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AVATAR AND SELF: A RHETORIC OF IDENTITY MEDIATED THROUGH
COLLABORATIVE ROLE-PLAY

by

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ABSTRACT

This project responds to a problem in scholarship describing the relationship between virtual avatars and their physical users. In *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle identifies points of slippage wherein the persona of the avatar becomes conflated with the user's sense of self to create an authentic self predicated on both real and virtual experiences (Turkle 184-5). Although the conflation of the authentic self with the virtual has provided various affordances for serious games or other pedagogical projects such as classrooms hosted through the game Second Life, the processes enabling identification with an avatar have been largely overlooked. This project examines several layers of influence that affect how users play with identity to create successful social performances within an online community connected to a work of fiction. In doing so, the user must consider his or her own motivations for creating a persona, how these motivations will allow the avatar to achieve social acceptance, and how these social performances connect to the scene created by the work of fiction. Using an online role-playing forum based on a work of fiction as a site of analysis, this project will borrow from game studies, dramatism, and identity theory to create a framework for discussing processes through which users identify with their virtual avatars.

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INTRODUCTION

This project studies identity practices within collaborative role-play by tracing three kinds of relationships that users negotiate in the online role-playing game forum *Absit Omen*. In choosing this topic, I wanted to investigate my own development as a writer through this website and how it encourages collaborative writing. When I describe this writing to others, I generally use the term "round-robin storytelling" as a way to link it to more traditional forms of storytelling. However, this term only describes the product of collaborative role-play. From the position of the writer, the moves necessary to create this type of storytelling require a more complex negotiation of character, story, and environment. Writers are asked to tell a story collaboratively, in addition to constructing characters through which this story is told. As these stories take place within an online forum, the relationship between writers and characters bears a surface resemblance to that between players and avatars within game studies. Characters are created by writers to navigate the online forum and tell stories. By drawing attention to the storytelling process, however, I move away from this concept by looking at the relationship between the writer and the character to posit each as separate agents capable of different motivations. This move allows me to look at how these relationships function within the website.

These characters act as stable identities that mediate a variety of contexts, all within the universe of the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling. In this project, I identify three types of relationships that must be negotiated in order to tell a story through collaborative role-play: the writer and the character; the character and the larger social network within the website; and the social network with the *Harry Potter* series. Each relationship builds upon and complicates the

other, resulting in a sophisticated network that writers navigate in order to tell their stories.

Collaborative play results as writers must rely on each other to negotiate these relationships.

Good writing, for the purposes of this forum, invites writers to participate in a story and

negotiate these complex rhetorical constraints together.

What is Collaborative Role-Play?

I rely on the term "collaborative role-play" to describe the general rhetorical moves

present within *Absit Omen* without limiting it to any specific genre. The *Absit Omen* website is a

complex textual ecology made up of the formal in-character role-play boards, out-of-character

forums for writers' discussions about the role-play boards, a twitter feed introducing new

characters and major events, a synchronous chat box, out-of-character newsletters, and in-

character news outlets. These spaces come together to form the *Absit Omen* website, prompting

collaborative role-play through writers' negotiations of these different writing spaces and voices.

Absit Omen's official description lists it as a play-by-post *Harry Potter* online role-playing game

forum; throughout this project, however, I will refer to it as an online role-playing game forum or

RPG forum. In this description, the website invokes three major genres, each with their own

norms of participation: Multi-User Dungeon games (MUDs), fan fiction, and role-playing games.

As seen in the description, these genres are not mutually exclusive, but prioritize different

elements of storytelling. Describing these genres in detail and explicating how collaborative

role-play in an online RPG forum is like and unlike each of them can shed light on the unique

constraints of writing, rhetoric, and identity present in online RPG forums.

Multi-User Dungeons

MUDs have often acted as a source for scholarship that explores the construction of identity online, going back to the first explorations of LambdaMOO by Pavel Curtis, Amy Bruckman, and Julian Dibbell. MUDs are basically chatroom-like spaces in which users can build, interact, and navigate with others primarily through present-tense commands. Due to the real-time nature of the MUD environment, active participation drives the creation and maintenance of the site (Talamo, Pozzi and Mellini 27). Players must be visible to participate, developing their characters through real-time actions within the space. Sherry Turkle's study of MUDs found that "On a MUD one actually gets to build character and environment and then to live within the toy situation. A MUD can become a context for discovering who one is and wishes to be. In this way, the games are laboratories for the construction of identity" (184). The reliance on text-based environments rather than the game design's visual rhetoric allows for greater customization for the player. This environment also allows each character to be exactly described and perceived as the player wishes. The ability to write an identity rather than choose one body from those given by the game designer allows a greater freedom of choice in creating virtual and projective identities.

Although it no longer retains the narrative velocity of a MUD, where actions are conducted in real-time, the online RPG forum maintains MUDs' commitments to character development and identity experimentation through writing that is archived and presented online. The benefit of this kind of online RPG forum is that it also acts as a repository of actions, allowing characters' actions to be recognized and re-read while they are away from the website. Although this appears to be a superficial difference of synchronicity, the stability of the forum

also allows writers to build structures and refer to them without having to activate any type of "looking" action within the MUD. Writers can build and act within structures created by archived writing while the original writer is away, as ownership is given to the website society at large instead of individual actions. Writers can also refer to objects within the larger *Harry Potter* universe without having to create an object within the forum, signaling to the larger text that encompasses the forum.

Fan Fiction

The presence of the *Harry Potter* series in *Absit Omen* emphasizes how online RPG writings are structured around a cultural artifact (the *Harry Potter* series) that creates a foundational knowledge which writers can rely on and invoke without any confusion. However, the act of writing through a popular culture artifact causes many to align it with fan writing, particularly fan fiction. Through Henry Jenkins' and others' tireless efforts, fan studies has been elevated to a field of its own as a way of looking at how writers build knowledge with and through pop culture. The object of this gaze is not merely the text but rather how the text functions as a performance. In an edited volume on Fan Fiction studies, Francesca Coppa cites Richard Schechner in that "characters are neither constructed or owned, but have, to use Schechner's phrase, a life of their own not dependent on any original 'truth' or 'source'" (230). Fan fiction has been used in multiple arenas to open and expand a text and test fictional characters against the writer's own experiences, or even to create a space wherein moments that are marginalized or silenced by the text are played out to their full extent. The text is not a limitation but rather a springboard for the writer's own imagination.

Although *Absit Omen* arose from this spirit, it maintains a slightly different relationship with the origin text. A knowledge of the *Harry Potter* series will be helpful to any reader, but the work of the *Harry Potter* series for the forum is primarily to provide a basic level of knowledge about the world they are writing in order to bound the types of writing involved. In this way, the online role-playing forum steps away from fan fiction writing. Whereas fan fiction opens a text by inserting original characters, modifying canon characters, and inviting crossovers between works, the online RPG forum uses the canon of the *Harry* Potter series to set up mutually agreed upon constraints for writing such as time period, characters available, and past influential events. Writers may insert original characters, but these characters act within the spirit of the *Harry Potter* series. Fan fiction may ask, "What if this happened?" while online RPG forums lead with the question, "How could this happen?"

Role-Playing Games

Finally, the very title of the online RPG forum indicates its relationship with graphical and embodied role-playing games. The primary difference lies in their mediums of play, between video games and text-based games. During their examination of the online MMORPG *Everquest II*, Williams et al. question whether "text-only spaces will hold true now that players have almost entirely moved to graphical avatar-based virtual worlds" (175). Text-based online RPGs not only still exist but also resist the assumptions and underlying ideologies related to rhetoric and identity that graphics carry with them into the virtual world. The visual constructions of characters alone can carry ideologies held by game designers. Physically bulkier avatars are often aligned with warring races, while the smaller, more diminutive races value peace, survival, or scientific progress. The game *Guild Wars 2*, similar to many other massively

multi-player online roleplaying games, provides a selection of races and classes for the player to choose from. Each race and class comes with mythologies and visual tropes that influence how a player may project an identity onto them. From the *Guild Wars 2* website, the large, ferocious, feline Charr race is described as "A savage race of conquerors…forged in the merciless crucible of war. It is all they know. War defines them, and their quest for dominion drives them ever onward" ("Charr"). If a user attempts to resist this narrative by picking a profession for the chosen race with contradictory values, the game design finds a way to intertwine their value systems to create a cohesive identity. If a warring member of the Charr is given a profession such as the Guardian class which describes itself as "brilliant tacticians and selfless defenders who know when to sacrifice their own defenses to empower their allies to achieve victory," choices within the game construe the selflessness of the Guardian as a reflection of the Charr's unceasing dedication to the progress of their race ("Guardian"). Although the player is allowed to customize the avatar's appearance and choose which class will shape his or her personality, the character itself is still limited to the templates provided by the game.

Within online RPG forums, writers may either perform the role of a canon character, one who appears in the origin text, or create an original character of their own design. Those who pursue canon roles often walk a line between representing the character as written within the book as they would have experienced the world of the forum and presenting their own interpretation of the character. Although they may be limited to using visual representations of the character from the *Harry Potter* films, the writer is still able to develop the character and influence the composition of the canon character by naming unspoken interests or histories. Despite the canonicity of the character, the writer is still responsible for its development in a way

that is not always available in video role-playing games. As for writers who create original characters, they are able to draw from and remix other cultural resources without being constrained by the shape of those resources outside of the forum.

The RPG Forum as a Rhetorical Situation

The rhetoric of online RPG forums borrows heavily from all three genres described previously. In negotiating different commitments to character, story and environment, writers enter a situation that resembles Jenny Edbauer's description of distributed rhetorical ecologies in "Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies." The RPG forum is composed of moments of encounters: between writers and characters; characters and social context; and social context and constraints of canon. Edbauer cites Margaret Syverson's distributed approach to rhetoric and composition that challenges typical rhetorical analyses, which single out the writer, text, and audience as discrete elements that ignore the "emergent ecological process of writing" (12). Collaborative role-play emerges from the interactions between these writers and characters. The forum is filled with spaces for writers to communicate with other writers, characters with other characters, writers with other characters, etc. The writers are the audience, and the text is composed by them for their own pleasure. As the writer, text, and audience are often one and the same, they require a lens of analysis suited toward examining these ambiguities.

For this analysis, I rely on Kenneth Burke's dramatism as a lens for rhetorically examining the performances and negotiations involved in these interactions. The elements of the pentad—scene, agent, agency, act, and purpose—are terms used not to "avoid ambiguity,

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but…clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise" (Burke, "Grammar" xviii). Using Burke's own definitions of the terms, a pentadic analysis looks at the following: "Act (names what takes place, in thought or deed)…scene (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred)…what person or kind of person (agent) performed the act, what means of instruments he used (agency), and the purpose" ("Grammar" xv). As Burke has said, "Distinctions…arise out of a great central moltenness, where all is merged" ("Grammar" xix). Although these terms will be used to describe interactions within the forum, each term is located in relation to the other through the use of ratios. The use of ratios allows Burke to look at how one term may influence the shape of another without excluding the other term from the overall composition of the moment.

