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Strangers in Strange Lands:  
Virtual Worlds and the Newbie Experience  
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### Abstract

Virtual worlds are a complex and potentially confusing places, especially for the new user. Intricate social structures can spring up within and surrounding them. In order to better facilitate the integration of the new user or 'newbie' into these environments, it is essential that designers and even the other users themselves understand how and why the new user behaves as they do. Towards this end, this study examines three distinct aspects of the virtual world experience as it relates to the game of virtual worlds. These are: rules, culture, and play. The results, although inconclusive in many regards, provide a starting point for future studies, and demonstrate a strong connection between the learning process of new users and player-created social and information based structures such as guilds and fan sites. The testimonial backing up this claim and its relationship to the long-term sustenance of a virtual world is of import to anyone who might find themselves concerned with growing a virtual world user base.

### Overview

Virtual worlds are expansive and complex places. New citizens of these worlds are bombarded with information and ideas immediately upon their entry. In addition, they must immediately choose their representation in this new world, their actions, and their social relationships. What is the connection between this first collision with the rules and culture of a game and the new user's experience? What types of play emerge and what learning happens as a result of this initial collision?

In short, this paper explores the first user experiences in a virtual world. This work will cover the first interactions with the mechanics and rules, the players' first attempts at using the interface, their playful attempts at exploring the space, and the first contact with the emergent social structures within. To gain further insight on this topic, I interviewed people who had recently begun to take part in new virtual worlds (See Appendix 3 for a list of interview questions).

The findings could potentially hold interest for a number of parties. The results and their implications might be integrated into the design of

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future virtual worlds, especially the mechanics revolving around the introduction of new players. Individual guild managers or other leaders of social spaces surrounding virtual worlds (such as fan sites or spoiler sites) might find this information particularly useful as means of determining what types of services and advice are most beneficial to the new player, as well as the importance of their services as a whole. Alternatively, virtual world researchers who want to understand why certain cultural structures or types of play sustain themselves within virtual worlds might consider it important to understand the origins of behavior in the new user.

## Literature Review

### Virtual worlds and rules

The rules of games focus on what exists without the players. In their book, *Rules of Play*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman define the general characteristics of game rules as: limiting, unambiguous, shared, fixed, binding and repeatable (2004). For a virtual world this includes the geography, any rules of interaction, and any potential non-player characters. It is the formal rules that the new citizen first comes into contact with in a virtual world, and what defines the formal relationships between the elements of a virtual world.

It is also important to consider the implications of in game rule based reward systems. Nick Yee's work on achievement in MMORPGs serves as a practical example of how rules enforce social standing and bolster the effects of actions in virtual worlds. He argues that levels are concrete goals which indicate social prestige and an increase in power, and are therefore appealing and meaningful to the players (2004). New user understanding of the rules is essential in order to add meaning to their actions and to provide a clear structure for organized play.

Although the rules themselves vary among virtual worlds, they often serve the same functions. They distinguish 'good' performers from 'bad', they define wealth, and they define the range of actions. The new user's acclimation to these rules represents the first steps within the formal structure of a virtual world and can determine their level of frustration or feelings of achievement.

### Virtual worlds and play

Play in virtual worlds stems from different sources of expression and user desire. The focus on play in an individual world can range from restrictive to open-ended, depending on the rules and mechanics implemented. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) define play as, "free movement within a more rigid structure" (p. 304). By using this definition, it is possible to point out several different types of play that a new user might experience in a virtual world. Arguably, under this definition, all action within a virtual world could be termed as play. However, for the purposes of this discussion,

'free movement' is anything that doesn't have a formalized reward with the system of the virtual world. For instance, if a fixed reward is given for each dragon killed, then killing dragons is not considered play. However, if no reward is given for killing fluffy bunnies and a player chooses to go on bunny genocide, then that would be a form of play. The question raised by this is if a new player chooses to play in a given virtual world, and if so, under what circumstances?

One instance of this type of play is social gatherings and events outside of normal rule based gaming. Examples include organized group fishing trips, hide and seek, or player weddings (Terdiman, 2006). As new players encounter and understand the confines and actions allowable in a virtual world they will often begin to experiment with these mechanics in an attempt to discover new ways to play within the world. Other forms of experimental play could include self governed games of capture the flag or freeze tag. These games would exist outside of the formal set of goals and rules set forth by the virtual world, but nonetheless have the opportunity to exist given the abilities of the users. This relatively benign form of play is not, however, the only type found within virtual worlds.

