that only offer you "because we said they're your enemy" as incentive.

The other aspect is the idea of elder-game, that the portion of the game dedicated to those players who have achieved the highest level must now pursue certain tasks to continue to progress. Bartle (2013) shares how this constant introduction of new end-game content that requires players to grind through is actually detrimental to the design of virtual worlds. Stating that players need to feel a sense of completion, he believes it is important that players can actually reach the end of the game and feel a sense of victory. This will encourage them to stick around and enjoy their exploits, as opposed to burn the player out as play becomes too akin to work (Nardi 2010; Bainbridge 2010; Yee 2014).

It's on this point that I must admit there is a flaw within *ArcheAge*. It has been deemed a hybrid themepark/sandbox virtual world. That is because in a patch that was introduced later after release, it incorporated elder-game aspects, and revamped the system so players had to partake in daily quests and could only obtain certain items by doing certain tasks, whereas before they were openly approachable from a variety of different avenues open to all player types. Now, only achievers could enjoy the content, and socializers had to leave their farms and explorers leave their caves, put on their work hats and reluctantly battle through content designed to cater to one type of player. That, or quit of course. Lots chose the later, and will be

addressed in the next section. Despite its flaw, many players overlook it stating “it’s the most sandbox environment currently out, so I’m happy with it”.

To address Sasha Newell’s book *The Modernity Bluff* (2012) a bit more we’ll explore the process that the *nouchi* utilize for their bluff. The *nouchi* would earn money from their semi-legitimate jobs that they would refer to as “business”, and then transfer this wealth into obtaining name brand designer clothing and spending-cash. They would then put on a display during a single night of endeavors focused around celebrating and demonstrating ones “success”. We can actually use this in several different comparisons for how those that utilize sand box virtual worlds are able to demonstrate their success. Firstly, the *nouchi*’s transfer of this wealth and act of outfitting themselves and behaving in a different manner can be seen as being an avatar for oneself, and the locations and activities representing a virtual world. This is because the entire night is focused on representing something they are not (which in this case is wealthy), and upon the night ending they return to their former lifestyles. It is also important to note that the finances are “transferred” because not only do they consume all their available spending cash, but the clothing/outfits they acquire for this night are not to be reused if they are to truly demonstrate “success” in an “authentic” manner, just like how when someone buys a MMOG account their acquisitions remain a part of that virtual world that they cannot readily extract when they log off. Just as the *nouchi* are demonstrating their “success” and attaining a certain level of status, so too are players in MMOGs who invest their currency into purchasing an avatar already wearing “designer” gear so they can be perceived to have that status and rank within that community.

*ArcheAge* allows this to be taken further, with the availability of land, housing, and an in-game cash shop that sells large amounts of gear and perks to enhance the appearance of your avatar and your home. From our interactions within the virtual world, we can see that players did in fact hold it in high importance to be able to display their success within the virtual world, and the evidence of class/status battles between land-owners and non-land owners also speak to the importance of being able to participate in this arena of self-expression and one's value derived from their perceived success, much like the *nouchi*. Interestingly enough, the demand for this allows the exact opposite form of demonstration of success. This correlates quite well with what we discussed in the introduction in regard to modernity, its imitation, and the cycle the myth perpetuates.

Because people are so adamant about being able to express oneself in an environment in which the major resource, land, is finite, it creates a market. Players anxious to get their hands on it could visit websites where users were selling land plots, or entire accounts with several land plots for hundreds of dollars. This creates an environment where people can actually capitalize on their perceived success, and bring it to fruition in the real world. This however isn't particularly unique to a sand-box virtual world, as we have seen these occurrences in other virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft*, where a player sold his account for \$10,000 as it had rare equipment (Wachowski 2007). The difference however is, for that players to be recognized for his success, he has to be standing in that world, present. When he logs off, he no longer exists really until the next time he logs in. Within *ArcheAge*, regardless where the player is, their land, their house, their farms, their castle remain, a testament to their success. And as Nicklisch and Salz (2008) demonstrated with their experiment in reciprocity,

status and wealth do indeed affect player's interactions with one another in virtual worlds.

Which makes our one respondent's reasoning for not displaying his success very practical. While he selected "no" to finding it important to display his success, he cited the reason being:

"My style in all games has always been to just keep my wealth hidden. This was strengthened during the time I played Runescape. Those who revealed themselves to be high leveled or to carry riches in the old days in RS were often harassed by beggars. It was hard to find honest people who were just looking for other players. So I carried that pattern of play with me. I discovered that concealing your wealth within all games makes you less of a target and allows you to do business, engage socially, and generally live a less bothered lifestyle."

With the increase in popularity of conventions such as comic-con, PAX (Penny Arcade Expo), and game publisher specific conventions (such as BlizzCon), players of virtual worlds are finding themselves with more venues in which their virtual prowess can actually earn them accolades and respect in the physical world. However, this leads us into a discussion on what exactly is a virtual world per say. With the *nouchi*, we can call their yearly demonstration as wealth a virtual world as it does not represent their actual life style. We can see a correlation with this and users attending such events, especially when these events often involve cosplay<sup>36</sup>.

