

PARTICIPANT INTERACTION AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE-CENTERED DESIGN
IN MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES: A
QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FURCADIA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this ethnography is to understand participant interaction in a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPGs). As participation and action of users are the glue of any community, it is imperative to examine how and why people congregate in graphical virtual environments. This relatively new phenomenon is studied within both existing and emerging schools of social thought. In this paper, the question is asked: how do participants interact within the context of an MMORPG, and are they encouraged to do so? This question is answered through an ethnographic study of one such MMORPG entitled Furcadia. This study applies both Human-Centered Design (to answer the how), and Social Exchange Theory (to answer the why). It is asserted that MMORPGs can be explained through a marrying of theories into a new one entitled Social Exchange-Centered Design.

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Section 1: Opening Vignette

Salvatore took a sip of his lukewarm diet cola as he leaned back in his chair and switched his gaze away from the computer monitor. He'd spent an hour and a half chatting on Yahoo!, and like most nights this past month, it had left him unfulfilled. It was not always like this, but recently he'd begun to grow bored of the text-based chat clients he frequented. While he had been conversing with his usual friends this evening, he simply was not feeling engrossed with it.

Sal was 24-years-old and lived alone in a small apartment. He did not have many real life friends other than the co-workers at his office. They had different interests than him, such as watching sports, drinking beer, and discussing their favorite reality television shows. As a result, he often turned down their invitations to socialize outside of work.

Yet in the privacy of his home, Sal had made numerous acquaintances through IRC, AOL, and Yahoo! chat rooms over the years. A few had become close friends, while some he only communicated with occasionally. While he enjoyed his experiences on these platforms, sometimes they felt impersonal and stale through the cold unwavering text on his monitor. As his eyes went back to the words scrolling slowly across the screen, he considered switching to a video game.

Sal considered one that his online buddies had occasionally referred to. It was called "Furcadia", but Sal always rejected it due to its bizarre premise: a fantasy world where users assumed the role of an anthropomorphic animal (known as a furre). Another point that he found odd was that there was no established objective. People played only for the purpose of interacting with others. Sal could never understand why someone

would use a game for that when chat rooms and instant messaging clients already comprised forums for online communication. Yet, mulling it over now, he considered that for a night, it might prove an interesting change of pace.

In less than a few minutes, he was able to download Furcadia off of the web for free. As Sal began the installation process, he went in the kitchen to get another beverage. By the time he had returned, it was ready to play.

Upon launching the program, Sal was faced with designing, naming, and creating a description for his character. Although given several options for the type of animal he would assume, Sal chose feline as a representation of his quiet intelligence. He also decided to choose bright, clashing colors for his fur and apparel, indicative of his eccentric interests. As for a name, he decided upon “SleekWatcher” to reflect the exploratory nature of this venture. After all, this would decide whether or not he would continue to participate. In the space for describing himself, Sal wrote: “a kind, shy, but interesting 20-something-year old who is looking to make new friends”. The game greeted him with a high-pitched voice that purred, “welcome”.

The game opened to a tutorial. The text on the screen indicated that he could use this to learn how to play, or he had the option of getting assistance from another participant. Having had enough experience with video games, Sal brushed off the need for a tutorial, and pressed a funny looking icon in the game’s command box.

Cobblestone roads led away from a green baby dragon statue in various directions. He began to wander in a southwesterly direction. As he walked virtually, exotic trees dotted the landscape off of the road, as did tall grasses adorned by various

flowers. Lamp posts stuck out here and there, and groupings of blue, black, yellow, purple, and other colored cushions decorated the perimeter.

As he walked, the feline passed by fellow fures of various races and gender. Rabbits, squirrels, canines, horses, and even dragons were just some of the characters he saw. A canine character stated, “oh hey, I know, I’ll poke someone and not respond for 20 minutes”, while another voice elsewhere commented, “don’t hate me cause you ain’t me”. SleekWatcher continued to walk onward.

The feline wanderer passed many brick buildings including a coffee house, a tech support center, and a library. He passed by a river decorated with giant purple flowers spinning in place. During this time, he saw multiple fures of all varieties, some sitting on cushions, some standing, some lying down, some alone, and some in groups with others. Sporadically as he walked, he passed through conversations, but did not engage in any.

Finally he came upon The Welcome Mat, a cleared off spot on the grass with panels made up of various shades of green and blue, some bearing odd circular patterns that interlace. Numerous fures sat or lay in and around this space, engaged in conversation.

Upon saying “hi”, SleekWatcher was ignored. There was already a group conversation, or many going on, though it was hard to be certain. Murky Slices, an obviously male feline with yellow fur, dark blue stripes, and hair the color of leaves said, “my tongue is totally bleeding!”

Ranvedz, a rodent with fur that resembled the design of a koala bear with a black mullet stated that she was going to leave. A laugh came from FogLadenTones, an all

gray, male feline. Another voice belonging to Ana Ng 64, who is not in direct sight, responded, “ate too much sugar?” The conversation continued:

FogLandenTones: i did, i kept dropping it on my leg...
FogLandenTones: not a good thing..
FogLandenTones: hehe
Ana Ng 64 looks away
FogLandenTones: stupid razors...
Murky Slices: if you guys could just stop being so mean, that'd be great. ^^
FogLandenTones: theres no blood
FogLandenTones: this time
FogLandenTones: :-)
Murky Slices: brought*
Ana Ng 64: another uncle died while he was razing himself,, you would understand how of course
FogLandenTones: i ran out of strips to test my blood sugar.... :-(

Sal sat and observed as the antics continued. As a newcomer into this group, he was not entirely sure what was happening. It was not unlike the text-based chats he was familiar with, but making sense out of them did not come immediately. This was a more complex environment, and it appeared strongly conducive to fostering social discourse. It was clear that these individuals were spending their time here for a reason. But how Furcadia encouraged social gatherings and discourse, and why they chose this forum was not immediately evident.

This thesis will explore participant interaction in MMORPGs such as Furcadia. Through the application of both design and social theories, an understanding of elements that entice individuals to act in virtual environments will be revealed. The observations that Sal noted above are indicative of the behaviors that will be explored in this paper.

Section 2: Introduction

Literature Review

In examining participant interaction in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), it was first necessary to identify literature on virtual communities, research methods, and theories that would help place the study in perspective. The minimal availability of any materials about MMORPGs indicated that this study would tread upon ground not widely explored.

Literature Review: Virtual Communities

Because participants in MMORPGs interact simultaneously in a defined environment, it is important to consider literature about other virtual groups featuring online participation. The following works were reviewed because their content establishes a background of relevance for this study. They also provide fodder to shaping and contextualizing the data into robust assertions.

It is important to understand some of the key elements of traditional culture before calling attention to how virtual communities compare. *How Culture Works* by Paul Bohannan defines the various facets of culture and provides a detailed understanding of them. Bohannan's definition of culture "is a combination of the tools and meanings that expand behavior, extend learning, and channel choice", noting also that it is learned, and that "an act can have different meanings in different contexts" (1995; 9). Social structures are identifiable in three distinct ways: the network, the group, and the category. Networks are made up of linked individual relationships, groups are made up of relationships that incorporate multiple individuals, and categories are classifications based on the characteristics of people or groups (Bohannan 1995). Highlighting the basic

structures of traditional culture allows one to gain a point of reference when studying the social formations generated by MMORPGs.

The book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* by Howard Rheingold (1993), was published a few years before the Internet was opened up to the public. This book provides insight into a time when online personal communication was not yet in the mainstream. In his text, Rheingold documents historical accounts of the Internet's birth, discusses some of the visionaries who made it possible, provides descriptions of varying types of virtual communities, and talks about participants (including himself) and their experiences in such environments. He devotes an entire chapter to Multi-User Dungeons (MUDS) and Online Identity. He explains that MUDS were word-based imaginary worlds that existed in computer databases where people engaged in activities ranging from competitive games, to puzzle solving, to sexual entanglement. It is Rheingold's examination of MUDs and of users within the MUDs that proved to be most relevant to this study.

Also dealing with the subject of MUDs is Lori Kendall's book *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online* (2002). This is a well-developed ethnography of one particular MUD that the author codenames "Blue Sky." While there is an emphasis on how gender roles play out virtually, her study centers on participants and how they interact. Kendall became an active participant in the MUD she was studying, noting the interweaving of life online and off. She also acknowledges the ambiguities of online identity, stating that people "cannot be sure that the identity characteristics presented online match the participant's offline identity" (Kendall 2002; 112). Such assertions about Blue Sky are relevant because many attributes of MUDs

have diffused into MMORPGs. As it will be explained below, MMORPGs have essentially evolved from MUDs.

Sherry Turkle's book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995), considers not just online identity but also the reciprocal effects of participating in social interactions both in real life and in virtual arenas. This serves as a reminder that when studying the people in a virtual environment, the researcher has to consider both the real self and the computerized incarnation of self. Turkle stresses this point when she says that her book tells "of the eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual, the animate and the inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self" (Turkle 1995; 10).

Literature Review: Research Method

Ethnography was chosen for this paper as the most effective research method because of its effectiveness in analyzing cultural elements that exist in a MMORPG. It is important to note that while we may ascribe "real-life" characteristics to virtual communities, and that those under study may use methods created for traditional cultures, these social groups are not traditional. Thus, while one can apply an ethnographical approach to studying MMORPGs, one also has to be mindful of the differences between the traditional and the virtual. Just as virtual cultures have been derived from traditional ones, virtual methods are adopted or adapted from traditional ones based on the field in question. The following works were reviewed to highlight aspects from various ethnographic approaches that frame the ethos and logos of this study.

The roots connecting this paper to customary qualitative methodology are found in *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions* by John Creswell (1998). This text describes the practices and processes of distinct research

methods. In defining ethnography, Creswell writes that it “is a description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system.” (1998; 58). Participant-observation, he explains, is a key approach in which the researcher becomes an active participant in the group being studied. While this best exemplifies Creswell’s take on the method, some of the procedures he outlines for conducting an ethnography will be referenced later in this paper.

Virtual Ethnography by Christine Hine (2000) moves from traditional ethnographic methods to those suited for online realms. Much of her book analyzes how the Internet, as a relatively new medium, can be studied, or can be a place of study using classical approaches. In particular, she proclaims that a researcher has two options at how to interpret virtual ethnography. She explains that “the first view of the Internet is that it represents a place, cyberspace, where culture is formed and reformed,” while the second view “sees the Internet as a product of culture” (Hine 2000; 9). In other words, a researcher can study online groups as if they are separate cultures, or a researcher can examine such groups as artifacts of existing cultures. This study uses the former approach. The reason for this will be developed as the paper progresses.

Miriam Catterall and Pauline Maclaran in “Researching Consumers in virtual worlds: A cyberspace odyssey” (2002), address concerns about studying online groups. The focus of their work is research that is “turning increasingly to ethnographic research methods to more fully understand how consumers behave in their everyday life” (Catterall and Maclaran 2002; 235). Their findings, much like that of Hine, infer the same concerns of the traditional ethnographer and that of the virtual ethnographer. Their considerations bolster the framework for the methodology used on this study.

Furthering the ethnographic approach for MMORPG study is “Involving The Virtual Subject” by Maria Bakardjieva and Andrew Feenberg (2001). The authors maintain that there is no set of guidelines for conducting research of online communities. Also, privacy has become a major issue that is worth looking at. Bakardjieva and Feenberg consider that participants may be alienated and objectified, if their “words” are taken for the sake of research without their knowledge. They conclude that not alienating subjects is paramount, and that the subjects need to be involved to the extent that they are aware of what is going on.

“The Anthropology of Online Communities” by Samuel Wilson and Leighton Peterson (2002) makes a case for anthropology as a science involving a rich methodology appropriate for studying online communities. Wilson and Peterson explain that anthropology’s consideration of online communities is somewhat new, and that anthropology has paid little attention to alternative media forms in the past. The authors maintain that this particular medium plays a unique role in culture, but that scholars in CMC typically have employed non-anthropological methods. Though debates exist as to whether they are real or imagined, online communities, as a social force, should be studied as a social force. Wilson and Leighton’s assertions reinforce the methodical foundations used in this paper.

Literature Review: Theories

In attempting to understand participant-observation in MMORPG, contextualizing observations and interviews within existing theory is advantageous because it provides reference points to help make sense of that data. Based on the themes that began to

emerge from data collection, two theories were chosen to help explain Furcadia: Human-Centered Design and Social Exchange Theory.

In *Information Design*, Mike Cooley contributes an article entitled “Human-Centered Design” (1999). He explains that this theory is one that strays from the predictability of the scientific method “because the scientific methodology excludes intuition, subjective judgment, and tacit knowledge” (Cooley 1999; 64). Systems designed from a human-centered perspective support the ingenuity and talent of the user, as opposed to letting the system handle decisions. The human uses the system as a tool that enhances his/her abilities, rather than as a singular approach at completing a specific task. This theory is already a key element of MMORPGs, as humans are the forces that animate the culture of these games. The traits that Cooley ascribes to Human-Centered Design will be described in Sections 4 and 5 as it applies to MMORPGs.

Susan Gasson argues in her article “Human-Centered vs. User-Centered Approaches to Information System Design” (2003) that Human-Centered Design is structured around the self-interest of the user. Meanwhile, user-centered systems have a “goal-directed focus on the closure of predetermined, technical problems” (Gasson 2003; 41). The author looks at designs in modern information systems. While her observations on the subject are primarily business-oriented, she acknowledges the socio-technical aspects of Human-Centered Design, stating that it strives for balance between the systemic rule-bound dictation of technical systems, and the social actions inherent in human activity. This balance is key to understanding the potential for social-exchange that is characteristic of MMORPGs.

“Beyond Human-Centered Design?” by Nico Macdonald (2005) concludes that human-centered methods have not been sufficiently used to impact the business world. Macdonald notes “understanding users more completely permits design creativity to be focused where it will have the greatest impact, leading to more innovation” (2005; 76). He advocates ethnographic techniques and context scenarios as methods to generate effective design. MMORPGs encourage creative behaviors that distinguish them from typical communities. It is Macdonald’s emphasis on creative and innovative design that resonates within the theoretical framework of this paper.

Social-Exchange Theory is touched upon in *Sociological Theory: An Introduction to Concepts, Issues, and Research* by Mark Abrahamson (1981). Although the author only devotes a chapter on the subject, social-exchange may be integral to understanding why people act the way they do whether it be online or offline. Abrahamson maintains that this theory is about “the notion that people’s behavior is influenced by the amount and kinds of rewards they anticipate” (1981; 171). In other words, the ways that people interact is based on reinforcements such activities provide. These rewards are learned through experience and thus impact behavior. The author contends the strength of relationships corresponds to the rewards that are offered to the participants.

Furthering the application of social-exchange to culture is “Bringing Emotions into Social Exchange Theory” by Edward Lawler and Shane Thye (1999). Their paper acknowledges that the integration of emotion into the theory works to improve and expand upon it. Based on their literature review, the authors assert the inseparability of reinforcement from emotion. Lawler and Thye claim that the context of a situation will impact the exchange behavior that someone displays. It is therefore rational that the

virtual exchanges in MMORPGs are analyzed in the context of emotional circumstances, rewards, and outcomes.

Sally Planalp continues with this theme in “The Unacknowledged Role of Emotions in Theories of Close Relationships: How Close Do Theories Feel?” (2003). This work explores the emotional aspect of human interaction. Planalp argues that Social Exchange Theory has long been tied to monetary issues. Instead, she proposes looking at feelings as a type of currency. She also stresses that “rewards are in the eye of the beholder, and so are emotions” (Panalp 2003; 83). Social exchanges that produce discrepancies for participants are unpleasant, so people often tend to coordinate relationships that are emotionally balanced.

