COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING 2.0:
A FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING FORUM-BASED ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

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Forum-based role-playing games are a rich, yet barely researched subset of text-based digital gaming. They are a form of storytelling where narratives are created through acts of play by multiple people in an online space, combining collaboration and improvisation. This dissertation acts as a pilot study for exploring these games in their full complexity at the intersection of play, narrative, and fandom. Building on theories of interactivity, digital storytelling, and fan fiction studies, it highlights forum games’ most unique features, and proves that they are in no way liminal or secondary to more popular forms of role-playing.

The research is based on data drawn from a large sample of forums of various genres. One hundred sites were explored through close textual analysis in order to outline their most common features. The second phase of the project consisted of nine months of participant observation on select forums, in order to gain a better understanding of how their rules and practices influence the emergent narratives. Participants from various sites contributed their own interpretations of forum gaming through a series of ethnographic interviews. This did not only allow agency to the observed communities to voice their thoughts and explain their practices, but also spoke directly to the key research question of why people are drawn to forum gaming.

The main drawing power of forum games is their focus on creative, collaborative writing. Players interested in writing with others in a playful setting, and engaging with their favorite popular culture texts through composition, are drawn to these sites because of the narrative freedom they offer compared to other gaming platforms. In addition, their narratives born from play are consciously, intentionally, and enthusiastically multimodal. Multimodality offers a wide
range of creative opportunities for telling stories in a digital space, and it also has connections to older, oral forms of communal storytelling.

This study creates a framework for theorizing forum-based role-playing games as a distinct style of gaming, worthy of scholarly attention. It also opens up new opportunities for future research, as well as applications including ESL education, collaborative writing, literary studies, and graphic design.
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“What are you doing?”

“Just playing my game.”

“Oh, like, a videogame?”

“No... not really. It’s a forum RP.”

“A what now?”

“It’s a role-playing game that people play in writing, on online forums.”

“Like... Dungeons & Dragons?”

“Yes, sort of.”

“So, you are chatting with them now?”

“No. We write posts.”

“Write?... For fun?”

Every single day, thousands of people engage in text-based role-playing activities on forum sites all over the Internet. During the eight years since I first became part of this gaming community, the conversation above played out with various people in my life in various iterations, but always stemmed from the same point of origin: Forum gaming is either virtually unknown to people (even gamers), generally misunderstood, or regarded as a substitute for, or second best to, various other forms of gaming. Some mistake it for fan fiction; others may think it simply means discussing one’s favorite video games on an online forum. Even when just considering the term “role-playing” itself, people have various pre-conceived notions. Outside of gamer culture, the term often has sexual connotations that tend to make conversations come to an awkward halt. Among gamers, role-playing is most often associated with tabletop, pen-paper-
and-dice games (such as the above mentioned *Dungeons & Dragons*), or videogames where the player experiences the game world through a pre-designed character’s point of view and narrative arc. In-between these two styles lies the vast realm of text-based digital gaming, of which forum-based role-playing games are an unduly unexplored, and underestimated, subset.

Being an academic, immersing myself in forum gaming led me to ask several questions. I realized that while to me, and my fellow players, it was obvious why someone would choose to play on these sites, and spend hours creating characters and typing out stories, it was hard to explain to outsiders what made this form of gaming so alluring, especially when compared to video games. I also encountered skepticism often enough to second-guess my own assumptions. As I began to take a critical look at forum gaming, a few key questions emerged: Are these games just a substitute for other forms of role-playing, or can they really be described as their own distinct style? What makes people interested in them? What kinds of players join forum-based role-playing, what brings them there, how do they choose their preferred sites, and what makes them stick around for years, occasionally even decades? On the other end of the spectrum, what makes them leave? What are the distinguishing features of forum gaming, and what opportunities do they offer for the creation of digital narratives? And if thousands of people spend their time and energy writing stories in a digital space together, could their practices and motivations be applied outside of recreational play?...

Before a study could be designed to answer some of these questions, since academic research has largely glossed over forum games so far, a basic terminology had to be established. The first step towards understanding forum-based role-playing games was creating a clear and concise description for explaining what they are.
A General Outline of Forum-Based Role-Playing

First off, I refer to the subject of this study either as *forum-based role-playing games* or *forum gaming*. I reserve the term “role-playing forums” for online forums about role-playing – sites where games (tabletop, video, etc.) are discussed, but not actually played. This latter term falls outside of the scope of the present study, but I will be using the former two interchangeably. In the interest of brevity, the term *forum* in the body of this work will also refer to forum-based role-playing sites, unless specified otherwise; similarly, *RP* or *RPG* might be used to abbreviate the term “role-playing (game).”

Forum-based role-playing games, as the name suggests, take place on online *forums* (messaging boards). The basic unit of a forum game is the *post*. In the course of the game, a post is written *in character* (IC) by one player, narrating part of an event from their character’s point of view. *Threads* are made up of multiple posts by two or more players, taking turns describing the sequence of events from the alternating points of view of their characters. There is usually a *posting order* implemented so everyone gets equal chance to react to everything; however, if the story so requires, this posting order can be broken (“You are closer to the monster than I am. Go ahead and skip me, I’ll post right after”). *Plots* are storylines that can be limited to one thread or a multitude of threads, either in sequence or parallel to each other (e.g. in a villain plot, heroes would chase the villain through multiple encounters one after another; while in a zombie apocalypse plot different groups of characters would be dealing with the end of the world in different settings simultaneously). The activity of playing on a forum is usually referred to as *threading* or *posting* (some people differentiate between the two, claiming that ‘threading’ is used for forum posts while ‘posting’ is used for the chatbox, but in this present study I do not make that distinction). One *player* (sometimes also called a puppeteer, or a fandom-specific
word such as “idjits” for the television show *Supernatural*) can create and play one or multiple
*player characters* (PC) that inhabit the game world. Sometimes *non-player characters* (NPC)
also appear – these are side characters that anyone can use as they see fit. Characters are often
represented by images used as *avatars* (smaller picture on the side bar of each post) and
*signatures* (a larger picture at the bottom of each post), taking advantage of the mechanics of
online forums that allow these. It is important to note that while in video games the word ‘avatar’
often refers to the player character itself, on forums it only refers to the character’s visual
representation.

Forum-based role-playing games can take place in various game worlds. Some are based
on pop culture texts and their fandoms, while others are made up by the creators of the forum
(the latter are usually called *original settings*). Fandom-based forum games can be categorized
by the characters they allow: They are *Canon* and *Non-Canon*. On *canon* forums players embody
characters that are established in the original text of their choice: For example, on a site based on
*Star Wars*, people would *claim* a character from the *Star Wars* universe (such as Han Solo or
Luke Skywalker) to become their PC. On *non-canon* forums people have to create their own
*original characters* (OC), and then implement them into the game world (e.g. playing Han
Solo’s long-lost second cousin). Some of the game worlds are canon, but the stories and the
characters within them are original (e.g. playing a random student in Hogwarts in the *Harry
Potter* universe), while others are *alternate universe* (AU) forums where the world of the fandom
has been shifted into a fan-made setting (e.g. Hogwarts in a dystopian future). For an extended
glossary of often used terms, see Appendix 3.

Unlike many other games, forum RPGs do not have winners and losers. There is no set
end point or ultimate narrative goal. People play because they take pleasure in the process, and
they collaborate to make the shared experience enjoyable for everyone. This collaboration is shaped by both informal negotiation and set rules. Forum RP sites all have their own rules, many of them tailored towards the game world, fandom, and community that they represent. These practices and written guidelines shape the narratives that are born from collaboration through play, and create the gaming experience that draws regular players in. In the following chapters, several elements of the simple descriptions above are explored to reveal their complexities, and shed light on some possible answers to what makes forum gaming exciting, unique, and popular.

**Summary of Chapters**

Chapter one contextualizes forum-based role-playing at the intersection of play, narrative, and fandom. Placing this virtually unexplored topic within the larger context of research on digital storytelling, interactivity, and fan fiction (among others), it aims to tie forum games to parallel academic discussions, and explore their relevance outside of the narrow field of Game Studies. In order to fully grasp their complexity and potential, research requires an intersectional foundation, one that it does not privilege a single aspect of forum RPGs over others, or try to fit them into such existing categories as “fan fiction.” Through highlighting previous research on related fields and topics, this chapter creates an academic starting point for discussing forum-based role-playing without simplifying it.

Chapter two introduces the methods and methodologies that form the basis of this study. In order to begin constructing an academic framework for the research of forum-based role-playing, a three-phase project was designed to explore the basic features, player practices, and emic views and opinions of this style of gaming. By combining close textual analysis, participant observation, and ethnographic interviews, both large-scale and in-depth data was collected to
address the key research questions (pre-existing and emergent) of the project. This chapter also discusses the possibilities and difficulties of conducting ethnography in digital spaces, and the special guidelines set up for the project to avoid breaking generally accepted rules of online privacy and confidentiality.

Chapter three focuses on the uses and regulation of language in forum games. Since written text is the core element of these sites, the rules and practices that shape both linguistic expression and narrative content are vital to our understanding of what makes forum games unique, and what draws people to become involved and invested in them. Exploring the uses of language, with their possibilities and their limitations, also provides valuable insight on how coherent digital narratives can emerge in an online space through acts of play. Collaboration and improvisation are both vital to shaping stories told by multiple people, and the processes of policing and negotiating them reveal interesting details, and possible far-reaching implications, about collaborative composition through digital media.

Chapter four explores how multimodal narratives are created on forum RP sites, expanding the exploration of digital storytelling beyond written language. Multimodality is one of the key features of the narrative creation that takes place on these forums; several practices and regulations are aimed at assisting players in creating coherent multimodal narratives in collaboration with each other. Since modes used by any community are largely based on the semiotic resources that community has access to, and the shared practices of meaning-making with the use of those resources, this chapter also ties forum gaming to the larger context of multimodality in digital media, and compares its practices to those of other forms of storytelling. Multimodality on forum role-playing sites is tied to creative freedom, as well as the power to
shape closely knit creative communities; it is not merely a feature, but also a conscious and self-aware way of communicating meaning through diverse digital texts.

This dissertation is a pilot study of forum-based role-playing. It provides a starting point for future research; it contextualizes forum games within larger academic discourse, describes them in their fascinating complexity, and offers terminology and organizational structures drawn from a large set of data. I present it in hopes of starting a longer, more diverse, more in-depth discussion of the various facets of this unique style of gaming. I aim to provide a new perspective through a popular online hobby, a perspective that might have innovative and lasting effects on digital storytelling, collaborative writing, and game design.
CHAPTER 1. STORIES AT THE CROSSROADS: THEORIZING FORUM GAMES

“What is the focus of your research?”

The more people asked me this question, the more I realized that there had to be a concise, easily accessible way to explain where forum-based role-playing falls within various academic fields. Outside the context of game studies (and sometimes even within), people found both concepts confusing, and every conversation ended in a detailed, elaborate explanation of what these games entail, and why I care about them as a researcher. Are they video games? Not really, but they are online games. Are they like Dungeons & Dragons? Yes, in a sense, but without the dice or the mathematics. Are they fan fiction? Some of them are, yes - but not all. Are they a writing exercise? In a way, but still with an element of role-playing. Are they storytelling? Yes… but it is hard to argue why. In order to talk about forum-based role-playing in its full complexity, I had to find the intersection of fields of theory that would cover all of these elements, and allow for an easier, clearer definition. In order to have an elevator pitch, one has to construct an elevator first.

I have divided the literature relevant to this study into three categories. The first one contains sources that either deal with forum-based role-playing specifically, or delve into other, closely related forms of role-playing that provide valuable points of comparison. The second group of sources outline the three intersecting frameworks I am using to theorize forum gaming: Play theory, narratology, and fandom studies. Because these fields are very prolific, and contain immense amounts of academic writing, apart from a few seminal texts I have narrowed all three down to their parts that are most directly relevant to forum gaming: The theory of interactivity (play theory), digital storytelling (narratology), and fan fiction studies (fandom). The third group
of sources represents transmedia storytelling and multimodal composition, two concepts that overlap in many ways and shaped my main focus in describing forum-based role-playing games. While the former generally falls under media and culture studies, and the latter is often discussed as part of narratology, I believe it benefits my project to present them as a separate category, due to both the scope of the literature, and their crucial importance to the project.

**Forum-based Role-playing and Other Related Platforms**

I decided to begin my review of literature by locating academic sources that mention forum-based (sometimes also called *play-by-post*) gaming. It soon became clear that scholarly literature on this specific style of gaming is severely lacking both in depth and scope. The most concise explorations to date can be found in dissertation and thesis projects, while a number of other studies on literacy, fandom, and gaming give brief descriptions or passing mentions to forum gaming among other types.

Kathleen Marie Alley (2013) presents an in-depth case study of a forum-based RPG and its implications about young adult literacies. The forum she examines, titled *Trelis Weyr*, is based in the world of Anne McCaffrey’s *Dragonriders of Pern* book series. In the introduction, Alley lists a number of different role-playing styles (pen-and-paper, live-action, single-player digital, MMORPG, etc.) but interestingly she does not position forum games within this typology (p. 53-56). Her work is focused on how the players engage with literary text, what motivates them, and how they collaborate in composition. Alley braids theories of new literacies, learning communities, and self-determination to study motivation and engagement on her chosen gaming site. She examines fandom as a collaborative learning community, but her focus remains on what bonds and motivates participants in engaging with the source material (p. 63-67). While
examining role-playing as a collaborative process, she highlights mentorship and communication practices on the site, and only mentions role-playing as a form of “new-aged storytelling” in passing (p. 166-170).

Another case study that focuses on a forum RPGs is a master’s thesis by Pamela L. Andrews (2013), which selects a *Harry Potter*-based site called *Absit Omen*. Andrews uses this site to examine the relationships between players and their “avatars” (characters). She describes forum games as a form of “collaborative role-play” or “round-robin storytelling” (p. 1-3). She compares them to three other genres: MUDs (multi-user dungeons, text-based games played out in chat rooms), fan fiction, and tabletop role-playing, but also notes their distinctive features and differences from all three (p. 2-6). It is interesting to note that she traces the origins of the forum’s gaming community from 2005 through various iterations and boards until *Absit Omen* is born in 2009 (p. 9). While working on the sample of forums for this dissertation, I came across and coded *Absit Omen*, as it was still very much active in 2016.

In her study, Andrews includes a case study of character creation to illustrate the relationship between players and their characters; she explores the process and the relationship through interviewing one of the site’s participants (p. 21-24). She talks about plot development on the forum, and the various ways character development through narrative can be planned and played out (p. 31-33). Andrews also examines in detail how non-canon wizarding schools are added (written into) the world of the game by the players, expanding both the spatial/geographical element and the narrative potential of *Absit Omen*’s site (p. 53-56). It is especially interesting to read her interviews with players who talk about the ways these settings influence the character’s backgrounds. All three of these processes – character creation, plotting,
and setting - are relevant to my own study and participant observations, and served as a valuable point of comparison in exploring how character and narrative are constructed on different sites.

A shorter case study was written by C.J. Pascoe to illustrate the use of new media by teenagers and adolescents (2010). It describes a seventeen-year-old girl, Clarissa, and her activities on a site called *Faraway Lands* (pseudonym applied by the author) which is only described in the study as an “online hangout.” Despite its brevity, the essay offers a couple of interesting points on the role this site plays in the interview subject’s life: As an aspiring writer and filmmaker, Clarissa uses the site to develop complex plots and characters, and get feedback from other players on her writing (p. 53). She also points out that she makes friends from all over the world through in- and out-of-character interactions – plotting in the site’s chat box is specifically mentioned (p. 52). While the essay doesn’t describe the game site, and the pseudonyms keep the details vague and somewhat mysterious, someone who has played them before can easily recognize the core features of forum games.

Sarah Lynne Bowman also mentions forum-based role-playing in the context of fandom in her essay on various forms of *Harry Potter* RPGs (2015). She points out that play-by-post games happening in an online environment have a number of advantages for certain groups of players: They don’t require financial resources for costuming, or the players’ physical presence at a certain place; they are asynchronous, so one does not have to log in at any specific time; moreover, they are anonymous, therefore allowing more freedom for crossplay (playing a different race/gender/age than one’s own). She claims that all these features make text-based online games very advantageous for adolescents who are “limited in mobility and are deeply engaged in the process of exploring their identity.” She relates this to the fact that many forums limit the minimum age of their players and characters, and issue rules about mature content (p.
This provides some conceptual background for the “content rating” regulations described in chapter three.

Angela Thomas (2007) briefly describes forum games in the context of collaborative fan fiction (p. 147-149). Her case study focuses on two adolescent fan fiction authors who utilize role-playing methods (among others) in the creation of their stories, including chat games and a personal, private forum RP (p. 139-147). Thomas mentions that there is a large number of forum-based role-playing sites available on the internet, and she notes that they could be seen as a stand-alone form of narrative creation (p. 147). Similarly, Jessica Hammer (2007) mentions forum-based games as a form of role-playing, and refers to participants in her study that identified as forum gamers, but she does not analyze forum gaming specifically. She does, however, point out that technology affects the stories and narratives created by players, and that web-based games operate in a “many-to-many medium” that supports and enables participatory storytelling (p. 90).

Next to specific mentions of forum-based games, there are also sources that focus on closely related styles of gaming. I reviewed these to create context for the place of forums among other forms of text-based role-playing, and to find points of comparison that helped me outline what makes them distinct from styles of gaming with which they are often lumped together.

Sherry Turkle’s classic work on MUDs and identity, Life on the screen (1995), contains several concepts and observations that are applicable to other forms of text-based gaming, forums among them. Her book focuses on the multiplicity and flexibility of identities in online spaces, specifically in text-based MUDs (multi-user dungeons). She describes MUDs and their mechanics in detail, labeling them a “metaphor for physical space” (p. 183). She compares them to tabletop role-playing games such as Dungeons & Dragons, pointing out that while in face-to-
face gaming the players step in and out of character, online role-playing spaces allow them to develop several parallel identities – a statement that holds true for forum games as well (p. 186-187). She also dedicates a chapter to online identities and gender, including “passing”, “crossplay”, “genderswap”, and virtual intimacy. Since many forums have very detailed rules and guidelines regulating the latter and accepting the former, Turkle’s description of MUD interactions and identities provides a valuable point of comparison for their parallels in forum gaming.

Luisa Ellen Stein in her essay “This dratted thing”: Fannish storytelling through new media explores a form of fan fiction that is structurally very close to forum-based role-playing games – something she calls “LiveJournal-based RPG fan fiction” (2006). Using the online diary (blog) format through the LiveJournal platform, writers create narratives in first person, masquerading as fictional characters sharing their own thoughts and the day-to-day events of their lives via regularly updated blog posts. Multiple writers writing as multiple characters can interact through the “comments” and “friends” features of LiveJournal, and create “unfolding narratives” together (p. 250-251). Stein notes that participants in these fandom groups contest the use of the term “role-playing,” many of them referring to their creative-collaborative activities as “interactive fiction” instead; and yet she consistently labels the subject of her study as a form of role-play. She is not wrong. She also refers to these activities as “fannish storytelling” - a term which I believe is more dynamic than “fan fiction” and therefore more applicable both to her area of study, and to forum-based games. LiveJournal fan fiction and forum-based role-playing games have a lot in common. As Stein states, they are a “part of new developments in fan storytelling spurred by the rapid growth of online media culture” (p. 246). Stein’s observations on LiveJournal games as storytelling are extremely relevant to discussing forum-based role-
playing as a form of storytelling. LiveJournal has been on the decline in the past decade, but other, similar blog-based role-playing formats have emerged through platforms like Tumblr. Even some of the forums I have coded had links to LiveJournal and Tumblr-based character journals to provide yet another medium for character development and interaction. Since I had little to no personal experience with LiveJournal before, Stein’s observations and examples were extremely helpful to these parts of my research.

In *The evolution of fantasy role-playing games* (2011), a chronological and typological examination of role-playing styles, Michael J. Tresca dedicates a chapter to play-by-post and browser-based games (p. 92-99). He originates the play-by-post gaming style from play-by-mail and play-by-email games. Tresca categorizes text-based games as PBBG (persistent browser-based games), and highlights their asynchronous nature. While his description is fairly accurate – describing them as a primarily text-based, social form of gaming – he claims that the most popular ones run on Twitter and Facebook, disregarding forums (p. 93-94). The type of text-based gaming he calls “play-by-post” refers to versions of statistics-based, quest-oriented, *Dungeons & Dragons*-type role-playing (such as *D&D Tiny Adventures*) that happens to unfold on digital platforms. What especially makes this different from the kind of forum-based gaming this dissertation focuses on is that Tresca calls these social media-based adventures “fundamentally a solitary experience” where the character’s main goals are tied up in killing monsters, gathering treasures, and winning achievements, and there is almost no narrative arc at all (p. 95). However, Tresca’s general concept of role-playing is very much applicable to forum games. He describes the games as unfolding within three frameworks: primary (real life), secondary (game mechanics), and tertiary (the imagined world). Having a tertiary framework is what differentiates role-playing games from other forms of gaming (p. 8-9).
In their study titled *Gaming, identity, and literacy*, Daniel Keller et al. explore the genre of Interactive Fiction (2007). As a genre of “entirely text-based” games played only on computers, Interactive Fiction (IF) is a close parallel to forum games. The authors describe the practice of engaging with IF games as “playing (reading)” and point out how players also become authors through them (p. 72). These games are commercially produced, and as such, consumers had to be convinced that they are worth playing – something that was achieved through marketing them to middle-class literate families along with classic print texts (p. 76). While in the case of IF games it was a conscious marketing tactic, in the case of forum games the connection to literary texts happens naturally through fandom. Keller et al. highlight the possible educational uses of text-based games, and question what makes them popular. One of the possible reasons they point out is that IF games provide “each individual the degree of choice they require to invest productively and enjoyably” in a virtual identity (p. 83). Since IF games are regulated by computer code, much more so than forum role-playing, this claim proves even more applicable to the popularity of forum-based games. Similarly, the recognition and reward systems implemented in the majority of forum games fit the authors’ claim that these games “provide low-risk environments and continuous assessment, reinforcing positive choices and encouraging players to take risks” (p. 84).

In her book titled *What is your quest?*, Anastasia Salter examines adventure games at the intersection of gaming and interactive fiction (2014). She positions these narrative-driven videogames as “a space between book and game, where the needs of storytelling are balanced with the desire (and the technical ability) to create a dialogue between story, reader, and author” (p. 4). She makes an observation applicable to the discussion of forum games: “With the advent of graphics, it would be easy to see interactive fiction merely as a precursor to other genres
emerging from its roots,” Salter notes, but then goes on to point out that the interest in interactive fiction did not disappear with the advent of videogames, even if it remains a “niche” (p. 29). Given the lack of official histories of forum-based role-playing games, it is hard to determine whether they pre-dated some of their counterparts, but it is clear that they retain the interest of many people even in the current “golden age” of videogames. It is interesting to note that Salter designates graphics-based adventure games as “one of the most literary genres among games” – a claim that could easily apply to forum-based role-playing as well (p. 37).

While examining the creation of narratives in tabletop role-playing games, Jennifer Grouling’s work also provides connections to forum-based role-playing (2010). She notes that tabletop role-playing offers more flexibility in narrative creation than book-based (“choose your own adventure”) interactive fiction or online adventure games – she claims that the level of interaction present in face-to-face gaming is “simply not possible even in the best new media texts” (p. 37). While this categorization clearly ignores several text-based forms of gaming, her examination of game narratives is very much relevant to this present study. Similarly to Jessica Hammer’s work, Grouling also explores narrative agency in detail, focusing on the freedom tabletop players have in exploring and creating narrative compared to computer-programmed games (although she does note that MUSHes, MUDs, and other freeform text-based games fall outside of this binary) (p. 46-50). Even though her site, methodology, and focus are different, her theoretical frameworks (ludology, narratology, fandom, transmedia) align more closely with this present work than any other academic source, and therefore her book provides a valuable frame of reference for comparing and contrasting the creation of narratives in tabletop and forum-based role-playing.
Edward Castronova explores the worlds of multiplayer online games in his book *Synthetic worlds* (2005). He describes them as online spaces that host “massive flows of real human interaction,” and argues for the importance of studying them (p. 1). He makes an important note of their difference from “virtual reality” technology, claiming that while VR “focuses on sensory-input hardware,” games focus on “mentally and emotionally engaging software” to create immersion (p. 5). This difference between sensory and emotional immersion is vital to the understanding of how forum-based role-playing games operate, and how they become compelling for players despite their lack of impressive graphics. Castronova also explores the concept and history of Massively Multiplayer games, which he defines as games with larger numbers (3,000-4,000) of players - a number that certain forum role-playing sites easily achieve (p. 9). This raises the question: Should forum games be qualified as MMORPGs? In my opinion, while they technically fit the criteria, the currently available academic literature on MMORPGs would largely be irrelevant to them due to their unique text-based nature; therefore, while the term could be applied, I decided against it.

While there seems to be an emerging interest in case studies, no comprehensive large-scale research on forum-based role-playing has been conducted yet. This relative blind spot in game studies becomes even more obvious when we look at certain examples: Even an article on the use of digital role-playing in teaching *creative writing* omits forum games, and focuses on video games instead (Hergenrader 2012). It is clear that the gap in current game scholarship needs to be filled; not only because forum games draw a large number of people who identify with them and therefore need to be acknowledged, but also because studying them might open up new connections, new perspectives, and new methods of research for a larger field of related
genres. Before we can move on to assessing these connections and applications, however, forum-based role-playing needs to be situated within larger, intersecting theoretical fields.

Theoretical Frameworks: Play, Fandom, Narrative

I explore forum-based role-playing games at the nexus of three distinct theoretical frameworks: Play theory, narratology, and fandom studies. While these fields often overlap, in many cases academic texts privilege one over the other. Much like other forms of text-based gaming, forum games also fall into the contested territory between narrative and play – an ongoing academic discourse that has created an oppositional binary which researches have only recently begun to dismantle. After exploring play and narrative separately, I will review literature on the debate and its possible resolutions.

The theory of play, and the theory of interactivity. It may seem somewhat self-explanatory that forum-based role-playing games would fall under the theory of “play,” but I believe that this claim none the less needs to be established. While some theorists may argue that fiction writing in itself is a playful act, it is still valuable to explore what – if anything – makes these posts and threads a “game” rather than just “fiction” or even “collaborative fiction.” I begin my exploration by taking a look at the seminal works of famous play theorists, in order to discern whether role-playing games in general, and forum games in particular, could be considered “play” by their respective definitions.

Johan Huizinga first published his work on the theory of play, Homo Ludens, in 1938. In his introductory chapter, he defines the formal characteristics of “play” thus:

 [...] a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an
activity concerned with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (p. 13)

Role-playing games seem to fit this definition seamlessly. They definitely stand outside ordinary life – in fact, they transport the players into other “worlds” through shared imagination. They have the element of full immersion; depending on the platform of gaming, this can range from costumes-and-acting to staring at a computer screen intensely for hours on end. Most forms of role-playing provide no material gain to players; forum games in particular operate on a communal, non-profit basis. They also proceed within spatial and temporal boundaries - they are restricted by their platforms, as well as the rules published and upheld by moderators. Role-playing games also have the added element of distinguishing between in-game and out-of-game time (which in many cases flow very differently). Role-playing in all its forms definitely creates a sense of community, both through multiple people playing together, and by involving them in a larger “gamer culture” and allowing them to identify as “gamers,” “nerds,” “LARPers,” or other close-knit subcultural groups. The gaming community has its own vernacular that contains specialized words and phrases, as well as shared knowledge of the games which makes inside jokes and coded messages possible – thus filling the element of “secrecy” mentioned in Huizinga’s definition. They have culture-creating power in the form of creating communities and shaping subcultures in various contexts around the world. This power, together with the elements that fit Huizinga’s definition listed above, places role-playing games firmly within the realm of “play.”
George H. Mead’s work, compiled from previous papers, essays, and lecture notes, was published under the title *Mind, Self and Society* (1950). The main focus of the volume is to explore how the individual self emerges through social processes (instead of being a pre-existing, independent entity, a “soul”). According to Mead, “play” and “game” are important background factors in the genesis of the self (p.149). He divides them not just as two separate concepts, but also two distinct, consecutive phases of development: Before organized play (games), the first step is playing – as in, playing at something. Children in this phase take on the roles (in Mead’s spelling, rôles) of others, such as pretending to be doctors, mothers, etc. This, however, does not lead to complete self-consciousness in the individual until they advance to the next step of organized play. This next step in the development process is what Mead calls *games*. They differ from rôle-playing because they come with a defined set of rules accepted by everyone involved in them, and the roles that players take on for the duration of the game have a definite relationship to each other (of which relationship everyone is aware, and they all agree on them) (p. 151). ‘Organization’ is the key word Mead focuses on: Games are organized activities where the child experiences social unity – the actions of all individuals involved are related, follow a certain set of rules, and there is an end to be obtained through everyone’s collaborating in following that set of rules. It would be easy to immediately conclude that role-playing is the same as rôle-playing; however, when Mead talks about rôle-play, he is specifically referring to children’s play-acting, an instinctive process that the developing consciousness of the individuals is not aware of. Role-playing games, while they have their roots in activities like this, are much more organized and self-aware. They have published and expressed rules agreed upon by all players, and they proceed in an organized fashion, with a definite goal (or goals) in mind. Set in an asynchronous online environment, forum-based role-playing games even open up the
possibility for individuals to take on a higher number of roles at the same time. These can be roles within the gaming group – Game Master, Player, Moderator, World Creator etc. – and/or player characters. Since multiple storylines happen within the same time frame, often involving multiple characters, people partaking in this form of role-playing are not only not taking their roles one by one (as in the case of “play”’) but they might even take on multiple kinds of roles that all have specific relationships to each other within the social group. Following Mead’s logic, it seems that role-playing games are a more complex, further developed version of rôle-playing, one that has turned into a game.

Brian Sutton-Smith’s often-quoted book, The Ambiguity of Play (1997) takes a rhetorical approach to the study of play. By exploring the diversity of rhetorics applied to the scientific exploration of play in various fields, Sutton-Smith investigates the question of whether “play” is an ambiguous concept in and of itself, or rather made ambiguous by the rhetorics applied to it. He identifies seven main kinds rhetorics (defined as persuasive discourse adopted by researchers and larger cultural units), some of which encompass the arguments made earlier by Huizinga and Mead: Huizinga’s claims of the agonistic nature of play could be identified as “play as power,” while Mead’s theory of the development of the self would fall under “play as progress” (p. 8-10). Sutton-Smith specifically refers to Dungeons & Dragons under his nebulous category of “mind or subjective play” alongside daydreams and metaphors; this would place the study of role-playing games under the rhetoric of “play as the imaginary” (p. 11). In his “Introduction” Sutton-Smith notes the absence of research on players’ own definitions of their play experience and functions (p. 16). Over the course of this study, I interviewed players with this lack in mind.

While forum-based role-playing games have yet to be included in any definition of gaming, some theories involving videogames and tabletop role-playing could be applied to them
with a few - if any - modifications. One such example can be found in *Rules of Play*, written by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004). Their definition of play is more abstract than the ones previously mentioned: It simply states “play is free movement within a more rigid structure” (p. 304). Games, the most specialized kind of play, are defined by a set of rules that form a more rigid formal structure. Game play is a formalized interaction; the act of experiencing the game system through play. When playing a game, Salen and Zimmerman claim, one is essentially interacting with and inside a representational universe, a “space of possibility with narrative dimensions” (p. 377). With this wide definition, the authors have no problem reconciling game and narrative – in fact, they explore the narrative approach to game design in great detail in their chapter “Games as Narrative Play” (p. 377). They focus on the ways games construct a narrative experience (instead of questioning whether games are narrative at all), and outline two kinds of game narratives: *Embedded* (fixed narratives and narrative options that exists prior to the player’s interaction with the game system), and *emergent* (narratives that arise from the set of game rules governing the player’s interaction with the game – essentially, stories created by the players themselves while playing the game) (p. 383-385). This distinction is especially applicable to forum-based gaming since emergent narratives seem to be prioritized in them over embedded (pre-designed) elements; and yet both kinds provide an interesting point of comparison (and distinction) to both videogames and fan fiction. Because Salen and Zimmermann’s approach to the definition of “play” and “game” seems to be easily reconcilable with the narrative elements, I have decided to refer to their definitions in my own work.

The most important feature of play that needs to be explored in relation to forum games is interactivity. Game studies claims often hinge on “true interactivity” (or lack thereof) in relation to narrative. Forum games have repeatedly been described as “interactive fiction,” a term also
applied to other related texts such as “choose your own adventure” novels. The levels of interactivity, however, greatly vary by platform and style.

In observing interactivity, I refer to Marie-Laure Ryan’s essay *The interactive onion* (2011) where she outlines five (or, rather, four plus one) distinct levels of interactivity in digital narrative texts. At the lowest level, the interactive interface does not affect the story, or the order in which it is presented. At the second level, interactivity affects the order of presentation, but the text itself is still fully predetermined (e.g. hyperlink narratives). On the third level, interactivity creates variations in a predefined story – this is the level most videogames occupy as they progress through pre-written storylines selected by player choice. Level four, “real time story generation,” is where forum-based games can be placed. Ironically, Ryan notes that “to this day, we do not have a story generating system sufficiently sophisticated to produce a wide variety of interesting stories out of data internal to the system” (p. 48). While she clearly limits her study to coded computer games, it is easy to expand it to include text-based role-playing, where the narrative is generated through interactions between players, and only limited by their imagination (and rules implemented by the community). The fifth level, “meta-interactivity,” could also apply to forum-based games since it deals with players interacting with the game structure (site setup, rules, graphics, etc.) itself.

Another text that is directly relevant to forum gaming is Richard Bartle’s often cited classification of gamer types (1996). Bartle focuses his research on MUDs, exploring whether MUDs could be classified as games, as well as discussing how different types of players might define the same games differently. He bases his categorizations on opinions given by a MUD’s active player base about what they expected out of the game. All opinions, he claims, could be grouped into four distinct categories: Achievers (their main goal is to gather points, level up, and
unlock achievements); Explorers (they examine the game in detail, hoping to unveil all its hidden features); Socializers (they use the game to interact with other people); and Killers (who impose themselves on other players, most often by killing their characters). Players in all four categories engage in all four types of activities, but usually pursue three of them as subservient or supportive to their main goal. Bartle points out that how many of each type exist on a site depends on what the site’s focus is, and what features it offers; the most successful sites need to balance all four. He concludes that what players categorize a MUD as depends on what type they belong to – achievers would call it a game, socializers would call it entertainment, killers would call it a sport, and explorers would call it a pastime. Bartle’s classification is not only important because it has become one of the seminal texts of game design, but also because it is based on the players’ own opinions and analysis.

Summarizing the texts and their claims in this section, it is reasonable to conclude that forum-based role-playing games are, indeed, *games*, and they fall within the framework of the theory of play. This basic feature - the strong, pronounced presence of play and rules - sets them apart from simply being digital literature. The presence of play puts the emphasis on the process of creation, rather than a polished final product.

**Narratology and digital storytelling.** The narrative aspect of forum games is important because it is one of their most prominent features, one that appeals to players with interest in writing, composition, and storytelling. Exploring them in their full narrative complexity, as well as through the players’ own narrative experience, provides valuable information for the ever growing research field of digital narratives.

Narrative, as defined by Jerome Bruner, is “an account of events occurring over time” (Bruner, 1992, p. 6). While some definitions also call for these events to be sequential in order to
form a narrative, Bruner points out that they can be rearranged through devices such as flashbacks and flash forwards, and still constitute a story. This is an important distinction in the case of forum-based role-playing, since many plots occur out of order for various technical or creative reasons. Bruner explores narrative and story in detail in his book titled Actual minds, possible worlds (1986). He seeks the least constraining definition of “story,” and finds it in saying that it “deals with the vicissitudes of human intentions” (p. 16-17). He discusses plot and sequence in depth, defining plot as “how and in what order the reader becomes aware of what happened,” and pointing out that the same story can be told in various different sequences with its meaning preserved (p. 19).

In addition to Bruner’s work, I have also found studies relevant to my project in the essay collection On narrative (Mitchell 1980). The opening study, titled The value of narrativity in the representation of reality, provides useful definitions of concepts that exist in forum games (White 1980). Unlike Bruner, White doesn’t believe that the definition of “a list of events” is enough to constitute a narrative – the events need to be narrativized, constructed by imposing the form of a story upon them (p. 5-7). He lists the essential attributes of “story” as central subject, well-marked beginning, middle, and end, peripeteia, and identifiable narrative voice, which is a much more confining definition than Bruner’s (p. 7). He treats storytelling as related to the impulse to moralize a sequence of events – telling a story needs to have a meaning, a point. In addition, he also defines plot as a “structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with a meaning by being identified as parts of an integrated whole” (p. 9). While White’s definition of “story” might be too restricting for the purposes of the study on forum games, his concept of plot could be applied to the research. Working with more than one
theorist’s definition of “plot” helps with comparing how “plots” are defined by the role-playing communities themselves, who frequently use the term in a colloquial context.

Another essay in the same volume, titled *Twisted tales; or, story, study, and symphony*, delves deeper into the question of the sequence of events in narratives (Goodman 1980). Distinguishing between “order of occurrence” and “order of telling,” Goodman asks the question whether narratives can survive any/all kinds of rearrangements in the order of telling. He points out that when the order of occurrence is not discernible from the order of telling, people tend to automatically assume that the telling follows the chronological order (p. 104). He lists certain types of departures in the telling sequence from the order of occurrence, such as flashbacks, “foreflashes” (flash forward), and “flashbetweens” (an event that did not occur between two other events being recounted between them) (p. 105-106). His final conclusion is that “although every narrative will survive some reordering, and some narratives will survive every reordering, not every narrative will survive every reordering” (p. 111). This is a vital observation in relation to forum games, where events are often played out / written down out of chronological order.

