

Making sense of community in RuneScape

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Notions of community in a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG)

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Author:

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UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY



Abstract

This study looks to detail the notion of community and social structures that support RuneScape as a social entity. This is accomplish using a survey of around 1200 players, semi-structured interviews with over 40 of the respondents. The two limitations of this approach are bias towards the 'main' version of the game, RuneScape3, and the lack of direct comparative ethnography through participant observation. However, comparative ethnography by proxy was achieved through the structure of interviews. The main findings of the study are that the overall community of RuneScape is like that of a nation, with an 'imagined' notion of itself. In actuality the community is fragmented into thematic sub-community groups catalysing around the RuneScape clan system, which closely parallels communities of practice structures. Players are bound to these communities and RuneScape as a whole through a messy assemblage of bondage, comprising of gameplay and social bonds. Therefore, RuneScape, as an MMORPG, is not addictive in and of itself, because of a mix of gameplay and social factors binding players to it. Game designers need to appreciate that MMORPGs represent messy assemblages combining gameplay and social elements, meaning that changes they make impact on players lives.

Acknowledgments

An enormous thank you to the nearly 1200 people who took part in the survey, for all the time and effort spent as well as the willingness to share their own experiences with me. I'm indebted to over 40 of these people for giving up their time to engaged in interviews with me over the course of 3 weeks. Special thanks must got to Thomas Sweeny, Matt Heath and the rest of Jagex's community management team who graciously gave up their time to help, letting me utilise their experience, and promoting the study through Jag's community platforms. I must also thank Dr Sarah Clemerson who read through my dissertation, from a fresh perspective, and without whose insight the quality of the semantic structure would have been much lower. My unending thanks must go to Tina Walker, for providing a suitable devil's advocate helping me to find my argument and structure. A particular thank you must go to my supervisor Dr Hannah Knox, who has put up with my disjointed and non-linear writing style throughout this project, always offering encouraging advice. Last but not least, I should show appreciation to Hurgen Theans for providing the original spark of inspiration, that MMORPGs could be a interesting topics through which to investigate community.

I dedicate this to my great uncle Kenneth Morris, 26th November 1931

to

23th August 2015.

Take the little sail down, Light the little light. This is the way to the, Garden of the night.

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Glossary

Away From Keyboard (AFK) skilling

This is a method for training a RuneScape skill which does not require the players full attention all of the time. This may be something repetitive were the player just has to click every 30 seconds or a processing task which is done in batches taking a few moments to play the processing animation over and over for each item in the batch. During these periods of time the players attention is not needed in the game world so they can focus elsewhere, do other things outside of the game and not affect the in-game activities they are doing. Quite often this is used to alleviate the boredom associated with doing the same thing over and over again, grinding.

Away from Keyboard (AFK)

When a player's attention is not fully focused on the game world. This could be either they physically are not at the computer or that the browser window that RuneScape is running in is not currently in focus. Since the advent of tabs in web browsers this makes it much easier to be AFK for short periods of time, but more frequently.

Cape (Completionist, Skill)

These are material rewards for achievement within RuneScape. There are numerous different types of cape, from the plain coloured capes to special quest rewards. The capes of most interest to this study are those awarded for skill achievements (see Appendix 1: Table 8). These are awarded for obtaining certain xp levels in RuneScapes skill system. There are a few different types but all revolve around obtaining high levels through a lot of grinding. For example, a trimmed version for players with multiple skilles at level 99, a master skill cape for a level 120 skill, and then the completionist cape, also available timed, which requires the completion of all RuneScape content it gets unequipped at each new content update.

Devious Multi-User Dungeon (MUD)

DeviousMUD is the precursor to RuneScape. It was a multiplayer virtual world which used a graphical interface, unlike the text most MUDs used. MUDs were also the forbears of the modern MMORPGs, using role-playing game elements the player developed a character who explored a fantasy world. Most MUDs were designed to simulate Dungeons & Dragons series of dice games.

Experience, Exp, Xp

This is the fundamental indicator of progression within RuneScape. Players accrue experience points by doing activities in-game that are associated with one of the skills within RuneScape. As experience is collected certain threshold amounts are reached and these are known as levels. After attaining a new level the player unlocks the ability to do new activities associated with that skill. Doing these new activities often produces greater levels of experience. The levels thresholds are set along an exponential curve so each level takes more experience to reach than the last.

Free-to-Play (F2P)

RuneScape has an area of the world and a selection of skills which are available only to paying Member's (see Appendix 1: Table 6). The Free-to-play area is available to everyone regardless of if they pay Jagex or not, so long as they sign up for an account they can access this area of the world and a limited set skills (see Appendix 1:Table 7). It is wrong to suggest that the free accounts offer just a demo version of RuneScape. Originally RuneScape was totally free with payment only brought in to support the running cost of the game as its popularity grew. Free-to-play still stands alone as a playable version of RuneScape, all be it harder due to the lack of the more effective skill training methods. Some of the RuneScape players see free-to-play challenge and extra achievement to reach high levels within.

Gold Pieces (Gp)

This is the main currency of RuneScape. It is not unusual for players in the mid-game to have several million gp, by the end-game hundreds of millions or even billions of gp are not uncommon. RuneScape economy has gone through several periods of inflation over the years and balancing it is a challenge Jagex constantly faces.

Grind

To train a skill, by doing a repetitive task or series of task multiple times. This may include moving between several locations in the game world to access different materials, and services. Quite often players choose methods which can be done partially AFK to eliminate some of the boredom of doing such repetitive tasks.

Jagex

The company responsible for developing the game of RuneScape, as well as a number of other titles. It is run by a multi-award winning developer. The majority of its library is browser based games, though it has branched out into other platforms for some titles in more recent years.

Jagex is an acronym for JAva Gaming EXperiance, which points to the programming language used to develop their flagship game, RuneScape. Java has a number of technical limitations which Jagex has overcome making RuneScape one of the most technically accomplished games ever developed for the browser. Java is a programming language which works across multiple platforms, is very easy for the user to install, and is designed to work well for web based applications. Using Java allows Jagex to target a larger audience, of computer users across many different system configurations, age bands, and technical experience.

Level 120

True skill mastery, this refers to reaching 104,273,167 experience which is about eight times the experience needed to reach level 99. The Dungeoneering skill, is the only skill in RuneScape which can level higher than 99. Achieving a level 120 grants the player access to a master skill cape, these exist for all skills, and for the other skills unlock once the player reaches enough accumulated experience. (see Appendix 1: Table 10)

Level 99

Skill mastery, the maximum level a skill can be within RuneScape, with one exception. Achieving a level 99 takes a large amount of xp, since levels are awarded on a exponentially increasing curve. The same amount of xp is needed to get from level 0 to 92 as it takes to get from level 92 to 99. Achieving level 99 in a skill unlocks a skill cape related to that skill as a reward. (see Appendix 1: Table 10)

Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) Role Playing Game (RPG) (MMORPG)

An game which blends together elements of a role playing game, where the player takes the role of a character they design and make their own, with a world populated within which other players can join from an international audience. Often associated with a sci-fi or fantasy setting, these games are set in virtual worlds, populated with hundreds of thousands of NPCs and players.

MMORPGs are big business RuneScape alone in its life time has generated over £450 million (Jagex 2014a).

Non-Player Characters (NPCs)

Computer controlled characters in RuneScape. For example, Cows, chickens, sheep, shop keepers, bankers, and quest givers.

Noob, Newbie

Slang for new players with limited experience in playing a game. Is likely to make mistakes and ask questions which are considered 'silly' by more experience players. New players to RuneScape must pass through Tutorial Island before being allowed into the main world of RuneScape, this period teaches players the basic controls of the game before they arrive in the starting town of Lumbridge, where other players and NPC tutors are available to assist them learning the specifics of skills. Some of the early quests in RuneScape also teach players how to play effectively.

Pay-to-Play (P2P), Member

Originally these accounts were introduced to help pay for the maintenance of RuneScape. The benefits of membership(see Appendix 1: Table 6) include access to a much richer world, more skills (see Appendix 1: Table 9), items, more quests and lore. The majority of RuneScape's players are members and play with access to this additional content.

Player vs Monsters

Fighting monsters within RuneScape for their 'drops', the items the drop on death. There are many places within RuneScape that players can kill NPC monsters to earn gp, rare items, and earn xp. There are also several Boss monsters which require the use of certain tactics in order to defeat and even worldwide events which effect the lore of the game. The most recent of these was run in July 2015, called Tuska the World Eater, which required players to batter an NPC monster multiple times over the month and the resulting victories/losses would determine the future direction of the lore and change the shape of the world map.

Player vs Player (PvP), Player-Killer (Pker), Killer

A player who fights with other players, instead of NPC monsters, to gain xp and collect the items the looser drops upon death. These battles can take place in the Wilderness as well as the Duel Arena. The PKers were among the first people to form unofficial clans within RuneScape before clans where officially introduced into the game. This Pker community died back when the Wilderness was removed in 2007, and has only slightly recovered since its return in 2011.

Quest

Quests in RuneScape provide lore about characters and the world around the player, completing them also enables the player to access a cape. Quests are given out by NPCs and as a reward for completing them the player receives, items, gp, and xp. Quests often have requirements in order to complete them, these do not tend to be hard limits of starting the quest, but softer limits preventing progression through the quest without the appropriate skill levels to complete certain tasks.

Skill

"Skills are a player's trainable abilities that may be levelled throughout their gameplay. Any given skill can be trained by various actions that relate to the skill. Performing any of these various actions grants the player experience in that skill."

(RuneScape.Wikia 2015b).

See Appendix 1: Table 7 and Table 9 for a list of the RuneScape skill and a brief description.

Skiller

A player who plays to gain higher skill levels. Often produces items as a result of training skills which they sell to buy more materials.

Wilderness

A distinct area of the game world where players can kill other



Figure 1: RuneScape skills menu (RuneScape.Wikia 2015a)

players. Players are notified when they cross into the Wilderness with text appearing in the game interface as well has them having to cross an in-game obstacle. This was not always the case, when it was first introduced it was possible to walk into the wilderness accidentally, this was exploited by players to kill people who were not there intentionally to get their items.

Worlds/Servers

Copies of the world of RuneScape hosted separately with a limited number of player slots, this limit is based on technical limitation and the need to position servers worldwide to improve performance for international players. Players choose a world to play on when they login. Players can chat between worlds using the chat system. Players on different would cannot see each other nor trade with each other.



Figure 2: RuneScape development timeline (Jagex 2015e)

Introduction

This research examines the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG)¹
RuneScape, and attempts to detail the notion of community and social structures that support MMORPGs as social entities. This is important due to the number of people playing and the amount of hours they invest into the game, rather than other forms of social interaction.

RuneScape consists of a virtual world called Gielinor full of kingdoms to explore, skills² to learn, monsters to fight, and quests³ to complete. It is developed by Jagex Ltd⁴ for over fourteen years, in various forms, constantly being updated with additional playable content. Players have always been able to interact with each other by trading, and friends chat. Another aspect of the RuneScape community is its relatively stability and loyalty during all the content and version changes. Couple that with the distinctive technical position RuneScape holds within the MMORPG market, of a web browser based game, with a very low barrier to entry such that almost every computer can play RuneScape. This means that RuneScape can target demographics much larger than most MMORPGs. Being browser based means players can multi-task whilst playing, opening up whole new realms of possible polymedia integration for its social structure. Add to that a membership⁵ model, with an option for restricted free-to-play⁶ accounts, and the complexity of the social interactions increases. All together this makes RuneScape an interesting place to examine the notion of community and social structures which support MMORPGs as social entities.

RuneScape currently holds or, has held, a number of Guinness World Records (2015) including:

- Most popular free-to-play MMORPG in 2008 (200+ million accounts)⁷
- Greatest aggregate time playing an MMORPG in 2012 (443+ billion minutes of game time)⁸,
- Most prolifically updated MMORPG in 2013 (912+ content updates)⁹
- Most fish in a videogame in 2012 (8+ billion fish)¹⁰.

² See Glossary.

¹ See Glossary.

³ See Glossary.

⁴ See Glossary.

⁵ See Glossary.

⁶ See Glossary.

⁷ Majority of players 94% from 'western' nations with only 2% from Asia (Jagex 2014b). One of the pioneers of the MMORPG genre, which has been part of millions of childhoods.

⁸ Average session for an active player is 2 hours a day (weekdays) and 2 hours 32 minutes a day (weekends) (Jagex 2015c).

⁹ Unlike other MMORPGs Jagex has provided content updates to RuneScape almost every month for the past 14 years, on top of the usual bug fixing updates.

¹⁰ Evidence of the repetitive, grinding, nature of RuneScape's progression system.

My study uses a survey of nearly 1200 players, interviews with 40+ of them, and ethnographic analysis of RuneScape's supporting environment drawing from public sites, such as YouTube, and community sites such as RuneScape.wikia, a player run encyclopaedia¹¹.

Researching MMORPG communities is problematic because of the nature of their virtual worlds which present practical/ethical challenges, for example, getting informed consent, proving age, and public/private space inconsistencies. It is these issues, and others, specific to RuneScape, which have prevented the use of the primary anthropological method, participant observation. The decision not to use participant observation within the virtual world of RuneScape was not taken lightly, due to the ramifications on my study of a lack of comparison between what people say they do and what they actually do. However, steps are taken to mitigate the loss of ethnographic comparison through the construction of the interviews. By wording interview questions such that they asked both about both personal experiences, and what others might be perceiving, it is possible to regain some of the ethnographic comparison lost by not using participant observation. The sheer volume of interviews acts to increase the quality of this ethnographic comparison by proxy.

My study uses a detailed description of RuneScape's evolution (see Figure 2) from a small game of a few players, into a multi-national phenomena, and also explores how the RuneScape community expresses itself. The discussion concentrates on understanding:

- Community from a player perspective,
- The social structures that lie at the heart of MMORPGs,
- And how the emergent digital technology has transformed the nature of community.

It begins using Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined community, historically used to portray the nation-state, to explain the method the current RuneScape3 community uses to maintain its overall community coherence, and self image. The formation of social structures within RuneScape is explored using Lave & Wenger's (1991) communities of practice, since sharing practice and knowledge lies at that heart of MMORPGs. The structural elements are bound together by Pearce & Artemesia's (2009) communities of play, which describes the bonds holding the community together, allowing for the stable community despite the dynamic nature of the community environment. The entire discussion is set within the context of social spaces in the digital age (Walker 2015; Walker 2014) where polymedia environments abound (Madianou 2014; Madianou 2013; Madianou & Miller 2012a; Madianou & Miller 2012b).

٠

¹¹ It is the largest/most popular of its kind.

Literature Review

Anthropology in a digital age

The digital age of sociality has been made possible by the rapid expansion of the internet, a computing infrastructure that covers the globe defined by Uimonen (2001) as a "network of networks", over the last thirty years. This has allowed for the proliferation of media communication, which is easier to describe by describing what it is not, namely face to face communication (Spituluk 2001). The internet-based groups or collectives, which are commonly called online communities, are the source of many questions for anthropologists. For example, how is power manifested? Or given that these communities are cultural products, of cultural products, is a different method of investigation needed? Though, for my study, the most interesting is, "Is the concept of community itself misleading?" (Wilson & Peterson 2002, p.449), because the conceptualisation of community is frequently packaged together with assumptions about the environment in which it occurs, and in online environments these are often vastly oversimplifications.

Although having an early interest in new media, anthropology failed to produce any serious ethnographic study of the internet and its social practices until early 2000's, because there was a lack of a definitive anthropological approach (Miller & Slater 2000). Wilson & Peterson (2002) postulated that this may be due to anthropologies positioning of media as peripheral to culture (Dickly 1997), or viewing technology as context for, and not part of, culture (Aronowitz 1996; Hakken 1999; Latour 1992; Pfaffenberger 1992).

Much of the initial work on the internet and its impact on culture, saw it as revolutionary. Placing on it the "capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-democracy" (Rheingold 1993), or altering our perceptions (Poster 1990), or creating an entire new networked age (Castell 1996). Over time these more radical ideas have been replaced by a "normalisation of cyberspace" (Margolis & Resnick 2000), and eventually by polymedia environments (Madianou 2014; Madianou 2013; Madianou & Miller 2012a). This incorporates the "historically constituted sociocultural practices within, and outside of, mediated communication [...] that emerge from new information and communication technologies" (Wilson & Peterson 2002, p.453). For people who are immersed in the internet treating it as, "continuous with, and embedded in, other social spaces, that happens within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape" (Miller & Slater 2000, p.5), is apt. The contribution of anthropology to studies in a digital age should be to "break up the 'massness' of the media... by recognising the complex ways in which people are engaged in processes of making and interpreting media works in relation to their cultural, social, and historical circumstances" (Ginsburg 1994, p.5). Page 14 of 105

Digital communities

Digital sociality is now an integral part of peoples everyday lives, with group internet mediated communication having been the focus of debate in the literature as to whether they constitute community or not (Feenberg & Bakardjieva 2004). Community has been a focus of anthropological study for some time, however, it has proved a difficult category to define since individuals can be bound to different groups, in different ways, and to different extents. Meaning that the notion of community is often more fluid that it at first appears. At its most basic the discussion has pivoted around whether or not face-to-face communication is required for a group to be considered a community and then a dialectic debate about whether such communities are real or imagined (Coalhoun 1991; Markham 1998; Rheingold 1993; Thomsen et al. 1998).

"[A community is a] group of people who share common culture, values and/or interests, based on social identity and/or territory, and who have some means of recognizing, and (inter)acting upon, these commonalities." (Gregory et al. 2009, p.103)

Focusing on this dialectic approach means that "we miss the ways in which real communities of practice employ a whole ecology of media as they think together about matters that concern them" (Agre 1999, p.4). My study takes a similar view to Anderson (1983, p.18) that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined", so "some sort of vitality runs through all aspects of community life, regardless of the medium on which it relies" (Feenberg & Bakardjieva 2004, p.37).

Anderson (1983) looks at large scale community through an anthropological, rather than, political lens. Arguing that it is material-cultural practices of communication media, in his example termed 'print-capitalism', that creates/maintains large scale communities such as nations, in the in the absence of face-to-face contact. The Anderson's ultimate argument in *Imagined Communities* is that large scale community, such as a nation, is impossible to achieve without social constructs and shared experiences which exist interlinked with the minds of those in the community.

In the view of Wilson and Peterson (2002, pp.456–457) "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 [...] regardless of the ways in which the community members interact". Thusly community is not defined by such dialectics but by the thoughts of the people who form a part of that community.

Much of the initial work on online community described their supposedly "killer implications" (Feenberg & Bakardjieva 2004) as they existed on a new medium, thinking of McLuhan's (1968) "the medium is the message". For example, Rheingold (1993) postulated that over time they would become a new revitalised public sphere (Habermas 1989). In reality it turned out that online groups have often defied the predictions of optimists and realists alike, being neither "uplifting or degrading and much more often simply amusing, instrumental, or inconsequential" (Feenberg & Bakardjieva 2004, p.39).

Humans colonised the systems of the internet "by implementing within it a staggering variety of old, hybrid, and brand new forms of human sociality". People have created the polymedia environment of the internet (Madianou & Miller 2012a; Madianou & Miller 2012b), with "the implications and significance of what these groups build [depending] on the shape that they give to the space they create, and the relationships produced within it" (Feenberg & Bakardjieva 2004, pp.39–40). People use polymedia environment to create a flexible space to suit their own needs (Walker 2015; Walker 2014).



Figure 3: RuneScape summarised (Jagex 2015f)

Community and space

It is important for my study to understand how communities conduct themselves within different types of space and place. Space and place are two very integrated and well conceptualised theories within human geography. Massey's book *For Space* (2005) describes dynamic space which is built as an assemblage, formed from the paths travelled, communications had, and other networks people form around themselves. Building on Massey's work, Kitchen & Dodge (2011) propose code/space, that computer-mediation forms a part of the assemblage of space. In this way the code which manages the interactions, and the people who designed/implemented it, also plays a role in determining how the space functions.

