
Getting Level 99 in Research: What Lies beneath the Online Mask in RuneScape

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Produced in Adele Richardson's Spring 2013 ENC 1102

Introduction

As the Internet becomes ingrained in people's everyday lives, the way it is used becomes more crucial to understand. Throughout my research in the field of online identities, various aspects of personality development are common and these have created a solid base for my own study on the community of *RuneScape*. These concepts and ideas related to the research of online personas include the online mask and the process by which individuals use it to portray themselves online, the motivations behind the use of the mask, and how the anonymity of the mask allows its users to both express themselves and experiment with their character in ways they are unable to in real life. I have also found it important to note the online and offline (real) worlds are not easily separated; they intertwine with each other in interesting ways.

The concept of an online mask and its relevance to identity creation and manipulation has been discussed in relation to a variety of outlets, such as social networking sites, forums, and online gaming communities. However, *RuneScape* is an online game that has been overshadowed by other games even though it has a large player base with nearly one million active accounts and subscriptions (Van Geel). Although researchers Nic Crowe and Simon Bradford used *RuneScape* for their research, they examined the behavior of adolescents; my interest has always been in the community as a whole. My ultimate goal for this research has been to discover how individuals are using the online mask in *RuneScape* and what it enables them to do within the game. To accomplish this, I have conducted several interviews with players¹, observed player interactions in-game, and am relying on my knowledge of and experience with the game to analyze the behavior of fellow players in the community.

RuneScape

RuneScape is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), a type of game that allows its players to interact with others in a virtual world. The game is developed by Jagex Games Studio. It is set in the medieval fantasy world of Gielinor where players act as adventurers by training skills, completing quests, and exploring the world. There is a free-to-play portion of the game available as well as a pay-to-play version, which offers more skills, quests, and a larger world to traverse. While the role-play aspect of being an adventurer and performing tasks as an adventurer would be partially ingrained into gameplay, there is a freedom about how the player does so and, just by the nature of this, how a player decides to play the game places them among

¹ All player names have been changed for the purposes of this research. Furthermore, a copy of the interview given is located in the appendix.

various social groups. Unlike many other social groups which create limits for players, one's social division in *RuneScape* does not prohibit them from interacting with members of another, but it does play a role in the creation of their online identity, which I will address later on.

"Community" is important and there are many features in-game that allow players to communicate with each other. The most important of this, arguably, is the clan chat, which gives players the opportunity to connect with others of similar interests in a fashion that is recognized officially. To a lesser but still invaluable extent, friend's chats and the private messaging system facilitate the development of player interactions. All of these methods of communication are made available to everyone and can be taken advantage of or avoided at the player's discretion. These modes of interaction create a fascinating aspect of the game because they allow players to express themselves while experimenting with their new identity by the simple click of a button.

The Online Mask

Researchers agree the Internet allows people to act differently than they would in their real lives; this phenomenon is referred to as an online "mask" (Crowe and Bradford 340; Humphrey; Inman). This mask's existence is guaranteed by the anonymity of the Internet; however, the shape it takes differs based on the context. In the case of forums and online gaming, the mask's basic appearance is in the form of an avatar (Crowe and Bradford 340; Humphrey 40). In *RuneScape*, the mask consists of both an avatar and an RSN (*RuneScape* Name). The avatar is the character played in the game; unlike other fantasy role-playing games and aside from storylines in various quests, the player is always a human. The RSN is a name other players can see and is often used in place of a person's real life name, even if the real life name is known.

While experts concur about the mask's existence, there is much debate surrounding its usage. Crowe and Bradford insist the mask enables individuals to "secure anonymity *and* identity simultaneously (so they are concurrently *known* and *unknown*)" (340); other researchers, however, claim it permits people to alter themselves, portraying someone different from their true selves (Humphrey 33; Inman).