“A Social Exchange Architecture for Distributed Web Communities” by Amrit Tiwana and Ashley Busy (2001) looks at how web-based, knowledge-sharing virtual-communities promote social exchange in workers. Although their focus is primarily on how real-time feedback effects knowledge contribution among members of web organizations, the authors make observations that are applicable to this paper. In the groups that they studied, the authors note, “when organizations virtualize, they lose the binding glue of shared cultural norms, routines, and common frames of reference” (Tiwana & Busy 2001; 242). They argue that in such communities, the enabling technology must still allow participants to perceive costs and benefits of participation. As MMORPGs are virtual communities, there are parallels to this paradigm that Tiwana and Busy establish. This lends one to suspect that there must be personal rewards of significance to participants.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

Problem Statement

The purpose of this ethnography is to understand the ways in which participants interact in a MMORPG. As these specific virtual communities are relatively new, there is little scholarly literature available in academia and established periodicals. Thus, alternate sources such as Wikipedia, a user-created web-based encyclopedia, were used as background on the subject. Wikipedia defines MMORPGs as “online computer role-playing game(s) in which a large number of players interact with one another in a virtual world. As in all RPGs, players assume the role of a fictional character (traditionally in a fantasy setting) and take control over most of that character’s actions” (Wikipedia “MMORPG” 2006). The fictional character that players control is called an “avatar”, defined as “an electronic image that represents and is manipulated by a computer user” (Merriam-Webster Online 2006).

This study is concerned with the need to understand how people interact in the virtual world of a MMORPG. As participation and user interaction is the glue of any community, it is imperative to examine how participants engage each other within the context of a virtual environment. As MMORPGs provide a disembodied visual interface in which to act, it creates a non-traditional platform of social interaction. As this is a relatively new unstudied phenomenon that involves extensive interpersonal exchanges, it begs to be studied within the context of both existing and emerging schools of social thought.

Primary Research Question

- How do participants interact within the context of a MMORPG, and why are they encouraged to do so?

Research Subquestions

- What, if any, limitations of action and interaction exist within MMORPGs?
- To what degree does the virtual community allow for freedom in self-presentation?
- Does the environment of a MMORPG entice participants to interact?
- Do participants find personalized value in their experiences within the game?

Ethnographic Methodology

John Creswell writes that in conducting ethnography, a researcher “studies the meanings of behavior, language, and interactions of the culture-sharing group” (1998; 58). The researcher creates a cultural portrait of a group through description, analysis, and interpretation of that group. These three components of an accurate societal portrait are interrelated phases of the research process that will be addressed here and in the following two subsections.

Before data-collection began for this ethnography, consideration had to be given to the methodology. I chose participant-observation and interviewing as my primary tools for collecting this data and will explain why shortly. First however, I had to establish guidelines as to what ethical concerns may arise, and what, if any, obstacles I might encounter.

The ethos of studying a virtual, computer-mediated community is commented on by Wilson and Peterson. They assert that despite an ongoing debate as to their “realness, such an argument is counter-productive because:

Our view, and one that seems most consonant with current anthropological theory and practice, is that the distinction of real and imagined or virtual community is not a useful one, and that an anthropological approach is well suited to investigate the continuum of communities, identities, and networks that exist - from the most cohesive to the most diffuse - regardless of the ways in which community members interact (Wilson & Peterson 2002; 456).

Hine concurs with this way of thinking as she advocates being able to study such communities both as actual and as artifacts of actual communities (2000). While this strengthens the ethical feasibility of researching MMORPGs, it raises the concern of whether to examine them as societies or as products thereof.

According to Catterall and Maclaran, in online ethnography “the researcher has to be willing to accept the virtual community for what it is, rather than try to fit traditional research methods” (2002; 232). In accepting MMORPGs as they are, this study considers Furcadia as if it was an actual community, not an artifact. However, given that the corporeal characteristics of interaction are disembodied and manipulated by the software they occur through, those traditional ethnographic designs that Creswell outlines necessarily have to be adapted.

Interviewing and observing are the most popular types of data collection in ethnography, according to Creswell (1998). As a study of Furcadia would be hollow without involving the members of the community, much of the data collection was done online. This would mean that the authenticity of those encountered might be questioned.

Christine Hine explains:

The new technologies of CMC [computer-mediated communication] are often said to introduce fundamental problems for judgment of what is and is not authentic. Visual anonymity allows for people deliberately to play with their identities and adopt different personae. There is no guarantee that the identity performances seen in cyberspace will mirror those performed in offline settings (Hine 2000; 118).

Despite this inherent concern of distance data collection, Catterall and Maclaran recommend that researchers simply accept the personas that subjects present (2002).

Hines addresses these concerns by asserting that subjects should act as sources that enhance the authenticity of data collected (2000). Considering these two differing views, it seemed best to take a hybridized approach.

Creswell recommends using “triangulation” as a means to verify data. In practice, researchers use different collection methods to verify themes, thus gaining a sense of which data is most credible (1998). In addition to data collection within Furcadia, the author conducted a few interviews offline with players of other MMORPGs, and looked at existing literature on virtual communities. Through these intertwining methods, firmer reliability was established.

Questions regarding the authenticity of subjects could, in turn cause subjects to question the researcher’s authenticity. Catterall and Maclaran remind readers that gaining trust is essential in conducting ethnographic research, and that in real-life the researcher has more opportunity to present credentials (2002). In this study, the approach to illustrating credibility was two fold. A website about the project was built to provide subjects with additional background. An interview consent form was drafted to provide terms of the interview process and the researcher’s contact information.

The idea of creating a webpage to explain the project was inspired by Catterall and Maclaran (2002). The author included a picture of himself, his email address, and put it on his university’s web server. Because the inability to confirm personal details is a dyadic problem (Hine 2000), it seemed possible that if he created a vehicle for subjects to confirm information, they would be more willing to reciprocate trust.

Creating an interview consent form is a required prerequisite according to Creswell (1998), as well as part of the larger process in obtaining permission. The researcher needs to submit a proposal to his/her local human-subjects review board, including a consent form draft. Once the board has approved the study as ethically

sound, the researcher may move ahead. My consent form (see Appendix B) included the following key points, which have been adapted from Creswell (1998; 115-116):

- Participation is voluntary and subjects can decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any point.
- The purpose in conducting the study, and the methods planned.
- A note that strict confidentiality will be maintained.
- The researcher's phone number and email address.
- A spot to sign and date the form (with direction for the online subjects to do so electronically and then email it to me).

By having each subject review the conditions of the form, there was a further extension of trust, while expressing a value for their trust.

Although Creswell explains that the researcher typically gains entrance into a community through a gatekeeper (an individual who has already become an established member) (1998), this researcher had no existing relations with anyone who could assist in gaining cultural footing in Furcadia. As a substitution, he had to resort to lurking.

As explained by Catterall and Maclaran, lurking is a form of nonparticipatory observation that often carries with it a negative connotation. However, they note that such a strategy allows the user to learn rules, analyze the best tactic for joining, and provides clues as to who will make useful subjects (2002).

Having established a solid, ethical platform and methodology to begin collecting data, it was time to move on to the next phase of the process.

Data-Collection Techniques

The process of collecting data began when the author became a sort of a lurker. He recognized that the observations made during this period might still be incorporated into the paper. Hence, it was important that his presence not be misleading. Bakardjieva and Feenberg recommend that lurkers request permission before entering a virtual community, otherwise they are simply spies (2001). As Furcadia has no communication tool available for users to reach the entire community, the administrators were contacted via email to obtain research permission. The request went unanswered.

The research focused on Furcadia because it is open to anyone. There is no special fee or social prerequisites to become a member. Yet even without administrative permissions, the ethos of observation in this public space had to be considered.

Bakardjieva and Feenberg paradoxically point out “what sense does it make to ask for special permission to join a virtual community as a researcher when it is open to everyone to join as a participant?” (2001; 236) However, they conclude that user consent should be practiced whenever possible, otherwise the researcher risks alienating individuals from their own words and intentions. Yet in an environment such as Furcadia, members float in and out of the researcher’s bubble constantly, which makes it virtually impossible to seek such permission from everyone.

The resolution to this dilemma came upon entering the community for the first time. Furcadia makes users to choose a screen name, and makes them complete a description for others to view at will. For the researcher’s character, he stated: “I am a graduate student working on my thesis. I am here to learn about how people interact on MMORPGs. I may ask you questions. You can find out more about my project at

www.sunyit.edu/~scialdm/thesis". By providing detail about himself and his intentions, the motives were made clear to any user who inquired.

The process of interviewing MMORPG participants was the next technique that had to be considered. Creswell recommends that the researcher determine the most practical type of interview for the specific project at hand (1998). While having decided upon both face-to-face and online interviews, the majority of them would still be conducted online. Therefore, it seemed reasonable that interviews be conducted in a virtual setting. While this technique goes somewhat against the grain of traditional methodology, which values non-verbal cues and spontaneity on the part of the subject, Catterall and Maclaran suggest that online interviewing has its own unique advantages. The anonymity of the medium may present an enhanced opportunity for openness, while emoticons and the use of other textual manipulations may be used to convey emphasis and feeling (2002). Meanwhile, face-to-face interviews would be conducted in a manner consistent with traditional practice.

With the techniques for collecting data firmly in place, it was necessary to establish what types of questions would be addressed during the interview process. For reference, the works of Howard Rheingold (1993) and Lori Kendall (2002) were consulted because they had already investigated virtual communities at length. Their observations and concerns would provide reference points as to what sorts of inquiries should be made. Additionally, the researcher's initial lurking led to more questions.

Both Rheingold and Kendall include chapters concerning the role of virtual identities and the interplay between online and offline persona (1993; 2002). Kendall explains that there is a high degree of malleability in creating an identity within a MUD

(2002). Rheingold recalls that this is the first thing a MUD participant creates (1993). Kendall includes an entire chapter on the variations and nuances of virtual relationships (2002). Meanwhile, Rheingold makes numerous references to and tells anecdotes regarding virtual interactions, noting at one point that “it is also about the pleasure of making conversation and creating value in the process” (1993; 61). Both authors also indicate that the members of these virtual communities demonstrate high levels of commitment.

Having identified commonalities between these two researchers, appropriate questions were formulated. From the similarities noted above (as well as initial impressions from lurking), questions were created that addressed personal interest, comparison of the virtual against the actual, relations amongst members, and level of commitment. While the full Interview Protocol can be seen in Appendix C, here are some sample questions chosen for each category:

- Personal Interest
 - What is the significance to the name _____?
 - Why do you participate on Furcadia?
- Comparison
 - How does your Furcadia persona compare to that of your real-life one?
 - Do you prefer face-to-face or online communication?
- Relational
 - How do you typically come to interact with others?
 - Have you or do you take anything of value away from these interactions?
- Commitment

- How much time do you spend per week in Furcadia?
- Do you engage in other online activities while on Furcadia?

The Interview Protocol did change slightly over time. The initial phases of analysis combined with ongoing data collection led a narrower understanding of what needed to be asked. Both the original and revised interview protocols are located in the appendices.

The diagram below (Figure 2.1) shows the information that was collected:

Figure 2.1: Data Collection Matrix

Information Source	Interviews	Observations	Documents
Online Participants	8	11	0
Offline Participants	3	0	0
Articles	n/a	n/a	8
Books	n/a	n/a	8
Websites	n/a	n/a	3

Data collection matrix illustrating what kinds of data and how much was collected.

Summary of Analysis

The data analysis spiral is a technique that Creswell recommends regardless of the methodology being employed. He explains, “one enters with data of text or images and exits with an account or a narrative. In between, the researcher touches on several facets of analysis and circles around and around” (1998; 142). Such a methodical technique proved valuable for studying a forum such as Furcadia due to its many nuances and untraditional norms.

Figure 2.2: Data Analysis Spiral

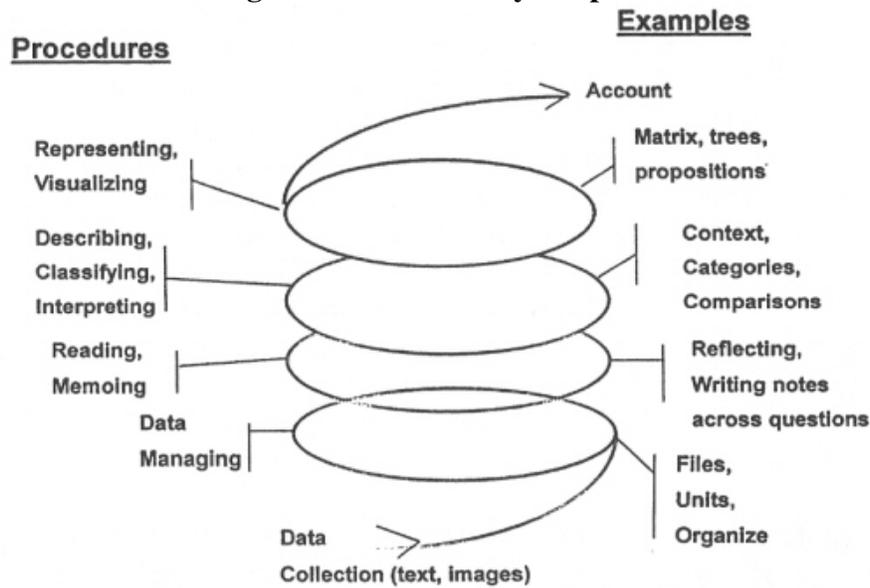


Figure taken from Creswell's Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions (1998)

The initial analysis, as noted above, began while the process of conducting interviews was still in progress. Creswell advises that the first loop of the analysis spiral should be organization of notes. This in turn provides the researcher a sense of the contents of the entire database as it is being built (1998). In this study, because data was being organizing while it was still being collected, the researcher had a working knowledge of what was being found. This next spiral of analysis sharpened the aim of collection, resulting in better data cycling upward through the loop.

The next spiral that Creswell defines involves categorizing, sense making, and interpretation. In this step, the researcher begins to identify themes and commonalities across the database (1998). This was the point where assertions began to emerge because the details of MMORPGs interaction were beginning to be identified through coherent similarities.

The final circle in the loop completes the process when the researcher presents the whole project in text, figures, and possibly other illustrations (Creswell 1998). This phase served to check other circles that were lower in the loop. For example, in the process of presenting the data, the themes and commonalities identified were reviewed again in a more panoramic framework, helping to further clarify them. The outcomes and themes that developed from this methodology are explained below.

Analysis Outcome and Emerging Themes

Themes evolved by applying this type of analysis, which would later become the flesh of this paper's assertions. These will be explained in much greater detail below. However, a brief description of the themes that developed is listed here.

The “how” of participant interaction is explained through the properties of Human-Centered Design Theory, while the “why” finds its roots in Social Exchange Theory. As these two theories interweave to explaining participation, a new singular theory emerges to support the larger phenomenon. Social Exchange-Centered Design (SECD) has four major components that work to characterize essential aspects of MMORPG participation.

The first aspect explained by a Social Exchange-Centered System is that it is multipurpose, suiting the individualized motives of many participants. The second aspect is personal malleability, the idea that the system allows individuals a multitude of ways to represent themselves both visually and through action. Negotiated inclusion is the third aspect, empowering participants with choice in who they interact with, and in what capacity. The final aspect is transcendent reciprocity, the concept that personal rewards from participation extend beyond the virtual forum.

Section 3: Evolution of the Virtual Community

To understand MMORPGs, one needs to look back on the emergence of social Internet use and the broad range of virtual communities that have since evolved. The Internet began as a network of connected terminals conceived so that computers could be remotely accessed and shared across various locations (Hine 2000). This project was known as ARPANET, named for its creators, the US Department of Defense's Advanced Research Project's Agency (ARPA). The expansive growth of this system throughout the 1960s and 1970s made its crusaders realize "that they also wanted to use their computers as communications devices" (Rheingold 1993; 67).