Such high level approaches to the creation of space can be used in combination with the idea of a spatial triad (Lefebvre 1991), which is often used to describe the lower level interactions occurring within spaces. Working from the premise that "spatial constructions matter for the sense of community" (2002, p.405), Gotved builds from Lefebvre's triad suggesting a topology for digital spatiality, Interface, Social and Metaphorical dimensions, through which interactions and the formation of space/place can be described for digital communities (see Figure 4). Walker (2015) defines the dimensions as such:

Interface space, the 'physical products' of social interaction

Social space, "the totality of the interaction, interpretations, expectations and demarcations" (Gotved, 2002, pg 410) for that actor within the community

Metaphorical space, the imagined geographies perceived within the code ether that exists beyond the interface space

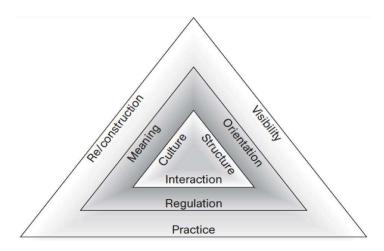


Figure 4: The Construction of Cybersocial Reality (Gotved 2005)

Walker (2015; 2014) combines these theories together to form a layered space approach, which describes how community can function when their social exchange crosses between 'virtual' and 'real' worlds.

Anthropology of virtual worlds

In the past much of the work on virtual worlds has emerged from subjects outside of anthropology (Hine 2000). The literature written about virtual worlds has explored many differing aspects, including, identity construction (Turkle 1995), gender (Kendall 2002), ethnicity and race (Nakamura 2002), embodiment (Taylor 1999; T.L. Taylor 2002), and formation of community through conversation (Cherny 1999). It is only in the more recent years that anthropology has begun its foray into the study of digital cultures. Rightly, in many respects, much of this initial work has been focused primarily on endorsement of a methodological approach suitable for what has now been termed digital anthropology. Now the focus has begun to shift back as the sub-field formally coalesces into a stable entity (Horst & Miller 2012), people are now looking into virtual worlds utilising the methodological framework set out by these early projects (Boellstorff et al. 2012), it is this stability and framework that my study seeks to utilise.

Two recent anthropological studies into virtual worlds, Boellstorff's *Coming of age in Second life*¹² (2008) and Malaby's *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab*¹³ and *Second Life* (2009b), provide an stable methodological footing from which to expand digital anthropological studies. They both present strong arguments for different aspects of digital ethnography, whilst the former also provides insights into the dialectic of virtual/real, and the latter, the governance of culture.

Boellstorff explores from a theoretical standpoint what is real and what is virtual from within Second Life using traditional ethnographic methods of long term in-situ participant observation. His resulting stance is that we are virtually human, so the avatars of virtual worlds are simply extensions of what we consider to be real, he describes the virtual world to be "places of human culture realised by computer programs through the internet" (Boellstorff 2008, p.17). Boellstorff posits that virtual worlds allow us to actively and intentionally engage in techne, "human action that engages with the world and thereby results in a different world" (Boellstorff 2008, p.55), this allows for an understanding of the creative processes which go into the development of a virtual world.

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¹² A virtual world which people can visit using avatars and take part in activities much like they would in the 'real' world. It is not a game as there are not objectives.

¹³ The company that develops Second Life.

According to Schackman (2009), Boellstorff makes a convincing argument for the application of traditional anthropological methods within Second Life, especially the creation/utilisation of 'Ethnographia', his virtual home and office, as a study site. The ethical stance Boestorff takes over treating Second Life as equivalent to a 'real' place and avatars as 'real' humans is what allows this methodological stance to hold the credence it does. The distinction between the virtual and actual is not seamless and through his discussion on personhood in chapter 5 Boellstorff highlights that the lines between the virtual and actual are blurring. Malaby (2012) recognises the viability of Boestorff's overall model for the application of traditional anthropology methodological practices within a virtual world setting.

Unlike Boellstorff, Malaby did not conduct his ethnography exclusively from within the virtual world. Malaby's goal was to understand the way Linden Labs implements their vision of culture within their virtual world, to this end he primarily conducted his ethnography externally to the virtual world. Boestorff takes issue with this implementation of an ethnographic approach in his review of Malaby's book, stating "the biggest disappointment in this book lies in its ethnography. [...] Despite turning to the virtual world for ethnographic authority [...] Malaby clearly focuses on the physical world offices of Linden Lab." (Boellstorff 2010, p.590). This is a criticism primarily of the way Malaby has presented his ethnographic work in the book. Malaby's choice of a hybrid style of ethnography fits his studies focus on the impact of the ownership of the virtual worlds by private companies and how this impacts on the contingency of the individuals forming communities and culture within that virtual world. Boellstorff recognises this saying "Malaby has opened a vital door to showing the power of ethnographic enquiry to chart the powerful role companies that own and govern online socialites will play in the years to come." (Boellstorff 2010, p.591).

Drawing a direct comparison between the MMO, Second Life, and the MMORPG, RuneScape, is impossible because of the enhanced gameplay elements of the latter. So despite both approaches yielding impressive results, neither is completely suitable to this project. However, they do stand as a tested methodological framework from which to construct a methodology suitable to the MMORPG, RuneScape, (Boellstorff et al. 2012)

Contingency of games

"I treat [...] Linden Lab [, and Second Life,] as a continual and open ended project, one that encompasses both intentional projects by institutions, groups, and individuals and the unintended consequences that inevitably unfold over time. The contingency inherent in the emergence of new social practices and expectations looms over all aspirations to control, and governance in all its forms is best seen as the outcome of a dance between efforts to control and the various and generative sources of contingency, including improvisation, evasion, and innovation." (Malaby 2009b, pp.132–133)

In the past digital games within anthropology have tended to be segregated into separate compartments. For example, play, work, and social lives. Malaby (2009a) and Schull (2012) show that the type of play which games facilitate is comparable to the sense of community belonging which rituals seek to produce, and that it is important to recognise how this is used by companies. Their hope is that efficiency and productivity can be found with "perfectly organised and controlled people", using the cultural forms of games, as ritual, through which "meaningful belonging can be cultivated" (Malaby 2012, p.291).

Companies are increasingly interested in the possibility for a controllable sense of belonging, through cultural manipulation (Malaby 2012). Schull's (2015; 2012; 2011; 2005) work details the effort undertaken by gambling machine designers to achieve a machine which falls into the 'sweet spot of perfect contingency' enabling them to maximise their command of the users attention. Schull describes how casinos have taken control of elements of gambling through technology to enhance the players experience of play, and relationship with the machine, using ideas of Latourian assemblages (Latour 2005; Latour 1992; Latour 1991). Schull calls this the 'machine zone' where "boundaries between human and machine become ambiguous" (2012, pp.2, 231), showing how the designers can influence people through their creations (Coleman 2004; Kelty 2005).

Gameplay in MMORPGs as practice

[Practices are] any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal [...] are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and practically definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellences, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre 1985, p.187)

Games are fundamentally built on doing things with an objective. The role-playing¹⁴ element of MMORPGs is mostly just a mechanism through which to produce that objective progression. My study looks at the gameplay of MMORPGs as the source of community, rather than the construction of shared identities because Role-Playing (RP) is a niche element of the RuneScape community. Only two worlds/servers¹⁵ are linked to the practice"41 (F2P)¹⁶ and 42 (P2P)¹⁷, however many players who log into those worlds have no interest in role-playing, and there are other reasons such as less lag or a friend who is on" (RuneScape.Wikia 2015a). Reynolds (2007) explores whether gameplay within MMORPs can be considered as practice using MacIntyre's (1985) understanding of practice, and finds that they do meet the requirements of coherence¹⁸, complexity¹⁹, socially established co-operative human activity²⁰, and excellence²¹.

Community's of practice

So since MMORPG gameplay is practice, it follows that MMORPGs are able to form community of practice based around the three constituent elements (Wolf 2007) (see left side of Figure 5). First, they involve a distinct form of practice which must be learnt and practiced over a period of time before the player can become proficient in playing the MMORPG effectively. Second, the millions of people going through this same process of learning and practice at the same time forms a community that can both interact in-game and shares ideas outside of the game building relationships through learning. Finally, MMORPGs have a set of objectives and requirements meaning that the impact of the practices have meaning within the domain of the MMORPG. Communities of practice were first proposed by Lave & Wenger (1991) and often defined as shown in Table 1.

¹⁴ "Rather than using the character as a tool, they become the character" (RuneScape.Wikia 2015a).

¹⁵ See Glossary.

¹⁶ Free-to-Play world/server 41.

¹⁷ Pay-to-Play world/server 42.

¹⁸ Despite the nature of MMORPGs as focused on conflict/power struggles they are still" governed by code, explicit rules and implicit rules of conduct" (Reynolds 2007, p.762).

¹⁹ MMORPGs utilise a rule system more complex than chess.

²⁰ Since most MMORPGs involve some necessary co-operation, requiring players to trust each other to complete objectives.

²¹ MMORPGs do have internal goods, which enrich the whole relevant community, in the form of knowledge about game mechanics.

Table 1: Different definitions for "Communities of Practice" (Wolf 2007, p.2)

Source	Definition	Informing my study
Lave & Wenger 1991,	"A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time	Defines the domains needed for a community of practice to
р. 98	and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice."	form.
	"A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around some	Highlights the importance of shared activities with
Eckert &	enterprise. United by this common enterprise,	common goal, coupled with
Wenger 1994,	these people come to develop and share ways	the emergent 'ways of being'
p. 2	of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values – in short, practices – as a function of their joint involvement in mutual activity."	that define the group from others.
McDermott	"Communities of Practice are groups of people who share ideas and insights, help each other	The philanthropic nature of communities that share
1999, p. 1	solve problems and develop a common practice or approach to the field."	knowledge and skills around their topic area.
Wenger & Snyder 2000, p. 4	"Communities of practice are groups of people who share expertise and passion about a topic and interact on an ongoing basis to further their learning in this domain."	The passion, and on-going nature of sharing experience and knowledge about the topic area.
Wenger 2001, p. 2	"In a nutshell, a community of practice is a group of people who share an interest in a domain of human endeavour and engage in a process of collective learning that creates bonds between them: a tribe, a garage band, a group of engineers working on similar problems."	Collective learning about topics in-situ, creates bonds between the participants

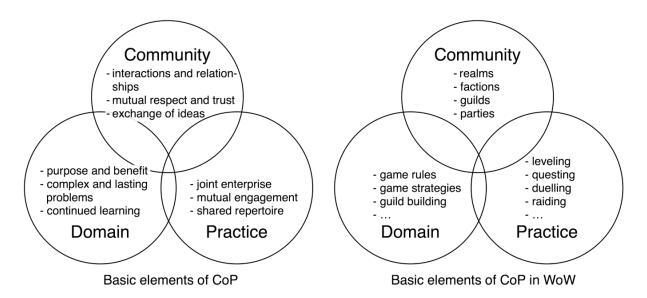


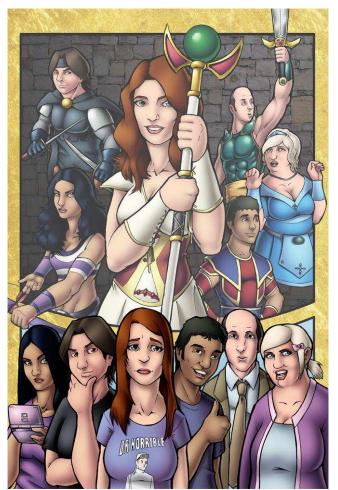
Figure 5: (Wolf 2007, p.3) Basic elements of Community of Practice: in general (left) and in WoW (right)

The MMORPG World of Warcraft (WoW) is comparable to RuneScape and has been used to show that communities of practice can be observed in MMORPGs. Wolf (2007) found that the gameplay elements of WoW appear to have been designed to enforce the formation of some aspects of a communities of practice (see right side of Figure 5), and the further into the game the stronger it is enforced. Along with the design of gameplay elements, WoW also has a selection of tools both in, and near-game, to support the building of communities. The players themselves also produce services to enhance their communities, often in the form of guild websites. It is the guild system which Wolf found to be "the most important game element for building lasting social structures" (2007, p.3). Other game elements such as parties provide more temporary structures. For Wolf (2007, p.17) WoW succeeds in creating some aspects of a community of practice by "supporting the collaborative nature of the practice through the game interface", in this way WoW's developers "need only to support the collaborative work of the community", to retain players.

Communities of play

Pearce & Artemesia (2009) note that a common thread running through research into online games and virtual worlds is a description of how the players initially start playing for the game, but over time that evolves into playing for the social aspect. This observation is based around an understanding of 'play communities' (DeKoven 1992a; DeKoven 1992b; DeKoven 1987), these are not new nor unique to online games. Many examples of these type of communities exist, chess clubs, golf buddies, table top gamers (e.g. Dungeons & Dragons), and re-enactment societies (Pearce & Artemesia 2009, p.3). Yet often they are treated as separate structures outside of what people normally consider community because of the connotations of imagination and immateriality. It is this which sets communities of play aside from communities of practice, since the former is conceived as 'imagination/play' and the latter conceived as 'reality/work'.

Much of an MMORPGs community's social structure coalesces beyond the boundaries of the game, as knowledge hub websites, guild/clan websites & forums, and conventions. This challenges the developers of MMORPGs since gameplay and community vie with each other impacting on the games ability to retain players. Viewing MMORPGs as complex social entities, seeds my study's discussion as to whether these two dialectic notions of community are really as



dialectic as they at first appear.

Investigating this using RuneScape, with its highly dynamic gameplay and community social structure, and its large dedicated population, provides a situation where the two dialectic notions can be viewed simultaneously supporting a social entity. From this the detail of how these two notions work together can be ascertained.

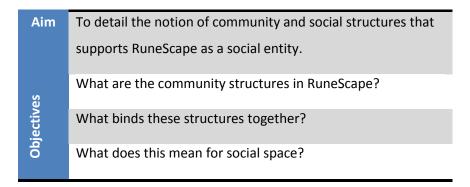
Figure 6: Fan art of 'The Guild' a web series, that focuses on a group of people who play World Of Warcraft together (the Knights of Good) whose virtual lives spill over into the real world (TravisTheGeek 2012).

Methodology

Having discussed the theories which inform my study it is possible to present its methodology. My study is mainly formed from a survey of nearly 1200 RuneScape players, and email semi-structured interviews with about 40 of them (see Appendix 3: Initial interview questions).

Participant observation is rejected as a method for my study based on a number of practical and ethical challenges. Despite this meaning there is no direct check on the difference between what people said they do and what they actually do. This comparison is obtained through the numerous interviews, and to some degree the survey. Overall it is clear that the aims and objectives of my study are not damaged by the lack of participant observation, either in or out of RuneScape.

Table 2: Aim and Objectives



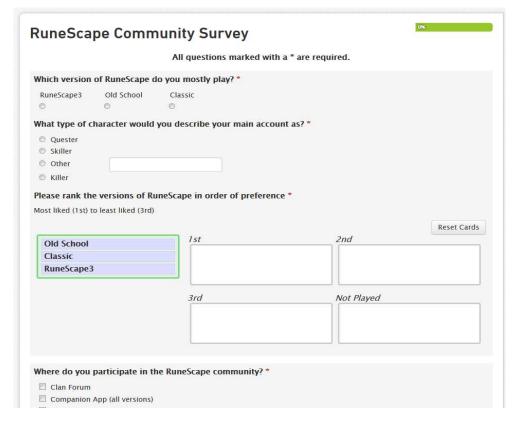


Figure 7: Opening questions to the RuneScape community survey

Ethical considerations

At the core of any research project should be the wellbeing of its participants, to this end Boellstorff et al. (2012, p.130) suggest the notion of "take[ing] good care" of your participants. Meaning to do no harm, and ensure that the participants benefit from the research. To this end information is made accessible to the participant about the nature of my study throughout the process, either through documentation or by ensuring they are comfortable asking questions of the ethnographer.

The informants confidence in the ethnographer is key to ensuring that they are informed enough to give consent. One method this is achieved through is the formalised, ritualistic, nature of signing consent documentation. Boestorff et al. (2012) suggest that this lends weight to the ethnographers insistence that participants understand what they are signing up for. Another method is to associate with respected people within the RuneScape community, namely Jagex, the games developers. In this way my study gains the confidence of its participants, since both the ethnographer, and study, have been 'vetted' by their trusted gate keeper, Jagex. My study itself also benefits from Jagex's publicity mechanisms, meaning that it can reach an audience many magnitudes higher than if advertised alone.

An ethical issue that arises from using Jagex as a gate keeper, is the perception of being related to the company, this may result in biased results and even hostility. On the flipside, if my study is seen as too separate it could cause distrust, limiting responses. With this in mind, all publicity is passed via both the company, and my supervisor, before being made public. It was also made clear that my study is not associated with the company beyond publicity and that material gathered is held by the ethnographer, not Jagex.

My study is designed to ensure that participants always feel they can ask questions, using methods they are accustomed to, and so uses emails as the primary means of communication between participants and the ethnographer for this reasons. Another benefit of this media is the university email address represents a well known and accountable organisation, with lends trust to the communication had with it. Another motivation, is the sheer number of participants spread over the globe across a multitude of time-zones, it is impractical to instant message or Skype call them all. Other communication methods this project uses include Reddit²² comments, making the ethnographer known and providing answers to questions about my study. The same thing occurred within the official RuneScape forums where Jagex provided a Member account, required for posting. In both instances the signature lines indicated the accounts relationship to my study and provided a means to access more information.

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²² An online bulletin board.

Methods employed

RuneScape Community Survey

Survey

The survey for this project is envisioned as the gateway for the interview stage. This method is used based on the knowledge that the RuneScape community is fragmented, so getting access to people to conduct interviews would be difficult. The survey is publicised by Jagex across a number of their communications platforms, including Reddit and the official RuneScape forum. Initially take up was slow as it had only been pushed to the official forum, but later once pushed to third-party social media platforms the number of responses exploded (see Appendix 2: Figure 38).

The link to the survey was accompanied by a brief explanation of my study. However, before beginning the participants have to accept a 'primer' explaining my study and how their responses would be used (see Figure 8). Once the participant has given their consent, they complete a maximum of 26 questions and optionally provide an email which is used to enter them into a small competition and is used as a interview contact point.

Before taking this study, you must agree to the following: This survey is operated under the auspices' of University College London. Contact details can be found below. Jagex is not responsible for the administration of the survey, the competition, nor data storage/analysis. By completing this questionnaire you are agreeing to participate in the following research project: Study Title How is a sense of community developed on RuneScape Aim of the Research This project aims to look at the notion of community developing around the RuneScape platform, from the perspective of both the players and the company. Objectives • What does the notion of community describe on the RuneScape platform? • What is it that holds the RuneScape community together? How does the DuneScape community with secript pages. Cancel Agree

Figure 8: 'RuneScape Community Survey' primer

My study uses the survey to gather initial information the community structure, such as which mediums are used for engagement, and primary focus of payers in playing. The survey was conducted separately with the public and Jagex staff, both using same set of questions. Of the Jagex staff, 25 responded, and nearly 1200 members of the public took part over the course of two weeks (see Appendix 2: Figure 38).

Ethics of offering an incentive

Jagex suggested providing a small incentive to boost participation. Their experience with previous studies utilising a survey, showed that the RuneScape community would most likely to respond well to a competition based participation incentive. The most recent example of this is a study run by Bangor University (2015g) offering nine prizes totalling £44.95, for a 25 minute or more survey. For my study a single £5 prize is offered for a 10 minute survey, most people only took 4 minutes. Both study's prizes are RuneScape membership to encourage only true players to participate. The small size of the incentive also reflects the scale of the survey and to garner only those with "a genuine desire to talk to ethnographers" (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p.147). Whilst offering compensation for participating in a study can bias responses, in this case the need to gather the requisite number of participants to achieve a viable comparative participant observation by proxy, outweighed the possible bias.

Due to the survey standing as a gateway and source at the same time, to prevent confusion participants are further checked they are giving informed consent before becoming involved any deeper in my study. It is made clear that a copy in the information accompanying the survey that a copy of the final report, edited into less academic language, will be published for the communities consumption after my study has finished. By promising to publish my study, it shows the participant the ethnographer is committed to producing something of benefit to them, and that their words do mean something. Although, extra care must be taken to ensure that any publish material has been anonymised.