The 'darker' side of play is the act of 'griefing'. A term with no formal definition, it is commonly used to describe an action that is within the rules of a game or virtual world, but causes harm or disrupts the experience for another (Griefer). There are essentially two ways in which new player will come into contact with this sort of play. The first way is usually by being a victim themselves, usually due to their unfamiliarity with the mechanics of a given virtual world. A new player can find themselves unknowingly giving away valuable goods or as an easy target in combat. Alternatively a new player may find themselves taking part in this type of behavior, especially if they find more traditional forms of advancement or rewards not to their taste (Yee, 2005). EVE Online is one example of a virtual world with an open-ended nature in which play and culture has begun to exist within the structure provided that promotes actions which would be termed unethical in the 'real world' (Rossignol, 2005).

It is possible that a new player may come into contact with either type of play in a given virtual world (although some are more prone to certain types than others), and possibly even choose to participate in such play. As a result, their place as part of the newbie experience should be evaluated and examined.

### Virtual worlds and culture

Culture and games are tied together by the 'magic circle' and the interaction between the play of a Virtual World and the 'real world' around it. Salen and Zimmerman highlight the meaning attached to character representation, the learned habits of behavior, and the cultural context outside of the magic circle (2004). It is important to consider each of ideas in the space of virtual worlds and how a new user first experiences each.

The first interaction a player makes with the game system and culture is with avatar creation. Choices at character creation include physical features including gender and age and attributes such as strength and stamina. One example of this connection between 'real world' culture and the bleed over into virtual world representation is Nick Yee's data indicating a correlation between age and attribute selection (2003). In another study, Yee (2001) shows the demographics of 'gender benders' in virtual worlds. As a result, one question that this study seeks to answer is if players who are more familiar with the culture of online worlds are more likely to experiment with their identity.

Other cultural interactions begin happening almost immediately after this initial avatar creation. New players have no choice but to begin interacting with their virtual peers. Virtual worlds, especially those focused around avatar progression through combat, typically focus on collaborative success. In addition, social groups such as guilds are organized through in world functionality, but often have out of world presences and structural organization. Nicolas Ducheneaut and Robert Moore (2005) explain how social behavior is learned from the ground up. The growth of social capital, the use of the buddy list and future social interactions in order to encourage types of behavior, and the notable difference between 'newbies' and more experienced players with regards to group cooperation are all examples of ways that a new player begins to understand the accepted norms of cross-user interaction in an unfamiliar virtual world (2005).

### Study Design

The collision between the new player and the rules and culture, along with what types of play they choose to take part in is diverse and yet seemingly interrelated. The goal might exist between these elements and attempt to determine any strong correlations. The study was performed through volunteer participation and involved interviews of 3-12 questions that lasted about an hour in length or through a survey of 10 questions. No interested participant was turned away, and the only restriction was that they had to have recently begun playing a new MMO within the last 3 months (see appendix 1 for the full recruitment message). The interviews were treated conversationally, so if a participant had more to say about any given topic, then they would often trend away from the prescribed questions. The survey was comprised of a strict set of questions which can be found in Appendix 3.

The participants came from a variety of gaming forums, some specific to certain virtual worlds, and others generic (for a full list, please see Appendix 2). The interviews took place either over IM or through forum private messages and they were conducted in this way in order to facilitate a conversational tone. The interviews were allowed to run their natural course, and often questions were asked that were unique to each interview. This seemed to beget more personalized responses and lead to some interesting results.

Although this work only has room for a portion of the responses given by the participants, a full outline and the highlights are given below. There were only slight modifications; in some cases editing has been done to clarify meaning or to remove typographical mistakes.

## Results

A total of nine people were interviewed or surveyed: five males and four females. Their ages ran from 20 to 38, and their gaming experience ranged from complete newbie to life-long addict. Their experiences were drawn from two virtual worlds in particular: Everquest 2 and World of Warcraft. In order to protect their confidentiality, the names of each of the respondents have been replaced by those from the work of William Shakespeare.

The first question asked in each of the interviews and on the survey itself was with regards to using outside resources for assistance if they ran into trouble. A vast majority of the responses indicated that they would rarely use official outside assistance, preferring instead to use information from other players, either directly or through player run fan sites.