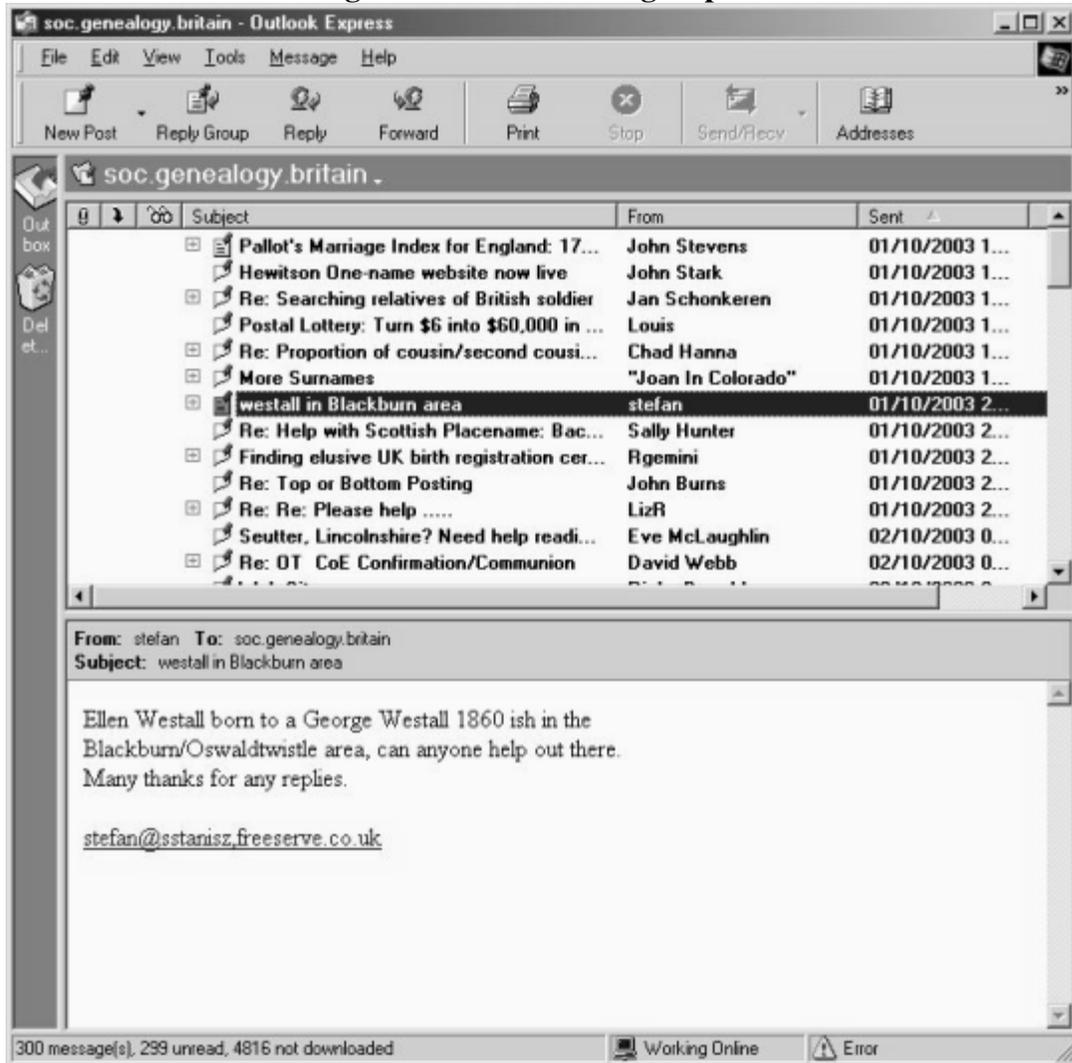
The late 1970s saw the emergence of personal computing technology, making it possible for a public citizen to partake in what had previously been the exclusive domain of government and research interests. An experiment in 1979 between two university students in North Carolina illustrated that individuals could directly link their own personal computers (PCs) together via standard telephone lines. From this collaboration came the Unix Users Network (Usenet), an expanding community of computers that were connected for the purpose of exchanging messages in a structured setting (Rheingold 117). This network stored comments from users in such a fashion that it allowed others to respond to previous postings as a type of ongoing dialog (Rheingold 1993). Figure 3.1 (University of Essex) shows an example of a newsgroup as read in Microsoft Outlook Express.

Hines points to research indicating that Usenet (also known as newsgroups) could arguably be considered a turning point in redefining community in that it relied "more on

shared social practices than on physical boundaries” (2000; 19). In regard to the growth of Usenet, Rheingold explains:

In 1979, there were 3 sites, passing around approximately 2 articles per day; in 1980, there were 15 sites and 10 articles per day; in 1981 there were 150 sites and 20 articles per day. By 1987 there were 5,000 sites and the daily postings weighed in at 2.5 million bytes. By 1988, it grew to 11,000 sites and the daily mailbag was more than 4 million bytes. By 1992, Usenet was distributed to more than 2.5 million people and the daily news was up to 35 million bytes (1993; 119-120).

Figure 3.1: Usenet newsgroup

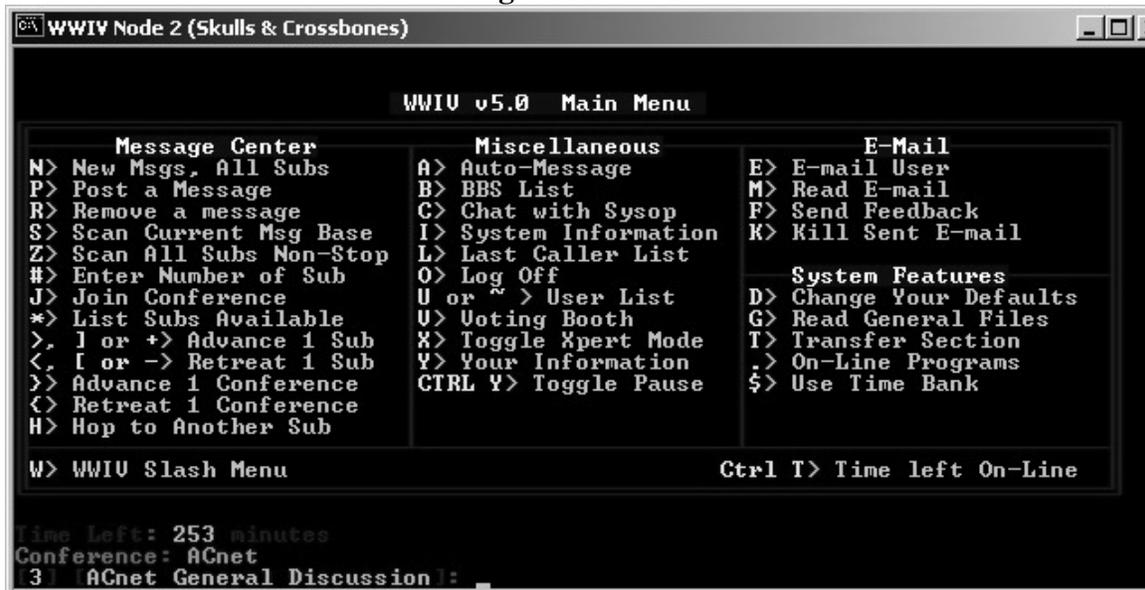


In this screenshot, a user is viewing all of the messages from the newsgroup “soc.genealogy.britain” in Microsoft Outlook Express

Another type of community that had similar grassroots origins was Bulletin Board Systems (BBS). These emerged in the late 70s as well when the advent of the modem

allowed PC users to connect directly to one another. All a user needed to create a BBS was software installed on their PC, and others could call a designated phone number to have access to stored software, messaging systems, and public forums. This permitted anyone to join the ranks of a virtual community (Rheingold 1993). Figure 3.2 (WWIV) shows a sample BBS main menu.

Figure 3.2: BBS

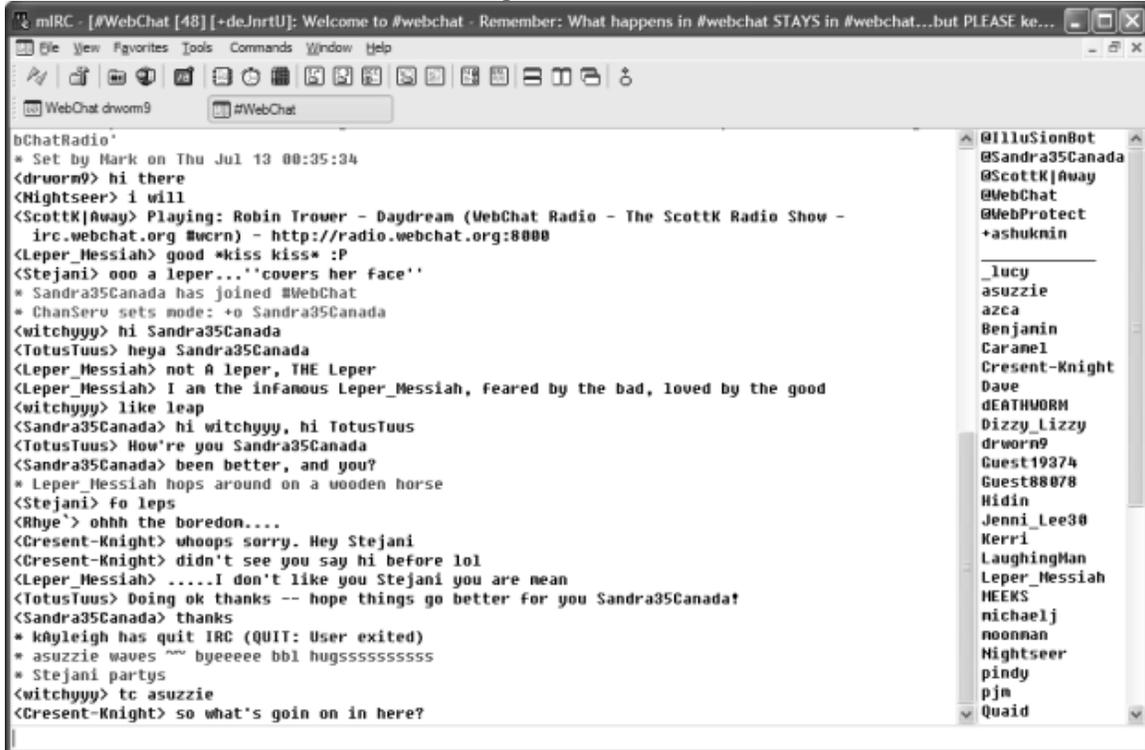


This screen shot from a BBS shows the options available to the user via the main menu

Still another type of virtual space that has emerged from computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology is chat rooms. A programmer from Finland created the Internet Chat Relay (IRC) program in 1988. Within a few years, it gained thousands of users (Rheingold 1993). Various commercial Internet service providers soon followed suit in creating similar environments. Chat rooms are primarily conversational forums, allowing users to “speak to each other as if in the same room (in) real time interaction with other people” (Turkle 1995; 14). Researchers have established that participants in CMC have a perception of community, and have “began to pay detailed attention to the

ways in which that perception was created and sustained” (Hines 2000; 17). A view from an IRC channel is seen below in figure 3.3 (mIRC).

Figure 3.3: IRC



Screenshot from IRC in the #WebChat room

While Usenet, BBSs, and chat rooms all have their own respective claims to the title of virtual community, MMORPGs are perhaps most closely descended from multi-user domains (MUDs).

Dungeons and Dragons was a popular role-playing game in the early 1970s where players could partake in adventures created by someone designated as the dungeon master (Turkle 1995). These scenarios were primarily Tolkienesque. Such adventures eventually became available as single-player computer games to people working mostly in academia (Kendall 2002).

Turkle states that as these games moved to computers, the term ‘dungeon’ came to be synonymous with virtual spaces. She continues to note, “so when virtual spaces were created that many computer users could share and collaborate within, they were deemed Multi-User Dungeons or MUDs, a new kind of social virtual reality” (Turkle 1995; 180). However, as they gained popularity with those not attached to Dungeons and Dragons, the term “dungeon” was dropped for “domains” or “dimensions”.

Although the first MUD was born in 1979 by university students in England (Turkle 1995), they did not gain popularity until “a flurry of articles in computer hobby magazines” around 1984 (Bartle 1999). By 1992, there were over 170 MUDs on the Internet. Rheingold explains MUDs as:

imaginary worlds in computer databases where people use words and programming languages to improvise melodramas, build worlds and all the objects in them, solve puzzles, invent amusements and tools, compete for prestige and power, gain wisdom, seek revenge, indulge greed and lust and violent impulses (Rheingold 1993; 145).

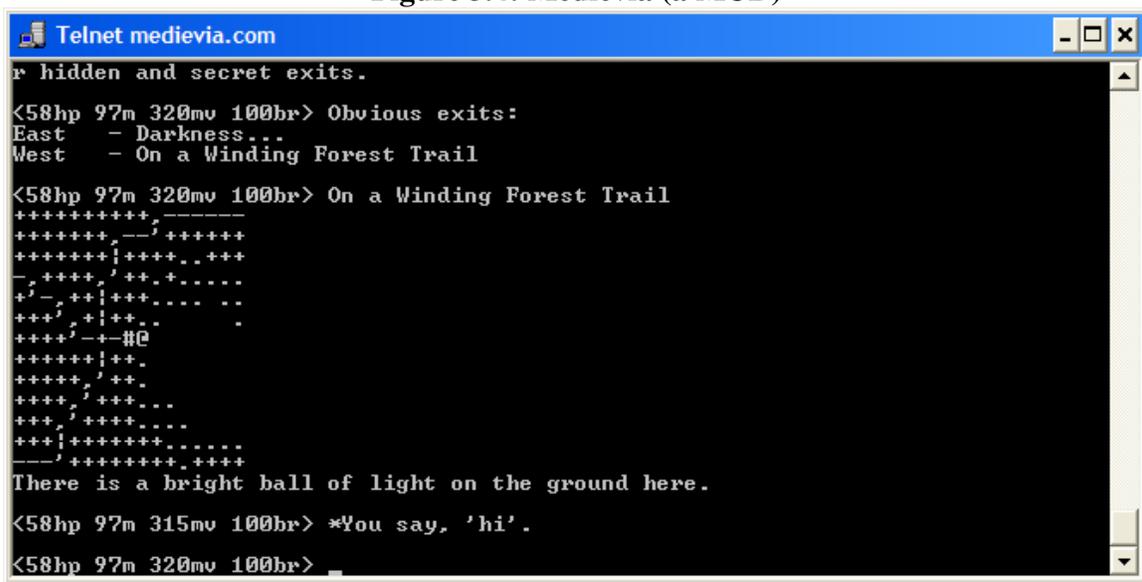
He further notes that they “are living laboratories for studying the first-level impacts of virtual communities – the impacts on our psyches, on our thoughts and feelings as individuals” (Rheingold 1993; 146).

A less abstract understanding of MUDs is provided by Turkle who defines them as “text-based social virtual reality” that often rely entirely on plain text to communicate a sense of place and action (although some are known to incorporate graphics) (1995; 181). Kendall suggests that the synchronous flow of communication within MUDs lends to the sometimes-vivid perception that they are social gathering “places” (2002).

Participants log on to a MUD through either a specialized client, or a computer’s local telnet program (Kendall 2002). Although two distinct categories of MUDs exist, adventure MUDs and social MUDs (Turkle 1995), most are constructed by the linkage of

various “rooms” (Kendall 2002). These rooms are imagined through narrative (Rheingold 1993). Participants assume the role of a “character” that acts as an interface for them to communicate with others via software commands. Character names and descriptions are entirely user-created (Kendall 2002). Every object within a MUD, characters included, can be “viewed” by participants as part of the homogenous narrative (Rheingold 1993). An example of a MUD is seen below in figure 3.4 (Medievia).

Figure 3.4: Medievia (a MUD)



Screen shot shows descriptive text of the user’s surroundings, and the user commencing a conversation with others. The oddly shaped collection of plus signs and other characters in the middle of the window is an ASCII representation of a tree.

As noted above, there are both adventure and social MUDs. Adventure MUDs center on the exploits of killing enemies and monsters in a fantasy-type setting, while social MUDs encompass a more open space where participants have considerably expanded freedom. In this type of MUD, the premise is often built on simple interaction with others (Turkle 1995). Participants can even create their own objects that can further be manipulated by others within the MUD (Rheingold 1993).

Despite the variations in individual MUDs, there are common threads between them. Turkle observes that relationships are the central experience that draws most people to remain active within the virtual community. She explains that in social and adventure MUDs “what really seems to hold a players’ interest is operating their character or characters and interacting with other characters” (1995; 182). In fact, it is not unusual to find relationships that began online which extend across the continents of our real world. Online ceremonies have been performed for those wishing to get married across the expanses of cyberspace (Rheingold 1993). There is evidence that for the participants in these virtual realms, there is a sense of meaning to what transpires and with whom it happens.

While MUDs have been around for over two decades, MMORPGs are a much newer phenomenon. I found that any literature, scholarly or otherwise, on their background was sparse. Even credible anecdotal sources were not easily located. Fortunately, I was able to locate a few.

The website MMORPG.com was established by people who were both either fans of the video game industry, or who worked directly in it. One of their contributors, Nathan Knaack wrote a series of editorials that looked at the history of MMORPGs. He notes the evolution of MMORPGs from MUDs. In 1996, a popular MUD called Meridian 59 was released in a new version that traded much of its previous text-based narrative for visuals (Knaack 2006).