Interviews

Boelstorff et al. (2012, p.92) considers interviews "in isolation [...] insufficient to constitute ethnographic research". This is a problem given the role of primary ethnographic source that interviews are going to constitute form my study, due to issues with conducting participant observation in RuneScape. The problem with interviews is that conventionally they do not offer a comparison between 'what people say' and 'what people do'. Drawing a contrast between these two types of ethnographic information reveals more about the social interactions being observed, the reasoning behind them, and often structures which would otherwise be hidden. However, interviews can be structured in such a way as to ask about people's observations of others. In this way it is possible to get a semblance of the comparative analysis lost by not utilising participant observation. People often take interest in their own culture and provide their own insights, which acts as a proxy for participant observation. Although this 'second hand' participant observation will be coloured/distorted by the interviewees own opinions. One advantage this method offers over participant observation is that it can offer a safe way to collect behind the scenes information on social/cultural activities.

The number of possible interviews after the survey was over 1100, as not all survey respondents provided an email address. The number of people who responded to the email request to participate further in my study, through an interview, was around 40 individuals. Whilst lacking in some of the qualitative detail of face-to-face interview, the information gathered through email interviews can still be of a high quality. Given the number of potential interviewees and the limits of a masters dissertation, email was the only viable option. Since it ensure all communications where located on one platform which could even be accessed 'on the go', meaning replies could be sent 'as and when' rather than having to schedule 40 individual Skype calls, for instance. Emails are also easy for the interviewees to handle, they are a format people are used to and the asynchronous nature of them means they do not impinge on everyday life, in the way a scheduled interview would. Face-to-face interviews are a non-starter for this project since RuneScape is an international game and its player base strongly reflecting that (see Figure 12).

However, that is not to say there are no issues with email interviews. The interviews are limited by being conducted in the English language, though some non-mother tongue speakers were interviewed. Another example is it is easy to slip into a routine, giving all interviewees the same questions regardless of their responses. Personalisation is key in email interviews, though it takes a long time to answer every email in that format, all responses should be made in relation to the participant comments, similar to how a face-to-face conversation would flow. This personalisation often leads to higher quality responses. Although the quality of the response will vary from participant to participant and throughout the interview's email chain, as time pressures and concentration levels change. A selection of guide question provide a framework for the interview responses, allowing a semblance of consistence. Using this framework also counteracts the danger of interview creep, whereby wanting to get a 'little bit more' from a participant can cause the disengagement of the participant. Finally all interviews were closed with an open question to allow participants to feedback on the process, and open any other ideas they feel had not been explored. This reinforces the notion that the participant is contributing to my study and that their voice has value.

Secondary Sources

It was clear from initial fact finding discussions that much of the RuneScape community's cultural material exists outside of RuneScape itself, as a polymedia environment (Madianou 2013; Madianou & Miller 2012b). As such an ethnographic approach is also taken when gathering information about the community from external sources²³, that the community itself, or Jagex, had produced. The source of the majority of this contextual material was posts to the video sharing site YouTube, where the RuneScape community has a substantial presence, that includes historical content. This content is used in conjunction with the interviews to clarify and contextualise my study's description and discussion of RuneScape's notion of community and its social structures.

This methodology for gathering secondary sources is an ethical approach since all the information is only used if in the public domain²⁴. From a quality point of view this ethnographic material has been produced, for the most part, by community member's 'off their own back' and it is all produced in the same cultural context of RuneScape. So it will lack any bias that could have resulted from being produced for my study and as such offers a clear impression of community interactions. Examples of such ethnographic sources are shown in Table 3.



Figure 9: YouTube video thumbnail (Rswillmissit 2013)

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²³ Outside of the game world of RuneScape.

²⁴ Not requiring logging in to access materials.

Table 3: Ethnographic Sources

Examples of Materials Used	Additional Details
A fan made video titled "RuneScape Historical	Explaining the history of RuneScape. Its
Timeline 1998 - 2015" (Plox 2015).	development, key features, and updates.
A thoughtful dialog on "Is the RuneScape	Commenting on whether the RuneScape
community bad?" (Rswillmissit 2013).	community is really as bad as its stereotype.
"Jagex, Please Listen The RuneScape	A video combining many players calling for a
Community Is Speaking" (OldRuneScapeAppeal	separate version of RuneScape without the
2012).	Evolution of Combat update.
RuneFest 2014's playlist on the RuneScape	An example of the RuneScape community
YouTube channel (RuneScape 2015)	interacting outside of RuneScape's world.
A video discussing the risk/reward elements of	How much of a skill there is in the Duel Arena,
RuneScape (B-Rice 2015).	thoughts of Schull's (2012) Addiction by Design
	come to mind.
Guide /community sites such as RuneHQ (2015)	Sites which combine RuneScape knowledge
and Tip.It (2015).	services, e.g. guides and skill calculators, with a
	community element e.g. forums.
The community build Knowledge base	Provides detailed information about many
RuneScape.Wikia (2015c).	different aspects of RuneScape. Produced with
	very little input from Jagex.
The RuneScape forum (Jagex 2015h).	The official RuneScape community forum,
	hosted and moderated by Jagex.
A satirical look at RuneScape, "Stuff Players	Despite its satirical nature, it does provide
Say" (Rswillmissit 2015).	insight into the communities view of itself.

Rejection of participant observation

Gameplay and other elements introduce methodological challenges and barriers for my study to overcome. The process of understanding and overcoming these provides interesting insights into, Jagex as a developer, and RuneScape as a social entity. Through participant observation the ethnographer steps into the emic²⁵ framing of the fieldsite (Coupaye 2009; Harris 1966). The purpose of participant observation is to "understand shared practices, meanings, social contexts and the interrelations between them" (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p.67). Despite how crucial many anthropologist feel participant observation is for anthropological study, it is not always practical or ethical to carry it out, in my study of RuneScape, this is unfortunately the case.

Practical challenges

Participant observation is a balancing act between participating in the everyday actions of the fieldsite, and recording/analysing those activities (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p.69). It is the difficultly to maintain this balance that is the basis of many of the practical challenges preventing my study from conducting participant observation.

There are two major practical problems encountered, the first is the limitations of researching within the criteria of a masters dissertation. Conducting participant observation within a virtual world, similar to Boestorff (2008) and Malaby (2009b), requires a period of time to settle into a community and gain trust and player confidence. This is especially important within a game community like RuneScape, where credibility is often based on in-game achievements. Unlike Second Life, RuneScape's content is restricted by a core game mechanic, the skill levelling system²⁶, which is essentially a proxy for time spent playing RuneScape. Unfortunately, once contact and previsions had been made with Jagex there was only one month left to do active fieldwork, this precluded the requisite in-game time to develop an appropriately levelled account.

Two solutions where investigated into conducting participant observation despite the limitations, using a normally progressing character who would only encounter lower level players thus have access to less insight into the community structures, or artificially progressing a character to interact with all players. Neither proved viable reasons can be seen in Table 4.



Figure 10: Members benefits (Jagex 2015b)

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²⁵ From the 'local' view point.

²⁶ See Glossary.

 Table 4: Possible participant observation solutions

	Normal progression		Artificial progression
Problem	Impact	Problem	Impact
Restricted	The free-to-play/pay-to-play model which RuneScape uses is	Lacking	Asking Jagex for a 'fake' higher levelled account is not practical
access to	a challenge as the greater proportion of content is both skill	knowledge to	given the relatively individualistic nature of RuneScape, where
content	level restricted, and for paying 'Members' only ²⁷ (see Figure	perform a high	gaining access to community groups is a slow process. So it is not
	10). Accessing these areas 'in person' would be impossible	level players	possible to be 'dropped in' to a high level community group and
	for a new account due to the level restrictions, even though	identity	have the requisite knowledge of game mechanics.
	membership is available.		
Restricted	Movement through RuneScape is designed to progress with	Economic and	Introducing a 'fake' account could causes is damage to the
movement	levels, so teleportation as used in Second Life, is not	reputational	RuneScape economy, adding items or gaining items without using
	available to a new characters. So moving between	damage to	the expected methods could trigger a devaluation of certain in-
	interviews and in-game events would take more time,	Jagex	game items/currency ²⁸ . It is unlikely that Jagex would be willing
	precluding interacting with players as meeting would take		to risk both the reputational damage nor the economic risks of
	them away from their everyday activities, the very thing the		such a move which could threaten the delicate balance of
	participant observation sets out to observe.		economic stability (Wikia 2015).
		Deliberately	Is ethical problematic since it impacts on participants informed
		deceiving	consent.
		players	

²⁷ They constitute 90% of the player-base (Jagex 2015b) ²⁸ See Glossary, gold.

The second major practicality issue is recording the observation. Accessing chat logs in RuneScape is not possible through Jagex's system, and the speed of conversations in RuneScape's public space, is too fast to be fully engaged in the activity as well as accurately recording it (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p.83). Had Jagex been able to access the chat logs there is still legal issues around the Data Protection Act 1998 which prevent Jagex from passing the data on to third parties. Recording these exchanges myself using video capture, has ethical challenges outlined in the next section.

Studying RuneScape using an alternative method of participant observation similar to that of Malaby (2009b), was considered. This would have involved working at Jagex's office with its community management team, looking into how their activities effect the development of community within RuneScape. Malaby (2012) describes the difficulty in this type of participant observation as, getting access to the community managers to conduct ethnographic studies, citing his own work with Linden Labs (Malaby 2009b) as being the "result of sheer luck" (2012, p.291). My study was not as lucky, Jagex was unable to host an ethnographer for even just a month due to the sensitive nature of the work being conducted within their office space. Which involves the development of several new game titles, and new RuneScape content which if leaked could damage the in-game economy. Following Jagex's staff, JMods, through RuneScape would be impossible given their access to a moderators toolbox which enhances their ability to move through the world, akin to Second Life's teleports.

RuneScape's 'culture' has developed into a fractal of different sub-communities. This occurs due to the individualistic nature of RuneScape as an MMORPG, focused on character/avatar progression. This is also the result of Jagex's style for delivering new content, through many updates each year. Subsequently people are playing for their own reasons and for different amounts of time. Given this variety, players tend towards grouping themselves into these loose sub-communities both internally and externally to RuneScape's world. Whilst this is similar to the plethora of different sub-communities which developed on different grids within Second life, RuneScape's spread outside of the world, to a much greater degree, orbiting like asteroids. For example, the RuneScape Wikia and clan¹ forums. This level of spread makes following the threads of social activity, as required by participant observation, a time consuming process which players may view as intrusive. Given the limits of research within a masters dissertation this would have been hard, if not impossible, to achieve.

Ethical challenges

Participant observation treads delicate ethical terrain given its focus on people's everyday activities. It is hazardous ethical terrain, specific to RuneScape, that is preventing my study from conducting participant observation.

There are two major ethical problems encountered, the first is presenting a clear representation of my study. Boestorff et al. (2012, p.133) recounts times when the ethnographers, Taylor, Malabey, and Nardi, used facilities inbuilt to the virtual world, such as modifications to their avatar or in information provided in a public 'profile page', to highlight the fact they are conducting research. RuneScape does not have an equivalent 'profile page' nor a means of linking the in-game avatar to an external profile, since the distribution of web links in-game is prohibited due to online safety concerns(Jagex 2015d). Avatar customisation within RuneScape is possible using preset elements, but this does not allow for a standout feature to indicate a researcher. This would not be effective in RuneScape anyway since the in-game items are already embedded with meaning thanks to RuneScape's progression mechanics. So unless a unique item was made by Jagex for the purpose of signing a research avatar, players would not 'get' any sign used to denote a research avatar. Creating such a unique signifier would take time and resources Jagex could not commit to.

The second challenge is conducting participant observation in public space, as already noted Jagex is unable to provide chat logs due to data protection law and systematic restraints. So the only feasible way to record the participant observation to record within RuneScape's fast moving public chat would be to use screen capture²⁹. The issues with this stems from treating avatars as akin to a body or 'objects to think with' (T. L. Taylor 2002). This means that recording the avatar of a child is equivalent to filming a child's body, this clearly has a multitude of ethical and social implications (Maorrow & Richards 1996). Unlike in Second Life, where the grid age rating system isolates the younger people (Reinhart 2015), or the MMORPG World of Warcraft (WoW) which has fewer underage players (Statista 2014), the age of RuneScape's players varies widely (see Figure 11), from <13 to 26+. Given 33% of the population is under 18 years of age, the chances of interacting with underage and ethically problematic person is highly likely. When you consider that RuneScape caters to players under 13 years old, it becomes really difficult to justify the recording of participant observation in a public space (Jagex 2014e). Since, unlike chat logs, or hand notes, video of a large public space cannot be immediately anonymised. Immediate anonymity is important for this kind of bulk information collection since the people involved have not given consent, other than appearing in a public place (Eysenbach & Till 2001; Hudson & Bruckman 2010).

²⁹ Recording the visual display of a computer.

Whereas, in surveys and interviews participants have given permission for data to be held, and in the case of emails, they are aware that their information cannot be immediately separated from identity information because of the nature of the platform. In all of those instances informed consent was given, but such consent cannot be given in the case of bulk video capture since it cannot be anonymised. Thus participant observation in the same manner as suggested by Boestorff et al. (2012, p.134) is considered too problematic to be conducted in the context of RuneScape.

Conduct participant observation by physically watching a participant play RuneScape was also considered. It is less of an ethical concern that in-game observation, since the recorded information is of the individuals actions rather than the actions of others within RuneScape, and is just recorded as fieldnotes. That said, finding people willing to be involved in physical participant observation proved difficult within the time allowed, mostly due to trust issues, and travel distance/cost, since RuneScape's player base is 70% international³⁰ (see Figure 12).

RuneScape Players - Age Breakdown

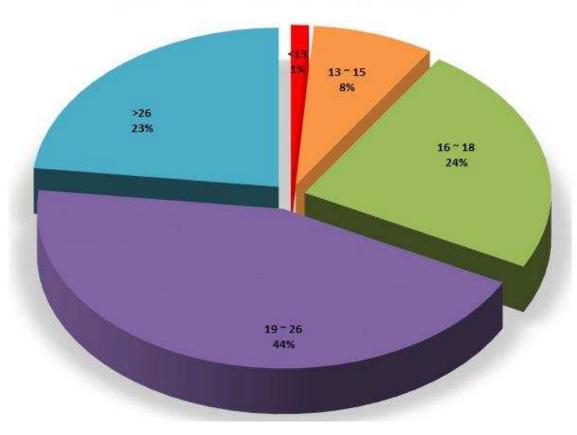


Figure 11: RuneScape age breakdown (Jagex 2014b)

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³⁰ Non-UK.



Figure 12: RuneScape geographic spread (Jagex 2014b)

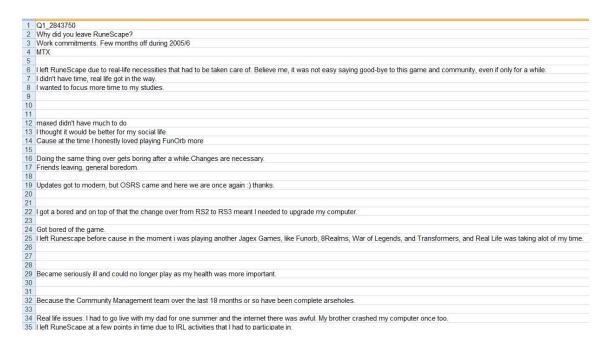


Figure 13: Example of anonymised survey responses

Describing the Findings

Having discussed the methodology of my study and before analysing the notion of community and social structures in/around RuneScape. It is important to understand how RuneScape developed and what impact this has on the thematic sub-communities of RuneScape today. This chapter is based on my study's survey and interviews findings, complimented by material gathered from secondary sources and information provided by Jagex³¹.

Forming the 'nation' of RuneScape

In the beginning, RuneScape1 had only a few servers, and a small world map. Meaning it was possible for players and the administrators to get to know each other face-to-face. From interviews that Groodt conducted, with veteran RuneScape1 players, he found that "the community was *tight* and [...] could be summarized as one in which *almost everyone knew each other*" (2015d, p.37). This is a similar description to that which Anderson (1983, p.49) uses when talking about the community of a primordial village. Anderson suggests these could be the only place where 'true' community is found, as the larger a population gets the more imagined the community becomes. So the same thinking must also applicable to RuneScape's community.

According to Groodt (2015d, p.37) "by May 2001 more than 2,000 players were recorded online at the same time and by December 2003 this number had grown to 22,000", this rapid growth in players is illustrated in Figure 14. There are many reasons for this growth including word of mouth, the release of RuneScape2 in 2004, and advertising on other popular websites at the time (Groodt 2015d). It is at this point in RuneScape's history that more sub-community began forming, particularly for long time players and players with higher level skills, who connected through personal 'Friends List¹³². Players formed communities based around in-game themes such as combat, skill training, and commerce. These thematic communities not only provided a social environment, they also enable players to exchange knowledge, offer assistance to one another, and trading resources. Helping players navigate the complexities of RuneScape's game mechanics, for the benefit of all.

³¹ Quotes which are not cited are from my studies interviewees, all secondary sources are appropriately cited.

³² A element of the in-game chat system, which allowed for private messaging. Page **38** of **105**

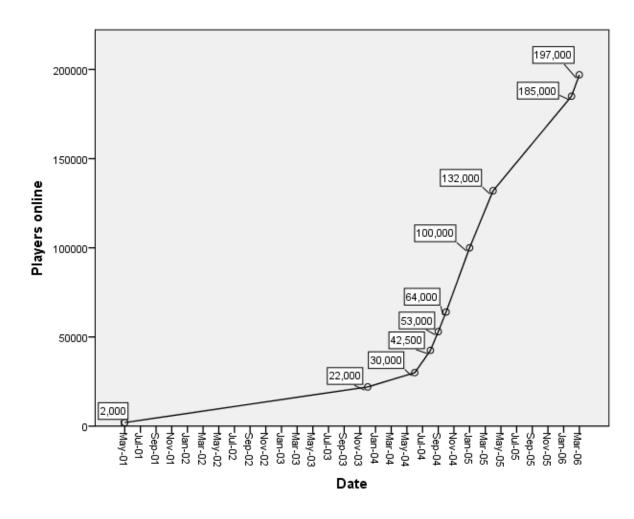


Figure 14: Announced number of simultaneous players that broke records (Groodt 2015d, p.40)

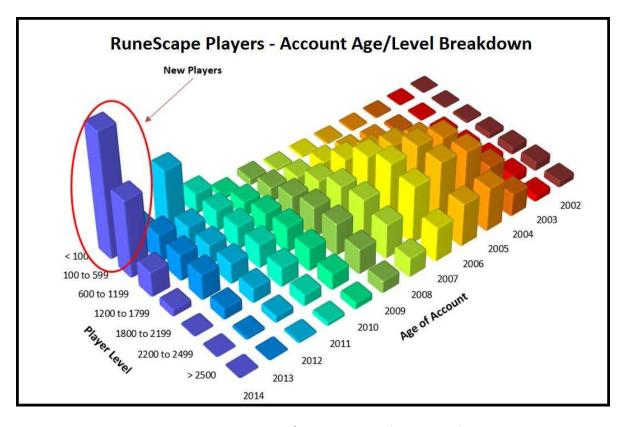


Figure 15: RuneScape age/level breakdown (Jagex 2014b)

RuneScape's thematic sub-communities

Risk/reward has been a core game mechanic in RuneScape since its inception. This was first facilitated through a character type system, where the player choose either a Player-Killer³³ or a Non-Player-Killer³⁴. This status choice determined whether or not that player could attack other players. The death of a player means they drop the majority of their current inventory, so being a Player-Killer, was to constantly risk this loss. Loosing items sets the player back, as replacing them takes time and money. Since time is tantamount to progression in RuneScape, dying is a major hindrance. Since Player-Killers roamed the entire world, nowhere was safe for them, and thus many players felt the risk was greater than the reward, opting for the Non-Player-Killer status. Non-Player-Killer's had the option of a localised risk/reward activity in fighting Non-Player Character (NPC)³⁵ monsters, which offered a better risk reward ratio. The division of players into Player-Killers and Non-Player-Killers through game mechanics, encouraged the players to form a certain community structure, which, despite the character type system being removed, is still reflected in the RuneScape3 community, some 14 years later.