Entering the Conversation

In order to map out Burke's "great central moltenness" through the relationships between writing, rhetoric, and identity in an online RPG forum, I first turn to my own experiences with this site of writing. My investigation of *Absit Omen* as a site of inquiry stems from my participation as a member of the online RPG forum. In 2005, I was introduced to an online role-playing game forum titled *Hogwarts Magic RPG*. I was encouraged to play the role of my friend's wife so that she could further develop her character's family life. That the game relied on the *Harry Potter* universe seemed incidental; primarily, we were writing a story together. It wasn't until I began creating my own characters that I became involved in testing the limits of the text. Eventually, the key administrator of the website needed to depart, and to avoid issues of ownership, those who wished to continue the game created a new website to host it. Many

writers moved the same characters to the new forum, while others took the opportunity to create a new website, *Specialis Revelio,* in 2007. However, *Specialis Revelio* soon faded as the game's main villains and heroes were too busy to maintain continuous play. In 2009, this forum was reborn as *Absit Omen.* The forum can be found at www.absitomen.com, with a home portal describing the website, and a link to the forums for gameplay. This forum did not have a central plot nor any pivotal characters for members to form around. After *Absit Omen*'s first year, an anonymous poll was held to gain an idea of its writers' ages. Of the 37 members then, the majority of its writers landed in the 18-25 year group, with a handful of members aged 13-17 or falling into the 30+ years of age range, choosing not to disclose how far above the 18-25 range they belonged. This same group has continued to write with *Absit Omen,* watching members age within the website and welcoming newcomers into the fold; *Absit Omen* recently celebrated its fourth anniversary. As this community evolved, a central group of writers continued through each manifestation, with some having written with other members even before I found it as *Hogwarts Magic RPG.*

When studying non-academic literacies, I found myself continually returning to the site of *Absit* Omen. When talking about my own writing and others within this website, I constantly found myself talking between my perspective as a writer and my character's own perspectives. The relationship between writers and characters within the forum has always intrigued me, especially in how there is a constant recognition that my actions are different from those of my character. Within the website, it is generally maintained that I am not held accountable for my character within gameplay, and my character is not held accountable for my own personal opinions of how politics play out between writers. At the same time, however, there is overlap

between myself and the character beyond the basic act of creating the character. To look at this relationship further, I've asked fellow writers from *Absit Omen* to talk about their experiences to get at the heart of this question: How is identification affected by the social dynamics within a play-by-post online RPG forum?

I then approached this research question through a layered analysis and generative process that involved exploring my own experience, reading relevant theory, and collecting other points of view through case studies of different kinds of rhetorical interactions that occur on *Absit Omen*. Because of my interest in identity as described by Sherry Turkle, I chose to speak directly to writers on the site and to look at examples of their writing that gave evidence of their interaction with social context and scene. I chose the form of an online questionnaire to ensure each participant would be asked the same questions, so that I could track different perspectives across the questions. The questionnaire was distributed by posting a recruitment flyer to the website. Each member who contacted me to express interest was sent a link to the questionnaire hosted on Dropbox. Of the four who returned the completed questionnaires, I selected three writers to speak with further regarding their responses. These three participants will be referred to throughout this study by their pseudonyms: Sharon, Karen, and Megan. Excerpts of our conversations can be found throughout this study. Each questionnaire (see Appendix B) asked about moments that influenced their creation of a character, and their relationship with one character of their choosing. The following chapters have been crafted with their responses and my own experiences in mind. As an insider to the community, I was able to ask follow-up questions that spoke more explicitly to the kinds of inherent practices and values within the community in order to dialogue further with them about their moments of writing.

<u>Chapter Organization</u>

The organization of these chapters begins with conceptualizations of the player-avatar relationship, or in *Absit Omen*'s case, the writer-character relationship. In Chapter One, I look at how the avatar has been framed in current studies, and how we can look at the avatar from a rhetorical stance, wherein it is granted autonomy in relationship to the writer/player. By looking at both sides of the relationship, I examine how the avatar/character makes as valuable a contribution to the relationship as the writer/player. Using Burke's concept of consubstantiation, I examine both writers and character as co-agents within Burke's dramatistic pentad.

However, the writer-character relationship does not exist in a vacuum. To ignore the collaboration involved in gameplay denies the social and participatory nature of the game. In the second chapter, I take a step back from the writer-character relationship to look at how it is networked with the social dynamics of the forum. While the writer-character relationship is a personal construction, it is also deeply influenced by the network in which it will be deployed. Within this network a group ethos develops as writers work together to maintain their community, whether through creating characters to balance the demographic makeup of the social circle or by working together to develop others' characters at the expense of their own.

The third chapter looks at these relationships in the context of their location within a popular fantasy novel series. The text of the *Harry Potter* series constrains the range of possible actions to those considered in-line with either the text or the spirit in which it has been read. This constraint, however, is not necessarily a limitation. Instead, it often provokes imaginative discussions regarding how they can negotiate the limits of the text to include invisible spaces

while staying true to the text. In this chapter I will look at the relationship between writers, characters, and how they respond to the boundaries created by the text of the *Harry Potter* series.

The last chapter talks across these relationships by looking at the culmination of these efforts and the nature of their relationship to the forum. One of the distinguishing features of the forum is its ability to archive these writings, becoming self-referential as more writers contribute to the forum. Within the website, boards are converted into physical locations, with each thread representing a moment in time. Although threads are logged with a date, readers can navigate in a non-linear manner and allow their characters to write in different moments of time from thread to thread. To locate specific moments, one can search through tags, location, or posts by character. However, it can be difficult for new members to get an overall view of what is happening throughout the website. The *Absit Omen Lexicon* is a wiki space wherein these different moments are documented and placed in context with one another through the creation of an overall *Absit Omen* canon. This wiki space creates a virtual palimpsest in that it uses the text of the *Harry Potter* series as a manuscript to write over creating a layer of fan texts woven together on top of the origin text. As writers further collaborate, the writings of *Absit Omen* become part of the history of the *Harry Potter* text, combining to create a fuller text in which the writers become co-authors alongside J.K. Rowling.

CHAPTER ONE: AVATAR AND SELF

This chapter explores the relationship between online writers and the characters they create through text-based online RPG forums like *Absit Omen* by comparing their relationship to conversations about players and avatars from video game studies. As the writer is using the character to tell a story in a virtual environment, he or she must first construct the virtual body and perspective through which the story is told. Similar to creating or choosing the avatar body that navigates the game environment of a traditional video game RPG, the online RPG forum requires writers to create a body that will represent their way of reading and enacting game events. Although writers can create a representation of themselves within an online RPG forum, the emphasis on role-play and the label of "character" encourages writers to construct characters as separate individuals with their own motives and experiences that best embody the role they have been constructed to fill. This chapter explores how the writer and character relationship draws from and diverges from the player and avatar relationship in traditional video game RPGs. By revisiting models of the player-avatar relationship, I draw attention to the ways that writing, rhetoric, and identity can be distributed between the writer and the character.

Defining Avatars

As literature on avatar usage is primarily based in video games, I return to game studies to trace the different conceptualizations of avatars and their relationship to the player. Online role-playing game forums such as *Absit Omen* trace their lineage back to tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. Even then before the term "avatar," players were performing the persona of their adventurer as he or she made his or her way through the

dungeon. Whereas a player would change the tone of his or her voice or don hand-made clothing that best resembled the physicality of his or her persona, online role-playing games allow players to slip into personas without the need for tangible signifiers of their performances. The shift between player and persona has been explored through its *Dungeons & Dragons* roots by Gary Fine, in *Shared Fantasy*. Fine argues, "for the game to work as an aesthetic experience players must be willing to 'bracket' their 'natural' selves and enact a fantasy self" (4). In role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, the physical player would perform or take on the imagined role of the fantasy self; in video games and online platforms, the fantasy self is instead a separate entity—a representation of the player within the virtual world, capable of acting within the virtual environment to accomplish player goals.

Although Fine's "fantasy self" can be either one with or separate from the body of its creator, different definitions of avatars highlight alternative ideas about representation. By locating these representations within the term "avatar," these definitions stem from an understanding of the process of representation inherent in the term's etymology. The term *Avatara* comes from Sanskrit and is used in Hinduism to describe a divine descent, wherein a deity takes on a bodily, mortal incarnation to access the physical plane. As the mortal body is still recognized as the deity, the deity's identity is implicitly carried through this process. Stemming from this description, Zach Waggoner's work *My Avatar, My Self* has collected several interpretations of this process in the virtual world. Moving from Miroslaw Filiciak's simple definition of, "the user's representative in the virtual universe," Waggoner presents Laetitia Wilson's refined definition of the term:

[An avatar is] a virtual, surrogate self that acts as a stand in for our real-space selves, that represents the user. The cyberspace avatar functions as a locus that is multifarious and polymorphous, displaced from the facticity of our real-space selves (8-9).

In moving from the user's representative to a real-space stand in, the avatar becomes a surrogate that collapses the virtual space between the user and his or her representative. The question of representation is used to categorize representatives of creators into two groups: agents that can only be controlled by the player to complete the game, and avatars that can be altered or played with and in so doing alter how the game is played. Although this distinction is more concerned with the customizability of the virtual body, the second categorization points to a transformative use of the avatar. This distinction allows Waggoner to classify Pac-Man and Lara Croft, from the respective game series for *Pac-Man* and *Tomb Raider*, as agents because they "can only be controlled by the user, never altered in appearance or skill level" (9). Waggoner, by contrast, draws upon Thomas Goldberg's work to assign the term "avatar" to those who are "representations of 'real' people in computer-generated environment[s]" (9). Although these representations allow for greater play with identity and performance, they are both conceived of as a bridge between the user and the game environment. Even when an avatar is customized to navigate the game in a different way, such as a stealthy thief or a more aggressive warrior, these are still used to achieve the same end-game goals. In moving from video games to text-based online RPG forums, representation and its relationship with identity is still entangled within gameplay but is allowed greater freedom and agency than when constrained by designer and game goals.

<u>Identity and Selfhood</u>

To tease out the relationship between representation and identity that is often packaged together within the avatar body, I look at frameworks of identity construction from both game studies and cyberculture. In his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Gee identifies three types of identities that function within a game setting: the virtual identity, the real-world identity, and the projective identity (54-6). These three identities must work together to create a cohesive narrative that allows the player to meet both the goals of the game and the goals they have set for themselves as both a player and a character within the game. Although these identities function together, a system of classification necessarily separates one from the other, allowing these identities to speak to each other, but not to bleed through to another. In an effort to look at identities as multiple, Waggoner describes how Donna Haraway uses the term "splitting" to conceptualize the formation of new identities in relation to those pre-existing (Waggoner 27). In doing so, Waggoner highlights that she names a knowing self, which is a partial identity, being composed of different identities stitched together. In her conceptualization, portions of an identity may be split apart in order to be remixed or recomposed, and stitched back together to create a new object (27). Although this concept continues to enact boundaries between identities, the idea of rotation and shifting perspective comes into play as users may choose which patch of identity they wish to experiment with through given platform.