Wikipedia, a web-based user-created encyclopedia supports Knaack’s account of evolution, but also points to earlier multi-user games that incorporated visuals. Previous games existed as additional services that were exclusive properties to Internet providers

such as AOL or CompuServe. Meridian 59 was the first MMORPG launched by a major game maker, and the first covered in mainstream gaming literature. It ran over one unified Internet account, allowing the institution of a single monthly fee for play (Wikipedia “MMORPG” 2006).

A year later, Ultima Online was released, known for establishing MMORPGs into the realm of public popularity (Wikipedia “MMORPG” 2006). Its widespread success was seen as a result of innovation and participant customization (Knaack 2006). Ultima Online was considered one of the three major MMORPGs during the late 1990s. The other two were Asheron’s Call and EverQuest (Wikipedia “MMORPG” 2006).

The latter, EverQuest, was such a monstrous success that it was featured in non-gaming magazines including TIME (Wikipedia “MMORPG” 2006). As a result, many games that subsequently came along emulated many of its game play components in hope of achieving a similar level of prosperity. Following in the footsteps of its ancestors, a majority of MMORPGs, including EverQuest, have been built around fantasy (Tolkienesque) worlds. Like adventure MUDs, users create their own virtual character, gain strengths and abilities for this character through dedicated play, and can combat one another (Knaack 2006).

World of Warcraft (WoW) was launched in April 2005, gaining an unprecedented amount of success (Wikipedia “MMORPG” 2006). While it is an entirely separate environment from EverQuest, WoW follows much of the pre-established formula that was described above (Knaack 2006). As of February 2006, over five million subscribers to WoW were identified throughout the world. Wikipedia notes that this growing popularity has recently begun to attract academic attention from the likes of psychologists

and sociologists, including Sherry Turkle (“MMORPG” 2006). A scene from World of Warcraft is seen below in Figure 3.5 (perso.orange.fr).

Figure 3.5: World of Warcraft



Screen shot from World of Warcraft shows many characters engaged in a battle simultaneously.

The official website for Furcadia does not provide a detailed history as to its evolution. Fortunately, Wikipedia explains that it was first released for public use in December 1996. Like other MMORPGs, the world of Furcadia is “set in a fantasy world inhabited by anthropomorphic animals”. In contrast to other MMORPGs, it does not allow for user combat (Wikipedia “Furcadia” 2006). Furcadia.com classifies it as a Massively Multi-player Online Social Game (2006). Yet, much like MUDs are broken up into two categories, we can follow the same paradigm and consider this a social MMORPG as it exemplifies the most common other characteristics of the genera. The website explains:

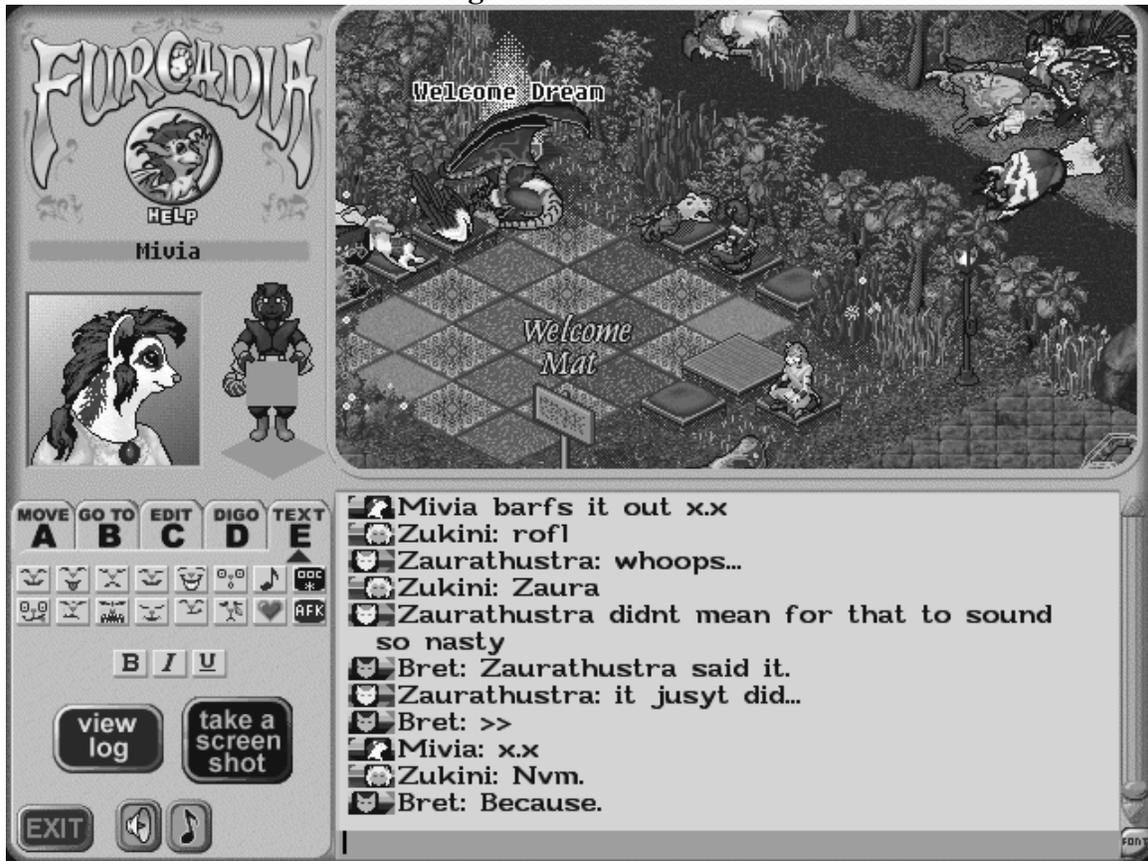
Furcadia is the magical world where the animals have learned to walk upon two legs and speak. Create your own customizable avatar and start exploring the friendly, graphical environment with rich, player-driven content. Our established online community grew over years and has become a second home to many. Furcadia invites you to an interactive experience unlike any other (2006).

Participants create a character known as a furre, which can be male, female, or unspecified. They choose from the races of feline, canine, lapine, equine, musteline, squirrel, and rodent. Wide arrays of pallet colors are available to further customize a furre. While the game's primary visual spaces are comprised of permanent maps created by the game's developers, users are encouraged to create their own. Furcadia includes an editor program that allows participants to create their own unique maps that can be uploaded onto the game server. As such, individuals can share their own virtual spaces with each other for a variety of purposes (Wikipedia "Furcadia" 2006).

Currently Furcadia boasts over 60,000 active players (Wikipedia "Furcadia" 2006). While this is only a fraction of the six million subscribers to WoW, it is still a respectable figure. There are often over 4,000 players online at once according to the statistics on furcadia.com, making it a legitimate virtual community in its own right. With the credibility and characteristics of the field established, it will be through the lens of theory that the question of why and how people interact within the game is clarified. Figure 3.6 (Furcadia) shows a sample view from a Furcadia session.

In the top left is the view box. This shows a close-up of any furre that is clicked on. Next to that is the view box, where action and movement through Furcadia is seen. The command box is located in the bottom left, where a number of options and actions can be implemented. On the bottom right is the dialog box where communication occurs. Further details on these elements of Furcadia will be available in Section 5.

Figure 3.6: Furcadia



Screenshot of Furcadia.

Section 4: Human-Centered Design & Social Exchange

Originally, this paper was to ask “what” participation is in MMORPGs. The early stages of research and data collection revealed that asking “what” necessarily branched out into “how” and “why”. As a result, two separate theories have been chosen based on their unique properties. To clarify how the technology allows participants to intermingle, Human-Centered Design is brought into the picture. To clarify why participants have been drawn to interaction, Social Exchange Theory is invoked. Although there is an obvious diversion implied here, the assertions resulting from this study show the interrelation between these two questions.

Human-Centered Design Theory

Macdonald writes that Human-Centered Design is separate from technology and business designs, which are geared toward organizational development or profits. He elaborates that, “the term Human-Centered Design was coined to distinguish a practice of designing specifically to meet human needs” (2005; 75). Cooley claims that a Human-Centered System questions the rigidity of the scientific method, instead placing influence on the human traits of judgment, knowledge, and intuition (1999). Gasson further explains that Human-Centered Design merges the social and individual aspects of human tasks with the technical systems required for accomplishing them (2003).

When creating a Human-Centered System, the designers “provide tools that would support human skill and ingenuity rather than machines to objectivize that knowledge” (Cooley 1999; 66). Such a system requires a build where creativity is focused on placing more innovation into the hands of the user (Macdonald 2005). This approach challenges much of the traditional perspective on technology that constructs

systems around data and information (Cooley 1999). Yet, Human-Centered Design has proven to be “a welcome tool for understanding and balancing the many priorities and tensions between the client, the end-user, and the technology” (Macdonald 2005; 78).

Gasson is aware of this when noting that it is an over-simplification to trust design that follows a predetermined set of goals. If a design begins following the results of an analysis, it perpetuates that analysis throughout its lifecycle rather than permitting user malleability (2003). By looking at the bigger picture of how people are using a system, the existing problems, the opportunities for improvement, and considering future needs, an influential Human-Centered System can be designed (Macdonald 2005).

Cooley provides a list of characteristics demonstrated by a competent HCS (1999):

- **Coherence:** Embedded meanings that are obvious to the user how to navigate and perform tasks in the environment.
- **Inclusiveness:** The user should feel that they are comfortable with the environment, and on friendly terms with it.
- **Malleability:** “A possibility to mold the situation to suit, to pick-and-mix and sculpt the environment to suit one’s own instrumental needs, ascetic tastes, and craft traditions” (68).
- **Engagement:** Creates a sense of empathy and invitation to participate.
- **Ownership:** “A feeling that you created and thereby own parts of the system. A sense of belonging and even companionship as traditional craftsman may feel with a favorite machine tool” (68).

- Responsiveness: A system responding to individual ways of doing things, requirements, and needs.
- Purpose: Does the design match the user's purpose for using it?
- Panoramic: Allows the user to see the "whole picture" (70).
- Transcendence: The user is encouraged, provoked, and/or enticed to go beyond the immediate tasks at hand and seek broader, higher-level knowledge.

Social Exchange Theory

Before defining the details of Social Exchange Theory, it is necessary to consider the wider picture of how a society is constructed. As Abrahamson observes, "individuals are not, strictly speaking, the primary subject matter" when it comes to social theory (1981; 2). The individual is a standalone unit, exhibiting specific behaviors and idiosyncrasies. However, a social unit is comprised of the relationship interconnecting multiple individuals (Bohannan 1995).

The most basic building block of society is the dyad, the relationship between two individuals (Bohannan 1995). A triad occurs when a third party is added to the relationship, influencing, moderating, or altering the formation (Abrahamson 1981). As a triad includes three dyads within it and all social units that expand to include more people are simply multiple dyads and triads connecting to each other (Bohannan 1995).

Bohannan points out three forms of relations that can be identified within any social structure (1995):

- Social Network: Linked dyads existing within the absence of any triads. "Linkages occur in the network because one person is involved with more than one other person,

but the persons with whom he or she is involved are not directly involved with one another” (27).

- **Social Groups:** More complex systems of dyads and triads that may themselves be parts of larger dyads and triads. The larger they are, the more complicated the structure. Members may or may not directly know one another.
- **Social Categories:** A classification scheme that is begotten from individual or collective characteristics that is not necessarily based on relationships. For example, race, age, or gender are attributes that may place one in a specific social category regardless of the dyads or triads within that individual’s life.

Although Abrahamson notes that individuals are often not the focus of social theory, he concedes, “individuals usually enter the picture because it is the actions of individuals that ultimately provide form and substance to these sociological abstractions” (1981; 2). That perspective lies at the soul of Social Exchange Theory. While this theory works to provide insight as to why various social units are formed and maintained, it relies on explanations at the individual level to give it credence.

Social Exchange Theory is the idea that the actions and behaviors people exhibit stem from the rewards they expect to receive from doing so (Abrahamson 1981). Self-interest and interdependence are key elements of social exchange. A self-interested individual interacts with another such actor because each anticipates the other has something of value to provide (Lawler & Thye 1999).

Original studies pointed to extrinsic rewards as the primary motive for social interaction, however, many of these studies were performed using laboratory animals (Abrahamson 1981). Bohannon observes that although both animals and humans are

capable of exhibiting learned behavior, the way that humans learn behavior is inexorably tied to the culture that they are immersed in (1995). This may be a clue as to why it is not just material rewards that motivate people to action. Abrahamson recalls examples of how positive evaluations from teachers result in increased student participation. He points to the complex social situations that humans belong to as a partial explanation for this (1981).

Lawler and Thye explain that classic studies about social exchange have somewhat marginalized emotion. However, their own research has led them to “believe that emotional dynamics have a more central role in social exchange than typically assumed” (1999; 218). Planalp concurs that theorists cannot overlook emotion because our own experience provides us with an understanding of their importance (78).

While theorists may not agree on a definition, Planalp notes “most agree that emotions are evaluative and move people to action (or inaction)” (2003; 80). These internal states are not completely controllable by those experiencing them (Lawler & Thye 1999). It is easy to see monetary and physical rewards as currency for exchange, but when something intangible is considered, interactions and exchanges may not be so obvious (Abrahamson 1981).

The benefits of interaction may differ from person to person, just as emotions and subsequent reactions differ (Planalp 2003). There are also variances of what types of emotions are acceptable within a given situation. For example, there is a different set of expectations as to which types of emotions are acceptable to display at a wedding than at a funeral. Similarly, emotions are integral to the salience of groups. Joint activity and joint rewards that produce collectively positive emotions will tighten solidarity amongst

members (Lawler & Thye 1999). Considering both the impact of a group setting on emotion, and the impact of emotion on a group setting, it is reasonable to accept the comments put forth by Tiwana and Busy in regard to group reciprocity. They note, “that participants in such peer-to-peer community networks expect mutual reciprocity that justifies their expense in terms of time and energy spent sharing” (Tiwana & Busy 2001; 243).

Bohannan observes that “people are uncomfortable if some of their knowledge and ideas are in conflict with other parts of their knowledge and ideas” (1995; 135). As a result, they search for consistency in their lives and aim to avoid causes of dissonance. Coupled with the idea of mutual reciprocity, it can be surmised that people will willingly participate in a dyad, triad, network, or group when they are expected to provide similar benefits as those previously experienced in other social units.

As enablers of the above social units, virtual communities allow for a sense of ongoing rhythmic interaction and membership. However, the technology needs to compensate for some of the lost physical cues associated with the costs and benefits of social exchange (Tiwana & Busy 1999). For the most part, online communities are maintained by sending commands through a computer. The anonymity of such an arena allows for interactions with multiple and uncertain identities (Turkle 1995). This would leave one to conclude that either the benefits of participating in such a realm outweigh the costs of accepting uncertainty, or that the technology does in fact provide ways of compensation for what is physically absent or ambiguous.

While Tiwana and Busy’s article focuses on how to make accommodations for providing valued exchange in web-based groups, we can expand their ideas to other

virtual communities such as MMORPGs. The major element they recognize is active feedback, which encourages participants to continue contributing. Such feedback provides users with information to “privately evaluate their relative contribution to the group” (Tiwana & Busy 2001; 245). It could also be reasoned that such feedback allows participants to gauge their emotional benefits of being a member. As Lawler and Thye explain, when individuals have a sense of their own emotional reaction, it allows them to “use this information to make inferences about themselves and the environment” (1999; 228). Therefore, if people continue to come back to a virtual community (and their prevalence suggests that people do), then such communities must provide enough feedback that allows users to recognize a personal benefit in ongoing participation.