According to Groodt's *History of RuneScape* (2015d, p.36) the design of RuneScape1 forced the two groups of players to use "*real-time interaction* [since] coins were the only items that could be stored in banks, leading to every player buying what they needed *right now* and not at a later moment", so despite the differentiation of the two branches of the RuneScape community all players interacted face-to-face due to the setup of RuneScape's systems. Later this would change, partly due to loss of the Player-Killer/Non-Player-Killer division, and partly due to the introduction of the Grand Exchange, a centralised trading hub. It would be safe to assume that players of RuneScape1, at the time, were accepting of the imposed community structure.

The final 'look' of the player killing risk/reward system was decided with a poll of players, the winning 'look' being the Wilderness³⁶. This update removed the imposed division. The Wilderness is an area of the world which all players who enter become able to attack, and be attacked by, one another. This change localised one of the major risk/reward activities in RuneScape, making it more appealing to players. The reward of Player-Killers is the prospect of leaping ahead, in terms of progression, by killing players who were holding items of high value. By moving to the Wilderness system the risk/reward 'profession' of the player killing was restricted to a distinct area of RuneScape's world, allowing those not comfortable with the level of risk ,to not participate.

³³ See Glossary.

³⁴ See Glossary.

³⁵ See Glossary.

³⁶ See Glossary.

Despite the removal of the imposed division, players still grouped themselves based around the old dichotomy of Player-killers, now known as PKers, and Non-Player-Killers, which became known as Skillers. Now PKers could find/produce their own food³⁷, without the risk of being killed for it. However, they still needed the Skillers to produce the higher level weapons and armour which would give them the edge in combat. This relationship is one of the building blocks of the RuneScape community. The change in the relationship caused by this update to the game mechanics still resonates today within RuneScape3.

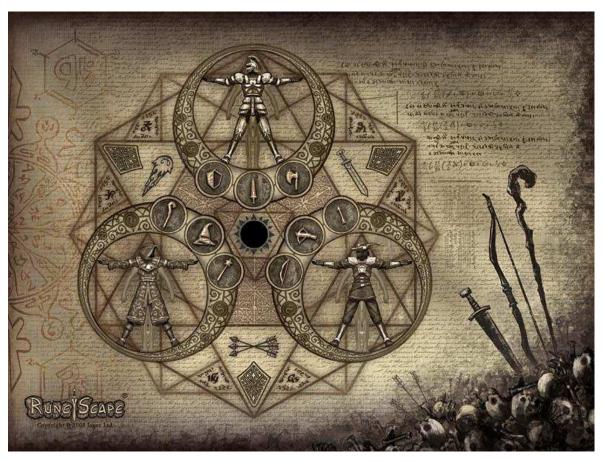


Figure 16: RuneScape's combat triangle(zybez 2015)

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³⁷ Used to replenish health during combat.

Primacy of skill progression

The transition from RuneScape1 to RuneScape2 saw a change in the targeting of updates, with content being directed towards the Skillers and the expansion of the world. The PKers as a distinct branch of the RuneScape community began to diminish as Player Vs Player (PvP)³⁸ became one of many activities, rather than a 'profession'. The updates from 2004-2007 focused on streamlining the experience for the Skiller, providing a choice of different methods and removing the inconveniences (Groodt 2015d).

In 2007 updates to the Trade and Wilderness systems affected the PKer/Skiller relationship. The updates, Trade and Drop Changes (Jagex 2007a), and Wilderness Changes, Bounty Hunter and Clan Wars! (Jagex 2007b), were both enacted to combat botting³⁹, gold farming⁴⁰ and item scamming⁴¹. The results on the philanthropic aspects of RuneScape's community were profound since the changes to game mechanics, removing unequal trades, meant high-level player could no longer offer items and money to help new players (see Figure 15). The removal of the Wilderness was the end of the distinct PKer, and seriously disrupted the social groups which had formed around the activity, unoffical clans⁴².

Another update which had a major effect on community was the previously mentioned addition of the Grand Exchange, at the end of 2007. This promoted Skillers as the dominant 'profession' due to the new ease to which they could now trade the products of their efforts. The Grand Exchange centralised trading through an auction-like system, which meant face-to-face trading was no longer needed. Players can just visit the Exchange, place items from their bank directly into their Exchange slots at a set sell price, then leave again to produce more, earn more xp, and thus reach higher skill levels.

Figure 17: A skiller clan logo (RuneScape.Wikia 2015d)



³⁹ Having another computer program simulate a players actions to grind killing certain NPC monsters saving the player time/effort. Has a negative effect on several aspects of the game the economy, progression system, and community since bots don't talk or follow social cues.

⁴⁰ Another form of botting, specifically designed to earn the player in-game currency, which is then sold for 'real-world' money, which again damages the in-game economy.

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³⁸ See Glossary.

⁴¹ People would lead other players into the wilderness where they would kill them for their items. Other forms include changing trades at the last minute before both players confirm, or scamming ill informed players for expensive items. Trades are one way in RuneScape and cannot be revised once complete.

⁴² Not yet supported by tools within RuneScape.

By the end of 2007 PvP was no longer at the top of the RuneScape activity hierarchy, "Skilling and Player vs. Monsters (PvM)⁴³ became the two new popular activities" (Groodt 2015d, p.42). An example of this shift can be seen by looking at the most profitable elements of RuneScape, which before 2008 was PvP and stakes made at the Duel Arena, after 2008 this the title was taken by PvM. The PvM, Skilling, and PvP communities now existed independently of each other. Despite PvM being the most profitable, all three contribute roughly equally to the overall player base, according to the survey for my study (see Appendix 2: Figure 40).

The 'no xp waste' phenomena

Through 2008 and 2009 Groodt (2015d) notes that the 'no xp⁴⁴ waste' community begins to develop. 'No xp waste' means trying to find the most efficient way to train skills. Knowledge hubs such as RuneScape.Wikia, RuneHQ, and Tip.it are created, eventually becoming the go-to websites to gain the information needed to train most efficiently. It is because of this shift in game focus that people begin questioning what is 'fun' about playing RuneScape, some playing to gain levels in the most efficient way, others feeling this took the 'fun' out of RuneScape. What this resulted in is the branching of the community into those who subscribe to 'no xp waste' and those who do not.

Many of my study's interviewees said that the focus on achieving the most efficient skilling method was detrimental to the overall community:

"I feel like it is pushing away new players, something that there's not many of"

They likened 'no xp waste' was a themed meme travelling through the overall community pushed by "high up people in the community, e.g. YouTuber's, Jagex mods, twitch streamers". The Global Social Media Impact Study (GSMIS) suggests that forms of moral memes⁴⁵ are common to all their fieldsites, so in theory could also occur within RuneScape's community (Miller 2015). The moral

memes are "humorous at the expense of some position of behaviour of which they disapprove", in this case 'no xp waste', and GSMIS suggest that this could be part of a "mechanisms that keep people in line" (Miller 2015).

Figure 18: An example of a 'no xp waste' meme (MemeGenerator 2015)

⁴⁵ Phrases which are often embedded into an image that can represent an effort 'morally police' an environment.



⁴³ See Glossary.

⁴⁴ See Glossary.

My study's interviewees judged that the issue of 'no xp waste' was overstated. For example, "for the most part, people use it ironically" and "I'm not saying that xp waste is a bad thing but how everyone has taken to it seems like a joke gone wrong". People's opinions about the drive for efficiency are nicely summarised by this interviewee when they said:

"I think the efficiency mindset does adversely affect the public community - can not talk to randoms⁴⁶ or you'll waste xp! - but in channels⁴⁷, talking about goals or efficiency is actually a popular topic, as it lets newbies⁴⁸ learn new things and experienced players can pick each other's brains on strategies. So I think that from an outside perspective, the efficiency mindset looks like it is killed the community. I think it brings the community together, just in smaller, concentrated groups with shared interests. Making light of it is pretty common really, I think people find the idea of absolute efficiency absurd - they are just interested in achieving long term goals, and improving efficiency can only help in the long run."

The majority of my study's participants are RuneScape3 players who found the survey through Reddit. The distribution of players between the two main versions of RuneScape, old school and RuneScape3, is 60:40 (Jagex 2015c), thus the survey should be used cautiously when considering of the entire RuneScape community (see Figure 39 and Figure 43). An example of how this may affect my study is that the RuneScape3 players are less attuned towards 'no xp waste' than the Old School RuneScape players, according to Jagex.

To counterpoint this argument, it must be stated that the Jagex staff who were interviewed for my study felt that updates to RuneScape, for instance more recently the introduction skill nodes⁴⁹ at events, had been made in reaction to the apparent desire for 'no xp waste', so that player could attend more social event without having to losing out on xp. The skill nodes are not a replacement for conventional skilling since they provide a very low amount of xp, they were imagined as a 'half way house' to appease all sides.

 $^{^{46}}$ Refers to random event NPCs that can appear whilst doing skilling activities.

⁴⁷ Refers to themed sections of RuneScape's chat system.

⁴⁸ See Glossary.

 $^{^{49}}$ A in-game phenomena spawned by a moderator, which provides a stream of xp up to a cap amount.

There has been a clear shift in the design ideology directing RuneScape's updates away from the more hardcore skilling⁵⁰ of the 'no xp waste' phenomena, towards more engagement orientated for of skilling(2015d, p.43). A clear example of this is the addition of an 'x-option' to certain skilling tasks, this removed the need to repeatedly click to start the same process again. Allowing for batch processing, means people can now go Away From Keyboard (AFK)⁵¹ for a short while to do something else while the processing occurred in-game. From my study's participants it is clear that the 'grinding'⁵² element of hardcore skilling, is disliked, so Jagex's move towards a more 'casual' form of skilling should be understood as them attempting to retain as many paying players as possible.

The AFK skilling allows the players more flexibility, they can either use the time to be social using the in-game methods or they can look outside of RuneScape, to watch Twitch streams, YouTube videos, or browse the internet. This change in design direction allowed Skillers to interact socially breaking the notion that you "cannot talk to randoms or you'll waste xp!", in a participants words. This highlights that RuneScape is not just inside the game window, it is an entire polymedia environment.

Groodt (2015d, p.44) suggests another reason for the direction change, "wanting to provide a healthier gaming environment", using his own experiences as evidence, "I used to be part of highly competitive skilling communities which revolved around hardcore skilling and I know quite a few players who at some point developed RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury) or suspected Carpal Tunnel Syndrome as a consequence of the constant clicking for many consecutive hours". This is just conjecture on Groodt's part it does seem plausible.

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 $^{^{50}}$ Training a skill using the more efficient method, attempting to attain the optimum the maximum xp per hour that is possible.

⁵¹ See Glossary.

⁵² See Glossary.

Social skilling and achievement

There is some disagreement among my study's interviewees as to whether the move away from high-intensity skilling methods improve the quality of RuneScape's community, a common view is "people were always focused on xp rates and stuff before, if maybe they did not utilise them all to the fullest". The move to a more "*Social Skilling*" (Groodt 2015d, p.44) agenda has, counter-intuitively, caused people to interact *less*. Interviewees noted that in the past conversations while skilling would "inevitably be, 'Wc⁵³ level?' '75 you?' '80' 'nice' 'nice' conversation, and that often led to more". However, with the increasing prevalence of AFK skill methods people are "likely to be watching Netflix or YouTube or Twitch, or reading other things on the internet than watching their game client and trying to make conversation".

Even though effort is being put into mitigating against the grinding aspect of hardcore skilling, doing so has adversely affected the social structures within RuneScape. Grinding is an integral part of RuneScape's game mechanics, so it is used as a marker of prestige. Attaining a high score is based on how much effort/in-game hours, a player puts in. Those with the most, accrue greater cultural capital. Jagex has encouraged this characteristic of the overall RuneScape culture by providing a means of displaying this in-game, through a form of material culture, the 'Capes of Accomplishment' 54.

RuneScape's in-game money, gold pieces (GP)⁵⁵, has never really been a status symbol, since players have always been able to get it relatively fast. The greatest prestige is held by Skiller's with the highest levels, for Skiller's GP is just a by-product of the levelling process, integral to it, but not the end goal. This is often either a position in the high score table, or a cape of some kind.

The 'softening up' of the skilling system, by increasing xp rates, has lead to what could be called 'achievement devaluation'. Many of the interviewees commented that they felt 99's⁵⁶ and their capes did not count as achievements anymore, only 120's⁵⁷ and completionist⁵⁸ did (see Appendix 1: Table 10). For example:

"It used to be that a single 99 was something to be proud of; you would get complimented on your cape and sometimes be asked to use the emote59 [...] Now, it seems that other players are only impressed by level 120 skill capes or trimmed completionist capes"

⁵³ Refers to the Woodcutting skill.

⁵⁴ See Glossary.

⁵⁵ RuneScape's currency, see Glossary.

⁵⁶ See Glossary.

⁵⁷ See Glossary.

⁵⁸ See Glossary.

⁵⁹ A in-game animation that a player's character does, e.g. dance, wave.

They go on to make the specific point that:

"The bar for acknowledgement is continually rising"

By increasing the rate by which xp could be generated, Jagex have produced a scenario where it took over seven years to for a player to gain the first billion points of experience, but it over the next seven a different player generated five billion (see Figure 19). Another method of tracking the value of xp for achievements is in the amount of xp offered as rewards for quests. Figure 20 shows how the xp rewards have increased over time, it is an exponential growth which would indicate that the cultural value of xp had lessened overtime. As the xp levels offered has risen, each point of experience 'buys' less admiration from the community. Groodt comments, "in 2001 a quest reward of 15k xp was considered to be a generous reward, today we need a three-digit amount of xp to consider the reward as being generous" (2015b, p.248).

The more recent quests tend to require higher levels to access and are designed as game-lengthening content, for end-game⁶⁰ players. Understanding this might explain the change in approach to xp and Skilling in general. Jagex wants to extend the life of RuneScape through additional end-game content, but still ensure the lower level players have the chance to reach this new content in an feasible amount of time, so it make sense for the amount of xp rewarded to ramp up. Effectively it comes back to one of the core game mechanics of RuneScape, progression. The 'no xp waste' phenomena is just a indication of this, as one of the interviewees noted "the efficiency focus is a result of a grindy progression model with a long-term payoff, which promotes creating smaller, stable sub-communities of people with similar goals", because players can work together doing the same activity, combining their efforts into achieving the highest amount xp possible, and sharing that knowledge with others. When asked about whether AFK Skilling was casualising and damaging the community the same interviewee replied:

"I think they are casualising what they can afford to casualise. It allows them to develop light, fluffy content while saving the skill checks for the meaty challenging content. The grind should be the midgame, not the midgame AND endgame, and this allows them to expand both naturally"

To summarise, using another historical example, F2P had its high score table closed in 2011, it was reinstated in 2014, but in the intervening period a number of the top players moved over to P2P to continue competing, some stayed in F2P and other left RuneScape entirely (Groodt 2015a, p.274). This highlights the importance of achievement, as a facet of RuneScape's gameplay, for binding players to the community. The shared practice of skilling and achievement chimes with Lave & Wenger's (1991) communities of practice.

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⁶⁰ Players who have done most of the content and have higher skill levels, thus have played for a long time.

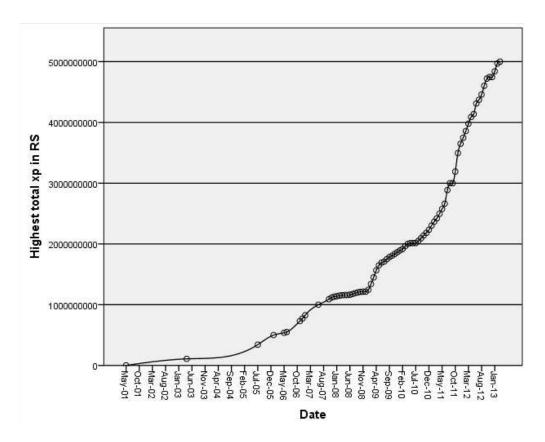


Figure 19: Highest single player's xp total over time (Groodt 2015a, p.269)

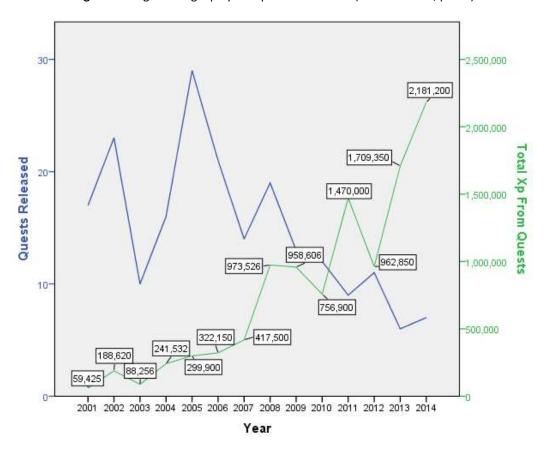


Figure 20: Quest released Vs. Total xp from quests (Groodt 2015c, p.248)

Designed co-operation and material signs of achievement

As mentioned, RuneScape has existed in many different versions, and has branched into multiple concurrent instances of RuneScape, all maintained and updated by Jagex (see Figure 2). The bulk of these updates to RuneScape go almost unnoticed by the majority of participants, for whom regular content updates are something they have come to cherish about RuneScape. With new content comes new game mechanics to learn, this is considered RuneScape's best feature, "since [...] there is the knowledge that there will always be something new to learn and experience soon", in the words of one participant. However, those updates which do prove controversial such as the move to RuneScape2⁶¹, or the Evolution of Combat (EoC)⁶², have meant Jagex providing branch versions of RuneScape, Classic⁶³ and Old School⁶⁴, respectively to cater for those players. Obviously this introduces yet more sub-communities into the overall RuneScape community ecosystem.

Jagex's is using the more recent updates to 'promote' community within RuneScape, because they have noticed that a vibrant community means players play more and remain paying Members longer. This change has been noticed by my participants one of whom stated that the new raids⁶⁵ use teams of 10 people, "is a lot for one activity in RuneScape". However, for another participant felt that:

"A lot of activities nowadays you need people. Now from that necessity springs forth friendship, which is great, but I think a lot of interaction is somewhat forced nowadays. There are some nice organic interactions from time to time, which is great, but I feel, especially for higher level bossing⁶⁶, it is because they need to be with others, not because they desire to".

 $^{^{61}}$ A graphical update, that also allowed for further game development opportunities. Not everyone liked the new graphical direction.

⁶² Shifting away from the old style combat system to a more interactive system, with more development possibility. Not everyone liked the new style of interactive active ability-based combat.

RuneScape branching at the change from RuneScape1 to RuneScape2, that retains the graphical style and state of RuneScape1. Has a small team dedicated to bug fixes/maintenance, almost no content changes.

Only available to Members who held accounts at the time.

⁶⁴ RuneScape branching from a 2007 version, with the old style combat system. Has its own development team, who put out updates in parallel to RuneScape3.

⁶⁵ A high risk/reward minigame that involves teams of players in combat with a high level boss NPC that requires the use of special tactics to defeat.

⁶⁶ Which the interview felt was the biggest co-op scene.

An example, given by my interviewees, of this type of content is the recent Tuska World Event⁶⁷, and the new raids, both of which are aimed at refreshing RuneScape for end-game players, whilst simultaneously providing "the hype that [...] will help draw in a new crowd of players to the game". But for some players chasing high-score achievement, "their exp rates/amount of attention needed do not provide a new epic way of training combat". These interviewees did say that if a unique/rare material sign of achievement was offered for the risk, and "the stigma of finding teams", then that reward outweighs the expected loss of xp per hour. The example given by the interviewee was a "gold mining suit" received as a reward from working the "lava flow mine" This proves that players do not always aim for a high-score sign of achievement, 'no xp waste', since "RuneScape has this very magical way of making the items you own very real within the game". So gaining more material culture is a valid way to status within the community, since it can display as a material sign of achievement.