In her work *Life on the Screen,* Sherry Turkle uses the term "slippage" to speak to a potential space between Gee's real-world identity and virtual identities: "But we shall soon encounter slippages—places where persona and self merge, places where the multiple personae

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join to comprise what the individual thinks of as his or her authentic self" (Turkle 185-6). The idea of merging speaks back to Haraway's quilted image of identity, but slippage implies a more fluid transition between identities. In terms of a slip, or descent, it also speaks back to the idea of divine descent from the real to the virtual. However, examples from Turkle's study often speak to their identities as if they are as real or more real than their non-virtual self, another nod toward the elevation of avatars to a status that involves having agency. Actions are then considered not to belong solely to the character, but rather as a collaboration between the player and the character. One of Turkle's participants speaks to this collaboration through writing poetry:

> I like to close my eyes and imagine myself speaking as Bette. An authoritative voice. When I type as Bette I imagine her voice. You might ask whether this Bette is real or not. Well, she is real enough to write poetry. I mean it's poetry that I take credit for. Bette gives courage. We sort of do it together. (209)

The question of boundaries, for Annette (the player) and Bette (the persona), only arises in terms of ownership and accreditation. As the work is composed by Annette's body, the work belongs to Annette; however, she does not deny the presence and need for Bette's voice. Physically, Annette is responsible for the poetry created but the writing process requires Bette's participation. The work does not exist if either participant is absent. This acknowledgement of work created together positions Bette as a separate and equal partner, similar to the work of the writer and character in *Absit Omen*. Although this relationship may only be valuable in the moment of writing, it parallels the kind of dexterity in negotiating avatar and player relationships with online RPG environments like the one I have been discussing.

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Avatars as Co-Agents

To discuss the process of moving between the avatar-identity and player-identity, I want to place Waggoner's categorizations of "avatar" and "agent" bodies in dialogue with Kenneth Burke's use of the term "agent" in his rhetorical theory of dramatism. Looking at avatars within the online role-playing game forum, the distinction between agent and avatar constructions of the virtual body is limited to the amount of customization available. In Waggoner's theory, agents are constructed as tools to be used, whereas avatars can be customized to fit the player's preferences of how to navigate the environment. Customization, however, continues to be strictly defined by the game designers; the virtual body is used as a tool to navigate the game environment towards a defined path that, although it incorporates user input, is still constructed by game designers. This distinction only describes the surface level relationship between the player and avatar and does not extend to the kind of control given to players within a text-based online RPG forum. When describing the role of the agent, Kenneth Burke uses the description a novelist creating an agent, "when he selects some 'sensibility' who will serve as the appreciative 'centre' of his story, and lets the reader follow the story *in terms* of this single consciousness" ("Grammar" 171-2). The novelist is separate from the character created to tell the story, given a single consciousness of its own which the writer has crafted but also stands at a distance from. Contrasted with Waggoner's use of the term, Burke's "agent" is capable of a greater degree of autonomy than when embedded as a tool for gameplay. Although Burke's conception of an "agent" speaks directly to the storytelling process, Burke draws from philosophies of idealism, in that reason and the mind are necessary for any theory of or perception of the universe, to test the position of the agent as a knower through whom knowledge is possible ("Grammar" 171-2).

Burke goes on to quote George Berkeley in that "this perceiving, active being is what I call *mind, spirit, soul,* or *myself*" ("Grammar" 179). The virtue of perceiving allows for a mind, spirit and soul, opening up the definition of a character from that of a writer's creation to a being with its own soul and motives. This knowing being is then raised to the level of agent, acting as a co-agent with the writer within this collaborative writing environment.

Through Burke's theory of dramatism, we might view players and avatars as co-agents who work together to navigate an online rhetorical situation or environment. This means that the player-identity and avatar-identity can also be viewed through the lens of Burke's concept of consubstantiation. Burke defines consubstantiation as a situation when, "In being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another" ("Rhetoric" 21). This concept allows the player and avatar, or in the case of the text-based online RPG forum, the writer and character, to exist separately as agents while also acknowledging their overlap. Gee's concept of projected identity and Haraway's patchwork identities are two possible theories that can frame travel between these two entities. However, each of these frameworks privileges or at least attributes the writer's physical self to be the primary source of these explorations. To characterize the character as a "co-agent" assumes a different role in the composing process for the writer. Through these multiple models for positioning the writer and character, the identities between character and writer may and often do overlap. However, this does not demand that the writer and character inhabit a hierarchal relationship to one another. Although the term 'agent' allows me to talk

about the separate bodies and motives of the writer and character, the actual writing requires collaboration between these entities in a unique way.

<p style="text-align:center">Case Study: Character Creation in *Absit Omen*</p>

This unique position of writer and character in a collaborative relationship can be best seen through specific moments of writing. For this discussion, I use the text-based online RPG forum *Absit Omen* to describe the practices involved in writing characters to populate the forum. To help us discuss the movements between writers and characters, I've asked one of the writers from *Absit Omen*, Sharon, to describe her writing process with a character. Sharon offers a more introspective account of her writing process during our discussions about writing within the website, framing the complex relationship that writer and character share:

> I saw in your draft how you mentioned that some writers see their characters as separate entities, and I added that some writers feel that their characters make decisions on their own and they just write them down. I don't tend to write that way.

> If I want to feel out a character's thoughts, I read and re-read the posts previous and allow myself to assume my character's facial expression, posture, and voice as I imagine them reacting to what's going on. Sort of…quietly method act the experience. I imagine that I ***am*** them. Instead of how I usually go about it, writing ***about*** them. (Personal Interview, Sharon)

Although Sharon differentiates her writing style from those who view the character as an autonomous agent, she points to a boundary between herself and the character in that she takes

on the character's identity or persona to "method act the experience." Although the character is informed by her experiences as a writer, Sharon constructs Tyrone as a separate identity whose motives and experiences can only be uncovered through a means of empathetic projection. While this borrows from Fine's 'fantasy self' in that a Dungeons & Dragons player would attempt to perform the body of his or her character, it does not require the kind of voice modulation and wardrobe change necessary to represent the character. Instead, it emphasizes the need to perform the character through the kind of 'slippage' Sherry Turkle describes in that it relies more on emotions and experiences. Although there is a difference between writing as them and writing about them, Sharon's form of acting indicates a movement of projection wherein she transitions from her position as a writer to the character's experiences as informed by current events within gameplay. This type of projection and representation is similar to James Paul Gee's projective identity; however, the performance isn't necessarily a meeting place between the writer and character, but rather the writer attempts to understand and embody the character's sense of identity and the experiences this entails. Listening to the character's identity is necessary so that the writer's response is informed and can enact this slippage wherein Sharon moves from her position as a writer to the character's position within the gameplay due to the character's motivations and the events of the scene. The writing becomes the site of collaboration, but the movement between writer and character perspectives maintains a separation between the two and raises the character to an equal agent within the relationship.

Writing the Character: Tyrone

Although these frameworks are useful for talking about the relationships between writers and characters, it's useful to see how these concepts then work together through the life of a

character. With this case study, I want to illustrate how these moves are made almost subconsciously when creating a character due to the writer's familiarity with online RPG forums. When talking about these specific relationships, I asked Sharon to talk about her relationship with one specific character. She chose Tyrone, a character she has been writing since 2005. Tyrone is currently a high-ranking official within the Ministry of Magic (Personal Interview Sharon).

When describing a moment when she felt particularly close to Tyrone, Sharon discussed a moment in which Tyrone's character faced a major change due to events in gameplay. A writer behind a major criminal element wished to orchestrate an attack in which a werewolf would be coerced into appearing at a very public, populated area (at a time when students would be within the area) during a full moon. The writer solicited volunteers for victims of this attack, and Sharon, among others, thought it would be an interesting experience for her character. Once enough volunteers were on board, the thread took place and Tyrone suffered a werewolf bite, which then turned him into a werewolf. When writing Tyrone's experiences as a werewolf, Sharon found herself drawing upon her own experiences having been diagnosed with bipolar disorder II.

> I didn't choose to pursue a werewolf plot with Tyrone because of any possible connection to mental illness – I discovered the meaningful connection to me as I was writing…When I noticed that connection, writing Tyrone became important to me and I felt that my writing became better, perhaps more genuine. Because for me, I was translating genuine experiences. (Personal Interview Sharon)

Again, Sharon draws attention to the act of translation between the writer's experiences and the character's. Although the character was not originally intended to explore the writer's experiences, this connection emerged from the in-game consequences to the character. It could also be said that Tyrone's incident led to him being in a position to share an experience with the writer, a perspective that is ignored in the "avatar as tool" model of their relationship.

This partnership between the writer and character is further highlighted when Sharon talks with outsiders about the events of the website. Sharon says she typically talks about the character as she would with any other character in fiction:

Oh so last night, my character Tyrone at Absit Omen – you know that Harry Potter role-playing website of mine – had to…try and overturn his sentence. He's all trying to be professional and appear sedate because he knows that if he gets emotional about it they'll just assume he's another crazy werewolf, despite already being a highly respected figure. (Personal Interview Sharon)

In discussing Tyrone's conflicted position in trying to appear professional so that he is not dismissed as an emotional, crazy werewolf, Sharon locates these experiences as part of Tyrone's struggle and does not discuss the connection between herself and the character that is used in writing the scene she discusses. This movement illustrates how the relationship between this writer and her character is much more complex than the notion of the avatar as a tool because the character is not used to gain any kind of material or social capital, but rather is being consulted as an equally valid perspective on a situation. When she describes his perspective, it is grounded

within his motives and experiences, signaling his independence from the writer while at the same time acknowledging the relationship between them as Tyrone is Sharon's creation.

<center>Implications</center>

When looking at scholarship on players and avatars, the avatar is primarily viewed as a tool of the player for navigating a game environment. Although the avatar can be used to explore identities, this is often linked back to the player's conception of his or her identity and fantasies that he or she wishes to explore through the avatar or modeled as a tool that allows a writer to achieve a game-based goal. When looking at writers and characters in the storytelling game environment of *Absit Omen*, however, the goal of identity exploration is less to explore personal fantasies and more to tell different types of stories. Whereas success may be considered as game completion or in accumulating game markers of material or social wealth, writers find personal or game-related success within a character's interactions, whether this results in a character gaining some type of capital, or in a character making the ultimate sacrifice of an in-game death. Motivations for avatar creation and use track differently within an environment geared toward collaborative role-play, particularly as the characters are considered to have motivations of their own that may be similar or highly conflicting with the writer's own motivations. Within this environment of collaborative role-play, these characters are viewed as equal partners in the storytelling process. By viewing the character as an equal partner, this site disturbs traditional views of the avatar as an extension of the self used to navigate the virtual world, with the avatar's value created by either the user or the game environment. In this

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collaborative form of writing, the avatar as a character is an equal partner with whom the writer collaborates to create a specific reading of the text.

CHAPTER TWO: AVATAR AND OTHERS

In the first chapter, I described how conceptualizing writer and character as separate agents in an online RPG highlights the complex negotiations of identity that occurs when collaborative written storytelling is the goal of an online community. However, writers and characters are not the only important relationships to questions of rhetoric and identity in an online RPG; a wider network of associations exists within the website. Social relationships within the website are extended between other writers and other characters, allowing for more complex interactions as writers and characters come together to write moments of gameplay. In *Absit Omen*, good writing requires collaboration with others. In this chapter, I explore how collaboration works as the game mechanism to provide characters with agency within gameplay, while also serving as part of a group ethos in which writers purposefully work toward creating spaces for collaboration. For writers and/or characters to solicit this kind of participation, the thread must be beneficial for other participants. While this may manifest in different scenarios for the characters involved, each thread adheres to the group ethos of the site as a place of collaboration by inviting others to write with them. Returning to Kenneth Burke's elements of dramatism, I look at how collaboration pivots between conceptualizations of agency and purpose to provide both the goal of writing as well as the means to achieve it.