Section 5: Selected Issues

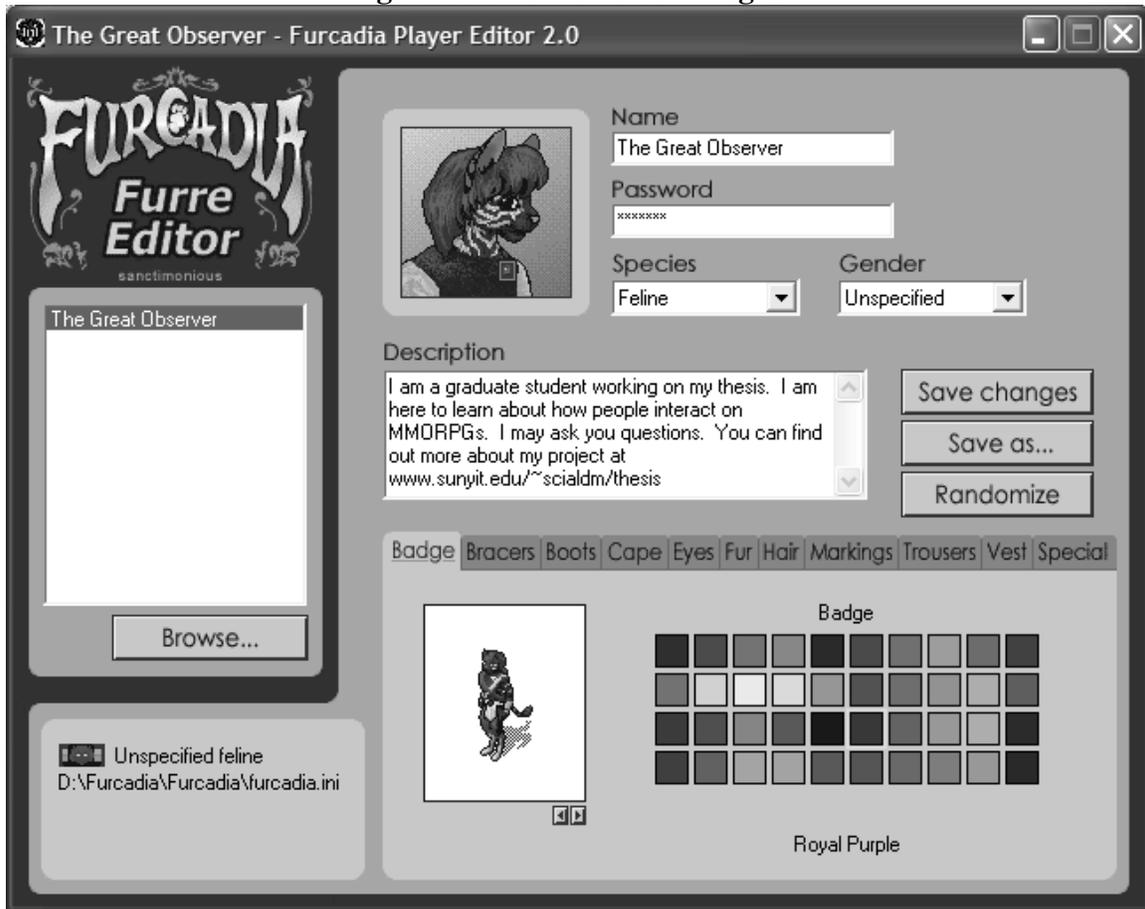
Creswell notes three different approaches to the narrative of ethnography. First he explains the realist tale, a style that presents findings directly without much background on the actual method. The opposite approach is taken in a confessional tale, where the researcher recounts the depth of his/her fieldwork experiences. The approach taken in this section is Creswell's third approach: an impressionistic tale. This is a mix of both previous approaches (1998). This narrative is effective because this field of study is untraditional and relatively unexplored. As such, the method, the fieldwork, and the findings all impact how the assertions are reached that attempt to explain the research question. Fortunately an impressionistic tale considers all of these elements.

As noted above, the theories chosen for this study emerged as a result of fieldwork and data collection. Evidence of this was seen from the first moment that the researcher entered the field.

Malleability and Ownership

Upon downloading and launching Furcadia, the program requires users to create their own character using the Furre Editor program as seen in figure 5.1 (Furcadia). This companion to the actual game allowed the researcher to setup the name, password, species, gender, and colors of his avatar. Both a close-up and full-bodied view are available to illustrate how personal decisions impacted appearance. While there are certainly limitations and rules binding choices, a vast number of variations are possible.

Figure 5.1: Furre Editor Program



Furcadia's Furre Editor Program allows the participant to customize several detailed aspect of his or her furre.

As the motives for the researcher's character were based on academic research, it was decided to choose a race that was appropriate. As cats are curious and keen creatures, it seemed prudent to select a feline.

The next level of customization is to determine the gender. In choosing a gender, the appearance of a furre changes noticeably. Selecting a male gives a look of short, untamed hair, a thick neck, and broad shoulders. The option of female provides a supple build, with a more curvaceous visage, and a narrower frame. These differences are illustrated in figure 5.2 (Furcadia). Despite the researcher being male in real life, he decided to choose an unspecified gender to reduce any reaction by participants based on

sex. This choice provided his furre with features that were ambiguous, such as shaggy hair, and a frame that is not extraordinary in any way.

Figure 5.2: Furcadia Gender Differences



Differences in the close-up view for The Great Observer with a female (left) or male (right) gender chosen.

Next many attributes can be customized including fur, hair, vest, trousers, eyes, and boots. Each of these 10 separate characteristics has a pallet of 25 to 55 colors to choose from. The researcher chose woodland green for hair, black for fur, and lavender for stripes. Also of note, there is an option for special attachments such as wings, or additional species such as dragon or phoenixes. However, these options are only available to participants who paid an extra fee.

The last step is to choose a name, and to provide a description for the avatar. “The Great Observer” was chosen by the researcher for a name in order to highlight the motivation of his participation. The description was completed with information about why the researcher was on Furcadia, and a link to website with personal information about his work.

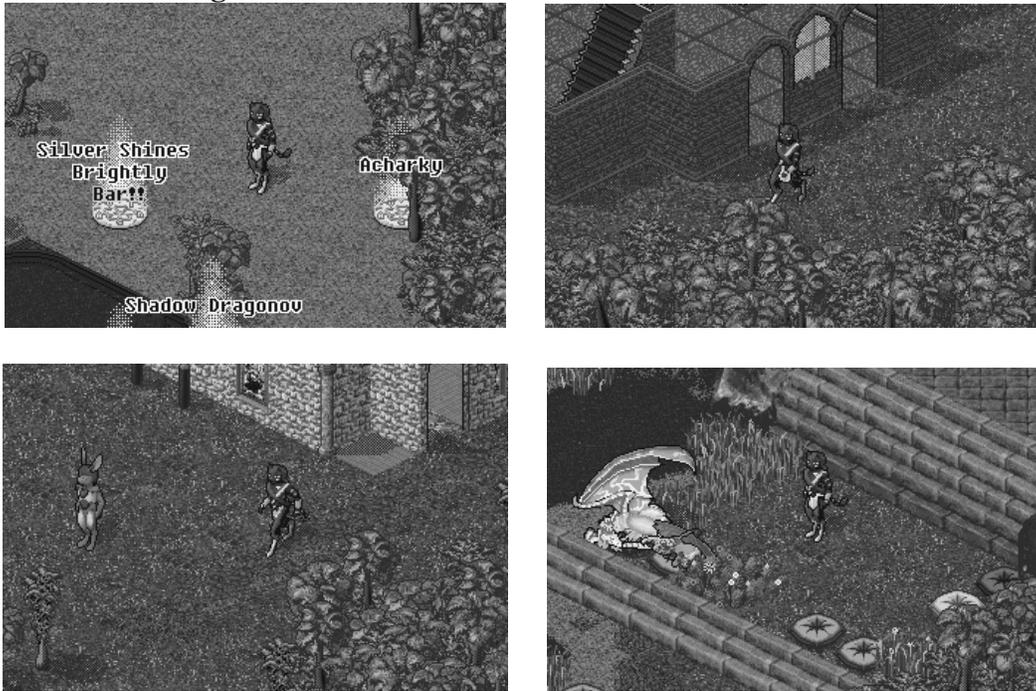
While character customization is one major facet of Furcadia that illustrates its malleability, another is the ability for users to create their own landscapes and share them with other players. These landscapes are called “dreams”, and anyone is allowed to place one on the existing in-game landscape for others to visit.

Participants on Furcadia can choose to move between any of 9 standard dreams at any time. Each has a designated theme, however it should be noted that few participants actually stick to those themes. These dreams cannot be significantly altered by participants. They are:

- Vinca: The main “starting” point of Furcadia. While participants can navigate to any of the 9 dreams by clicking an icon, Vinca also contained portals to them. It’s a crossroads of sorts.
- Naia Green: A community center to meet others and be friendly to new comers.
- Challenges: An area dedicated for users wanting to socialize and play some basic games, or create dreams that others can play games in.
- Imaginarium: Space reserved for those who wanted to role-play or discuss role-playing.
- Meovanni: This space is also designed for persona play and friendly talk.
- Acropolis: An area for socialization without role-play.
- Allegria: A space primarily for others to place gateways to their own dreams.
- Haven: Devoted to old friends having their own spot to socialize.
- FurN: An “R-rated” spot for mature chat and dreams. A warning pops up that one must be of legal age to participate.

Although these nine spots have set distinctions, there is a single “look” that permeated many of these environments. Most are either mostly outside with foliage and rivers, or take place within architecture reminiscent of medieval structures. This continuous homogeneity is exemplified in figure 5.3 (Furcadia).

Figure 5.3: Producer-Created Dreams of Furcadia



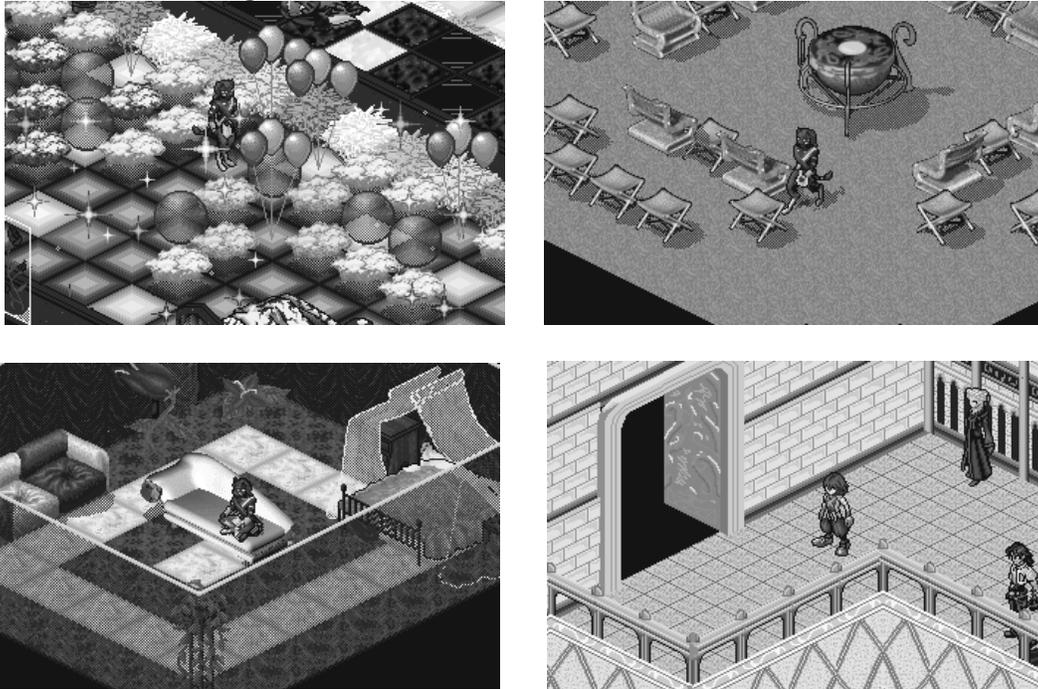
Screen shots from four standard producer-created dreams: FurN (top left), Imaginarium (top right), Meovanni (bottom left), and Naia Green (bottom right)

The user-created dreams (that could only be placed in designated spots) add considerably vaster possibilities to the landscape of the game. Portals to these are located on the ground, with the name of the dream listed above. Three examples (Silver Shines Brightly Bar, Acharky, and Shadow Dragonov) are visible in the top left of figure 5.3 (Furcadia).

One visits a user-created dream simply by walking over the portal. Numerous such customized areas were visited in this study including one designed to look like the inside of a spaceship, one based on the world of Pokémon, another that maintained a gothic sex house theme, and yet another which looked like a cross between a dormitory, an arcade, and an outdoor disco bar. Figure 5.4 (Furcadia) provides a look at some user-created dreams. Of special note is Hallow Bastion on the bottom right. This dream, along with several others, actually changes one's furre into an entirely different avatar!

As seen below, in this dream, the researcher's feline was transformed into an adolescent human.

Figure 5.4: User-Created Dreams of Furcadia



Screen shots from four user-created dreams: The Pink Tassel (top left), Talzhemir (top right), Metir (bottom left), and Hollow Bastion (bottom right)

Many features of Furcadia that allow for malleability also produce a sense of ownership. xMidnightShredx, a participant of Furcadia, was asked why he chose the particular race and colors for his furre. He responded:

My avatar is feline. I think I've always found myself to be feline-esque in personality in real life..it's kind of abstract, but just the general characteristics of felines, as being the kind of 'silent stalker' and relying more on intellect, than simple strength, although they can exhibit physical prowess when needed. Does that make sense? Other than that, that's the only connection. I think with Furcadia being as simple as it is, the avatars come down more to colors, than the actual model. My colors are crimson + black, which just happens to be the colors I like in real life.

xMidnightShredx customized his furre based on his own personality and his own tastes.

As this was the avatar he communicated and acted through, there was evidence of ownership. Coupled with the visual properties that were specifically chosen by xMidnightShredx, this served to reinforce his sense of owning the character.

Another participant, Leif Muscleman, indicated that this malleability provided him with a sense of ownership. In response to why he participated in Furcadia, he stated that a major reason was “being able to make a place of your own and upload it”. Meanwhile, Rootu Diimori explained that he enjoyed making his own dreams as they provided “custom places for myself and my friends to go”. Another perspective came from Supul Arua who expressed ownership in one character he created by proclaiming, “he’s really an extension of myself, so if I said that there was another ‘me’, it’d be him”. Although the comments above are direct allusions to the customization tools of the game, they illustrate overtones of ownership.

Engagement and Inclusion

Following the creation of a furre, there is a welcoming area designed to get one’s attention and make him or her feel like a part of the Furcadia community. A pop up window greets the participant and explains that he or she is welcome to have someone show him or her around, or that this person can be called for assistance at any other point.

Upon entering this area, the researcher noted that a statue of a baby green dragon stood near his furre with arms outstretched next to a welcoming sign. A screenshot of this is shown in figure 5.5 (Furcadia). Even the dialog box of my Furcadia window greeted him, stating, “my name is Beekin the help dragon. I’m here to help you learn the basics. If you’re interested, follow the grey arrows down the path and I’ll tell you more!” To the left were arrows in the stone pavement his furre stood on. They were pointing to numbered circles.

Figure 5.5: The Welcome Dream



The first dream a participant visits in Furcadia

The researcher could make Great Observer move by either using the pointer to tell him where to go, or by using the directional buttons on his keyboard. As he was navigated to the first circle, a message appeared stating, “You can see how many fures are in Furcadia right now by pressing **F4**! If you accidentally go to another map at any time, you can press **Ctrl-B** to come back”. He continued to the next circle where he was told “I bet you are wondering that there is to do here! We like to make **friends** from all over the world. You can also **explore**, try **games** and **puzzles**, join groups for **RolePlaying**, or even **create** your own world!” As he continued to cross other numbers up to 23, these helpful messages persisted. Three of the most relevant messages were as follows:

1. To talk to someone on your screen, just *type*, then hit **Enter**. To talk privately (**whisper**), just type **/theirname** and the message, and only they will see it. For names with spaces, *just leave out the space*.
2. If you have questions, troubles, or need help at any time, you can type the word **help** and what your **question** is. A live *Beekin Helper* will whisper you to help. For example: *help I'm new and need a tour of the main maps!* Beekin Helpers are the **volunteers** of *Furcadia*. You can tell them by the badge with my picture on it in their description.

3. There are **editors** to help you make your own **dreams**, create your own **graphics** and even an easy scripting language called *DragonSpeak* to make things happen, and add sounds and music!

Pressing tab **C** will get you to these.

Having received these welcoming hints, he continued into the rest of the Furcadia. His experience in the welcoming dream was engaging for a few different reasons. Visuals and text all served as friendly greeters welcoming him into this new community. Not only were they amicable, but he was encouraged to seek help and assistance in the capacity that was most suited for him.