One of my study's interviewees said "I feel [raids are] geared towards co-op play but this is not how the community will take it", meaning that players see this new content as a new source of "elitist tier sets of gear", another example of a material sign of achievement. This has left people "under the impression that players attempt raiding content specifically for item rewards", with a good number stating that "there needs to be a reason to do team content and that reason should not be gold/combat". This highlights how the many sub-communities within the overall RuneScape community scrape against one another with their requirements, leaving Jagex trying to find the best compromise to move RuneScape forward.

Designing for the future

An example of Jagex trying to find a compromise between its vision of the future and the myriad desires of the RuneScape community can be found in 2010, when players managed to persuade Jagex (2010) to "reintroduce free trade and the excitement of the old Wilderness, warts and all" because "something is missing from the 'good old days' of RuneScape". This became a 'hot topic' and the vote garnered a response of 1.2 million players, 91% of which wanted the return (Jagex 2011). The community hoped that this update would trigger the revitalisation of the PvP community within RuneScape, since the return of greatest risk, the Wilderness, in theory would provide the greatest reward. However, it became apparent that the reinstatement of the Wilderness would not return the "golden PvP days" (Groodt 2015d, p.44), because PvM and skilling had both become more profitable, with a better risk/reward ratios.

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⁶⁷ A event shared across every world/server, the actions of all the players who take part impact on the way the event concludes, changing RuneScape's lore, or even it world map.

⁶⁸ A set of items that can only be obtained from a random event NPC (aka footnote 46). If worn the set grants the player a small boost to mining xp.

A skilling area of the world specifically for mining, requireing the player to be active to obtain the best xp. Page **50** of **105**



Figure 21: Return of the Wilderness (Jagex 2014c)

An example of Jagex imposing its design vision upon players can be found in the later in 2012, when Jagex began an overhaul of RuneScape's combat mechanic, in an update called the Evolution of Combat (EoC). Previously RuneScape combat had been a simple affair of clicking on a enemy and waiting until one or other of the characters hitpoints⁷⁰ reached zero. With EoC Jagex attempted to make combat a more engaging experience, by adding active player participation, akin to how it had made skilling more 'social'. Changing these game mechanics also offered Jagex greater scope in how RuneScape could develop in the future, by providing a stable technical foundation.

The EoC update split the communities of RuneScape, with PvM players enjoying the new complexities and the PvP community, being older, not liking the change quite as much. After release of EoC, Jagex offered a legacy mode for those players struggling to adapt to the new game interface. Eventually, after community vote, a new branch version of RuneScape was released called Old School, based on the state of RuneScape in the "good old days" of 2007. Some players suggested⁷¹ that Jagex had been prompted to make this change based on the number of paying Members leaving, some quoted figures the millions. Jagex, in an interview for my study, said this was not really the case, they simply wanted to ensure that as many people as possible could play the version of RuneScape that they enjoyed. Ensuring a happy community in the process, retaining good will and paying Members. Despite this revolution to the combat system, the PvP sub-community has not recovered from the dearth of content since the removal of the Wilderness, and the heightening focus on PvM content (see Figure 40, Figure 47, and Figure 49).

Taken together these two examples highlight how reliant the community is on gameplay mechanics to bond effectively to RuneScape. Change the gameplay dramatically and the community is thrown into turmoil, equally giving the community what it wants does not necessarily mean you'll get the expected results in terms of player retention.

⁷⁰ The amount of damage a player can take before death in RuneScape, it is based on the constitution skill.

⁷¹ In discussions had in the external polymedia environment of RuneScape, forums, chat rooms etc.

The impacts of co-operative play

There is a fear that as Jagex increasingly designs for co-op play within RuneScape, this may erode the low barrier to entry, which is a key selling point of RuneScape as an MMORPG. In the words of an interviewee, "the game is quite simple as it does not require top end technology to play on nor is it very complicated to get into like other MMOs". Another interviewee suggested that "some people with the rs3 engine⁷² may not be able to load a mini game⁷³ that has 500 players, so [it would be better] if you could reward a group of 5 players, [...] for adventuring with clan members", this highlights that clans are a foci of co-op play already and should be exploited as a catalyst for community development.

Clans existed informally in RuneScape from its beginnings in RuneScape1, these were groups of friend which moved to RuneScape from other games (Groodt 2015d, p.36). Further clans began to develop around knowledge sharing and practicality, beginning to specialise into the three main activity types, PvM, Skiller, and PvP. For clan coherence internal communication between clan members is needed on a regular basis, initially this was only possible through the friends list system.

The clan update, in 2011, provided specialised tools to formalise this social structure within RuneScape. As clans began to grow within this new infrastructure, they became the main way for people to connect with each other, and as "clans became more popular, there was less and less need for players to socialize in the public chat. Especially if the clan member was also already participating in friend chats" (Groodt 2015d, p.50). This heightened the divides between the main sub-communities and the innumerable satellite sub-communities, since people's need to socialise could be met from within their own clan, the need/want to use the public chat systems dramatically reduced. As my study's survey found, most players are now part of a clan⁷⁴ (see Appendix 2: Figure 46, Figure 47), this might explain the perception that RuneScapes community has become less sociable. The sociality has moved into a less visible area of RuneScape.

⁷² The RuneScape3 software.

⁷³ Game-like activities within RuneScape.

⁷⁴ There are currently 122,396 official clans in existence in RuneScape3 (not inclusive of Old School) However, currently only 2,513 official clans have more than 100 members (Jagex 2015c). So the majority of clans are likely to be more social than practice orientated, evidenced by Figure 47.

Findings Summarised

The survey results are used to provide a contextual backdrop in this description, which has been constructed primarily from my study's interviews and secondary sources. For presentation of the full survey results see Appendix 2: Survey results visualised.

Key points to draw from this description of my study's findings are:

- The RuneScape community is not a continuous social entity, it is formed of innumerable sub-communities all of whom still retain an image of being connected to an overall RuneScape community. A player can be a part of many different, and sometimes opposing, sub-communities.
- The communities are all affected by the social tools RuneScape makes available to its
 players, namely the chat and clan systems. Gameplay mechanics and changes through
 updates to RuneScape have also changed how the community is structured, raising or
 lowering the profile of certain sub-communities and spawning entirely new ones.
- The RuneScape communities are all held together by a combination of gameplay mechanics, (e.g. knowledge & learning, achievement, risk/reward), and social ties of friendship and 'fun'. The result is that whilst new content keeps players from getting bored, the social aspects bind the communities together and keep people playing.



Figure 22: Clan senate (Jagex 2015f)

Discussion

The findings of my survey and interviews suggest that RuneScape is a complex entanglement of social structures, through the description only a small sample of this complexity has been shown. This discussion will focus on highlighting what the notion of community describe on RuneScape, using Anderson's (1983) thinking on the nation coupled with Lave and Wenger's (1991; 1998; 2015) communities of practice. It will also touch on how the RuneScape community views/accesses its social space using Walker's layered space approach, which relies on the imagined communities of Anderson (1983) and thoughts of polymedia environments (Madianou 2013; Madianou & Miller 2012a; Madianou & Miller 2012b). Finally it will explore what binds the players together into communities, using Pearce & Artemesia's (2009) idea of community of play and intersubjective flow, linking back to polymedia environments (Madianou 2013; Madianou & Miller 2012a; Madianou & Miller 2012b). Each of these theories provides different insights into what kind of social entities RuneScape and other MMORPGs are.

The nation of RuneScape, an imagined community

RuneScape has been through vast changes over its lifetime. RuneScape1 began with a very small population and simple features. At this stage the community could still be considered a 'true' community (Anderson 1983), since face-to-face contact was possible with all the players and administrators/moderators⁷⁵, because the number of worlds/servers was few (see Figure 14). At this stage it is possible to compare RuneScape to a primordial village, but it quickly out grew this description, rapidly rising in population to a point at which face-to-face contact was *not* possible. You can consider RuneScape's evolution as the growth of a nation, from its humble beginnings as a village, through being a town, city, to the multiple cities of nationhood. conclude

It is understandable that RuneScape is something akin to a nation when looking at its demographics (see Figure 12), its active player base is over two million (Jagex 2015c), with people and with moderators through many time zones. There is no way that all of these players all across the world would ever be able to meet face-to-face in-game, it is technically impossible due to server size limits and logistically improbable given the time zones. Coupled to this, the branched versions of RuneScape, Classic and Old School, cannot interact directly with the current version, RuneScape3. Brought together you clearly have a social entity which exists akin to the British Empire, with colonies in far flung areas of the world, in indirect contact with one another, yet still maintaining a sense of belonging to the same community.

⁷⁵ People who hold special powers that let them control elements of the game world to a greater degree than the average player. For Example, they can mute, or ban, abusive players, teleport around the world, become invisible or look like other things. They can also set off animations which help make in-game events, e.g. fireworks.

Anderson (1983) developed the idea that there is an 'imagined community' which embodies the notion of nationalism, "cultural genres of sociality, emotional registers, and struggles over power" (Madianou & Miller, 2012, p 139), that the British Empire required to stay coherent as a nationstate. "[The nation] is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1983, p.7). In Anderson's imagined communities, "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1983, p.6). For the British Empire, this image was drawn on by households in the outer reaches of the empire. For example, in India the home became a representation of the empire, keeping order over the home and indigenous servants was a representation of the order that the Empire could keep over its subjects (Blunt 2004; Blunt 2000; Blunt 1999). In this way, the "British women reproduced imperial power relations on a household scale, and the political significance of imperial domesticity extended beyond the boundaries of the home" (Blunt 2004, p.421). So an overarching imagined notion of community exists and is being drawn down into the reality of the colony as an embodiment of that space's inclusion within that 'imagined community'.

The embodiment of the British Empire's imagined community was established through the maintenance of the home as the physical face of its order and power. For the 'nation' of RuneScape, the embodiment is established in the digital community spaces (e.g. YouTube, Reddit, clan forums), as a polymedia environment (Madianou 2013; Madianou & Miller 2012a; Madianou & Miller 2012b). This reduces the need for a static, physical embodiment (Walker 2015), because this digital age's 'always on' culture (Madianou 2014), enables the same degree of connection to the sense of community, via multiple different pathways (see Figure 25). In this way the community is able to retain free movement in 'physical' geographic space whilst remaining stationary within that nexus that is the imagined community (Walker 2015). This is enhanced for the RuneScape community since the introduction of social skilling methods, enabling AFK skilling, means that players can be connected to the communities polymedia environment, via a pathway external to the game, whilst simultaneously connecting through the game.

From my study's findings it emerged that my participants envision they are part of a larger collective community that is RuneScape, but the reality its actually much more complex. The 'nation' of RuneScape is made up of multiple other sub-communities which are collected under its imagined community umbrella. Figure 23 shows a typical community structure where multiple community groups intersect with one another in numerous different ways. Each sub-community of the 'nation' of RuneScape can contain its own sub-communities, with the higher level container community becoming, in effect, a nested imagined community. A possible structure for RuneScape could be something akin to Figure 26. However the complexity of clan structures is poorly represented there, since if the clan is too large then it would constitute another layer of nested imagined sub-community.

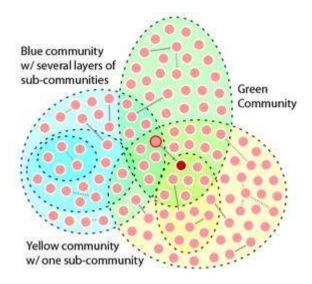


Figure 23: Community structure (Wu 2015)

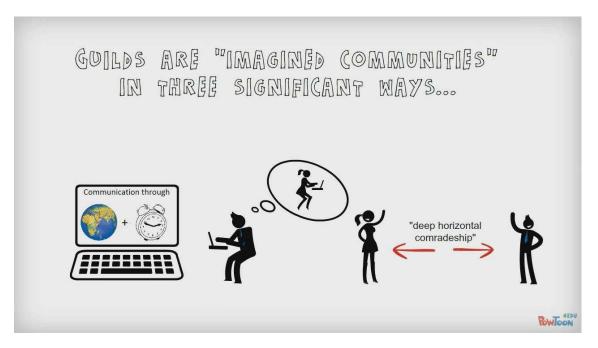


Figure 24: WoW's guilds (akin to RuneScape's clans) media communication, imagination fuelled non-faceto-face contact, and deep comradeship through shared interests (Rebeccasyar 2014)

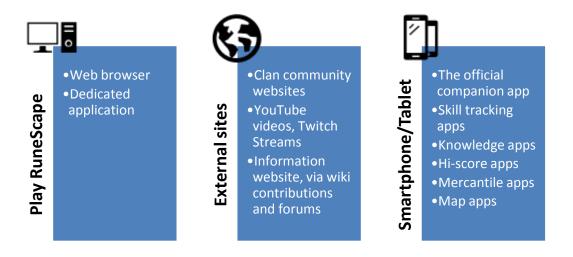


Figure 25: Examples of pathways for the 'nation' of RuneScape

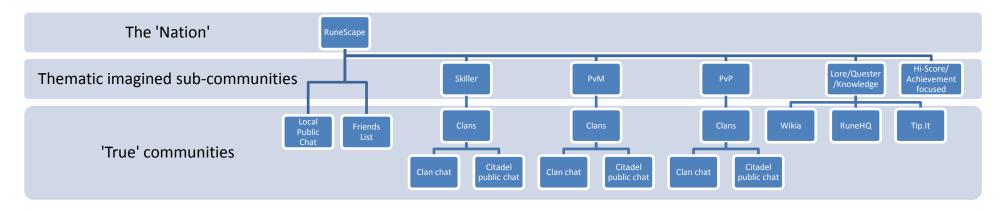


Figure 26: Possible community structure

RuneScape, a community of practice

Clans in RuneScape are what the communities social structure catalyses around, as they are the sites of 'true' communities conducting shared practice and learning. In RuneScape the majority (79%) of players are clan members, over half of those (58%) said their clan was a social/community type, (see Appendix 2: Figure 46 and Figure 47) which shows player see the structure as bonding them to friends. A clan in RuneScape can be of varying size, and thus may or may not be considered a 'true' community under Andersons (1983) philosophy. However, what a clan along with other elements of RuneScape's social structure do meet, is the criteria for is being communities of practice (Wenger 1998; Wenger & Trayner 2015). The original definition of a community of practice provided by Lave & Wenger is, "a community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (1991, p.98), clearly fitting how clans in RuneScape operate. The persons or community, world or domain, and a activity or practice, are all provided in RuneScape. Wolf (2007) shows that the MMORPG World of Warcraft (WoW) also provides these three elements required for a community of practice (see Figure 5). It should be noted that Wow's Guilds are the equivalent of RuneScape's clans.

From my study's findings it appears that RuneScape fits the basic definition of a community of practice, because RuneScape's players are participating in similar practices, and can clearly recognise each other as partners with shared experiences, within a shared domain of human endeavour. Being familiar with the practices and experience of other players within RuneScape makes it easy for participants in this study to establish ongoing relationships, especially if there is the potential for those players to help each other. This feature of a community of practice, whilst always being present within RuneScape, has lessened in intensity since the advent of the Grand Exchange. Now the Skiller's do not need to have a friends list populated with potential buyers for their produce, nor does the buyer. Through the Grand Exchange, buyer's do not have much of a connection to the producer, they can simply search and complete a transaction, leaving the Exchange to take payment and notify the producer. The Grand Exchange has lessened the trade relationships between players in some respects, but the clan system provides a surfeit of other relationship possibilities alongside friendships, and other more fleeting ad-hoc relationships whilst out and about in RuneScape's world. Communities of practice operate at many different scales throughout RuneScape, for the most part they are found at the 'Thematic imagined subcommunities' level of Figure 26, but they can occur at any level from the small scale 'true' community right up to the large scale 'nation' level.

Many of the participants in my study spoke of learning experiences when they first joined RuneScape, how they learnt the majority of the skills needed to play effectively by questioning other players in the locations they were practicing, in a similar fashion to the situated learning that Lave described as occurring in communities of practice (1991). Situated learning experiences require the participants to be within the same 'geographic' space of practices & identities. My application of Walker's (2015; 2014) notion of layered space aptly describes how players can forge the connections required to place themselves in the same 'geographic' space as other participants, to enable situated learning to occur in the 'nation' of RuneScape.

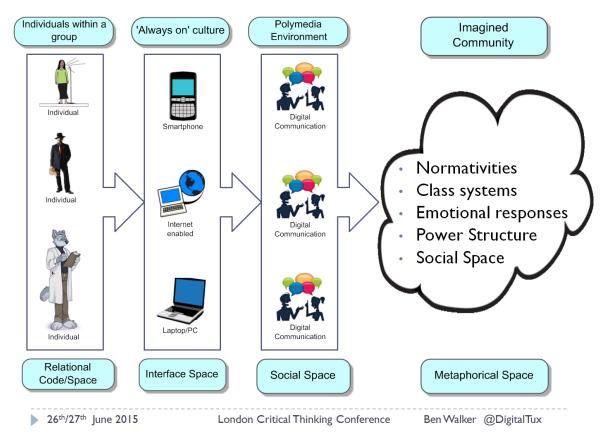


Figure 27: The Layered space approach (Walker 2015)

Figure 27 illustrates the basic structure of a layered social space. For situated learning in RuneScape the player accesses the interface space, the 'physical products' of social interaction which in this case is RuneScape's virtual world, through a code/space, where software mediates the social process and therein "code is essential to the form, function and meaning of space" (Kitchin & Dodge 2011, p.71). The social space, "the totality of the interaction, interpretations, expectations and demarcations" (Gotved 2002, p.410), governs the relationship and identities of the people involved. The metaphorical space, is their connection to the imagined geographies perceived within the code ether that exists beyond the interface space, in essence their connection to the rest of the 'nation' of RuneScape. In this way the players participate in learning & practice within the same 'geographic' space via their characters in RuneScape's virtual world.

My findings suggest that the same layering of spaces also enables AFK skilling within RuneScape. This activity is exceptional within MMORPGs and is only made possible thanks to the interactions between RuneScape's interface space and the players personal formation of code/space. By being playable in a browser window and with mechanics which require 'processing time', periods where the player is waiting before they can do another action, RuneScape provides an new type of 'always on' culture. Where the player can be simultaneously within RuneScape's world, and involved with other parts of the RuneScape community. In this way the polymedia environment can be accessed to a greater degree, since the connection to the community is manyfold. For example, the player can be engaging in an practice within RuneScape and learning about it from documented practices held in knowledge hubs, such as RuneScape. Wikia, whilst interacting in clan chat or forums.

The manyfold connection to the 'nation' of RuneScape's polymedia environment, enhances the situated learning. The learning becomes a partnership between practitioners, with individual challenges becoming the curriculum of the entire community of practice. For example, the goal of a entire skilling clan could be learning the most optimal way to produce certain products and gain xp. Whereas, in an ad-hoc relationship, the challenge could be learning the principles of skilling through a combination of RuneScape's formal learning via NPC tutors, and interaction with other players in public chat. In both cases, the learning is then distributed via the secondary connection throughout the polymedia environment, enabling others to conduct their own leaning at a distance from the original source practitioner.

This production of knowledge, as a 'good' that is internal to the community, is a key point in MacIntyre's construction of practices, "internal goods are indeed the outcome of competition to excel, but it is characteristics of them that their achievement is good for the whole community" (MacIntyre 1985). In RuneScape, this would mean a Skiller clan, like the one mentioned above, who find a better method for earning of xp, or a ad-hoc group who are the first to attempt a new raid, than sharing the knowledge gained with others either through fleeting interactions, conversation, or documenting the practice on one of RuneScape's numerous knowledge hubs.

Wolf (2007, p.3) showed that WoW provided a selection of tools to support the building of a community of practice, RuneScape actually has more tools on offer that support communities of practice than WoW (see Figure 28 top row is definition, bottom are examples). In Wolf's model WoW is missing, ongoing integration of work & learning, formal learning, and knowledge filtering. Although it would be reasonable to argue that some of these elements are present in WoW, e.g. formal learning in the form of in-game tutorials.