Agency through Collaboration

With collaboration as the mechanism for gameplay within *Absit Omen*, it may be helpful to first lay out what this agency entails for characters constructed within the website. When outlining the philosophies involved with each element of dramatism, Kenneth Burke describes

agency through pragmatism, which, "announces some view of human ends, and will require a corresponding doctrine of means" ("Grammar" 275). To talk about agency, one must also talk about purpose. Burke demonstrates how these terms are embedded: "Though our laboratory instruments may transcend human purpose, they exist only as the result of human purpose. And we might even say that they can perform satisfactorily without purpose only because they have purpose imbedded in their structure and design" ("Grammar" 281). Although the agency through which an agent may attain a purpose can be traced apart from these elements, its ability to provide agency relies upon the purpose being embedded within its very presence. This relationship between ends and means can be seen by tracing out collaboration as both the mechanism and goal of writing within *Absit Omen*. The work of the previous chapter elevating the character to the role of co-agent provides a way to talk about agency for both the writer and the character through the relationships that circulate throughout the website.

These relationships circulate through the mechanism of gameplay, wherein writers and characters make social choices that influence where, when, and how this writing occurs. Gameplay within *Absit Omen* is composed of a "Post and Reply" process in which a character physically locates themselves within a moment of time in the website by starting a thread. Another character who wishes to also inhabit this moment will reply to this first post with a post of his or her reaction to the written events. Whereas the material agency of this act is manifested through the Post and Reply buttons to activate this structure and provide a space for writing by the writer, it relies upon an understanding of the social networks and the consequences of locating a character within this moment. Collaboration itself does not occur automatically, but must be solicited or invited through social networks within the website. In order to better

understand how writers create context for collaboration in online RPG forums, I look back to game studies with a sociological lens to understand how social practices can be reified through online gameplay.

Social Autonomy

When describing role-play through game studies, MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler describe how socialization is used to encourage player practices: "peer pressure will always be the most effective method of encouraging role play, simply because it sets standards and encourages group participation" (239). What I want to highlight here is the role of peer writers in facilitating agency. Although MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* have a vast community of players to socialize with, a character's progression is marked through achievements and quests. While in video games the player is interacting with the design of the game, RPG forums rely on other writers and characters for this type of socialization through group participation. Group participation, particularly collaboration, requires that both the writer and the character be equal partners or co-agents, as discussed in the previous chapter, in negotiating the social contexts of gameplay. Sandy Stone argues that this type of human-computer interaction requires a degree of autonomy on behalf of the other, or in *Absit Omen*'s case the character, in order to react to the user in a realistic manner (Stone 10-11). This degree of autonomy manifests through the ability of the character to make choices within the social context of gameplay according to their own motivations. The social autonomy of collaborating writing partners, mediated through the RPG forum, is necessary for the character to interact and grow.

When asked to describe what good writing entails for *Absit Omen*, one writer listed several

qualities in keeping with the idea of social autonomy in that good writing is, among other things,

"allowing your character to make the wrong decision or an unusual decision to explore the

motives" (Personal Interview Karen). In this situation, collaboration occurs when each writer

approaches the situation with the character's motivations in mind. Writing with *Absit Omen* can

then be divided into two types of writing: in-character encounters and out-of-character writing

about writing. While both writer and character have their specific threads to chart their social

networks, both types of writing share significant overlap in that each is primarily used to make

choices about the kinds of connections created through the website. These types of writing are

then used to facilitate two types of connections: organic interactions that arise from open

gameplay, and deliberate choices about interactions to tell a specific story.

Organic Interaction through Social Domains

The phrase organic interaction highlights how writers foreground character identity in the

decision that a character would be available for interaction at a specific location in a specific

moment. If a character is not typically found here, the writer may negotiate the conflict between

the writer's goals and character's motivations by rhetorically situating the character in a moment

that would prompt such an action. Perhaps the character made a wrong turn down an alley, or

received incorrect directions, providing the exigence for a character's arrival to a place he or she

may not typically frequent. These moments may be labeled as "open threads," wherein a

character is found within a public space and as such is open to interacting with whoever may also

be found within this public space. The writing to set up such a thread usually begins with the

character's motivation for having arrived at this moment. Any gameplay that follows rises

through the natural interaction of the character with others sharing the space. The organic

interactions that arise from open gameplay are often the result of determining which social

domains have minimal or no barriers to the character's entry. Although these rhetorical

maneuvers may move a character outside of his or her typical realm of action, they typically

inhabit specific social domains which determine what might happen if he or she took a wrong

turn. Depending upon whether one is a Ministry official or perhaps a criminal element, the

consequences of taking a wrong turn may differ. When an *Absit Omen* character is crafted, he or

she is immediately identified with social domains such as adult, child, Hogwarts Alumni,

Ministry Worker, etc. This may become a primary means of motivation, or an originating point

within the social networks from which he or she must base his or her movements. Sociologist

Erving Goffman notes a similar practice in that, "the individual's initial projection commits him

to what he is proposing to be…As the interaction among the participants progresses…it is

essential that these later developments be related without contradiction to, and even built up

from, the initial positions taken by the several participants" (22). It is from this initial projection

that the character must move, although later developments may open up other social domains for

travel. To facilitate travel between these domains, open threads are used to signal that any

connections that may occur will be from organic interactions between characters and that little to

no story has been pre-planned, allowing for greater range of travel and possibility to occur.

Although a character may post an "open thread" in which anyone may enter, characters

are more likely to enter knowing that a specific type of connection can be made. The initial

decision to create a child or adult character determines his or her realm of interactions: children

reside at Hogwarts for the school year and can only access the London and Hogsmeade boards

during school trips or winter and summer breaks. Adults can access the London, Hogsmeade, and Other Wizarding Locations boards but are rarely seen within Hogwarts unless their profession requires it. As such, interactions between adult and children characters are limited to moments when children are free to explore the other boards, or through the Correspondence and Pensieve boards. If a writer wants to collaborate with a specific character, he or she must carefully situate his or her character within that social domain. If they wish to write in the Hogwarts boards, they must either create a child character or an adult professor; if they wish to write with Ministry workers, they should create a non-criminal adult character. If they wish to bridge both adult and child words, the situation becomes more complex. In these more complex scenarios, stories may be pre-planned through the Plot Development board in which writers exercise their out-of-character voices to speak about their characters and organize interactions for future in-game threads.

Plot Development

Although members can post an open thread to develop a spontaneous moment, many of these are pre-planned between the writers through the Plot Development board which allows writers to talk about the kinds of stories they want to tell with their characters. Writers can pre-plan or speculate about possible connections through the Plot Development board. If a writer is seeking a criminal connection to his or her character, he or she may post a request for such a meeting. Another writer may respond with a realistic encounter that would spark such a connection between his or her criminal character and the character in need. This encounter is then played out in game. Although the encounter is pre-planned, the end result may be a more organic process dependent upon the character's motivations within the thread. Someone may

post a thread with a story idea, and request feedback or volunteers to participate in this moment. Other writers may suggest ways to turn the story either by changing the events or suggesting how their characters may react and change the situation. However, pre-planning an event does not determine the result of these interactions. These discussions formulate the exigence of a moment, which is then performed through gameplay so that events occur organically and do not appear to be manufactured or artificial. These discussions may plan events that require multiple moments of interaction to build a story across time, or only focus on one moment in time that might have consequences for other characters to do with as they wish. This often stems from the writer's relationship and motives for his or her own character. To view the development and execution of one of these moments, I turn to one of *Absit Omen*'s members to talk through how a story comes into being. Using a moment from her student character, Peter, Sharon walks us through the construction of an event through both the writer and character perspectives:

> Once, my student character Peter had been told a secret about another classmate. He was told the secret so that he could be supportive of his friend who was struggling and afraid. However, Peter's fault is a lack of empathy, a lack of understanding of the societal wrath [the student] would face, a lack of awareness of his own privilege…and, of course, his big mouth! In order to impress a group of friends at a crowded dinner conversation, Peter blurted out [the secret]…and a conflict erupted! I had already gotten permission from [the student's] writer, and we both agreed it would be a major growth opportunity for both characters. We joked at how much fun it was to collaborate to ruin our characters' lives.

It was a huge success for the group of writers and that conflict inspired other writers, who weren't directly connected, to revive an in-game student activist club. My Peter and [the student] got to go through an amazing journey. Peter himself was disciplined…and through that struggle I got to explore Peter's limits as a growing young man.

Out of character, only the initiating incident was planned. Cooperatively, [the student's writer] and I decided that Peter would let it slip. Nothing after that was planned ahead of time. It occurred organically as writers allowed their characters to react. (Personal Interview Sharon)

Within this story, both types of writing combine to create the moment within gameplay. Peter's relationship with the student was developed enough that she thought she could share a secret with Peter. However, Peter betrayed the secret to impress another group of friends. While this is built through in-character motivations, out-of-character writing was used to ensure that the student's writer was okay with a major secret about her character being revealed. Although the act of betraying a secret was planned beforehand, the actual events of the moment were the result of the character's motivations within these scenes. Sharon points out how this event was used as a catalyst for a larger movement within gameplay. Although this was a moment planned between two writers and characters, it is quickly expanded to allow a greater number of writers and characters to react to this moment in time and develop their own responses to it by forming a student activist club. By advertising this moment to a larger social network through Peter's slip-up, a larger number of writers and characters are allowed to collaborate through this moment in gameplay.

<u>Purpose through Group Ethos</u>

As collaboration provides the means through which these relationships come together, the question remains as to what end these collaborations work toward. Kenneth Burke's discussion of purpose originates in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* wherein purpose is equated with good, or "whatever is desirable for its own sake, or for the sake of which we choose something else" ("Grammar" 292). The definition of good may pivot between the good of the character on an individual level, and the good of the website on a global level. As the end is determined by how it is achieved, Burke argues that "In a dramatist perspective, where the connotations of 'to act' strategically overlap upon the connotations of 'to be,' actions are not merely a means of doing but a way of being" ("Grammar" 310). Although collaboration is the means by which writers and characters write within the game, these writers are also informed by the goal to increase possible interaction by creating as many places for entry as possible.

On a much larger scale, the purpose of *Absit Omen* is to facilitate collaboration. As writers talk about the writing surrounding gameplay, as well as writing in-game encounters, these performances are shaped to provoke reactions and invite other writers to further collaborate within a thread. Within these written discussions, the values of collaboration are picked up within their performances, as moments that could be solitary, such as the example of Peter and his friend, expand to include larger groups like the student population of Hogwarts. This in-game moment of expansion echoes the kinds of invitations issued through the Plot Development board, wherein a writer may suggest a story and ask other writers to help make it occur within gameplay. With each writer's contribution, the story grows to incorporate additional motivations

and benefits, and quickly builds to become a more inclusive, generative moment than initially conceived.

Goffman uses the term "working consensus" to describe the level of agreement between people within a given setting: "When the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole" (Goffman 45). This conception can also be used to describe how gameplay picks up the same values that are generated in the Plot Development board, wherein ideas for how to maximize participation within *Absit Omen* are generated. These values of collaboration cohere into a group ethos in which writers who facilitate collaboration are viewed as more credible or community-oriented writers.

