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# Co-Creation in the Metaverse Towards Better Mental Health

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## ABSTRACT

Struggles with mental health are at an all-time high, and there is a lack of community resources to respond to the needs of individuals dealing with anxiety, burnout, and social isolation. With the rise of the Metaverse, there is potential in using virtual worlds, avatars, and games to address the lack of available community resources for mental health. Game worlds such as Final Fantasy XIV already have thriving communities of players. A sub-category of "role-players" is a niche subculture within the gaming community that repurposed in-game lore and elements to create unique experiences at virtual venues. A handful of these venues purpose themselves to relieve stress and foster community building. By conducting virtual ethnography in Final Fantasy XIV I will learn about community building in the role-playing community and build and test a virtual venue to reveal the effectiveness of virtual worlds to help mitigate the impact on anxiety, burnout, and social isolation.

**Keywords:** Video games, Virtual ethnography, Metaverse, Roleplay, Community building, Value co-creation, Behavior change, Mental health, Final fantasy

## INTRODUCTION

Many game worlds exist in the metaverse, each containing a unique lore, actions, and player base. A subculture of players, known as role-players, immerse themselves within the games lore by crafting backstories that integrate their avatars into the larger narrative. These narratives range from being a simple shop keeper to being a hero of great renown. Specifically in the MMORGP Final Fantasy XIV, the role playing community has repurposed in game housing to create venues that foster community building and forms of communal support for fellow players. The virtual ethnography conducted within Final Fantasy XIV in the role-playing community identifies the potential of virtual worlds, avatars, and player communities to mitigate the impact of social isolation, burnout, and anxiety.

Mental health issues have worsened since the COVID-19 began. Though COVID-19 will resolve in the future, it has changed the future of social interaction, technology, work, and living situations. The lack of resources to help individuals in the United States cope with their mental health demonstrates the dire need for mental health reform and the need to explore the potential of community lead initiatives for preventative measures to secure mental health and well-being. Games are a critical technology that can help engage, educate, and change behaviors. While games for mental health and virtual venues are

not anything new, this research serves to build upon previous discoveries and applications through UX research and design. Virtual ethnography previously conducted in virtual worlds helps inform and guide my process. Tom Boellstorff's work is highly influential in guiding the virtual ethnography methods for this research. The goal of this research is to create an MVP framework for a virtual venue. The venue will promote the relief of burnout, anxiety, and social isolation. The scale of this MVP will service the role-playing community of players in the North American Aether Server of Final Fantasy XIV. The initial venue will be virtual and leverage the available technologies that players use to market and promote their venues such as carrd.co, in-game party finders, discord, etc. The MVP will strive to inform opportunities to build analogous systems for similar ventures in the Metaverse. This will be co-created with the role-playing community in Final Fantasy XI. At the time of writing this, the project is still in its early stages of development- but future iterations would look to extend this system to tangible venues via Mixed Reality, Cross Reality, or other relevant technologies.

## METHODOLOGY TO CONTEXUALIZE THE NEEDS OF VIRTUAL COMMUNTIES

A soft-systems methodology is the overarching design methodology used to collect information based on lived experiences and correlates objects in a system to an experience. World-building, while not the main methodology, is used to inform how to leverage digital architecture, virtual assets, and touch points in a virtual space. These combined methodologies will provide community based insights and inform design decisions. The methods for this research will include field visits, field notes, field activities, ethnographic interviews with role-players, literature review, and popular media searches. The research will drive the design of a scaleable MVP that identifies opportunities for co-creating spaces with the role-playing community, addressing social isolation, and activities to mitigate anxiety and burnout.