The identity created is not always done so with the best intentions. As Michael Fraser, a professor for the University of Technology, Sydney, notes, "Those people [who participate in cyber-bullying and trolling] hide behind a mask of anonymity to abuse or harass or intimidate other people" (qtd. in Nicol 3). Trolling is defined as "deliberately trying to distress someone online...usually just to disrupt and often anonymously. It is frequently inflammatory and abusive" (Nicol 3). In *RuneScape*, it is not uncommon to see other players using the mask to taunt, troll, insult, tease, or otherwise perturb another player. In one instance of observed behavior, a male player made sexual advances toward a female player even though she was obviously uninterested (see Figure 1). Even after she made the request for him to stop, he continued, causing her to leave the chat she was in.

Motivations are Diverse

In order to fully comprehend how *RuneScape* players use the online mask, it was essential for me to consider their motivations. Two distinct routes emerge when analyzing motivations in an online gaming context: one that examines avatar design (and for the purpose of my research, name choice) and one that evaluates the drive to play.

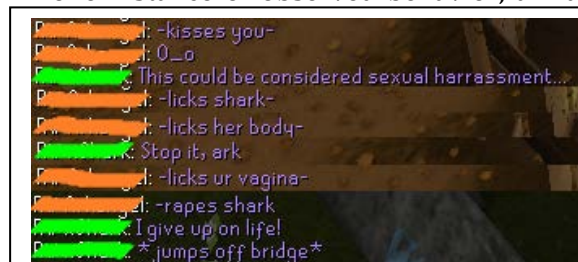


Figure 1: The male player, highlighted in orange, harasses a female player, highlighted in green.

There are three ideologies behind the creation of an avatar. One proposes players design their character to fit in with or stand out from their comrades (Crowe and Bradford 337-38). Another theory suggests the portrayal of an ideal version of oneself is the core motivation (Kim, Lee, and Kang 1664). Anne-Marie Schleiner, a writer and gaming artist/designer, concludes “gamers explore identity through their virtual characters, reflecting how they want others to see them through those images” (qtd. in Crowe and Bradford 340). A final argument presumes people create their avatar to present their true self in their online community (Kim, Chan, and Kankanhalli 1241). I believe the *RuneScape* community takes advantage of the mask in a combination of all of the theories listed above.

When an individual first makes an account in the game, they are allowed to choose their RSN, sex (male or female), skin color, hair color, hair style, and an outfit. Even after the original choices have been made, players are allowed to make adjustments at various locations around the Gielinor globe. Many players, including myself, have chosen to design our players to look similar to ourselves; this seems to be done almost unintentionally. One player interviewed, named John, confessed, “I’ve been told once that I look like my character. But [it] was rarely something I tried to keep to.” George, Daniel, and Timothy (other players who filled out my questionnaire) agreed their character did partially resemble them in real life.

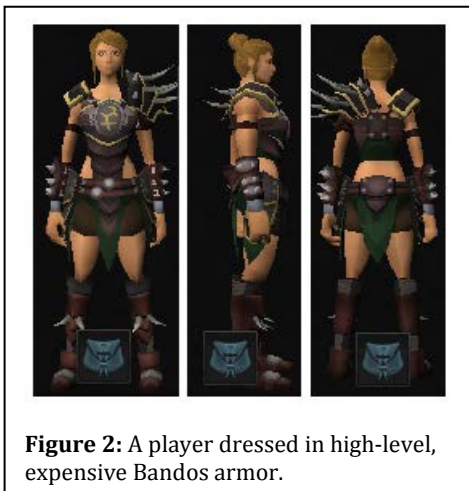


Figure 2: A player dressed in high-level, expensive Bandos armor.

In *RuneScape*, there are many ways to dress your character. The most common fashion choice is armor (see Figure 2), which can be used to fight monsters, quest bosses, and even other players. It gives people the chance to look “cool” or show off their wealth, simultaneously standing out from and blending in with other players. An interesting observation of player behavior came from a mini-game—a game within the larger game—known as Clan Wars on a free-to-play server. Because the armor choices are limited, this leaves players looking similar to each other. However, players will sacrifice protective bonuses by exchanging armor, like headgear and boots, and secondary items, like capes, for purely cosmetic replacements in order to differentiate themselves from the players around them.