<div align="center">Writing with Purpose</div>

When writing within this commitment toward facilitating collaboration, writers must become more flexible in storytelling to both adhere to their character's motivations while also forwarding the goals of the community. In Chapter One, Sharon described her writing process and the use of writing to become or observe the character. However, she adds a caveat: "But I also always consider the story. Even if it feels like my character would storm out and end the scene, I may look for another interpretation to keep the conversation/situation going" (Personal Interview Sharon). This commitment to collaboration, both as a means and the end, requires a kind of flexibility wherein the writer and the character work together to create a moment that both fits the character's motivations and the community's commitment to facilitating collaboration.

Within communications studies, scholars Ernest Bormann, Roxann Knutson, and Karen Musolf use the concept of "shared group fantasy" to describe the kind of scaffolded storytelling in which writing or stories are reframed to meet the initial values described (255). Bormann et al. describe the group fantasy chain as a process through which group members respond to a member's dramatization by adding to it, sharing in the excited emotions to build a chain of responses in which group members share in and expand the initial dramatization (255). This results in a shared group fantasy, wherein the process of chaining together these stories forms an overarching framework of values that emerge from these stories (257-8). When applied to *Absit Omen*, the chain of stories from gameplay do not result in an overarching story to which all members adhere; however, the way these stories are told by inviting as much participation as possible enacts the overarching framework of *Absit Omen* as a community that facilitates collaborative writing.

<div align="center">Balance within the Community</div>

With the commitment to facilitating collaboration, writers must consider how their characters are going to function within these types of interactions. Although there are not any regulations regarding character creation, most writers attempt to create a balance by trying to not let any particular social domain dominate the community. Writers may see an abundance of female characters and attempt to create a male character, or see an opportunity to create an adult character that heads up an organization that can then solicit the creation or transition of other adult characters to its domain (such as law enforcement or criminal activity) to balance an overabundance of characters in another domain. In the case study below, Karen talks about how

some of her characters were constructed with this kind of balance in mind, and how this is used as a generative way of thinking about her characters.

Case Study: Edward and William

During her initial interview, Karen talked about the balance of character personalities within an RPG forum. When asked to talk about this balance further, she used her character Edward as a way to trace how characters can be used to influence the direction of different social domains. To talk about Edward, however, is to talk about his original home in a *Harry Potter* role-play hosted by MSN Groups in 2003. When the role-play transitioned to include classes at Hogwarts, a staff of professors was necessary to create these classes. Karen stepped in to create a host of temporary characters, one of which resulted in Edward:

> Edward proved a hit, for being no-nonsense and strict. I expected people would hate him, he'd be a very unpopular professor, and the in character reaction would be to try and fight him, but he would balance out the vanilla personalities in the other staff I'd hastily created to fill the gaps. I only remember Potions and Herbology professors ever really having any sort of side plot past just churning out lessons for others. (Personal Interview Karen)

As few professors were well-developed, Edward was created to fill the gap while also providing students with an opportunity to write against the character, not necessarily to generate conflict but rather to create moments of tension that would generate stories within the role-play. Karen also mentions a similar pattern of personalities within the *Harry Potter* books in that most professors were friendly and approachable as a type of replacement family for Harry, with the

exception of the rather antagonistic Professor Snape who provided a large degree of conflict within the first few books of the series. Whereas the contrast here is to provide a more rigid, traditional educator against the more personable (though vanilla) personalities, Karen noted that this contrast was not as central a motive for character creation when she adapted Edward to *Absit Omen*.

Although Edward retained his strict disciplinarian tendencies, his development through gameplay yielded interesting results due to the social domain in which he resided. During an open thread in the Staff Room at Hogwarts, Edward was able to write with characters that he previously knew of but had not interacted with directly. Karen enjoyed reading the writing of another character in the thread, and made plans with the writer to create another opportunity for their characters to interact. This interest led to a pub thread in which they became closer friends through a series of mishaps:

> I do recall mentioning to the writer that I was disappointed she'd written such an early
> escape from the thread as she was quite a quick, good writer and I would like to write
> with her more. We agreed loosely on the two characters going to the pub I think – and
> about that time must have become more friendly via AIM messenger. (Personal Interview
> Karen 2)

These interactions, among others, resulted in a softening of Edward's personality. In order to continue this development while still having a more antagonistic character to generate tensions and potential conflict, she created a secondary character, William. Whereas Edward is considered a primary character, *Absit Omen* allows the generation of secondary characters as

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less-developed persons who can be used as generative elements in a way that primary characters may not be able to risk due to in-game consequences. Thus when Edward is no longer able to function to balance more positive situations with an antagonistic element, William is used to fill this role by "injecting disagreement in small doses where it matters most" (Personal Interview Karen).

Although Karen develops her characters in ways that make sense for their development, she is still able to use them in a larger sense to balance the community by injecting a contrary element when necessary, either through her primary or secondary character depending upon which character fits into the moment. By using characters as a way to balance personalities within the community, Karen demonstrates how the values of the website as a place to generate collaborative writing filter down to the actions of the characters. Characters are used to write compelling stories and fulfill character motivations, while also developing in ways that generate more participation by providing moments for writers to react to. In turn, the written threads are preserved to circulate these reactions to include as many participants as possible.

<u>Implications</u>

Although *Absit Omen* is a site for writing, the way writing is done at *Absit Omen* is dependent upon navigating social relationships between both writers and characters within the website. Writers demonstrate their ability to negotiate not only the stories of their characters, but also the greater purpose of *Absit Omen* as a space for collaborative writing with their characters as generative agents who are able to create opportunities for greater participation through the social autonomy attributed to them in their status as a co-agent with the writer. In the next

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chapter, I look at how these negotiations extend to the material space of the website in that even

the originating text of *Harry Potter* in which these stories are based is open to renegotiation

through these types of collaboration.

CHAPTER THREE: LOCATIONS OF PLAY

Within this chapter, I want to step back once more to look at the location of play that contains the social relationships between characters and writers discussed in Chapter Two. Collaborative role-play does not stop at the interactions between writers and characters. In the case of *Absit Omen*, it extends to the borders of the game environment to renegotiate what is and is not available for writers to draw upon within their writing. Relying on Kenneth Burke's discussion of scene, this chapter will discuss how his concept of the rhetorical scene can be used to analyze the structures that contain these social networks. One of the online RPG forum's primary structures is the text of the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling, which acts as the game environment. Writers use this constraint as a catalyst for invention that places what I will call the container model of the scene in tension with the ecology of relationships at play within the website. This tension allows writers and characters to press against definitions of the environment in order to create a more permeable boundary housing their writing. When collaboration extends to include the environment itself, it is no longer a mass producible, containable process that can be moved to other sites of writing. It permeates the container, transforming the very artifact from which it originated.

<u>Rhetorical Scenes as Inventive Constraints</u>

In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke identifies the scene as a container of sorts, a constraint which bounds the realm of action, agency, agents and purpose ("Grammar" 127). In tracing out the scene's philosophical commitments, Burke aligns it with the philosophy of materialism ("Grammar" 128). This philosophy of materialism "converts a method…into a substance"

("Grammar" 12). In this conversion, Burke describes the process in which affectation or motivation becomes embedded within the material shape and manipulation of a scene. The position of internal motivations as part of or excluded from the materiality of the scene locates an ambiguity that he explores through positioning the scene as linked in proportion to another element ("Grammar" 158). For example, Burke uses the Ibsen play *An Enemy of the People* to demonstrate the links between scene and act. In the third act, the study is in disarray, reflecting the harried state of the agent as he has been declared an enemy of the people. The scene is used to emphasize the state of the agent, wherein it could be said that the agent is the primary determination of how the moment is constructed; the scene is merely another tool of the agent. However, if the scene becomes the primary participant, the hero's body becomes part of the scene in that the body is so arranged to convey an affect ("Grammar" 10).

Theories of rhetorical situation have long emphasized the role of material conditions as direct influences on rhetorical possibilities. When rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer defines rhetorical situation, he inquires about the material natures of rhetorical contexts, as they are located in reality and are available for scrutiny (Edbauer 6). Jenny Edbauer describes this same ambiguity through the use of rhetorical ecologies, arguing that Bitzer's location of the rhetorical situation within external conditions ignores the emergent factors that are the result of interactivity within a situation (6). Edbauer argues that the rhetorical situation, when argued as a conglomeration of elements, ignores the fact that these elements "simply bleed" (Edbauer 8-9). Burke's image of "a great central moltenness" parallels this idea of bleeding in that the distinctions between these elements have "been thrown from a liquid center to the surface, where they have congealed" ("Grammar" xix). Instead of looking at congealed elements that have been separated for analysis,

Edbauer shifts to rhetorical ecologies to include networked spaces and movements between and among these networks (Edbauer 9). The emphasis on interaction between networked elements uses moments of encounters to locate the rhetorical situation through ever-changing connections instead of static conglomerations of elements.

Although the model of a container is useful for bounding a space, it functions as a classificatory mechanism in which a space is named and categorized (Edbauer 11). This model does little to help us understand the nuanced composition of a moment, particularly as processes push against or with each other within their encounters (12). These connections expand to include not only the actors, agents, and acts of a situation but also the purposes and agency behind them. Each node within the network contains a history of its own that is also considered for how it shapes and connects to the encounter (10). When looking at the act of writing, Edbauer cites Margaret Syverson's distributed approach that "points to how those elements are enacted and lived, how they are put into use, and what change comes from the in-processes-ness itself" (13). The open network embraced by a rhetorical ecology allows for the fluid exchanges within moments of encounter and exchange: "We begin to see that public rhetorics do not exist in the elements of their situations, but also in the radius of their neighboring events" (20). A rhetorical ecology framework, then, focuses on the processes of production, allowing for the consideration of broader negotiations that may frame moments of encounter within various social networks.

In using this vocabulary of distribution within *Absit Omen*, this project has already identified how the writer and character are acknowledged as separate, socially autonomous nodes

within each network; the character's age, profession, gender, and affiliations also affect which networks the character has access to and can manipulate. However, these terms are located specifically to the agents involved. Looking at the locations of play extends this vocabulary to consider the position of the *Harry Potter* series as a language of canon text, as well as the multiple readings of the text generated by gameplay. Drawing on both Burke's dramatism and Edbauer's rhetorical ecology, while the scene of *Absit Omen* limits the possibilities of movement and action, it functions as an inventive constraint that invites writers to negotiate the rigidity of the game environment into a permeable boundary that provides opportunities to expand the original text on which it was based. Burke quotes Lucretius as saying, "Nothing was born in the body that we might use it; but that which is born begs for itself a use" ("Grammar" 159). The body of *Absit Omen* begs writers to collaborate not only with each other but also with the scene through which their gameplay occurs. As this collaboration takes place through the reading of canon text, I draw from fan fiction and game studies to trace out how fan fiction is positioned in relation to canon and how canon functions as a rhetorical constraint to shape how fan fiction is produced.