### Virtual Ethnography and Field Immersion as Tools to Contextualize Player Culture and Needs

Ethnographic interviews with role-players will provide insight into the experience of community members, identify key activities, and highlight key needs. In actively immersing oneself into the role-play community in Final Fantasy XIV a clear understanding of systems, community customs, and player behaviors in context to their environment. Players in these social venues will be asked questions about systems, activities, and their emotional response to social venues. By actively attending venues, engaging with the role-play community, and working at a venue- details about designing a virtual space that actively helps the community will reveal themselves. Notes on community events, communication, systems and technologies to advertise, engage, will help outline role-players journeys and touch points. Finally, literature on player relations to avatars, virtual worlds, and mental health will help fill in technical gaps for the MVP. While discussing the role-playing community, it is acknowledged that problematic players, promiscuity, and

toxicity exist. While these elements exist in virtual worlds- the subject matter the research dedicates itself to informing an MVP of a virtual venue. Later iterations can address these issues in context to the goal of supporting mental health.

### Defining Language Native to Players in Final Fantasy

**Roleplay (RP)** is the practice "in which the players act out issues fictionally, such as enacting a familiar family conflict or using a fairy tale as metaphor for a larger psychological complexes."[Bowman]. While role-playing has application to education, drama therapy, and training it also remains a form of entertainment.

**Out Of Character RP (OOCRP)** is when a player breaks character to talk about real world issues, make request, or clarify certain information. In the role-play community in Final Fantasy XIV, OOCRP can occur in two context. The first being a venue dedicated to out of character role playing where players discuss real life emotions or situations based while concealing their identities. The second is when role players accidentally break character or use brackets or double parenthesis to respond to content or explain content to new role-players.

**Linkshell** is to message multiple players in different servers within the same data center. Players in the RP community will often use Linkshells for group chats to communicate with venue staff.

**Tell** is a direct message sent to another player. Players will often use PMs to share their in game location, break into out of character context, or inform players on certain rules or procedures at a venue to avoid inundating the chatlog for other venue goers.

**Emote** is a premade motion that player avatars conduct paired with a chat log description that players may purchase or unlock. Players also use custom emotes which are text based descriptions that detail actions, events, or responses in chat. Custom emotes use quotation marks to pair descriptions with verbal responses.

**Party** is when a group of two or more players enter a group in game world. Traditionally this function is to group players to conduct quest or battle monsters that require a party of players to defeat. In the role-play community of Final Fantasy XIV, a party is formed to create a private chat between a group of players.

**Magic Circle** is described by Johans Huizinga as a dedicated space where players suspend their disbelief of reality. In doing so, players abide by a series of rules while voluntarily partaking in a game for a given duration of time. This space is separate from the real world.

**Value Co-Creation** is the collaboration between businesses and communities to develop an efficient, viable, and resilient value proposition that addresses the needs of the community. Co-creating with the community reveals what community members value, what they have access to, and elements that impact their decision making.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature exploring role-play and virtual ethnography and game therapy.

## Text On Virtual Ethnography

Literature exploring role-play and virtual ethnography identifies that context is critical to understanding systems, behaviors, and trends of cultures in virtual worlds. Sarah Lynne Bowman in the book The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity identifies that role play "as a practice is utilized in a variety of contexts." From psychotherapy to education role-playing can help develop "awareness, coping skills, and compassion" [Bowman] but it also serves as a form of entertainment. Out of the various uses of role-play, players in Final Fantasy XIV use it primarily as a form of entertainment. In some specific instances players will use OOCRP to "distance" themselves while discussing life issues. Distancing "is a method by which the therapist can alter the level of involvement that the player has with the role. Playing a character 'like' the client but not associated with the client's real-world identity diminishes the potential for shame; the individual embodies the experience more symbolically than literally." [Bowman.] Thus, when exploring the RP community in Final Fantasy XIV was critical to engage with players in their natural environments to understand activities in context. Tom Boellstoff explains in the book Ethnography of Virtual Worlds that "the very immediacy of the experience of life, its patterns and rhythms, its artifacts and practices, is not easily explained in numbers." In fact Observations and field immersion are able to "yield profound insights that elude quantification" [Boellstorff.] When exploring virtual worlds and understanding customs, activities and actions within the "magic circle" in virtual spaces, observing players in context in natural environments is critical. This not only serves to inform how players behave but identifies opportunities to include elements of game therapy without isolating or othering individuals.