Seymour Chatman’s essay in the same volume similarly deals with the question of narrative sequences, comparing novels and their film adaptations (Chatman 1980). Chatman describes the same dual time structuring as Goodman, except he uses the terms “story-time” for the order of occurrence, and “discourse-time” for the order of narration (p. 118). He emphasizes the fact that these two concepts are independent from each other (the sequence of one doesn’t necessarily define the other). He also discusses the translatability of narratives: According to him, “narrative” is a kind of text organization that can be actualized through various media (text, still images, film, music, etc.) without changing (p. 117). The most valuable point in Chatman’s work to my research project is his examination of the role of descriptions in textual narratives
versus visual (film) narratives. In textual narratives, he claims, the story is interrupted and frozen while a description takes place; in addition, the number of features described is limited, directing the reader’s attention to certain elements of the whole scene or image (p. 119-121). While the description of the same character / object / scene might be distributed throughout the plot instead of presented in one block of text, it is still distinct from the narration of occurrences. This is relevant to forum games because of the unique structure of their digital space. Descriptions of characters, settings, etc. are usually stored in a separate thread, always available for reference, and sometimes linked to other threads where the character appears. This way, the descriptive texts might be completely separate from the narration of events, or linked into them through hypertext, instead of being embedded in them.

Within the vast umbrella of narratology, there is an ever-growing wealth of academic literature on digital narratives and digital storytelling. Since forum-based role-playing falls into this category, I focused my review of relevant literature on texts that explore new media narratives. While the basic elements of narrative apply to both digital and analog media, the way people have researched and theorized digital storytelling are more directly descriptive of, and therefore more useful for, the study of forum gaming.

Helen Fulton, taking a post-structuralist approach to narrative and media, describes narratives as something other than universal (Fulton et al., 2005). She claims that narrative is a form of representation, and it is “historically and culturally positioned to turn information and events into structures that are already meaningful to their audiences” (p. 1). Media narratives, she claims, are a part of a mythologizing process, a “formulaic articulation and naturalization of values, truths and beliefs” – highlighting the role of new media in constructing narratives that seem like natural and universal (p. 7). In the same volume, Rosemary Huisman describes a series
of concepts related to narrative: Modes, genre, focalization, temporality, duration, pacing, etc. (p. 11-14). For the study of forum-based games, the terminology of time is of special importance. She describes *duration* as the “speed of the narrative,” *length* as the length of the text that tells the story, and *pacing* as descriptive of the relative changes in the duration and length of the narrative (p. 14-15). Delving deeper into narrative theory, and building on Aristotle’s work, she also describes six kinds of temporality, three based on the human experience, and thee on the non-organic physical world, noting that only postmodern narratives venture beyond using the three human perceptions of time (sociotemporality, human mental temporality, and organic temporality) (p. 24). This builds on the aforementioned ideas of “story-time” and “discourse time,” and is a very significant part of forum-based role-playing games. Huisman also describes terminology related to storytelling: *Discourse* (as the particular telling), *story* (as the events in chronological order), and *plot* (the casually related order of events in a particular telling) (p. 36-37). The concept of narrative time is further explored by Julian Murcet in the same volume, in relation to film. She differentiates between *time of the story* (the time the events described would have taken in real life) and *time of the plot* (the time it takes to tell the story) (p. 61). In a case where these two would be the same, the text would be “isochronic” – but this is very rarely ever the case in any form of storytelling (p. 64). Anisochronic texts “manipulate the relations between plot and story time in various ways,” as well as changing the order of events in the telling (p. 65-69). This is a common practice in forum-based role-playing, and I will delve deeper into the ways players manipulate and negotiate these changes.

The focus within the study of new media narratives that holds special interest for the study of forum games is digital storytelling. There are two definitions for the term, one broad and one specific. The narrow, specific definition (usually capitalized) was coined by the Center for
Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California, established in 1992. It describes Digital Storytelling as personal stories told through short forms of media (video, sound, photographs) (Lambert 2013, p. 1). It aims to reframe personal experiences, give agency to people telling their own stories, and turn a private form of storytelling into something publicly accessible (p. 11-16). The Center for Digital Storytelling defines seven components of the digital stories they work with, including their self-revelatory nature, first person voice, and their basis in lived experience (p. 37-38). This, however, is too narrow and specific a definition to be applicable to forum-based role-playing games. In order to examine forum games as digital storytelling, I had to refer to texts with a much broader scope.

An early influential text on digital narratives is Janet Murray’s *Hamlet on the holodeck* (1997). She takes on the anxieties of scholars and writers that claimed that digital media would end narrative and storytelling as we know it, exploring the question of whether digital storytelling will be “continuous with the literary traditions of the *Beowulf* poet, Shakespeare, and Charlotte Brontë” (p. 24). Her answer is definitely positive, and while the book was published, as Murray puts it, in the “incunabular days of the narrative computer”, it proved to be prophetic regarding several aspects of digital storytelling as we know it today. She introduces the concept of the “multiform story,” a form of narrative that presents multiple versions of a single plotline that would be mutually exclusive in lived experience (p. 30). These parallel possibilities represent a non-linear storytelling format, and can also be observed in forum-based role-playing games as “Alternate Universe” or “non-canon” threads. Murray ties them into shifting world views at the turn of the twenty-first century (p. 39-40). These multiform stories, she claims, invite the reader to take an active part in interpreting them – they can’t be easily consumed in a passive way (p. 38). She also introduces the concept of digital storytelling as “kaleidoscopic
media” where simultaneous actions can be presented in a spatial mosaic on the screen (p. 155-157). This nature, Murray claims, might lead to compelling narratives about (and for) global communities (p. 282). This is a vision that has certainly come true in the past decades.

Murray sees the largest commercial success of digital storytelling in computer games, while also noting at that point in time that they have great potential to grow (p. 51-54). She describes hypertext fiction as “story webs,” another non-linear (and multimodal) form of storytelling (p. 55). She assigns four essential properties to digital environment: Procedurality, participation, spatiality, and encyclopedic potential (p. 71-90). The latter one holds special importance for digital storytelling, and leads to a concept very descriptive of forum-based games: Murray claims it “encourages long-windedness and formlessness in storytellers” and does not give a definite ending point (p. 87). While Murray presents this as a “handicap” of digital storytelling, in the case of forum games it is something players and creators encourage and thrive for, since it makes unlimited play possible – there is no ending to be reached, and narrative arcs are free to proliferate in digital space as long as they are needed.

Another text that comes to the defense of digital narrative is Caroline Bassett’s *The arc and the machine* (2007). She describes the concerns voiced by prominent scholarship (Walter Benjamin among them) about whether narrative can survive the “remediation of the world though information” in the age of mass communication (p. 1). The main concern voiced is that modern media is increasingly fragmented, and the “logic of information” seems to be replacing the “logic of the tale” (p. 2). Bassett, however, argues that narrative is a vital element of contemporary culture, and can make sense of multi-layered information and experiences – as a “continuous reaction to information and its discontinuity” (p. 2-3). Like Helen Fulton, she argues for exploring narrative in context, saying that “if narrative is socially symbolic then the materials
of which it is made, the conditions within which it is read, as well as the forms in which it is written or practiced and the tales that it gathers up within itself, *matter*” (p. 6, emphasis from the original). This is her argument for exploring narrative in digital media – but it can also been seen as a reason for paying attention to specific *kinds* of media, and specific *sites* in which narratives are created.

In 2008, a collection of essays on digital storytelling was published, edited by Knut Lundby, to “understand transformations of the age-old practices of storytelling that have become possible with the new, digital media” (Lundby 2008, p. 1). This volume starts out with drawing a clear line of differentiation between the Center for Digital Storytelling definition of “Digital Storytelling” (capitalized), and “mediated stories” in general (p. 2-4). Lundby highlights the fact that the term “storytelling” encompasses both the shaping *and* the sharing of stories (an important observation that is definitely true in the case of forum-based role-playing). The volume focuses on self-representations in digital storytelling, as well as multimodality (p. 5-9).

In their essay in this volume, Ola Erstad and James V. Wertsch explore the question of how “digital media might transform the role narratives play in our lives” (2008, p. 22). They rely on Wertsch’ concept of “mediated action,” and Bruner’s idea of the role of narratives in human functioning, highlighting the idea that storytelling is not invented by the individual, but rather, “renegotiated in a cultural process” (p. 24-28). They differentiate between *specific narratives* (dealing with concrete events, places, and characters) and *schematic narrative templates* that shape people’s thinking and speaking (p. 29). Since forum-based role-playing games, much like fan fiction, are often formulaic, this distinction helps with exploring the broader implications of individual storylines.
In the same volume, Larry Friedlander explores questions of authorship and authority in digital narratives (2008). He claims that the interactive nature of digital storytelling doesn’t eliminate, as much as multiply the number of authors involved with the creation of texts, blurring the traditional dividing lines between author, text, and reader. Following this logic, he asks the question: If authorship is dispersed in a digital space, plots are open-ended, and stories play with space and time, then “does an interactive medium subvert the basics of storytelling or can we invent new strategies that will produce satisfactory, aesthetically persuasive stories?” (177-180). I find this question very concise, and crucial to my exploration of forum-based role-playing. Friedlander’s answer to it is not only positive, but he even suggests that certain forms of digital storytelling might return to premodern forms and practices, where storytelling was still a communal experience (p. 180). In his view, this is just one more radical shift in the history of storytelling, much like the rise of the novel – and it is creating stories that are suited for our times, and their popularity can attest to that (p. 182). Friedlander also points out that digital narratives rely on the creation of “worlds” rather than the structure of a text, offering a field of possibilities for narrative creation. The elements of these worlds – including time, space, objects, beings, actions – are artificial, and therefore can be freely rearranged and manipulated for the needs of the aesthetic experience (p. 185-186). While Friedlander does not refer to forum-based games specifically, his description of digital storytelling fits them almost perfectly: For example, he claims that digital narrative means “establishing a set of possible dynamic interactions that will be set in motion by different users” (p. 186). He defines interactive narratives as stories that are “played out,” and narrative emerges from users interacting with the digital environment (echoing Salen and Zimmerman’s concept of emergent game narratives) (p. 187). He also claims that playing with digital narrative means playing with identities and self-expressions – the
narrative, he claims, becomes a “play of self-mastery” (p. 187-188). In the case of digital role-playing games, this is definitely true.

Bryan Alexander addresses the history and multiple uses of digital storytelling in his book *The new digital storytelling* (2011). He defines the term in a broad way as “telling stories with digital technologies,” contrasting this understanding with that of the Center for Digital Storytelling (p. 3, 28). Similar to Bassett, he brings up the question of how narratives can exist in cyberspace, in the “cold domain of data” – but he also points out that historically people have used all new technologies to tell stories, sooner or later (p. 4-5). In order to approach digital storytelling, he examines different definitions of story (p. 6-9). His own synthesis of these definitions describes stories as: “A sequence of content, anchored on a problem, which engages that audience [to which it is told] with emotion and meaning” (p. 13). The involvement of the audience in general, and in digital environments in particular, is crucial to this understanding of story. Alexander traces what he calls the “first and second waves of digital storytelling,” from hypertext fiction, through MUDs, urban legends, and interactive fiction games, starting decades before the birth of the World Wide Web in 1991 (p. 17-21). He highlights that the first decade of the Internet (1994-2004) saw the rise of browser-based storytelling in many forms – incidentally, this time frame also seems to fit the first emergence of forum-based role-playing (p. 22). This is followed by the “second wave” of digital storytelling, starting with Tim O’Reilly coining the term “Web 2.0” in 2004; this era is marked by three main features: Microcontent, social architecture, and new platforms (p. 29). Exploring the possibilities of various platforms, Alexander talks about the possible storytelling applications of character blogs, Twitter, image sharing sites, and Facebook – all of them platforms that forum games often utilize as multimodal components of storytelling (p. 58-75). He also dedicates two chapters to gaming as digital
storytelling, both on a small and on a large scale, focusing on interactivity, immersion, and the possibility of multiple, re-playable timelines.

Henry Jenkins talks about a concept of digital storytelling that is directly relevant to forum games, and relates to texts previously mentioned: Spatial and environmental narratives (2002). These narratives supply a world that the characters and their motivations inhabit; the focus is on world-building, creating an environment for the narrative to develop in. Jenkins uses the term “evocative spaces” for settings that evoke certain reactions from players based on earlier narrative experiences, which is exactly what many forums do: They either re-create the setting of an original text (Harry Potter) or create their own relying genre conventions (horror, steampunk, Regency era, etc.). Jenkins also claims that in games, emotions can often be evoked by a series of “micronarratives” that share the same setting – this is another core feature of forum gaming, enhanced by “oneshots,” “character journals,” and “flashbacks” among others. While Jenkins writes his essay from the game designer’s point of view (designing games with narrative options), he provides several valuable points for describing forum games as digital storytelling.

Exploring how forum-based role-playing games function as narratives, and especially as a form of digital storytelling, is one of the main goals of this present study. While several narrative elements and conventions might be the same as in other sites and media previously researched, they also offer some truly unique features, the discussion of which can contribute to our understanding of digital narratives as a whole. For this reason, relying on previous scholarship I explored above, I made note in my analysis of narrative conventions and storytelling practices that are unique to forum games, or were used in unusual and creative ways.

**Play versus narrative?** As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, the question of play versus narrative has been much debated in academia. The conflict, described as the
“ludology versus narrativism” debate, is discussed in detail by Marie-Laure Ryan in *Avatars of story* (2006, p. 181-203). Her study (as well as most of the initial debate) focuses on computer games, and whether they should be discussed as games or as narratives. A large portion of the conflict hinges on what definitions of “game” and “narrative” the opposing sides are using, as well as what they include in their understanding of “computer games.” Ryan outlines the most common arguments on both sides, as well as the history of the debate, and then she offers detailed perspectives on reaching a middle ground, with the acceptance that computer games can and do possess narrativity. She calls the concept “ludo-narrativism,” an approach that does not split game mechanics from narrative elements, but rather examines them together (p. 203).

Henry Jenkins also summarizes what he describes as the “blood feud” between narratologists in ludologists: The main point of conflict being that the former wish to focus on the narrative elements of games while the latter preference mechanics (2002). He also offers a middle ground between the two sides: He admits that not all games attempt to tell stories and therefore “games” as a concept can’t always be studied within the framework of narratology, and even if they can, there is no need to privilege the storytelling aspect over other elements. He points out that it is just as wrong to reduce games solely to “story,” and that studies that attempted to focus on the interplay of narrative and story had had (up to that date) a series of conceptual “blind spots” due to being based on older forms of media.

Debra Journet addresses the narrative versus play debate through a case study of the videogame *Myst* (2007). She situates games in the universal human “narrative desire” for compelling storytelling, and claims that narrative “provides an important way to understand the experience of playing video games” (p. 94-95). She agrees with and builds on Jenkins’ assessment of narrative spaces. In Journet’s view, narrative enriches and intensifies the game
experience (p. 96). She reconciles play and narrative explaining that finding answers within the game is “part of the game’s narrative framework and is also itself a narrative action” – the game offers a story within the game, and also a parallel story about playing the game (p. 114). Both kinds, according to Journet, can promote immersion and active learning.

Anastasia Salter’s examination of adventure games, mentioned earlier, discusses the intersection of game play and interactive fiction, pointing out the “problem of balancing the demands of narrative and play” (2014, p. 33). The basic source of the conflict, she claims, is that a game narrative that lacks sufficient interactivity doesn’t engage the player (who feels that their creativity is being “railroaded” by the authors of the game); while if there is no limitation on creative choices, players might wander aimlessly instead of progressing along a narrative line. This is interesting in reflection to forum-based narratives that don’t have a single author or game master; however, the narrative choices the players might make are still limited by the setting, the rules of the site, and the actions of their fellow players. Salter addresses the conflict between narratology and ludology concerning adventure games as something that doesn’t necessarily have to be an oppositional binary – researchers don’t have to categorize these games either as games or as interactive fiction. Instead, Salter suggests that an expanded definition of interactive fiction can easily encompass forms of narrative play (p. 51).

Grouling approaches the conflict from the perspective of tabletop role-playing – hers is the approach that comes closest to what I am following in this present study (2010, p. 72-87). She points out that attempts to reconcile the two sides had all been focusing on the appearance of videogames and new media – definitions and concepts were deemed inadequate because they could not encompass new forms of digital gaming. Grouling uses the example of tabletop role-playing to point out that they might not have been possible to reconcile because they did not
include certain forms of narratives to begin with. She offers a “social and rhetorical” approach to narrative for tabletop games, claiming that they “possess narrativity,” and are often seen by players as a “narrative experience.” She highlights the importance of player agency: “Rather than dismiss the views of gamers for not using the careful terminology as defined by scholars, it is our obligation to reconcile the actual gaming experience with our scholarly accounts, even those produced by scholars who are themselves gamers” (p. 86). This is what she calls the “social” (as opposed to the formalist) approach to narrative – given the social nature of tabletop role-playing, the experience of the gamers cannot be discounted. Allowing the same agency to communities of forum games has been an integral part of this present study as well.

Are forum-based games play? Or narrative? More play than narrative? More narrative than play?... Why not both? Examining forum gaming revealed how intimately the two are intertwined, and how narratives can emerge from acts of play through creativity and negotiation, as it is described in later chapters.

Fandom and fan fiction. While not all forum games are based on some original pop culture text, those that represent certain fandoms definitely are in the majority. Even if they only draw their starting concept from an existing text (e.g. “gifted RPs” based on Marvel’s X-men), they are in a close relationship with popular culture tropes and references. Reviewing literature on fandom and fan fiction provides valuable resources for exploring forums in communication with the larger domain of popular culture.

One of the early seminal works on fandom and fan fiction is Henry Jenkins’ book Textual Poachers (originally published in 1992). This book focuses specifically on “media fandom,” selecting examples from popular culture instead of generalizing fandoms of all kinds (e.g. music or sports); while parts of the book are now regarded as outdated, it is still a valuable text. Jenkins
addresses the origins and negative connotations of the word “fan” and then proceeds to dismantle the stereotypes in order to present fandom as a site worthy of academic attention. He describes the relationship of fans to the original texts as a mixture of “fascination and frustration” where they seek to influence the canon through the creators, while also “claiming to the rights to retell the stories on their own terms” (2013, p. xxi). He posits fandom as a subculture of resistance to the interpretive practices fostered by formal education and mainstream culture, claiming agency in creating their own understanding (p. 18-19). Instead of mindless consumers, Jenkins describes fans as “active producers and manipulators of meaning,” using the term “participatory culture” to highlight the interactive nature and interpretive agency of their engagement with the original media (p. 23). He points out that fandom is often intertextual – fans can be interested in several texts (TV shows, comics, etc.) that are somehow connected to each other, and inspire associations – this is his early idea of the concept that later was named “affinity space” (p. 40-41). This tendency towards intertextuality in fandom manifests itself in forum games in the form of crossover forums and multi-fandom sites. Jenkins’ list and exploration of different types of fan fiction is especially relevant to my study, since many of the game threads and site concepts mimic these genre conventions, such as contextualization (writing missing scenes), expansion of timelines, refocalization (developing minor characters), moral realignment, genre shifting, crossovers, alternate universes, the insertion of original characters, emotional intensification, and even eroticization (“shipping”) (p. 162-177). Jenkins also examines fan videos, exploring the non-verbal, multimodal elements of fan fiction on an early example (p. 227-229).

Twenty years after its first publication, the book was reprinted with an extensive introductory interview, where Jenkins elaborates on a couple of points of his original work, as well as developments in pop culture and fandom studies in the two decades in-between. He
points out the terminology that emerged in academic studies since 1992, especially concepts like “affinity spaces” and “communities of interest;” he also describes fandom as an imagined community, borrowing Benedict Anderson’s term and applying it to the collective imagination (p. xxix). More interestingly, he argues that fandom could be construed as a “modern day gift economy existing within commercial culture and building on the resources it provides” (p. xxx). Since forum-based role-playing games are close knit communities that provide resources for each other within and without the game, this concept seems especially applicable to them. Similarly, his observations on the increasingly transnational nature of fan networks are directly related to the multicultural communities of forum games (p. xxxviii-xxxix).

The research of fan fiction in recent years has taken a number of different directions, as described by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse in their introduction to the Fan Fiction Studies Reader (2014, p. 8-10). The most applicable to forum games is examining fan fiction as a communal gesture, since their entire creation is an act of social play. Angela Thomas explores this social element of fan fiction in her article titled Fan fiction online (2006). One of the important things she points out is that the particular forum her case study focuses on was created to allow a higher level of collaborative writing that was not possible on fan fiction sites such as FanFiction.net (p. 228). One of the features in this community is role-playing, which is used as a tool for character and story development. The article argues the point that adolescents participating in fan fiction communities can learn a lot from them: They can hone their writing and composition skills, engage in mentoring each other in knowledge development on certain topics, practice community management, etc. Writing fan fiction based on original texts, instead of limiting their creativity, allows a jumping off point for developing originality (p. 227-229).
Bronwen Thomas defines fan fiction as “prose fiction of any length, style, genre, and narrative technique, produces by fans of a wide range of cultural products including TV shows, movies, video games, Japanese manga, and ‘classic’ literature” (2011, p. 205). She describes fan fiction as a participatory experience – even in its non-game format, it involves feedback and collaboration (“review culture”) by multiple people in a fan community (p. 209). Taking a closer look at her definition, one can easily fit fandom-based forum games into the larger category of fan fiction: They draw on all of those examples of cultural products, they create prose fiction, and they work with a range of styles, lengths, genres, and techniques.

Abigail Derecho takes an artistic, rather than ethnographic, approach to defining fan fiction, and suggests the use of the term “archontic literature,” based on Jacques Derrida’s concept of archives (2006). Her argument is that both “derivative” and “appropriative” (terms previously applied to fan fiction in scholarship) refer to a hierarchy of texts as well as property rights, while “archontic” focuses on the ever-expanding nature of fan fiction, one that both allows and invites authors to participate in its creation (p. 64-65). The “archives” include artifacts (characters, settings, images, etc.), the original texts, and the ever-expanding collection of fan texts, all in conversation with each other (p. 65). Given the archival nature of forum-based role-playing games, as well as their complex relationship with canon texts and cultural tropes, I believe that Derecho’s definition of “archontic literature” is very much applicable to them.

Deborah Kaplan analyzes fan fiction from a literary rather than a cultural standpoint, and explores how characters are developed through narrative conventions (2006). While her research focuses on novel-length fan fiction, it becomes applicable to forum games because of the importance of character development in the latter. Fans, claims Kaplan, are members of an active interpretive community. Developing canon characters in fan fiction, while it follows the narrative
conventions of fiction writing, has to be in constant dialogue with the original text (“canon”), as well as its interpretation by the fan community as a whole (“fanon”) (p. 136). Fan fiction, says Kaplan, is inherently polyphonic – due to the community participating in their development, it has a “plurality of narrative voices” (p. 150). Since many forum games allow players to take on canon characters and develop them through the narrative threads while supervised by the community, this claim also rings true in their case.

Theories created for fan fiction will not be applicable to all forum games all the time. But since they often work with concepts and terms that also exist in forum gaming, they definitely describe a larger trend in popular culture of which forum gamer are a part. Even sites that are not based on any specific fandom draw on their terminology and ideas in creating their original settings and narratives – they engage in “shipping,” they have “OTPs”, they model their original characters on archetypes and tropes that exist in certain fandoms, etc. Therefore, fandom and fan fiction provide a framework for the study of forum-based role-playing that should not be pushed into the background – many references, story types, and practices could be accurately described and analyzed without understanding the references behind them.

An overview of relevant theoretical fields provides a starting point for thinking academically about forum-based role-playing. These sites combine play, storytelling, and fandom in ways that are made truly fascinating by the structures and tools they apply to create a coherent whole from all the parts; to make a pastime that grows stories organically, and provides an entertaining, challenging gaming environment for large and small communities alike. In order to understand and describe how forum games work, I needed to add yet another field of study to my research project, one that focused on structure and platforms, and I found it in the idea of multimodality. I arrived to this addition in a roundabout way, through another often-quoted term
that appeared to apply to forum games first, but turned out to be only tangentially relevant: Transmedia storytelling. The last section of this chapter traces the process of how I weighed both concepts against each other, and decided on implementing multimodality into my study.

**Transmedia Storytelling and Multimodal Composition**

Henry Jenkins drew academic attention to transmedia storytelling in his seminal work *Convergence culture* (2008). Using *The Matrix* franchise as an example, he described it as “entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium” (p. 97). In an ideal case, claims Jenkins, the story unfolds across multiple media platforms, while each remains a self-contained unit enjoyable on its own as well as an entry point to the larger story; because different platforms draw different consumers, transmedia storytelling maximizes the reach of a franchise (p. 97-98). In the case of *The Matrix*, transmedia storytelling was designed, created, and controlled by the creators behind the original movie – all forms of media formed the parts of one coherent marketing plan. Data was compiled, analyzed, and discussed by fans, but it was *created* by authors. Jenkins also points out that transmedia storytelling requires collaboration and investment from the readers / consumers; but ultimately his study focuses on transmedia storytelling from the point of view of “media makers” with authority over the created texts (p. 97-99). He reiterates his earlier claims of the importance of world-making in creating a setting that can support multiple characters and stories across multiple forms of media, and claims that diverging from conventional plots and narrative structures doesn’t mean that storytelling is declining – rather, that it is taking on new, non-linear forms, echoing previously mentioned scholarly opinions on digital storytelling (p. 115-127).
Colin B. Harvey expands and elaborates on Jenkins’ (and others’) definitions of transmedia storytelling (2015). He suggests that examinations of transmedia should include tie-ins and other licensed works set in the same storyworlds, and he also points out the need to more clearly define both “transmedia” and “storytelling” before they can be used for an interdisciplinary discussion (p. 1-2). While a significant expansion on previous academic definitions, Harvey’s study still focuses on transmedia storytelling franchises created from the top down, by authors and designers who own the intellectual property rights to their storyworlds and have the legal power to create contracts for allowing others to create within them. Since forum-based role-playing, even when it deals with certain pop culture texts, falls outside of this legal domain and into the grey area of fan fiction, Harvey’s definition seems to exclude it from his scope of study. The book, however, contains a very well organized and detailed exploration of the history and definition of intertextuality, intramedia, and transmedia storytelling, which provides a valuable historical and literary background for examining forum games as well (p. 40-62). Harvey also expands significantly on Jenkins’ idea of transmedia storytelling as the “art of world making,” offering further points of reference for setting-based narratives and the changing nature of storytelling (p. 42-50).

Packard defines transmediality as “transcending media boundaries into an abstract point of reference beyond media specificity” (2015, p. 62). He brings examples of comic book characters that are referenced across multiple media platforms (comics, film, television, games, etc.) and their multiple appearances have to be spatially and temporally specified. Packard mentions that this works similarly with top-down, centrally created transmedia projects as well as collaborative play in storyworlds. Since many forum games feature characters that exist in transmedia storyworlds (e.g. Star Wars characters), or multiple iterations of themselves (e.g.
King Arthur), it is interesting to compare them to how comic book character “abstracts” are brought into specific settings and narratives.

While exploring transmedia storytelling definitely contributed to my research on forum-based role-playing games, it did not seem to fit as the overall category for explaining them. For one, transmedia storytelling has been overwhelmingly presented by academia as a unified, top-down design and marketing approach – which, given the community-created, non-commercial nature of forum games, was not a good fit. There is another term, however, that does not only apply to forum-based role-playing, but also reveals their nature of narrative creation - and that term is multimodal composition.

In 2003, on the pages of his book titled Literacy in the new media age, Gunther Kress explored the shift in composition and literacy from “the centuries-old dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image,” and the move from the medium of the book to the medium of the screen (p. 1). He described the mode of writing as regulated by the principles of time, while the image is governed by the logic of space – whatever is expressed through these modes has to follow their governing principles, and therefore one has to choose between modes in order to use the one that expresses their meaning the most accurately (p. 2). In his research, Kress focuses on exploring what each mode makes available. New media, he claims, makes a multiplicity of modes (text, image, sound) readily available and easy to use side by side – this changes “the potentials for representational and communicational action” for their users (p. 5). Kress defines mode as a “culturally and socially fashioned resource for representation and communication.” Modes can be time-based (speech, gesture, action, music, etc.) or space-based (layout, architecture, image, etc.) – the fundamental logics of these groups differ, and so do their affordances (p. 45). Semiotic power does not solely belong to the written word on the screen as
it used to in the book (p. 9). Kress uses the term *transduction* to refer to shifting “semiotic material” across different modes (p. 36). He notes that while it is a lot easier to create multimodal texts in digital media, that does not mean that one mode won’t carry more of the “functional load” of meaning than others involved in the narrative creation – a claim that is true to forum-based role-playing games where text is still the main mode (p.46). This distinction is important to this current study, which aims to posit forum games as inherently multimodal, but not *equally* distributed across modes. Similarly important are Kress’ observations on the “reading path” of new media texts, which is not as easily laid out and linear as print texts are - rather than simply following them as the author intended, multimodal texts invite “reading as design” where the reader constructs their own reading path as they go along (p. 50-51).

In his 2010 book, titled *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*, Gunther Kress delves deeper into the theory and practice of multimodality (2010). He states that “multimodality” as a term refers to both a field of study, and the domain to be theorized (p. 54). He explores, through social semiotics, how using multiple modes to convey meaning has benefits to the communication process. He reiterates the fact that multimodality is nothing new to the human experience – and yet it has received increased attention form scholarship since the early 2000’s (p. 5). He also stresses that resources of representation vary by culture – what modes someone uses, and how multimodal texts are understood, is rooted in cultural understanding (p. 8). Members of social and cultural groups have access to semiotic resources “needed to act in their social world” (p. 18). This idea could also be expanded to subcultural groups such as genres of gaming or certain fandoms – which is why focusing on different kinds of multimodality by site can’t happen without understanding the cultural group behind them. The social semiotic approach, therefore, asks questions such as “Whose interest
and agency is at work here in the making of meaning?” or “With what resources, in what social environment [is meaning made]?” – contributing valuable questions to be considered in this current study (p. 57).

Joddy Murray, in his book *Non-discursive rhetoric*, delves deeper into the role of images in multimodal composition (2009). His central claim is that emotions are “not only omnipresent, but also integral to image and textual production,” and that rhetoric can be divided into two kinds – discursive and non-discursive – out of which the latter is often neglected. He argues that the concept of “language” should be expanded beyond discursive texts to include non-discursive elements as well; he also argues that image is central to symbol systems, regardless of mode or medium (p. 1-2). Discursive rhetoric, he explains, is ordered, sequential, adherent to the “laws of reasoning,” and usually associated with written text (the same concept Kress called time-based modes). Non-discursive rhetoric, on the other hand, happens without sequence, is affective, and primarily relies on image (p. 4). He integrates a neuroscientific approach into his study, exploring connections between cognition, image, and emotions – claiming that “language, image, and consciousness are intimately connected” (p. 16). But this idea of non-discursive rhetoric is not limited to image – it includes all sensory information as rhetorical, be it visual, aural, olfactory, gustatory, or haptic (p. 8). “Image” is posited by him as the most important element of multimodal composition, because it is capable of conveying meaning that discursive rhetoric can’t (p. 57). “Image,” however, does not necessarily have to be solely visual – it can also include literary images (p. 58-59). “Image rhetoric” therefore becomes a synonym of “non-discursive rhetoric” in Murray’s understanding (p. 76). At the core of non-discursive rhetoric, in turn, is emotion, or the “affective domain” (p. 84-85). Murray stresses the importance of including this domain in our understanding of textual production for a variety of reasons, the
most important among them that he claims “rationality” and “emotion” as an oppositional binary that is inherently false (p. 104). Even in the most rational states or uses of language, emotions are still a part of the composition process. He offers that one way to emphasize non-discursive rhetoric in analyzing texts would be to change the question “What does the text mean?” to “How does it feel?” (p. 177). In my exploration on narratives created through forum games, I made sure to apply this question to the texts I analyzed, and pay attention to what modes were used to convey emotions in forum gaming narratives.

Andrew Morris defines multimodal composition as “the changing practices and analyses of such multiple mediations that are often enacted collaboratively and across established domains” (2010, p. 5). He points out that the difficulty in analyzing multimodal texts lies in having to account for the complex relations between their “diverse parts, variant relations, and summative wholes” – an activity that requires a form of multimodal theory that is transdisciplinary (p. 6). The importance of doing so lies in the increasing presence of multimodal texts in all domains of life – work, education, and leisure. He also introduces two related terms: Multiliteracies and multimediation (p. 10).

Initial explorations of multimodality tended to equate it with digital media. In her essay titled Including, but not limited to, the digital, Jody Shipka questions this theoretical standpoint (2013). She highlights the fact that texts have a history of being multimodal that goes back beyond the birth of digital media (p. 74-75). She warns that not considering non-digital multimodal texts may create blind spots in the study of multimodal composition practices. She also borrows the idea of “rhetorical sensitivity” from Roderick Hart and Don Burks, the idea of a series of traits in an individual – among them, the fact that a “rhetorically sensitive” person would accept “role-playing as part of the human condition,” attempt to “avoid stylized verbal
behavior,” and understand that “an idea can be rendered in multi-form ways” (p. 78, quoting Hart & Burks). While the playing of roles in this context does not refer to the genre of gaming known as role-playing, these traits fit especially well for players of forum-based role-playing games.

Claire Lutkewitte, in the Introduction to the edited collection Multimodal composition: A critical sourcebook, addresses the confusion of terminology that permeated academia in the past decade (2014). Among the terms in use at the time she lists “multimodal composition,” “multimedia composition,” “new media composition,” “multiwriting,” and “multigenre” (p. 1). In order to encompass all studies in the collection, she settles for a broad definition of multimodal composition as “communication using multiple modes that work purposely to create meaning” (p. 2). She points out that it can be best explored by shifting attention away from the final product, and focusing on the process of composition (p. 3). It does not only allow agency to students to reflect on their own role as a composer as well as their audiences, but it also allows for multiple voices, from marginalized groups, to be a part of composition (p. 4-5). In the same volume, Claire Lauer explores the terminological confusion around “multimodal” and “multimedia,” both in academic and non-academic contexts (2014). She finds that rather than a fundamental difference in meaning, the use of the terms largely depends on context, and the audience a certain text is talking to (p. 23). She does, however, delineate the difference between “mode” and “medium” through examining scholarship on both – “mode” refers to semiotic channels used to represent information (words, sounds, images, etc.) while “medium” refers to the tools used to produce texts (such as books, or computers) (p. 24-28). I found this a very clear and applicable distinction, and referred to it in my own writing.

Several texts on multimodality have been written from the educational point of view, focusing on how teachers can tap into the multimodal literacies of younger generations. While
this is a next step that will go beyond the scope of this present pilot study, I found it very useful to create an overview of literature on the application on multimodality in the composition classroom. Lutkewitte introduces as primary text the National Council of Teachers of English’s *Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies* (2014). This very concise document defines multimodality as “the interplay of meaning-making systems (alphabetic, oral, visual, etc.) that teachers and students should thrive to study and produce” (p. 17, emphasis my own). They point out that young children practice multimodality naturally and spontaneously, and that multimodal projects often require a high level of collaboration and teamwork (p. 17-18). They also state that creating multimodal texts is an “aesthetic, self-originated, self-sponsored activity for many writers” (p. 20). This is certainly true in the case of forum gamers.

Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia L. Selfe explore the uses of multimodality in their essay in a volume of resources for teachers (2007). They claim that while younger generations’ literacies are increasingly multimodal, assignments in the classrooms still follow the print-based structures from 150 years ago, only using visual elements to supplement the text. Their definition of multimodal texts claims that they “exceed the alphabetic and they may include still and moving images, animations, color, words, music and sound,” which, while not exhaustive of all modes, gives an idea of the complexity these texts can achieve (p. 1). They point out that in an increasingly transnational digital world, conveying meaning simply through text is difficult, and therefore people have to learn to take advantage of multiple semiotic channels (p. 2). Students need to be able to read (consume) multimodal texts, as well as compose them; it is an activity that is not only important and intellectually challenging, but also engaging (p. 3-4). Much like Shipka, they also contest the idea that multimodality is inherently a digital, new media phenomenon – they successfully argue that multimodality pre-dates computers (p. 7).
Jerome Bump explores the creation of multimodal worlds through assignments created for a college class (2013). He asks the question: “Would the use of an MMORG virtual world enable us to push the boundaries of English, rhetoric, and composition curriculums, providing these students entrée into truly multimodal composition and the communities of innovation related to it?” (p. 112). He does not only focus on the possibilities, but also the drawbacks, such as the tendency of digital content to simply vanish, or the “anti-verbal bias” of many current videogames (p. 114). He bemoans the tendency of students to refuse to read, and especially ignore instructions, which forces multimodal media to be coherent and understandable without verbally expressed guidance (p. 116-117). It is glaringly obvious that his essay is focusing on videogames and graphics-based virtual worlds when making this claim. Later on, however, he moves on to explore the concept of “sandbox” MMOG’s – the term refers to game worlds that do not offer narrative content, only a setting, and the narrative has to be created by the players themselves (p. 117-118). Players gain an increased sense of space through these games, according to Bump, and also learn about “architextural” writing – ways to write and re-write a setting or a world (p. 119). At the end of the essay, Bump questions where multimodal composition in virtual worlds could be taken to make them more literate, and improve the students writing skills (p. 133). One possible answer could definitely be: Forum-based role-playing. In these games both the environment and the story are created through composition, and on top of that good writing is communally rewarded both through explicit (“Player of the Month”) and implicit (players clamoring for your attention) achievements. Over the course of my research I have repeatedly seen (self-described) high school and college students set writing, artistic, and calculative goals that one rarely sees inspired by traditional classroom education.
Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes tackle multimodality from the point of view of college composition studies (2014). They claim that in order to assert Composition as its own discipline, it has privileged text-based forms over others, and that exploring and including multimodality (building on Lutkewitte’s work) composition could and should evolve as a field – even if it would have to become interdisciplinary to do so (p. 3-5). They also spend a whole chapter on computer gaming and its possible applications (p. 127-170). They posit interaction and collaboration as essential for gaming, claiming that “multimodal interaction” should be at the center of attention when engaging with game literacies (p. 128). Games require the use of multiple literacies – Alexander and Rhodes suggest using this aspect of them to explore how games contribute to the development of literacy in individuals (p. 129).