Choosing a *RuneScape* name is often difficult. Creating an RSN worthy of the attention of others while still representing one’s self can be an arduous task. Although some players decide to change their name as often as they can, many choose to stick with one or hop back and forth between a few they really enjoy. The reasoning for this is to remain recognized and out of a fear for loss of identity. For example, Jordan, a player I interviewed, refuses to change his RSN: “I’m recognized by this name and like it as it’s unique.”

Recognizing the motivation behind playing a game is also important in analyzing the online mask. Researchers have found that players invest time in games because they become captivated by the online worlds (Billieux et al.; Crowe and Bradford). Edward Castronova, a professor and expert on the economies of synthetic worlds, attests to this, stating “users can fairly easily immerse themselves in [online games]...becom[ing] so involved mentally and emotionally in the synthetic world that [they] stop paying attention to the fact that it is only synthetic” (qtd. in Sarbu 7). Another proposal suggests online games can provide opportunities for actions and expressions that are impossible to achieve in the real lives of players (Crow and Bradford 342; Schechtman 332-33). Gabriela Sarbu, a researcher who immersed herself in an MMORPG, sums up player motivations, stating three major reasons players get involved in the games they play: “as an entertainment and for relaxation; as an escape from reality in the case of one who wants to forget about the daily problems, or did not want to deal for some hours with the offline reality; and those who are treating

issues from the game with the same amount of dedication and implication, similarly to a real situation” (6).

Once a person is engaged in the virtual sphere, the desire to interact with others becomes an important aspect of gameplay (Billieux et al. 103; Crowe and Bradford 337). These interactions unveil the ways in which *RuneScape* players use the online mask. Earlier, I mentioned that the way players immerse themselves into the game divides them into a social class. For example, people who like to train skills become Skillers and those who enjoy killing other players become Player Killers. Even for certain skills within the game, there is a division (e.g. Dungeoneers who enjoy Dungeoneering). These groupings do not prevent interactions between members of another group; however, the lexis used by one group may not be easily understood by another. This creates a sense of belonging that is important for people even within an online game. It is more easily facilitated in *RuneScape* because there are so many different groups in which a player can become involved. For John, who was bullied in school, “*RuneScape*. . . was an experience I’d never had before, the first time I could interact and ‘prove my worth’ with others.” His story is not uncommon. The online mask gives many players an opportunity to “prove” themselves in ways they are unable to in their real lives.

Anonymity Invites Expression and Experimentation

The anonymity the mask provides allows people to express themselves online in ways they cannot or do not in their offline lives (Crowe and Bradford; Hongladoram; Humphrey; Nicol; Schechtman). This enables them to experiment with elements of physical appearance and personality traits they wish to exhibit.

Physical characteristics are no longer set in stone and can be changed to project one’s idealized self or to investigate what life could be like in a physically different manifestation (Crowe and Bradford 340-41; Kim, Lee, and Kang; Schechtman 340). For *RuneScape*, it is not infrequent to find players exhibiting this behavior in the form of changing their character’s sex in the game.

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Although there is a quest that requires male characters to become female, and in other games, being a girl character has certain benefits, in *RuneScape* there are no direct in-game advantages. That is not to say there are not any advantages at all. From personal experience, female players tend to receive specialized attention from their male comrades; however, not all of this is pleasant (for instance, the situation in Figure 1 on page 4). In certain cases, though, this attention is paid in the form of gifts of money or virtual items. John, along with many other players, is convinced most of the “transgenders” within

RuneScape do so in order to gain these advantages.

However, motivation for changing one’s sex can be as simple as having fun. Interviewees Alex and Jordan have become girl characters as social experiments to see if doing so changed how people acted toward them; for each of them, this was the case. Jordan informed me when he and a friend changed into girls and went to a populated server, “a mob came saying all sorts of crazy things so we ended up going back to mem[bers] and switching gender again.”