"Generally its helpful for the very basics, like how to control your character or do basic functions, but utterly useless for learning some of the finer game play movements (in *Second Life* for example, I learned how to pick up and make copies of free objects, but not how to apply them to myself). I generally either google for answers, or stalk player forums." (**Beatrice**)

"I mostly asked my husband who also plays the game and started about 5 months before I did. If he didn't have the answer I asked guild mates. I only checked online resources if I couldn't find answers from people first." (**Titania**)

"Generally I get information from fan sites." (**Hamlet**)

When asked if and when they used in-game public chat channels to voice their questions, the responses indicated that it was common, but often accompanied by some degree of mocking or teasing (or at least the fear thereof).

"I'm sure I did, I still do. Usually people make a reference to some major boss or quest and I get confused so I ask and then people sort of tease me a little but still explain." (**Viola**)

"Sure, plenty of times. Usually things like "how do I get to such-and-such a place." People always helped me out, though some did occasionally make fun of me." (**Orsino**)

"I usually preface a noobie question with the fact that it is a noobie question. I do that to avoid anyone generally giving me crap about being new to the game."  
**(Hamlet)**

"Nope. I make it a point of pride to never ask newbie quests in public channels. If I'm really confused or lost I'll look up the information online." **(Othello)**

When asked about memorable times that they were unsure of what action to take or goal-less, players again indicated a tendency to turn to other players or player run online resources for direction.

"One of the quests that I did gave me a task to complete, basically take a ritual bath in the water around the docks, and I spent a good five minutes trying to figure out how to do this, since just swimming around in the water didn't net any result. I first asked in /ooc chat if anyone knew how to do the task, no response. Then I tried looking up the quest on two different websites with no result, so I just kept swimming around and by chance, found the quest trigger point by diving down to the bottom of the dock area at a certain point." **(Juliet)**

"Not really. Generally I was pretty good at piecing quest information together and rarely consulted guides. I will look up info on Allakhazam or Thottbot if I need a specific monster, drop or leveling range though."  
**(Othello)**

"Whenever I got lost (hourly, until I got my footing down) I would turn first to friends, then to random players, then I would exit the game (at the time alt-tabbing was not an option in Everquest) and browse the net for answers." **(Prospero)**

The next set of responses dealt with player identity and their entry into the community of the game world. The first step along this path is choosing an avatar. When choosing their representation in game, the majority indicated that visual representation was the primary factor on their mind, and when choosing their class or attributes there was an even split between a representative choice and one that was more powerful.

"In WoW, the first MMO I've played, I was first impressed by the graphics and the different representations of the classes. I actually sort of picked a character that represented me (short, female), but I could already guess my playing style (which includes long-range fighting more so than close group work), and picked a mage class." **(Beatrice)**

"I do have a tendency to play hybrid characters. I spent more time designing the character's look than anything else" (**Prospero**)

"Generally I try to make a character that I would find either attractive or one that displays the qualities of the personality that I am trying to portray." (**Hamlet**)

As the conversation turned to player interactions, the respondents would most frequently comment that their memorable experiences included acts of random kindness, such as:

"When I was a lower level, for no apparent reason someone I never knew or saw before gave me a 'green' weapon. That means it was of good quality. I was surprised, but it also gave me a positive impression of the people in the game." (**Titania**)

"I asked where to find a particular boss I needed to kill. A kindly higher-level showed me the spot and helped me win the fight." (**Orsino**)

"My first day in *EQ*, I spent some time grouping with a pretty nice higher level wizard as my paladin, and he kind of showed me the ropes. And then went link-dead and left me to die at the orc hill." (**Othello**)

Other players, perhaps lacking such a benefactor due to their connection with 'real world' co-inhabitants, had no such interaction of note.

"Well, I didn't play much with others really, especially outside of those I knew. Really, the most positive memorable experience I had with an "outside" player, and therefore outside my safety net, was months into gameplay." (**Beatrice**)

"First other player would have been my friend Tybalt, since I joined AC1 with him and two other RL friends. First player that I didn't know outside the game? Honestly can't remember, although I do recall the first time someone tried to PK me." (**Juliet**)

When it came to the interactions with guilds, many of the responses indicated that they were either the reason for playing that particular virtual world in the first place or a key part of their formation as a member of the world's community.