Blaine E. Smith conducted and published a study summarizing research on adolescents’ practices of multimodal composition (2014). By coding and summarizing 76 empirical studies within the framework of multiliteracies and multimodality, Smith explores the observed benefits of multimodal composition to adolescents, and delineates common trends in their findings. One of the findings confirms multimodal composition as a collaborative, social process – even when working at home, adolescents often engage in participatory cultures and affinity groups (p. 7-8). Studies found that multimodal composition is particularly beneficial to adolescents from marginalized groups, by offering multiple “points of entry” to each text, making them more culturally available (p. 8-9). Smith also points out topics of multimodality that need to be researched more extensively in the future – for example, “how do the processes of multimodal composition differ based on mode, media, purpose, and audience?” (p. 14). This calls for in-depth case studies; in my exploration of forum-based role-playing, I offer some valuable insight
to some of these practices. Forums and their storytelling often differed, for example, based on how often they used visual images and artwork to convey or enhance parts of the narrative.

The relationship of multimodal literacies and games has primarily been explored by academics from the educational point of view. One of the most often quoted texts, James Paul Gee’s book *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*, specifically explores the educational benefits of gaming (2007). Gee focuses on role-playing videogames, interested in the multiple identities players can take on in these virtual environments, and the way they solve problems through them (p. 1-7). He claims that videogames embody a new literacy that people entering them have to learn. This literacy is multimodal; the games function as a semiotic domain where players have to participate in certain practices and communities in order to be able to encode and decode the signs that belong to them. Gee defines “semiotic domain” as “an area or set of activities where people think, act, and value in certain ways” (p. 17-19). He points out that different gaming genres can all form their own semiotic domains – following this logic, forum-based role-playing games, or even individual and highly specialized sites, would constitute their own semiotic domain (p. 20). A group of people associated with a given semiotic domain is labeled by Gee as an “affinity group” – they recognize each other as insiders of the domain, people able to decode (read) and encode (write) texts using the domain’s set of signs and convey meaning through them to each other (p. 27-28). Gee’s Affinity Group Principle describes them as a community that is “bonded primarily through shared endeavors, goals, and practices and not shared race, gender, nation, ethnicity, or culture” (p. 212). Semiotic domains have “design grammars,” principles and patterns that decide whether something is or isn’t acceptable as content or practice for the domain (p. 28-29). Gee’s conceptual description of video games is summarized by him as:
They situate meaning in a multimodal space through embodied experiences to solve problems and reflect on the intricacies of the design of imagined worlds and the design of both real and imagined social relationships and identities in the modern world (p. 40-41).

This definition, in whole and in detail, fits forum-based role-playing games perfectly.

The connection between games and multimodal literacy as a semiotic domain is also explored by Cynthia L. Selfe, Anne F. Mareck, and Josh Gardiner in their essay Computer gaming as literacy (2007). Building on Gee’s work, they explore the gaming literacy and practices of a high school student, Josh Gardiner. They claim that participating in gaming-based affinity groups might prepare students for operating in a digital and transnational world in a way that formal education doesn’t – because they learn how to work with multimodal texts (p. 30).

Forum-based role-playing games are inherently multimodal – they use text, image, movement, and sound, to create meaning within their own semiotic domain and affinity groups. The way they arrange and weave these modes, and the way narratives emerge from the process of play, makes them a complex, unique, and valuable site for the study of multimodality, literacy, and composition in the digital age. This richness of structure and content, however, does not only inspire fascination, but also presents a challenge for scholarship: Their study requires methods and methodologies that are capable of encompassing, exploring, and describing forum-based games in their full complexity.
CHAPTER 2. FIELDWORK IN IMAGINED SPACES: METHODOLOGY, METHODS, AND SAMPLE SELECTION

“First of all, in games, as in a lot of these communities, you really don’t understand them unless you’re participating.”

(Constance Steinkuehler, quoted by McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 118)

It was clear from the first moment when I started considering forum games from an academic standpoint that these sites cannot be solely researched and interpreted from an outsider’s point of view. One thing that sets them apart from literature, or even fan fiction, is that the process of narrative creation is just as important as the finished product – “plotting,” “threading,” “blitzing,” writing contests, chat conversations, and out-of-character games are all elements that make these games a bustling, interactive environment. A huge part of the stories created through forum games are negotiated “behind the scenes,” and only the result is visible for outsider to read. Remaining a lurker (a common online term used for passive observers) would have made me miss integral parts of the creation process, as well as a lot of the “fun” aspects, the IC and OOC interactions, of the player communities. I needed to involve methodologies and methods of data collection that did not only allow me to take an insider-outsider role in the research, but also allowed agency to these (very much literate and self-aware) communities to contribute their own opinions and interpretations as well. My own identity as a gamer was both help and hindrance; I needed to be clear on how it was going to affect the study, and I had to set up ground rules for myself to keep my hobby and my research separate, yet mutually beneficial to each other. While my exploration took place in entirely digital spaces, it was still a venture
into communities that were very real, with all the challenges, disappointments, social intricacies, and fascinating experiences of ethnographic fieldwork.

In this chapter I outline the methodologies and theoretical frameworks that informed my process of data collection, and then explain each phase of the research project. After the review of literature on digital ethnography, I detail the three consecutive steps and methods of data collection – large-scale coding and textual analysis, participant observation, interviews – and how they collectively contributed to my findings. At the end of this chapter I outline the key research questions of the project; the research questions themselves have gone through several changes as I moved through the different stages, narrowing in focus and shifting in terminology. Therefore, I thought it was fitting to present them after the process itself has been described, pointing forward to the analysis in the following two chapters that aims to answer all of them.

**Digital Ethnography in Virtual Worlds**

The main methodology for this study is digital ethnography. Ethnography as a methodology, as Christine Hine points out in her book *Virtual Ethnography* (2000), is capable of “addressing the richness and complexity of social life,” and is applicable for “dealing with complex and multi-faceted concepts like culture” (p. 41-42). Since forum-based role-playing games, both as games and as collaborative forms of narrative creation, are based on the complex interactions of player communities with each other, and with the technology they use, ethnography fits the requirements of exploring their complexity instead of using reduction or quantitative analysis. Forum games fit the definition and general concept of “virtual worlds;” for all intents and purposes, they constitute their own subcultures and miniature universes (McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 113-114).
The main difference between “traditional” ethnographic fieldwork and the ethnography of virtual worlds is the vague nature of what constitutes “public” and “private” in online spaces, and how the researcher can tell “authored text” (falling under rules of copyright and fair use) apart from “personal communication” (falling under possible IRB review) (McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 5-6). While the distinction is easy in a print/face-to-face setting, it becomes a lot harder to trace when one is dealing with chat logs, screen captions, blogs, and other forms of digital media. What counts as “sensitive” information cannot always be defined by what is posted publically – the lacking technological understanding of some Internet users might make information available even when they think it is protected (McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 87-89). Furthermore, there is no clear policy for virtual ethnography that can be applied to every research situation; often it is left up to the researcher’s consideration to make ethical judgment calls herself. McKee and Porter offer four points of consideration for making such decisions: 1. How the users themselves see the public/private nature of their communications (whether they intended it to be considered as public text); 2. The sensitivity of the topics discussed (common interests vs. details of one’s private life); 3. The degree of interaction between the researcher and the potential participants (were they specifically disclosing things to the researcher?); and 4. The rhetorical, technological, and/or material vulnerability of the participants (2009, p. 86-88). In my work with forum gaming communities I considered all four when making decisions on what I considered “publically archived materials,” and what I asked permission or offered informed consent for. The guidelines I set for myself for using information acquired through participant observation will be detailed in the corresponding section below.

A lot of discussion surrounds the position of the researcher on the Internet. Hine points out that Internet-based ethnography loses the “travel” aspect of the methodology – the researcher
cannot be a literal outsider, arriving to a site with no previous knowledge (2000, p. 44-46). The mere fact that one is using the Internet presupposes a certain familiarity with the medium. This, however, doesn’t mean that the researcher has no chance at learning and experiencing a site as a newcomer. “Travel” is replaced with negotiating access, observing interactions, communication with participants – and acquiring the (technical and social) skills needed to participate in the site itself (p. 46). The field of ethnography has long concluded that objective, neutral “outsider” observation is not possible, and texts created by ethnographers are all story-telling, constructed from a personal perspective (p. 44). However, others warn that the unavoidable impact of the participant observer on the research site should not be overstated either, since the researcher is but one variable among several that shape a community and its social interactions (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 45). There is also, in my opinion, a positive side to the lack of travel and the open access to research sites on the Internet: I believe that it raises the possibility of reproducing, expanding, and/or fact-checking research. While an ethnographer traveling to a remote area and experiencing things in person can only bring back personal narratives that are often impossible to replicate or verify, Internet ethnography can direct people to the same site with relative ease, and – in the case of forum games – can even point out the archived records of the interactions that happened during the researcher’s time spent as a participant observer.

In summary, (virtual) ethnography does not require the researcher to be an impersonal outsider in order to make valuable observations. In fact, feminist researchers such as Nancy Naples have questioned whether a clear divide between “insider” and “outsider” can exist in ethnographic research at all (2003). While this current study was not intended as a feminist project, feminist methodologies of interacting with communities definitely informed the way I conducted participant observation. Naples claims that power relations in fieldwork are usually
more complex than a simple researcher-researched hierarchical binary, pointing out that “our relationship to the community is never expressed in general terms but is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated” (2003, p. 49). She also claims that “dynamics of power influence how problems are defined, which knowers are identified and are given credibility, how interactions are interpreted, and how ethnographic narratives are constructed” (2003, p. 48). This was in particular true to my research on forum gaming. When entering a site as a participant observer (I will detail the sites in the following sections), my identification as a researcher set me apart somewhat from other players – but at the same time I was at the bottom of the hierarchy of knowledge, and under the supervision of administrators and moderators who often made executive decisions on both my player activities and my research. Power, therefore, was not a clearly defined binary with me holding complete control over what I wanted to experience and how – rather, it was a complex system of written and unwritten rules, personal attitudes, roles within the site, and my repeated reminders to the community that I was there for more than just play. These negotiations, as Naples said, were not just an initial phase or learning curve – rather, they were a constant and continuously shifting part of the entire project, from beginning to end.

Another important element of the virtual ethnographic methodology is the shifting definition of what is “real” or “not real.” Hine points out that virtual ethnography makes interactions between researchers and subjects complicated because there is no way to verify that what they choose to share about themselves is true. This, however, she argues, doesn’t make the interactions inauthentic; standards of authenticity need to be negotiated. In her definition, authenticity means correspondence between the identity of the subjects performed in interaction with the researchers and the way it is performed in both online and offline spaces. In other words, there is no reason why the offline identity of a person should be the only “authentic” or
“real” one, especially if the study is focused on the online identities of its participants (2000, p. 49-50). This opinion is echoed by other virtual ethnographers that advocate for understanding avatars as “real” in their own right (McKee & Porter 2009, p. 118-119). While I conducted my interviews with forum gamers in their OOC personas, and not through their characters, I still paid attention to their claims of identity and ownership of their in-game appearances as well.

Related to the concept of “real” identities is the issue of privacy. An illuminating discussion of privacy and ethics in Internet research can be found in the volume titled *Internet Inquiry* (Markham & Baym, 2009). Referring to the Association of Internet Researchers’ ethics guidelines, the authors point out that it is generally considered acceptable to avoid seeking informed consent if the site is considered public, and no sensitive data is being collected (p. 72-73). The book’s discussion on private vs. public online space is especially relevant to my research, since it is one of the criteria used in selecting the forums included (see criteria in the following section). According to Malin Sveningsson Elm’s concept of privacy as a continuum, most forum RPs fall under the concept of a “public site” since they are “open and available for everyone,” can be accessed by anyone with an Internet connection, and don’t require any form of membership or registration (Markham & Baym 2009, p. 75). However, several forums restrict their “public” areas to out-of-character interactions, while the actual game posts and narratives can only be accessed by registered members. In this case, the restricted areas of the forums should be considered private. While I initially only analyzed publically available sections of such forums (rules, introduction, general description), this question became relevant when I moved on to the sites chosen for participant observation in phase two. One of my main reasons for announcing myself as a researcher before joining a site, and asking permission from the community, was that I consider texts posted in the private sections of forums as private
information. Similarly, while HSRB does not consider usernames or screen names private data (their biomedical approach has been critiqued in the same volume by Elizabeth A. Buchanan, p. 89), I decided to offer all my interview subjects the option to replace them with pseudonyms anyway, since many people on the Internet do claim their usernames as part of their identity, just as they would an offline, “real” name. Reacting to Sveningsson’s approach to privacy, Susannah R. Stern also points out that it is important to allow participants to voice their own expectations of privacy (Markham & Baym 2009, p. 96-97).

In her exploration of virtual ethnography, Hine suggest that multi-sited ethnography, focusing on connectivity, might fit the Internet better than a holistic approach (2000, p. 61-62). Trying to locate bounded sites and explore them as a separate entity within its own limits doesn’t fit the highly networked and connected nature of the Internet. I referred to this principle by exploring a larger sample of sites, and following up on their connections and associations (what Hine calls a “flow of connectivity,” p. 64) that reached beyond the realm of role-playing games. In the following chapters I note examples of “satellite sites” (such as Tumblr or YouTube), as well as the applications of game skills and knowledge in fields outside of forum gaming.

Ethnography requires participation; it is an interactive methodology. Traditionally, the authority to interpret data used to belong to the “scientific” ethnographer only. But, as Naples points out, if “we become the (solo) authors of ‘true’ texts, which have unintended, often hurtful, consequences for those who have trusted us,” we are not considering the ethical implications of our research and its possible impact on the communities that provided the data (2003, p. 37, quoting Richardson). In agreement with her, I prefer the concept of ethnography that allows the observed communities agency to form their own conclusions, and voice their own theories, interpreting the data that they themselves provided directly (through interviews) or indirectly.
(through textual analysis or observation). I believe that it is important for the role-playing communities to claim ownership of what they create – not just the characters and the narratives, but also the sites as virtual spaces, and the communities that formed around and through them.

In order to encompass the complexities of forum-based role-playing, and to trace some of the larger trends and distinguishing features of this gaming style, I designed a research project that consisted of three major phases. In the first phase, I conducted a large-scale textual analysis on a sample of 100 sites, coding them based on a set of common elements. In the second phase, I selected a small number of sites from this sample, and joined them as a player (announcing myself as a researcher first) to conduct participant observation. This phase lasted for several months (April-December, 2016), and provided large amounts of fascinating data, as well as many memorable experiences. In the third phase, which ran parallel to the participant observation (September-November, 2016), I interviewed volunteers from the player communities of these sites, asking open-ended questions about their player experience, practices, and their opinions on forum gaming in general. Before I move on to the chapters analyzing the results of this three-phase project, I introduce my methods in detail here, in order to clarify the process and explain my reasons for the decisions I made during the selection.

Large-scale Coding

When designing the research project, I wanted to create a general outline of forum games based on a large and diverse sample. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, all academic explorations of this specific gaming style that I could locate have been single-site case studies; therefore a larger scale, across-the-board exploration was needed to trace common traits, differences, and general trends across multiple forums and multiple genres. I decided to locate
100 forums, and code them according to a certain set of selected traits, to create a basis for the participant observation and the interview phases of the project. In order to know where to look, and what to ask, I needed to see the bigger picture of forum gaming first.

**Sample selection and search.** I selected the sample based on a certain set of criteria: The forums had to be *active* (had IC posts created within one month before I first accessed the site – that is, over the course of February 2016), *open to the public* (basic information could be read by a visitor without registering or logging in), in *English*, and had to *have at least 10 registered accounts* (in order to weed out the smallest personal or private games, and focus on the more popular communities). In addition, I also aimed to have a wide variety of different settings, genres, and texts of origin, to ensure diversity in the sample. For this reason, I only selected a few sites of the most popular settings (*Harry Potter*, *Fairy Tail*, etc.), to allow space on the list for less well-known game worlds as well. In the cases when I included multiple sites based on the same text, I attempted to make sure they differed in some aspects, such as universe (Alternate Universe sites, prequel or sequel storylines), canon (canon and non-canon versions), or setting (different geographies, such as “Harry Potter” schools in countries other than the UK). I also aimed to include range in time, purposefully seeking out the “oldest” forums listed in directories, as well as sites based on recently published or premiered materials, such as the movies *Mad Max: Fury Road* (May, 2015), *Jurassic World* (June, 2015), and *Zootopia* (March, 2016).

I located sites through several methods. With the most popular texts, I simply used Google search with the keywords “[name of the text] forum RP[G].” I also worked my way through the list of Play-by-Post and Forum Role Plays on the website TV Tropes (tvtropes.org), as well as other sites such as Top RP Sites (toprpsites.com) and RPG Directory (rpg-directory.com). These latter sites collect, thematically organize, and rank forum-based role-
playing games, and sometimes even give out awards based on players’ votes. I also followed a snowball-type method with sites that had an advertising board: I followed the links leading to other forums, and if those had advertising boards as well, then I moved on several more steps until I ran into sites I had already seen. It occurred to me that it would be an interesting project to map out these cross-linked relationships between sites of similar genres, or a similar player base, but such an exploration would have moved well beyond the scope of this current study.

The sample. At the start of my research (March, 2016), the sample included 100 forums that fulfilled all criteria I previously listed. At the last round of visits at the end of December 2016, 84 of them were still active (6 of which had gone through some kind of a reboot or overhaul over the course of ten months). To illustrate the kind of thematic diversity I managed to achieve, here is a list of different forum types included: I coded forums based on the *Harry Potter* series (8), anime/manga (14), movies or TV shows (8), books (10), original settings (17), historical settings (7), certain genres (horror, romance, steampunk) (7), original “high fantasy” settings (8), multi-fandom crossovers (7), video game worlds (10), Disney movies and non-Japanese cartoons (10), superpowers and “gifted” characters (4), animals and pets (5), *Star Wars* and science fiction (4), fairy tales and mythology (4), adult sexual play and other “real life” settings (3), and comics (5). I coded forums that accepted canon characters only (7), original characters only (35), or both (39). For the full list of the sites included, see Appendix 2.

I only introduced one new site into the sample later on (June, 2016) – *Zootropolis Chronicles*, a brand new forum based on Disney’s animated film *Zootopia*, which premiered after the starting date of my research. I decided to include it because it was valuable to observe as a new site sprung up mere weeks after the movie’s premiere, and gained a solid player base
and post count in merely two months’ time. Since by that time some of the forums in the sample had been shut down, I counted it as part of the 100-forum sample, rather than noting it as 101.

**Coding, second coding, monthly re-coding.** Once the forums were selected, I performed close textual analysis on each, with special attention to their published rules, guidelines, and codes of conduct. I created a spreadsheet that contained all relevant information for easy comparison. During this first round of coding all features noted were based on my previous experience with forum gaming – I was looking for certain elements I knew existed on some sites, but didn’t know how frequently. As I was working my way through the list, I also made notes of other recurring features that caught my attention, and put them in the spreadsheet; once I finished the first round, I returned to the top of the list, and examined all sites a second time, filling out information on these newly added features (and sometimes the previous ones too, if I happened to gloss over them the first time). The updated spreadsheet included 62 pieces of information on each site in the sample – things such as name and age of the site, content rating, rules on behavior, satellite sites etc. (for the full list, see Appendix 2). Of course, not all sites had all features listed in the spreadsheet, or even published rules regarding something similar. But all features included in the coding appeared on multiple sites, and seemed important, or interesting, enough to be noted. In certain cases, if a feature proved to be especially relevant to my analysis of forum gaming, I returned and re-examined the sample, paying attention to its appearances, variations, implementations, and general place in the workings of each site.

After March, 2016, I also performed monthly visiting rounds on all sites in the sample. I mainly focused on two things: Activity (if a site went inactive, or was closed/deleted, I marked it accordingly; it if moved to a new location or got a “reboot”, I also made a note), and the number of new accounts and posts in a month. The latter, while I did not venture into the field of
quantitative analysis, proved to be very useful in providing insight into activity in general – compared to my participatory experiences with sites, I could tell if a certain monthly post or character count signaled a stall, decline, or increase in a forum’s popularity. It was also interesting to observe how more accounts did not necessarily correspond to more posts (per account) – sometimes smaller, more closely knit player communities churned out a stunning amount of new posts, while larger sites merely cruised by at a comfortable average. For some sample numbers and trends, see Appendix 2.

Participant Observation

“One method above all others is fundamental to ethnographic research. This method is participant observation, the cornerstone of ethnography.”

(Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 65)

Because so much of forum gaming revolves around interaction, I would not have felt comfortable in my analysis and conclusions if I had merely been an outside observer. I have mentioned above that I identify as a forum gamer myself, and have valuable previous experience; but with it also came assumptions that I needed to deconstruct and re-evaluate. I could not have done any of that without starting fresh, and joining new sites for this project.

Participant observation is the core method of ethnographic research; one that provides flexibility and adaptability, and “allows the investigator to alter ethnographic research midstream in a manner difficult with many methodologies” (Boellstorff, 2012, p. 54). Participant observation was a key component in my research, and it provided more and more valuable data than any of the other (also integral) parts.
Site selection criteria. I decided to join a select few (five) sites for this part of my research – all of them came from the sample I previously coded. While still in the coding phase, I already paid attention to, and made notes of, sites that would have been good candidates for participation. In addition to the coding sample’s selection process, I also considered a few more factors in this decision. One of them was familiarity – I aimed to choose sites where I was familiar with the setting or pop culture text they were based on, so that I could feel confident in my assessment of the games and their implications. This also allowed me to get right into playing, without having to read/watch the background materials and familiarize myself with a new fictional world. I kept to my general rule of diversity, and did not join more than one forum of the same genre or setting; I also tried to select both canon and OC forums, and sites based on movies, comics, history, and books. While a smaller sample allowed for less range, I still ended up with a satisfactory array of different sites. I also gave preference to forums that seemed active, in order to gain a better amount of hands-on experience within the limited time frame of my project; while I opted both for big and small sites, I tried to select the more popular ones. Finally, and most importantly, I looked for access through group consent. My own judgment on how to proceed fell in line with the methods of acquiring group consent described by McKee and Porter (2009, p. 92-93), and Boellstorff et al. (2012, p. 77): I announced myself as a researcher on the sites I intended to join, and only proceeded with registration after I discussed my project and goals with the moderators or administrators, and received their agreement. Once I registered, I also wanted to make sure that there were no rejections or concerns raised from the player community. I did this by posting on their Guest or Visitor boards the following text:

Hello everyone! My name is Csenge. I am a Culture Studies PhD student at Bowling Green State University, OH, USA. I am writing my dissertation on
forum-based role-playing games. I have been a forum gamer for a long time, and I want to make this form of gaming better known and better understood – and find out more about it myself. I am especially interested in why people like to role-play on forums, what they enjoy about it, and how forums work as a form of storytelling.

This is not a case study – my work is not going to be about [name of the site] specifically. Rather, I am picking a few sites that caught my interest, and I am here to experience the game in person. So yes I am making a character (or two) and I’ll be RPing as well as observing! Later on, I would also love to interview some volunteers about their experience – I want RP communities to add their own voices to my research, rather than just me speaking for everyone.

I wanted to introduce myself, let you know who I am and why I am here. I am not going to be collecting any private, personal, or identifiable data, and I am not going to use real names or usernames in my notes. I also fully respect the authorship rights of the threads on the forum – I am not going to quote or screenshot anything without permission. Since my dissertation might turn into a book later on, I am taking copyright very seriously.

With that said, I don’t want to make anyone uncomfortable, or put anyone on the spot. If you have concerns about me joining the site, or any questions about my research, please let me know!

Out of the six sites I approached, only one rejected me; the moderators claimed that having a researcher on the site would have made their players feel “on the spot” or uncomfortable, and respectfully declined permission for me to join. The other five sites,
however, welcomed me with open arms and expressed enthusiasm for my project, offering help and advice every step of the way.

In order to keep my hobby and my research separate, as well as to maintain my personal privacy, I did not include in this project any of the forums I previously played on for recreation. I held it important to have a fresh experience, and a full learning curve, on each participant observation site, and to be present in the capacity of a researcher from the very first day. Announcing myself before joining provided clarity of my role and intentions, as well as an ethical way of gaining the approval of the communities I intended to join and observe. This does not mean that I did not draw previous knowledge from my own forum gaming past – but whenever such information became relevant to my research, I made sure to double-check with the research sites, and question my own assumptions.

**List and introduction of participant observation sites.** In the following I provide a list and descriptions of the five sites I participated in (in order of joining). By introducing them I hope to shed light on my selection methods and decisions, as well as provide a general introduction to the spaces and communities where most of my research data originates from.

**The Hunger Games RP (HGRPG)** (hungergamesrpg.com). The largest and most active of the five, this site initially attracted my attention because of its stunning player base: In March 2016, it had more than eleven thousand account registered, a number which is even more impressive when one finds out that each of them correspond to an individual player, all of whose characters are covered by that one single account. Active since 2008, the site is based on *The Hunger Games* book and film series created by Suzanne Collins; it is a post-apocalyptic setting in which North America is divided into 12 Districts, oppressed and managed by the decadent Capitol. Every year, each District sends one boy and one girl between the ages of 12 and 18 into
an arena where they have to fight each other to the death until one victor remains; the so-called Hunger Games are televised across the nation to keep the Districts from revolting. The site did not only recreate the setting, but it also managed to find ingenious ways of emulating the mechanics of the Games, starting with the selection of the tributes (Reaping), through fight mechanics, all the way to the final victory. The site runs 3 Games per real life year; each usually lasts about three months, with a month-long break in-between when players can prepare and “hype” (get excited) for the next round. While the books ended the Games with the main heroine Katniss Everdeen’s revolution during the 75th Hunger Games, the site has no intention of following that canon; at my arrival, the 72nd Games were in progress (the 22nd since the site’s founding). When asked what would happen when they caught up to the canon, the moderators assured me that the site’s story would diverge. There would be no revolution, and no Katniss. Later on, I had the chance to play a tribute in the 74th Games – a truly unique experience.

HGRPG is by far the most complex of the four sites I observed. It has so many moving parts, so many simultaneous activities, and so many refined mechanics combining social media, forum boards, and additional digital platforms, that the result often feels overwhelming. And yet, it somehow manages to create a coherent, enjoyable, and truly stunning role-playing world, enjoyed and shaped by a very dedicated community.

**Bellefonte Academy (BA)** (bellefonte-academy.proboards.com) is a site loosely based on the concept of mutants from Marvel’s *X-men* comics; they describe themselves as a “mutant inspired role-play.” It is strictly non-canon, and has its own, original setting: Bellefonte Academy, a school for gifted students built in Kalispell, Montana. I addition to high schoolers, players also have the opportunity to apply with college age mutants, as well as teachers, BA staff members, non-mutant family members, or local human citizens. The site was founded in 2014,
and at the time of my joining it counted about 860 accounts (multiple character accounts per player) and a very diverse international team of moderators and players. I decided to join BA because it represents the cross-section of the popular genre of superpower RPGs and the similarly popular high school slice of life setting. I was especially interested in how the supernatural powers were managed and negotiated without being “overkill,” as well as the role-playing potential in the site’s unusually high number of LGBT+ characters and ESL players. In June 2016 the moderator team put BA on an “extended hiatus,” created a brand new site with a “high fantasy” original setting, and most of the player base moved with them. While Bellefonte Academy remained open, activity started to dwindle, and without the moderators approving characters and announcing events, it took a steep nose dive. After months of silence, the site was eventually rebooted under a new URL in November 2016, and started again with a clean slate. At the time of this manuscript’s submission, the new site was growing steadily, but I did not re-join it as a player.

*Aeterna Roma (AeRo)* (aeternaroma.com) is a historical RPG based on an alternate history of 1st century AD Rome. Founded in 2008, at the time of my joining it sported less than 200 accounts and only a couple of dozen players, but had a surprisingly high post count, which is the sign of an active community. The setting’s timeline follows Roman history up to Caligula’s assassination, after which they diverged into their own alternate storyline with player-created characters that could rise to the rank of emperor, dictator, or military leadership. As a Roman archaeologist myself, I was stunned at first sight by their level of historical accuracy and attention to detail. The board has extensive guides for building realistic characters including citizenship status, *cursus honorum* (career stages for the sons of nobility), naming customs, clothing, and even the Roman outlook on different sexualities. Unlike many other forum games,
the site mostly involves players in their twenties and thirties, usually with invested interest in history. One of the distinguishing features of AeRo is the way the player community shapes larger historical events by popular vote on plot points (e.g. barbarian invasions), and how directly individual characters can change the fate of the Roman world.

*Live to Rise (L2R)* (live2rise.jcink.net) is based on the Marvel Cinematic Universe. I decided to join it because it was one of the few canon-only sites in the sample, and also because it is fairly new (established in 2015). I wanted to observe how a canon-only site develops, especially at a stage where many “big name” characters are still not taken (at the time of my joining, we had no one playing Captain America, for example). Even at one year old, the site only had 52 accounts registered, but its small player community was both friendly and enthusiastic. The posting rate was slow, but every post was in tune with the established personality of the canon characters, and full of references to events happening in the Marvel movies. In addition to film canon, the site also allows characters from the TV shows and the comics, and offers plots for players to integrate them to the existing storyline. Over the course of several months, I watched the site grow, acquire a timeline and several plots, and find its footing in establishing their own social dynamics between various superheroes and –villains.

*All of Me (AoM)* (allofme.jcink.net), opened in 2014, describes itself as “a fantasy romance RP.” It takes place in an original setting, an alternate future North America where several fantasy species exist side by side – Humans, Mutants, Shape-shifters, Werewolves, Vampires, Mermaids, Djinn, Unicorns, etc. At the time when I joined (after BA went on hiatus) it had a character count well over 700, and approximately 60 active players. The site uses animanga style artwork, and the stories and characters themselves often follow animanga tropes and archetypes – since many forum games are based on anime and manga, I was glad to add an
example to my participation sample. In addition, AoM also represents a very intriguing subgenre of forum games – it is a *shipping* game, a forum that focuses on creating and playing out romantic relationships between characters. Most stories (but by far not all) on the site are romantic in nature, and characters are created with love plots in mind. Participating on this site made me re-evaluate my own preexisting biases against the romance genre in many ways. Given the central role of relationships (both dual and polyamorous), it is no wonder that all kinds of sexualities and gender identities are represented on the site in a stunning display of diversity. In addition, relationships are further colored by differences in species and their special powers - this creates a rich background for love stories where attraction, physiology, consent, and romance can be negotiated in various and creative ways.

While there are many people who play on multiple sites at the same time, participating in four of them actively was a more intense experience than what I would have preferred for recreational purposes. The above mentioned sites, however, proved to be a good selection for research – not just because of their distinct systems and diversity of stories, but also because their different posting paces and communities made sure that I always had somewhere to play, even if one of them slowed down temporarily. I believe that these five provided a valuable sample for participant observation, and the data gathered from them is representative of a large number of forum-based role-playing sites on the Internet.

**General guidelines of interaction.** I set several guidelines for myself before going into the participant observation phase of my work. I made an effort to maintain the clarity of my dual presence as player-researcher even after the initial acceptance – in addition to the board post quoted above, I also added “I am a researcher” to my static post signatures (with a link to my
introduction), and introduced myself as the “friendly neighborhood researcher” to new members who joined the site after me.

While there were questions that I prepared for the interview phase, I also allowed for learning organically, through interactions on the site, and took extensive field notes of the process. I found this crucial to my research; as a passive observer, I would have never been privy to all the details of player-to-player informal mentoring, or the more formal role of the moderators teaching newcomers about the site rules. I could not hold off on all my questions until the official interviews; often I asked them through the day-to-day communication channels of the sites, the chat boxes and OOC boards. I do not quote these word by word, unless something was said so eloquently or in such an intriguing way that I felt it important to do so; in those cases I asked the people participating in the conversation if it was okay to screenshot and quote in my work. All of these conversations happened in the public chatboxes, on screens that any visitor to the site could see; but still, I always made it clear that I was asking a certain question and permission for research purposes (see McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 124-126). These questions were usually aimed at the mechanics of a site (“How do I attach a picture to a template?”), or a general feel of the game (“Do players do this kind of thing often?”). Players were always helpful and eager to provide answers, or point me to someone else who could.

In quoting verbatim and using screenshots, I also followed guidelines and considerations described by previous research (McKee & Porter 2009, p. 93-108). Once I had the quotes and images selected for my analysis, I contacted the people involved in creating them, and asked for their permission to use them; I also kept in mind other possible trademark and copyright considerations, such as the platforms, templates, and artwork visible in the images (McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 56-61). In the case of direct quotes from public posts, I had to make it clear to
the participants involved that even if I used a pseudonym for their username in my work, the verbatim text could be searched on the Internet, and their real username thus revealed; a fact that I thought they might not be aware of, but one that was crucial to preserving the subjects’ privacy (McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 106-108). In some cases, subjects wanted to claim authorship of their work; these cases I evaluated according to the considerations suggested by Boellstorff et al. (2012, p. 140-141): If there was no harm that could have come to the participants by disclosing their username, I allowed for stating authorship at their request. If anonymity had to be preserved, I either refrained from using a direct quote, or I changed other details to preserve privacy. In cases where parts of a screenshot image would have presented a problem or copyright infringement, I used various tools to crop and blur out the unnecessary and possibly problematic elements (see McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 137). I never took silence as agreement; I only used things I had expressed permission to use. For example, when I contacted the administrator of a site about taking a screenshot of the home page’s general layout (which is technically available to the public), but did not hear back from them by the submission deadline, I decided to leave out the screenshots, and describe the layout in my own words instead.

In my own player activities, I aimed to follow a “try everything” mentality. While in my recreational games I am often too lazy to create a character directory, a template, or a plotter for myself, in the case of the research sites I resolved to do everything by the book, and experience all the aspects, modes, and moving parts of the gaming experience. I spent extensive time in the chat boxes socializing, I participated in OOC “just for fun” threads, learned to tweak the HTML coding of templates and re-size character images, etc. I also made an effort to try all of the different avenues of character creation and plotting: I answered “wanted” ads for characters, and also put some up myself; I made canon, original, and canon-related characters; I negotiated
“ships;” I used different kinds of character applications (traditional, freeform, concise, etc.); I even registered and nominated threads and characters for awards and “Of the Month” recognitions. One’s character and avatar choices can directly impact the social interactions and player experience on a site; I wanted to create characters that allowed for a range of such experiences on each forum, which is why I often created several of them (see Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 75). While normally I’d have focused on threads I posted in, drawing enjoyment from creating stories myself, for research I also went out of my way to read threads created by others, as much for enjoyment as for observation. Reading each other’s threads and showing appreciation is an integral part of forum gaming, and one that was important to experience.

I clocked hundreds of hours on the participation sites; I created a total of 28 characters, and wrote more than 1000 posts. I started every morning (except for times when I had other engagements) by checking all of them, responding to threads where it was my turn to post, and socializing in hopes of building rapport, new plots, and new things to learn. The sites were usually open in separate tabs in my browser, and I would check them periodically when time allowed during the day. I did so not only to capture as many aspects of the day-to-day interactions of the community as possible, but also to build the “researcher ethos” that allowed me access to participating in all the different groups and activities (see McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 98-102). Since part of building rapport with the player communities was to be seen as a dedicated player myself, I kept my levels of activity high and my visits regular; I strived for quality writing, likable character design, and other signs of player dedication and mastery in order to show that I was serious and well versed in these games (see McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 122-123). I also recorded monthly summaries of my participation, noting the number of my characters, threads (started, active, finished), posts, and sometimes even word count.
Interviews

Much like participant observation, interviews are also integral to ethnographic research, both offline and in a virtual space – even though “interviews in isolation are insufficient to constitute ethnographic research” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 92), they are still the most direct and effective way for the observed community itself to voice its opinions. Boellstorff et al. describe a few key benefits of ethnographic interviews; among them the fact that interviews can provide people’s own understanding of their culture and social world, and gives them a chance to reveal previously unknown details by commenting on, and explaining, their own practices (2012, p. 92-93). Researchers have to be aware and articulate about the place interviews take in their overall project, and how they connect to other methods of research (in my case, textual analysis and participant observation). In combination with participant observation, interviews can help identify topics and practices to be delved into through participation, while the observation can help create and frame interview questions (p. 94-95). Considering these mutually beneficial connections, I decided to conduct the interview phase of my research simultaneously with the latter half of the second phase; I began the interviews approximately four months into my participation on the selected sites, once I had built enough rapport and credibility with their communities. I also decided to conduct interviews grouped by site, so that I could use cues gathered from participation to tailor follow-up questions the specific communities.

Recruitment of interviews subjects. At first, I recruited volunteers for the interview phase from the sites I played on. I already had rapport with the players, and since they were aware of the research project and its goals, many of them offered to talk to me even before the official recruiting began. I contacted these volunteers individually, and I conducted the
interviews through private chats, instant messaging systems, or private messages (depending on their choice). Conducting the interviews in private did not only help with keeping them anonymous and preserving the participants’ privacy, but it also helped with saving their written words exactly, without the need for any transcription. At the start of every interview, subjects were asked if they were over 18 years old, and told that only people over 18 were allowed to participate. While due to the anonymous online nature of the interviews it was impossible to verify if they told the truth about their age, I did everything I could to ensure that no minors were included in the sample (some volunteers did decline the interview once they found out they were not eligible due to their age). Before the interview began, participants were also presented with an Informed Consent form (see Appendix 4), and at the end I repeatedly informed them that I might quote their words in the dissertation and a possible resulting book, asking if they wished to take anything out. I also allowed them to choose what pseudonym they wanted – some asked to use their actual screen name, while others picked another moniker. In a few cases, where two subjects chose the same pseudonym, I shortened one of them to its initial letter.

I interviewed 27 volunteers from the sites I participated in (13 from HGRPG, 10 from AoM, 3 from L2R, and 1 from AeRo). In addition, I also conducted shorter interviews with people from the RPG Directory website, an online gathering place for forum gamers. 19 of them responded to my call for volunteers, and answered a shorter list on non-site-specific questions. With all of these interviews combined, I gathered information from a total of 46 individuals.