Subsequent launches of the program greeted him with a brief flash of a welcome screen, and a high-pitched purr that said as much. Perhaps most engaging was that his furre was not referred to in the third-person. All of the text used “you” in place of his name. Not only did this make it more personal, but it was evidence of an attempt to connect one’s real self with his or her virtual self.

Furcadia allows one only to communicate with, and read the communications of, anyone who was within the view of one’s window. During one observational session, the researcher came across a gathering of other furies in the dream Naia. Seeing this group, he decided to greet them. As he typed “hi”, the following transpired:

You say, “hi”

Sheeni: Hi!

You say, “how are you”?

LesChandelies: Pretty good thanks, and yourself?

You say, “not to bad”

LesChandelies: That’s good!

You say, “what are you up to today?”

Particle: Ready to go guys?

Hammy: ?

Particle: The event

LesChandelies: Oh nothing really. A bit of chatting, a bit of mass cookie consumption.

Hammy: What event?

LesChandelies giggles

Particle: I'm going to head over there now. It starts in 20 min but still

Hammy: What is it?

Particle: story telling, I will summon anyone who wants to join

The conversation continued, and the researcher was a bit confused still by some of what was going on. He had been quiet for a minute or two, but LesChandelies pulled him back into the group by directing a series of messages at him. He was then further confused when nearly all of the furies in the group vanished. A few disappeared first, but then all of a sudden, nearly everyone was gone. He wondered if he had done something wrong.

Then a message came across his dialog box "LesChandelies asks you to join his/her company. To accept the request, type 'join [user's name]'. To decline, type 'decline [user's name].'" Upon following these directions and typing "'join'", the researcher received the message "LesChandelies summons you". He was no longer in Naia, for he had been transported to a user-created dream, the same one that everyone else had apparently traipsed off to!

This was my first experience in being summoned. By typing "'summon [user's name]'", a furre could request that another join his/her proximity. As in my case, accepting this invitation transported me immediately and directly to the other player.

Although he had barely been a part of their conversation, LesChandelies made the researcher included in the community by inviting him to the storytelling event that someone (presumably Particle) had invited her to. The conversation continued in this new area much as it had in the old.

In the above case, the researcher witnessed inclusion through simple happenstance. He said hello to a group of people, and one of those people apparently

decided that he should be invited into a more intimate group setting. Subjects interviewed often referenced meeting others in similar ways. Supul Arua reported that “other’s usually initiate conversations” with him. Offshot stated “I park my avatar somewhere on the Naia map and hang out with some fures until someone talks and sparks my brain”. Paul, a person interviewed in real life who was a participant in numerous MMORPGs, reported that his experience had shown that if a participant is just courteous to others, he or she will end up making friends and meeting new people.

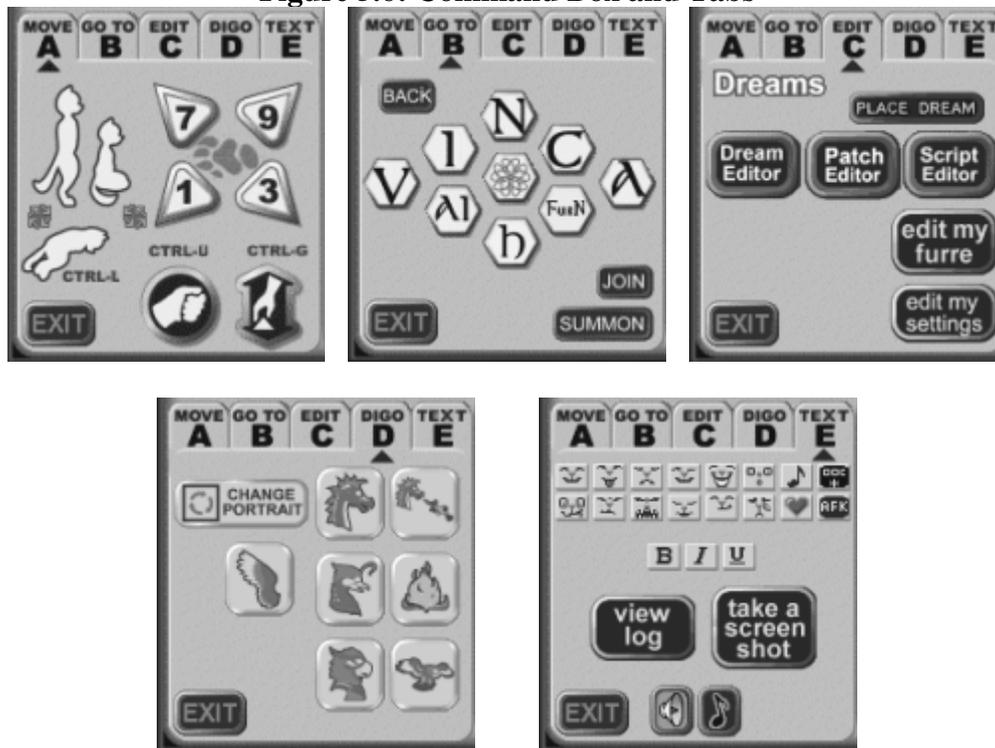
It is reasonable to ascribe characteristics of engagement to MMORPGs not only based on the anecdotal evidence presented here, but also due to their growing notoriety. If they did not have the strength of engagement, they would not be able to maintain and expand their popularity as they have thus far. As subjects reported on how they came to be included in social interaction with others, there is additional evidence that inclusion is a higher-level phenomenon than engagement. Based on experiences in Furcadia, one has to first be engaged in the MMORPG before others can include them (as in the example provided above). Such is evidence that these two elements of human-centered designed were necessarily connected.

Responsiveness and Purpose

The controls in Furcadia prove to be pretty basic. Using the cursor on the screen, can move an avatar by clicking the direction one wants it to walk. As an alternative, one can also press the numbers 1, 3, 7, and 9 as those related to specific directions. A third alternative is to use the arrows under tab A in the command box, as those also correspond to movement.

Using the same command box, one can also command her or his furre to sit down, lie down, pick up items, use items, transport to other dreams, and summon or join other fures. Other options include editing game settings, going to a dream editor, customizing and changing one's furre, performing special commands (for the specialized races that one must pay to play), adjusting sound settings, and expressing special emoticons in the dialog box. Many of these functions are also accessible through keyboard shortcuts. The options provided under these varying tabs are illustrated in figure 5.6 (Furcadia).

Figure 5.6: Command Box and Tabs



Each tab on the command box allows a participant specific options and commands

The game responds to specific commands, demonstrating both the freedoms and limitations as to what a participant can do. The limitations are a result of how the game was programmed. One could not have her furre drive a Porsche through a dream because the creators of Furcadia did not allow for that ability. One could not sail across an ocean

and explore in search of islands because at a point the landscape just stops. Participants are limited to the circumference and boundaries that were decided by others.

Leif Muscleman exclaimed that if it were up to him, he would kick some people out of Furcadia. However, the game did not allow him that ability. Meanwhile, Khamore expressed that he wished there was better ways to communicate on Furcadia because often “a misunderstanding or typo or other typing conundrum causes strife”.

However, MMORPG restrictions are not unique to Furcadia. Another participant, Illorelif, engaged in other MMORPGs because he used Furcadia “exclusively as a chat program to keep in contact with friends. There’s nothing other than that and role playing to do.” He continued to elaborate that World of Warcraft was more vibrant and expansive. Lionel, who played World of Warcraft exclusively, lamented that there were not ways to further customize the pet his avatar owned in the game. He explained that certain characters within the game could have animals, and his was one. Lionel said:

I have a bear that I really, I travel with him all the time, and I build him up, he’s the same level as me, and he’s pretty much going to go through the game permanently with me and, you know, he basically looks like he did when I got him. He looks like all the other bears in the game. It’d be cool, even if it didn’t really add to their value or whatever, in terms of armor or whatever, it’s be cool to put on a specialized collar or whatever, armor piece or something. I don’t know. That would make me happy.

Lionel, like the participants of Furcadia, recognized that the responsiveness of the game is limited by the game itself.

While freedoms within a given virtual environment are impacted by its design, it is important to recognize another element that is not so controlled. Participants come into a MMORPG and with it they bring a purpose. For example, the researcher’s purpose was

to conduct an ethnography of Furcadia, and the controls available to him suited that purpose.

Other participants in Furcadia had purposes as well for spending time there. Leif Muscleman mentioned a few different reasons for his attraction to Furcadia. He noted “(the) wide range of people (and) being able to make a place of your own and upload it”. An obsession with mythical animals is what drew Offshot to this particular MMORPG. xMidnight Shreadx found that when he was younger, he didn’t have many friends in real life because his family moved around frequently. However, he confessed “I could always count on my Furcadia friends to be there, no matter where I went. So I think it provided me some consistency”. Similarly, Rose Ann explained that her purpose was to meet new people and make more friends.

The motives that these participants had for logging onto Furcadia are within the boundaries of what the environment allowed them to do. Whether the environment shaped their purposes, or they found an environment suitable to their purposes, is a point that could be argued, and may differ from one subject to another. What is significant here is that the responsiveness of the MMORPG cannot be separated out from the purpose. Considering there are over 60,000 active members of Furcadia, it is reasonable to presume that the design of the software must be somewhat conducive to fulfilling the motives these members have in ongoing engagement.

Social Exchange and Transcendence

The value of online exchanges to a participant is not always clear to others. Consider the following dialog:

sportz gurl661: whats wrong?
ZeEMiZz: He just wants in your pants Mist
ZeEMiZz: XD

picard chalice: lol im suplying diablo with naughty mist pics
Cali Cantnro: *sighs*
ZeEMiZz: Lol he whispers me and says shut up
Cali Cantnro: Don't worry
ZeEMiZz: yah i kno
picard chalice: krystal pics
picard chalice: *
picard chalice: god my head is slow
sportz gurl661: if it's something bothering u maybe i can help
picard chalice: lol im a member of a website that has hundreds of naughty krystal pics
k-la29: it is k
k-la29: ok*
picard chalice: no its on msn
sportz gurl661: is it something bothering u???
Cali Cantnro: Nope
sportz gurl661: did som1 do u soming that u didnt lik!!
sportz gurl661: i ment ?
Cali Cantnro: Kinda
sportz gurl661: did they say something mean to u or soming??
ZeEMiZz: Bgy o.o
picard chalice: hi bgy
sportz gurl661: trust me i can help
Cali Cantnro: This guy said he was my bf and then he dumped me
sportz gurl661: ooo
sportz gurl661: :~(:~(
Cali Cantnro: I don't care
sportz gurl661: is ther anything that i can do 4 u?
Cali Cantnro: I don't know
sportz gurl661: ok
ZeEMiZz: lmao scorp iz such an idiot
ZeEMiZz: the things he says
Cali Cantnro sighs
sportz gurl661: well if u need me then call me u no im here
Cali Cantnro: I hate people like that

It is clear that there are multiple conversations transpiring, with some overlapping others. What is not so obvious is the value that the participants are getting out of

choosing to spend time in such social discourse. While rewards from social exchange are situational and individualized, their worth in this environment is not superficial because otherwise it would be self-evident in interactions such as the one above.

Figure 5.7: Screenshot of Many Participants in One Spot



Despite the large gathering of fures in one spot, it is not immediately evident what reward they are receiving from this participation.

As seen in Figure 5.7 (Furcadia), this may lead one to question whether or not there is value in virtual interaction. The properties of social exchange theory dictate that if one is engaging in a particular action, this action must yield higher gains than other available actions. Therefore, due to the time participants are investing in Furcadia, there is evidence that it provides value.

The amount of time participants reported being on Furcadia varied. xMidnight Shreadx reported that he was on from 12-20 hours per week. Leif Muscleman reported being on over 30 hours per week, while Supul Arua claimed 35. Rose Ann avowed that she was on “usually at least 1 hour per night but probably a bit more.” Barry, a participant in many different MMORPGs (but not Furcadia), reported spending 15-20 hours per week on them. He explained that before he got married, he would spend more than 25. However, Barry noted that now “those are just rough estimates. Usually, I try to devote one night a week to not playing so I can be with my wife.”

Out of 11 interviewees, Rose Ann’s one hour per night proved to be less than anyone else’s participation level. Five subjects reported spending over 30 hours per week. Such commitments are indicators of the value found in spending time in MMORPGs. Barry’s admission that he takes one night off a week for family time serves to highlight that he finds value in the other six nights he does participate.

The insight the researcher received into what subjects got from MMORPGs was only through directly asking them. It was obvious that participants were not physically rewarded for moving their avatar around and engaging others. Emotional rewards were not explicitly evident from the discourse witnessed in participant-observation. This lent support to the idea that the rewards transcended the virtual, impacting each individual in a unique fashion.

Illorelif explained that participating in Furcadia filled a creative need in his life. He was able to role-play using various characters, and this proved to be an entertaining path to fulfillment. Khamore proclaimed that he found it fascinating to “meet new interesting people and gain an insight into their lives outside of Furcadia.” Paul, another

non-Furcadia participant, confessed that online interaction “makes it a little more enjoyable than just sitting there and thrashing a button and being by yourself.”

Illorelif, Khamore, and Paul provided testimonial that their time in MMORPGs were of personal value. Yet, those they were interacting with may not have noticed these rewards. The disembodiment of avatars from their real-life incarnations enhances the difficulties in ascertaining the benefits for those engaging in virtual social exchange.

Section 6: Assertions and Conclusions

Re-statement of Questions with Answers

Primary Research Question Answered

Earlier in this paper, the question was asked: How do participants interact within the context of a MMORPG, and why are they encouraged to do so? It was explained that the how is addressed by the application of Human-Centered Design Theory, and the why is accounted for by the properties of Social Exchange Theory.

A human-centered system is a deviation from traditional perspectives about technology that have focused on the system rather than on the user (Cooley 1999). At the heart of HCD is the attitude that the user should direct innovation and creativity, and the system should support that (Macdonald 2005). This is done by designing systems that give people tools to enhance their skills and intuition, giving the user preference over the machine (Cooley 1999). As such, a system strikes harmony in balancing the desires of the user, and the abilities of the technology (Macdonald 2005).

When applying HCD to Furcadia and other MMORPGs, how people interact becomes clear. The system, the actual software itself, allows for participants to decide what they are going to do in the environment. It is the creativity and will of the user that dictates the appearance of his/her furre, what it will be called, and the persona that character will demonstrate. As users can decide where to roam and who to engage with, it is evident that there is a high degree of freedom available. Furcadia did not decide who the researcher was going to interact with. The choice was his. Participants interact through their own choices that are allotted to them through the freedoms and personal creativity that the environment allows.

Social Exchange Theory explains that people engage in specific actions and behaviors due to the rewards they expect to receive from doing so (Abrahamson 1981). Bohannan notes that such rewards are not always material, but are often intangible and self-motivating (1995). In fact, self-interest and interdependence are essential ingredients in social exchange theory. An individual interacts with another because each anticipates something of value stemming from the interaction (Lawler & Thye 1999).

Social exchange theory explains the why of participant interaction in MMORPGs. Members of Furcadia partake in being a part of this virtual community because they are receiving something of value from these interactions. While these rewards may not always be explicit, they are clearly of enough worth for participants to continue their exchanges.

Research Subquestions Answered

What, if any, limitations of action exist within MMORPGs? While Furcadia can respond to a myriad of commands and demands, there are limitations that are dictated by the software itself. It is arguable whether or not the purpose of users is decided by these limitations, or if users simply are drawn to an environment that suits their needs. The common denominator here is that the motivation participants carry in with them works in tandem with the limitations of the game.

To what degree does the virtual community allow for self-expression? This is answered by the HCD properties of malleability and ownership. Furcadia, and other MMORPGs allow for users to customize their character, determining the race, sex, build, name, and other properties. In addition, Furcadia allows users to create their own landscapes that can be shared. Such malleability is a form of self-expression that creates

a sense of ownership over both a participant's avatar and the environment. Granted, this expression may be restricted to the tools within Furcadia, but the point remains that the participant can use these tools as he or she likes.

Does the environment of a MMORPG entice participants to interact? Furcadia engages the user from the start in its many welcomes, in explaining the working of the environment, and in making it clear that there are many avenues for assistance. Once engaged, inclusion begins by exploring the environment and encountering others. Engagement and inclusion are perpetuated by Furcadia's constant referral to the user's avatar as "you".