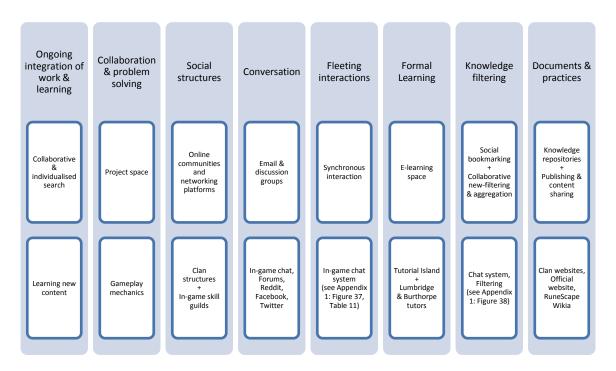


Figure 28: Tools supporting communities of practice in RuneScape, based on Wolf (2007, p.4)

RuneScape has in-game tools to support the building of communities of practice, and external tools such as knowledge hubs, community forums, and clan websites, all created and maintained by the players outside of Jagex's control. As Wo

If (2007) points out, tools alone do not make a community of practice, RuneScape's design has to provide "socially established co-operative human activity" (Reynolds 2007, p.762), and provide the prospect of achieving excellence, so the complexity of RuneScape should not enable it to be easily trivialised as "button pressing" (Reynolds 2007, p.762).

Wolf suggested that WoW's design "forces players to group together especially in the higher levels" (2007, p.3), whilst this is not the case for the majority of RuneScape's content, it does appear to be a trend within the more recent updates. Jagex already provides enough support for RuneScape's communities of practice through the chat system, forum, and social media presence. The effectness of which is enhanced by the player-produced tools, built on Jagex's APIs⁷⁶ and press releases. So long as Jagex continues to produce "worthwhile challenges and rewards" (Wolf 2007) with its updates to RuneScape, its players will continue to maintain communities of practice.

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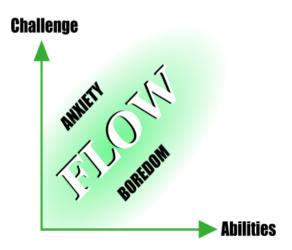
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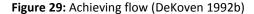
⁷⁶ Application Programming Interface, a set of tools provided by Jagex to allow members of the public to build websites that use the data generated from RuneScape.

RuneScape, a community of play

My participants cited gameplay and social bonds as reasons for both leaving/returning to RuneScape (see Appendix 2: Figure 44, Figure 45, Figure 51, and Figure 52), suggesting that communities of practice are not alone in binding players to RuneScape. Pearce & Artemesia's (2009) 'communities of play' shifts the focus from, playing the game because it is a game, to, playing for the social interaction. The two theories of community work in conjunction with each other to bind players into RuneScape's plethora of different sub-communities and the overall imagined community of RuneScape as 'nation'.

Players may dip in and out of the playing RuneScape, but during their active play sessions, duration is as much determined by their current gameplay goal, as it is the social interactions they are engaged in. DeKoven (1992b) cites the concept of flow where the player becomes engrossed in the game, "one of the hallmarks of flow is a sense of temporal compression, 'time flies when you're having fun'" (Pearce & Artemesia 2009), which is a strikingly similar notion to Schull's (2012) machine zone. Flow is achieved when there is balance between the level challenge and the level of ability required, as shown in Figure 29. That interpretation of flow is very individual centric and focused on gameplay, DeKoven (1992a) suggests coliberation to add a social element to flow (see Figure 30).





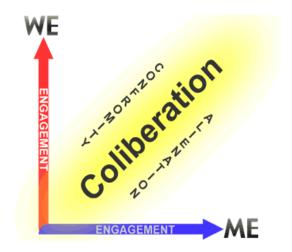


Figure 30: Achieving coliberation (DeKoven 1992a)

When my participants spoke of addiction in relation to RuneScape thoughts of Lazzaro's (2004, p.5) study's observation that "people are addictive" comes to mind. Lazzaro's (2004) study highlights the importance of social interaction as a factor binding players to games. If flow and coliberation are combined together into intersubjective flow, meaning:

"Shared meanings constructed by people in their interactions with each other and used as an everyday resource to interpret the meaning of elements of social and cultural life" (Seale 2004)

Then, 'no xp waste' is simply a way to achieve intersubjective flow, using "emergent, spontaneous, and unanticipated behaviour" (Pearce & Artemesia 2009, p.134). Other examples of this type of conduct within RuneScape are people placing bets on which side of a player a pet would spawn, or what colour flower would grow, these "Unofficial Player Run Games Of Chance" are not allowed under the Rules of RuneScape (Jagex 2015d), and are something Jagex described as unanticipated. Emergent behaviour also covers the meta-rules of social conduct often operating within player run clans, as illustrated by this interviewees comments, "the RuneScape community also seems to be one of the more organized ones in planning things as many clans have specific objectives and teams seem to know their roles very well". Players act to produce extra content by exploiting gameplay mechanics within RuneScape to prolong its 'life', making it fun again for bored players, to keep them playing, and socialising. Thus balancing the intersubjective flow.

Jagex felt, from their experience, it was the sunk cost fallacy⁷⁷, sometimes called the Concorde fallacy⁷⁸, keeping the end-game players playing. Paavilainen et al showed that social 'Facebook' games could be "potentially addicting, which makes them resemble gambling games" (Paavilainen et al. 2013, p.812), whilst MMORPGs are not the same in terms of design, the possibility for them to tap into peoples' loss aversion tendencies in the form of sunk-cost fallacy must be considered (Paavilainen et al. 2013, p.812). However, RuneScape's community is more than just a practice of gameplay mechanics, it is also a set of social relationships, since "friends are important in gameplay" (Paavilainen et al. 2013, p.811) and "people are addictive" (Lazzaro 2004). So the reason end-game players keep playing can be understood as an assemblage (Latour 2005) of two bond types, gameplay and social.

⁷⁸ "The idea that you should continue to spend money on a project, product, etc. in order not to waste the money or effort you have already put into it, which may lead to bad decisions" (Dictionary.Cambridge 2015).

⁷⁷ "The idea that a company or organization is more likely to continue with a project if they have already invested a lot of money, time, or effort in it, even when continuing is not the best thing to do" (Dictionary.Cambridge 2015). "I can't stop now, otherwise what I've invested so far will be lost" (Carroll 2015)

For example, end-game players often run out of gameplay content resulting in weakening gameplay bonds. Yet these players have had more time to construct social bonds related to RuneScape, and thus their assemblage of bondage's strength may, or may not, reach the critical level which would cause them to leave. As updates occur and friends move around, the strength of the assemblage of bondage changes. This enables players to leave and rejoin the active playing community. Many of my participants cited feeling addicted to RuneScape, always returning to it after periods away, as either other players, or the gameplay, adapts to pull them back (see Appendix 2: Figure 55 and Figure 58). This is shown within the words used to answer open questions on why players left and rejoined RuneScape (see Table 5, Figure 32 and Figure 33. Also see Appendix 2: Figure 51, Figure 52, Figure 63, and Figure 64).

Table 5: Example word and bond association

Gameplay bond	Social bond
Bored, boredom, break, lack	Friends, mates, friendly
Fun, new, interest, updates, EoC	Clan
Nostalgic, missed	School, real life



Figure 31: Thumbnail from YouTube video on what to do when bored in RuneScape (BerserkerBoots 2014)

🤼 15 Why did you	leave RuneSo	×		
Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)∇	Similar Words
bored	5	272	4.92	bored, boring, dull, slow, tedious, tired
friends	7	114	2.10	favor, friend, friends, supported
school	6	99	1.82	education, school, schooling, schools, train, training
interest	8	97	1.81	interest, interested, interesting, interests, occupied, sake
real	4	91	1.70	actual, actually, genuine, real, really
life	4	91	1.69	alive, life, live
quit	4	123	1.60	quit, quite, quited, quitting, rather, stop, stopped, stopping
break	5	131	1.53	better, break, breaking, breaks, bursts, check, checking, died, discovering, dying, fault, interrupted, part, parts, rift, ruin, ruined, several, several, stopp, stopped, stopping
runescape	9	75	1.41	runescape, runescapes
much	4	89	1.37	lot, lots, much, often
lost	4	73	1.33	confused, confusing, lost, missing
eoc	3	69	1.29	eoc
left	4	65	1.20	left, remain, remained
like	4	66	1.14	care, cared, compared, like, liked, likely, liking, probably, similar
needed	6	89	1.07	ask, asked, motivated, motivation, need, needed, needs, require, required, requirement, requires, want, wanted, wanting
busy	4	59	1.00	busy, engagements, interfering, job, occupied
new	3	49	0.92	modern, new, young
years	5	49	0.90	ages, classes, day, days, year, years, yrs
free	4	59	0.85	free, liberally, release, released, releases, spare
lack	4	62	0.81	lack, lacked, missing, want, wanted, wanting
updates	7	43	0.81	update, updates
membership	10	39	0.73	membership
became	6	39	0.73	became
things	6	38	0.71	thing, things
feel	4	43	0.70	experience, feel, feeling, feels, fingers, look, looking, opinion, sense
enjoy	5	44	0.65	enjoy, enjoyable, enjoying, enjoyment, love, loved, use, used, using
account	7	37	0.62	account, accounts, control, controlled, reporting, scores, story
months	6	33	0.62	month, monthly, months
even	4	50	0.60	even, level, leveled, leveling, levels, regularly, still, ties, yet
good	4	54	0.60	effectively, full, good, honest, honestly, nearly, safe, seriously, skill, skilling, skills, well
grind	5	32	0.60	grind, grinded, grinding
came	4	32	0.60	came
boredom	7	31	0.58	boredom
commitments	11	34	0.58	commit, commitment, commitments, committed, dedicated, invest, invested, investing, loyalty, place, put
reasons	7	36	0.57	grounded, pretty, reason, reasonable, reasons, think, thinking, thinks, understand

Figure 32: Word frequency in open question 'Why did you leave RuneScape?'

17 What brough	ght you back W	or x		
Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)∇	Similar Words
new	3	189	4.08	fresh, new, young
friends	. 7	158	3,43	friend, friendly, friends
nostalgia	9	122	2.65	nostalgia
wanted	6	147	2.55	desire, lack, miss, missed, missing, need, needed, needing, needs, private, require, want, wanted, wanting
runescape	9	114	2,47	runescape
updates	7	91	1.97	update, updated, updates
free	4	85	1.46	free, release, releases, spare, unblock
interest	8	62	1.31	interest, interested, interesting, occupy, pursuit, sake
bored	5	59	1.28	bored, tired
love	4	79	1.27	beloved, enjoy, enjoyable, enjoyed, enjoying, enjoyment, fond, fucked, know, knowing, love, loved, lovely, loving, passion
like	4	59	1.21	care, caring, compared, like, liked, liking
quests	6	53	1.11	pursuit, quest, questing, quests, requests, seek
eoc	3	51	1.11	eoc
see	3	77	1.07	check, checked, checking, date, experience, figured, hearing, look, looked, looking, looks, project, see, seeing, watched, watching, witnes
old	3	45	0.94	old, older, previous, sometimes
really	6	48	0.83	actual, actually, genuine, real, really, truly
boredom	7	38	0.82	boredom
school	6	37	0.79	school, training
decided	7	38	0.77	decided, deciding, definitely, resolved
always	6	33	0.72	always, constant, ever, forever, perpetual
day	3	45	0.70	day, days, year, years
good	4	48	0.67	full, good, honest, honestly, nearly, seriously, skill, skilling, skills, thoroughly, well
much	4	40	0.67	lot, lots, much, often
account	7	33	0.66	account, accounts, story
try	3	34	0.65	attempt, hearing, seek, test, tried, try
found	5	35	0.64	base, found, grounding, initially, innovative, introduction, launch, launched, originally, origins
return	6	33	0.64	fall, recall, regain, regained, regaining, rejoined, return, returned, returning
still	5	32	0.62	ease, even, however, still, yet
goals	5	43	0.61	end, ended, finish, finished, finishing, goal, goals
missed	6	46	0.61	escape, escapism, fill, lack, lose, losing, lost, miss, missed, missing
changed	7	29	0.56	change, changed, changes, changing, exchange, switched, switching
legacy	6	26	0.56	legacy
one	3	26	0.56	one, single
came	4	26	0.56	came
rs3	3	26	0,56	rs3

Figure 33: Word frequency in open question 'What brought you back?'

Conclusion

My study's findings and discussion suggest that although MMORPGs are designed to be platforms for sociality, they are also games. Thus design and gameplay mechanics must play a role in how people interact with them. From the study's finding it can be concluded that thinking of them in terms of distinct categories: a game, a social entity, virtual, real, or imagined, is completely inane and counterproductive. Confining our thinking into these categories means that "we miss the ways in which real communities [...] employ a whole ecology of media, [aka a polymedia environment], as they think together about matters that concern them" (Agre 1999, p.4). Using his experience, in what can be considered a more straightforward environment, the MMO Second Life, Boellstorff (2008) made the argument that the virtual/real dichotomy was a false one.

Second Life just provides a platform for social entities to form, and we are already virtually human, the avatars are simply extensions of what we *consider* to be real. Adding an 'objective', to form a MMORPG, does not change that, it remains a multifaceted 'thing'.

As a MMORPG, RuneScape is unusual as it has continually developed through a record breaking number of updates. This dynamic nature has produced a complicated community structure, a mix of ad-hoc and persistent sub-communities. However, these are all different expressions of the same sense of belonging, a shared comradeship of RuneScape. Acknowledging this complexity and the growing population of players, it is then possible to compare RuneScape to a nation-state. Using Anderson (1983) notion of 'imagined community', to understand the belief, the populous holds, of their shared connection. Considering RuneScape as a 'nation' allows it to be positioned within a layering of the spatial triad (Lefebvre 1991) reinterpreted by Gotved (2002) as three spatial dimensions, interface space, social space, and metaphorical space, wherein RuneScape as 'nation' lies (Walker 2015; Walker 2014).

To trace 'true' community within the 'nation' of RuneScape you have to accept that it is structured as both communities of practice and play, signifying the gameplay and social aspects of MMORPGs. They also represent Gotved's (2002) interface space and social space respectively. So this lets community be both enacted/performed and emergent, within the locus of action where all three spatial dimensions converge (see Figure 34). The three spatial dimensions help to reveal the nature of social interaction as enacted through the people, code⁷⁹, and the polymedia environment of our digital age. My study advocate that community, "as a result of [...] the enhanced integration of the different realities of space, has become much more imagined⁸⁰" (2014, p.44).

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⁷⁹ The design/development of software that enables human culture.

⁸⁰ Held in the mind, **not** fantasy.

The 'Nation' of RuneScape

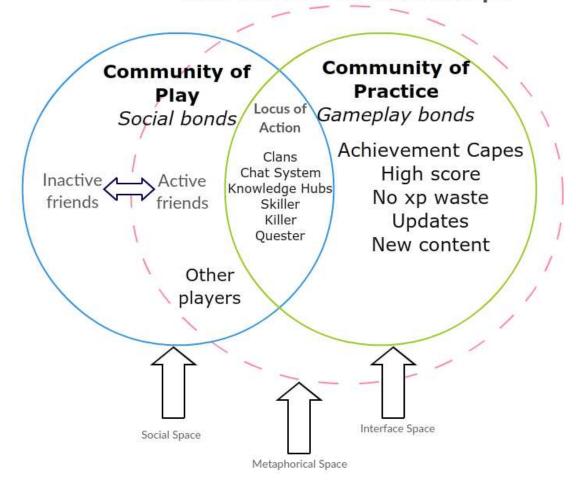


Figure 34: RuneScape, a messy assemblage

An example of this used within the context of RuneScape is, the variability of players connection/addiction to the MMORPG. Players are bound to RuneScape via an assemblage of gameplay and social bonds (Latour 2005). The volatility of this assemblage is what allows players the flexibility to leave and rejoin RuneScape. Over time as Jagex releases new content/updates or friends move between games, the strength/number of bonds a player maintains in their assemblage changes. Which in turn determines whether or not they remain as active within the 'nation' of RuneScape. Differentiating between the two elements binding players to RuneScape is difficult because they are so tightly interwoven within the assemblage of bondage. RuneScape's players are also 'addicted' to each other's company, as well as the gameplay.

My conclusion from my research is that MMORPGs are not just games! Neither are they distinct worlds or social entities. MMORPGs integrate into the environments of their players through messy assemblages of social and gameplay bonds. For companies designing/building/running MMORPGs this should highlight just how much power they hold, not only over the gameplay experience, but also the social and emotional well being of their players. Therefore, they are responsible for the consequences of not properly considering the players when making changes to "places of human culture realised by computer programs through the internet" (Boellstorff 2008, p.17). For anthropologists it is a warning, that focusing on categorisation/definition can hide the simple fact that "some sort of vitality runs through all aspects of community life, regardless of the medium on which it relies" (Feenberg & Bakardjieva 2004, p.37). My study suggests that MMORPG do not stand separately, as virtual worlds, since so much of their 'community life' takes place in a polymedia environment (Madianou 2013; Madianou & Miller 2012a; Madianou & Miller 2012b). My study concludes that the browser based nature of RuneScape allows for multiple simultaneous connections to and from that environment, during active play sessions, boosting the productivity of the communities of practice and providing communities of play additional possibilities for "emergent, spontaneous, and unanticipated behaviour" keeping RuneScape interesting (Pearce & Artemesia 2009, p.134).

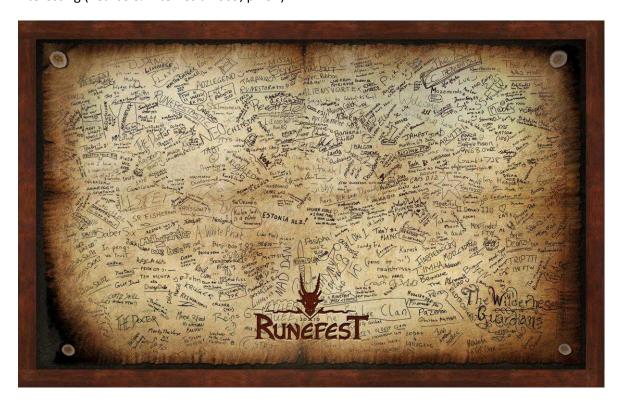


Figure 35: RuneFest2010, The 'nation' of RuneScape comes together for their first convention (Jagex 2015f)

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Appendix 1: RuneScape background information

Table 6: RuneScape members benefits (Jagex 2015b)

	Free Players	Members
Quests	24	208+
Skills	16	26
Minigames	4	41+
Treasure Hunter Keys/Day	1	2
10% Discount to Solomon's General Store	No	Yes
Armour and Weapons	Limited	Full
Bank Space	88	556
Character Customisation	Limited	Full
Game World Access	Limited	Full
No Adverts	No	Yes
Loyalty Programme	No	Yes
Auras	No	Yes
Costumes	No	Yes

	Free Players	Members
Emotes	No	Yes
Titles	No	Yes
Recolours	No	Yes
Character Name Changing	No	Yes
Clan Citadels	No	Yes
Grand Exchange Slots	2	6
In-game Pets	No	Yes
Player Housing	No	Yes
Skill Capes	No	Yes
Transport and Navigation	Limited	Full
Customer Support	Yes	Priority
Full Screen Graphics	No	Yes

 Table 7: RuneScape's free-to-play skills (RuneScape.Wikia 2015b)

Skill	Description
1	Grants players using melee weapons higher accuracy, thus
Attack	increasing the number of hits dealt to an opponent during
	any given time period. Since more of the player's hits will
	be successful, the player's opponent will incur more
	damage per any given period of time.
*	During melee, higher strength increases a player's
Strength	maximum potential damage to an opponent for each
	successful hit.
₩	Allows players to wear stronger armour, as well as
Defence	decrease their chance of being hit.
Ø	Allows players to fight with arrows and other projectiles
Ranged	from a distance and increases a player's chance to hit
	when using ranged.

Skill	Description
*	Allows players to pray for assistance in combat, such as for
Prayer	stat boosts and partial immunity from attacks. Effects last
	until the player runs out of prayer points, or turns their
	prayers off.
<u> </u>	Allows players to cast spells, including teleports and
Magic	enchantments, through the use of different types of runes.
	Increases magic-based attack accuracy and reduces the
	chance for magic-based attacks to hit you.
₩	Allows players to sustain more damage without dying. Your
Constitution	base life points are one hundred times your constitution
	level. All combat skills train constitution at a rate of 1.33
	experience per 10 damage done.
V9	Allows players to craft items from raw materials, such as
Crofting	pottery, ranged armour, and jewellery.
Crafting	pottery, ranged armour, and jewellery.