**Questions.** I arranged all interviews along the lines of a set of open-ended questions about the players’ general gaming experience. After each answer I asked follow-up questions to get to more individual details, opinions, and examples. The originally prepared set of questions
and generic follow-ups was as follows (not necessarily in this order, due to the free-flowing nature of the resulting conversations):

*How long have you been role-playing on forums?*

*How many forums do you currently play on?*

*Do you play other kinds of role-playing games? Which kinds?*

*Why did you start playing on forums?*

*How did you find out about forum gaming?*

*How do you usually choose which forums to play on?*

*How many characters do you have?*

*What are some of the things you like about role-playing on forums?*

*What are some of the things that you dislike about role-playing on forums, or problems you have run into?*

*Do you think you learned things or gained skills from playing on forums?*

*Have you ever started a forum / been present on one from the start? Have you ever experienced one closing, moving, or changing drastically over time?*

*How do you choose a face claim for your characters?*

*Do you use music for inspiration, for posts or for characters?*

*Do you use character templates? If yes, do you make them?*

In addition to these generic questions, aimed at the overall forum gaming experience, I also gathered and used as needed a second set of follow-up questions that were specific to the participant observation sites. The most often asked follow-up questions were (organized by site):

**HGRPG:** *Have you ever had a tribute in the Games? If yes, what was the experience like? Did you ever win? What do you think about the site’s fight system? What is your favorite*
thing about the Games? Did you have a favorite year/arena? Do you have a favorite District? Do you do anything to raise your chances in the Reaping? Have you ever been a Gamemaker or a tutor? If yes, what was that like?

**AeRo:** Do you have a background in history? What are your sources for Roman culture? How historically accurate do you think a character should be?

**L2R:** What is it like to play a canon character? How closely to the original canon do you play your characters? Do you have a canon face claim (why or why not)? What are your sources for your character’s personality? What are your thoughts on canon vs. non-canon ships?

**AoM:** What is your inspiration for ships? Do you have a favorite type of ship? Have you ever had a ship that did not work out? What part of a character do you come up with first?

In most cases, participants were eager to share their preferences and opinions, and provided abundantly long answers to many of the questions without prompting. In some cases where they brought specific examples to their creative endeavors, I asked them to provide links or screenshots, and acquired their approval for including them in my research. In general, the interview phase of the project was very much enlightening, and instead of merely providing data for interpretation, it also actively shaped the focus of my overall research questions and interests. It was clear from the way participants detailed their gaming experience that they were not only eager to share, but also very much aware of the underlying motives and interests that shape their gaming practices.

**Key Research Questions of the Project**

I began this research project with one overarching question: *Why do people play forum-based role-playing games?* I wanted to know what draws thousands of players to this style of
gaming specifically, when they have so many other, more high-profile options to choose from.

The easiest way to learn the answer, of course, was to ask the players themselves: This is why the interview phase of the project was essential. For example, almost all of my interview subjects claimed that they also play other forms of RPGs (such as videogames or tabletop games) – effectively disproving the general belief that forum games are a “substitute” in the lack of other options. The majority of participants named forum gaming as their preferred style of gaming over others, something they specifically sought out and valued for its unique features.

In order to explore why people are drawn to forum-based role-playing, I had to gain comprehensive understanding of what the key features of forum games are. Therefore, the first generic research question yielded a second, more specific one: *What are the most common features of forum games?* Are there enough of them to describe forum-based role-playing as a distinct style of gaming? I used the large-scale coding sample and textual analysis to answer this question, as I described earlier. Once I had a list of features, I used participant observation to gain experience with how they fit together in practice, and asked interview subjects to explain how they used and understood them.

The third question emerged from the research process itself. The more forums I visited and coded, and the more time I spent as a participant observer, the more it became clear that forum-based game narratives are inherently multimodal. Not only are many modes used to create one coherent story, but they are also applied consciously and with great awareness of their possible uses and meaning-making capabilities. I became interested in how forum-based role-playing was not only a form of digital storytelling – but also a form of multimodal narrative creation. Thus, a new research question emerged: *How do forum gamers use different modes to construct and convey coherent narratives?* This question guided my analysis of the formidable
amount of data gathered over the course of ten months. At the beginning of the interview phase, I decided to focus on topics that helped me understand not only what players like about forum games, but also how they see the different modes fitting together.

Based on all three phases of the project, I distinguished seven different modes that are in use: Linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, spatial, numeric, and temporal. Out of the seven, the first one – language and written text – stood out as the core unique feature of forum gaming, and the foremost drawing power that made people gravitate towards these sites. Interview subjects talked at length and in detail about their passion for the written word, and the connections of text-based gaming to their everyday skills, interests, and experiences. Participant observation taught me that many of the above mentioned modes could be limited or even ignored – but without written text, forum gaming would be nonexistent. Because of this, the first chapter of analysis solely focuses on language in all its complexity, and the many ways it is regulated on forum gaming sites. This chapter also highlights some of the most commonly claimed reasons why forum gamers prefer this style over others, and how it is distinct from them. The second analysis chapter details the other six modes, exploring how they make up narratives and convey different types of information. In addition to further exploring what players like about building multimodal stories in a digital space, this second chapter on multimodality also points forward to possible future research. The complexity and communal aspect of forum gaming makes in an intriguing example of digital storytelling, one that could be applied to creating new forms of education, or new ways of meaning-making in an increasingly networked society.
CHAPTER 3. THREAD BY THREAD, POST BY POST: SHAPING LANGUAGE AND NARRATIVE IN FORUM GAMES

“RP is nifty collaborative storytelling, and it can't be replaced with individual writing or with reading a book; rather, it sort of blends both of those things together.”

(Jen, interview subject)

People come to forum-based role-playing sites for various reasons. Many are looking to immerse themselves in their favorite fandom; some come in hopes of making friends from all over the world; others seek to expand their creative boundaries, or practice a foreign language. Whatever the case, however, there is one thing that holds true for all of them: If they don’t like to write, they will not stick around for long.

The single most important feature of forum-based role-playing is that it is based on written language. Forum games are categorized as “text-based” games along with things like MUDs, MOOs, and social media role-playing. The core of meaning-making in this form of storytelling is the linguistic mode. Stories emerge through play (narrative and linguistic), seemingly spun out of thin air and unbridled creativity. Through participation and observation, however, it becomes clear that both the use of language, and the creation of narratives, are carefully regulated on these sites. Administrators implement written rules (incidentally, an exercise in technical writing itself) that everyone is required to follow – but even beyond the word of the (site) law, players carefully negotiate their choices with each other, and with the moderators watching over them all. Language, as Bruffee claims, is a “community construct”
that “constitutes, defines, and maintains the knowledge community that fashions it” (1999, p. 55). The language of forum gaming could not be effectively studied without paying attention to how it shapes the community, and how the community regulates itself through language.

In this chapter, I examine forum games through these choices, options, and practices, in order to offer a picture of text-based role-playing in its full complexity. First, keeping with my intention to explore forum games at the intersection of narrative and play, I focus on collaboration, interaction, and improvisation, as the most important features in the creation of narratives. Next, I examine the written and unspoken rules regulating language and narrative on these sites, and their effects on the resulting stories. Last, I offer some insight into the importance and possible applications of text-based gaming, through the testimonies of players who described to me what kinds of knowledge and skills they gained from writing as play.

Since written text is the core of forum games, some of their most common features and customs are also described in this chapter. While each one of them would merit its very own in-depth study, I hope to use them to provide examples of the richness of these sites, and the complexity of interactions in their communities that provide the fertile soil from which stories spring up. One might browse a forum RP site as a casual visitor, scrolling through threads as if reading a novel – but such an outsider would miss out on much of the craft, creativity, planning, and fun that gives birth to the narratives. In this case, it is definitely worth seeing how the sausage is made.

**Improvisation and Collaboration**

Language used in forum-based role-playing is shaped by a number of factors. In order to contextualize these sites as both play and narrative, the first and foremost to focus on is the
element of collaboration – the fact that text emerges from play. Language is negotiated and adjusted by multiple (often a large number of) people working towards a common goal. This goal might not be any defined narrative arc or desired end point – it might just be the adventure of co-creation itself, and the emergence of a coherent, continuous narrative. Text is created by a community of individuals, so much so that collaboration is not only encouraged – it is often required. Multiple forums I have observed had explicit rules against posting “solos” (threads written by only one person) or “role-playing with yourself” - unless these one-shots fulfilled a specific purpose, such as revealing a character’s thoughts in the form of a diary entry. Even on sites that had no such rules written down, participants only posted one-shots on occasion, and never at the expense of playing with somebody else. People, after all, join these sites to play with others, not to write alone. Collaboration was mentioned by more than half of my interview subjects as one of the foremost positive aspects when they were asked what they like about forum gaming – and these were just the people that used that specific word. Almost all of them talked about how writing with, and alongside, others offered both challenge and enjoyment in their forum gaming experience. As one player pointed out:

I also like the unpredictability of play-by-post roleplaying. I don't usually surprise myself when I'm writing alone - for obvious reasons, I guess. You don't know what your writing partners are going to do until they do it, and sometimes that's the best part.

The interest in collaborative writing is not new to the field of composition studies; in fact, it has been researched in depth and detail. The popular notion that writing is necessarily a solitary act has been refuted by various scholars (Ede & Lunsford 1990, p. 7; Bruffee 1999, pp. 54-55; Speck 2002, p. 2; Shipka 2011, p. 31-38). What makes forum games especially interesting
as a form of collaborative writing is that they happen through acts of play, and therefore they place the emphasis on the process, rather than the final product. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, in their book *Singular texts / Plural authors*, criticized scholars’ (Kenneth A. Bruffee’s, among others) insistence on focusing their explorations of collaborative writing on the finished text, rather than the process, or limiting the concept of collaboration to peer review of texts already drafted by single authors (1990, p. 7). They suggested that scholarship should focus on the processes of co-authorship instead, and that writing should be examined as a larger scope of activities beyond simply putting words onto paper (1990, p. 20-21). Their working definition of ‘writing’ encompasses “any of the activities that lead to a completed written document,” including “written and spoken brainstorming, outlining, note-taking, organizational planning, drafting, revising, and editing” (1990, p. 14). This importance of process is echoed in Jody Shipka’s work, *Toward a composition made whole*, talking about the inclusion of activities that lead up to the creation of texts (2011, p. 147). Shipka calls these contributions to the writing process “nonwriterly activites” – “technologies that students use to create or sustain the conditions for engaging in these activities,” and mentions gaming among them (2011, p. 10).

Interestingly enough, forum-based role-playing games seem to fulfill most criteria that scholars of collaborative writing have deemed essential to successful (student) projects. Bruffee claims that project that allow students (participants) to talk to their peers about what they are writing every step of the process, rather than a teacher (outsider) is an important goal in collaborative learning – and also an opportunity that forum games inherently provide (1999, p. 58-59). For another example, Ede and Lunsford’s concept of “substantial collaborative writing assignments” calls for: 1. Time for group cohesion; 2. Inviting collaboration through specialized tasks and their synthesis; 3. Allowing the negotiation of authority and responsibility and the
evolution of group norms; 4. Encouraging and allowing creative conflict and protecting minority views; 5. Allowing peer- and self-evaluation; and 6. Calling on students (participants) to monitor and evaluate to reflect on the collaborative process (1990, p. 123-124). All of these elements are present in forum-based role-playing; for example, negotiations of authority manifest through the selection of moderators, and evaluations happen through reward and appreciation systems.

The element of surprise, the unpredictability of emergent narratives was a recurring theme in the players’ interviews as well. More than a third of them mentioned it as a positive, desirable aspect of forum gaming, and one of its major draws. Most players on forums adopt an improvisative, “yes, and” attitude towards responding to others’ posts (and cases when they don’t – to be discussed later in this chapter - are often seen as unacceptable behavior). Once a post is made, whoever has the next turn is expected to accept whatever happened in it, and continue the story. Things are only retroactively edited if a post breaks the logical flow of the narrative, or states something that the character itself could not possibly know. For example, I had a couple of initial issues on some sites, when my lack of expertise in formatting text resulted in my writing partners not being able to tell if my character was “speaking” or “thinking,” and responded to the latter as if it had been said out loud (I discuss the importance of post layouts in the next chapter). In these cases I had to clarify to my writing partner what happened, and they edited their post accordingly. However, interestingly enough, not even all of these cases required editing, given the creative flexibility of the game. In one instance, my role-playing partner’s character happened to possess telepathic powers, so if I wished, I could explain the OOC (out of character) slip in communication as the psychic accidentally reading my character’s mind, and build on that in my next post – moving the narrative forward, rather than retroactively “fixing” something just to continue the way I hoped it would go. A player named Cloud described the
experience in an interview like this: “Roleplaying has certainly taught me [...] the merits of a meticulously outlined plot versus an organically unfolding plot.” Meticulously outlined plots, in my experience, were few and far between in the forum gaming world. Whenever people were not completely satisfied with the results of an ongoing thread, they usually voiced their concerns – but they were also often willing to compromise, and give up some of their expectations in exchange for a better collaborative experience. Retroactive editing was rare, and often happened for fun rather than because of a misunderstanding. Every once in a while I would talk to a role-playing partner over chat about what they just posted, and say something along the lines of “I would have loved it if your character had...” Sometimes, the response was “Oh, that would have been hilarious! Let me go back and edit that in.” In these cases, the narrative did not technically require “fixing,” but the additional details, according to the cooperating players, enhanced it enough to be worth the trouble of editing. All of these changes happened fairly fast. I have not encountered any instances where older posts (several steps earlier in the narrative) would have been changed for any reason. Entire threads of story arcs might have been nulled (e.g. if a player left, and someone else took on their character), but individual posts were left as they were.

Despite the general excitement for “surprise” on the forums, there were also a few voices claiming different opinions: They pointed out that it can be frustrating if a plot does not progress the way one wanted it to go. When I interviewed players from AoM, a site built on romance stories, I often asked them if they had ever had a ship not work out. Shipping is aptly described in the context of fan fiction by Deborah Kaplan as “the justification of the romantic pairing between two characters” (2006, p. 136). In forum game settings, ship can refer to any kind of a relationship between characters, although it is still often used for romantic pairings, especially on romance genre sites like AoM. Despite the fact that many of them are pre-planned – the
characters are literally “meant for each other” from creation – they do not always result in a satisfying story. Several players answered the above question with a yes, listing instances when ships failed for various reasons. Some of them were IC (in character) – the characters themselves just did not click, they did not fit together. In a few cases, the players themselves had no posting chemistry. Posting chemistry (sometimes called thread chemistry or simply chemistry) was a term often used when players described how well they worked together. On player on Bellefonte Academy told me that it is “one of the most important factors to roleplaying in general.” They also added: “I have never, hands down, enjoyed a thread where I had no thread chemistry with my partner. […] If the thread chemistry is there, you can do just about anything together and have loads of fun.” When asked what they do in cases when ships fail, AoM players told me that they would “break up” the characters, and search for others that would make a more suitable match. What was often heavy and emotional IC drama was handled OOC – in most cases - with polite negotiation. One of the more difficult cases was described in an interview by Vixen, a player and admin on AoM:

My character, […] whom I created for someone else's wanted ad, actually had a failed out plot. Everything was fine initially. The plot and threads were going all right, but the role-player of the other character actually began making uncomfortable remarks and started sort of god-modding [my character’s] reactions and actions to things even though it's my job to do that. I eventually dropped the ship and kept [the character].... It's very awkward. Because, on one hand, I wanted to keep the ship out of obligation […], but on the other hand, it did bother me a lot and I wasn't comfortable continuing the ship. He's shipped with [another character] now. 100x better.
This working concept of posting chemistry is especially interesting when examined in relation to collaborative writing. Ede and Lunsford note that negotiating different writing styles, and people insisting on using their own chosen style, is a “recurrent problem” in collaborative writing projects (1990, p. 61). While writing style might only be one element of posting chemistry, it is certainly an important factor in whether or not players decide to keep creating stories together on the long run.

In order to avoid uncomfortable experiences, collaboration and improvisation have to be carefully balanced in forum games. While most people enjoy the element of surprise or unexpected turns in the narrative, and most players adopt the improvisational “yes, and” attitude, it would be unrealistic to claim that nothing about the emergent narratives is planned before it is written. In fact, planning – known in forum gaming slang as *plotting* – is a very important feature on most sites. When a new character is created, players often start a *plotter* (also known as *shipper* on some sites) thread in a dedicated OOC sub-board, where other players who want a thread with them can sign up, suggest scenarios, and plan. “Let’s plot!” is an often seen sentence in chat rooms, an invitation to bounce ideas, a call to collaboration with a fellow player.

It is interesting to examine forum gamers’ understanding of the term “plot.” In Chapter 1, I introduced several narrative scholars who defined plot, story, and narrative in various ways. Bruner distinguished between narrative (what happened) and plot (the order in which a reader becomes aware of what happened) (1986, p. 19). Other scholars echoed the distinction between order of occurrence and order of narration (Chatman 1980, p. 118; Goodman 1980, p. 104; Huisman 2005, p. 36-37; White 1980, p. 9). Forum gamers, however, see plotting as a way of determining both occurrences and their order of narration. Plotting refers to deciding up front where a story is headed, how a character will develop, or in what direction a ship is progressing –
and also making practical decisions such as which part of the story should they role-play out first, which scenes are worth embellishing in a thread, which ones can be skipped and merely implied, who starts the new thread, etc. Plotting can happen in various forms, and to various extent, depending on the site and the players. Organized loosely from most to least improvisational, the scale might look like this:

1. *Encounter.* In this case, players simply agree that their characters should meet. Whoever volunteers to start the thread has the freedom to set up the place, the time, and the situation their character is in, inviting the other(s) to find their own way of introducing their character(s). All that is pre-planned is who’s participating.

2. *Opening situation.* In threads like this, players agree on the fact of the encounter, as well as the general nature of it. For example, I can state: “My character, Kate, wants to try to sneak into the Avengers Tower. Would you be up for catching her as she climbs through a window?” If the other player says yes, we have a general starting situation (that I am responsible for setting up as I open the thread), from which point on we will improvise.

3. *Scene.* In these cases players agree on the general narrative direction an entire thread would take. For example, one might say: “My character just broke up with her girlfriend and she is very upset. Would you like to cheer her up?” In this case, the agreement does not just involve the opening situation (a friend walking in on a crying girl), but also the desired end point toward which the story will progress (by the end of the thread, the friend will succeed in cheering up the heartbroken girl). How the end goal is achieved, and what happens between the two plot points, is up to improvisation.

4. *Miniplot.* This is a sequence of events that is planned to span multiple threads; it usually includes character development. Miniplots are most often player-created and player-
driven; some might require approval from the moderators (such as pregnancy plots, see later in this chapter), but they don’t usually affect the larger story of the site. Loose ends and story seeds from a character’s background can often blossom into miniplots. For example, one of the players on AoM had a character that had been murdered and came back as an angel (one of the playable species on the site). While the murder itself happened in the character’s past, and was only mentioned in her bio, her character arc called for a multi-thread story about how the murderers were eventually discovered and brought to justice, allowing the angel to get closure about her own death. This reminded me of Hayden White’s claim that a narrative is not only a sequence of events – it also needs to have a meaning or a point, in order to constitute a story (White 1980). The statement that the angel had been murdered in the past was simply the mention of an event – but role-playing out how that made her feel, and how she eventually found closure, narrativized the event, turning it into a story with meaning and emotional impact.

Wanted ads (wanteds) also often fall into this category. They are advertisements where people put out a call for a character that would play a significant role in their own character’s life. Lethe, one of the players on AoM, graciously allowed me to use their wanteds as an illustration (Figure 1). Since most characters on AoM are created with a love story in mind, they are always in need of a soulmate (or two) played by someone else; players pour a lot of creativity and effort into creating enticing templates for their wanteds, and promoting the plots they would like to role-play out with others. The example below displays two calls for Soulmates, and one for “blind ships”, the most improvisative form of shipping on the site:
Figure 1. Wanted ads posted on AoM by Lethe.

All of Me, November 2016.
Wanteds often involve the basic points of how they expect the relationship to unfold. For example, one of my characters on AeRo, the Roman history site, was created for a wanted where a player was looking for a husband for her character. She wanted the character (Gaia) to have a challenging husband, someone who would be overbearing, annoying, and possibly abusive on the long run – in order to turn an idealistic girl into a powerful Roman matron. Since playing such a character was out of my comfort zone, I agreed to do it as an experiment. We struck a middle ground, and I created Publius, an entitled and lazy Roman nobleman who, while he loved Gaia, was a constant annoyance to his clever wife due to his womanizing, drinking, and general lack of ambition. Their relationship was pre-planned as it had to hit certain plot points – courtship, wedding, fights over ambition, pregnancy, cheating, etc. – but the individual threads and additional events were mostly improvised. Both Publius and Gaia were simultaneously also involved in other storylines and other events; miniplots do not usually aim to be the sole story told about a character.

5. Site(-wide) events. These are story arcs that are pre-planned by the moderators of a site. Players can choose whether or not to participate in them, but they usually come with a certain set of rules, and narrative points that everyone needs to adhere to. For example, the three annual Hunger Games were such events on HGRPG: They were moderated by the Gamemakers, and had long lists of rules and practices to keep the story progressing in an orderly fashion. In these cases, individual threads that were part of the event were not only in some of the previous 4 planning stages, but they also had to fall in line with the overarching story. This structure was reminiscent of serialized television dramas where there is a self-contained story every week (“monster of the week,” “murder of the week”), but also longer, more elaborate season-long plots that the writers of every episode need to maintain.
This form of narrative creation – agreeing on plot points, rather than details – is incidentally very similar to the way oral storytellers work, echoing Larry Friedlander’s claim that certain forms of digital storytelling might return to premodern storytelling (2008, p. 108). Oral tradition very rarely treats a story as text (a collection of pre-composed sentences, paragraphs, and dialogues), but rather as a set of moments or evocative images that have to be connected by improvisational language. Plotting in forum games is not the planning of exactly what will be written – rather, it is the stating of what happens next. It organizes narrative, not language.

One would assume that since events on forums “happen” as they are written, all plots would unfold chronologically – but that is often not the case (I discuss the role of the temporal mode in detail in the next chapter). There can be various reasons why one part of a story might be role-played out before another, even if they happen sequentially in the narrative – and all of these changes affect the language used in telling the story. Some flashbacks and flash-forwards happen for technical reasons. If a thread progresses very slowly due to the absence of a player, the others might move on to role-play out an event that happened one week later IC, without knowing exactly how the previous scene ended. In these cases, language and references to the past are handwaved, kept deliberately vague in order to help the story move forward without any inconsistencies. A player might use language that can be interpreted in various ways, such as writing “after that mess last week….” instead of describing specific events as “after winning the fight last week...” In these cases, the later thread also formed a sort of narrative goal – whatever would happen by the end of the earlier one, it could not alter the opening situation of the next.

Another chronological twist often happened when new players and new characters joined the site. For example, a character that had been active for (IC) years might suddenly get a sibling that was created as a response to a wanted ad. In this case, the players of the two siblings would
often role-play out past threads to establish childhood events and the emotional connection
between their characters, often at the same time as their “current” narratives were unfolding as
well. References to past events would appear in present threads as they were written out –
creating a richer narrative over time, but not holding the characters back from being active in the
site’s present, and engaging with others. These threads were often labeled as “flashbacks,” using
some of the same terminology as scholars use for exploring narrative order (Goodman 1980, p.
105-106). “Flashforwards” were a lot rarer – although I did observe a few site events that
involved characters getting a glimpse of their possible future(s).

Plotting, as important a role as it plays on the sites, is often taken loosely. I have observed
countless occasions where threads took an “unexpected turn,” surprising everyone involved.
More often than not, players were more than willing to roll with such events, finding enjoyment
in the element of surprise mentioned earlier. They were willing to abandon a pre-planned plot for
one that they suddenly found better, or at least more intriguing. As long as it happened with the
consent of everyone involved, scenes, miniplots, and even events could be changed at a whim.
When consent was not given by everyone, rules had to be invoked – they will be discussed in
detail in the following section.

Both collaboration and improvisation require game rules that enable the most amount of
creative freedom, but also have contingencies for cases when difficulties arise. Forum-based
gaming is both writing and play, and play requires a set of rules agreed upon by all participants
in order to provide the “rigid structure” described in Salen and Zimmerman’s definition of games
(2004, p. 304). Since written text is the most important element of forum games, most of these
rules focus on regulating language and narrative, to make the players’ experience enjoyable, and
protect the sites from devolving into narrative (and social) chaos.
Regulating Language and Narrative

Collaborative writers, claim Ede and Lunsford, are able to establish collaborative bonds (with each other as well as their readers) “through the constraints imposed by their highly controlled language” (1990, p. 32). Tailoring the uses of language to the people collaborating, as well as to the audiences their written products might read, allows connections to form and strengthen, and allows messages to be expressed with clarity. Many of the rules involving the use of language and the development of narrative on forum RP sites are fairly uniform (almost formulaic) across the sample, while a few tend to serve more specific purposes based on setting or genre. Some deal with text and language, and others deal with content, or forms of expression; during the coding phase, I observed a wide variety of rules and practices, and the players participating in the interview phase provided insight into their effects on the game play.

Starting with the most elementary form of regulating language, almost half of the sites in the sample had written rules requiring good grammar, proper spelling, a decent grasp on the English language, and “no chat speak.” This latter term, sometimes also called netspeak, text speak, or Internet slang, refers to shortened forms of words (such as “u” instead of “you”, or “m8” instead of “mate”) often used in texting, tweeting, and other short-and-fast forms of written communication. In the forum gaming community, this form of writing in IC posts is generally frowned upon (unless it is within the narrative, e.g. a character texting). As small a problem as it sounds, it was often posited as one of forum gaming’s most bannable offenses.

Another common way of regulating language on forums is rules on tenses and persons used. One third of the sample declared that IC posts have to be written in the third person and past tense, and this seemed to be the unspoken norm on many others as well. While a few noted that players could write in any person and tense they wished, only one of the five sites I observed
actively made use of all of them: HGRPG. Players there had their own personal favorite tenses/persons to use in their posts, and the active threads on the site showed great variety in this regard. As a player I have gotten used to 3rd person/past tense over the years, therefore it was jarring at first to see someone write in 1st person/present tense on a forum site; but I soon adjusted both my posts and my expectations to whoever I was role-playing with in any given thread. I did this for a sense of consistency, but by far not all other players did so – it was not uncommon to read threads where one player wrote in a different person/tense than another. Some players switched styles between characters or between threads as they felt most comfortable, or as they developed familiarity with different ways of writing. Some interview subjects told me that they learned to write in certain persons/tenses through playing on the site. Some had initially preferred first person present tense (incidentally, the way The Hunger Games books were written), while others, like myself, wrote in third person unless inspired (or challenged) otherwise. Lancelot, a player on the site, explained the benefits of third person writing in an interview thus: “It forces me to add a bit more detail and work a bit harder to make the writing good than the other two do, which in my opinion has led to some of my best writing.” Second person, while rare in literary fiction, was also used on multiple sites as a format for character bios. It is conducive to emotionally evocative language, and creates an established, almost conversational connection between player and character. As an example, here is the opening paragraph from a character bio on AoM, written by a player named Lethe and introducing a character named Neveah:

*Your childhood is a blur, with flashbulb memories that haunt you as you sleep. Your mother died giving birth to you, leaving your father in a terrible state.*

*At first he didn't do much. He took care of you to an extent, but he was slow to*
respond to cries and gradually got bitter and angry whenever you woke him up

bright in the morning.

Lethe told me that they usually used first or second person for sad or emotional character bios because it felt more personal. The character bio is the first thing a player creates when a new character is born; therefore it is also their first piece of writing where they try to get a feel of the character’s personality, and the writing style that would best represent it. Another player who writes bios almost exclusively in second person, however, claimed that they were better at conveying factual information about the character, while they reserved third person posts for depicting emotions. Second person therefore, while not very common, was not only present in forum gaming, but it was also very consciously chosen by players to achieve their storytelling goals.

This focus on tense and person, while it might seem like micromanaging at first, speaks a lot about how forum games position themselves as text. They don’t usually describe actions in the way it is customary in tabletop games: Nobody simply states “I enter the dungeon” or “I draw my sword” in a post. Instead, forum texts are seen as storytelling, not unlike writing a novel: Posts are created for the reading pleasure of others (fellow players and lurking readers), and meant to link up into a continuous narrative, with the characters as protagonists. Consistency is the most often cited reason on sites that have a strict tense/person rule: They wish to make the stories in threads flow as if they were one continuous text, without abrupt changes in person and tense. Compared to other forms of role-playing, the instant gratification of action and achievement present in tabletop and video gaming is exchanged for the enjoyment of “writing a good story,” and finding out “what happened next.”
Regulating the use of English, as opposed to other languages, presented a variety of attitudes across the sample. Some sites encouraged ESL players to join, offering feedback on their writing and a supportive community; others had “absolutely no foreign languages” policies, or required tags for threads that were not written in English. In many cases it was expected as a common courtesy to translate character dialogue written in another language (for example, if one of my characters spoke Hungarian, I would have to supply a translation for my readers, usually as a footnote in the post). Despite the seemingly strict regulations, foreign languages were often used as flavor – spoken by characters of different ethnic origins, or as a nod towards the setting. AeRo, for example, included a lot of Latin terms and phrases within the English dialogue, such as calling women ‘domina’, referring to households as ‘domus’, or calling characters by their titles (‘primus pilus’). Other games featured characters with strong accents. In the case of L2R, within the canon of the Marvel Universe, characters like Rogue or Gambit of the X-men would speak with staple Southern/Cajun accents that the players were encouraged to replicate in writing.

These practices and regulations involving foreign languages become especially important in the study of forum gaming when one realizes that many players on English-language forums (such as myself) are not native English speakers. Depending on the rules, some sites might attract, or repel, non-native speakers, changing the linguistic and cultural makeup of their player community. A few of my interview subjects offered insight into their experiences as ESL players. Many of them saw writing in English as a challenge, and a way to improve their vocabulary and composition skills; some reported significant improvements in their command of the language. I can confirm this from my own personal experience. Compared to what my first posts were like when I began playing on forums seven years ago, my composition skills show a
clear improvement; I also write posts a lot faster, and with less mistakes, than I did in the beginning. I have joined Spanish language forums in the past to keep my Spanish skills up to date. Choosing to play on English-language sites, therefore, is not simply a matter of convenience for non-native speakers – they could role-play in their native languages if they wanted to. This is confirmed by the fact that during the coding phase of my research I have encountered numerous forum-based role-playing sites in other languages such as Spanish, French, and even Hungarian. More research should be conducted to gage the educational potential of forum games in the field of ESL; the signs of the discussion are already present within the player community, and affect how language is used within the games.

Another common form of regulating text on forum RP sites is the word count. It is a staple feature of forum gaming, one that appears in the rules even when there are no rules – in fact, many sites advertise themselves as “No Word Count” sites, to distinguish from others where a minimum word count is required. In the interviews, several players expressed opinions coming down on either side of the issue (“no word count” vs “X minimum word count”). When asked about what criteria they select sites by, some said that a minimum word count would ensure “quality writing,” while others dismissed it as a nuisance or a cumbersome obligation. The latter claimed that having to adhere to a minimum (usually around 200 words) just felt too much like “work,” adding pressure to something they merely thought of as an enjoyable hobby with no serious obligations. Some also saw word count as a restriction to the player base; a player named Tom explained: “I prefer no length requirement just because I like to see all types of people being able to roleplay. New writers, old writers, more experienced writers.” Whichever the case, word count is one of the most common forms of regulating text on forums, so much so that many use it to describe themselves in their advertisements. About one quarter of the sample required
posts that were 150-300 words minimum, and several asked for 1-3 paragraphs; a third of the sample consisted of “no word count” sites. There were grey areas on both sides. Sites that required no minimum count often did so with the caveat of “make a decent effort,” expecting players to post significantly more than just a stray sentence or two. On the other hand, many sites “suggested” or “encouraged” minimum word counts, but did not actively enforce them.

Word count rules are not primarily concerned with the quality of writing – rather, they exist because longer posts give role-playing partners more information to respond to, and build upon, in their own posts. Players tend to “pad” word counts with descriptions and inner monologues, providing context for the story and insight into their character’s thinking; all of this information can be used by the next person to flesh out the narrative. One- or two-sentence posts are often restricted to what a character does and/or says, with no descriptive text; at a glance, threads like that read as a script, or a chat room, rather than a narrative. Forum games hold detailed and eloquent descriptions in high esteem, and describing characters’ thoughts and emotions is a very useful tool for developing them further.

Some sites incentivize longer posts by offering rewards by word count. For example, HGRPG holds a “Post-a-thon” before the start of each Hunger Games, asking players to set a word count goal for themselves (no less than 5,000 words). Anyone who meets their projected count within two weeks receives in-game money (to be spent on sponsoring their favorite tributes in the Games), and the people who exceed it the most receive additional rewards. One of the winners I observed had a word count of almost 21,500, after aiming for an initial 7,000. The Post-a-thon did not only inspire players to write longer posts, but also to be more active, make new characters, start new threads, and reach out to play with people they had not interacted with
before. Several templates used on the site came with built-in word count brackets for players to note and follow their accomplishments.

The most often used way of regulating both language and narrative on forums is content rating – so much so that sites have their own rating system, usually referred to as RPGR. It comes with a plug-in that is easily coded into any site, and contains three numbers that correspond to levels of content allowed. The website for the app gives the reasons for its use as follows:

*When deciding whether or not to join an RPG, many members say that among their most important considerations is the rating: How much swearing, sex, and violence can I expect? The RPG Rating System lets admins assign a level for how much harsh language, sexual content, and violence is allowed at your rpg. The Rating was created because ratings for other media just didn't quite fit with what roleplayers needed. The rating is not a value judgement on content - it doesn't mean that using bad words is Wrong - but rather, it's a way for roleplays to know how intense that content is so they can decide what they enjoy.*”

(RPGR, 2016)

The RPGR system consists of three numbers, all of them ranging from 0 to 3, with 0 being “None allowed at all,” and 3 standing for “No (or few) limitations.” The first number corresponds to Language, the second to Sex, and the third one to Violence. The rating of a site, therefore would look something like this: L2 / S1 / V3 – meaning that strong language is generally permitted (barring extreme examples), only the lightest sexual themes are allowed, and violence can be described with no limitations. Since these ratings limit the creative expression of the players, many people pay close attention to them when choosing a site to play on, and most
sites make an effort to display their settings in easily visible places (the importance of layout is discussed in the next chapter). Out of the 28 sites in my sample that used RPGR, twelve were 3/3/3, five were 2/2/2, four were 2/1/2, another four 3/2/3, two were 3/2/2, and one was 1/1/2. It is interesting to note that sexual content is usually the lowest number of the three categories.

RPGR is not the only “official” rating system in use. Sometimes restrictions come from “higher up” – not from the creators or administrators of the forum, but from the host itself. Jcink, one of the most commonly used forum hosts, for example, only allows “adult content” on premium sites – meaning that forum staff has to pay a fee and update the forum to “Premium” before they can allow a rating like 3/3/3 for their players.

Official or self-imposed, almost all (91) forums I coded had specific written rules about strong language, violence, and sexual themes. The ones that did not use RPGR usually described their restrictions though the MPAA movie content rating system. Several of them had both, just to be sure. Almost half of the sample was tagged as PG, PG13, or 13+; a third was tagged as M, Mature, or 18+. Almost all the boards that allowed “adult content” in any form had rules about using specific restricted (sometimes password protected) sub-boards for adult threads, or applying [M] tags to mark the threads that contained adult scenes. In some cases during my participation on forums that allowed mature content, threads were tagged after the fact – when the story took an unexpected darker or riskier tone, one of the players had to go back and apply the [M] tag to the thread. This was occasionally done “just in case,” when players anticipated that some content might toe the “mature” line in the eyes of some readers. Several forums with adult themes also had restrictions on the age of the characters. Minimum age ranged from 11 to 18, and any sexual activity had to involve characters that were over the age of consent.
Apart from strong language, graphic sex, and violence, certain themes were often restricted even further. Sexual themes specifically were often restricted beyond the scope of the ratings, with further rules about “no graphic details” or requiring “fade to black” (a scene that cuts out before the sexual act begins). Since most forums are publicly available for reading even without logging in, and therefore also available to search engine bots, these restrictions are usually applied by creators to avoid the site being tagged as “pornographic.” Related to the topic of sexual activity rape, incest, pedophilia, and pregnancy were often especially forbidden or frowned upon. While the first three are understandable concerns for sites that might have underage players and readers, the latter requires further explanation. Several sites allowed no character pregnancies at all, and others required staff approval for pregnancy plots. In some cases these rules were implemented because the setting involved teenagers – high school RP sites are a common example. Teen pregnancies specifically were often labeled as “restricted content,” requiring staff permission and/or warning tags. Charmed, a Victorian era Harry Potter site, pointed out that in the given the historical setting, pregnant students would be expelled from the school (and therefore have no reason to be present on the site). Gossamer, a multi-fandom RP, banned pregnancies for a different reason: They are a canon-only setting, and children born to canon characters would be, by definition, non-canon. Several sites that did allow pregnancies (or, in the case of canine, equine, feline, or other non-human-character sites, “breeding”) had rules about consent from both potential parents’ players, in order to avoid OOC arguments when one player “forced” a pregnancy plot on someone else. Rape, similarly, was generally reserved for [M] plots where both players agreed on it (usually for character development). Incest, according to my observations, was very uncommon, although it did appear occasionally, representing a sub-section of fandom (incest is a frequent theme in fan fiction). The one incestuous story I
observed during my fieldwork was love between two brothers – interestingly, the “drama” of the plot solely revolved around their coming out as homosexual, while the fact that they were related was never raised in the narrative as an issue. No players seemed to have a problem with (or expressed any negative opinions about) the incest element of this story (for a discussion on romanticizing sibling incest in fan fiction, see Tosenberger 2008).

Violence and gore were similarly regulated, although significantly less often than sex. In this case, the most problematic elements were suicide/self-harm and character death. The former was considered a potentially triggering topic, and therefore often required warning labels ([TW] for trigger warning) or staff permission. The latter was most often filed under “no killing PCs without player approval” or “no killing PCs without staff approval” – and in a few cases just plain “NO.” It stands to reason that in games where the players engage with the world through their characters, killing someone else’s character should be tied to mutual consent. Staff approval was most often required as a preemptive measure to monitor “adult” themes, as well as control over characters on canon sites – canon characters are rarely ever approved to die, in case the player leaves and someone else wants to take them on. Several sites also had “dead is dead” rules, preventing narrative loopholes (so often utilized by serialized TV dramas) to bring dead characters back into the game. Whenever the setting merited it, there were some sites that had “afterlife” boards, or options for dead characters to return as ghosts. Depending on the narrative flexibility of the site plot, and the genre of the game, death ranged from a clear breach of conduct to an organic part of the setting. HGRPG provides an example of the latter extreme: The story simply would not work without 23 out of 24 tributes dying in the Hunger Games. Their death scenes were both highly emotional and highly anticipated within the player community.
Restrictions on death, therefore, are dependent on the sites and settings. Gore, graphic violence, and self-harm, being “darker” themes, were more often restricted or banned.

