

The Ratworks

*Between Worlds*

By

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*\*Photo by Charlie Cummings*

Summary of Project in Lieu of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
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THE RATWORKS  
*BETWEEN WORLDS*

By

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# PROJECT REPORT

## Introduction

One of the greatest gifts of human imagination is the ability to transcend the confines of our physical realities. The enduring popularity of play through toys and of entering virtual worlds through games is proof of our longing and appetite for fantasy. While other media may serve similar purposes, video games provide active engagement that cannot be obtained from partaking in books and movies. Games are one of the few media through which people may enter another world and yet retain feelings of power, control and agency. In my Project in lieu of Thesis, titled, *The Ratworks*, I prompt viewers to contemplate power and freedom through a daring escape to the underbelly of another world.

The opportunity to reinvent oneself or occupy another entity's shoes exists in all video games to a certain extent, but none so much as in the genres of Role-Playing games (RPGs), and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs).

## Types of Game Worlds and Digital Spaces

### Role Playing Games

Role playing games, otherwise known as RPGs, are mainly single-player games where the player creates a character or an avatar to represent oneself in the virtual world. They tend to focus on development of the avatar's persona and its interaction with the virtual world (Vorderer 2006). Players go to great lengths to choose a name for their avatar and a personality for them. Defining a character and growing it usually takes a lot

of time spent playing, and is akin to a relationship between the player and avatar. There is no end point at which players can say that they have “beaten the game” because there is always something new to do. RPGs have existed in tabletop and card format for many years before computers, in *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Magic*, and it is only comparatively recently that they have been realized as video games, which has served to evolve and enrich the genre.

### Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games

MMORPGs are a close relation of the RPG, with the notable difference that the virtual world is shared and inhabited simultaneously by not only the player avatar and non-player characters (NPCs), but also the avatars of millions of other players’ avatars as well. Furthermore, while the player of RPGs can often customize their avatar or at least choose aspects of their appearance or personality, customization options are usually considerably broader in MMORPGs. This is reflective of the increased numbers of avatars coexisting in the virtual world. This coexistence generally means that MMORPGs offer more possibilities for social interaction, networking and communication than any other game genre; this also makes shared virtual spaces much more appealing to humans, as inherently social beings.

MMORPG virtual worlds are characterized by what scholars call “world persistence” – that is, a world that can be accessed at any time and that preserves its own schedule, timeline and narrative irrespective of individual players’ progress within it (Vorderer 2006). World persistence allows community, economy and social structures to emerge, and allows players to feel as though they are entering a parallel reality when they enter the virtual world. This is accompanied by “avatar persistence”, wherein the status

of the avatar does not change between episodic entries of the player avatar into the world; upon re-entry of the player into the virtual world, the avatar retains all progress and reflects all choices made by the player up until the point of exit.

## Inhabitants of Virtual Spaces

Behind every avatar lies an individual, who each have their own way of approaching and carving out an existence in the virtual world. By and large, players can be loosely grouped into various categories according to their behavior and priorities in-game, and we shall discuss these in the following sections (Bartle 2003).

### The Achiever

Achievers' main goal in-game is the accumulation of points, power and levels; everything they do ultimately leads back to these. These pragmatic players will only undertake exploration if there is powerful loot or points to be gained from it, and their socialization revolves around discovering what other players know about gaining points, power and levels so that they may apply these strategies to their own ends. Killing is only regarded as a means to one of the three abovementioned ends (Bartle 2003).

Achievers say things such as:

*"I'm busy."*

*"Sure I'll help you. What do I get?"*

*"So how do YOU kill the dragon then?"*

*"Only 4211 points to go!" (Bartle 2003)*

## The Explorer

Explorers' first and foremost purpose in-game is to discover knowledge that nobody else possesses. The Achiever may do this for the sake of treasure or power, but the Explorer does this only for the simple reason of *knowing*. They “try progressively esoteric actions in wild, out-of-the-way places, looking for interesting features, unintended mechanics and figuring out how things work (Bartle 2003)”. According to explorers, point acquisition may be necessary to continue exploration of new areas, but anybody can do this. Killing is too much trouble if a feud between players begins. And listening to the grapevine often only produces old news that is common knowledge. The explorers' true joy in-game comes chiefly from going where none have gone before.

Explorers say things such as:

*“You mean you don't know the shortest route from <obscure room 1> to <obscure room 2>?”*

*“I haven't tried that one, what's it do?”*

*“Why is it that if you carry the uranium you get radiation sickness, and if you put it in a bag you still get it, but if you put it in a bag and drop it then wait 20 seconds and pick it up again, you don't?” (Bartle 2003)*

## The Killer

Killers delight in conquering other players, chiefly in order to feel in control, to feel the rush of dominance and because causing distress is enjoyable to them. Their behavior most commonly takes the form of killing off other players' avatars, both in fair fight and in unfair scenarios. Normal point acquisition is usually necessary to obtain the requisite power for killing other avatars, and exploration of sorts is also occasionally required for new and improved ways to kill people and wreak havoc. Bartle (2003) sums

the killers' view up nicely, "only in the knowledge that a real person, somewhere, is very upset by what you've just done, yet can themselves do nothing about it, is there any true adrenalin-shooting, juicy fun." Perhaps seeing how their actions have a very real effect gives a Killer the sense of agency that players crave. Likewise, Killers' behavior is often provocative and rude in the hopes that they may incite another conflict, for that is the environment in which they truly thrive.