Canon as Rhetorical Scene

The term canon refers to official or authorized events of a text, whether a television show or book. As an official narrative, it has a complicated relationship to unofficial narratives that promulgate through fan practices. Fan fiction is distinguished from fiction in that it is built in relation to other published media, whether television shows, movies, or books. In the literature on fan fiction, the activities connected to canon have been described through Henry Jenkins' term

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of textual poaching: "Fans raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions" (18). Although fans may rework these materials, they must still be recognizable as belonging to the official narrative.

For fan productions, official narratives can be deconstructed into canonical moments or facts that are then reintegrated into a fan narrative. The fan narrative depends upon being recognized as related to the original text from which it is built. This recognition highlights the tension between fan fiction and fiction. After E.L. James published the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Publishers Weekly* readers noted that the novel originated as a work of fan fiction. When publically discussing the distinction between fan fiction and fiction, Amanda Hayward, CEO of The Writer's Coffee Shop which published *Fifty Shades of Grey* stated: "Essentially only the character's names were borrowed, the setting, plot, abilities, relationship structure, feel and focus of the story were original" (Deahl). The connection between the *Twilight* series and *Fifty Shades of Grey* depends on recognition of canon elements such as character names from the original text of *Twilight*. Without these elements, fan fiction is simply fiction. Canon is critical for recognizing fiction as fan produced, and becomes a major constraint for how far fan fiction can deviate from canon information while still being recognized as fan fiction. The designations of *canon* and *fanon* are then helpful to talk across canon facts and the fan narrative that is used to fill in these gaps (Busse and Hellekson 9). Although *fanon* is used in a more general sense to talk about commonly accepted fan narratives within the larger fan community, it also privileges fan-constructed narratives to a level of factual information equal to that of canon.

Jenkins explores the fan practice of recontextualizing a cultural artifact through the following processes: recontextualization, expanding the series timeline, refocalization, moral

realignment, genre shifting, cross overs, character dislocation, personalization, emotional

intensification, and eroticization (162-75). Maintaining recognition of canon can be as simple as

maintaining character names or giving a nod to established canon events within gameplay. The

gaps of the official narrative that are exploited through recontextualization highlight the

permeability of the canon as a rhetorical scene. The relationship between canon and fanon may

be read as similar to the relationship between the virtual character and the game environment

within a video game. James Paul Gee describes these relationships in that "the virtual character,

that character's goals, and the virtual world of the game are designed to *mesh* or fit together in

certain ways" (68). Although the character's goals are important for the narrative, they are also

contained with the game environment and thus designed to work with the environment rather

than against it. In this same way, writers of fan fiction may work with the canon. However, if

they wish to deviate from it they may need to untangle the character from the game environment

through the use of an "alternate universe" or other signifiers.

In discussing canon as part of the rhetorical scene, I focus on the practice of

recontextualization, wherein "fans…fill in the gaps in the broadcast material and provide

additional explanations for the character's conduct" (Jenkins 162). The official narrative

contains the fan narrative, allowing it to surface only during gaps when the official narrative is

silent. Even if the fan work is not strictly contained within the official narrative, as it may

expand the timeline or insert a crossover with another media artifact, the hierarchy between

official canon and fan fiction is preserved by its need for recognition. It cannot cast off the

official narrative entirely. New media scholar Jessica Hammer adapts the familiar terminology

of primary, secondary, and tertiary texts to describe three types of text in fan made role-play and

look at how authorship and agency shift between and through each layer (70). The primary text, typically considered the system rules for table-top or live-action role-playing games, manifests as canon with fan fiction communities. Fanon would then be considered a secondary text as it constructs situations from the primary text. The tertiary text is the text of the moment, where encounters occur through character action. The primary text, canon, assumes a degree of authority and rigidity that assumes many characteristics of the container model of the scene. Hammer refers to this as a "canonical limit," through which players acknowledge they are playing the same game (74). This limit can also be acknowledged through a type of social contract in which they agree to exclude or include specific story elements in order to best uphold the group ethos of gameplay (76). This limit may be articulated in terms of recognition as well, wherein writers rely upon elements from the primary text in order to maintain their status as fans of a work. The boundaries among the primary, secondary, and tertiary texts are only recognizable when placed next to one another, when a character travels between one text to another. To extract any text from the layering that takes place within gameplay is to extract an incomplete text.

The Ecology of a Scene

To return to Edbauer's rhetorical ecology framework, the structure of *Absit Omen* is created and invented in the writing that is part of gameplay: shifting social networks and other emerging elements of scene are manifested through text. These layers of text, for *Absit Omen*, would also fall chronologically; the primary text of *Harry Potter* presents events of the past, while the secondary and tertiary texts compose the present and recent past. As events are

currently written, they are simultaneously becoming the fanon history of *Absit Omen*. The

association of chronology with layers and values of texts allows *Absit Omen* to use its non-linear

structure to entangle itself within moments of both primary and secondary texts that have already

been produced within the website. *Absit Omen*'s official description lists it as Post-Deathly

Hallows, and Pre-Epilogue, utilizing a specific 20-year gap between the end of the events of

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows and the events of the Epilogue within the same book to

situate its writings within the text.

As writers position their encounters within this gap, they also re-use primary text

materials to collapse the distinctions between primary, secondary, and tertiary texts. The primary

text contains the construction of the tertiary, which by nature of its preservation within the

website is immediately considered the secondary text. As writers continue to build their

narratives, they draw from their collaborations within the secondary text, which is inherently

informed by the primary text. As gameplay continues, the primary text is relied upon less as it is

preserved within the secondary text: the product of direct collaboration between the writers,

characters, and the primary text. As gameplay refers to previous moments within the website,

gameplay is reified as fanon and reworked again within the tertiary text of the website. As the

Absit Omen community refers back to itself and is seen as one RPG forum among many, this

fanon in not generally accepted within the wider *Harry Potter* fan fiction community. Instead, it

is referred to within the website as *Absit Omen* canon, pointing toward the importance of

continuity throughout gameplay.

Absit Omen, Harry Potter, and the Rhetorical Scene

To look at the rhetorical scenes that inform gameplay, I locate two moments where the canon is consulted and then reworked to benefit the *Absit Omen* community. Both instances use an element from the canon text, prompting recognition of the institution invoked, but modify the way in which it occurs. During these moments, the container model is invoked as they find a space within the canon text for it to occur, but their occurrence within *Absit Omen* highlights the tension between the container and ecology models of scene. The first instance pertains to a site-wide game within the website, and the second allows an individual to expand the canon to incorporate unspoken communities.

Harry Potter and the Tetrawizard Tournament

In the fourth book of the *Harry Potter* series, the scene expands beyond the scope of the school of Hogwarts to include two other such magical schools: Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. These previously unknown magical schools are brought in for the Triwizard Tournament, in which one student from each school represents his or her institution in a series of three challenges. When it was suggested that *Absit Omen* host its own such tournament, beginning the tradition again after the unfortunate end of the Triwizard Tournament within the series, a few changes were made. After making provisions to create characters from the other schools within the book, a fourth school was created to allow for North American students, a demographic not as well represented within the *Harry Potter* series. The Salem Witches Institute of Magic (SWIM) was created, and the tournament was renamed as the Tetrawizard Tournament.

By using a very similar title, newcomers to the site are able to recognize the Tetrawizard Tournament as a version of the Triwizard Tournament from the *Harry Potter* series. Although

the Triwizard Tournament only allowed one representative—a school's champion--from each school to compete in a series of three trials, the Tetrawizard Tournament allows new champions with each task in order to maximize site-wide participation within the event. Three champions were chosen from each school for the first task, two champions each for the second task, and three champions each for the third task. The choosing of champions, within the book, is done through the Goblet of Fire. Students over 16 years of age from each school are invited to write their name on a slip of paper and place it within the goblet (Rowling 166-7). Within the book, once a student has entered his or her name for the task it cannot be withdrawn and the student must compete. During the second task at *Absit Omen*, one of the student champions became ill and could not compete. The Goblet of Fire drew another name, and this student competed in her place, a practice that was remarked upon as highly irregular within game as a nod to *Harry Potter* canon, but allowed the tournament to proceed.

Within the in-character thread to sign-up for the first task, a photo of the Goblet of Fire from the film version of the book was used, overlapping the events of *Absit Omen* with the history of the event within the book and film canon of the tournament. The Tetrawizard Tournament deliberately draws upon these moments of overlap to establish itself as part of a tradition that began within the books, but deviates to accommodate the goals of collaboration by allowing for maximum participation. These modifications use the canon event as a template wherein the *Absit Omen* event uses the same structures but changes how they function to accommodate the numerous networks of the website. In order to accommodate these networks, the canon template must be revisioned not as a fixed set of events but rather as a permeable structure that allows multiple entries and exits so that *Absit Omen* can travel within its structure

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and resituate it to fit its community's needs while still retaining recognizable elements from the canon event.

Traveling through the Text

In order to create characters from the other schools, discussions were held within the Plot Development board to talk about canon information for each school. Although the schools are mentioned and described, the *Harry Potter* series only provides enough information to give readers a surface understanding of each institution. In order to perform students as representatives of each institute, further detail was necessary. Through the Plot Development board, members were asked how they felt each school operated and what other information would be necessary for them to perform as a student character if so interested. The books often aligned the Durmstrang Institute with the Dark Arts, as it permitted only pure or half-blood students to enroll. This influence led to discussions about how this exclusivity would filter down to student perceptions towards muggleborn students at Hogwarts, the admissions process for Durmstrang, and the morals of its residents. Questions asked of the members circled around each school's curriculum and focuses, how students progressed through the school year, what language they speak, and any details about Durmstrang mentioned during gameplay by adult alumni that should be incorporated into current understandings of the school. By consolidating all information about each school into a wiki page, writers could then use the same information to inform their characters, leading to a more consistent base of knowledge between student representatives. Within these discussions, writers distinguished between *Harry Potter* canon, *Absit Omen* canon, and their own readings of the schools within the *Harry Potter* series.

The mention of alumni information is important for intertwining the histories of those who have already written about Durmstrang on an unofficial level, with the newly generated official history of *Absit Omen*'s Durmstrang. As adult characters do not have to be a graduate of Hogwarts, some of them chose to have previously attended Durmstrang before relocating to the wizarding London in which many of *Harry Potter*'s institutions outside of Hogwarts take place, notably the Ministry of Magic, Diagon Alley, and St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. Gameplay within *Absit Omen* is not restricted to these areas, but they are more populated than other areas such as Hogsmeade, where most activity is limited to student field trips. As these other wizarding schools serve as part of a character's history or a means to connect with other alumni, they are generally only invoked in gameplay when establishing connections or talking briefly about the character's past. In either case, information is mentioned in an informal way to facilitate an encounter. However, when assembling a canon for future references, these conversations must be deconstructed for factual information that can be re-used by other alumni, such as the mention of previous professors or a secret passage.

The relationship between *Harry Potter* canon and *Absit Omen* canon relies upon a feedback loop wherein students may skim information about the school from books, add their own interpretations, and have their comments reified within the *Absit Omen Lexicon* as factual information about Durmstrang for future use. At the same time, writers may choose to either intertwine factual information from the *Harry Potter* books such as elaborating on a canon professor's personality that may not have been described in the books. They may also, as shown through the Tetrawizard Tournament, use the structures of canonical elements to create their own

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canon institutions, ensuring that although this tournament is of *Absit Omen*'s creation it is still recognizable as part of the *Harry Potter* canon.