Why implement higher ratings at all, if they are so problematic for staff and players alike? It seems like that, in the world of text-based gaming, with a higher rating comes higher creative freedom. Some of my interview subject expressed approval of 18+ sites, either because they believed that they allow more opportunities for writing freely, or because they disapproved of role-playing with (or alongside) children and teenagers. Players drawn to “darker” characters (villains, tortured souls, monster creatures, etc.) would seek out sites that would allow them access to the full range of linguistic of narrative expression without (perceived) censorship. But even sites that allow or even encourage “adult themes” usually make sure (or attempt to make sure) that their players feel safe, and are not forced to write or read things they are not comfortable with. A lot of this comes down to negotiations between players, and only rarely requires staff intervention. On multiple sites I participated in, when my characters formed intimate relationships with others, I have been asked by players if I was comfortable “writing smut” – or on the contrary, told at a certain point that “we will need to FTB [fade to black]” for their own comfort. On one occasion, I was also offered a compromise: The scene would “fade to black,” then players involved would discuss in a chat room what happened after the FTB (using lists or bullet points, rather than detailed description), and then the scene would resume on the morning after, giving players a chance to write their characters thoughts and reactions according to what had been discussed in the chat. Since the “mature” details were never posted on the site, they did not break the content rating rules – but they still influenced the following narrative, agreed upon by all players involved.
Regulating Language and Narrative through Player Behavior

Apart from grammar rules and content ratings, there are also several types of rules that regulate player behavior, especially the kind that might negatively affect the enjoyment of play and the quality of the emergent narratives. The three most often discussed breaches of forum etiquette are known as godmodding, powerplay, and metagaming. While I have discussed them briefly in the Introduction, I return to them here because all three directly affect how narratives unfold in written role-play. These types of behaviors contain both mistakes in play and mistakes in writing. They are some of the most often regulated across the sample: 71 sites out of 100 had written rules against godmodding, 44 against powerplay, and 25 against metagaming; 14 forbade all three, while godmodding and powerplay were banned together on 43 occasions. It is intriguing to observe that godmodding and powerplay represent two distinctly recognizable player behaviors, but the terms themselves are often used interchangeably, and it is hard to gage from written rules which definition a site is adhering to (unless they explain it in detail). Since they are so often mentioned (and banned) together, this has little practical impact on the implications of regulations, but for the sake of clarity, I have decided to adhere to their definitions as stated below.

*Godmodding* is usually understood as one player declaring actions or reactions for another player’s character. Normally on forum games one player is only responsible for their own character, and write from that perspective. It is considered a breach of conduct to “puppeteer” someone else’s character without their expressed permission. For example, a player could write about their character Jack’s action (“Jack told a joke”), but they could not also describe how another player’s character Lucy would react to it (“Jack told a joke and Lucy laughed hysterically”). This becomes especially important when describing action without the
use of any dice rolls (for detailed discussion on the use of dice and numbers, see the next chapter). Saying “Lucy punched Jack and knocked him out” would qualify as godmodding, since it does not allow the other player a chance to describe their character’s reaction (doesn’t give Jack a chance to dodge). Instead, it is acceptable to write “Lucy threw a punch in Jack’s direction,” and wait for Jack’s player to decide if they want the punch to land. In certain cases, permission can be given through other channels, such as chat or private messages (“Is it okay if I say that the punch landed?”), usually to cut down on the number of posts needed to describe an occurrence. The resulting post might read as godmodding to the outside observer, but if none of the parties involved raises a complaint, then it is likely that the post was the result of previous negotiation and mutual agreement.

*Powerplay* is usually described as a character being presented by their player as too perfect, too strong, too accomplished, or generally overpowered. Following the example above: If Lucy keeps throwing punches at Jack, and Jack keeps “effortlessly dodging” all of her attacks (even though Lucy is a trained warrior and he is not), then it is likely that Jack’s player is powerplaying, tipping the scales of the narrative to present their own character as untouchable and invincible. Since the majority of forum threads don’t include stats or dice to balance out the scales and add an element of luck, players who powerplay can soon become extremely frustrating, and can render a narrative unrealistic.

Characters that are overly perfect from creation are known in Internet slang as a *Mary Sue* (or *Gary Stu*, if they are male). The term originated from the fan fiction community, and it generally refers to a writer’s self-insertion into the narrative through an idealized Original Character (Chander & Sunder 2007, p. 597). Henry Jenkins described Mary Sues in the *Star Trek* fandom (the term’s point of origin) as “idealized images of the writers as young, pretty,
intelligent recruits aboard the Enterprise”, and noted that the fandom tended to be dismissive or suspicious of such characters (2013, p. 171-173). My sample contained 20 sites that expressly forbade the creation of Mary Sues. AoM even had a fake profile for a Mary Sue character (aptly named Maria Sparkledot Lovu Lovu Doki Hime Cherry Blossom Susana, see Figure 2), created by one of the admins named Elsen, filled with all the clichés and narrative pitfalls they expected their players to avoid in character creation.

Mary Sue characters, while they represent their own trope in fan fiction, are generally frowned upon in forum gaming communities because they tend to powerplay. According to popular opinion, they immediately and effortlessly learn the use of all magic and weapons, they are miraculously attractive to all members of the opposite sex around them, and they insist on being the center of attention by fulfilling the role of the “Chosen One” in any narrative they encounter. One character effortlessly succeeding at all narrative challenges while others attempt to portray more realistic situations often leads to player conflict over how the story should go.

The third form of disputed behavior, *metagaming*, refers to discrepancies between the knowledge of characters and their players – or rather, lack thereof. To metagame means to allow one’s character access to knowledge that they could not realistically have, just because their player has it; shortly, it’s the use of OOC knowledge in IC interactions. For example, if someone read a character’s bio and found out that they have a horrible phobia of spiders, and then in the next thread had their own character “accidentally” throw a spider at them to win a fight, that would qualify as metagaming. Instances like that break the logical flow of the written narrative by having characters act upon knowledge that they have no plausible explanation for possessing.

One of my characters on AeRo was a girl disguised as a young boy, wearing bulky clothing and having years of experience in passing as male. As I started a thread with a new
Figure 2. AoM's fake profile of a "Mary Sue" character.  
All of Me, November 2016.
player, they immediately stated that their character “could easily see through the disguise at first glance,” and proceeded to role-play accordingly (most players usually had their characters react with various levels of belief, suspicion, or doubt – and they always asked for my permission on whether they could guess the truth). While I did reluctantly agree that someone might be unexpectedly talented in guessing people’s sex, it still felt like the story was pushed in a direction I did not want it to go. In this case, metagaming was combined with tendencies to power-play, and it shows how these player behaviors can sometimes overlap.

However, metagaming can also occur with the consent of all parties involved, in order to steer a story in an interesting direction. Michael J. Tresca points out that many videogames display the mechanics (points, stats) of characters even if the computer is doing the actual work, to allow (and even encourage) players to make in-game decisions based on that “meta-knowledge” (2011, p. 9). In narrative games such as forum-based RP, “meta-knowledge” is used not for achievement or success in combat, but rather in order to make a better story. For example, giving another player hints of how to throw their character into a plot twist would be allowed in order to create exciting role-playing scenarios: If I told someone that my character had a horrible phobia of spiders, and suggested that their character could show up to a Halloween date in a spider costume, the situation could lead to a fun thread of IC panic, apologies, awkwardness, and, ultimately, character development.

Personal and in-character conflict can spill into each other if players fail to observe the established boundaries between IC and OOC interaction. This effect of IC events on the OOC mood and behavior of players, or the other way around, is known in role-playing studies as bleed (Bowman 2015, March). While often discussed in terms of emotional effects, it can often directly influence the behavior of characters, and therefore shape the unfolding narrative. Twenty
sites in the sample had explicit rules instructing players to “keep IC and OOC separate,” and accept the fact that a player’s character might behave differently than the player itself.

Bowman distinguishes two forms of bleed: *Bleed in* (“the emotions, thoughts, relationship dynamics, and physical states of the player affect the character”) and *bleed out* (the opposite of the former) (2015, March). I have observed examples of both in great frequency on HGRPG during the Hunger Games, and saw their effects on linguistic and narrative choices. Often, players would avoid having their tributes attack another tribute because it belonged to their OOC friend – or the other way around, they would go out of their way to inflict extra damage on the character of someone they were having an OOC conflict with (bleed in). They would also display strong emotions such as sadness, anger, indignation, and grief, when their character was hurt or died in the Games, especially if it was the result of an event that they saw as tragic or unfair (bleed out). Behavior like this, when amicable, was considered nothing out of the ordinary - but when it became confrontational, it could lead to serious player-versus-player arguments, to the point where the moderators needed to step in. On one occasion, a tribute was killed (“hunted”) by others while showing respect to a fallen opponent by performing a funerary ritual – an act that, while not against the rules of the Games IC, was frowned upon OOC because of an unspoken social contract among the players. Other players immediately teamed their tributes up, putting aside IC differences to attack the “hunters” in revenge. The conflict strongly affected relationships between players on the site for the rest of the Games. This event of bleed did not only alter the social network of players, but it also altered the unfolding narrative of the Games itself, making allies out of enemies, and enemies out of neutral parties. Everyone was keenly aware that this was an unusual occurrence, an exceptionally strong example of bleed affecting players and characters alike – some of them even apologized to me as a researcher,
worried that the event would show the site in an unfavorable light. While, as they claimed, there was always some OOC drama during the Games, it very rarely got so far out of hand (in fact, many interview subjects described the community of HGRP as one of the most “drama-free” they have ever encountered). Since I was present as the player of a tribute at the time, I could experience first-hand the rapidly shifting dynamics of the player community, and the turning point in the narrative as new posts went up with fascinating speed (in less than two hours). Many of them were written in language conveying strong emotions, displaying bleed on a level of linguistic choices.

Metagaming and bleed are similar terms, and one can lead to the other, but it is important to attempt to maintain a distinction between them. The former is the conscious and intentional use of OOC information for IC success; the latter is a two-way effect that IC and OOC personalities can have on each other, often without conscious intent or acknowledgement. As Bowman points out, bleed by definition is neither positive nor negative – whether it becomes a valuable experience or a problem depends on how it affects the game, and how players react to it (2015, March). Crossing the IC/OOC boundary is allowed when it is done with the consent of all parties, and applied to further or enhance the narrative - as long as it does not lead to conflict.

All three discouraged behaviors – godmodding, powerplay, and metagaming – have a direct effect on the enjoyment of play, as well as on the narratives that emerge from it. Rules that regulate these behaviors are in place to maintain the consistency of the stories, as well as to reduce player conflict, and make sure no one feels pressured or manipulated into writing situations they are uncomfortable with. Godmodding rules preserve the agency of players over their own characters and their narrative creation; powerplay rules even the field for success and failure to create more narrative tension and more compelling plots; rules against metagaming
ensure that IC and OOC emotions and interactions remain separate from each other. By regulating play, these rules also regulate plot and narrative, and even character development – effectively illustrating how intimately interconnected play and text are in the world of forum gaming.

**Developing Language and Writing Skills**

Collaboration is not only important because it creates new narratives – it also shapes language in forum gaming because it brings people with different levels of writing skills together. Much like fan fiction, forum gaming also carries the stigma of “sub-par” or “derivative” writing – something the player communities vehemently disagree with (Hellekson & Busse 2014, p. 5). When asked about the drawbacks of this style of gaming, several interview subjects pointed out that people, usually outsiders, have very condescending opinions about their quality of writing or narrative originality, and “don't expect actual, high quality writing to be going on” on the sites (Feather). Quite contrary to popular belief, however, players of forum games often credit collaboration with multiple people for visible development in their writing skills. According to them, role-playing with people that they perceive as better writers inspires and challenges them to improve their own writing skills. Some sites, like HGRPG, even offer peer tutoring for beginners, connecting them with veteran players to help them develop various skills. However, this is only one possible avenue for development, and not even the most common – simply playing for an extended period of time would “naturally” enhance players’ linguistic abilities, if the site and its community placed a high enough prestige on quality. This fell in line with academic claims about processes in collaborative learning; it appears that, as Ede and Lunsford point out, participants learn best as they “actively use concepts and ideas or
strategies in order to assimilate them” (1990, p. 121). Learning occurs through doing – in this case, playing.

Some players, however, found that developing skills was not only a side benefit of their favorite hobby, but oftentimes also a necessity. One player, going by the alias Jade, noted: “If you're not a strong writer, you sometimes get singled out and it's hard to find people to write with.” Appreciation and recognition is an important element in forum gaming – but as much as it generates positive outcomes for people whose writing is deemed outstanding by the community, it can also draw interest away from others who are less skilled in the kind of language expected from accomplished role-players. Some sites try to counteract this by randomly matching up players with each other through “thread roulettes,” or other types of writing challenges. This emphasis on peer tutoring echoes Ede and Lunsford’s claim that mentoring ability and leadership are the “characteristics of effective collaborative writers” (1990, p. 66). Since the tutors play and create within the same group as new writers, they can lead through example and inclusion, rather than imparting information from a superior, detached position.

When I interviewed one of the volunteer tutors on HGRPG, nicknamed Zoe, about what kinds of things people ask for help with most often, this is what she said:

*Elements of writing like imagery, description and length, as well as helping to develop or get in the "feel" if you like of a character. We get a lot of ‘I want to write like X member’ so it's all about breaking down elements of X's writing and finding what makes it good, and teaching tutorees [sic] how to apply those skills into their writing.*

“Quality of writing” in this case is defined by the distinct style and language used by the most popular players. Quality in creative writing is a notoriously difficult thing to define or
monitor; Jody Shipka even points out that asking questions such as “is this writing good?” is less productive for a composition made whole than considering a text’s purpose and potential, and asking what it can, and was meant to, accomplish (2011, p. 132). In forum gaming, the only points of reference were the players’ own ideas and opinions on what makes RP writing “good.” These opinions are expressed on most sites through awards and rewards, such as “Of the Month” votes and nominations submitted by the community. HGRPG also had a separate room in their chat room titled “love yourself,” designed for people to share posts they were especially proud of, and get positive reinforcement from their peers. Several sites had “post museum” boards where the most popular pieces of writing were “exhibited” for everyone’s reading pleasure.

Some people had specific goals in mind when they engaged in peer tutoring. Onyx, also from HGRPG, described them in detail, also highlighting the personal aspect of tutoring and the use of creative writing challenges in the process:

Once I had already established a friendship with my tutor - this made me much more comfortable as it gave the tutoring an informal feel which I appreciated - I wanted help with balancing the down-to-earth descriptions in my writing with the emotional descriptions and exploration of feelings. I found the chances to practice my writing through actual writing exercises to be much more helpful than the direct advice I was given as feedback.

Unlike sites specifically designed to help people read-and-critique each other’s writing, forum games provide a playful environment where indirect feedback is given through appreciation and invitations to play. Outside of the context of tutoring, I rarely encountered direct writing advice – but I did receive and observe a lot of encouragement, and appreciative
comments such as “I love your character,” “we should thread!”,” that was an awesome post,” or one of the most honest forms: “You have to read what XY just wrote!”

Over the course of my research I have also often encountered players who began forum-based role-playing in order to develop their writing style. Several of them said they found out about forum gaming from writing sites, or while searching for help with specific kinds of writing. Venus, a player from AoM, was looking to practice within a genre: “I wanted to explore my writing weaknesses. I admit, romance was one of them. I plan on writing a book and wished to improve upon that and see what I could learn from a romance based site.” Genre-based forums such as romance, horror, or steampunk sites can be a convenient space for such writers to hone their skills within an appreciative community.

These examples of direct and indirect feedback show that forum gamers don’t only write for enjoyment – they also consciously analyze their own, and others’, writing style, and apply what they learn to improve their writing. This is a remarkably self-aware and academic attitude towards learning composition, especially on non-commercial sites that exist for entertainment, and are usually labeled as a “hobby.” Writing about collaborative learning in academic settings, Kenneth A. Bruffee noted that being able to engage in constructive conversations “requires willingness to grant authority to peers, courage to accept the authority granted to oneself by peers, and skill in the craft of interdependence” (1999, p. 12). Since most people join forum RP sites for recreational purposes, this willing exposure to peer review and scrutiny is even more intriguing. In her book Virtual peer review, Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch compares the uses of face-to-face and online peer review, and their effects on learning about writing; I suggest that the tutoring and learning activities described above fall under her definition of virtual peer review, “the activity of using computer technology to exchange and respond to another’s writing for the
purpose of improving writing” (2004, p. 10). Exploring the main characteristics of online peer review, she points out that it requires peers to familiarize themselves with each other’s writing before they engage in giving feedback through synchronous or asynchronous channels (p. 39-40), and suggests that, given its less personal nature, it would be more successful if the peer groups involve the same people, who work together over longer periods of time (p. 45-47). She also claims that text-based peer review might actually be closer to writing than face-to-face feedback – simply because both writing and feedback are done through text, and reviewers have more time to formulate what language they want to use to convey their thoughts (p. 49-50). All three characteristics are descriptive of peer tutoring and feedback on forum game sites. People are intimately familiar with each other’s writing style through constant interaction through play, and they tend to spend a lot of time interacting on the site (some veteran players can spend years, or even decades, in each other’s virtual company). This makes forum role-playing sites an ideal space for peer review, where both creation and feedback are conducted through written text in closely knit communities.

Writing “quality” can also often vary by which element or event of the game people are engaging with – in some threads, the narrative and IC stakes are simply higher than in others. On HGRPG, the most notorious posts occurred during the Hunger Games. Before going into the arena, each tribute had to post a PTS (Private Training Session) – a scene where the character has to prove their skills in front of the Gamemakers and receive a score (in the original book, this is the scene where Katniss Everdeen shoots an arrow into the Gamemakers’ balcony). The scores were given out by the staff members acting as Gamemakers based on how well written, innovative, and entertaining the posts were – thus, the quality of the players’ writing directly influenced the fate of their characters. The other highlights, in terms of writing, were the “death
posts” of tributes fallen during the Hunger Games. They had templates and images, high word counts, and detailed language specifically applied to evoke strong emotions. Even among the generally “higher quality” and higher volume writing of tribute posts, these were some of the most often discussed and praised. To illustrate the attitudes towards the writing of 24 select players during the Games, here is what HGRPG player Tom told me when I asked what his favorite part of the Hunger Games was: “Reading them. I enjoy reading all the writing people put out there since it tends to be some of their best writing ever. It helps me learn for my own writing and I just enjoy reading in general.” Tom’s opinion was echoed by many other players who expressed enjoyment in reading threads that they were not actively participating in.

Forum-based role-playing sites provide a low risk, highly interactive, and (mostly) supportive environment for people to practice their writing. When asked what they liked about them, almost all interview subjects mentioned the writing aspect specifically, and claimed that they became better writers through playing. Various interviews provided testimony of their prevailing conviction of the benefits of forum RPs. As one player named Cass noted: “It's incredible to watch how much people can develop over time.”

When players talk about the quality of writing in forum games, they mean a lot more than just language skills, grammar, and vocabulary (although these are frequently mentioned). Two other things often highlighted are storytelling and character development. The latter is a staple of forum games, since the role-playing model requires people to engage with narratives through their characters’ distinct points of view. As one player, Ems, described:

*I like that it offers more freedom. On video games, yeah you can create characters and such, but you can't specifically make different personalities for them. [Here] you design the character from beginning to end. Developing them*
instead of staying as the same video game character forever. The personalities grow, and it's fun to sit back and watch it happen. I feel it gives a chance to express more individuality.

Characters develop through play, often in directions the player would have never considered without the influence of other writers on the story. Site events and overarching plots can also affect development, although it is up to the players how they want to apply them to their own characters. Cass, an HGRPG player who had the chance to play a tribute in the Hunger Games, described the character that ultimately emerged as a victor: “It's incredible to write something like that and just the amount of development that you can actually see in your character from then and now is awesome. I just feel really lucky” (it should be noted that, for obvious reasons, victors are the only characters that get a change at development after they participate in the Hunger Games. True to Suzanne Collins’ world building, they are usually highly sought after by role-playing partners). Several players admitted that they liked to “test out” characters in forum games before they implemented them into their own creative writing. Role-playing with a character gives insight into their motivations and personalities, and helps players develop quirks and styles for them, making it easier to embody that character outside of the role-playing setting. I have seen a couple of examples of characters that have been played for a while, and then retracted by their players to be placed into an upcoming novel or other artistic endeavor.

What is especially intriguing about the overwhelming amount of claims that forum-based gaming improves writing skills is that several players had examples of the game effecting their writing, and even their careers, outside of the online gaming world. Younger players noted that practice with writing improved their grades in English and Creative Writing in high school or
college; some even mentioned that their teachers complimented their above-grade-level skills. I have also encountered several players who became published authors, or were on their way to a career in fiction writing. But not only IC posts can provide valuable practice for developing skills. Jen, who acts as staff on a site, described the beneficial effects of creating guide texts:

*I also am very good at more technical writing, like for guides, or even site rules; I choose my words carefully so as to convey exactly the right meaning and tone, I write with an audience in mind, and I put a lot of consideration into the order in which I put things. Here on the 'D [the RPG Directory], someone told me I should write a guide to guide writing, and I probably will at some point.*

Written words are carefully considered, chosen, and evaluated by players collaborating on a narrative, and picked to reflect the canon texts (“how would they say this in the books?”), the setting (“what’s Latin for ‘ma’am?’”), and the players’ preferred writing style. What counts as “quality” writing differs by site, genre, player, and event; but whatever makes the writing “good” is much discussed, praised, and rewarded by the gaming communities. It would merit further research to explore and possibly quantify the improvements the players claim to experience through gaming, and find their possible educational applications.

**From Language to Multimodality**

As I have expressed at the beginning of this chapter, the exploration of language and narrative would not have been nearly this detailed without participant observation and interviewing players. While many of the rules were clearly written on the sites in the sample, the meanings they carried, the reasons behind their creation, and their direct or indirect effects on language and the resulting stories would not have been clear to me without actually being
immersed in the play. Spending months as a participant on various sites yielded first-hand experience with the rules in “action,” having had to conform my own narratives and use of language to their requirements. I did not only observe, but also participated in negotiations between players on various aspects of narratives, from character creation through plotting to restricted content; I also experienced conflict and resolution within the communities, and on a few occasions was involved in the “drama” to a smaller or greater extent. All these experiences helped me understand what it is like to follow the rules, or invoke them when I ran into problems – but all of that would have been a merely subjective (albeit diverse) experience without asking for the opinions and interpretations of other players. The interview phase allowed me insight into how players young and old, new and veteran interpreted the rules, and shaped their creative activities accordingly. It was clear from their thoughtful and detailed answers that the community is very much aware of their use of language and the resulting emergent narratives; they make conscious choices for the best narrative and linguistic tools, consider content ratings at length, and have ready explanations for why they selected a certain tense, phrase, or turn of events to move their stories forward. As accomplished writers, they all answered my questions eloquently, offering elaborate insight into how language and narrative are (or should be) regulated, negotiated, and applied creatively through play to create the best gaming experience possible.

Creating narrative, and regulating language, through play should merit even more exploration in the future. At various points in this chapter I aimed to highlight some aspects of writing-based forum gaming that the community itself held in high esteem, naming them as the most valuable features of their chosen style of gaming. Collaboration and improvisation were such elements, connecting forum games to the larger field of collaborate writing studies; so was the development of language (native and foreign) and composition skills and their possible
transfer into the world outside of gaming. On the topic of play, it is interesting to note that forum games, by the definition of scholarly studies, are truly interactive, involving real-time story generation, and direct narrative consequences to players’ actions (see Ryan 2011, and the discussion of interactivity in Chapter 1). Stories emerge through play, and the playful actions of participants result in ever-changing, ever-evolving narratives. This rare feature of true interactivity, strived for but seldom achieved in the commercial sphere of video games, could also merit further exploration. The motivating factors provided by play, and by community feedback, described in this chapter could also be valuable for educators looking for new ways for their students to creatively engage with text.

Language is at the heart of forum-based role-playing; it is regulated in many ways, and creatively used in even more. However, written text is by far not the only mode of expression, and not the only part that makes up the emergent narratives. As common as it is to refer to forum games as “text-based,” as we will see in the following sections text is surrounded, enhanced, and altered by other modes, other forms of meaning-making. Often these other modes are translated into linguistic expression – a character’s looks (visual), voice (aural), and gestures (gestural) are described in words, and physical spaces the characters inhabit are “built” from written text (spatial). Language makes up for things that other forms of gaming present through visual, aural, and procedural rhetoric. However, even if to a lesser extent, forum games also make use of all the other modes. It would be a mistake to examine language on forums without paying attention to the others; such an examination would result in an incomplete picture of what this form of digital storytelling can truly accomplish in terms of creativity, expression, and play experience. Therefore, the following chapter focuses on the multimodal elements of forum-based role-playing games.
CHAPTER 4. BEYOND WORDS: MULTIMODALITY IN FORUM-BASED ROLE-PLAYING

“Who’s your playby?”, “I’ll posts as soon as I find a good template for her”, “This music is giving me muse…”, “Are you up for some rapid fire?”, “Look at that ear twitch!”, “Is a stiletto under the spiked weapons code?”, “Where should I put this thread?”, “I got bored and made a video…”, “How do you like the new skin?”

While this soup of words might mean nothing to the casual reader, they have one very important thing in common: They all represent the non-linguistic aspects of forum-based role-playing. Apart from the many uses of language discussed in the previous chapter, emergent narratives on these sites are also partially told through other modes. Often-used phrases like the ones above (the meanings of which will come to light in the course of this chapter) do not only show that these modes are used with great frequency, but also proves that players apply them consciously, and with awareness of their potential for meaning-making and communication.

In his book titled Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication, Gunther Kress argues that multimodality is the “normal state of human communication” (2010, p. 1); John Trimbur repeats this claim in A call to write as he states that “there is nothing new about multimodal compositions,” with the addition that new media have made them more widely possible (2014, p. 10). Questioning these claims as well as building on them, Jody Shipka in Toward a composition made whole says that while many scholars claim that literacy has always been multimodal, their focus has not included the processes that lead up to the creation of multimodal texts, overlooking various aspects of all communicative practice (2011, pp. 12-14). Much like in the case of language use discussed in the previous chapter, the
‘process’ part of the creative process deserves closer attention – at least as much as it receives from the forum gamers themselves. While academic research tends to put a heavy emphasis on language, written text, and the process of writing, other modes of communication and meaning-making should also be considered. This is especially true in the case of forum-based role-playing, where participants draw from several semiotic resources readily available in online spaces to build their complex narratives. Image, gesture, sound, numbers, even layout are all part of the same story being told by multiple people. Only by considering them as parts of a larger whole can one arrive to a more integrated view of the narratives that emerge from play.

Kress states that multimodality should be examined through a social-semiotic approach, keeping in mind that different cultural groups have access to, and put emphasis on, different semiotic resources for meaning-making and communication (2010, pp. 18-19). One cannot examine multimodality in forum gaming without examining the technological, social, and cultural resources members of this subculture are drawing from. In order to explore these “modal preferences” (what messages and meanings are preferably conveyed by what mode), however, research has to establish what modes exist in forum gaming - and even before that, define what does and does not count as a mode in this context (Kress 2010, p. 83-88). One way to judge if something is a mode, according to Kress, is examining whether a group of people uses a set of semiotic resources “with relative regularity, consistency, and with shared assumptions about its meaning potential” (2010, p. 88). The other way is to examine three key functions of a mode: Representation of meanings (ideational function), representation of social functions between those engaged in communication (interpersonal function), and the capacity to form coherent texts (textual function) (2010, p. 87). Jody Shipka similarly notes that “cultural tools” in multimodal composition might not always be used for goals and purposes they are usually
associated with; creativity comes into play when multimodality is achieved through repurposing tools originally developed for something else (2011, p. 45). With this in mind, over the course of the research project I took note of non-linguistic resources, comparing them across the sample as well as the sites I participated in, observed their uses in representing and communicating meanings, and their capacity of forming texts that told part of the emergent narratives.

In the following sections, I present my arguments for considering six types of non-linguistic resources as modes frequently used within the forum gaming subculture: Image, sound, gesture, layout, numbers (including code), and time. I explore the meanings they convey, and how they are applied by players to tell parts of a larger story. In Appendix 1, I also present a case study that examines the use of all of these modes together as an integrated whole.

**Images – The Visual Mode**

Visual imagery is arguably the most important mode in forum gaming after language. Even though forum RPGs are categorized as text-based games, all sites are filled with visual elements that play an important part in conveying information, and shaping the narratives. The visual mode is used in many ways, from character faces to site skins – and for a very good reason. In their essay *Computer gaming as literacy*, Selfe et al. claim that visual, interactive images are more compelling to people, possibly because they are “more biologically familiar to the human mind than print-based communicative modes” (2007, p. 29). People look before they read. Images are an integral part of the “new” – that is, increasingly important - multimodal literacy of the upcoming generations. Images have their own visual grammar, a set of organizing principles that create and convey meaning through the visual mode (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006, pp. 1-5). Players make conscious choices to apply these principles to their narrative
creations. The following sections examine some of the most common ways images are used in forum gaming.

**Face claims, playbys, avatars.** The most common form of involving images in forum-based role-playing is using them to represent a character. The terminology surrounding character faces is fairly consistent, with a few overlaps. While in videogames visual representations of one’s character are usually called an *avatar*, on forums they are most often referred to as a *playby* or *play-by* (pb). If one has to make an official claim to reserve a certain face for a character, then the images are also called *face claims* (fc); this term is sometimes used even on sites that don’t have a reservation system, and seen as interchangeable with playby. Character faces that appear in the side bar of posts are called *avatars*, while images representing the characters in a more elaborate manner at the bottom of posts are called *signatures* (sigs). Some sites or players may use all of these terms interchangeably, but for clarity’s sake I will use them consistently as defined above.

Many sites restrict the style of images they allow for playbys. The two most popular categories are “cartoon only” and “real people only” forums – the former require character faces that are from cartoons or comics, while the latter prefer photo images of actual people. Both of them often come with further restrictions, the most common being “animanga only” for the former (only faces from Japanese style animation or comics), and “celebrities only” for the latter (only images of public figures). Many sites implement these rules for visual consistency. For example, AoM is an “animanga only” site, where all characters that are not from Japanese comics and animation have to be re-drawn in their style. Many characters had faces that used Japanese-style fan art for Western cartoons such as *South Park* or Disney movies, or even for
live-action series such as *Game of Thrones* or *Supernatural*. The emphasis of the rule, therefore, was not on the source of the images, but rather their visual style.

Playbys are an essential part of characters. They visually represent them, providing a “shorthand” to the written description of the character’s appearance; every IC post comes with an avatar, showing people what the character looks like without having to pull up the character’s bio and read the written description. They also give hints of other sorts of information on the character beyond physical appearance: Personality (facial expression), social standing (clothing), ethnic/cultural background, species (in the case of fantasy and sci-fi), occupation, fighting style, etc. In fact, several people I interviewed stated that they usually choose the playby first, and then create a character “around” it, fleshing out a personality and story that would fit the image, rather than the other way around. As Feather, a player on AoM, described it: “Sometimes I just go looking through Zerocan [an anime image board] because I'm bored and then bam! One face will just grab me for some reason and I'll get a whole idea from just that one face.”

Finding the perfect face for a character concept can be a long and difficult process. Tara, one of the interview subjects described it like this: “I imagine it's a bit like casting agents hosting auditions for a movie. When you find the right one, you just know it.” The process is made even more difficult by trying to find one that is not used by other players on the site. Sites that require face claims usually restrict the use of one face to one character at any given time (with a few exceptions, such as twins). The bigger the character count on a site, the more difficult it becomes to find a face that fits the character and is not reserved by someone else. Most sites put time limits on how long a face can be on hold without making the character, or how long a player has to be inactive before their claims are “up for grabs” again. Still, it is often a tedious process to sift through hundreds of images, find the perfect match, and then realize that someone else is
already using it. When one runs into such a problem, something has to give – and the technicalities of face claiming may affect the characters themselves. With a different face might come a different personality, or a new background story.

Searching for playbys is a process that usually makes use of multiple online platforms and technologies. Apart from search engines such as Google Images, or movie/TV databases such as IMDB.com, there are also sites that specialize in making the search easier for role-players. One of my interview subjects pointed me to a Tumblr blog known as a “face claim helper.” The blog functions as a fairly simple database: It contains images of celebrities, and is searchable by age, eye color, hair color, ethnicity, gender (including trans and non-binary), and type of media (movies or TV shows). There are several similar sites online, assembled and designed to help role-players find the perfect playby. Hundreds of players pool their visual resources to help each other find the one image that is a perfect fit for a character.

Searching for a playby becomes even more cumbersome when the images have to reflect the setting and historical era the characters inhabit. I encountered this problem on AeRo, where the relative lack of pictures of celebrities dressed in Roman clothes presented an additional challenge. The easiest solution was to search historical movies specifically; faces from HBO’s hit series Rome, for example, were in high demand (this is where I found the face for my first character). If this failed, people would turn to other historical movies; as long as the person in the picture was wearing a relatively simple tunic or generic armor, movies with medieval or fantasy settings also yielded usable images. For my second character, who was a barbarian in newly-colonized Britannia, I selected a face from HBO’s Game of Thrones. The small size of the avatars (200x200 pixels) was helpful in that modern clothing and accessories could be cropped out of the images; when no historical playby fit the character’s requirements, people would cut
and manipulate an image until it “passed” as a Roman character. Visual consistency required that playbys should not be portrayed wearing modern clothing, sunglasses, etc. Cropping out details made sure that the images conveyed the right message about the character, while leaving out circumstances that did not align with the playby’s role in the game (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006, p. 72). Choices of visual representation of characters, therefore, do not only come down to eye and hair color, age, gender, or physical appearance. Players focus on various details, selecting the ones they deem essential, and discarding others that would not line up with the written descriptions. One of the players I interviewed, Elena, who plays on a historical site that involves pirates, described her choices for a character she pictured as “a darker Latino man with a blade in his hand, be it sword or dagger.” Elena told me that she “gave up Antonio Banderas for Fernando Colunga in Pasion, simply because Antonio Banderas was in Zorro, with the mask which I didn't want.”

Many of my interview subjects said that they look for playbys that reflect the personality of their characters. Certain types of faces are associated with certain characteristics. The way images might reflect a character’s personality speak directly to the expressive capabilities of the visual mode. The still image of a person or cartoon character (I discuss the use of moving images later in this chapter) can represent attitude and behavior in several ways – facial expression, the vector of the gaze, stance and posture, lighter or darker colors, background, etc. This is also where the visual mode most often overlaps with the gestural – characters presented with a certain gesture or in the middle of a recognizable motion speak to personality as much as they speak to general appearance. For example, on HGRPG one will see “career tributes” (trained fighters) portrayed in fighting stances or with a determined expression on their face; cheerful and bubbly characters (especially females) on AoM are usually shown smiling, or in the middle of a skip or a
twirl. Avatar images might also have the playby make eye contact with the viewer, creating a personal connection between character and reader, and conveying a certain type of message or attitude (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006, pp. 117-118). Creating a character on AoM that was flirtatious and extroverted, I managed to find a playby that was portrayed making eye contact with the viewer, standing in a flamboyant pose.

The ethnicity of playby and character also often come into play. I have seen sites that outright required playbys to be the same ethnicity as the character, to avoid “whitewashing.” Many players set the same general rules for themselves, sometimes even going beyond visual characteristics. Katie, one of my interview subjects, told me that she usually “tries to find a Russian celeb” for a Russian character’s playby – even though most casual observers would not be able to tell the difference between Russian and other Caucasian faces. For Katie, and many other players like her, it was a matter of principle, a meaning hidden in the visual mode.

These choices speak to a deeper connection between character and playby than just visual representation. Playbys also bring emotions and background information with them, condensing them into a visual format, and conveying them through the visual mode. As one player put it: “I quite rather cheekily use a face knowing that it's basically typecasting - if you see me play with an Al Pacino face, for example, you should know exactly what you're in for” (Steelgoat). Other players stick with their favorite faces/celebrities, and carry them over to multiple sites, representing multiple characters. These face claims come with pre-conceived notions based on the actors and their roles in various media – admiration and love by fans, hatred or approval towards their roles on the screen, assumptions of their real-life personalities based on celebrity gossip, etc. - adding them to the character as a whole. I have seen several times characters with popular actors as their playbys (Tom Hiddleston, Benedict Cumberbatch, Jesse Williams) get
more interest, and more threads, from players just because they were fans of the celebrity. Star power and sex appeal were obviously a part of their draw. Creating new stories with characters that were represented by one’s favorite faces from shows or movies, would have the same draw of wish fulfillment as single-author fan fiction does for its writers and readers. It would be intriguing to do a larger-scale survey of celebrity faces in forum gaming, and calculate statistics based on their age, body type, and general facial features; as a participant observer, I noted that the majority tended to tip the scales towards “young and attractive.”

This multi-layered nature of playbys is especially true in the case of canon characters that contain in themselves multiple iterations of the same character. L2R, a canon-only site, encouraged, but did not require, playbys from the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Some players chose to stick with the beloved actors that portrayed Iron Man or Captain America – but not in all cases. Fans often do not agree with casting choices made for their favorite (comic) book characters by the movie studios; site rules have the final say in whether or not they have to “stick to the canon.” When I created my version of the character Gambit, the player who coaxed me into it opened a discussion with me on the possibility of using as playby Taylor Kitsch, who briefly portrayed the character in X-men Origins: Wolverine (2009), or Josh Holloway, who never played Gambit, but was “fan-cast” by popular opinion all over the Internet. We decided on the latter option. It had the added bonus of existing fan art portraying Josh Holloway with the signature black-and-red eyes of the comic book character, an iconic detail that had been left out of Kitsch’s movie portrayal. In addition, Holloway had played a similarly “roguish” but ultimately likable character on the TV series Lost (ABC, 2004-2010), fitting fans’ ideas of what Gambit should act like. The face claim, therefore, did not only more accurately represent what the character looked like (according to comic book canon), but also told a story about who
should have played him in the movies, referenced personality traits, and evoked favorable reactions from Marvel fans. One image of Sawyer as Gambit conveyed, through the visual mode, a whole range of information that affected what player would think of the character, and how they would react to him in threads.