"I started playing because of a guild." (**Orsino**)

"I joined a guild about a month into the game, and learned a lot of things I was missing (agro control for instance) and how to be a much better player in a group." (**Lucio**)

"In Dark Sun Online, gaming guilds were a relatively new concept. Most guilds were built along racial lines, so alliances had to be struck to combat the player killers back in those days. I remember some interesting meetings in a tavern back in the day, and still remember how cool it felt that it was the "meeting of the minds" so to speak." **(Hamlet)**

"They were RPers and the ones I met first gave me a great impression of their guild. There was much more RPing going on back at the start of the game, so I felt comfortable doing that right off. I guess that maybe one of the first non-friends that I met in game would have been this guy - Romeo. They were 'good guys' in game, and their playstyle - the guild is a family and you are one of the family - helped to shape my MMO gaming."

**(Juliet)**

The last segment of each interview or survey had to deal with the different aspects of play, and in this the responses were highly varied. In addition, although those who described their play did mention it as a meaningful part of their MMO existence, there was little correlation between play and existing in a world as a 'newbie'. In the discussion section that follows I will go into detail about why I believe I found these results and the possible implications. However, those who did describe their MMO play did so as follows:

"In-game weddings happened all the time in the Wall. It was amusing, and no one really took it seriously. we'd go to the dwarven city, get our characters smashed, and go running around on the ice-bridge until someone fell to their death. In WoW, periodically someone hosts a 'naked run' where contestants try to get naked level 1 toons from their home cities to as deep in the home cities of the opposing faction as they can manage."

**(Prospero)**

"One time I started my own "unusual game behavior". I was with my gnome character, probably in Ironforge, and there's a sort of museum in one of the halls with skeletons and the like. I spent an hour or so getting my gnome to clamber on top of all the skeletons, and inside their mouths, to take pictures, and I got a lot of varied, usually amused reactions from people who stopped to watch." **(Beatrice)**

The closest correlation to the newbie experience and play that was reported was mentioned by Othello, who said,

"Sure, I participated in a couple of friends' wedding (they got married both in and out of game on the same day). I've also done a couple of corny games as an excuse to help newbies out and encourage actual thinking

before they start powering up to the levels where I have to group with them." (*Othello*)

## Discussion

The discussion of play in each interview was either detailed or non-existent, indicating that there was no universal trend. In addition, it was rarely tied to the newbie experience itself. Yet there is still a conclusion to be drawn from this, namely that play isn't tied in any distinct way to the newbie experience. If a logical consequence may be drawn from the data, it is that freedom of play isn't necessarily a part of what a new player expects or needs in order to be fulfilled by a virtual world and to continue to participate.

On the other hand, a correlation between culture, rules, and the newbie experience can be easily made based on the information given. Players, and especially new players, clearly turn to social organizations such as forums, guilds, and fan sites in order to find solutions to any problem they might be having. There is also evidence to show that guilds are important for determining how a new player interacts with a virtual world and its inhabitants, as well as what virtual world they choose to inhabit.

There were of course certain hypotheses that that this study was unfortunately unable to come to any definitive conclusion on. For instance, although the respondents showed interest in avatar customization they displayed no particular trend that would indicate a preference given their virtual world experience. And the responses which indicated play, while interesting, showed no connection to the amount of experience a player has in a virtual world or with virtual worlds in general.

## Conclusion

There were many ways in which this study could have been improved. A wider audience could have been selected and from a wider cross-section of communities. The depth of questioning could have been increased, perhaps by choosing to focus on only one aspect of the newbie experience rather than several. However, given these shortcomings, there are still several conclusions which can be drawn with an acceptable degree of certainty.

As mentioned above, the lack of play as a guaranteed part of the newbie experience shows that -- at least for new players -- a sandbox feel is unnecessary. It is beyond the scope of this work to study the impact of play on the virtual world experience as a whole, so it remains to be seen if open play caters to such things as long term retention or any community related phenomenon.

On that note, future studies in this area would benefit from a more comparative analysis between newbies and 'oldbies'. Asking these same questions from the point of view of an experienced player would theoretically yield more definitive answers as to the learning process of a player. Other

ways to gain more from 'newbie studies' would be to conduct more in depth interviews strictly on either rules and rule breaking or culture and guilds. One area of study could even revolve around how new inhabitants are compelled to join a particular world (for instance: through friends or moving as a guild).