### The Socialiser

Socialisers enter virtual worlds in search of other people and new social opportunities and connections. True to their name, cultivating relationships between players is of utmost importance and interest to the Socialiser. Point acquisition and exploration take a back seat to this, although if it is a group activity the Socialiser will deem it well worth their while. According to Bartle (2003), in the eyes of the Socialiser, "the only ultimately fulfilling thing is not how to rise levels or kill hapless drips; it's getting to *know* people, to understand them, and to form beautiful, lasting relationships." These categories are not mutually exclusive. Though players are usually a mix of several of them at once, they will always be dominated by one.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As Nick Yee of the Daedalus Project online notes: "One problem with such a just-so model is that the 4 types may overlap. For example, it may be the case that most Achievers are Explorers, because to advance in levels quickly, one has to know about the game mechanics. The problem of employing a just-so model is that it becomes self fulfilling. If a questionnaire is constructed such that a respondent has to choose between being an Achiever or an Explorer, then the end result will be a dichotomy where none may exist to begin with. It would be like asking - Do you prefer pizza or ice cream? (Yee 2002)"

## Motivations for Entering Virtual Worlds

Thus far, we have discussed the kinds of virtual worlds that many distinctly different types of players choose to inhabit. The next logical question is *why*; why do players choose to spend so many of their waking hours journeying in a whole other world? Research indicates that there are six recurring key motivations that players across all player archetypes share.

### Arousal

Arousal of emotions and adrenaline rushes are a frequently stated reason for playing video games. This comes through continuous, fast-paced action and feelings of immersion in the virtual world.

### Challenge

According to Vorderer (2006), study respondents commonly cited pushing themselves to a higher level of skill or personal accomplishment as a primary motivation in playing video games. Most preferred to play familiar or similar games in which they felt comfortable and capable of performing well in.

### Competition

Proving one's worth and skill and asserting dominance over other players was another frequently shared motivation for playing games in a shared virtual world. This gratification "derives its power from the reactions of others to the dominance shown by the player, establishing a relative position in the peer group's hierarchy (Vorderer 2006)."

## Diversion

Also quantifiable as “escape”, diversion is a motivator insofar as entering the virtual world allows players to escape the pressures, stress and responsibilities of the physical world. Killing time for lack of desirable things to do in the physical world and relaxing also come under this category. As one student respondent so neatly put it, “When you study so much, you’re just like ‘uugh, I want a break.’ I don’t necessarily use it for a study break. I use it more for an excuse to stop studying (Vorderer 2006).”

## Fantasy

Briefly put, video games allow players to do things that they would not normally be able to do, such as incinerate people, fly, kill dragons, experience towering peaks and venture into dank underworlds. Further, they are able to do so without risk to their physical bodies, and without having to experience the physical cost associated with such activities were they undertaken in the real world. This is one of the most insidious motivators, and yet the one that I consider the most intertwined with diversion. Feeling frustrated? Incinerate despised foes with a crook of your fingers. Stress that you would otherwise have taken out on those around you can be released by pushing oneself beyond one’s limits in a daring car chase. The possibilities truly are boundless.

## Social Interaction

Although frequently decried as an antisocial, basement-dwelling activity, video games, especially the multiplayer variety featuring a virtual world shared by many individuals, are one of the most actively populated social settings around. Social

interaction is consequently rife in such worlds and a major draw to players wishing to share their hobby and triumphs with similarly interested others.

## Social Capital: the Theoretical Framework

Given the amount of people sharing virtual worlds, as well as the fact that the social aspect is a highly central part of life there, I find it pertinent to discuss the theoretical framework through which I analyze human dealings in virtual space. I believe that social capital theory as put forth by sociologists Coleman and Bourdieu, does a good job of explaining the social structures shaping the human condition in these games.

According to Bourdieu, social capital is the total amount of resources one has access to while taking into account a person's social connections. Being part of a social network allows members access to the combined capital of the network. Capital can be material or symbolic. As regards material capital, some avatars can gain the ability to craft powerful armor or precious items – ownership of which is not only a display of power, but also proof of considerable social or economic capital. When an avatar brings this ability to a group, it benefits the whole. Likewise, as an example of symbolic capital, in gaining entry to a famed band of adventurers, the community then expects a certain standard of ability of an avatar affiliated with that group.

Coleman's version of social capital comes down to 3 things: obligations and expectations, information channels, and norms and effective sanctions. The first is straightforward; if somebody does another person a favor, he expects it to be returned, and the recipient feels obligated to return the favor. One's social capital can be measured by how much credit they can call in if they choose.