Choosing playbys becomes increasingly difficult when it involves non-human characters. One of my interview subjects, nicknamed Poe the Villain, who plays on a canine RP site, described the process: “For my canine RPG we use stock photos from Flickr to represent our characters. With so many different breeds to choose from it can be hard to narrow it down and find the perfect character.” Where celebrities have star power and recognizability, non-human characters may need additional work to reflect their uniqueness (the untrained eye would be hard pressed to see the difference between two grey wolves). Photo manipulation often comes into play to transform stock images into the same kind of layered representation that human playbys naturally have.

Playbys are used to provide a shorthand for the character through avatars and signatures. People usually put more effort into their signatures – instead of merely using a character’s playby in a larger format, they often add background images, symbols, objects, and even quotes, to represent the personality and “flavor” of their character at the bottom of every post. Both avatars and sigs tend to present the characters in a close-up or a medium shot (head and shoulders or head and torso only), which, apart from giving a clearer and recognizable view of the face, also promotes personal attachment and intimate knowledge of the figure depicted (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006, pp. 124-125). This sort of close personal connection to one’s character is reflected in forum gaming language through terms of endearment applied to characters such as “my sons”, “my babies”, “my children”, etc.
As seen in the example from AeRo below: In the top left corner, next to the character’s name (Aurelia Gaia) there is the avatar of her playby (Lyndsy Fonseca). At the bottom of the post, her sig features two other images of the playby arranged within a frame. The sig also includes the character’s name in a different font, and a short quote in Latin (flamma fumo est proxima – where there is smoke, there is fire), referencing both the ancient Roman setting of the game (I discussed the use of Latin in the previous chapter), and the quiet yet powerful personality of the character. Below the signature, the link leads the reader to Aurelia Gaia’s character application, in case they need more information about her. The two images not only represent the character, but also visually frame the text in the post.

Figure 3. Screenshot of IC post by Aurelia Gaia. Aeterna Roma, November 2016.

Signatures and avatars are often made to order by players who are adept in photo manipulation. One of my interview subjects, nicknamed Lucifer, offered testimony to the
prevalence of this practice in forum games: “My involvement in forum games [lead] to an interest in graphic design. Because I have had to design multiple graphics for forums, I’ve become interested in graphic design and am now pursuing a degree in it in college.” Lucifer’s claims were echoed by many other players, and mirrored the many claims discussed in the previous chapter about the real-world applications of skills gained through forum gaming.

One step beyond photo-manipulated avatars and signatures is original art. This is the term that most sites use for fan art, and especially artwork created by the players themselves. Some restrict its use with the claim that they want to uphold the visual “quality” of the site, while many players are passionate about creating and using their own art, or commissioning others to draw/paint their unique characters. Elsen, a player on AoM who creates original art, told me that whether a site allowed original art for playbys was one of the foremost factors in their choices to join: “I can't stand it when sites ban things like original characters. Stopping someone from using their own art, art that they worked on or paid money to have drawn for them, seems like a silly rule.” AoM requires players to name the source of the images they use, but most of them only credit the secondary source (Tumblr, Zerochan, Google Images), not the owner or creator of the anime or manga. Non-commercial artwork and fan art (from Deviantart, Instagram, Pinterest, etc.), however, are treated with considerably more respect and care. I have seen players in the chatbox discussing artwork they discovered online, and weighing the merits of purchasing a playby from the artist to create a character around it. They would also commission other players or outside artists to draw characters that have already been made. The advantage of original art is that it is unique to the character. It portrays them exactly as the player imagined, based on descriptions and discussion with the artist; it presents the character in detail, text translated into image, without the added background information or limitations of “copied” playbys.
Commissions and original art, however, cost money. In some cases, AoM had contests where some of the prizes were commissions; people competed for those with great enthusiasm. Players who create or commission original art for their characters are among the most dedicated.

**Character post templates.** Apart from avatars and signatures, the visual mode also plays an important part in the posts people make with their characters. Over the course of my research, I often encountered people or even whole sites that used templates - coded layouts for individual posts that included images and static text, making all posts by the character look uniform and “sophisticated.” On some sites, they were a necessity: On HGRPG, where all of one’s characters are under the same account, templates let the other players know which one of my characters was participating in the post. Templates range from simple to extremely elaborate; their spatial layout is discussed later in this chapter. For now, I will focus on the visual elements embedded in them.

One of the players I interviewed offered insight into the trends of the forum gaming world involving the use of templates:

*I think making your posts look good is increasing in importance as more and more people have started to use tables/templates (they were popular before I joined the site and then sort of dropped out of fashion before coming back into fashion again).* (Onyx, who joined HGRPG 4,5 years ago)

Templates (sometimes also called tables), while they definitely make a post look more organized, are also difficult to use. One has to write, or acquire, the basic code, and then tweak it to suit the character’s purposes: Change the images, change the color scheme, change the size of the character pictures, etc. Even simple templates require a basic knowledge of code, because it is easy to mess them up by copy-pasting text into the wrong place. But despite the technical challenges, people also find a lot of enjoyment in creating unique templates for their characters.
Some find character templates positively inspiring: “a beautiful aesthetic (usually through the coding or an image) for me to look at helps fuel my muse for a response post,” claimed a player nicknamed Palisade.

Templates reflect characters in a number of ways. Besides representing the character through a still image of the playbook, they often use additional imagery to offer more information, either tailored to the character itself, or the events of their current thread. One of my interview subjects, Tara, explained that template images reflected a character’s feelings by saying “For instance, I wouldn't want to use a sad image if the character is in a happy thread, or vice versa.” Character emotions came up often when I discussed templates with players in interviews. Templates would be adjusted based on how a character was feeling at the time, or the kind of emotional arc the thread was supposed to be a part of. Since templates are static once they are posted, one could read back to older threads and follow the visual changes that had been made over the course of a character’s narrative arc.

Colors, especially colored text, can also represent characters. In Reading images, Kress and Van Leeuwen discuss the communicative functions of color, and even the possibility of whether color could be considered its own mode (2006, pp. 228-238). They point out that the function of color in communication goes beyond affect, and it can be used to enhance textual cohesion (through color coordination) as well as convey messages in certain contexts.

Sometimes colors used by people reflected physical details about their character. For example, one character on AoM I interacted with was a girl with pink hair; all of the dialogue in her posts came in a bright bubblegum pink color that matched the image in her avatar. Color could also refer to the character’s background, or even provide connections to texts outside of the game, as it shows in the following example from HGRPG (Figure 4).
Figure 4. Character template by Jade (detail).
The Hunger Games RPG, October 2016.

Figure 5. IC post by Minos Vallanso (detail).
The Hunger Games RPG, October 2016.
Jade, this character’s player, explained the template design: “The green represents poison. He's based off Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and well his father got poisoned in the story and now his life is poisoned with grief…” In another template by the same player, the color scheme was the yellow-red-orange of a sunset, and the silhouette of a man sitting on a bench, because the character “believes himself to be an outcast and lonely in the world despite actually having people around him.” Tom, whose tribute Minos died in the 73rd Hunger Games, showed me his template (Figure 5) with the explanation: “Minos’ table had a storm on it because it was a part of his character, him believing he was a storm of chaos.” The motif of the storm was also central to the narrative of the character’s posts, and a key element in his elaborate death scene.

These examples were very common on the sites that I observed. On four out of five sites that I participated in, at least a number of the players used templates, and had very detailed, well thought-out opinions on why they looked the way they looked. Even the one site where I did not observe any templates, AeRo, made use of embedded images in posts, usually at the start of a thread, to set the mood and the scene. The post pictured in Figure 6 was supposed to set the scene for a thread where some of the characters in Britannia, led by the centurion Decimus Rutilius Atellus (in the avatar) ventured into the autumn forest to locate a Briton village. The title of the thread (*The Colored Forest*), the image of Roman soldiers marching in the woods, and the information at the top of the post (in bold) all fit together to create a sense of time, place, and ambiance, even before one would begin reading the text itself. Red and yellow were the ruling color scheme of AeRo, and the images in this case – the red-gold of the autumn leaves, the red of Decimus’ toga in the avatar, and the red of the Roman soldiers in the forest – created textual coherence through the use of color and the visual mode.
Whether fit into an elaborately coded template, or simply embedded into the text, images play an important part in making posts convey additional information. They speak to the personality, mood, and history of the character; they reflect the setting and the ambiance of the events that take place in the thread; they link the posts to the character’s past and future, to the larger setting of the site, and add descriptive details to spaces that exist in the world of the game. Their function is not merely aesthetic; they “speak” to the readers who have the experience to read them.

**Site looks.** Visuals also play an important part in the overall appearance of forum RP sites. In fact, the “first look” at a site often makes or breaks player interest, and therefore decides how popular a forum might become, and how long it will stay active. “Looks” or, more
elaborately put, “visual aesthetic” were named among the top criteria for a good site by one-fifth of my interview subjects, and also highlighted by several others. One subject, nicknamed Cloud, had a very apt name for making decisions based on first look: “I’ll admit to something of a skin bias, as well. If a site has a poorly done skin or there’s something that doesn’t fit with the rest of the skin, I won’t join” (emphasis by me). Skin in this case refers to the overall visual appearance of the site.

Aesthetics, however, are once again not the only reason images draw such intense attention. Experienced players who have seen (or joined) multiple sites in their career use the “first look” to gauge other kinds of information about the site, and pick out the factors that they deem important to their player experience. As a player named Amaretto explained: “I find that the more pleasing it is to look at, the more likely it is to be active and well-written.” Another player noted: “I will likely turn away a site if its plot involves a horror-based theme and yet has a bright, colorful sort of skin with flowers all over the place” (Lucifer). Skins therefore speak to the setting, genre, and general tone of a forum. Color, once again, comes into play: unified color schemes can be used to set the right mood for the site, and present coherence both between different sections of the forum, and between the forum and its theme (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006, p. 230). It is generally accepted that sites with more elaborate, unique and artistic skins are better maintained and better designed, not just visually, but in terms of rules and characters as well. While this might or might not be true in every case, it is a fact that creating and adjusting a skin is a long and detailed process that takes dedication, skill, and creativity from the administrating team. Some admins revel in these tasks, as described by one of my interview subjects, Tristan: “I adore finding and altering skins or making my own for my forums. I adore
the amount of customization you can do, and the overall format of forums appeals to me more than Tumblr, chat, or other forms of gaming.”

Skin design is always meticulously credited on forum sites, especially if it was created by an “outsider”. Skins also change fairly frequently on most sites, reflecting updates in plot, changes of the seasons, or even random occurrences like April Fools’ Day. Sites that go through a reboot almost always do so with a new skin, using new looks to signal a new chapter in the forum’s history. Looks also change across forums over time. In my interview with Bob, a person who visits hundreds of forums as a full-time advertiser for a site, I asked what trends have been visible in forum gaming in terms of graphics. Bob claimed that site looks in general have gotten a lot more elaborate and sophisticated over the years.

Skins, site graphics, and overall looks highlight a site’s most basic elements, but also offer a glimpse “behind the scenes” for people who understand the skills and technologies required for their creation. They offer visual information on what a new arrival can expect; they convey the tone of the narrative through color, the setting and the genre through imagery, and the dedication of the community through quality. All of these details have to be interpreted in context; the more sites one visits, the easier it gets to read their visuals.

**Satellite sites.** Several sites I coded made use of social media platforms outside of the forums to store and share images relevant to the game. At least four of them had Pinterest boards, six had Deviantart, and fourteen had Tumblr blogs. These platforms were attached to the forums through buttons or links on the main site, allowing easy access for players to find what they were looking for. It is also possible that other sites in the sample had similar connections, they just did not overtly advertise them on their front page or in the Information section.
Some of the Pinterest “satellite sites” were so-called *inspiration boards*: They contained a collection of images that evoked the general mood or genre of the site. They had pictures for clothes that characters in that setting might wear, items they might use, places they might visit, as well as artistic drawings and photographs collected from the Internet that had a connection to the theme of the game. Some historical sites had extensive boards detailing costumes and items for different types of characters within their era, to help less history-savvy players stay “period appropriate.” Canon sites had images displaying characters and settings from the original text/film/show, providing a visual database for players to pick their playby and template pictures from. A witchcraft-fantasy RP had collections of mystical symbols and amulets, historical paintings featuring angels, demons, and witches, and even “spells” displayed over various related photographs. These pictures might be translated directly into a character’s description text (clothing, items), or referred to in the narrative whenever they became relevant (spells). They were also supposed to inspire *muse* for writing or for the creation of new characters; some images were apparently included just for affect, rather than having anything to do with witches or demons.

DeviantArt galleries attached to sites usually displayed fan art created (or commissioned) by players. They had pictures of characters, scenes from the game, and even secondary “fan art” (PCs depicted in ways or situations that never occurred within the game’s “official” narrative). Sites with an original world designed by their creators also had art depicting their settings, imaginary species, clothing, and other forms of visual data relevant to the game, to provide players with visual reference points that they could not find from other sources.

Tumblr blogs attached to forum sites were more of a mixed bag of things, depending on the site’s player community and their needs. Some collected character playbys from movies or
TV shows (I have already discussed “face claim helpers” earlier). Some collected “mood”
images, artistic photographs depicting key elements of the setting; a site based on library books,
for example, had a blog full of pictures of old books and quotes about the love of reading. Sites
also often used Tumblr to advertise themselves. Tumblr fosters many kinds of fandom, as well as
its own form or text-based role-playing, so it falls in line with the target audience of forum-based
games. The sharing (re-blogging) feature makes it easy to spread information about sites, usually
linked to images that pique the interest of people as they scroll by. Fandom involvement also
makes sure that images of popular texts can be found in great abundance on Tumblr, and creators
of blogs only have to pick out and share the ones that are relevant to their site.

The visual mode, while it does not play the same essential part in forum gaming as it does
in videogames, is still very important on these sites. It conveys information about characters,
contributes to the narrative, shapes and represents the world of the game, and even provides
information about the structure and community of a site for those who know how to decipher it.
Players who participate in the same fandom, or the same game, share their visual semiotic
resources; they learn to interpret visual cues, understand the background information that comes
with a certain playby, or consciously select symbols to convey the mood of a thread. Visual text
is created to supplement what is written in posts, and images tell part of the story without being
explained or duplicated in words. All of these carious implementations of the visual mode are the
results of conscious, self-aware choices from players who know exactly how they want to tell a
multimodal story. The playful and creative uses of the visual mode, from drawing avatars to
manipulating colors for a skin, create an aesthetic draw for forum gaming sites, one that not only
bring people in, but also allows them opportunities for artistic creation that other forms of role-
playing might not. As it is seen in the testimonies of players who have taken their forum-honed
skills of graphic design from hobby to a career (see also Appendix 1), visuals might be one of the unique features that draw people to forum gaming. Images, pulled from various sources and representing various artistic trends, speak in their own way - and forum gamers invented many ways to let them tell part of the story.

**Music and Sound – The Aural Mode**

Cs. Z.: “Do you use music for inspiration?”

Jade: “Nope. I am the anomaly.”

The use and role of music and sound in video games has garnered attention from scholars in recent years. While originally seen as marginal to the gaming experience, it has been pointed out that players do pay attention to music and sound, and see it as an important factor in their game selections (Collins 2008, p. 128). According to research, music can enhance the immersive quality of videogames, drawing players into the game world through the creation of emotional bonding (pp. 133-134). During the course of my research I have found that it fills a very similar role in forum gaming as well.

Voice and sound on forums are options, rather than necessary features, and therefore I found less regulations concerning them than the other modes. However, interview subjects mentioned them with great frequency, and music especially seemed to have an almost unanimous popularity among players as a source of inspiration and character development. Sites themselves often have music “channels” or playlists to create aural ambiance for their setting. The aural mode is commonly used in several interesting ways, adding flavor and emotional depth to the unfolding narratives.
**Character voices, character sounds.** Some forum hosts, like Jcink, allow people to attach or link sound files to their profiles. In these cases, a sound bar appears under the character’s avatar. Some players use this feature to add *voice claims* to their characters; these represent what a character’s voice sounds like, through audio snippets from film, TV, or other forms of media. The term itself is the aural parallel to face claims. Much like in the case of video games, character voices can “reveal details about places or characters – whether they are a friend or a foe, for instance, either by their musical accompaniment or by the accent, language, or timbre of their voice” (Collins 2008, 131-132). Voice claims can convey or underline several aspects of a character such as age, gender, personality, cultural background, native language, etc. I have seen players who liked to choose singers for a voice claim, using voice and music for their character’s representation.

More popular than voice claims are character theme songs or playlists. Music accompanies characters from their very creation through their narrative career. Several people I interviewed talked about certain songs or musical genres inspiring characters or plots. One player who wished to remain nameless provided an example:

*My character [...] is part of this plot which is entirely based off a My Chemical Romance album. The character herself is based off the character of "The Girl" in the music video for the song SING, from that album, whereas the rest of the characters are based on the band members and their album alter egos.*

Many players provided examples for songs or soundtracks inspiring characters’ attitudes, appearance - or even history: “I used [Hosier’s] *Take Me to Church* as inspiration for an OC’s background - he's a southern boy from the 50s who had a male lover who was killed protecting
him” (Tristan). Players are very much aware of the influence of music on their character creation process. Whether inspiration strikes through one song, or an extended list of songs, they are usually conscious of what originally sparked the idea.

Once a character is created, the player often assembles songs and pieces of music that they associate with it, to listen to while planning or writing posts. Some people I talked to claimed that they could not split their attention between writing and listening, but they did use music to inspire them before they began to write. The common word used for inspiration was *muse* – “having muse” for a certain character means that one is inspired to write them (alternately, expressions such as “my muse is dead” referred to a temporary lack of inspiration). This concept is known in academic terminology as *mood induction*: “Sound works to control or manipulate the player’s emotions, guiding responses to the game” (Collins 2008, p. 133). Unlike in commercially designed video games, the mood induction in this case is self-imposed: Players themselves choose the pieces of music that evoke the emotions necessary for them to write a certain kind of scene, or a certain type of character. People I interviewed talked about character music in great detail and with obvious enthusiasm, and also offered insight into what connects certain pieces of music to certain characters, such as: “For my character, Jewel (a flamboyant, narcissistic Djinn) I play music that oozes confidence, things that remind me of parties, and a general ‘in your face’ attitude, to draw muse from” (Amaretto). In this case the style and genre of the music corresponded to the character’s personality in that it is similarly ‘vibrant’, upbeat, and bold. On the other end of the spectrum, we find angst: “I have a whole angsty playlist for Loki that I have probably used for RP at some point, not for L2R because he's not angsty really right now” (D.). *Angsty* in player slang, borrowed from fan fiction terminology, most often refers to characters or threads that are filled with hurt, worry, desperation, or other dark emotional themes.
In this case, music reflects the character’s general mood – but it only comes into play when the character is actually supposed to be experiencing (and exhibiting) their angsty side. I was allowed to take a look at the playlist mentioned in the quote above; it was an assortment of film soundtracks with somber tones as well as pop, rock, and heavy metal songs that reflected sadness or anger.

Songs are often chosen because of their lyrics as well as their music. Players are not only conscious of the words in their chosen songs, they also often actively make use of them in their character creation:

*Most characters have a theme song which helps me when writing the bio.*

*The pirate has Tierra Santa - "La canción del pirata", the mercenary Mago de Oz - "La Cruz de Santiago" (it is said that the mercenary in the song is Alatriste. From this my character got his name Santiago, a pilgrimage to Compostela in his history, and a blade as favourite weapon). (Elena)*

In this example lyrics do not only align with the character’s occupation, but also provide his name, his choice of weapon, and link him to a famous literary character, Captain Alatriste. Both songs fall into the genre of heavy metal, and have a very energetic, determined beat that conjures images of action and combat. The former also includes ambiance sounds associated with the sea, such as the cry of seagulls and the crashing of waves, referencing the character’s occupation. A player from a Viking-themed site had different ideas of marine music (slow-paced and mysterious, sung by a deep female voice and featuring increasing musical accompaniment as it progresses), but a similar affinity for matching lyrics to character:

*The second verse in particular fits the character really well: "You can tell by the sores on my feet / That I've traveled far / Still nothing is mine to keep / You*
said you were lonely / First time around / And I lost my mind / Cause I know both you and me were born under a bad sign." (Jen)

Musical cues such as ambient sound describe above can draw the readers’ attention to certain aspects of the character or the narrative. Karen Collins claims that sound symbols can “focus the player’s perception on certain objects” in videogames (2008, p. 130) – and in many ways, it works the same in forum gaming as well. While character bios are mostly static, representing the character in the moment of its “birth,” sound cues can help convey their current mood, personality, or story arc, focusing the reader to a specific moment in the narrative.

Lyrics often make their way into character posts, either in quotes, or as a permanent part of a template. While they appear as written text, they are also supposed to evoke the music, often linking it from YouTube or other music hosting sites. Players can be very creative in incorporating lyrics into the game. Some use them to open or close posts, or as dividers between paragraphs. Some go even further: I have seen players announce that they wanted to start a thread just so they could use a song’s name, or a piece of the lyrics, as a title. Titles were frequently references to song, even when no actual links were attached. For example, multiple threads that involved martial or military training I have encountered were titled Let’s get down to business, the opening line of the iconic training montage song from Disney’s Mulan.

In many players’ eyes, music is strongly associated with individual characters. Different characters written by the same person may have playlists that include vastly different genres. Tom from HGRPG told me about the tributes he had played, as well as their musical inspirations; musical genres on his list ranged from rap to dubstep, electronic, rock, and lyrical instrumental songs. Some playlists can go extremely long, and feature a variety of selections; it was not rare for players to have several hours’ worth of music collected for a beloved character.
It is interesting to compare these playlists, often played on a loop while writing or composing posts, to video game music. The latter is often interactive and adaptive, changing automatically based on choices players make, actions their characters execute, or virtual spaces they enter (Collins 2008, p. 4). Following this logic, Collins points out that pop songs are often linear, and therefore can’t be adapted well to changes in the game (p. 119). In the case of forum narratives, however, the players themselves hold full agency over what they want to listen to when, and they can also use links and visual cues to point readers to the music that should accompany a post or a thread.

Music often came up as a source for inspiration for writing certain scenes, or even entire stories. Players use different types of music associated with emotions as they plan and/or write: “I tend towards Irish music for calmer, more mellow things—and occasionally Moonlight Sonata for tranquility—and do a lot of pop or rock for most of the rest” (Cloud). Sometimes music inspires events in the game, shaping the narrative itself, implementing emotions into the story that had not been expressed or explored before: “Lately, I’ve been listening to ‘Speeding Car’ by Walking on Cars and it helped me plot the almost-breaking up of a pairing I am currently writing” (Missy). In these cases, music and sound directly influence the emergent narratives of the game, steering characters’ actions in unexpected directions. In the 74th Hunger Games, the Gamemakers told me in confidence, and entire Random Event (RE) in the arena was inspired by a pop song, *Muddy Waters* by LP. When a tribute activated the RE, a post appeared from the Gamemakers, opening with the lyrics “I will ask you for mercy / I will come to you blind.” The tribute who activated the trap went permanently blind. The lyrics linked directly to the song on YouTube. Both the music and the lyrics of the song are evocative of dark emotions and thoughts that are prevalent among tributes in the Hunger Games arena.
**Site playlists.** Just like forum RP sites make use of visual elements to make themselves more appealing and convey information about genre, setting, and tone, they also sometimes use music to broadcast similar messages. Game music can be and is used in video games to signify genre, and site-wide selections of sound can convey similar messages (Collins 2008, pp. 123-124). While ambient sound is not very common on forum sites for technological reasons (many people find “sound out of nowhere” annoying), it can be used to create a sense of space, similarly to video game settings (Collins 2008, p. 105). Since the setting in these cases, unlike in traditional film, is not a real place where ambient sound could be recorded, the lack of “natural” background sound is replaced by carefully selected artistic choices. I have encountered multiple sites that had their own playlists, sometimes composed of various character themes, and sometimes of songs and pieces of music that fit the setting in genre or mood. In one case (Phantom Manor) players could spend points earned through activity on the site to “buy” songs for the playlist featured on the home page. In this specific case, music was an integral part of the setting: The game is based on the many iterations of *The Phantom of the Opera*. Several sites also had their own “trailers” or fan-edited music videos, featuring clips of the playbys of their active characters. Since these involved moving pictures, they will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Music in forum games is the mode that conveys mood and emotion, for individual characters as well as settings and narrative arcs. It inspires and changes emergent stories, describes character’s moods and personalities, and creates ambiance for people entering the site for the first time. Information is conveyed through the aural mode, and other modes (written lyrics, visual markers) are used to link sound to the site. Lyrics, while they belong to the
linguistic mode, have a strong evocative purpose in these cases; often as I was threading with a character or in a plot that were labeled with quotes from songs, I found myself humming along as I was reading or writing, falling into the mood of the music they alluded to. The aural mode, while much less prominent in directly contributing to the narrative, is one of the most powerful tools in forum gaming’s repertoire for invoking emotional response. The complete agency that players exercise over deciding what sounds should accompany characters or plots at any given time, and the ability to freely shape narratives based on certain songs, once again offer an artistic feature that makes forum sites especially appealing to certain types of creative people.

**Movement – The Gestural Mode**

Character animations are an essential, and very popular, part of video gaming. Forum games, on the other hand, tend to rely on still imagery, and only allude to gestural movement and body language through written text whenever characters interact, or the occasional avatar or signature. However, there are a few ways the gestural mode and moving images can be, and are, integrated into forum gaming in meaningful ways.

**Profile gifs.** Next to avatars and signatures, many forum layouts also offer options for players to embed .gif images into their profile. “Gif” (Graphic Interchange Format), while it can technically refer to both still and moving images, in these cases (and forum slang) specifically means moving pictures, short video loops that repeat the same few seconds of motion over and over again. These can either take the place of a still avatar, or be embedded in a separate frame.

Character gifs usually depict the playby in motion. They are no more than a few seconds long, and repeat the same movement on a loop; they can be cut from any video clip that features the character’s playby. People choosing gifs for their characters usually select the ones that are iconic to them in some way, and depict part of their personality – a smile or a wink might portray
a friendly and cheerful character, while a frown or an eye roll might allude to a grumpy or sarcastic one. Some, if the character is similar enough to the playby, might even show them using a signature weapon, fight move, or supernatural power.

Gifs, especially the ones depicting the right face and the right movement, are a lot harder to find online than still images, and it can be technologically more challenging to embed them. If no suitable gif can be found, they have to be made. Recently, tools have been appearing online that allow people to cut gifs directly out of streaming videos hosted on sites such as YouTube. Once created, gifs have to be saved and stored on appropriate platforms. One site in the sample had a Tumblr blog dedicated to “gif hunts” – players helping each other create, or locate, gifs that they could use for their characters. In some cases gifs depicted generic things that had a connection to the character, rather than the playby itself – a hand writing, a ship, etc. They all had a meaning to the players who selected them, and the readers who were familiar with the character. For an extensive example of the use of gifs in character descriptions, see Appendix 1.

Character gifs mostly exist for flavor, and they make use of the gestural mode to convey bits of information. They represent the character’s body language, showing their typical mood, attitude, or personal quirks. Some gestures can be interpreted multiple ways, especially in the case of animated faces where facial expressions are stylized; gifs in themselves do not speak volumes about a character, but they do provide subtle pointers.

**Fan videos.** Fan-edited videos combine in themselves the aural, visual, linguistic, and gestural modes, but I decided to discuss them in this section because, for all intents and purposes, they most often fall under the “moving picture” category. I encountered fan videos on multiple sites; sometimes they represented the site as a whole, and sometimes they were edited to tell the story of individual characters, or a select narrative arc.
Fan videos are usually music videos. That means they have been edited from video clips from various sources to a piece of background music. Sometimes they contain text that informs the viewer about the site or the characters portrayed; sometimes their purpose is promotional, and they serve as a “trailer” for a forum to lure in potential players, just like a movie trailer is supposed to pique people’s interest to see the full film. “Trailers” are often cut to dramatic music – film soundtracks, or other kinds of fast-paced instrumentals that suggests adventure and excitement. Clips can be gathered from multiple sources; typically every playby tends to come from a different film or TV show, therefore their clips have to be carefully matched to make them blend into one visual narrative. As Kress and Van Leeuwen explain in *Reading images*, in moving images vectors are replaced by movement, and these indicating gestures have to be carefully matched between shots to keep the consistency of the narrative they portray (2006, p. 258-259). In this “blending” great care is given to the gestural mode. If the editor of the video can find clips that portray certain actors together, or people displaying gestures that can be connected (e.g. a woman giving a meaningful glance to her left, while the man in the next clip giving a meaningful glance to his right), the illusion of a continuous visual narrative can be established. Kress and Van Leeuwen also point out that connection or disconnection between Reactors and what they are reacting to can convey different messages to the viewers – disconnected reactions might feel more “emotionally involving” (2006, p. 261). While these might be conscious choices on the part of a movie director, the makers of fan videos often have limited resources to work with. Video clips are cut from previously recorded materials, some of which might not be digitized, or available in high enough quality. What is left and is usable has to be matched to create a coherent visual narrative to the best of the creator’s abilities – but even
then it might only convey the right story to those who are “in the know”, and willing to overlook the inconsistencies between individual shots of gestures.

If the video serves as a “trailer”, dramatic and fast-paced scenes such as fighting, running, dancing, etc. are often used; so are romantic moments, if romance is a prevalent part of the setting. “Filler” clips such as landscapes, buildings, atmospheric phenomena, or animals might also be used to provide more visual information about the game world. If the video portrays specific characters that are active on the site, clips are often chosen to portray them with their typical moods, body language, or activities. Their names or titles might be noted at the bottom of the screen, reminiscent of opening credits for a film or TV show.

HGRPG has been doing “recap videos” for every year of the Hunger Games, and posting them on YouTube. These videos mostly feature clips of the year’s arena (wide shots from western movies for a “Wild West” theme, clips of volcanoes and ocean waves for “Elements”, etc.), and the still portraits of every tribute, followed by text that provided information such as their name, district, training score, and how they died. The music that underscores these videos is either reminiscent of the setting (e.g. country-style music for westerns), or something that emotionally reflects the intense and dark nature of the Hunger Games. While these images were not moving, their steady progression on the screen interspersed with the moving images told a story through rhythm and movement.

Fan videos, more often than not, are created for flavor and fun. They do not replace any written narrative on the site, although they may portray some; they do not contribute information to the unfolding stories or character development, rather, they dramatize them. What they do, however, is create a sense of belonging within the player community by portraying their characters as parts of the same story, the same setting; connected through dramatic action and
meaningful gestures, they become a part of a whole, depicted as such for the viewing pleasure of insiders, and the intrigue of prospective recruits.

**OOC gifs.** While not technically a part of In Character narratives, OOC gifs also merit a short mention. Almost all chatboxes on forum sites make use of animated emoticons or gifs to convey emotions, and provide an entertaining way for OOC communication for the players. The emoticons that come built into the chatbox often depict tiny bubble-figures interacting with each other (hugging, pouncing, dancing) or displaying emotional behaviors (flailing, bouncing, climbing into bed, or swirling around in a cup of coffee), and can be called up by a simple textual cue (:flail:). Players use these animated images often in their everyday communication, sometimes simply for comedic effect, and sometimes to more concisely and accurately represent their thoughts and emotions for others.

The diminished role of the gestural mode in forum gaming is one of the most remarkable differences between forum RPs and video games. Video gamers expect to move through virtual worlds with their avatar, interact with objects and creatures through movement, and great attention is paid to how that movement is executed. In contrast, forum gamers use the gestural mode as flavor, something that adds information to the narrative, but does not create it. Most gestural elements could be left out of forum role-playing and no meaning (or enjoyment) would be lost. That, however, does not mean that information is not conveyed through the gestural mode; as demonstrated above, gestural elements are carefully selected to contribute to, and enhance, the stories told through play. The fact that they are optional doesn’t mean that players are not aware of their uses. Quite the opposite – the fact that people go through the difficulties of cutting and embedding gifs, or editing music videos, just to include the gestural mode, speaks
strongly to how much these elements are appreciated when participants integrate them into the stories they tell.

**Layout – The Spatial Mode**

"Is layout a mode?" asks Gunther Kress in his book on multimodality, before he proceeds to examine the key features of conveying meaning through layout (2010, p. 88-92). In the end, he concludes that if we were to “accord to layout the status of mode” (emphasis from Kress), the decision has consequences involving how we think about the ideational functions of other modes as well. In *Reading images*, Kress, alongside with Theo van Leeuwen, examines the possible meanings of the placement of visual elements, essentially applying social semiotic analysis to layout as if it was a mode (2006, pp. 175-199). Shifting attention from text (including several modes such as linguistic, visual, and gestural) to how portions of text are arranged in relation to each other opens up new levels of complexity in interpreting multimodal narratives. And layout, as we shall see in this section, does convey several meanings to members of forum gaming communities, and is used with great attention to those meanings.

**Site layout.** “Where should I put this?” is a question that is very often asked by players when they decide to start a new thread. In forum gaming, the layout of the site itself reflects the physical-architectural spaces the characters inhabit. Built from visual and linguistic elements, the site’s layout provides a spatial structure for navigating the game world, and a framework for placing narrative threads within the categories that represent physical locations.

On sites that revolve around a certain place, the forum boards usually expand “outwards” from it from top to bottom, starting with the narrowest location on top. For example, on school and college based sites such as *Bellefonte Academy* the first board one encounters would be the school itself, with sub-boards for classrooms, the gym, dormitories, etc. Then comes the
immediate area (school grounds, swimming pool, park, etc.), and then the surrounding town with its places of importance (clubs, pubs, malls, shops, etc.). In case characters venture even further, forums may have boards for larger cities nearby, the state, the country, or even the continent; if the setting includes alternate dimensions, they may get their own board as well. All boards are carefully labeled to help players find the appropriate place for their characters’ interactions; they often have representative images or short written descriptions attached.

In the case of forums that are based on real-world spaces, the layout might follow their generally accepted organization. AeRo, for example, was re-designed in 2011 to reflect the 14 regions (regio) of Augustan Rome. The boards on the site are listed in order of their regio numbers, and each one comes with a short written description of the area including the name of the region, and an explanation of its geographical location and most important features, for example:

**Regio I – Porta Capena. Named for the gate that leads from the Servian Wall, and by way of the Via Appia leads to the city of Capua. This region is located in the midst of the valley that forms between the eastern side of the Aventine, and the western side of the Caelian hill. (Aeterna Roma)**

Each board has sub-boards for the most prominent buildings of the area, as well as the homesteads of the families of active characters. Threads that take place in these spaces can be found on these sub-boards, while threads that take place in the general area (characters walking, visiting unspecified houses, etc.) might be under the general board heading. Thus, characters that go to the market or stroll around on the Forum can simply interact under “Regio VIII – Forum Romanum”, while characters who are Senators might interact in threads located under “Curia Julia,” the sub-board that represents the Senate House. If one wishes to venture outside of the
City of Rome, say, to the newly colonized province of Britannia, they can start threads under the corresponding “Britannia” sub-board of Extra Roma (“Outside Rome”). Most provinces that exist in the site’s alternate history can be found there.

Players usually choose a board based on where characters are supposed to be at the start of a thread. If they decide to move to another location as the narrative progresses, they may start a new thread under the corresponding board; this, however, is rarely a requirement, and many players “handwave” it depending on what happens in the story. If the move is temporary (e.g. two students make a trip from the dorms to the cafeteria and back while they talk), they might keep them in the same thread to make the writing run more smoothly, without the interruption of closing one thread and starting another – breaks between threads often signal breaks in the narrative as well (time skip, new scene, new person joining, etc.). Players might also request the creation of new sub-boards from the administrators. These might be dorm rooms shared by characters, the domus (household) of a noble Roman family, a secret club house, etc. On some sites such as AoM, players can “earn” their own spaces by collecting points or winning contests.

The layout of forum sites represents at a glance the physical spaces the characters inhabit. New players can take a look at the forum’s home page and see all the places – buildings, cities, worlds – their characters might venture into. The layout of a site uses the spatial mode to convey information about the game world: What spaces are available, where they are located in relation to each other, how far characters, and their stories, might travel on an adventure, etc. Threads organized under boards and sub-boards that signify physical locations give game narratives a spatial dimension.

Layout, however, does not only signify physical space – it can also represent temporal dimensions. Many forums have “Past thread” boards where players can write or role-play out
scenes from their characters’ past – things that happened before the site’s current time frame. In some cases where time travel is a part of the game setting, different eras have their own boards, usually organized in chronological order. Site layout, in these cases, uses the spatial mode to convey information about time within the narrative (the temporal mode will be discussed later in this chapter).

Forum layouts also work to physically separate IC and OOC interaction. Most sites have IC and OOC boards that are clearly distinguished from each other. As it has been discussed in the previous chapter, “keep IC and OOC separate” is a part of many sites’ policies, and considered common courtesy on all of them. By separating IC and OOC boards in the layout of a site, a person gets a clear sense of what belongs in the game world, and what is outside of it. Many sites also have AU (Alternate Universe) boards where people can play out scenarios that are not part of the site’s canon events.

Kress and Van Leeuwen examine the possible meanings behind layout directions in *Reading images* (2006). One of their claims is that “left” and “right” (at least in a Western context) often correspond to “given” and “new”: On the left there is the information that is generally accepted as normal or known, while on the right we find the elements (text, image, etc.) that contain the key message, something that is new (pp. 179-185). Similarly, top and bottom seem to correspond to the “ideal” and the “real”, a vertical differentiation between “what might be” and the “what is”, with the top playing the lead role the bottom part is subservient to (pp. 186-193). These elements can also be combined in Centre-Margin-Centre type structures to prioritize information in the middle (e.g. text between two side menus) (pp. 198-199).