Skill	Description
7	Allows players to obtain ores and gems from rocks found in
Mining	some specific places. Ores can be used with the smithing
	skill. Gems can be used with the crafting skill.
₩.	Allows players to smelt ores into bars, and smith bars into
Smithing	armour, weapons, and other useful items.
\$	Allows players to catch certain fish. The fish can then be
Fishing	sold or cooked and then eaten.
(2)	Allows players to cook food. The food can then be
Cooking	consumed to heal a player's life points. The higher the
	cooking level, the lesser the chance is of burning food.
<u> 8</u>	Allows players to light fires, lanterns, etc. Players can cook
Firemaking	on these fires.
*	Allows players to cut down trees for logs, and to carve out
Woodcutting	canoes for transportation.
2	Allows players to make runes in special altars using tiaras,
Runecrafting	talisman staffs, or talismans, aiding in the magic skill.

Skill	Description
8	Allows players to progress further down the dungeons of
Dungeoneering	Daemonheim, unlocking access to exclusive weapons,
	treasures, monsters, and areas. Gives rewards only
	accessible through dungeoneering.

 Table 8: RuneScape's achievement capes (RuneScape.Wikia 2015b)

Cape type	Description
Capes of	Can be obtained after reaching skill mastery (level 99) in
Accomplishment	the corresponding skill.
Master capes of	Can be obtained after reaching true skill mastery in the
Accomplishment	corresponding skill.
Expert Skillcapes	Can be obtained by training a specific group of skills to
	level 99.
Quest point cape	Can be obtained after all quests have been completed.
Max cape	Obtainable if the player has all skills at 99.
Completionist	Obtainable if the player has completed all of the in-game
cape	content, and completes a set of miscellaneous tasks.

Table 9: RuneScape's members skills (RuneScape.Wikia 2015b)

Skill	Description
次 Agility	Allows players to use shortcuts and increases the rate at which energy recharges. It is also used to enhance several other skills, such as allowing the player to catch multiple fish at once.
W Herblore	Allows players to clean grimy herbs and to make potions which can be used to boost/restore skills.
Thieving	Allows players to steal from market stalls, chests and certain non-player characters (and other players in Stealing Creation) and to lockpick doors.
Fletching	Allows players to create projectiles (such as arrows, bolts, and darts) and bows/crossbows which can be used for Ranged.
હીં Slayer	Allows players to kill certain monsters using tactics not used in normal combat. Useful in raising combat skills. Has the potential to give very rewarding drops unique to slayer monsters.

Skill	Description
	Allows players to grow plants (such as fruits, vegetables,
♦	herbs, or trees) in certain patches across the world of
Farming	RuneScape. Farming is notably very useful for collecting
	many common and rare herbs for Herblore.
	Allows players to build a house and its contents, such as
**	chairs, tables, workshops, dungeons, and more. Every
Construction	players house is located inside its own instance,
	separated from the rest of the game.
6000	Allows players to track, net, deadfall, snare, and trap
Hunter	animals for their hides, abilities and treasures.
***	Allows players to summon familiars and pets to enhance
Summoning	game play in both combat and non-combat skills.
%	Allows players to collect divine energy around the world
Divination	in order to create products such as signs and portents.

 Table 10: Number of players with max skill level (RuneScape.Wikia 2015b)

Skill	Players	Player
	at 120	at 99
×	2,206	175,746
>	4,674	197,685
>	1,858	80,138
**	2,502	208,732
寒	424	58,184
Ŧ	479	69,710
*	4,766	177,349
*	1,029	103,358
\$	803	103,038
Ø	3,670	165,585
99	4,048	69,798
\$	2,240	185,897
+	774	110,870
×	419	69,963
8	2,451	159,378
<u> </u>	4,249	204,004
1	866	144,185
*	894	159,204
2	392	67,617
ď	1,759	88,070
4	895	60,444
***	328	57,920
6003	347	58,798
W	1,599	92,220

Skill	Players at 120	Player at 99
®	23,926	91,256
60 3	380	45,639
0	28	20,237

Table 11: RuneScape chat channels (Jagex 2015a)

	Channel	Description
	All Chat	This channel is the local channel. It shows you any public chat in the area around you, chat from all of your other channels and information from the game itself such as level up messages.
	Private Chat	This channel is private, it shows messages sent directly to you that cannot be seen by anyone else.
<u></u>	Friends Chat	This channel will display messages from your current Friends Chat channel, if you are in one. This can be your own channel, or one that belongs to another player.
	Clan Chat	This channel will display messages from your Clan Chat channel, if you are a member of that clan. This can be a clan that you own, or one that belongs to another player that you are a member of.
	Guest Clan Chat	If you are not a member of a clan but you know the name of the clan, you can join their clan chat and this channel will display messages from that chat.
	Trade & Assistance	All trade requests and offers of assistance will appear in this chat area.
<u> </u>	Twitch Chat	All twitch.tv chat will appear in this chat area. You cannot access this channel unless you are logged into twitch.tv.
	Group Chat	All group chat will appear in this chat area. You cannot access this channel unless you are in a group.



Figure 36: RuneScape chat interface (Jagex 2015a)



Figure 37: RuneScape chat filters (Jagex 2015a)

Appendix 2: Survey results visualised

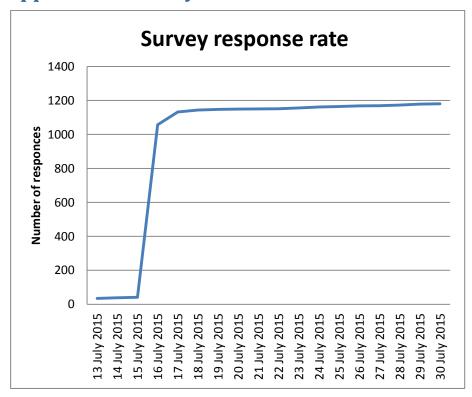


Figure 38: Survey response rate

From the 13th to the 15th The survey was only publicised on the official RuneScape forum, on the 16th the publicity was also pushed out on other platforms such as Reddit.

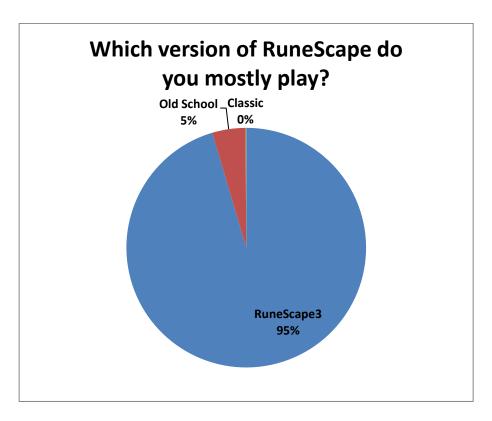


Figure 39: Which version of RuneScape do you mostly play?

The majority of the survey respondents are RuneScape3 players, this is the mainstream version of RuneScape. However, these figures are not representative of the typical distribution of Old School vs. RuneScape3 players, normally 40:60 (Jagex 2015c).

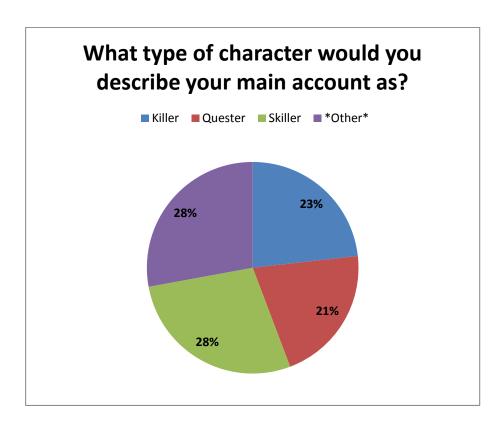


Figure 40: What type of character would you describe your main account as?

The balance of all three main play types is slightly off due to the wording of the question, 2% players placed themselves into the 'Other' category instead of the intended PvM category, 'Quester'. The remaining 26% of the 'Other' responses were indicating their 'all rounder' status. Even after this adjustment the majority of player s are Skillers.

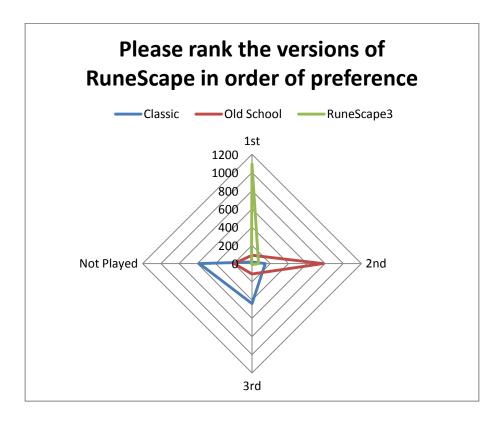


Figure 41: Please rank the versions of RuneScape in order of preference

Overall these results are as expected given the demographics observed from Figure 39.

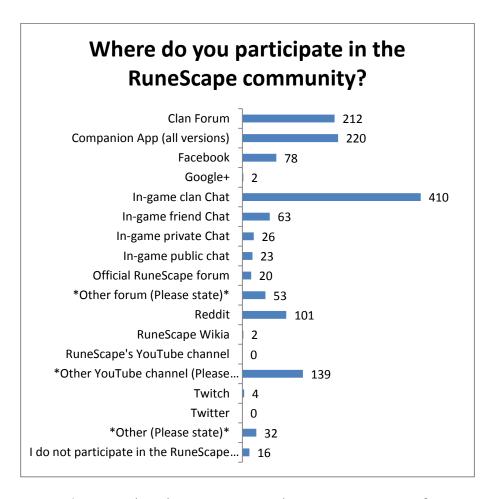


Figure 42: Where do you participate in the RuneScape community?

This highlights the importance of the clan in the structure of the RuneScape community. It also highlights the extent to which the community uses the rest of RuneScape's polymedia environment.

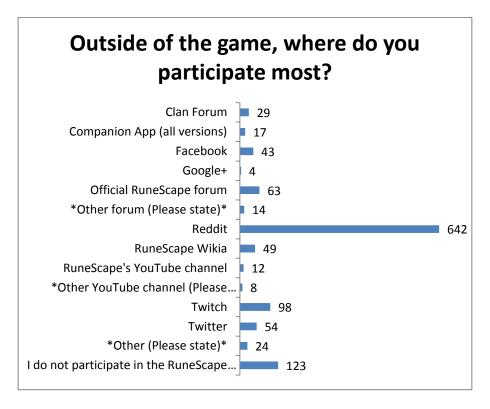


Figure 43: Outside of the game, where do you participate most?

This question retained a copy/paste error while live, offering in-game options, these responses were re-coded to be a non-participant outside of the game. Unsurprisingly given where the survey was publicised Reddit holds the majority, with the rest of the responses relatively evenly spread over the other options. The other responses mostly offered a selection of other community specific websites, such as RuneHQ or Tip.It.

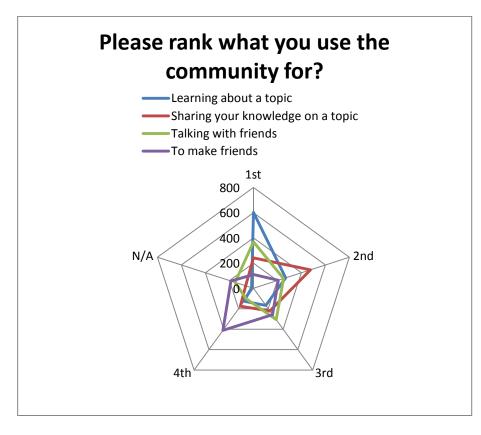


Figure 44: Please rank what you use the community for?

This highlights key aspects of the RuneScape community, primarily it confirms the use of the community as a learning tool, mostly people are drawing information from it as a source but they contribute to it as well, just not as much. The community is not used for making or communicating with friends all that much.

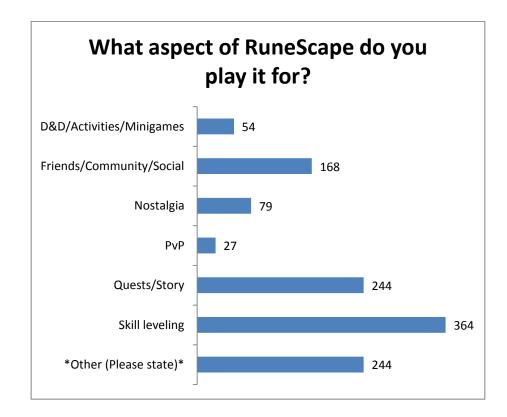


Figure 45: What aspect of RuneScape do you play it for?

Again this is expected given the account types displayed in Figure 40, and again PvM occurred frequently within the 'Other' category, the additional 77 responses push Questing up to 321, close behind Skilling. It is important to note the low representation of 'Killing' in for form of PvP, this is likely again due to definition problems with the survey.

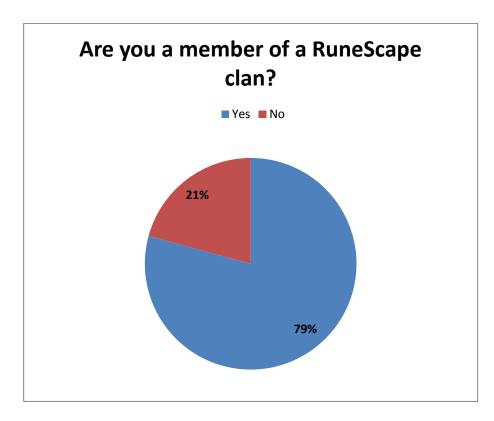


Figure 46: Are you a member of a RuneScape clan?

Expected results, given the importance of clans to RuneScape's social structure as seen in Figure 42.

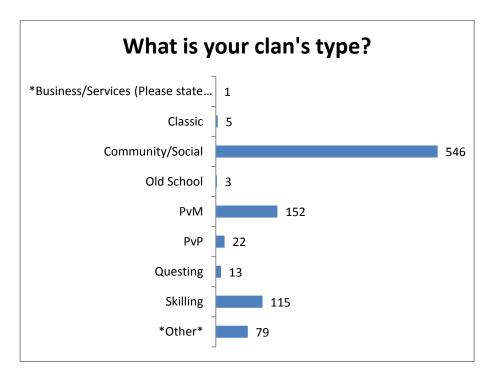


Figure 47: What is your clan's type?

The majority of plans do not have a specific purpose, which would be expected if RuneScapes community is bound together as a community of play. The community of practice elements of the community do show through in clan types less frequently than might have been expected, which may indicate the strength of the intersubjective flow that players of RuneScape have produced, it is masking the community of practice structure underneath the social bonding of a community of play.

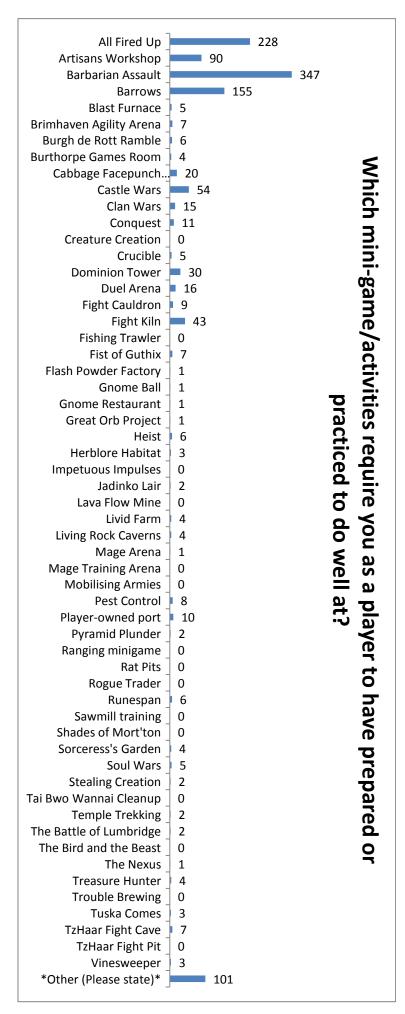


Figure 48: Which mini-game/activities require you as a player to have prepared or practiced to do well at?

proportion of the other responses were indicating all of RuneScape's activities required some level of practice/skill to perform well at. mitigated against had the display of the list been randomised, this was not done because it would have made finding specific activities more difficult. A large The main flaw with this question is its length (the number of check boxes). Most respondents only bothered to check the first few activities. This could have been

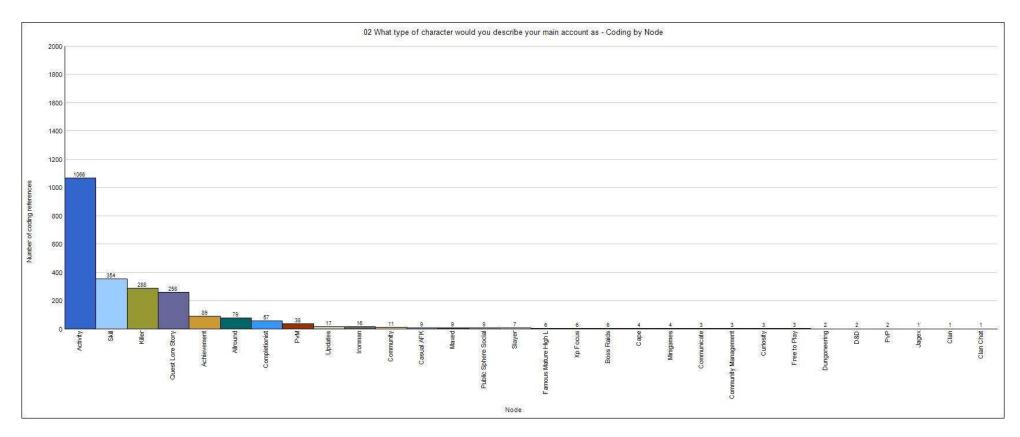


Figure 49: What type of character would you describe your main account as? Coded by node

A visualisation of Figure 40, where the other responses have been coded in the same way as the player interviews. The node hierarchy can be seen clearly in Figure 70. It is interesting to see the number of achievement related character definitions used, 'completionist', 'Maxed', 'Xp focused'.

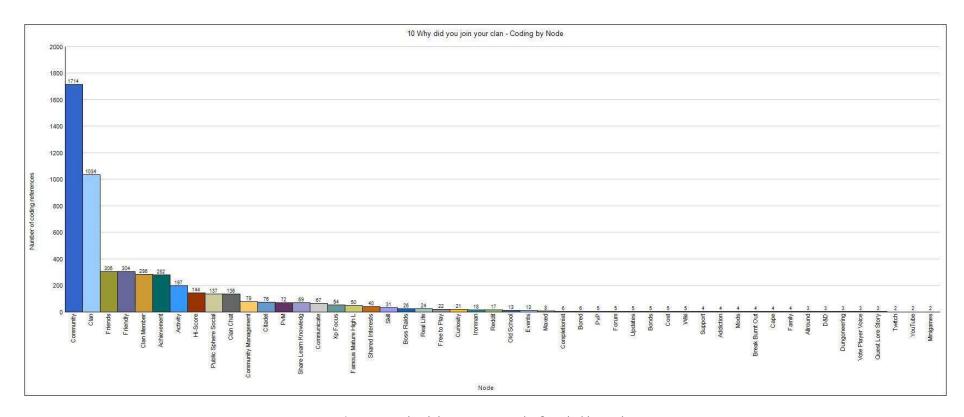


Figure 50: Why did you join your clan? Coded by node

It is interesting to note the prevalence of community nodes in this open response question, as well as how friends and friendliness of the clan also occur frequently. This would again suggest that clan members see them more as social bonding structures over learning structures, counter to what people have said they use the community for in Figure 44. Achievement, a trait in this instance of community of practice structures, is also a high factor in choice of clan, but it is dwarfed by the social elements. Also see Figure 62.