Do participants find value in their experiences within the game? On the surface of Furcadia, there is not direct evidence of rewards in choosing to spend time in virtual discourse and action. As social exchange dictates, if an individual is choosing to invest time in an interaction, there must be a perceived benefit from that choice. In the case of MMORPGs, the reward is highly individualized and transcends the game itself. Participants reported receiving a benefit that extended beyond the virtual realm, despite that interaction not actually occurring in real life.

Assertions: Social Exchange-Centered Design

This paper split the primary research question into both a how and a why of participant interaction. Yet, it is significant to note that without the how that HCD puts into context, there could not be the why explained by social exchange theory. With no working environment upon which to interact, meaningful interaction could not occur despite the purpose of the user. Likewise, if nobody had a motive for entering a virtual community, it would not matter how well that community was designed. Therefore, as

these two theories are inseparable in explaining MMORPG participation, it is reasonable to combine these theories into one that explains both the how and the why.

Social Exchange-Centered Design (SECD) works by considering both elements of MMORPGs explained by HCD and social exchange, and those elements identified through data collection. A social exchange-centered system (SECS) is an engaging design that promotes individual motives through empowerment within environmental limitations. Such a system will exhibit the following characteristics:

- **Multipurpose:** Supports multiple motives and actions, despite limitations imposed by design.
- **Personal Malleability:** Users are empowered, through their avatar, to choose their own visual representations and personalities.
- **Negotiated Inclusion:** The design allows for individualized discretion in engaging others and interpersonal interactions.
- **Transcendent Reciprocity:** Participation creates specific, personal rewards that extend beyond the immediate environment.

Multipurpose

One of the key insights social exchange theory reveals about human nature is that people engage in activities that will yield a personal gain, whether it is a physical reward or an emotional benefit. When considering a virtual system that is designed for social exchange, it is reasonable to expect the elements of that system to support multiple motives. Though participants may expect the system to have limitations in scope and ability, the system will still need to support a variety of purposes in order for it to be of use to participants.

Every individual interviewed in this study expressed a specific motive for his or her participation within MMORPGs. While the majority of these interactions were similar, they all had their specific nuances that were only identified by probing subjects for additional information. For example, both xMidnight Shreadx and Khamore avowed that they only used Furcadia because it was a way to keep in touch with existing friends. Yet Khamore expressed an interest in meeting additional friends and learning about their real lives, while xMidnight Shreadx seemed more content with his long-term relations.

Erik Strongman and Rootu Diimori both maintained receiving satisfaction out of role-playing various personas. While Erik Strongman's characters were fictional extensions of specific personal traits he wished to express, Rootu Diimori claimed "the majority of the characters I play are not made up. They're real people." In fact, the persona he based his furre after was on an Asian rock star.

Both Paul and Barry, who were members of other MMORPGs expressed similar but slightly different motives. Paul found it to be enjoyable experiencing a game with the company of others, while Barry had fun role-playing in the midst of additional actors. Although they were not involved in Furcadia, the virtual communities they found were sufficient for satisfying their objectives. This evidence suggests that an effective SECS responds positively to the individualized purpose of a user.

Personal Malleability

The idea of malleability and ownership was explained in section 5.2. However, the personal malleability element of SECD is slightly different than that discussed above. As participants start off in a virtual environment, they choose and customize their avatar. However, as this avatar is designed to go forward into interpersonal situations, the

participant may choose to shape more than just his or her outward appearance. A participant may manipulate an on-screen persona to better obtain the personal reward he or she is expecting to receive from the MMORPG.

An example of this is seen with Leif Muscleman. He had explained that a major reason for his time spent on Furcadia was to build dreams and share them. However, he also indicated that part of his motivation is to role-play either in his own landscape or on those that others created. The relation of his online persona to this reward is illustrated in the following interview segment:

You say, "is there any significance to the name you chose?"

Leif Muscleman: sadly no, i try for names that i like, or use a lot. i Try to stick with the same bases with each name, I choose the name because it sounds appeling to me. The first name for all my alts are one i choose because i liked the sound of the name.

You say, "what is an alt?"

You say, "I never heard the term"

Terri Coalclaws: that would be me, i am Alt of Leif.

Leif Muscleman: another character.

You say, "ohhhhhh...so you are playing two characters at the same time? is that common for people? any how do they differ?"

Leif Muscleman: actually i am playing four at once. ITs not uncommon to play two or three, its just hard to do, best way to do is keep them seperate. i have all three grouped here so i can watch them with one screen.

As Leif Muscleman's reward from participation was playing various roles, he customized multiple characters in order to carry out that end. When asked about the personas he enacted through his characters, Leif Muscleman explained "each character resembles me in one way or another. Take Terri there, she is sweet and docile, and Lexie shows Frustration, and this alt here shows strength and willingness to stand for what i think is right".

While Leif Muscleman's goals are enabled through the personas he plays, we see another example of personal malleability through xMidnight Shreadx. What he valued in Furcadia was that it has provided consistency in maintaining communication between himself and his friends. When asked how his online identity compared to his in real life, he reported "I would say they almost co-exist. I think Furcadia to some degree, through all my experiences on it, has shaped my personality in real life, and vice versa. So I think at some point they kind of converged, and there's really not much of a difference."

xMidnight Shreadx expressed the opposite of Leif Muscleman, in that he had not taken on a different persona. However, the identity xMidnight Shreadx expressed in Furcadia enabled him to meet his goal just as Leif Muscleman's role-playing helped him meet his. xMidnight Shreadx looked to maintain friendship and consistency, and therefore his online personality was congruent with that of his offline. Personal Malleability assists participants in meeting their needs by allowing them to shape their personas as much or as little as they want.

Negotiated Inclusion

As established previously, MMORPGs take in participants by initial engagement through the environment, and then create a sense of inclusion through exploration of the community. When examining inclusion through the lens of social exchange, it becomes evident that the types that occur in Furcadia are negotiated between participants.

Offshot spent over twenty hours per week on Furcadia, yet she claimed that most of the people she encountered "are just empty cans rattling about whatever mundane thing they come up with". When asked how she came to interact with such people, she noted that she simply left her furre in one spot until someone sparked her brain. She

continued to explain that she was less outgoing online because in real life, she has to react. Furcadia allowed her to decide to what degree and with whom she wanted to interact.

Another example of negotiated inclusion came from Paul, a self-proclaimed connoisseur of MMORPGs. When asked to choose how outgoing he is online on a scale from 1 to 10, he claimed to be a 14. Paul stated that it is much easier to be a jerk to people within a game and not feel bad about it because there are no consequences. In real life, he noted, “you get punched and stuff like that. In game, it’s totally different. You don’t think there’s a consequence cuz it’s a fantasy realm.”

Additional subjects reported different ways of coming to interact with others. Supul Arua explained that others typically engaged him in discourse, as he did not actively seek it out. Conversely, Rose Ann sometimes engaged people and claimed to have made about 30 friends. Also partaking in more active group discourse was xMidnight Shreadx. He attested to hanging out in particular areas and joining in on conversations when he was so inclined.

The common thread in the above examples is that the degree to which participants were included in interaction was mostly at the participant’s own discretion. The design of the environment empowered participants with such flexibility. Since participants could choose where to be, whether or not to react to others, and how to react, they were directly responsible for negotiating their level of inclusion.

The result of these negotiations may serve to advance an individual toward his or her purpose. Offshot claimed that Furcadia allowed her to shoot the breeze and pass time by babbling about random things. Her ability to choose whether or not to react sustained

this motive. If she had to react, she could not be fulfilling her intentions because she would be in an undesired discourse. Yet if she could never react, she would also be unable to fulfill her purpose because she could not partake in any discourse. Negotiated inclusion empowers participants to benefit from choosing their degree of social interaction.

Transcendent Reciprocity

Rewards from participating in MMORPGs are highly individualized and transcend beyond the game into real life benefits. It would be a disservice to the mechanics of MMORPGs to look at such rewards as purely singular. It is important to recognize that while one's reward may be a specific and personal benefit, one's ongoing participation directly or indirectly assists others in achieving their specific personal benefits. Although one's interaction with others may not be a direct reciprocal exchange of common currency, his or her participation in the MMORPG is one atom that allows its existence to continue. And since its existence continues, transcendent benefits are available for those who choose that environment in which to seek them.

While transcendent reciprocity is perpetuated by a virtual community that can support it, and while rewards cannot be looked at as singular, we can still gain a robust understanding of this concept by examining it at the atomic level. In considering the data collection methods of this study, the researcher had to seek out social groups (formed of dyads and triads). From these groups he had to identify individuals who were willing to talk. After obtaining permission to chat, the researcher's focus was shifted directly upon the interviewee.

The relation between the subject and the researcher was dyadic. The social exchange that occurred within the dyad provided the researcher with the benefit of fodder for his thesis. The reward for the interviewees was not always clear, though many of them expressed enjoyment at being able to provide insight on Furcadia to an outsider.

In the participant-observation section of data collection, conversations were often confusing and overlapping, particularly if there were many fures gathered in a spot at once. For example, figure 5.4 illustrates that the dialog a participant encounters may not always be dyadic. This is because social groups are, by nature, comprised of dyads and triads. Multiple and overlapping conversations should be expected in such a setting, especially in a MMORPG where the technology does not bind participants into a single social etiquette.

Since MMORPGs support both single relations (dyads) and complex structures (social groups), it is reasonable to assert that an individual's benefit may stem either directly from a single relation, or may only exist within the presence of a social group. Yet, it cannot be ignored that dyads are the basic building blocks of both social groups and triads. Dyads represent reciprocity as a process, taking transcendence from the atomic level (individualized) to the molecular (interactions where reciprocity occurs).

Social exchange maintains that individuals will choose interactions that yield the most valuable reward. Considering such, it is reasonable to suggest that if a dyad formed in a MMORPG isn't worth reciprocity, it will dissolve. As Offshot had noted, she did not have to react when encountering another participant in Furcadia. Yet, if someone did spark her mind, she would respond. She continued in a cyclic motion with negotiated inclusion until a dyad was formed that produces a transcendent reward (someone sparked

her mind). However, in the larger social group, she may have found reciprocity within one dyad, while continuing through loops of negotiation with other participants.

Both Barry and Leif Muscleman professed to engaging in, and enjoying the ability to role-play within MMORPGs. It can be reasoned that the rewards in forming dyads link them back to personal malleability. As Leif Muscleman explained, the point of role-playing is “to let your imagination soar. Each of my alts differ a lot from me.” Inferring from this that his reward in participation was personal malleability, there lays a mutual relationship between malleability and reciprocity. Meanwhile, if role-playing was not worthwhile for Barry, it is likely that he would continue to seek that out (as dictated by social exchange, unless another, better reward came along) through negotiated inclusion until he found a dyad that satisfied his objectives.

xMidnight Shreadx indicated that his original purpose for being on Furcadia was simple enthrallment at being able to interact with people thousands of miles away. However, as his family began moving around, he came to rely on Furcadia as a place for keeping in contact with friends he had made there. The original reward he received in forming dyads was just to be a part of the dyad. However, as time progressed and his purpose changed, so did the rewards. In fact, at the time of the interview, he noted that he was only on usually between 10am and 2pm as “it seems a large portion of the immature crowd is away during those hours, so it’s a bit more relaxing”. This suggested that he stopped finding a reward in any relation he could form.

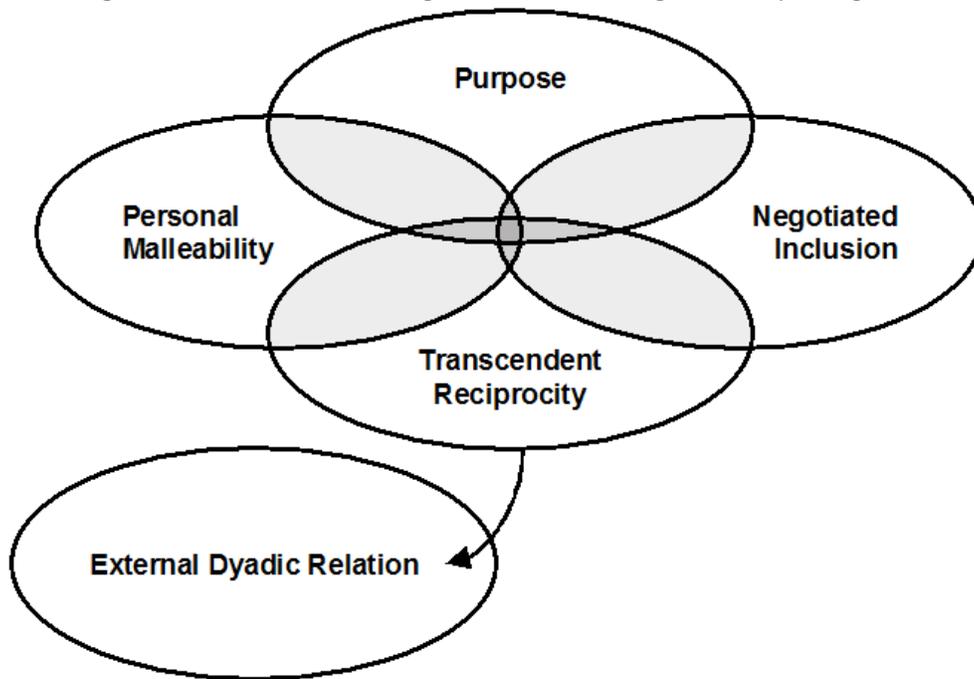
Changes in reward can be congruent with changes in purpose, as demonstrated in xMidnight Shreadx’s case. A dyad that stops producing a valued reward may be the result of a shifting motive. Even with a change in purpose, the participant may still have

dyads of value in both the current and former motives. As xMidnight Shreadx explained, he made about 10 friends that have been constant over the years. While his objective shifted, these remained steadfast.

Most participants reported at least some interactions that began in Furcadia, and later extended beyond. Leif Muscleman noted a few that he continued interacting with on Instant Messaging clients. Meanwhile, Supul Arua stated that the month prior to being interviewed, he spoke with one individual he met online for over 800 minutes on the phone. He also noted “I try to meet with as many of my online friends offline as I can. I have done it once or twice”. Rose Ann claimed “I’ve never actually met anyone off here in person, but I have spoke offline on either AIM (America Online Instant Messenger) or the phone to some of them.” This suggested that the rewards gained through participation were capable of branching out into other forums, existing independently of the environment they began in. An external dyadic relation is the result in such a case.

Figure 6.1 is a graphical representation of social exchange-centered design theory, illustrating how different elements overlap with each other. External dyadic relations are shown as exist independently, formed as a result of transcendent reciprocity.

Figure 6.1: Social Exchange-Centered Design Theory Diagram



The major characteristics of Social Exchange-Centered Design Theory.

Statement of Limitations

The scope of this paper was dictated by being a Master's thesis. The genesis of this study was at the beginning of the semester, with data-collection occurring throughout, and the actual writing occurring during the three months beyond the completion of the academic year. These major limitations are as follows.

While three interviews were conducted offline, none of these interviews were with participants of Furcadia. It was established in this paper that in an ethnography, it is acceptable (if not mandatory) to collect data virtually when studying a virtual environment. However, to further triangulate the data, it would have been prudent to do a portion of interviews with Furcadia members offline. In the course of data-collection, the researcher noted that face-to-face meetings were more spontaneous, and that nonverbal

cues could be deduced to enhance the meaning of statements. Hence, richer data may have been obtained about Furcadia through face-to-face interviews.

Another weakness in the data-collection was observations. Participant-observation is an essential technique in ethnography, but not one that was able to be fully exploited. Lori Kendall's study of the MUD Blue Sky took place over a few years, during which time she not only interviewed many participants, but she also engaged in continuous participant-observation. In contrast, the observations in this paper occurred during a period of a month and a half. None of these observations included the same fures twice. Kendall's comprehensive participant-observation allowed for an expansive understanding of Blue Sky through getting to know participants intimately. This study was not afforded this luxury.

While this paper makes a case for Social Exchange-Centered Design as an explanation for participant interaction in MMORPGs, this new theory has not been robustly tested. This limitation is severe as the strength of any theory is measured through additional and continuous testing. Although this study did use various data collection techniques to add credence to the results, the majority of data came from Furcadia. Currently, the most popular MMORPGs are subscription-based, making them private forums. To expand testing of SECD, one would need to consider the ethos of studying a less public community, and to obtain resources to pay the subscription fees.