## Text On Game Therapy

In regard to games as a medium in therapy- virtual ethnography is critical to understanding the virtual world a player is invested. Anthony M. Bean states in Working with Video Gamers and Games in Therapy that by "listening to the content of the world from the video gamer and asking questions about the types of games being played, the genre of enjoyment comes into focus." Active listening contextualizes meaningful play and can introduce opportunities to adopt certain activities, conversations, etc. Active listening and engaging in meaningful play are key to helping individuals dealing with burnout, social isolation, and anxiety. In the 2021 The State of Mental Health In America Report, it was shown that "people screening at risk for mental health conditions are struggling most with loneliness or isolation…among people who screen with moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety or depression, 70 percent reported that one of the top three things contributing to their mental health concerns was loneliness or isolation." The same report identified that suicidal ideation among adults has increased 0.15%, a total of 460,000 additional people. Suicidal ideation is highest among LGBTQ+ youth with thoughts of self-harm nearly every day. Lastly the cost of mental health services and the wait times to be seen by a therapist act as barriers to improving mental health.

## FIELD IMMERSION AND OBSERVATIONS

Spending time with players in spaces and participating in activities relevant to the roleplay community.

### Field Activies

Field activities included but were not limited to attending concerts, raves, eating at restaurants, dining at cafes, bar hopping, dancing, cosplaying, watching films, and working as a barista. It is important to note that activities in these virtual spaces are derived from activities in real life with elements of fantasy. The core of the role-playing community is a form of socialization through an ideal form. The autonomy given to players to define their given name, title, history, occupation, and motives draws from their knowledge of game world and its lore, players ideals, and ultimately a player's lived experience. While attending themed venues, players would at times enter OOCRP and discuss how their in game operations were informed by their work experience and education in real life. The most notable was the owner of a pirate themed venue who hired staff whose occupation was designing casino games. More frequently you see staff and entertainment at venues draw upon work experience or research when serving drinks or entrees.

### Field Immersion

While working as a barista at a venue that was a jazz bar and cafe I would implement custom emotes when creating entrees or beverages for clients. I would receive tells out of character thanking me for creating a more immersive experience. While the bulk of role players enjoy immersing themselves with real wait times, descriptions, and reactions- there are a handful of roleplayers that prefer their needs met immediately. Players will visit venues to feel out the customer base, activities, and type of role play conducted. After exploring a series of venues, players will often frequent a venue they feel most immersed and comfortable in.

### Field Observations

Observing players as both staff and as a venue attendee are completely different experiences. Attendees usually frequent a venue with a small social circle, to meet friends, or to engage with staff members. Surprisingly much like in real life, it can be difficult to engage random players at these venues. How interactions are conducted depends on the type of role-player, their character traits, and their objectives. While many players in Final Fantasy XIV enjoy the social aspect- there are players that enjoy singular conversations or simply the phenomena of "being together alone." Players can demonstrate the type of interactions they will have by using in game status markers. With the exception of an RP status, players have repurposed other status icons to distinguish staff, immersive role-play, casual venue goers, and other services offered at venues such as entertainment, performers, etc. Venues declare the type of services, types of interactions, and activities by posting snippets on an in-game party finder, advertisers in major city hubs who use a shout feature

to reach all players in the immediate area, web pages made on Carrd.co as well as outline community guidelines on their discord channels.

### Field Interviews

Discussions with the player base at venues focused on first creating a relationship with the owners and venue clients. All conversations adhere to in game elements, venues, and retrospectives on their experiences as role-players in the Final Fantasy XIV community. No real life information is collected from players and at times, and all quotes are tied only to character names. Discussions with players revealed that many were introduced to role-play in Final Fantasy XIV through friends or members of their free companies (guilds that players form for socialization or to obtain bonuses such as housing, bonus experience, etc.)