## Aftermath

My participant observation ended in December of 2014. I found myself unable to keep up with the guilds demands while also taking care of my avatar, and just as important, having

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<sup>36</sup> **Cosplay:** Dressing up as a character from a video game or cartoon.

fun. I've alluded to two issues that were present in *ArcheAge*. First was that the western publisher for the game, Trion, had greatly mishandled the launch of the game and made questionable decisions in the subsequent months. The other was the fact that *ArcheAge* could be/was identified as a hybrid virtual world, composed of both sand-box and theme-park environment elements. This was because of that abhorred end/elder-game content introduced, forcing players to abandon their sand-box play and grind through that end content if they wanted to be as powerful as their peers.

Upon checking in only a couple months later, I found Mischivous disbanded. The co-leader Rose was now leading a guild by a different name, and the rest of Mischivous had gone into hibernation, awaiting the next big title to come along that would actually deliver on the promises *ArcheAge* had failed. While there are many titles in the works, *Black Desert* has been in the sights of many.

Traversing the world and browsing the forums, players yell of a dead game, complain of few players, and servers that feel empty. Land is no longer a commodity for the few, as there aren't enough players playing to own all of it. I can't help but wonder what would have happened if the games developers or publishers had simply read Bartles 2013 paper, if they could have avoided such a quick and decisive fate. One of the first things Bartle cites is the revenue model. MMOs used to strictly adhere to a subscription method. Players paid a monthly fee (commonly \$15) a month to be able to access the virtual world (a method *World of Warcraft* still uses).

I equated this approach akin to a concept in David Graeber's book *Debt: The First 5,000 years* (2011). He identifies what is called the flesh-debt. An example of this would be a child having an inherent debt to their parents, as they have been given life and the only thing that can repay life is life. Graeber points out examples with the Tiv, whose marriage ceremonies require an equal exchange between the families, a female for a female. When the male has no females (a sister actually) to provide in exchange, he instead continually provides currency in exchange. This however does not mean that the male owns the female, it merely serves to demonstrate the acknowledgment of the existing debt. I like to equate this to the argument behind MMOGs and ownership of virtual goods, as the argument often revolves around players perceiving that because they buy the game and pay a monthly subscription fee that they own whatever it is they do with their account. The example of the Tiv given by Graeber however helps to illustrate how the exchange of currency does not equate to ownership, and is merely an acknowledgment of debt to the game developers. In essence, the players are continually making monetary contributions to the game developers who have provided the player with a "virtual" life.

Unlike *World of Warcraft* however, *ArcheAge* opted for a "free-to-play" model. This meant any could play the game without having the first purchase it or pay a monthly fee. The large majority of MMOs have adopted this approach, and it has created a very tense environment. People instantly take a negative outlook on such models, as they are deemed "pay-to-win", meaning you can use real life currency to gain an advantage within the game. This is a prevalent trend, and even games that claim no such method is possible within their game, they are often lying, as was the case with *ArcheAge*. The publishers consistently put items in

their cash shop that provided unique advantages within the game world, creating a gap between those with more real-life currency versus those with little. In these free-to-play models, there is often a subscription method still offered with unique bonuses, such as increased exp and gold accumulation, and in the case of *ArcheAge*, land ownership. You had to be a “patron” to own land in *ArcheAge*, which meant either being a subscriber, or purchasing Apex from players (who themselves purchased it from the publisher for cash) to obtain patron status.

The advantages of subscription based models and free-to-play are still hotly debated as to which is superior and which attracts the better group of players. There are a few games that have mastered specific models, as *World of Warcraft* survives on subscription where so many have failed (*Age of Conan*, *Star Trek Online*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, *Everquest II*, *The Elder Scrolls Online*, *TERA*), and *Guild Wars 2* with its “buy-to-play” model (which is you buy the game once, and are able to play it without ever paying a monthly fee). Each game mentioned as “failing” to survive using the subscription model currently lives on with a free-to-play model, with the exception of *The Elder Scrolls Online*, which will be adapting a buy-to-play model. Despite all this though, I am able to speak to the issues this presented in *ArcheAge*.

Myself, like many were intrigued by the prospect of being able to utilize our mercantile skills to acquire patron status and play the game with this subscription status without having to pay a dime. This was even advertised as one of the sand-box elements, and touted as a feature in the games marketing. At first, it worked wonderfully. Not only did I quickly accrue enough gold to purchase Apex for my account, I made enough to have a second account actively subscribed to generate more labor points and acquire more land. The problem I, and many

other players, ran into however was the cost kept going up. Apex became more and more expensive where it got to the point I couldn't make enough gold to cover the costs without it feeling like work. It became a daily obligation to log on, tend to all my farms multiple times a day, and also trying to acquire gear for the guilds gear requirements. At this point, I had to bow out. Now, I and the other players distraught by this of course had the option to fork over \$15 a month and not have to worry about it, but the idea of paying for a "free" game did not sit well. Especially after this advertised "feature" had betrayed us.