While it is more common, guys are not the only ones who transform themselves into the opposite sex. Madeleine sometimes plays as a male character because “the outfits are better” and “less attention are put onto male characters.” Changing sex to avoid attention is an interesting observation. A YouTuber who calls himself JarekHasNoLife explained he becomes a girl while he trains certain skills because, as a male character, other players will interfere with his training by “steal[ing] kills.” However, when he changes his character into a girl, these types of interruptions occur less frequently, making his experience “more enjoyable.” Additionally, some players merely

exhibit an RSN that implies they are of one sex while maintaining a character of the opposite (Marc12313).

Another use of the mask is to embrace characteristics of personality one cannot or does not embody in their real lives (Crowe and Bradford 341; Schechtman 332-33). I have observed this behavior in myself, as well as those around me. Players like Madeleine find that “[i]t’s easier to talk to people online [because] I’m quiet [in real life].” I am similar to her in that respect and have observed comparable behavior in others. One survey showed 40% of players are willing to “tell fellow gamers things they wouldn’t tell their friends” (Silverman). On the other hand, some players hide behind the mask to act in ways uncharacteristic of the offline world, choosing names, like IStripForGP (GP standing for gold pieces, the currency of *RuneScape*) or UrLocalSlave. Such names carry negative connotations but draw attention to the person who chooses them, which is the ultimate goal for these players. While some of this attention might be in the form of disapproval, others will acknowledge their name choices as funny or amusing.

The Overlap of Offline and Online Worlds

Identity creation behind the mask is viewed as an extension or complement to the real world rather than an act completely separate (Crowe and Bradford 340-41); there is “a fusion between the offline and online” in “the area of the self and the person” (Hongladoram 534). Many researchers appear to agree with these theories, and discuss ways in which the real, offline world weaves itself into the virtual, online world and vice versa (Humphrey; Schechtman). Anthropologist Caroline Humphrey details a story in which a forum poster was accosted in a bar for posting a controversial story on a forum (44-45). Romantic involvements between players have also been observed in-game (Sarbu 6; Schechtman 339). Some of these people attempt to meet in real life, continuing those relationships or even getting married: “One couple whose avatars met in SL [*Second Life*], and who then married also in RL [real life], nevertheless felt that they needed to have a wedding in SL as well. Less happily, RL divorces have been initiated on the grounds of SL relationships” (Schechtman 339).

It is quite common in *RuneScape* to see such romantic involvements. “E-dating” is the term coined for internet dating. Matching or declarative RSNs are often observed (see Figure 3). Another way to publicly demonstrate affection is to “dance” (see Figure 4). When players follow one another, it creates a spinning motion, which mildly resembles a dance. While this is not always an action performed by players in an online relationship, it is typical to see across the *RuneScape* world.



Figure 4: Two players “dancing” with each other.

An article written by Matt Silverman, the editorial director for *Mashable*, a website dedicated to social media news, discusses possibilities of why e-dating might be so common (and arguably more successful than dating websites): “[A] disinhibition effect makes people honest online... [And] men approached by women in a high-adrenaline situation are 37.5% more likely to feel attraction... [B]attling demons and trolls with a girl is a bigger rush than grabbing coffee with her.”

Although his article was written on a different MMORPG, *World of Warcraft*, the theories could still hold true

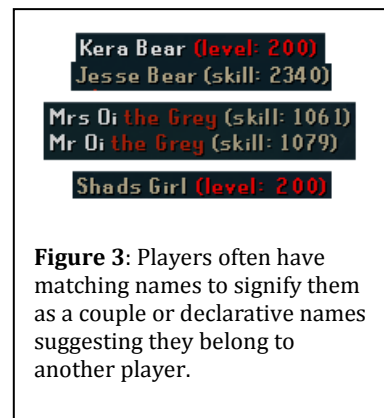


Figure 3: Players often have matching names to signify them as a couple or declarative names suggesting they belong to another player.