Questions for Further Research

Social Exchange-Centered Design needs to be further tested to gauge its credibility. In concluding this study, the need for such testing raises a number of additional questions. These would serve as expanded insight as to how participants

interact in MMORPGs and why they are encouraged to do so. The questions are as follows:

- Although MMORPGs support multiple participant purposes, do some support more purposes than others? If so, what elements can be identified to explain expanded support?
- Does physical malleability (within the game) have a reciprocal relationship with persona malleability?
- Does personal malleability impact the ability to form relationships based on trust and honesty? How does this compare to real life trust building?
- Is there a skewed playing field for negotiated inclusion in regard to the choice of an avatar's sex?
- Does in-game transcendent reciprocity impact the social exchange expectations of dyads that were not formed in the MMORPG?
- How do relations that have extended beyond the game compare in their strength to parallel relations formed in real life?
- Do participants who contribute more than average time to MMORPGs exhibit traits similar to those who have Internet and/or video game addictions?

Section 7: Closing Vignette

Following a long day at the office, Sal finally arrived home. Some guys from work were going out to happy hour, but Sal had elected to pass. He didn't have a whole lot in common with his coworkers, so such evenings usually did not prove to be overly enjoyable.

Throwing a frozen dinner in the microwave, Sal bounced to the living room and switched on his PC. He tore off the tie from around his neck and ducked into his bedroom, slipping into a loose pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Returning to the kitchen, he retrieved his meal just as the buzzer went off, and grabbed a fork. The familiar sound of windows starting came from behind, and Sal headed to his computer chair grabbing a cold diet soda on the way.

As he had many nights for the past three months, Sal quickly scanned his email, and then immediately launched Furcadia. A high-pitched voice purred the word welcome, and Sal was pleased to see SleekWatcher back in the Imaginarium. He stood in a hall opposite two statues that resembled anthropomorphic mice. Furies sat and in various positions of the sparsely furnished space. Through a doorway he headed, coming out into a courtyard that was crossed with two cobblestone paths. On the grass sat the portals to numerous user-created dreams. Spying one entitled "Inn of the Final Home", SleekWatcher crossed into its path. He was immediately whisked away.

SleekWatcher was now outdoors on a path that was surrounded by large trees and snaked around a cropping of boulders. The dialog box noted "welcome to the tree-top town of Si-Lace. Northeast lies the Inn, famous for its spiced potatoes. Southeast finds Doorknob's Rock, a place where old friends can meet. Southwest leads to the Heroes

Tomb. Northwest will take you on kendar's adventure". Turning, SleekWatcher headed Northeast.

Sal remembered when he had first entered this dream. His friend Lauranitalus had built it, and every time he visited, he could see new details that she had added or changed. She took a lot of pride in this dream as it was modeled after a setting in one of her favorite fantasy novels.

SleekWatcher approached the Inn, a red building that looked as if it were made out of tall wooden beams. Two barrels sat on either side of a rounded doorway. Three fures sat out front. After greeting them, he continued inside.

Square tables circled by cushions dotted the Inn's interior. Barrels were randomly spread out against the walls of the small room. A countertop stretched one pace from the northeast wall, running parallel. A fire pit sat in one corner, a new addition since last night. There were 5 fures, some standing, and some sitting. He spotted a familiar green bunny with shoulder-length blonde hair. Her leggings were a deep green, and black boots adorned her feet. A conversation was in progress:

Tanus Half-Canine: she was on dr.who?

Sir Dimblade has to go

Sir Dimblade: buhbye everyone

Tanus Half-Canine waves by at Sir

Lauranitalus: SLEEK!!!!

Sir Dimblade waves

Tanus Half-Canine: yep

Silverwind hiccups.

Tanus Half-Canine: irl?

SleekWatcher: Hey Laura, I am sorry I missed ya last night :(

Tanus Half-Canine: what episode?

Tanus Half-Canine: let me google it

Lauranitalus frowns and pouts

Silverwind burps.

Silverwind: Excuse me.

Tanus Half-Canine: the girl in the fireplace

Tanus Half-Canine: think she played

Tanus Half-Canine: mme. de pompadour

Tanus Half-Canine: Uh oh, SleekW done f'ed up!

Lauranitalus: Yah, fool!

SleekWatcher: Long story, I got held up at working finishing some stupid project, and by the time I got home, it was past my usual time. Such a miserable day, I just went to bed!

Silverwind: Where'd that Sir go?

Tanus Half-Canine: He's gone...had to go buy a dragon or something.

Lauranitalus: Yah, I figured! I am not mad, I was teasin' ya! No biggie!

SleekWatcher: Phew...after we spent 2 hrs on the phone last week, I figured you knew me to be a sensible guy.

Tanus Half-Canine: Oooooo....romantic

Lauranitalus: Shut up, I was helpin' Sleek learn how ta make a dream

SleekWatcher: Yah!

Sal realized he'd been smiling this whole time. Maybe he was developing a bit of a crush on Lauranitalus. He had met her while he was sitting by the lake in Naia one night, chatting with some furies that had he decided to sit near. Eventually, Lauranitalus came by, and stopped to talk with some furies she knew. At this point in time they were discussing Aristotle. As a major in rhetoric, she was able to add value to the discourse. She mentioned a dream that was based on a series of books she had read, and as it turned out Sal had read them too. He visited her dream the next week, and found her there with the same furies he'd encountered by the lake. They began talking about the books they had both read, and soon the conversation evolved. Then every time he logged on, Sal made it a point to see if she was around. After chatting for a few weeks, she began to teach him how to customize his own dreams.

Sal realized his soda can was empty. Tossing it in the trash, he took the last bite of his dinner and brought it back into the kitchen. Throwing the plastic tray out, Sal flung the fork into the kitchen sink with a loud clang. Without missing a beat, he flung open the refrigerator door and pulled out the last diet cola. Shutting the kitchen light, he

plopped himself back down in his computer chair. He realized he better take his time with this soft drink, because he would likely be sitting there until at least midnight again! Scrolling over the dialog he missed during his brief trip to the other room, Sal's face was again lit with a smile.

Appendix A: Glossary

- **ARPANET:** US Department of Defense's Advanced Research Project's Agency's network of connected terminals that grew through expansively throughout the 60's and 70's to become The Internet (Hine 2000; Rheingold 1993).
- **Avatar:** "An electronic image that represents and is manipulated by a computer user" (Merriam-Webster Online 2006)
- **BBS:** Computer Bulletin Board Systems that emerged in the late 70s, allowing users access to stored software, messaging systems, and public forums (Rheingold 1993).
- **Chat Room:** Online conversational forum allowing users to communicate in ways similar to being in a real-life room together (Turkle 1995).
- **Dyad:** The most basic building block of society is the dyad, the relationship between two individuals (Bohannon 1995).
- **Engagement:** Human-Centered Design characteristic creating a sense of empathy and invitation to participate (Cooley 1999).
- **External Dyadic Relation:** The migration of a relation formed in a virtual system to a system different than the one it originated in.
- **Furre:** Avatar that is the incarnation of an anthropomorphic animal.
- **Human-Centered Design:** Systems that "provide tools that would support human skill and ingenuity rather than machines to objectivize that knowledge" (Cooley 1999).

- **Inclusion:** Characteristic of Human-Centered Design stating that a user should feel that they are comfortable with the environment, and on friendly terms with it (Cooley 1999).
- **IRC:** Internet Chat Relay, program created in 1988 that provides users with multiple “channels” in which to chat.
- **Lurking:** A form of nonparticipatory observation that allows the user to analyze the best tactic for joining, and provides clues as to who will make useful subjects (Catterall & Maclaran 2002).
- **Malleability:** Human-Centered Design Characteristic explaining the ability to mold a situation or environment “to suit one’s own instrumental needs, ascetic tastes, and craft traditions” (Cooley 1999; 68).
- **MMORPG:** Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, an “online computer role-playing game(s) in which a large number of players interact with one another in a virtual world” (Wikipedia “MMORPG” 2006).
- **MUD:** Multi-User Dungeon, word-based electronic forums where people can engage in various activities (Rheingold 1993).
- **Multipurpose:** Characteristic of Social Exchange-Centered Design noting that systems designed under this theory will support the individual motives of many different users.
- **Negotiated Inclusion:** Social Exchange-Centered Design characteristic stating that users in such a system will have control over their level of inclusion with others in the environment.

- **Ownership:** Characteristic of Human-Centered Design indicating “a sense of belonging and even companionship as traditional craftsman may feel with a favorite machine tool” (Cooley 1999; 66).
- **Participant-Observation:** An approach to research in which the researcher becomes an active participant in the group being studied (Creswell 1998).
- **Personal Malleability:** Characteristic of Social Exchange-Centered Design indicating a system designed to empower the user with many different choices in both visual and textual identity.
- **Purpose:** Human-Centered Design characteristic noting that such a system will support a user’s motive in using it (Cooley 1999).
- **Responsiveness:** Characteristic of Human-Centered Design explaining that such a system will be conducive to individual needs and ways of doing things (Cooley 1999).
- **Social Categories:** A classification scheme derived from individual or collective characteristics such as race, age, genders, or other attributes regardless of the dyads or triads within that individual’s life (Bohannon 1995).
- **Social Exchange Theory:** Idea that the actions and behaviors people exhibit stem from the rewards they expect to receive from doing so (Abrahamson 1981).
- **Social Exchange-Centered Design Theory:** Design of an engaging system that promotes individual motives through empowerment within environmental limitations.

- **Social Groups:** Complex systems of dyads and triads that may themselves be parts of larger dyads and triads where members may or may not directly know one another (Bohannan 1995).
- **Social Network:** Linked dyads existing within the absence of any triads (Bohannan 1995).
- **Transcendence:** Characteristic of Human-Centered Design explaining that in such a system, the user is encouraged to go beyond immediate surroundings and seek broader, higher-level knowledge (Cooley 1999).
- **Transcendent Reciprocity:** Social Exchange-Centered Design characteristic noting that rewards from such a system are highly individualized and transcend beyond the game into real life benefits.
- **Triad:** Occurs when a third party is added to a dyad, influencing, moderating, or altering the formation (Abrahamson 1981).
- **Triangulation:** A means to verify data using different collection methods to recognize which data is most credible (Creswell 1999).
- **Usenet:** Community of computers connected for the purpose of exchanging messages in a structured setting in such a fashion that it allowed others to respond to previous postings as a type of ongoing dialog (Rheingold 1993).

Appendix B: Ethics Protocols

Ethics Protocol: Face to Face Version

Ethics Protocol for Study of Online Community and Relationships

[Michael Scialdone]

This authorization is being requested in part to fulfill requirements of the State University of NY Institute of Technology's Human Subjects Research Review Board as well as state and federal regulations regarding the use of human subjects in research. The project involves a study of community that may be used in my master's research at the SUNYIT Information Design and Technology Master's program. Excerpts or rewritten versions may also be submitted to professional journals for publication. The case study involves qualitatively studying how humans form meaningful relationships within the context of a Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game. The work involves participant and non-participant-observations online, as well as face-to-face individualized and group interviews.

I can be reached at 315-269-7283. I would be happy to answer any questions about the project.

I would like to reassure you that as a participant in this project you have several, rights.

- Your participation in these studies is entirely voluntary.
- You are free to decline to answer any question at any time,
- You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

My notes (electronic, written, or recorded from meetings, interviews, and observations) will be kept strictly confidential. Excerpts from these notes may be made part of the final thesis.

Copies of the final publications will be supplied whenever possible and as requested.

I would be grateful if you would sign this form to show that you have read its contents.

_____ signed
_____ printed
_____ dated

Ethics Protocol: Online Version

Ethics Protocol for Study of Online Community and Relationships

(Cut and Paste the entire document below this line into an email)

Subject review form for thesis by Michael Scialdone.

Forming Meaningful Social Relationships via Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games

This authorization is being requested in part to fulfill requirements of the State University of NY Institute of Technology's Human Subjects Research Review Board as well as state and federal regulations regarding the use of human subjects in research. The project involves a study of community that may be used in my master's research at the SUNYIT Information Design and Technology Master's program. Excerpts or rewritten versions may also be submitted to professional journals for publication. The case study involves qualitatively studying how humans form meaningful relationships within the context of a Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game. The work involves participant and non-participant-observations online, as well as face-to-face individualized and group interviews.

I can be reached at 315-269-7283 or through the email address below. I would be happy to answer any questions about the project.

I would like to reassure you that as a participant in this project you have several rights.

- Your participation in these studies is entirely voluntary.
- You are free to decline to answer any question at any time,
- You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

My notes (electronic, written, or recorded from meetings, interviews, and observations) will be kept strictly confidential. Excerpts from these notes may be made part of the final thesis.

Copies of the final publications will be supplied whenever possible and as requested.

I would be grateful if you would sign this form to show that you have read its contents.

_____ (type your full name and date here) _____

By typing your name above, you agree that you have read all of the comments above, are over the age of 18, and are a willing participant. This electronic signature will be kept on file. It is recommended that you keep a copy of this form for your own records.

Please email this form to scialdm@sunyit.edu

Appendix C: Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol (Original)

Time:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Interviewee Screen Name:

Interview character attributes:

(Description of study)

Why do you participate on Furcadia?

Is there any personal significance to the visuals of the character you have created?

What is the significance to the name _____?

When do you typically go on Furcadia? (Day, time, or mood)

How did you first hear of Furcadia?

How would you categorize the typical Furcadia player?

How do you typically meet others on Furcadia?

What does friendship mean on Furcadia?

What value do you place on relationships you have formed on Furcadia?

How many friends have you made on Furcadia?

How strong would you say these friendships are?

What, if anything, do you have in common with other users?

Has relationships formed in this community extend into other forums?

If so, which?

How much time do you spend per week in Furcadia?

What do you feel is the approximate ratio of males vs. females on Furcadia?

Do you engage in other MMORPGs? If so, how do they compare to Furcadia?

How much of your real life do you disclose to others on Furcadia?

How would you describe your personality in real life?

How does your Furcadia persona compare to that of your real one?

How do your other online personas compare to your real-life one?

Have you ever pretended to be someone you are not online?

How close do you think other users' online identities are to their own?

How would you categorize your level of outgoingness in real life (1 to 10)?

Do you prefer face-to-face or online communication?

Do you engage in other online activities while on Furcadia?

Do you participate in MMORPGs other than Furcadia?

If so, how much time do you spend on those per week?

What do you like most about Furcadia?

What would you change about Furcadia if you could?

Interview Protocol (Updated)

Note: Changes in italics
Interview Protocol
Changes 4/8/06

Time:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Interviewee Screen Name:
Interview character attributes:

Why do you participate on Furcadia?

Is there any personal significance to the visuals of the character you have created?

What is the significance to the name _____?

When do you typically go on Furcadia? (Day, time, or mood)

How did you first hear of Furcadia?

~~*How would you categorize the typical Furcadia player?*~~

~~*How do you typically meet others on Furcadia?*~~

How do you typically come to interact with others?

~~*What does friendship mean on Furcadia?*~~

~~*What value do you place on relationships you have formed on Furcadia?*~~

Have you or do you take anything of value away from these interactions?

How many ~~friends~~ *relations* have you made on Furcadia?

How strong would you say these *relations* ~~friendships~~ are?

What, if anything, do you have in common with other users?

Has ~~relationships~~ *relations* formed in this community extend into other forums?

If so, which?

How much time do you spend per week in Furcadia?

What do you feel is the approximate ratio of males vs. females on Furcadia?

Do you engage in other MMORPGs? If so, how do they compare to Furcadia?

How much of your real life do you disclose to others on Furcadia?

How would you describe your personality in real life?

How does your Furcadia persona compare to that of your real one?

How do your other online personas compare to your real-life one?

Have you ever pretended to be someone you are not online?

How close do you think other users' online identities are to their own?

How would you categorize your level of outgoingness in real life (1 to 10)?

Do you prefer face-to-face or online communication?

Do you engage in other online activities while on Furcadia?

Do you participate in MMORPGs other than Furcadia?

If so, how much time do you spend on those per week?

What do you like most about Furcadia?

What would you change about Furcadia if you could?

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