Directional cues like these are important because they make the often staggering amounts of information on forum sites organized and readily available. When people make a decision on
whether or not they will join a site, a clear layout and easy navigation can be very important factors. Not being able to find the information required was one of the most commonly mentioned annoyances in interviews, and forums that repeatedly made that mistake tended to be seen in a less than favorable light (or even abandoned) by their players. For this reason, most sites make an effort to highlight important information on their home page. These links and texts usually include the site rules, the basic setting or premise, the site statistics, the names of the administrators or moderators, and current events happening IC and OOC, placed at the top so they are easily visible without scrolling down. In this case, the “what might be” and the “what is” are flipped, compared to Kress and Van Leeuwen’s claim: Practical, current information is shown on top, and everything else is below. However, one could argue that the “what might be” is often represented by the site’s main header image or logo, giving a visual representation to genre and style through images (as has been discussed before).

Figure 7 shows the topmost part of HGRPG’s home page. The main picture on top changes every time the page is re-loaded, featuring past victors of the Hunger Games (this is an achievement players strive for, and a very prominent visual representation of recognizing their victory – definitely a promise of “what might be” for potential players). Below it there are 24 images representing the 24 tributes in the site’s ongoing Games (at the time of the screen shot, November 2016, it was the 74th Hunger Games, the 21st in site history). Tributes whose portrait is in color are still alive in the arena, while black and white images represent fallen contestants. If one hovers the cursor over one of them, the name and the district number become visible. The box in the top left corner includes information on the site’s current IC time frame and weather, the latest victor, and the next upcoming event in the current Games (with OOC time). Right below it is the chat box.
Sites usually make an effort to display the chat box in a prominent place, since new arrivals tend to begin familiarizing themselves with the site and its community through the chat. The majority of forums in the sample (90 out of 100) had an OOC chatbox for general community interaction. About a third of them also had IC chatboxes where players could interact in character, although in most cases they came with warnings like “this is not canon to the site story” or “it is not a substitute for posting,” marking posts clearly as the preferred form of IC play. One third of the sites featured “tag boxes” in a prominent and easily visible place. These are chat rooms where people can let others know that they have posted for them (as in “tag, your turn!”). This helps players see at a glance what is happening on the site, and where they need to post. The example below (Figure 8) shows the bottom section of the home page of AoM.
The images on top are links to the site’s “Of the Month” winners (left to right: Member of the Month, Character of the Month, Ship of the Month). The large chat window is the OOC chat where people interact with each other. Names that are purple belong to site staff; blue are registered members, and white are guests and new arrivals. The smaller box on the left is the tag box where people post links to threads they have just posted in, tagging whoever is up next (“Tag [Character name/Player name]”). The smaller images on the bottom are advertisement links to other forum RP sites. The very bottom of the page (not featured here) shows some additional information, including the site credits, copyright notes, and the link to the forum host.

The organization of different kinds of information in different parts of a forum is what makes forum game narratives different from reading a book, or any other form of linear
storytelling. Twenty years ago, Janet Murray examined the origins of hypertext, and mused about its possible future applications in game design (1997, pp. 90-94). She claimed that “current narrative applications overexploit the digressive possibilities of hypertext”, creating overly complex digital structures and disjointed, fractured narratives that are near impossible to follow (p. 93). However, it is exactly this disjointed nature and “digressive possibility” of hypertext that forum games make use of in order to streamline their narratives by storing different kinds of information in different sections of the site. At first glance, threads are organized spatially, not chronologically, with multiple stories happening side by side. Information relevant to the stories appears in various places within the layout; for example, there is usually a separate OOC board that stores the characters’ bios; it often comes with sub-boards sorting characters into categories (e.g. on AoM, character bios are organized by species: Faefolk, Vampires, Djinn, Merfolk, etc.). While a player is interacting IC with someone else’s character, the description of that character usually does not appear in the current thread itself – instead, it is linked to the character’s profile, leading the reader to another section of the forum in search of information. If the player needs to know how a certain species’ powers work, they need to follow the links to the species descriptions. Textual, visual, aural, etc. elements of the narrative might be located in various places all over a site; a clear layout is essential for assembling all of them into a coherent story.

**In-post layout.** How text and other information is laid out within individual posts also has an effect on the creation of game narratives. Font sizes, types, and colors are varied to signify certain things, and add more meaning to written text. Most often it is dialogue that is separated through bold lettering, different colors, or spacing. In addition, people also frequently quote dialogue from a previous post, to make it clearer what exactly their character is reacting to. These quotes can be separated from the rest of the post in various ways including italics, >>
marks, frames, or different colors. Changes in layout signify or clarify who is talking, how they are talking (italics often mean whispers, telepathy, or foreign languages), and allows players to interject reactions in-between the events of the preceding posts without having to edit into it. In the example below (Figure 9), one of my own posts from L2R, the lines in italics prefaced with a >> sign are lines of dialogue from the previous post in the thread, written by another player. The lines written in bold letters are lines said by my character (Kate) in the current post, as a response to the previously started dialogue. The post describes the thoughts and reactions Kate had while listening to what was said in the earlier post, and references what she is reacting to by repeating the lines of dialogue in the form of a quote. This way, the two consecutive posts are not completely chronologically sequential, but rather, they are woven together through a system of quotes connecting to the previous post, and text and dialogue moving the plot forward.

![Image](image-url)

Kate Bishop

*Posted: Aug 21 2016, 09:49 PM*

Clint opened his mouth, and a woman’s voice came out.

>> "Not that I am aware of, but we’ll be sure to keep an eye on Tony,"

Had Kate already gotten a drink, she would have snorted it out through her nose - so in retrospect, long lines at Starbucks were clearly a blessing in disguise. This way, she only made an amused little squeaking noise as the red-haired woman made a sudden appearance.

>> "I’m pretty sure Tony’s house-trained. But Dog is fine. JARVIS has one of the bots watching him."

As fascinating as the idea of Dog being watched by a robot was, Kate was momentarily distracted by the third party joining the table. She had guessed a lot of people in her mind when Clint said ‘friend’, but she was beyond her expectations...

>> "Not, I’d like you to meet Kate. I kinda wandered into a mugging she was about to shut down. She’s an archer, too. And a very good one. Kate, this is Natasha, my partner."

"I know!" Kate blurted out, tripping over the compliments Hawkeye had just paid her to get to the introduction part "...I mean, yes I know who she is. Who you are. Big fan." she offered a hand to the woman with a grin

"Kate Bishop. Great to meet you."

As far as chill was concerned, right now Kate had none.

*Figure 9. IC post by Kate Bishop. Live to Rise, November 2016.*
I have already discussed post templates under the visual mode; now return to them to examine their use from the point of view of spatial elements. As Feather, one of my interview subjects so eloquently put it: “A good template is like the perfect frame for a picture. It adds to what’s inside instead of distracting from it.” What Feather is touching on here is the same idea that Kress and Van Leeuwen discuss when they talk about framing (2006, p. 203-204). Visual framing can disconnect (mark off) and/or connect elements of layouts, depending on how it is used. Post templates do both: They frame a post as its own unit, with all of its various elements integrated into a whole – but it also visually separates said elements so that they don’t blend into each other, and that they consistently appear in their own, clearly indicated place. The specific elements and layout of post templates, however, are often up for debate. The most often used features are hovers (images or text that become visible when one hovers the cursor over the template), scrolls (a scrolling bar on the side of the template that allows readers to move through longer pieces of text), and images. Many layout elements exist to make the post look more concise, and only show information when one is looking for it. However, this attempt at clarity and compartmentalization can also backfire if a template becomes too complex. It is a common complaint that templates don’t work on smartphone screens; especially if the scrolling bar is very thin or hard to see, it can be near impossible to read a post when one is using a touch screen. Hovers tend to create similar difficulties. Depending on the coding, the text can become so small or tightly spaced that it makes reading quite frustrating. Coding itself is often an obstacle: Players who use templates, but don’t code them themselves, are hard pressed to figure out the solution when something does not quite look the way it should. For all of these reasons several of my interview subjects voiced less than approving opinions about templates; one of them, nicknamed Desertpuma, called them “extraneous and superfluous.”
Post templates, therefore, are seen as both aesthetically pleasing and technologically challenging. They do play a part in creating meaning through layout: They separate dialogue from third person narrative, or multiple characters speaking; they also offer additional elements such as font and color that convey information about the manner in which things are said. They might provide images of playbys, information on word count, or links to character information. All of these pieces of information are arranged within a framework that players may or may not all agree on; but the general purpose of post templates is still to use the spatial mode to contribute and organize information relevant to the IC narrative.

The use of layout and the spatial mode to organize elements of a forum role-playing site speaks directly to the non-linear nature of the narratives that emerge from play. Since so many stories are created at the same time, so many scenes of one plot take place on various boards in various chronological orders, and so many multimodal elements of the same narrative are dispersed over different sections of the forum, without a consistent way of organizing information and framing text a reader would never have a chance to assemble a story of any coherence. But the structure provided by layout is not only required to be concise – it also has to be flexible enough that the players can use it to fit their creative processes. Bruce W. Speck, discussing collaborative writing in digital spaces, points out that creating hypertext can heighten students’ (participants’) sense of audience (2002, p. 98). Players are aware that their stories can be accessed through multiple points of entry, and multiple kinds of relationships can exist between texts created on the site. Layout and the spatial mode allow players to clarify these points of entry to their stories, help direct readers to them, and make it easier to locate and frame information relevant to any given part of the narrative.
Numbers and Coding – The Numeric Mode

While forum-based role-playing is a form of narrative gaming where outcomes of actions are usually decided through negotiation between two or more writers, sometimes the use of numbers or “stats” cannot be avoided. In her seminal work *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray defines game mechanics as “the narrative conventions that control the boundary between the real world and the illusion”. As part of these mechanics, she explains, many games represent IC combat as “elaborate arithmetical calculations of comparative strength, force, and vulnerability values” (1997, p. 122). While game mechanics as a whole, theoretically, include all rules and customs regulating player behavior on a site, they are most often referred to in relation to numerical information representing certain comparable attributes of the characters, commonly called stats. People creating a new site have to make a judgment call on whether the use of numeric elements would enhance or needlessly complicate the game experience. While almost no sites use numbers to the extent of tabletop *Dungeons & Dragons*, many of them have creative secondary systems in place for players to quantify their characters’ skills and abilities, or ways to collect points and spend them on various things that translate into the narrative.

In addition to the meaning-making role of numbers, I also discuss code in this section. Coding is a skill many forum-based players have, or wish to acquire; it is an essential part of creating and running a site, and often named among the top skills people learn from this form of gaming. Code, existing at the intersection of text, numbers, and procedurality, merits its own examination.

**Character stats and fighting systems.** “Character stats” are numbers that correspond to a character’s skills, abilities, or other attributes. They quantify how good a PC (player character) is at certain things, compared to others, on a scale. While emphasis is usually placed on text and
images when a character is described, the numbers can provide additional information that comes into play when PCs are pitted against one another, or against NPCs (non-player characters), in a competitive situation. As the interview subject named Desertpuma put it: “Some sites use stats, because with any kind of powers it almost becomes necessary - not just as a barometer of who can do what, but also in adjudicating results.”

The use of character stats is often directly connected to fight or combat systems on a site. In games where fighting is a crucial element to the narrative, there has to be a way to objectively judge which character might win, in order to avoid disputes and powerplay. The way children on a playground might say “Boom! I killed you!” “No you didn’t!”, narrative role-players might also argue over whether an attack was successful or not. Fight stats eliminate, or at least mitigate, these arguments. On forums they are usually kept fairly simple, and merely used to support the narrative elements of the game.

The only site with a fight system among the five I observed was HGRPG. Since PvP (Player vs Player) fights were an integral part of the Hunger Games, the creators had to come up with a way of using randomized numbers to determine the outcomes. The system works fairly simply: When someone writes a post that includes an attack, they plug a line of code into it, depending on what weapon the character is using. For example, for an unarmed attack it would be [roll range=”unarmed”]. When the post is posted, the code automatically turns into a random number. The sidebar of the site includes an Attack Lookup gadget; typing the random number into it tells the player what the result of their attack was (Figure 10).
The Attack Lookup also provides quantified damage. All characters have 40 health points (HP) total; when they are reduced to 0, they either die (in the Games), or are incapacitated (in “leisurely” threads). Damage can be adjusted if tributes spent time training before the Games on certain skills, as the Damage Calculator window indicates above: Training for certain weapons adds damage points, while having trained in self-defense deducts some. However, during my interactions with players who had tributes in the Games it became clear that the DC is not often used, and most people simply take notes by hand (attacks and damage are verified by moderators anyway). Forum gamers generally seem to like their stats and fight systems as simple as possible, and focus on the narrative instead.

At this point, once the attack and damage are calculated, the player can either go back and edit the description of the attack into the post, or wait for the next round to describe their
character’s reaction to what happened. Using the example above: They can A) Edit into the post, saying “Character X grabbed the arm of his opponent and twisted it”, or B) Wait for the other player to post something along the lines of “Character Y felt his arm crack”, and then use their next post to react, e.g. “Character X saw that his attacker had been incapacitated, as their arm hung limp at their side.” In rapid-fire events option B is the one that comes into play; in other threads, players might take the time to go back and adjust the narrative to the random results.

I interviewed multiple players from HGRPG, and asked their opinions on the fight system. Some of them highlighted how it provides an element of surprise: “I like thriller movies, and the suspense that the games have are like them because you never know what the result will be from your own dice and others” (Jade). Others pointed out the obvious drawback of using a randomized system: The results did not rely on a player’s skills or tactics at all. As a player named Brown noted: “It's kinda annoying when you write a major build up to a big attack, but then miss or do very little damage. But it kinda represents life and how not everything's gonna go as planned.” The element of surprise, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, was one of the things most interview subjects named among what drew them to forum gaming. Since the game is narrative-based, there are, theoretically, unlimited options for “what happens next.” While a fight system such as the one described here is not technically unlimited, it still adds a strong element of surprise to the story. On other sites, fighting might be solely limited to numbers, with no descriptions attached – in these cases, it is up to the players’ imagination to describe if a certain number of damage was inflicted by a kick, a punch, a projectile, or any other action.

The fight system on HGRPG also evens out the inequalities inherent in the setting: In the original books by Suzanne Collins, the Hunger Games are most often won by “career tributes,” people from the Upper Districts who have been training to fight from childhood. If the site was
true to the books, players with characters from the Lower Districts would not have many chances to shine, and therefore they would be discouraged from role-playing characters from those districts. The fight system, since it only considers previous experience when it comes to damage, evens out the odds – but also muddles them somewhat:

*It's hard to write a career character that has trained their entire life for this, only to have them slaughtered by a lower district. You're left going 'but really, would my career miss six times in a row whilst they cut my legs off?*(Cass)

The randomized fight system balances the odds, and adds the element of pure luck. Most players accepted it as an “easy to use” and well thought-out solution to making the game more diverse, and more surprising. It also has the added bonus of eliminating disputes. A player named Onyx noted that the fight system “removes anyone's blame of anyone else (or it should, removing personal emotions for a dead tribute).” Even with the addition of a fight system, emotions often ran high on the site during the Games. Kay, who has been a Gamemaker for HGRPG in the past, said this when asked what the most difficult part of running the Games was:

*The drama? There's invariably some flail between different alliances, or an RE [random event] can be interpreted broadly, or I mess something up in the engine that's complicated to fix. Those moments are incredibly stressful because a lot of them come down to judgment calls. It's incredibly important to me to run a fair Games (rather than favoring people I like) so sometimes these judgment calls are not in favor of my dear friends and _that_ is a horrible conversation to have.*

Emotional bleed (discussed in detail in Chapter 3) often resulted in blame for random events falling on players or Gamemakers, even when the twists in the story were the direct results of an impartial numeric system. For example, when my tribute in the Hunger Games died
as the result of an “instant kill” (a very lucky dice roll on the part of my opponent), the player of
the other tribute apologized to me abundantly for the death. From the following reactions of the
player community I got the impression that many players tend to take such strokes of bad luck
personally, and in the heightened emotional state of losing a beloved character they might blame
other players for the occurrence – even when all parts of it were randomized. As much as
numbers and stats were in place to make the game fair, emotional bleed could still result in OOC
conflict – the unmitigated version of which, no doubt, would have been much worse.

Character stats and fight systems introduce the element of surprise into game narratives
through the use of numbers and code. Players use these and build the story around them,
following the cues given through the numeric mode to steer the plot in unexpected directions,
and explore situations they might not have invented otherwise. The “fairness” of the numeric
systems, while sometimes debated by members of the playing community, is generally viewed
by players as a positive aspect of the game, one that helps move the story forward while
mitigating conflicts resulting from events that take place inside the narrative.

**Site statistics and point systems.** Character stats and fight systems, however, are not the
only way numbers are used in forum gaming. I have observed several sites that had reward
systems based on points, or even in-game money that players could spend on various things. On
HGRPG, every post earned $5 automatically for the player’s “account” that they could spend on
sponsoring (or betting on) tributes. On AoM players could earn points for certain activities, such
as: Creating a character of an Encouraged Species or Encouraged Gender (types the site had few
of at the time), winning an “Of the Month” award, advertising the site on other forums, recruiting
a friend, etc. The collected points could be spent to purchase Anomalies (rare species of
characters), open a board or a sub-board for a new setting, or create mutant characters with
powerful abilities such as time travel or life/death manipulation. Points in all of these cases had to be approved by the site staff. I have coded several other sites with similar systems; both the ways to earn points, and the ways to spend them, were tailored in every case to the site’s own setting and needs.

Things such as encouraged or restricted character types were often quantified in the form of character statistics. While I generally use “stats” as explained in the previous section, *statistics* in this case refers to compiled demographic information of the site’s character population. They often categorize PCs by gender, species, age, or occupation; if the site features factions or other categories (such as the Districts in HGRPG) they can also be mentioned. Several sites had rules in place specifically to balance out these numbers. If a romance site had too many (heterosexual) male characters, and too few females, they might put a temporary ban on new males, or incentivize the creation of females through point rewards, to give players a better chance at finding role-playing partners. Canon/OC sites might have limits on how many Original Characters can exist side by side with the canons. Approximately a third of the sites in the sample featured their statistics on their home page, or some other easily accessible location; also a third had types of characters that were capped, banned, or encouraged, or rules about keeping thing “balanced.” Many featured “premium” character types that had to be purchased or earned.

Character statistics often took on very elaborate forms. For example, HGRPG had a player who was the self-nominated Statistician of the community; shortly after my interview they were elevated to Staff status as a Coder, in recognition of their voluntary work. They helped the player community by compiling information on the Hunger Games. I conducted a long interview with the Statistician, curious about what their methods of compiling data were, and what results they got from it. The Statistician tracks multiple kinds of data from the Games, such as damage
dealt/taken, number of kills, the list of members in each Game, charts of the mutts (monsters) in each Game, etc. All of these are numeric and quantified, allowing for easy organization and comparison at first glance. One of the most coveted things the Statistician tracks is the *Reaping odds* - they are numbers that describe how likely a certain character is to be drawn as a tribute for the Hunger Games. Reaping odds combine several sources of complicated data such as gender, district, and age. When I asked about the difficulty of calculations, the Statistician said: “A lot of people struggle with it but somehow I was able to pick it up quite quickly.” It was their innate curiosity and talent with mathematics that proved to be useful for the site’s community. Both site staff and players were very appreciative of the Statistician’s work, therefore I was curious how these charts might influence the narrative of the game:

*I think that it offers everyone a chance to see the people who often do well so that they might be able to see what allows them to do well. The reaping odds definitely affect choices people make, as they’re more likely to make or add a character in that is in a district with less entries.*

The information gaged from the numbers seemed to effect the narrative in various ways. It helped players determine what kinds of characters to create – besides underrepresented districts, age was also a factor, since the older the character was (up to 18), the more likely they were to be selected for the Games. They also might have influenced players’ decisions on what kinds of weapons to use, or what skills to train their characters in. Statistics helped the site staff observe the results of their Gamemaking work, and adjust the upcoming Games accordingly.

When I asked the Statistician about larger trends they have observed since they began tracking numbers, the answer was telling:
I think what stands out the most is that there aren't a huge amount of trends. Looking over the comparisons of the tributes shows that, after 20 Games, everything is quite equal. The level of fairness, and random chance, that goes into the site is shown by how even things end up in the long run.

This “fairness” is descriptive of the way numbers are used to balance out narrative results on the site. Statistics are important in revealing, and controlling, the balance resulting from these numeric systems; reading the charts, the trained eye can de-code how they will affect the narrative itself, or how they may be applied to gain better results in the future. Keeping site statistics and demographics, therefore, is not only an intriguing piece of trivia – it is a delicate balancing act that keeps the entire site’s story run more smoothly.

**Coding.** Given that forum-based role-playing takes place in a digital space, code is what all these sites are made of. Code is a form of virtual language that translates into the other modes discussed earlier in this chapter: Text, layout, visuals, sounds, etc., or introduces an element of random chance into the game (as we have seen in the case of fight systems). It could have been discussed in the previous chapter as a form of language – but after some consideration, I decided to include it here instead. The main reason for that was that treating code as a part of language would have disregarded the use of code in gaming that Ian Bogost labeled *procedural rhetoric* (2010). Code in forums, much like in video games, represents creation and communication through processes – changing opinions (or, in the case of forum gaming, narrative) through executed action (Bogost 2010, p. 29). As Bogost describes it, the use of procedural forms determines video game genres, and while forum gaming is ultimately determined by text, sites can be divided into multiple sub-categories based on their uses of the secondary numerical systems described earlier. Procedural representations take place in code – code has the capability
of representing process as process, instead of describing it (Bogost 2010, p. 14). Randomized results from virtual dice or fight engines influence game narratives through the procedures of decision-making done by the computer through a coded prompt. Bogost’s idea of procedural rhetoric essentially treats procedurality as a mode separate from images, language, or gesture. In the world of forum gaming, it most often takes place in a numeric, quantified format – therefore, I decided to include it under this section, with the caveat that code could be interpreted in various ways in various other social and cultural contexts.

My interview subjects had a lot to say about coding, and the use of code in enhancing their game experience. When asked about what they learned from forum gaming, many of them mentioned coding as one of the most useful, marketable skills. The interesting part about learning to code from forum games is that it is almost always a self-taught, self-motivated process: Several players mentioned they learned it by “trial and error” or “tinkering around,” and that they had had no background in computer studies before. One of my interview subjects, going by the nickname Dino, described the experience:

*I've never had any formal training, but I'm now at the point that I can
blind code HTML/CSS. I've learned how to write and edit Javascript (but still
need to google sometimes), and I'm currently learning Rails and PHP. I know
how to build databases, transfer information between databases. I've learned how
to use tools that professional web developers use.*

All the skills that are listed in this excerpt would be marketable outside of the world of forum gaming, or even game design. They are by far not common, even in the younger generations generally seen as “tech-savvy” – as Jody Shipka points out, while most people can email and use Facebook, it is by far not a guarantee that they can also write JavaScript and
Future research focusing on the possible educational uses of forum gaming should definitely take this into consideration.

People who develop their coding skills to a higher level are often popular and much thought after within the forum gaming community. Most of their work involves templates and graphic design; they all called on when players are in need of something particularly elaborate or unique. Some sites (such as HGRPG) actually have Coders among their staff, responsible for making the site run smoothly and look good. Without coding experience, people who wish to start their own site either have to contend with the basic settings offered by the forum host (Proboards, Jcink, Invisionfree, etc.), learn the basics of coding themselves, or call on someone who has the skills required to build the site up.

While forum hosts offer more and more elaborate options, people also have strong opinions about their advantages and disadvantages. The sub-account feature of Jcink, for example, was praised by multiple players I interviewed. Traditionally on most forum sites if one had more than one account (a separate account for each character), the player would have to log out and log back in every time they switched between characters, or between a character and their OOC profile. Jcink created a very convenient feature for switching between accounts without having to log out and put in another username/password to log back in. Several sites migrated over to Jcink because of this, and other features geared towards forum gamers. Code can often make or break the gaming experience, and force sites to shut down, reboot, or migrate to a different host. As one player described it:

Had an absentee admin at the first site I was on. He just wasn't doing what needed to be done, and as a result, we were running decade-old forum code on a very old server (that was also several years behind on updates), and it was really
feeling its age. I could single-handedly bring down the server and force it to
reboot, but other people were getting temporarily banned, in error, by code that
was supposed to prevent DOS attacks... (Jen)

The coding of a site and its features can heavily influence the gaming experience, and
even the narrative itself. One of the most common problems was described by Venus, who talked
about being logged out while writing a post, due to inactivity. If someone hits Send on a post
after the site logged them out, the whole post might be irreversibly lost. “Losing a post” is one of
the most frequent, and also the most frustrating, glitches on forums. People put a lot of effort,
energy, and creative work into their writing; losing an entire scene, especially if it was long and
elaborate, can be truly annoying, and throw off the narrative. People who have to repeat writing a
post might not have the patience or the inspiration the second time around to make it as detailed
as it had been the first time. The glitch in the code that was responsible for deleting a piece of
writing might send the whole story in another direction.

Code does more than just provide the “behind the scenes” structure of a site; it can be
responsible for how the players experience the game, how they manage their information, or
even, through randomized systems, what the outcome of certain narrative actions might be.
People who learn how to code might have an advantage within the player community, and can
earn considerable respect; many of their skills can directly translate into occupations in “the real
world.” Code, therefore, is an integral part of forum gaming, and also one that players are very
much aware of.

The use of the numeric mode is, once again, a feature that sets forum games (and forum
gamers) apart from other styles of gaming. With narratives that so heavily rely on written text
and personal communication, the numeric mode takes on secondary, yet innovative roles within
the process of play – roles that echo its uses in some ways from tabletop or video games, but also require different skills, and allow different creative opportunities, for the players who engage with them. The detailed examination of code and numeric elements is definitely integral to answering the question of what makes forum gaming different from other platforms, and unique in its narrative creation.

**Time – The Temporal Mode**

Is time a mode? Can the passage and measurement of time itself convey meaning in forum games, represent interpersonal relations, and form parts of a coherent text? Do members of the forum gaming community consciously and regularly make use of time to convey meaning that is not conveyed in other forms as part of a narrative?

Forum gaming takes place in an asynchronous environment. Players share an online space, but they do not necessarily share it at the same time; one does not have to be online at a given moment to play with others. Posts, once created, remain on the boards indefinitely, and there is no requirement to reply to them immediately, or to be online when they appear. In fact, on many boards it is considered rude, or even forbidden, to “pester” other players to post, or try to hurry them along (sometimes also called *post bullying*). The leisurely time requirement of forum gaming is an important factor for many people who prefer this style of role-playing to others. Incidentally, this is also why many people tend to see forum gaming as a “second best” choice for gamers who can’t spend hours solely focusing on a video game or an MMORPG.

In her book titled *In the meantime*, Sarah Sharma examines what she calls *temporalities* in public spaces, and the “micropolitics of temporal coordination and social control between multiple temporalities” (2014, pp. 4-7). Temporalities are lived experiences of time, multiple of
which converge in any given space, creating a complex hierarchy of time that exists at multiple intersections of “a range of social differences and institutions” (p. 15). *Power-chronography*, a term coined by Sharma, is an analytical way of detangling seemingly stable spaces by examining the multiple temporalities that converge in them (p. 148). Among other things, Sharma points out that popular culture and media tend to react the “speeding up” of everyday life in multiple ways – among them, by promoting conscious “slowing down”, a concept fraught with power hierarchies in the economy of time management (p. 16). What makes all this relevant to forum gaming, and time as a mode, is that forum games are generally seen as “slow spaces” that offer an alternative to fast-paced video games and the real-time demands of MMORPGs. However, examining the converging temporalities on these sites, one realizes that they are asynchronous in more ways than one: They have the capability of connecting players from multiple temporalities in ways that would not converge otherwise, and they contain narratives that develop and represent multiple temporalities. This connection is not only something forum creators strive for, but it is also carefully managed through various regulations and unspoken rules.

This asynchronous nature is both a staple, and a challenge, of forum gaming. On one end of the spectrum it makes role-playing accessible to people who would not have the time, or the flexibility of schedule, to play otherwise; on the other end, it can mean that many narratives never come to an actual conclusion. Sites try to regulate IC and OOC time in multiple ways to create the best possible game experience, and help narratives develop at a steady pace; depending on the setting, the staff, and the player community, these regulations can take various interesting forms. The two extremes of time management – posting too slowly, or too fast – are most often regulated in two ways: Activity checks, and “rapid fire” rules. The former refers to regulations that describe the minimum amount of posting a player needs to do to be considered
active on the site. This requirement can vary by site: Most of them perform activity checks once a month, bi-monthly, or every 3 months, while the more “leisurely” do it once every half a year, or on a yearly basis. Activity is usually counted in terms of IC posts made, and often by character – a player might be active, but if they have not made a post with one of their characters in a long time, the character itself is considered inactive. Half of the sites in the sample had activity rules in place – which is a low estimate, because most sites I have observed had staff checking periodically if players/characters were still active, and performing regular “cleanups.” Losing “active” status can have various consequences, such as characters being deleted, canon characters being given to someone else, or player accounts being frozen.

The other end of the regulatory spectrum involves rapid fire posting. This term refers to posts being written in rapid succession, usually by players who are online at the same time. These posts are usually shorter, in order to cut down on the writing (and waiting) time. Such short-post threads may also have other names – on HGRPG they were called “blitz”. While rapid fire sometimes occurs naturally between players who are in the same time zone, and have a similar writing pace, I have seen several sites that limited its use. The reasoning behind such rules was that it might make other players feel “left out,” or advance certain plots so fast that others can’t keep up. Some forums delegated rapid fire to separate boards, or strongly advised against them.

Similarly to “no pester” rules, players who were impatient or trying to advance the narrative too fast were generally seen as “pushy” or “rude.” Learning what the acceptable amount of “pestering” was, and how long one should wait before it is polite to remind another player to post, was one of the most elaborate pieces of online etiquette I have ever had to master. Sometimes it is necessary to reach out to one’s playing partners: If there are multiple people
involved in a plot, one person’s absence can halt the entire gaming process. One of the most often described negative aspects of forum gaming was “members disappearing” without a word – a huge breach of etiquette. Most forums have “Away” or “Hiatus” boards for people to post in when they know they will not be around for a while; simply disappearing without a note, and leaving threads unfinished, is considered the number one most common source of frustration and conflict on forums. It is crucial, however, to know how to reach out and remind someone without seeming too persistent or rude.

Between rules on minimum activity and limitations on posting speed, most forums have a clear view on how their community should manage their time. With such guidelines in place, occasional uncommon uses of asynchronicity can greatly contribute to the game experience. The most interesting example I had the chance to observe were the “real time” events of HGRPG – most prominently the Blood Bath, where players had to be online at a certain time to post. The Blood Bath is the opening moment of the Hunger Games, where all 24 tributes burst into the arena, trying to lay claim to the Cornucopia and all of its vital resources. Players of all tributes were required to be online at a given time (11am EST on a Saturday morning); if someone could not make it, they asked another player to trib sit (play their character) for them. There were rules regulating how fast and how often one could post (one post per 10 minutes, minimum 5 posts between two of one’s own, etc.) and time stamps on posts were closely monitored by the moderators - but in the end, posting speed decided which players got in their first attack, which ones managed to flee from the fight, and which ones had to watch their characters get killed. This exception to the usual asynchronous gaming style created tension and excitement through a sense of urgency; emotions in the OOC chatbox ran incredibly high. This event was the closest parallel to real-time video game combat that I have ever experienced on a forum site.
Synchronous posting was implemented to inject a sense of urgency, and higher narrative stakes, into the game; time was used to create an emotional effect, mirroring the tributes’ emotions within the story itself. Essentially, time was used to create emotional bleed on purpose.

In addition to regulating players’ time management OOC, there are also many rules about the temporal elements of the narratives themselves (IC time). The most important term in forum gaming related to this is *liquid time*. Liquid time means that a character is allowed to be in more than one threat at once, playing out scenarios that would, within the game world, happen in a linear chronological progression. It allows players to thread with more than one person at a time, and balances out the differences in pacing: If one thread progresses more slowly, the character is not “stalled,” or blocked from being active in others. A third of the sites I coded had written rules allowing liquid time, but it seemed to be common practice on almost all of them, although sometimes with certain limitations. Certain types of threads may be limited to a smaller number (e.g. “up to three fight threads at a time”), there might be a general limit to ongoing threads per character (usually three to five), or there might be warnings about “keeping your timeline straight” (since too many simultaneous threads could result in inconsistencies in the narrative).

This last part is especially important, and is a general unspoken rule all over the forum gaming world. If a character can be in multiple threads at the same time, somehow the narrative’s plot still has to be “kept straight” – the players have to be aware which threads’ events take place first, which second, etc. Players usually use *trackers* for this purpose – posts in designated OOC sub-boards that list the links to all of one character’s threads in chronological order, assembling the timeline of that character’s experiences. Many sites also require time stamps at the beginning of posts (referring to IC date and time), as I have shown in the example from AeRo earlier. A tracker post usually lists threads by title and in chronological order,
sometimes including a short summary of the events taking place in the thread, and links all of
them in one place. Keeping track of the timeline is important to keep the narrative consistent.
One has to be aware what “past” events a character might refer back to in any given thread, and
know what they might not know yet, even if the next thread has already been played out. This
can result in very complex situations: The player might be aware of things that their character
does not know yet, or, on the flip side, they might have to write ‘around’ something that
technically happened in a past thread, but it has not been written yet (as discussed in Chapter 3).
Liquid time adds an extra challenge to writing in forum games, and makes it more difficult to
avoid metagaming. It influences the narrative as it develops, and since not many players ever go
back to edit threads after they have concluded, the results of its effects remain visible as the story
moves along. This is where the archontic nature of forum narratives comes into play, as
described by Abigail Derecho in relation to fan fiction (2006). Forum RPGs form their own
archives. Finished threads remain posted for anyone to read; sometimes they are moved to
“Archive” boards, or labeled “Finished,” to set them apart from ongoing events, but they are very
rarely deleted completely. People visiting HGRPG, for example, can go back and read any of the
past Hunger Games in their entirety on their dedicated sub-boards; the stories are still there.
Players joining sites are encouraged to go back and read some especially well-received or
important threads that the community often refers to. Sites are conscious of their own past,
created by the players themselves, and the stories are not only archived, but also read, re-read,
referenced, mined for “plot hooks,” and praised, often even several years after they were written.

Many sites have a time frame that count as their narrative “present” – it might be a year, a
season, or a couple of months corresponding to OOC time. “Current time” is often noted in a
visible place on the site’s home page (as seen in the example from HGRPG’s home page), and
usually described as a time frame, rather than an exact date, to allow people time to role-play longer stories out. When I joined AeRo, for example, the time stamp on the site said “August-December - 62 AD.” Any thread taking place outside of this time frame is considered a “flashback”, or a “flash forward.”

Time itself as a mode can add various elements to the forum gaming narrative. It can signal excitement or camaraderie (in the case of rapid posting), or connect players from incompatible time zones; it can shape the knowledge and experience available to the characters; it can assemble a coherent narrative from disjointed threads written out of order. It can signal appreciation and inspiration (if the playing partners respond frequently), or underlying conflict and disinterest (in long waiting periods), or raise the narrative stakes of an otherwise leisurely style of gaming (as seen in the case of the Blood Bath). The connections and discrepancies between IC and OOC time make forum games a complex network of temporalities to navigate, and often a challenge to write in – but they also add an element of creative freedom, and narrative possibilities that might not present themselves in other forms of role-playing.

**Conclusion**

Forum role-playing narratives, much like most of human communication, are inherently multimodal. Through observing sites over an extended period of time, it also became clear that participants are aware of this multimodality; they carefully select the semiotic resources that best convey the meanings they want. While it is universally agreed within the forum gaming community that the written language at the core of their storytelling practices should not be substituted with anything else, other modes are also used to represent key elements of the emergent narratives. Images condense information through the visual mode, portraying
characters and world-elements; music is added for emotional depth and signifying genre; the
gestural mode is used to symbolize character personality and create narrative cohesion. Forum
role-playing sites are complex spaces where information is organized spatially, and layout takes
an essential role in structuring the multiple narratives and temporalities that converge in them.
And although it is to a much lesser extent than in video games or tabletop role-playing, numbers
and code also play a role in adding a procedural element to storytelling in these digital spaces.

What counts as a mode, and what semiotic resources participants have access to, differs
from one subculture to another. Forum gamers draw their references from their favorite fandoms;
they use gifs, memes, faces, and sounds associated with many forms of media, and combine
them in creative ways for telling their own stories. If a forum is based on a specific pre-existing
pop culture text, sites might require their players, at least to some extent, to be familiar with the
source material – the community itself often supplies the resources and information needed for
new arrivals to gain an entry point to the world of the game, through peer tutoring. If the forum
is an original world based on a larger genre (fantasy, sci-fi, western, etc.), players might draw
their symbols and references from a whole range of related texts and formulaic narrative
conventions, using multimodal storytelling to combine bits and pieces of pre-existing texts from
various other media to create whole new narratives. This engagement with popular culture
through various texts, and the shared interest, creates the shared set of visual, aural, gestural, etc.
semiotic resources that players can draw from, and use to convey meaning in their stories that
other members of the community can interpret, and play off of, for narrative coherency.

When exploring what makes forum-based role-playing different from other games, and
makes players drawn to these sites through conscious choices and preference over other styles of
gaming, it is essential to understand that their multimodal storytelling happens in a very self-
aware way. As illustrated through this chapter, each mode used in narrative creation is carefully chosen by players for its unique possibilities of conveying different kinds of information and meaning. If a player doesn’t have the inspiration to create an emotional scene, they turn to music, or might even ask others to recommend a song. If someone wants to give others an idea of what their character’s wedding dress looks like, they might provide a link to a Pinterest board to supply a visual reference point. If someone feels like their long-form posts tend to float in space as an intimidating wall of text, they might ask another player with coding experience to help create a post template that will frame the text, and break it up into more easily distinguishable paragraphs and colored lines of dialogue. All through the process of digital storytelling, from the first look at a site to the most elaborate narratives, players know what they want to say, and they consciously choose the best semiotic resources, the best modes, the best ways to say it.