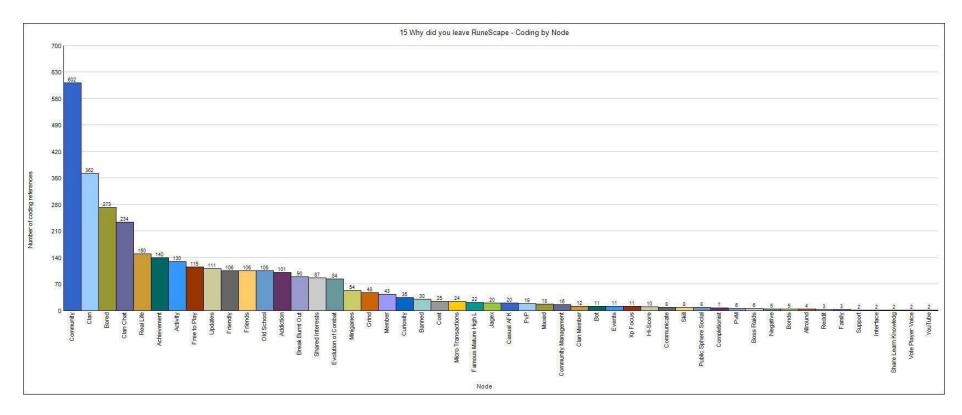


Figure 51: Why did you leave RuneScape? Coded by node

Another open response question. Where community also occurs frequently, again suggesting community of play aspects binding the RuneScape community together, if friends stop/move to a different game other friends follow. Boredom also rates highly along with real life issues. Issues take with the direction Jagex is taking the game through updates is also referenced a lot. Also see Figure 63.

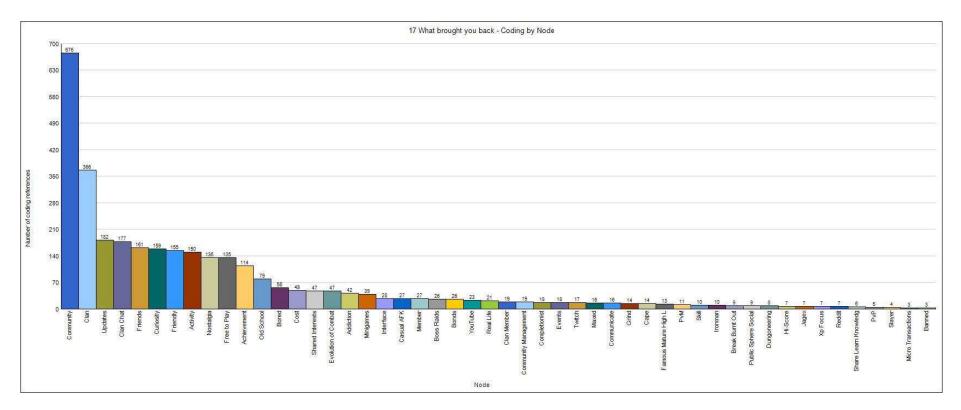


Figure 52: What brought you back? Coded by node

A open response question, were community rates even higher, a large majority of this is made up from clan coding, suggesting friends in existing RuneScape clans are pulling others into the game through the bonds of communities of play. Updates and curiosity about them also pull people back. The contentious issue of the Evolution of Combat also comes up with people admitting they came back only to find it was not as bad as they thought or found they actually liked it. Also see Figure 64.

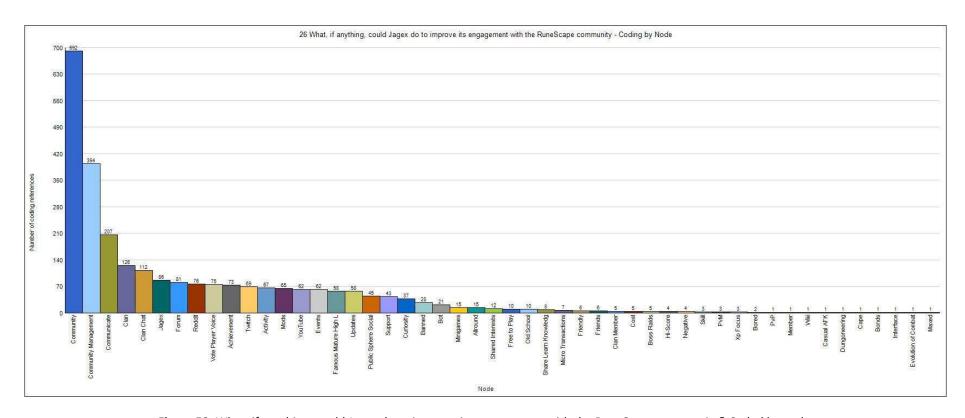


Figure 53: What, if anything, could Jagex do to improve its engagement with the RuneScape community? Coded by node

Mostly in these open responses people wanted the community management team to communicate with them more, and allow the players greater say in future content. Also see Figure 65.

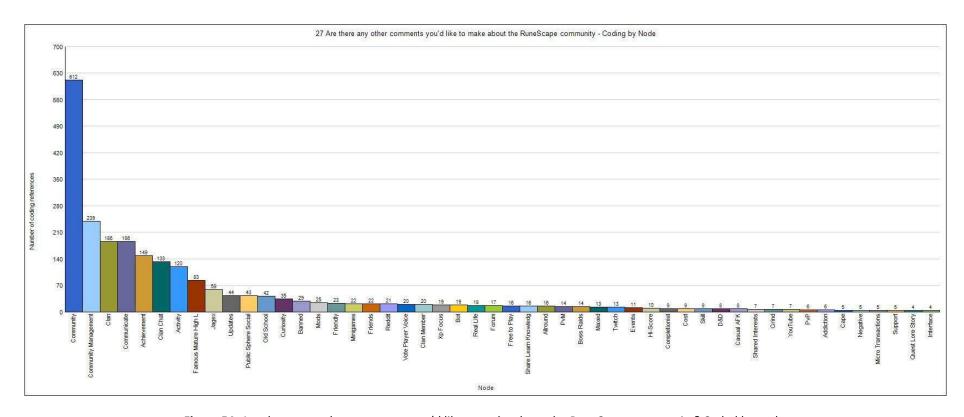


Figure 54: Are there any other comments you'd like to make about the RuneScape community? Coded by node

An open response, which some respondents used to criticise the 'no xp waste' culture, other used to praise the community, a lot just indicated they had no comments. Also see Figure 66.

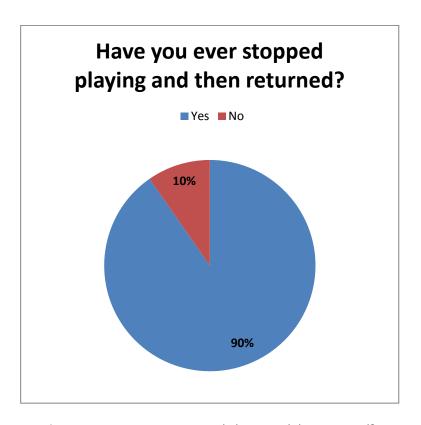


Figure 55: Have you ever stopped playing and then returned?

This tallies with interviewees comments about the RuneScape community being something you never truly leave.

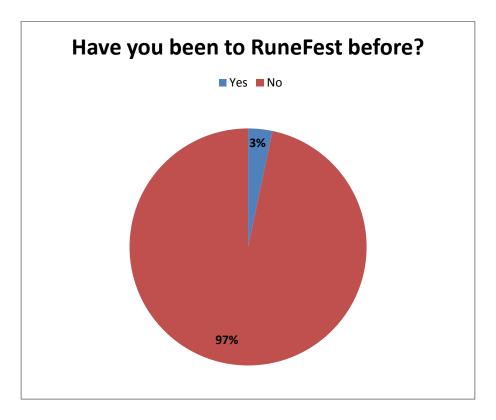


Figure 56: Have you been to RuneFest before?

Not surprising, given the size/international of the community and the limited RuneFest tickets and its location in the UK.

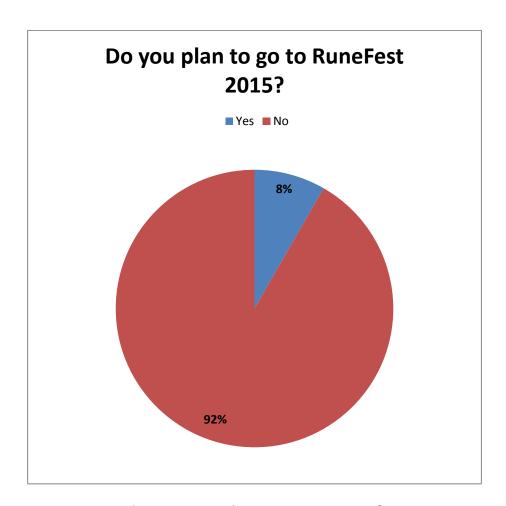


Figure 57: Do you plan to go to RuneFest 2015?

Not surprising, given the size/international spread of the community and the limited RuneFest tickets and its location in the UK.

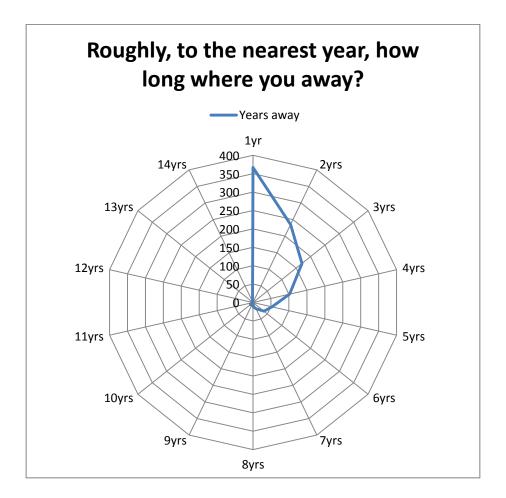


Figure 58: Roughly, to the nearest year, how long where you away?

This shows most people do not spend that long away from RuneScape before returning. Another take would be that as the length of time spent playing increases the chance of returning reduce.

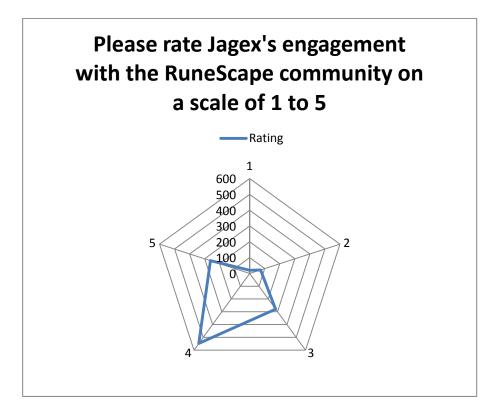


Figure 59: Please rate Jagex's engagement with the RuneScape community on a scale of 1 to 5

On the whole players are happy with Jagex's community engagement, though they do think it could be improved in some places.

Please rate RuneLabs as a method for gathering community input for RuneScape's development on a scale of 1 to 5 —Rating

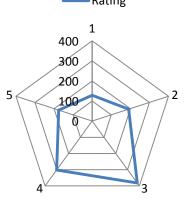


Figure 60: Please rate RuneLabs as a method for gathering community input for RuneScape's development on a scale of 1 to 5

Players think there is some improvement needed in the RuneLabs system, though the impression from comments is that they appreciate the system giving them a voice.

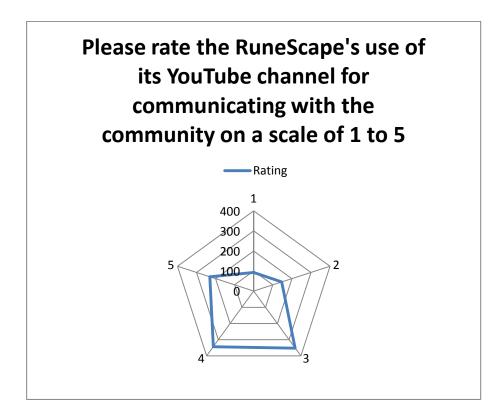


Figure 61: Please rate the RuneScape's use of its YouTube channel for communicating with the community on a scale of 1 to 5

On the whole people like Jagex's output through YouTube, the biggest complaint was there not being enough of it.

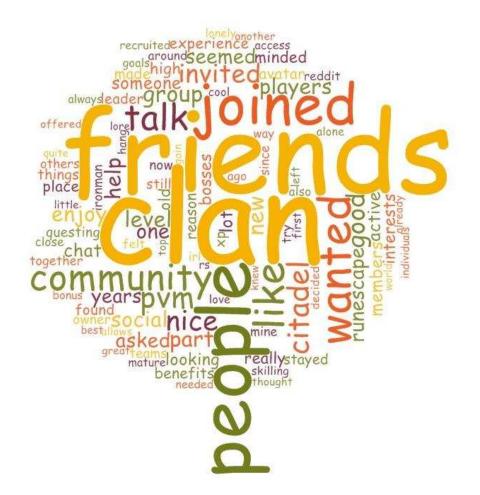


Figure 62: Why did you join your clan? Word frequency cloud

Again this highlights that friends are the primary factor for joining clans, followed by other specific features, goals, and benefits such as the citadel.



Figure 63: Why did you leave RuneScape? Word frequency cloud

Boredom/lack of interesting updates and real-life time issues are the main reasons for leaving RuneScape. The 'feel' of the game also comes up in the form of too much grind and feeling burnt out with the game mechanics.



Figure 64: What brought you back? Word frequency cloud

New updates/content is a major pull factor, as well as friends, and a nostalgia factor. Spare time also comes up, people use RuneScape as a boredom buster, playing AFK to distract themselves.



Figure 65: What, if anything, could Jagex do to improve its engagement with the RuneScape community? Word frequency cloud

People want to see better support for the players with problems. People would also like to feel that their voice is hear by Jagex and some form of action is taken on it. A large number of the comments were specifically targeting elements of game content.

together thanks
focus keep of toxic talks
focus keep of toxic talks
whole of the seep of t

Figure 66: Are there any other comments you'd like to make about the RuneScape community? Word frequency cloud

On the whole people were complimenting the community with a little bit of denigrating of certain elements and aspects of it that they do not like or disagree with.

Appendix 3: Initial interview questions

Why do you play RS?

What is your main focus within RS? (Eg. High scores, Specific goals)

For you, what does 'community' describe on the RS?

So do you feel playing RuneScape is a skill you have learned over your time playing?

Do you miss that period of learning how to play the game? Did you get anyone's help through that period?

How do you feel when playing RS?

What do you think of RS as? A separate world, a competition, an addiction, or something else?

So what do you think is it that holds the RS co-op/community together?

Does the focus on xp/efficiency damage that?

So do you find RuneScape less fun now, because of afk playing?

Do you think that the grind (xp focus) makes the game a more casual experience?

Is that why skills/achievements are held in such high regard?

Final question

I've come to the end of what questions I'd like to ask for now, but I would like to know whether there are any comments you'd like to make that we've not touched on, or ask any questions about the study?

I may contact you later if any other questions come up.

Appendix 4: Interview coding visualised

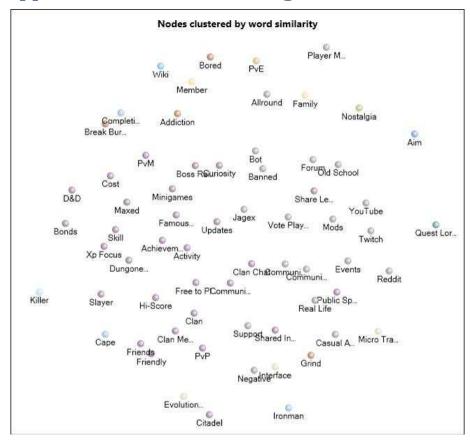


Figure 67: Interview coding clustered by word similarity

Other than a slight grouping for clans, friends, friendly and PvP there are no disenable patterns among the nodes

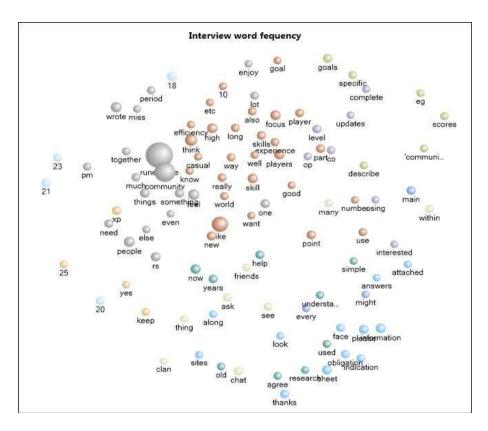


Figure 68: Interview word frequency cluster analysis

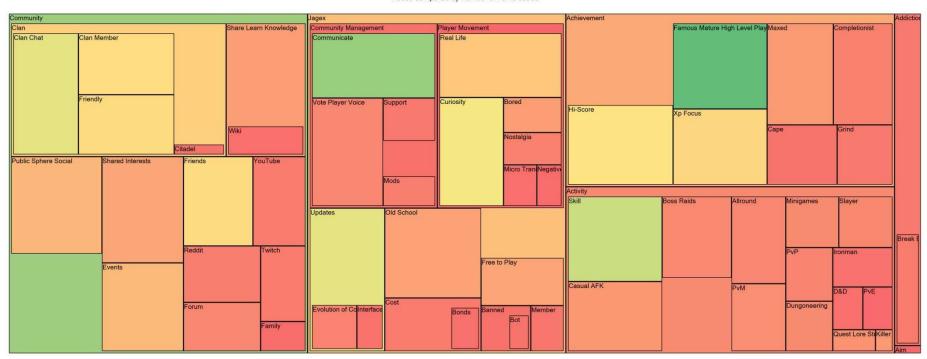
There are few tight groupings within the interviews but you can make out a cluster for achievement, goals and levels (red), which was a topic a lot of the interviewees fell back to when talking about the community, it highlights that skilling as a practice is core to the RuneScape community.



Figure 69: Interview word frequency cloud

This combines all of the interviews into one word frequency tally. The drawback of this is that words used in the interview questions and the exported email 'junk' text is also counted. For the most part this has been removed by adding stop words to NVivio that occur frequently but are not written by the interviewees.

As you would expect 'community' is discussed a lot, along with 'RuneScape'. However more surprising is the frequency of things like 'information' and 'help', 'goals', and 'experience'.



Nodes compared by number of items coded

Figure 70: Interview coded nodes visualised

This shows the node structure that was used to code the interviews. Green is higher numbers of items coded. Clan is a core element, occurring with high frequency, along with communication and high level, mature, players.

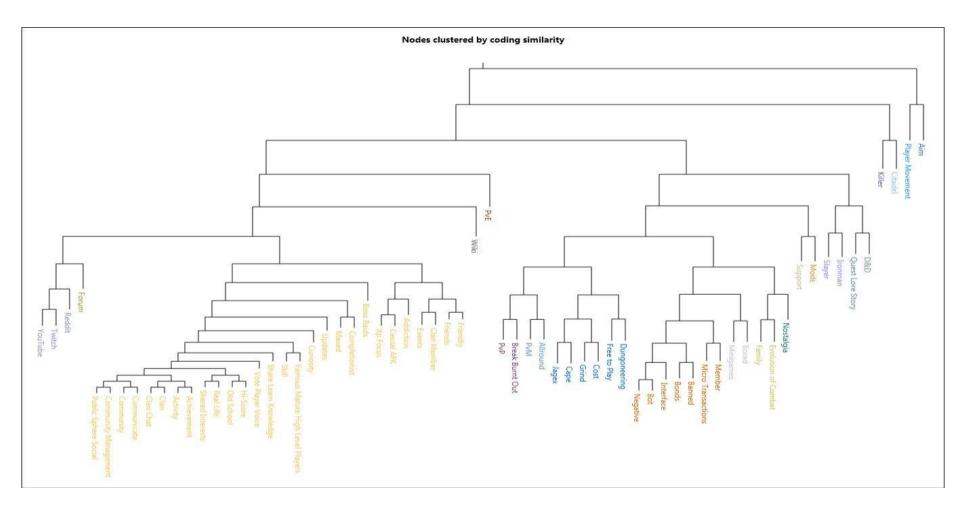


Figure 71: Interview nodes clustered by if they coded the same source

The most obvious grouping is in yellow, which are the most commonly occurring codes. The more interesting groups are the next two larges containing the blue and orange sets. These correspond to reasons for leaving and returning to RuneScape.