Case Study: Beit Gaddol

Although the Salem Witches Institute of Magic (SWIM) is built along with Durmstrang and Beauxbatons as part of *Absit Omen*, the official canon information of each school was built through site-wide discussion. SWIM is largely of one writer's creation, built in collaboration and consultation with other writers, then discussed again as it was adapted to *Absit Omen*'s Tetrawizard Tournament. SWIM is not the only writer-created school within *Absit Omen*. Writers have written characters from other schools in Canada, USA, Japan, Israel, and Iran, among other places. To look at how these non-canon institutions are created, I asked another of *Absit Omen*'s writers to talk about the process behind creating such an institution and the kind of writing involved in doing so.

When Megan responded to the interview questions about moments of character creation in *Absit Omen*, she described the process of creation as far more linked to the backstory of the character than situated within *Absit Omen*'s present events. In deciding upon a character's backstory, she stated, she also determines the social issues they will eventually navigate within the website. History, in this case, was far more important for determining a character's motivations. In describing this moment, Megan locates the spark of inspiration in joining *Absit Omen*: "I did not know then what form my character would take, just as Shelley might not have known what tale of horror she would tell, but I knew I would. The work came in drawing from influences and research" (Personal interview Megan). Megan uses Mary Shelley's dream that

inspired *Frankenstein* as a metaphor for creation, noting that it is not simply the spark of inspiration necessary for writing but that this inspiration begins the research and work necessary to manifest what was dreamt.

The influences and research used to create her character David came from her experiences of studying abroad and helping a family friend who is a Jewish man of the diaspora. Within *Absit Omen*, these influences resulted in a character who would be used to explicitly explore these interests within the *Harry Potter* universe:

> Religion has always fascinated me, and I saw in the sometimes closed-off and fraught Jewish culture, and Israeli national identity, a potential parallel to J.K. Rowling's insular magical community. Both were communities which had struggled with genocide in the past, blatant sectarianism, and—quite uniquely—the opportunity to break away from prior histories, to start again, and to rebuild. J.K. Rowling, to my knowledge, never explored this topic. I wanted a character who, like myself, was keenly aware of these similarities and who, also like myself, was searching for a way to put into practice the various social theories that had the latent opportunity for real change. Not entirely unlike (though clearly, more fictionalized) the magical world choosing to separate itself from the Muggle world, or Israel building itself as a new nation, to me the *Absit Omen* forum was an opportunity to create a new world, to test theories, and to build up a new culture. A venue for idealism, fostered in a fictionalized community. (Personal Interview Megan)

In order to explore national identity, Megan decided to break away from the dominant narrative of the UK wizarding world by creating an Israeli wizarding school. The choice to have her

character graduate from a different school from many of the other characters was deliberate. Instead of translating these narratives to the UK-centric *Harry Potter* universe, Megan created a space within the dominant narrative, using the silence toward other wizarding schools as a gap in which she could insert a school that would allow her to explore a Jewish identity, Beit Gaddol.

The move to create a wizarding school is similar to the way in which other wizarding schools appeared within *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* without any prior indication of their existence. However, the insertion of Beit Gaddol into the canon of *Absit Omen* through character history occurs on a less public level than site-wide discussion of a school for the Tetrawizard Tournament. Although Beit Gaddol expands the canon of *Absit Omen* on an international level, it is not as integrated into the writer-character networks that make up gameplay as insertions that might be more familiar to other writers. Although this school exists as *Absit Omen* canon, it is not information that is generally drawn on as other writers and characters may not have a direct connection or interest to this information unless prompted. Megan describes this difficulty:

> For a time, they were the only Israel characters, though I have since solicited a few others to play Israelis on the board. I think my characters may still be the only ones that very actively explore their religion, or are influenced by it, though recently, a Jewish character was created, and I reached out to the writer to see if David and that student might know each other. (Personal Interview Megan)

Drawing from this more international perspective of *Absit Omen*, Megan also used her character to extend a pre-existing department within the Ministry of Magic that led to the employment of

other characters. In linking these institutions through David, Megan was able to facilitate further interactions between her character and others, as well as making visible the role of Israel within the ministry to make these new agencies more visible within the larger *Absit Omen* community.

<center>Implications</center>

Visibility and recognition are two key factors in retaining in-game institutions' relationship to *Harry Potter* canon while also negotiating its borders to include other writers' concerns that lay outside of the book series. This negotiation relies on reading the canon not as a restrictive element but rather as a catalyst for imaginative invention wherein writers use moves from the canon text to insert their own interests. The canonical limits of the text are investigated for gaps that allow the entry of non-canon elements, allowing writers to use resources beyond the *Harry Potter* series. By making the boundaries of the canon permeable, the container model is penetrated to allow for the influence of outside ecologies to enrich the writing within the website. The primary, secondary, and tertiary texts are laminated into the single history of *Absit Omen*. However, this is not a single rereading of the primary text but rather what happens when a reader approaches a text with his or her own context and creates a character with similar motives to move through the text. Whereas the canonical limit of the text would prohibit those contexts from entering if they are not already included in the canon, the permeable boundary allows these contexts to enter and work together to create an ecological model of reading and writing.

In the next chapter, I look at the product of this writing: the *Absit Omen* website and its wiki database. Merging the container and ecological models of writing transforms the product of writing and what this writing does with the relationship between the writers and the *Harry Potter*

series. I argue that the wiki documents the rereading of *Harry Potter* through *Absit Omen*, creating an archive of how writers within a certain time reacted and interpreted this text. Each character represents a different method of reading the text, with these readings in turn influenced by the larger community of readers and writers. This archive then collects simultaneous multiple readings and how they move through text.

CHAPTER FOUR: ARCHIVED PRODUCTIONS

By situating the writer and character as co-agents, collaboration is both the catalyst for writing as well as the underlying value that affects its shape. Having situated the relationships between writers, characters, and the world of *Absit Omen* within Kenneth Burke's elements of dramatism, I now explore how the website archives the production of these relationships. Collaboration allows both the writer and character to renegotiate the boundaries of their space of play, recontextualizing the *Harry Potter* series into a space that better fits the goals of collaboration within the website. However, the transformative nature of their writing may sometimes call into question the stability of the website as a space to support these renegotiations.

As a way of navigating these rhetorical scenes, I explore how the concept of "archive" describes the means of preserving the relationships within the website. To do so, I draw upon preservation theories from rhetorical, game, and cultural heritage studies to present a framework for conceptualizing the website's position in relation to the writing it produces. From these frameworks, I present an example of how these artifacts can produce nonlinear ways of reading through the idea of the narrative database in order to establish how relationships, and not merely the products of writing, are privileged in interpreting the artifact. As these relationships are intimately linked to the text upon which the world of *Absit Omen* is based, I use the virtual palimpsest as model for preserving these relationships when reading the website.

Preservation Frameworks

As a repository and space for writing, the forum attempts to answer the question posed by games studies scholars regarding methods of preservation: "How does one go about formally describing and preserving an entity that does not really exist until 100,000 people interact with it?" (Winget 1872). In her review of archival methods that game preservationists must consider, Megan Winget draws attention to the need to preserve not only the gameplay between the player and the game, but also "the interactions between players playing the game" (1869). These interactions often result in material products such as game modifications which she labels as "artifacts of participatory culture" (1871).

One of the primary difficulties in archiving game performances lies in the context of use and the different ways meaning is constructed both through the game and participatory culture artifacts made with the game (1880). Although the forum is not a solution to this issue as it does not account for the graphical interfaces and the player vs. player or player vs. environment modes of gameplay, it is a place wherein these interactions can be mapped through documented collaborations within the website. Henry Lowood suggests the creation of game performance archives using video capture, or converting saved game replays into video or emulation software (Lowood 15). In archiving versions of the game from a specific playing, Lowood's method of performance culture in itself becomes an artifact of participatory culture in that it is built from the game by its users.

The emphasis on performance over the game itself is shared with archival studies dealing with cultural memory and heritage. In discussing the dynamic of cultural memory, Diana Taylor discusses the contradiction in attempting to externally store embodied practices in that they are

multiplied and continued through a constant state of successive performances (Assmann 105).

However, Aleida Assmann draws attention to the types of memory that inform these

performances. She distinguishes between "archive" and "canon," a term used in the previous

chapter to distinguish between official and unofficial readings of a text. In light of cultural

memory, canon is referred to here as "actively circulated memory that keeps the past present"

while the archive is used to indicate "passively stored memory that preserves the past past" (98).

By articulating this tension between past and present, Assman argues that "both the active and

the passive realms of cultural memory are anchored in institutions that are not closed against

each other but allow for mutual influx and reshuffling" (106). The permeability of these

institutions allows movement between where the official canon narrative can be archived, as well

as the how the archive renegotiates of *Absit Omen's* canon narrative into the previous official

narrative.

It is in this mutual influx and shuffling that I want to look at the online RPG forum as an

artifact, not to look at it as a product of writing, but as a catalyst for the kinds of rhetorical

invention through which social networks are used to construct identities for both the writer and

the character. When Winget's "artifact of participatory culture" is situated in this network, it is

able to not only archive the production of player interactions, but can also trace the motivations

behind its creation. *Absit Omen* exists in a unique position in that performances are acts of

inscription, allowing them to be more easily preserved as an artifact while also inscribing the

levels of relationships explored in previous chapters to preserve the fuller network of events that

are necessary for these writings to occur.

<u>Ways of Reading</u>

Although these frameworks describe how the website as an archive can be positioned as a cultural artifact, little is said regarding how one may interpret the artifact or trace the relationships through which it was created. Using the example of fan-based wiki spaces, Paul Booth discusses these spaces as examples of Derrida's archontic texts, in that this space "allows, or even invites, writers to enter it, select specific items they find useful, make new artifacts using those found objects and deposit the newly made work back into the source text's archive" (373). In order to do this kind of work, Booth argues that these readers and writers make sense of the archontic text through the structuring and layering of linked portals or pages of text, which are then available as paths for reading through the text (383-4). Booth further describes these fan-made wiki spaces as "mediated narrative databases" wherein "narractivity" takes place, "the process by which communal interactive action constructs and develops a coherent narrative database" (373). The fluidity of the wiki in that it is always under construction positions the story and writing as ever-changing, opening itself up for future collaboration and change. The wiki then documents and archives these various storylines within the database of the wiki, allowing for varied ways of reading and interpreting the text produced by in-game threads.

Within *Absit Omen*, a wiki space is used as an archive to record events that have occurred within gameplay. These events are documented as past and can be referred to, but may not circulate as often during in-character threads. Titled *The Absit Omen Lexicon*, this space holds past stories in a documented location that remains open for writers to go back and embellish existing characters or storylines or insert new characters who may wish to have resided in the periphery of the event. As in game events are positioned around the current timeline (generally a

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space of four weeks at a time), chronology becomes one of the primary methods of reading the website, particularly as its emphasis on realism within the fantasy setting calls for a depiction of time that it is similar to the writers' own experiences. The timeline then becomes a path for reading the website, while also functioning as an organizing principle that ties together in-game writing and planning. However, as these moments occur in individual threads separated by their physical location within the *Absit Omen* universe, it can be difficult to read the events of the entire month or even year. The *Lexicon* then functions as a space to contain overall readings of the individual moments that occur within the forum. This space allows for easier travel between the current events of *Absit Omen* and the past events that have shaped it into what it is today, while also allowing writers to organize future moments around past events.