in *RuneScape* as e-dating within the game does happen. Three of seven players interviewed admit to having had online relationships through *RuneScape*. A fourth player, John, is in an online relationship right now, although his originated elsewhere. “[I]t just happens sometimes,” Madeleine stated. The “it” she refers to is having romantic feelings for other players. This is supported by a particular study that found 42 out of 100 female gamers admit to feeling attraction toward another player (Silverman). Alex revealed his motives for online dating as stemming from curiosity: “[I wanted] to try it out and I’m not exactly the ladies man in real life.” Still others, including a player known as George, refuse to ever online date: “I need to be with her, talk to her. The physical aspect is too important.”

Interestingly, a *RuneScape* player famous for being the first player to achieve the highest level in each skill is also known for having a wedding in the game. The wedding took place in 2006 and was very “official,” with a limited number of guests invited to attend (“The Real Zezima”). His bride, a player called Elianestp, confirmed on a forum that they had met in real life and were even crazier about each other in real life than they were online (qtd. in “The Real Zezima”).

It is also significant to consider the discovery that many players are so committed to their games they view the virtual world as real and treat issues that arise as they would in the offline world (Crowe and Bradford; Kim, Chan, and Kankanhalli; Sarbu; Schechtman). This can often be observed within *RuneScape*, as players will discuss “no-life” training methods to attain a desired level in a skill. “No-lifing” occurs when players avoid real life responsibilities to play the game; it is often mentioned as a joke, but many players will spend hours upon hours playing in order to achieve their in-game goals. In the Clan Wars mini-game, players will non-stop (NS) attack each other in an activity known as the Free-for-all White Portal. The phenomenon of NS-ing can last for over 24 hours, with players bragging that they made another player log out of the game after repeatedly killing their character for hours on end.

The online mask in RuneScape creates a safe place for people to experiment and I believe this to be relatively harmless. Some people are enabled to become more “themselves” due to the lack of physical limitations, while others become who they wish they were.

Conclusion

The creation of the Internet has allowed people to express themselves in ways they never could before. The phenomenon of the online mask and its ability to lower inhibitions has forever changed the ways in which they interact. It is important for people to remain aware of this as they create identities for themselves online, while not forgetting their responsibilities to the real world.

The online mask in *RuneScape* creates a safe place for people to experiment and I believe this to be relatively harmless. Some people are enabled to become more “themselves” due to the lack of physical limitations, while others become who they wish they were. For a few players, their mask lets them become ever changing but for the majority, the desire to make a name for themselves, be recognized for their achievements, and feel as if they belong somewhere create a draw to the mask that cannot be replicated elsewhere.

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Appendix

Thank you ahead of time for agreeing to participate in my research on online identity within RuneScape. For the purposes of this research, your responses will remain anonymous and confidential unless I am given permission otherwise. Feel free to disregard any question you feel is too personal or do not wish to answer.

1. Age/Sex/Location?
2. Would you prefer to remain completely anonymous or can I refer to your RuneScape name?
3. What is your RuneScape name?
4. Why did you choose this name?
5. What do you think your name says about you?
6. Would you ever change your name? To what? Why/why not?
7. Do you usually tell people your real life name?
8. Which do you prefer to be called in game? Why?
9. How long have you played RuneScape and/or how old were you when you started playing?
10. What made you start playing?
11. Is your RuneScape character male or female? If this is different than you irl, why?
12. Have you ever played a character of the opposite sex? Why or why not?
13. What do you enjoy doing most in RuneScape?
14. What are your real life interests/hobbies?
15. Does RuneScape allow you to integrate real life interests/hobbies? (and/or Does RuneScape allow you to do something you're unable to in real life?)
16. If yes, is it easier or harder to fulfill them while playing RS?
17. Have you designed your RuneScape character to look like you irl? Why/why not?
18. Do you think you behave differently around people you meet online rather than real life? Why/why not?
19. Do you think others do it? Why/why not?
20. Have you ever dated online? Why/why not?
21. Do you play other role-playing games? If so, what are they and why?