### Revolution or Revival?

As previously mentioned, this "new" trend isn't exactly a new trend. Developers like Gordon Walton have identified what can be seen as a "return to roots" movement, as his new MMO virtual world *Crowfall* is entering its first round of crowdfunding. This is because a lot of features I have discussed as present in these new and upcoming virtual worlds, are actually features that were presented in many of the original MMOs like *Everquest*, *Ultima Online*, and *Star Wars Galaxies*.

Beollstorff (2008) and Bainbridge (2010) reference these worlds, and Dibbel (2006) actually utilizes a few of them in his participant observation giving us a written account of what the interactions were like. *Star Wars Galaxies* is often sighted as a prime example of a player driven economy among players, and remembered fondly as it was shut down in 2011. These worlds also featured open world player housing, open world PvP, and a much more laissez-faire approach to player interactions. Bartle (2013) identifies one of the ways this trend died out was the developers attempting to stop players from griefing each other. The problem that this created however was it broke immersion.

“To protect players from one another, MMOs omit common functionality that objects in the real world exhibit. This makes the virtual world less immersive. For example, doors either don’t exist or, if they do, can’t be opened or closed; this is to stop players from shutting one another in or out of buildings. Objects that are dropped on the ground are instantly destroyed before they land; this is to stop players from dropping thousands of pieces of rubbish to flood the MMO’s database and slow it down. Objects can’t easily be transferred between players; this is to degrade the services offered by gold farmers. If a world doesn’t behave.”

This did wonders in attracting new players who were completely new to the idea of virtual worlds, as the stress and added work of combating not only the game environment but also players can put a real hamper on ones enjoyment. This is still a desired trait as virtual worlds such as *Final Fantasy XIV* still flourish while completely removing PvP or the ability of one player to adversely affect the other (aside from simply being bad at the game and useless in a party or raid). Other players however have matured, and are looking for that added tension or dynamic to their gameplay as revealed in my time with those in *ArcheAge*. Turning to Huizinga’s aspects of play (1970) we see that a key element of play is actually having something at stake. By having your avatar or possessions in real danger, it enhances the experience of play for the user.

This is why we’re not only seeing triple A titles being developed by major publishers, but we’re seeing several crowdsourcing projects being met with huge success that offer these sand-box environments. Brad McQuaid, developer of *Everquest* is not working on *Pantheon: Rise of the Fallen*. Richard Garriot, developer of *Ultima Online* now developing *Shroud of the Avatar*. Both of these projects being led by those seen as fathers of MMOs in gaming culture, able to break free from publishers thanks to

crowdfunding, and develop games the players want rather than what will drive a profit. *Shards Online*, another sand-box virtual world that takes the unique approach of allowing players to host their own servers, or “shards” and create unique and dynamic interactions that way. *Crowfall*, seemingly taking a page directly out of Bartles 2013 paper, utilizing both persistent worlds known as kingdoms, while creating worlds that act as the major point of resource gathering and battles that age and die, thus giving you moments of respite where a victor is decided, the game is over for a period as one invests what they acquire from their results of that victory into their kingdom, and then they away new worlds to be created to start the process over. And of course the megalith that is *Star Citizen*, a space sci-fi virtual world that has raised over \$55,000,000 in crowdsourced funding.

One thing all of these developers have in common is that they worked on this first generation of MMOs. They gave birth to a genre and laid the foundation, and now that players are tired with this generations versions of *World of Warcraft*, they find themselves with a captive audience, ready to relive the “glory days” as one player put it of MMOs.

## Conclusion

Going through the history of participant observations conducted by the likes of Beolstorff, Nardi, Dibbel, Bainbridge, we’re able to see wonderful snapshots of virtual world history. Through the early virtual worlds such as *Everquest*, *Ultima Online*, and *Star Wars Galaxy*, crossing into the new era of which *World of Warcraft* lead the way and defined an era.

With this came a surge of interest in not just users of virtual worlds, but researchers as well.

With so many of the former worlds being shut down due to age or lack of interest in the *World of Warcraft* era, it is a marvelous thing to see this trend of sand-box virtual worlds re-emerging once again. Because they rely so heavily on player interaction rather than scripted directive as theme-park virtual worlds do, we as researchers are presented with a myriad of possible research avenues in a much richer environment brimming with potential. As researchers we know it's important not to interfere with a research site and to let it play out naturally, but if that environment is scripted and controlled by an ultimate authority (the game developers in this case), then we're only seeing a certain perspective. With the keys of the kingdom in the player's hands, we are sure to see much more dynamic interactions as players willfully express their own agency upon the world. It is in such an environment for history and epochs can truly be formed, and give us a much better view into the human psyche as a result.

This paper and my research within *ArcheAge* have made the case for a call to recognize this shift in the MMO virtual environment, and identified what changes it brings about and the importance it lends itself to in terms of the users of these virtual worlds and research. It is time to step away from our interests in *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* and to begin to unearth the wealth of information these new upcoming worlds such as *Everquest Next*, *Shards Online*, *Crowfall*, and *Black Desert* can reveal to us. We are returning to an era where finally the player is the story, instead of following the story and this brings the story to life. Life is organic and ever changing, and we need to be on the frontlines watching it unfold.

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