Forum sites allow remarkable creative freedom to do so. More than any other, commercial form of role-playing, they allow freedom to their players to draw multimodal resources from any point of the World Wide Web, and integrate them directly into the game. Faces are not limited by code and pre-set graphics; sound is not limited by in-game soundtrack; plot twists in the story don’t have to adhere to a pre-designed set of narrative choices. Rules and regulations do exist, and many of them are specific to various modes, as explored above. But these rules are implemented only to provide a social and technical structure to help coherent stories to be formed with the least conflict and confusion possible. This creative freedom offered to players to design characters, tell stories, and engage with pop culture text is at the heart of the drawing power of forum games – one of the most essential features that make them unique and popular. Forum-based role-playing narratives can take form through true interactivity, collaborative storytelling, and an enjoyable gaming experience.
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS

At the start of this research project, my main focus was to ascertain whether forum-based role-playing games can be described as a distinct style of gaming, rather than a substitute for tabletop- or video games. As a forum gamer myself, I was familiar with the common attitudes towards my hobby, which usually assigned it to a liminal place, labeling it a “second best” option for people who did not have the time, resources, or social connections to pursue other forms of role-playing. Similarly, scholarship on role-playing, or even text-based games, often glossed over forum gaming. The first research question, therefore, was simple: Is forum-based role-playing even a distinct gaming style, or simply a substitute?

In order to decide whether forum games can be distinguished from tabletop- video- and other text-based games, their most common features had to be explored. If they were merely a substitute for other forms of gaming, their structures would be set up to emulate those others, trying to make the play experience and goals similar to the “original” - essentially, creators of forum RPs would try to use the digital tools provided to them by the platform to make game play follow video- or tabletop games as closely as possible. If, however, forum gaming was a distinct style of its own right, then its structure and key features would be different from others. In addition, if forum games were truly a substitute, then the majority of their participants would be people who don’t play on other platforms, and have resolved to a “second best” option. If, however, they were proven to be the majority of players’ first choice or preferred platform, then their “liminality” would be called into question.

The first part of this inquiry was addressed through a large-scale sample, and close textual analysis. The list of most prominent features developed through the coding of a variety of
sites was then refined and explored through participant observation – simply listing them, after all, would not have revealed their uses and roles within the gaming structure. The second question was addressed directly through a series of in-depth player interviews. Both lines of inquiry led to the same conclusion: *Forum games have a set of distinct features, and systems of rules, that set them apart from other forms of gaming.* All three phases of the research process pointed to the same key elements: The heavy emphasis on written text, the importance of collaboration and community, and the creative freedom provided by the way narratives are created on these sites. From the interviews it became clear that the majority of players play other forms of role-playing (tabletop, or video games) simultaneously with their participation on forums – and the ones that do not, claimed that forums were their preferred, first choice over the others. Data collected from the one hundred sites in the sample supported their claims: Several forums are either directly based on commercially available video games (e.g. *Assassin’s Creed*, *Dragon Age*, etc.), or feature game worlds from pop culture texts that do have professionally designed tabletop or video games attached. Players nonetheless join fan-made forum RPGs, in order to explore the worlds better, or gain more agency over their own fan creations. It is not need, therefore, that draws players to these sites - but rather, conscious choices of preference.

Labeling forum role-playing games as their own category re-shapes the typology set up and accepted by Game Studies scholars over the past few decades. Typologies of role-playing games tend to move from tabletop RPGs to MUDs and MOOs to videogames. Adding forum games into the lineup, under the larger umbrella of text-based gaming, is an important step towards exploring role-playing in its greater complexity. This is especially interesting in regards to theories of interactivity – as mentioned in the first chapter, researchers often make the assumption that digital games cannot be “truly” interactive (understood as the real-time creation
of emergent narrative consequences). Forum games, on the other hand, display this kind of “true” interactivity discussed and coveted in the field of role-playing games, as well as ample options of “meta-interactivity” – the chance for players to shape the structure of the game itself.

Concluding that forum games are not a liminal or substitute style of gaming, however, was merely the beginning of the exploration. Since they have been largely ignored by academic studies before as a gaming style (while individual sites have been occasionally researched in relation to literacy), their complexities merit further examination. Once described as distinct from others, the next question had to be addressed: Why do people play forum-based role-playing games? Which key features have the most drawing power for players, and what do they base their decisions on when they select a site over another? In the interview phase of the research project, participants spoke at length about their preferences. Writing emerged as their topmost priority – they claimed to have joined forum games because they wanted to role-play in writing. There were various underlying reasons for this, from hopes of improving one’s writing style, getting over writer’s block, developing characters, or producing fan fiction in a certain genre, all the way to preferring asynchronous online spaces for social interaction. People drawn to forum games are people who want to write – more than that, people who genuinely enjoy the act of writing. Furthermore, forum games exist at the intersection of writing and play. Play makes these spaces highly collaborative; participants claimed that one of the most important sources of their enjoyment was collaboration, and the element of surprise that came from writing with others. Collaborative composition, multiple players creating narratives through acts of play, made forum gaming sites a unique environment for digital storytelling. Exploring the rules and practices that regulate the uses of language and written text, and help players negotiate the creation of
narratives, provided valuable information on how writing translated into play, and play translated into writing.

Another fact that emerged over the course of this study is that the narratives born from forum games are highly multimodal. Exploring this feature in detail led to important conclusions about their multimodality. One of them is that players are very much aware of the modes, shared semiotic resources, at their disposal, and they consciously apply them in their acts of meaning-making, selecting the mode that best conveys certain kinds of information for every part of the texts that they create. Multimodal composition on forum-based role-playing sites is a conscious, self-aware creative act, one that holds the linguistic mode at the center, but is by far not limited to it. Furthermore, this range of multimodality, and the various tools and resources at the players’ disposal for shaping their narratives, is one of the aforementioned key drawing powers of this gaming style. They offer a kind of creative freedom that is limited in other forms of role-playing – players can tell the stories they want, and tell them the way they want to, with access to all the resources the Internet can offer. While rules regulating the use of certain modes and modal resources do exist, they exist in a structure that has the flexibility to allow ample space for narrative creation, and to support the player communities in negotiating their collaboration with others on the site.

Establishing the place of forum-based role-playing within a wider range of gaming styles, creating a framework for describing their key features, questioning why people are drawn to it as their preferred platform, and exploring its uses of language and multimodality, were – hopefully - only the first step towards more detailed academic attention. As a form of play that involves collaborative composition, digital storytelling, and creative engagement with popular culture texts, forum games merit deeper and more extensive research to fully explore their complexity,
community dynamics, and possible applications. First among the limitations of this present study was that it did not include data collection and in-depth analysis of the player demographics of the sites. Future projects focusing on the communities in terms of distribution in gender, age, nationality, native language, etc. could provide valuable information for understanding the attraction that this style of gaming holds for certain social groups. It could also shed light on how these sites might connect players across social, linguistic, or national boundaries, and how that affects the informal tutoring practices that take place among them. Power relations and boundaries among the player communities similarly require further research and analysis. For example, one topic that emerged from participant observation and textual analysis was the question of consent. While it involved consent in the commonly used sexual sense (in the case of IC character relationships), it also extends beyond in-character situations to include the negotiation of manipulating each other’s characters, or inhabiting each other’s virtual spaces. The way consent to engage and interact is carefully negotiated on many forum gaming sites could have implications regarding consent in anonymous online spaces in general, and possible applications on a much larger scale.

Another possibility for future research, once forum games have been explored in detail and in depth, is to apply some of their key features to educational settings. Using games and simulations in the classroom is a trend that is still gaining momentum at the same time as it is integrating new technologies. The ways forum games motivate their players to create, engage, plan, and write could hold valuable lessons for the integration of text-based role-playing into the classroom. Quoting previous research, Ede and Lunsford point out that collaborative learning groups can help students not only gain specific skills (e.g. writing), but also “increase their general cognitive skills and their engagement with an interest in learning” (1990, p. 11).
Referring to higher education, Bruffee also notes that “there is no more important skill to learn in acquiring the craft of interdependence than learning to write effectively” (1999, p. 53). Writing, according to him, lies at the center of collaborative learning, just like it lies at the center of forum games. It is not only important to composition studies, but also to many academic and professional fields that require people to work effectively together (p. 54). A game that brings collaboration and writing together through play could be a valuable addition to many classrooms.

Ede and Lunsford point out that collaborative writing is “highly goal-oriented and context bound;” what works in one project might not work in another (1990, pp. 26, 62). Shipka notes that making multimodal texts and strategies more commonly accepted can be accomplished through increasing both their number and visibility – more studies, more discussion, and more attention might lead to more integration of multimodality into education (2011, p. 135). With this in mind, exploring various forms of collaborative writing in online spaces, especially in process-oriented contexts such as role-playing, could contribute varied examples of how certain collaborative writing practices might serve certain goals. How forum-based role-playing communities create structures for writing through acts of play, and how the motivate themselves, and each other, to collaborate while creating multimodal narratives together, could provide insight for future research. The multimodal aspect, also discussed in relation to composition classrooms, is important to probe further as well. The ways forum gamers use multimodality to create coherent texts, and especially the fact that they do so in close collaboration with each other, could lead to the creation of more motivating, more comprehensive assignments or projects for educational settings. Similarly, expanding the research of forum gaming to sites in languages other than English, and exploring the bi- or multilingual members of their communities, could lead to studies that can assess the impact of these activities on second
language learning and practice. Furthermore, composition and linguistic studies can, and should, include explorations of coding literacy and code as language – something that, as we have seen, forum games are very much familiar with.

Further assessment, as well as carefully designed projects, would be required to verify (or at least contextualize) forum gamers’ claims about having gained significant and applicable skills through role-playing. If forum games, through motivation, peer tutoring, or sheer practice, have the possibility of significantly improving the writing, planning, technical writing, composition, coding, graphic design, etc. skills of their players, then it would be valuable to explore how they do so, and how they can be shaped and applied to provide the best possible space for such practices, within or without formal educational settings. This, of course, would also need researchers to deconstruct and re-examine imagined hierarchies between different gaming styles and platforms, and present forum games as a topic worth talking about within the academic discourse.

Possibilities for future research and application, however, extend even beyond education and academia. Role-playing games, both in the tabletop and the video game format, have long been a part of pop culture texts, expanding on the worlds created in film, television, literature, etc., and they take more and more of an integral role in large transmedia storytelling projects as well. Since forum games draw significant numbers of players (including those who might not be interested in other platforms of gaming), offer a creative space for fans to engage with the texts of their choice, and can be designed and maintained with limited resources, they could be a new point of entry to transmedia projects that want to allow their fans to apply their creativity to an open world setting.
This present research project was designed as a pilot study of forum-based role-playing games. Its goal was to establish them as a distinct gaming style, outline their key features, and explore how and why those features draw players to these sites. The regulation and negotiation of language, and the conscious creation of multimodal narratives, was explored in detail in order to provide definitions, insight, and points of departure for researchers in various academic fields, in hopes of further studies in the future. Forum gaming is a rich, creative, and vibrant online subculture that presents a unique form of collaborative storytelling, and fosters dedicated communities that constantly experiment and explore with narrative creation. It is, much like the countless imaginary worlds the sites themselves represent, largely unexplored, deeply intriguing, and full of possibilities.
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APPENDIX A: REPRESENTING A CHARACTER THROUGH MULTIMODAL POSTS

Case study

To illustrate how all the different modes described in Chapter 4, and language use analyzed in Chapter 3, might work together to represent a character, I have chosen an example from *The Hunger Games RPG*. As I have mentioned earlier, HGRPG is one of the sites that use elaborate templates to distinguish character posts from each other; one of their most accomplished designers during the time I spent on the site was known by the screen name Elegant. When I interviewed her about her player experience and her design work, she readily supplied an example of her choice – a template that turned out to work perfectly for a case study on multimodal character representation. Beyond giving me permission to analyze the template and the character, Elegant also allowed me to interview her about the details and concepts involved in the creation of her design, giving me insight into the creative process as well as the hidden meanings behind the final product. Elegant told me that she has been role-playing on sites like HGRPG since she was 15 years old, and she is currently pursuing a degree in Graphic Design as a direct result from her interest in forum RP graphics.

The template was created with a specific character in mind: A boy from District Eight, Elegant’s own interpretation of the Mad Hatter from *Alice in Wonderland*. The character therefore came into being at the intersection of two well-known popular culture texts: the world of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice*, and the *Hunger Games* series. As a creative take on a literary character, the boy named Madds (spelled m.:a.:d.:d.:s in the character application, presenting a disjointed visual layout) comes with a set of associations and images based on readers’ pre-existing
experiences with the source materials, or any of their several iterations in literature and popular culture. The template Elegant designed for him was rich in elements and context:

Figure 11. IC template for Madds, designed by Elegant (detail). The Hunger Games RPG, November 2016.
When I asked about design choices, Elegant began with a connecting idea for template and character: “He is very scattered as a character, completely off his rocker actually. I wanted to get this across in his template by having a seemingly random scattering of images that have to do with them” (emphasis my own). The template includes sixteen images total, each of them separated from the others by a small circular frame, and a dark smoky background that creates a visual barrier, cutting off direct connections between them. Each image seems to float on its own in the smoke, as if it was a snapshot, or a keyhole glimpse, into a different place. Despite the fractured and divided layout, however, the images are not completely random. They alternate between still image and gif (the first and third image in Rows 1 and 3, and the second and fourth image in Rows 2 and 4 are moving on a short loop), and they also alternate between character and object/place (first and third image in each row shows the playby himself, while the second and fourth images show objects or places). The latter, while not directly representative of Madds’ physical appearance, are signs symbolic of certain aspects of his personality. Elegant took the time to explain them to me: “The ticking clock one is to show that he is stuck in one frame of mind” (Row 2, image 4, the hand of the clock ticks back and forth in the gif); “the shaking house is to show his instability” (Row 4, image 4, a gif of objects shaking and swaying); “the garden is his paradise / where he goes in his brain when he is scared” (Row 1, image 2, still image), and “the forest on fire represents the loss of paradise” (Row 1, image 4, still image). The flamingo feathers, “eat me” cookies, and the hat are references to the original book *Alice in Wonderland*. The swirling tea (Row 4, image 2) “is just because he is obsessed with tea”, which could be taken as another literary reference – just like the disjointed, top-to-bottom cascading letters spelling *We’re all mad here* between the images. The other two words spelled out against the smoky backdrop are *madds* (the character’s name) and *seventeen* (his age). The latter is more
than just a number – it also has implications within the setting. In the world of *The Hunger Games*, seventeen is Reaping age, which means the character is eligible – in fact, likely – to be selected as a tribute. The age adds a sense of looming tragedy to the already somber mood of the template.

The character’s playby, a Korean singer from a *kpop* (Korean pop music) band, appears in four gifs and four still images. Elegant told me that she likes to use kpop stars for face claims because they change their looks often, and there are many images and gifs of them readily available on the Internet: “If you are a kpop idol that means you are not only a singer and dancer, but also an actor, model and variety star.” Being a performance artists means that the videos and gifs available for the playby feature a wide range of gestures and facial expressions. Out of the four gifs in the template, one showed Madds slowly breaking into a smile, one featured him serenely admiring some flowers, and one showed him singing while staring intensely into the camera. These gestures presented the playby – and therefore the character – in vastly different moods, referencing both his scattered nature and his personality.

The arrow and the line below the images is a visual cue: Clicking on it links the reader to a song, *Dlm* by James Blake. Elegant explained to me that the song felt fitting for the character because “it’s disjointed and sad, just like how he is as a character. It has lyrics that never really explain themselves.” Music, once again, is used to invoke emotional response that reflects the character’s mood and personality, with the help of sound (slow and arrhythmic piano music) and lyrics. Elegant highlighted part of the latter: “*We’re feeling more apart / and we know you can do more,*” explaining that part of Madds’ character was that if he wasn’t crazy, he’d be considered a genius. The same principle of mixing order with chaos was represented in the visually disjointed, but conceptually connected imagery in the template.
Post templates work as a framing device for the written text, the actual story of the post. While the template is always the same, the text is always different, therefore the template provides a coherent visual framework for the progressing story. Because the first thing a reader needs to know is “who is talking” in a post, the template has the visual part on top (one reads forum threads scrolling downwards), in this case, representing Madds at a glance with a multimodal composition of text, imagery, layout, movement, and sound. The text of the post (in this example, the character’s bio) is reflecting the same trends of confusion and coherence. Elegant explained that the idea behind the bio post was to “make as little sense as possible while getting his story across.” The disjointed language, therefore, was not only conveying meaning through the linguistic mode, but also referencing the character’s personality, even though it was written in the third person. The language was not only experimental, but also aimed to impress: Madds was created as an application for a larger plot (featuring a Hunger Games style take on *Alice in Wonderland*). People could apply with character concepts, and be accepted for the plot if their bio was impressive enough. Elegant, therefore, was not only creating a remarkably complex template to describe a character – but also to showcase her creative abilities in order to earn appreciation (acceptance to the plot) and rewards - a chance to participate in writing part of the story through her character.

When I asked Elegant about the technicalities of designing such a complex template, she told me that learning to code was the result of a lot of “trial and error.” To showcase the complexity of the code behind the template, here is a short sample of the code she shared with me:
Figure 12. Code written by Elegan for the IC template (detail). *The Hunger Games RPG*, November 2016.

Code, in this case, is responsible for arranging all elements of the template into a coherent visual layout. It requires skills that are different from the other modes used – and yet it is the canvas through which all the other modes appear.

This one example, lifted from a site that has thousands of registered players (dozens of them active at any given time), and even more characters, showcases how the modes described in Chapter 4 can be integrated into one single post to tell a complex, yet coherent, story. The visual mode is used not only to represent the character himself, but also to convey references to various pop culture texts, and use images to describe parts of the character’s personality and innermost thoughts. The gestural mode contributes more meaning to these visual cues through movement – gif images of the playby show the character’s personality through facial expressions, and fill images with additional meaning (as in the case of the shaking house). The aural mode is present
in the music linked to the template that adds to the feeling of disjointedness, and evokes strong emotions of confusion and despair, through both lyric and sound. *Layout* does not only frame and organize the textual elements of the post, but also conveys meaning through the relative positions of its elements, and reinforces the core idea of a scattered personality by dividing the images into smaller frames against a dark background, giving them a circular, self-contained shape, and narrowing them down to glimpses through a hole. The *numeric mode*, while only present through language (“seventeen”) in the post itself (the number still carries meaning that can be interpreted by readers immersed in the Hunger Games fandom), contributes largely to the creation of the post through code. *Temporalities* converge within one post in various ways: The post itself would come with a time stamp designating when (in real time) the post was created; the time when the story is set would be dependent on what part of the narrative the character is currently participating in (having a flashback, interacting with others in the present, planning for the future, being in multiple threads through liquid time, etc.); and there is even the underlying temporality of the Hunger Games, whether they are occurring with or without this character’s participation, sectioning the site’s entire schedule around preparation, Games, and aftermath.

Language, as the seventh and most important mode in forum gaming, is framed, supported, and enhanced by all these semiotic elements. They not only visually surround the post, but also contribute meanings to it, meanings that are directly integrated into the progressing narrative. The written text reflects the same connecting idea of disjointedness through visual layout, as well as linguistic cues, the use of words, sentence structures, etc. The story is told in writing, but it is part of a larger, multimodal text. People who miss the cues provided by other modes might still be able to appreciate the posts, but would be missing several layers of meaning supplied by the player who created them.
While Elegant’s skills in graphic design definitely make her work remarkable, she is by far not the only forum gamer who applies so much effort, energy, and creative planning to a character. Combining all the different modes for conveying meaning, personality, and “flavor” is common practice among forum gamers – and the community aspect of such sites makes sure that those who do not have the required knowledge of coding can get help from others who do. Many different systems of meaning-making can converge in a thread, or a character application, adding information to the narrative in many different ways. Forum games learn how to decode the symbols, and include their meanings and references in the unfolding stories. While forum games are categorized as text-based, most of them, as reflected in this remarkable yet far from unique example, are inherently, creatively, and enthusiastically multimodal.
## APPENDIX B: SITE SAMPLE AND CODING

### Sites Included in the Coding Sample

Sites shaded in gray shut down or went on hiatus during the course of the research project, and did not get rebooted before the submission of this manuscript.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of site</th>
<th>URL</th>
<th>Genre / Fandom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absit Omen</td>
<td>Absitomen.com</td>
<td><em>Harry Potter</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aelyria</td>
<td><a href="http://www.aelyria.com">www.aelyria.com</a></td>
<td>Original fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aeterna Roma</td>
<td><a href="http://www.aeternaroma.com">www.aeternaroma.com</a></td>
<td>Alternate history (Rome)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Intrigue</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ageofintrigue.com">www.ageofintrigue.com</a></td>
<td>Alternate history (17th century England)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All of Me</td>
<td>Allofme.jcink.net</td>
<td>Fantasy romance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Althanas</td>
<td><a href="http://www.althanas.com">www.althanas.com</a></td>
<td>Original fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anastasius Island</td>
<td>Aizrp.proboards.com</td>
<td>Original zombie RP</td>
</tr>
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<td>Acrpf.forumotion.com</td>
<td><em>Assassin’s Creed</em></td>
</tr>
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<td>Before the Mast</td>
<td>Beforethemast.b1.jcink.com</td>
<td>Pirates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellefonte Academy</td>
<td>Bellefonte-academy.proboards.com</td>
<td>“Mutant inspired” Superpowers, school setting</td>
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<td>Bittersweet Forever</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Multi-fandom modern witchcraft</td>
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<td>Bleach Online World</td>
<td>Rpforumbleach.proboards.com</td>
<td><em>Bleach AU</em></td>
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<td>Bookhaven</td>
<td>Bookhavenrp.com</td>
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</tr>
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<td><em>Percy Jackson</em></td>
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<td>Celestial Refresh</td>
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<td>Multi-fandom</td>
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<td>Charming</td>
<td>Charmingrp.com</td>
<td><em>Harry Potter, Victorian era</em></td>
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<td>Circle the Wagons</td>
<td>Circlethewagons.b1.jcink.com</td>
<td>American Old West</td>
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<td>Cry Wolf</td>
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<td>Mercy Thompson</td>
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<td>Dawn of the Republic</td>
<td><a href="http://www.thestarwarsrp.com">www.thestarwarsrp.com</a></td>
<td><em>Star Wars</em></td>
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<td>DC United We Stand</td>
<td>Dcunitedwestand.proboards.com</td>
<td>DC Universe</td>
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<td>Dimensional Clash</td>
<td>Mrsaturn123.proboards.com</td>
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<td>Disney’s World of War</td>
<td>Disneywownow.proboards.com</td>
<td>Disney AU</td>
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<td>Distension</td>
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<td>Original fantasy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divested</td>
<td>Divested.boards.net</td>
<td><em>Attack on Titan</em></td>
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<td>Dotai Academy</td>
<td>Dotai.b1.jcink.com</td>
<td>Original yaoi</td>
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<td>Doutaini</td>
<td>Doutaini.net</td>
<td>Elemental wolves</td>
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<td>Dreamscape</td>
<td>Dreamscape-rp.boards.net</td>
<td>Original, Japanese inspired</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elder Tale</td>
<td>Log-horizon.proboards.com</td>
<td><em>Log Horizon</em></td>
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<td>Engi no Jutsu</td>
<td><a href="http://www.narutorp.net">www.narutorp.net</a></td>
<td><em>Naruto</em></td>
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<td>Episkey</td>
<td>Episkeymarauders.b1.jcink.com</td>
<td><em>Harry Potter</em>, Marauders era</td>
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<td>F*ckin Problem</td>
<td>Fknprblm.jcink.net</td>
<td>Original, gang based</td>
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<td>Findtherabbithole.jcink.net</td>
<td>Dark fairy tales</td>
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<td>Flight of fantasy</td>
<td>Fantasy-flight.proboards.com</td>
<td>Original fantasy, modern, animanga</td>
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<td>Rpg.harrypotterhaven.net</td>
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<td>W11.zetaboards.com/HavenCity</td>
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<td>Houtian.b1.jcink.com</td>
<td><em>Avatar: The Last Airbender</em></td>
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<td>Forums.hyrulecastle.org</td>
<td><em>Legend of Zelda</em></td>
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<td>Invisible to the Eye</td>
<td>Itte.b1.jcink.com</td>
<td>Alternate history (Regency England)</td>
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<td>It’s not rocket science</td>
<td>Itsnotrocketscience.jcink.net</td>
<td><em>The 100</em></td>
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<td>Boards.jedivsith.com</td>
<td><em>Star Wars</em></td>
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<td>Keep the Magic Secret</td>
<td>Ktms.b1.jcink.com</td>
<td>BBC’s <em>Merlin</em> AU</td>
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<td>Fantasy</td>
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<td>Lecirquenoir.com</td>
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<td>Live2rise.jcink.net</td>
<td>Marvel Cinematic Universe</td>
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<td>19th century murder mystery</td>
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<td>Mtg-roleplay.proboards.com</td>
<td>Magic: the Gathering</td>
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<td>My Little Pony RP</td>
<td>Friendshipismagicrpg.proboards.com</td>
<td>My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic</td>
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<td>Anita Blake / Merry Gentry</td>
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<td>Of Myth and Men</td>
<td>Mythandmen.jcink.net</td>
<td>Supernatural fantasy &amp; mythology</td>
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<td>Olympus Has Fallen</td>
<td>Fallenolympus.b1.jcink.com</td>
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<td>Ouadrp.com</td>
<td>Once Upon a Time</td>
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<td>Onceanightmare.b1.jcink.com</td>
<td>Dark high fantasy</td>
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<td>S1.zetaboards.com/One_Piece_RP</td>
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<td>Out of the Ashes</td>
<td>Oota.b1.jcink.com</td>
<td>Supernatural AU</td>
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<td>Pandora</td>
<td>Padorarpg.com</td>
<td>Multi-fandom</td>
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<td>Panem Forever</td>
<td>Thgtrilogy.boards.net</td>
<td>The Hunger Games AU</td>
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<td>Persona: Project Rebirth</td>
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<td>Rise &amp; Fall</td>
<td>Marveldcriseandfall.proboards.com</td>
<td>Marvel / DC crossover</td>
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<td>Shelf Space</td>
<td>Shelfspace.jcink.net</td>
<td>Books and comics</td>
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<td>Shrieks &amp; Whispers</td>
<td>Shrieks.jcink.net</td>
<td>Original magic school</td>
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<td>So Shiny, So Chrome</td>
<td>Soshinysochrome.proboars.com</td>
<td>Mad Max: Fury Road</td>
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<td>Songsofwesteros.jcink.net</td>
<td>Game of Thrones AU</td>
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<td>Soulsrpg.com</td>
<td>Original, werewolves</td>
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<td>Star Army</td>
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<td>Original sci-fi</td>
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<td>Stoneshore</td>
<td>Stoneshore.boards.net</td>
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<td>Survival of the Fittest</td>
<td>S10.zetaboards.com/SOTF_V2</td>
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<td>Tales of Illyria</td>
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<td>The Four Elements</td>
<td>Avatar-rpg-revised.forumotion.net</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.thehobbitroleplay.com">www.thehobbitroleplay.com</a></td>
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<td>The Hunger Games RP</td>
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<td>The Next Incantation</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Superhero RPG</td>
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<td>Toiltroublev2.jcink.net</td>
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<td>Jurassic Park</td>
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<td>Xwabattlezone.com/XWA</td>
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<td>Zootropolis Chronicles</td>
<td>Xzootropolischronics.jcink.net</td>
<td>Zootopia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Coding Criteria**

These are the features I observed and coded during the first phase of the research project on each of the 101 forums included in the sample.
1. The name of the site

2. “Found through” (how I found the site)

3. URL of the site

4. The date I first accessed the site (the date I added it to the sample)

5. Fandom/setting (what the site is based on)

6. Canon (Canon character/OC acceptance rules)

7. Active since (year the site was created)

8. Age limit / Content rating

9. RP level (beginner, intermediate, advanced) – if stated on the site

10. Does the site require knowledge of the original canon?

11. Rules about acceptance and “safe spaces” (LGBT+ players, etc.)

12. Number of accounts registered

13. Number of posts

14. Number of moderators

15. Number of administrators

16. How many characters can a player have on the site?

17. Do posts have a required minimum word count? If yes, how many?

18. Rules about writing in a certain tense/person in IC posts

19. Rules and requirements about “chat speak” and grammar competency

20. Rules about the use of other languages, and the acceptance of ESL players

21. Rules about separating IC and OOC posting / communication

22. Rules about IC consequences for IC actions

23. Number of simultaneous threads allowed per character (“liquid time” rules)
24. Rules about posting order within threads
25. Does the site have plotters/shippers?
26. Rules about writing solo threads/posts (writing alone instead of with someone else)
27. Rules about “thread invasions” (posting in threads uninvited)
28. Rules about face claims and playbys
29. Rules about IC pregnancies and/or “breeding”
30. Rules about IC deaths, suicides, and killing
31. Activity checks (does the site have them, and how often?)
32. Does the site have a recognition system? What is it? (Character of the Month, etc.)
33. Stats, dice, and points systems (IC money, combat statistics, dice rollers, etc.)
34. Rules about Mary Sue / Gary Stu characters
35. Rules about godmodding
36. Rules about powerplaying
37. Rules about metagaming
38. Rules about spoilers for the original text (e.g. ongoing TV shows)
39. Rules about plagiarism
40. Retribution systems for rule-breaking (punishments, strikes, warnings, bans, etc.)
41. Does the site have an OOC chatbox?
42. Does the site have an ICC (In Character Chatbox)?
43. Does the site have a Tag Box?
44. Does the site have chat rules published?
45. Does the site have an Advertising and/or Affiliates Board?
46. Does the site ask for player votes for RPG rankings? (“Vote for us!” button)
47. Does the site take donations from players?
48. Does the site publish character stats? (Number of characters, gender, age, type, etc.)
49. Rules about character balance (certain genders/types/groups banned or limited)
50. Does the site have gadgets showing IC time/date, season, or weather conditions?
51. Boards or gadgets for IC news or rumors
52. Does the site have Twitter?
53. Does the site have Facebook?
54. Does the site have Google+?
55. Does the site have Tumblr?
56. Does the site have Pinterest?
57. Does the site have DeviantArt?
58. Does the site have a wiki?
59. Does the site have a TV Tropes page?
60. Does the site have other forms of social media?
61. Mission statement (if published)
62. Miscellaneous features and notes, elements worth mentioning

Posting Numbers and Trends

**Highest numbers of posts in 10 months.** Feral Front (1,4467,291 posts), Shadow Fleet (122,857 posts), Dawn of the Republic (80,967 posts), Virtual Hogwarts (79,180 posts), Fairy Tail RP (42,890 posts). 26 forums posted more than 10,000 posts in 10 months.
Sites with the highest number of accounts (as of December 2016). Feral Front (77,754), Engi No Jutsu (51,187), Fairy Tail RP (22,345), Aelyria (15,867), Harry Potter Haven (13,255). 25 forums had more than 1000 accounts registered, as of the end of December 2016.

Sites with the largest number of posts per account (as of December 2016). Age of Intrigue (88 accounts, 238,513 posts), Celestial Refresh (300 accounts, 313,253 posts), Soul Eater RP (170 accounts, 129,550 posts), Aeterna Roma (150 accounts, 96,289 posts), Tudors Saga (36 accounts, 20,701 posts)

Oldest active sites in the sample. Aelyria (active since 1989), Souls RPG (active since 2001), Althanas (active since 2002), Star Army (active since 2002), Engi No Jutsu (active since 2004), Dawn of the Republic (active since 2005). 14 forums were older than 10 years. 28 were between 5 and 10 years old.
APPENDIX C: GLOSSARY OF TERMS RELATED TO FORUM-BASED ROLE-PLAYING

AeRo: *Aeterna Roma*, one of the participant observation sites in the research project.

Animanga: Anime and manga; collective term referring to Japanese cartoon and animation Styles.

AoM: *All of Me*, one of the participant observation sites in the research project.


AU: Alternate Universe. A setting or storyline placed in an alternate reality from the original text.

Avatar: An image representing a character (usually in the side bar of a post).

BA: *Bellefonte Academy*, one of the participant observation sites in the research project.

Bio: A character’s background story. Sometimes also used interchangeably with App.

Bleed: The phenomenon when in character events affect players’ real life emotions, or the other way around.

Canon: Things included in the original pop culture text the game is based on. Canon forum:

   Forums that only allow canon characters.

Chat speak: A form of online written communication where words are phonetically shortened (e.g. “u” instead of “you”)

Face claim: An image reserved to represent a character on a site. Sometimes used interchangeably with Playby.

Fanon: Fan-made canon. Non-canon information that is generally accepted and approved of by the fan community.

Feels: Slang term for strong emotions.
FTB: Fade to black. Scenes that end early in order to avoid writing adult (usually sexual) content.

Handwaving: Dismissing something as unimportant. Sometimes the act of agreeing between players that an event happened, without actually role-playing it out.

HGRPG: The Hunger Games RPG, one of the participant observation sites in the research project

Hype: Slang term for excitement and anticipation.

IC: In character.

ICC: In character chatbox.

L2R: Live to Rise, one of the participant observation sites in the research project

Lurker: Passive reader or observer; a person that is present on the site but does not interact with others. Verb: to lurk.

Muse: Slang term used for inspiration in general, or for a certain character (“my Han Solo muse”)

Netspeak: See Chatspeak.

Non-canon: Things not included in the pop culture text a game is based on. Non-canon forum: A site that does not allow canon characters. See also: OC.

NPC: Non-player character. Minor characters played by anyone on the site, or by moderators.

OC: Original Character. A character of the player’s own creation.

Ones-hot: A single-post thread, written by one single player.

OOC: Out of character.

OTP: One True Pairing. Fan fiction term referring to one’s favorite or preferred Ship.

OT3: A Ship that involves three characters. See OTP.
**PC:** Player character. A character in the game that has a player.

**Playby:** The figure or person whose images represent a character on a site. See also: *Avatar, Face claim, Sig.*

**Plotter:** An *OOC* thread where players propose and plan threads for their characters. One plotter can belong to one character, or all the characters of one player.

**Plotting:** The act of proposing and planning future threads.

**Posting chemistry:** A good and inspiring working relationship between players.

**Reaping:** The event in the Hunger Games where future tributes are selected by random chance.

**RP(G):** Role-playing (game).

**Ship:** Slang term for a relationship between characters, often romantic in nature. Verb: to ship

(“I ship these characters” = “I approve of their relationship”)

**Shipper:** See *Plotter.*

**Sig / Signature:** An image representing a character at the bottom of its posts. See also: *Avatar, Face claim, Playby.*

**Slice of life:** A game genre that represents everyday settings such as schools or cities (as opposed to fantasy or sci-fi worlds).

**Smut:** Graphic sexual content.

**Solo:** See *One-shot.*

**Stats:** Numeric values assigned to a character to quantify their skills and abilities.

**Tagbox:** A chatbox used to inform other players that it is their turn to post.

**Thread:** A series of consecutive posts.

**Threading:** The act of writing threads with other players.

**Trib:** Short for tribute. Participant in the Hunger Games.
Victor: The winner of the annual Hunger Games.

Wanted: An advertisement posted on a forum, looking for certain characters to be created by someone, usually with certain plots in mind.

Whitewashing: Representing a non-white character as white.
APPENDIX D: HSRB

BGSU®
BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY
Office of Research Compliance

DATE: May 5, 2015
TO: Csenge Zalka
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [740574-2] Forum-based role-playing games
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision
ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: May 5, 2015
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #2

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has determined this project is exempt from IRB review according to federal regulations AND that the proposed research has met the principles outlined in the Belmont Report. You may now begin the research activities.

Note that an amendment may not be made to exempt research because of the possibility that proposed changes may change the research in such a way that it is no longer meets the criteria for exemption. A new application must be submitted and reviewed prior to modifying the research activity, unless the researcher believes that the change must be made to prevent harm to participants. In these cases, the Office of Research Compliance must be notified as soon as practicable.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact Kristin Hagemyer at 419-372-7716 or khagemy@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.
Informed Consent

Introduction: This consent form contains all essential information about participating in the research project titled “Forum-based role-playing games.” The project is conducted by Csenge Virág Zalka, a PhD graduate student in the American Culture Studies Department at Bowling Green State University, OH. The project explores forum-based online role-playing games, looking at how stories are created through collaborative writing, why people choose to play on forums, and what players find especially interesting about this style of gaming. You were asked to participate in this research project because of your experience as a player of forum-based role-playing games.

Participants must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study.

Purpose: The purpose of this research project is to explore how and why people play role-playing games on online forums. Forum-based games have been a missing piece in the field of Game Studies, and this project aims to eliminate that gap, and find out more about how stories are created on forums by multiple players. The intellectual benefit of the research project will be a better understanding on how forum games work, what motivates people to play these kinds of games, and what they might learn from playing them.

There are no direct benefits offered to the participants of this project.

Procedure: Participation in this project involves an interview. Interviews will be conducted anonymously, in writing, through a medium selected by the participant (instant messaging, or private forum messages). During the interview a series of open-ended questions will be asked about the participant’s role-playing habits and preferences, their experience with different role-playing games and forums, and their thoughts and opinions on forum gaming. Based on the answers, some follow-up questions will be asked at the end of the interview. Every participant is interviewed once. Interviews will be recorded anonymously in text format (no usernames will be attached). Interviews include 6-8 basic questions, and the time spent answering them is determined by the participant; they should normally take 15-30 minutes.

Voluntary nature: Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time without
penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your relationship with Bowling Green State University or with the person conducting the research project.

**Confidentiality Protection:**
All records of the study are anonymous. The written records of the interviews don’t include identifiable personal data, and they will be stored in a secure computer in password-protected files. The records can only be accessed by the person conducting this research project (Csenge Zalka), and the identity or identifiable data of participants will not be disclosed in any publication.

**Risks:** Risks of participation are no greater than experienced in daily life.

**Contact information:** If you have any questions or concerns about participating in this research project, please contact Csenge Zalka at 108 East Hall, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 34303, at czalka@bgsu.edu, or at 419-372-2231. You may also contact Csenge’s advisor, Dr. Radhika Gajjala, at 419-372-0528 or at radhik@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research.

Thank you for your time!

By answering the interview questions in writing, you signal your consent of the following:
“**I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.**”