Discussions with the role-playing community reveal that socialization, group activities, and shared experiences were the core factors that drive attendance. Players describe the majority of their experiences as mostly positive and ascribe those positive aspects due to the type of players at the venues they frequent, the community base, and the playful banter between role-players. While some players have encountered a handful of negative experiences, the community act as stewards to keep one another safe, enforce the guidelines of the venues, etc. Many of the players interviewed described dancing, beverages, and people watching as their favorite activities. When asking players if virtual venues help relieve stress and anxiety- players explained that it all depends on context. The elements that help contextualize when venues are beneficial include the type of crowd at the venue, their emotional state, and if others will socialize with them at said venue. One answer that stuck out was the owner of a cafe describing their original intent in creating their venue. The core aspect of their venue is to allow people to gather and rest to help with social anxiety. In a sense it became a type of therapy for the owner and their patrons.

## CREATING AND MARKETING A VIRTUAL CAFÉ

After initial research on game therapy, virtual worlds, avatars, and immersion in the role-play community the first iteration of the venue could be created. The original design of the venue took inspiration from various venues frequented during field visits and activities. With an initial design, a second and third iteration took place after collecting input from members of the role-play community who I established a relationship. When discussing the types of activities – players wanted a place to sleep, eat and drink, listen to music, and an isolated area to unwind.

In order to create assets for the cafe such as signage, seats, wall decorations, etc. I had to level all of the in-game crafting and gathering classes to max level. This was known as an omni-crafter and omni-gatherer. Many but not all cafe owners in game will either hire an omni-crafter or gatherer or become an omni-crafter and/or gatherer in order to serve higher selling consumables, create the decorations, and save in game money. After obtaining max-level in these classes, the cafe was constructed using items available from

the list of craftable materials. A few items which required specific ingredients that was not easily available cost me 2.5 million in game currency. The total time it took to become an omni-crafter, gather, purchase, craft and design the cafe was 1-2 months. After the cafe was built, it was necessary to build a carrd webpage, create a menu, and establish a discord channel. These elements are standard for any virtual venue in Final Fantasy XIV's role-playing community.

Carrd is a website that integrates with a discord server and twitter. Most cafe owners will use the carrd site to inform patrons of their available services, menu prices, and provide information on the staff and venue for role-play purposes. The discord server acts as a liminary space to update clients, conduct re-targeting ads, promotion of events or sister venues, and helps promote community building. Standard channels in these discord servers include community rules, voice chats, text chats, server suggestions, screenshot sharing, announcements, raffle updates, and VIP sections (depending on the type of venue).

## CONCLUSION

### First Iteration of Café Esoona

The MVP for the virtual venue is titled Cafe Esoona. The café was successful in achieving its intention of the café to act as a space for players to unwind and connect with other players. On the initial soft opening over 50 players attending the venue over the course of five hours. When compared to the average attendance of players at similar venues, café attendance was average.

Players attending the café used role-playing to engage with the space and make it their own. Community members expressed their satisfaction with the space's design to help them relax and unwind alongside members of their community. The first iteration of the café demonstrates potential for virtual spaces to mitigate the impacts of stress and build a supportive community. Additional research must be conducted to explore community models, activities, and the needs of various virtual communities and their subcultures.

### Future Iterations of Café Esoona

Future iterations of Cafe Esoona will be looking into expanding the size of the virtual venue, hiring staff, and adding activities that promote socialization and community building. Activities will be informed by direct input from the role-play community and practices that support mental health. Consideration for resources via the discord server will be further explored. Ideas being explored are in-game meditation periods, dance, and art therapy by leveraging community favored technologies such as twitch, youtube, twitter, and drawpile. Additional research will be conducted to inform and validate these activities and community marketing. Discoveries, resources, and distribution strategies will be shared with the role-play community.

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