Revising the Past in Absit Omen

The fluid nature of the mediated narrative database, particularly when viewed as the type of artifact of participatory culture outlined above, raises questions of revisionary practices and how current events become coded as the past. Within *Absit Omen*, a newcomer may wish to write a Shopkeeper with a history that establishes how his or her character has "always" been present, or may wish to take over a Ministry position such as the Head of the Department of Mysteries wherein the previous writer of this position exited without explanation. Although this relies on how the writer draws upon the social network of writers and characters to support his or her character's newly founded history, it can be difficult to write a new history against what has previously been documented.

To explore this further, I've asked Sharon to talk about the processes involved in revising histories within both the fluid nature of gameplay and the more static nature of the documented past:

> Investment is a big deal at a community like *Absit Omen*. We invest in each others' characters by giving them our attention, awarding them central roles in-character, by tying our characters' lives and stories tightly to another's. This investment, for me, is the root of what makes the role-play fun. It makes it immersive.
>
> But it's delicate. When a character leaves the game, it can be hard work to just let it be. We create little narratives about it, like that character is still present, there's just no one telling their story. Or, sometimes friends grow apart. Sometimes it takes a little more and we need to 'write out' or offer a story solution for why a character is gone. Usually we do this with the cooperation of the writer, but sometimes the writer has also moved on and we have to, as gently as we can, make some explanation…
>
> Now as administrators, we acknowledge the power of investment and the discomfort the community feels when they have to accommodate many changes like that, so we have policies in places that make character creation a thoughtful process and the 'retirement' of a character something that also requires thought and a write-out if possible. We want to mitigate that jarring sensation. (Personal Interview Sharon)

Although she doesn't talk about documentation specifically, the amount of writing and the interactions between writers and characters are a large investment on each person's part in that they are working together to create the storylines, and any absence affects the power of these

relationships. Revision is then linked to visibility and invisibility, in which characters who are not currently writing (typically for a period of 4 months or so) are deemed inactive. While they are still counted as part of the population, they are only speculated about or ignored through gameplay as these aspects of the storyline are moved to the background and other relationships are foregrounded through gameplay. This kind of maneuvering can be seen with an example from Karen in which she and another writer struggled to have a moment occur in gameplay due to outside obligations:

> The only revisions I can think I've had to make were a former friendship and meeting Edward had with a character in his travelling past. The writer vanished, reappeared, and as the thread was not fantastically timeline dependent, we shifted it, tried again to continue. She vanished again, and although she's mentioned in passing Edward's description and memories in other threads, I'm ambiguous and I don't let it become a fixed point. (Personal Interview Karen)

Karen draws attention to the flexibility allowed in that the moment is not "timeline dependent" in that it is not a fixed point that other storylines may revolve around or touch base at. In navigating revision, characters and writers show a flexibility in more local moments that do not support an overarching storyline. However, even when an event is a fixed point there is a way of foregrounding and backgrounding different relationships to allow it to continue despite any contradictions or conflicts with previously documented writing.

RPG As Virtual Palimpsest

The negotiation between *Absit Omen* and *Harry Potter* events to create a fan-written role-play requires that the canon text of *Harry Potter* also be saved when preserving *Absit Omen* as an artifact of the writer's negotiations. To illustrate the preservation of the *Harry Potter* series within the writings of *Absit Omen*, I invoke the concept of the palimpsest, repositioning the website as a virtual palimpsest that writes on top of the *Harry Potter* series, preserving the text and its relationship to the website as it simultaneously reads and writes over the underlying text.

The term palimpsest refers to medieval manuscripts that were erased in order to reuse the parchment for later scholars. The manuscript would still bear marks from the previous writing underneath the new text (Graham 422). Recently, this term has been appropriated to describe the layering of the virtual over physical spaces. The world of *Second Life*, for instance, mirrors the physical world as businesses and institutions replicate physical spaces inside the virtual world. Augmented reality projects seek to find ways to allow users to attach notes or reviews to physical spaces through virtual programs. Google Earth, while mapping out the physical spaces of our world, also serves as an archive as images may preserve owners who are no longer part of our world. The online role-playing game forum, *Absit Omen*, in this sense, serves as a virtual layer of the *Harry Potter* series, in which the series is central to its existence but is overwritten by reader participation. Mark Graham points to the term neogeography for understanding how we map out virtual geography, citing a description in which "methodologies of neogeography tend toward the intuitive, expressive, personal, absurd, and/or artistic" (Graham 425). As a creative, expressive method of traversing this virtual map, characters are ideal structures for moving between the physical and virtual geography as they have a history of appearing within both

environments: the characters of *Harry Potter* are no more or less real than the characters of *Absit Omen*.

As the palimpsest expands, more characters populate the website with their readings, beliefs, and cultural referents to create a collaborative living text in which the virtual world can overlap with reality. By creating a collaborative reading, all readers work together to layer their interpretations and create a story that is greater than any of the characters individually. This is not a linear world, but a space that is open to multiple, simultaneous readings of the text that allow for a synergistic palimpsest that incorporates the original text while also expanding it. When writers draw from their own actions and bodies to simulate the movements of their characters, they blur physical and virtual identification in an exhibition of the transaction of reading through their virtual performances.

Within *Absit* Omen, writers position their readings of a text to create a collaborative narrative in which many different contexts can intersect within the boundaries of the fictional world set by the origin text. These fictions become embodied through the reader, not through a mental activity but through a multi-modal construction built on text, image, and sound. This creates a palimpsest in which a virtual world is layered over the originating text, allowing both to influence the other through the use of character/avatars as mediators.

Implications

By naming the website as an archive of these writings, the work of both writers and characters within the site is set on an equal level to the text of the *Harry Potter* series. The stories are turned into factual information that is consulted and referred to as seriously as writers

originally referred to the *Harry Potter* series. In this process of rewriting, writers navigate a series of complex relationships involving their identities as writers, readers of the *Harry Potter* series, and the character as an equal partner in the storytelling process. While the archive preserves the primary text of the *Harry Potter* series, it only preserves the underlying structures that the writers and characters see fit to make visible through the palimpsest of *Absit Omen*. Instead of building a web of writings around a central conflict such as that between Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort, these writers and characters tell stories of everyday interactions that together build a larger narrative about identity, social distribution and balance, and personhood as interpreted both by their experiences and the experiences carried through their characters. These stories cannot exist in isolation; they depend on the social networks between the writers and characters, and the recognition that these networks function as generative constraints that facilitate further collaborative writing within the online RPG forum.

EPILOGUE

In pairing the online RPG forum with Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad, I have been able to provide a more in-depth reading of these online relationships than could be explored through fan fiction or game studies alone. Although this space is used for fan writing, the complexity of the relationships necessitates study of not just the writing produced but also how this writing comes into being. Through looking closely at the process of writing, it became clear that one of the pivotal differences between the online RPG forum and other spaces of fan and game constructions was the position of the avatar-character. By attributing agency and social autonomy to the character by assigning it the role of co-agent, the social networks grow more complicated but also more meaningful as writers learn to rhetorically strategize about how stories are told through their character's navigation of the world. Each writer I spoke with in this research used a different pathway to build the character's identity, showing a resourcefulness that originated from the conception of the character as an autonomous agent. More closely examining each path of identity-building (i.e., through strong personal identification, through motivation to align with or expand social networks, or through primary interaction with the rhetorical scence) may prove fruitful for future studies. By showing the character through different layers of relationships to both the writer, the *Absit Omen* community, and the *Harry Potter* series canon, I demonstrate how an identity, through whichever path a writer wishes to construct it, is intimately linked to other social networks that affect how the character moves within the world. Outside of *Absit Omen*, a rhetorical understanding of how resources are deployed is helpful to these writers as they talk about using their character's experiences to navigate real-world scenarios and develop their writing skills in non-fan based works.

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When considering the effects of online RPG forum writing with tasks outside of the website, the young age of many writers suggests usefulness within the composition classroom. Fan studies scholars have slowly urged for the incorporation of non-academic writing practices and tasks into the classroom, with assignments asking students to write fan fiction about a class text or other such tasks. In attempting to unite home and academic literacies, more attention is drawn to the fan than the fiction produced. In light of the work done in *Absit Omen*, I suggest that more attention should be placed on the kind of resourcefulness used to navigate immense social networks as well as the processes used in carrying the fan work underneath the fiction produced. When students view their writing resources as partners within the relationship, they may become more aware of how widespread collaboration is, and how agency is distributed within the various networks they use to construct themselves as writers.

It is clear that writers within *Absit Omen* have a high sensitivity to issues of ownership through their stance toward character construction, character interactions, and modifications to the *Harry Potter* series. However, this sensitivity is not a limitation but can clearly be seen as a generative way of thinking, if not problem-solving. Within these issues of ownership lies a discussion of responsibility and community-building. As the community is made up of character interactions, creating a character ties the writer to not only generating stories, but to building the website together with other writers and characters. In recoding these stories as factual information for other writers to use and interpret, each character carries with him or her a sense of authority in that his or her actions matter and have real consequences for gameplay. This space is important not just as a place for fan writing but as a place where writers of a common interest can come together to build something meaningful for both themselves and others.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Pamela Lynn Andrews**

Date: **December 19, 2012**

Dear Researcher:

On 12/19/2013 the IRB approved the following human participant research until 12/18/2013 inclusive:

Type of Review:	Submission Correction for UCF Initial Review Submission Form
	Expedited Review Category # 7
	This approval includes a Waiver of Written Documentation of Consent
Project Title:	Avatar and Self: Exploring Identification Practices In Online Role-Playing Communities
Investigator:	Pamela Lynn Andrews
IRB Number:	SBE-12-08900
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

The Continuing Review Application must be submitted 30days prior to the expiration date for studies that were previously expedited, and 60 days prior to the expiration date for research that was previously reviewed at a convened meeting. Do not make changes to the study (i.e., protocol, methodology, consent form, personnel, site, etc.) before obtaining IRB approval. A Modification Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at https://iris.research.ucf.edu .

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 12/18/2013,
approval of this research expires on that date. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. The new form supersedes all previous versions, which are now invalid for further use. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Participants or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Patria Davis on 12/19/2012 09:32:03 AM EST

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IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Group I: Moment of Creation

- How would you describe the moment you decided to create a character? Was there a specific catalyst involved, i.e. image, song, etc.?

- What factors influenced your choices regarding the character's bodily appearance?

- What factors influenced your choices regarding the character's personality?

- When writing the character's biography, how influential is your character's position in the community, regarding access to story-lines or interaction with groups?

- If you base a character on your own identity, how closely do you reproduce that identity through the character?

- Have you ever created a character that is very unlike you? If so, could you tell me about that?

Group Two: Avatar/Character Relationships:

For this part of the interview, we'll focus on just one character of your choice. Do you have one in mind?

- Tell me about a time when you felt close to your character?

- Tell me about a time when you felt distant from your character?

- At any point, have you regretted or wished to change your choices in constructing the character?

- If applicable, how influential is the character's personality on their goals within the forum?

- How do you talk about your character to people who are unfamiliar with the website?

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