However, the primary conclusion that should be taken from this work is the importance of the out of world player community and its relation to the newbie experience. New players are often hesitant to use in-game channels to ask their questions, despite the availability of potential answers. Even if they do use these channels, it is possible that they fail to find the answer they are looking for. In these cases they turn not to official sources for answers, but rather to player-driven repositories of information such as online communities or databases. This means that for a virtual world to thrive and cater to its new player population, it is important that there exists these social resources and that they are readily available, active, and up to date. This focus on fan sites and player run resources would seem to indicate that the propagation of player culture takes place within virtual social spaces that aren't necessarily the worlds themselves. In order to manage or understand the culture and growth of a player population it is essential to take these virtual spaces into account. And while this type of space for popular virtual worlds may always exist, virtual worlds with smaller populations should take note and particular attention should be paid to the cultivation of player driven communities and data repositories. These sites could be created and maintained by the initiative of the development team itself or a player base concerned with increasing the long-term membership and vitality of their world.

## Appendix 1. Sample recruitment message

My name is Andrew Krausnick and I am an undergraduate student enrolled in a course on virtual worlds at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Our class has been playing Everquest II for the past four months, with characters ranging in level from 10 to 27. Our primary characters are members of the guild The Vindicators on the Antonia Bayle server.

As part of an ongoing research project, I would like to speak with people over the age of 18 about their thoughts on the newbie experience. As long as you have recently begun playing a MMO (I'm looking for the 3 months or under range) I'm interested in talking to you.

We can conduct the interviews in whatever manner is convenient for you. I have a WoW and EQ2 account, and can register a free account for any game that offers it. We could also use an instant messaging service, a private forum, or just go through e-mail.

If this sounds like something you'd be willing to participate in, e-mail me at [akrausni@trinity.edu](mailto:akrausni@trinity.edu) and we'll figure out a place and time. Your name will be kept completely confidential, and upon completion the research findings will be freely distributed online (the projects from last year are hosted at: <http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/mmo/students.html>, if you want to check them out).

If you have any other questions, there is a FAQ located on the class website at <http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/worlds/faq.html>, also feel free to use my e-mail, or post here. I'll be checking back in on this thread on and off as long as it stays active (and even if you don't really want to contribute to the project, if you have any other questions, such as about the class itself or the academic worth of virtual worlds, I'd be more than willing to tackle any of those questions as well).

## Appendix 2. Forums

- The World of Warcraft General Forum is the most active of the official WoW forums and can be found at -  
<http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/board.aspx?forumName=wow-general>
- The EQ2 Non-Gameplay forum isn't quite the most active official EQ2 forum, but was the appropriate one for the recruitment message, it can be found at -  
<http://eqiiforums.station.sony.com/eq2/board?board.id=Non-Gameplay>
- The MMO Round Table is a collection of EQ2 weblogs, and their forums have a cross-section of gamers interested in virtual world goings on - <http://www.mmoroundtable.com/forums/>
- Grimwell Online is a long time MMO rant site with attached forums -  
<http://www.grimwell.com/phpbb/>
- The MMORPG.com forums are populated by a varied group of MMO gamers, it was here that I sought to expand the variety of virtual world users in my sample pool -  
<http://mmorpg.com/discussion2.cfm?forum=51&fp=1152,864,1146691125257,20060503171845>
- Forumopolis is a former web comic affiliated site, and now hosts a collection of gamers and nerds, it sports a large population, some of whom recently began their first steps into virtual worlds –  
<http://www.forumopolis.com/>

### Appendix 3. Interview questions

The following questions were used as a baseline when interviewing, and as the questions included in the automated online survey.

- Have you played more than one MMORPG? If so, which ones?
- What is your current or most recently played MMO?
- If you read the manual or on-line help, what did you think about its usefulness? If you didn't use these resources, where did you go for help?
- What were your impressions of the character creation process? What influenced the choices you made during this process?
- Were there any memorable times when you were unsure what action to take next or what goal to follow? If so, what action did you take?
- Describe your first memorable contact with another player.
- Describe your first memorable contact with a guild.
- Did you ever ask a question in a public game chat channel that signified that you were new to the game? What was the question, and what kind of response did you get?
- Have you ever come into contact with any activity that was outside the usual in game behavior? Examples could include such activities as an in game wedding, group fishing trips, or games of hide-and-seek. What was your impression about this activity?
- Were you ever grieved or did you ever participate in griefing behavior (this could include player killing, scams, or the like)? If so, what were your impressions of this activity?

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