Information channels are another form of social capital because information is power. Social relations are valuable sources of information: for example, an explorer may learn about the location of a tribe of trolls that drop powerful items from the group of players they habitually spend time with.

Effective norms and sanctions are forms of social capital because they provide a structure that can be relied upon by members of a community. For instance, norms that support skillful play in-game make group adventures easier. Better players means a better chance at killing that dragon. Bad players? Get used to dying a lot.

Sanctions can deter undesirable behaviors through peer pressure. Closed social networks where everybody knows everybody else are more effective in imposing norms and sanctions because the player stands to lose any accumulated social capital if they leave. On the other hand, sanctions can prove ineffective in games with a high degree of anonymity.

I feel that the individual-oriented, utilitarian view of Bourdieu and Coleman's social capital is appropriate when looking at games because gamers often view their relationships and networks with a proprietary eye, since they usually have to pay real-world money to access these in-game networks and can enter and exit the virtual world at will<sup>2</sup>. This alone can make individuals see virtual relationships as more objectified than real-life relationships.

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<sup>2</sup> On a side note, the last main social capital theorist I will mention is Putnam, whose *Bowling Alone* (2000) truly popularized social capital as a theory. His social capital focused more on volunteerism in the community, and on duty to civic society via participation in community-building activities. I find that his ideas, while valid, are not the best suited to apply to MMOGs because such virtual worlds are not approximate to the real world to such an extent.

## Toys, Collectability and Display

Collectable toys (also known as designer toys) are a natural link to the virtual worlds that humans spend so much time in. They serve as powerful physical touchstones to games, as visual reminders that the virtual world is always there and always waiting. These toys are different from children's toys in that they are primarily marketed towards adults, and are of high quality, accuracy and detail as befits its target audience. Their primary use is consequently not, rough and tumble play, but gentle posing and display. The rise of the designer toy is relatively recent, but has spread across both the East and West with surprising speed.

My interest in the Toy as both inspiration and subject matter was aided greatly by a research trip to Japan last year to learn more about toy culture and associated display methods. The graphic quality of the custom-designed packaging for my toy-like rat forms in *The Ratworks*, brings to prominence the show's logo and mirrors the marketing of a brand name. Both of these elements are key to establishing and referencing a toy serial. Additionally, only toys of great rarity or quality were relegated to vitrines at the toy fair I attended in Japan, and were duly thronged by admiring collectors with hungry gazes. By placing my larger and more detailed pieces in vitrines, I intended to give those selected works the same elevated status; desirable yet untouchable, and all the more desirable for their aloofness.

## The Work: Stylistic Decisions

In *The Ratworks*, I use sculpted interpretations of the rat as a metaphor for empowerment. I have created a tough world in which rats have to constantly fight to be

on top, but they have the drive to succeed and the ability to survive and conquer. My show juxtaposes realistically rendered rats meant to convey power contained within an avatar, with playfully rounded and toy-like renditions. The intent is to evoke empathetic desire within the viewer and show this through my rats' distinctly human gestures and emotions like an abject hunch, or triumphant pose. Thus, the pieces in *The Ratworks*, while referencing an animal reviled by the masses, are realized in a caricaturistic fashion that evokes indulgent curiosity and a friendly regard. The omnipresent gas masks donned by the pieces retain a vague sense of threat and mystery, while hybridizing the human and animal worlds. The act of taking a creature commonly viewed as an abject, weak underdog and empowering it closely references the transformative process that avatars go through in-game in their quest for power. Similarly, taking the undesirable rat and turning it into something both appealing and collectable serves the ancillary objective of empowering it in our world as well.



**Fig 1**

## Snivel's Story

### Snivel

The animal sculpture “Snivel” is the first part of three in “Snivel’s Story” (fig. 2). It features a grey rat, hunched over and looking furtively over his shoulder with a face on which the emotions longing, envy and worry vie for supremacy. “Snivel’s” deliberately comely facial features are



**Fig 2**

stylistically rendered in a cartoon-like manner to emphasize his state of mind, with large, ungainly ears and a giant snout. His body is likewise exaggeratedly ragged and skeletal to underscore his physical weakness and helplessness. “Snivel’s” proportions are more human than rat – seen in the way the musculature of his upper body and arms is rendered, and this holds true for all three pieces of ‘Snivel’s Story’; this acts to tie the trio to the true matter at hand. It is, after all, human behavior that is being exhibited and the rat is but a vehicle. He represents all that we are before entry into a limitless virtual world – powerless and limited by our mortal realities, but hungry for adventure. The only part of “Snivel” that is realistically rendered is his dark grey fur; this is his sole tie to the physical world. Additionally, as befits a novice who has not yet crossed into the fantastical, alluring, yet dangerous virtual worlds, “Snivel” is the only piece in *The Ratworks* who has yet to don a gas mask.

### Choose Wisely

The second sculpture of “Snivel’s Story”, “Choose Wisely” features a lean and fit rat in the act of putting on a gas mask (fig. 3). It is wearing a light grey skintight suit with visible clothing seams and with



**Fig 3**

openings at its hands, feet and head. All you see of what lies beneath its suit is at the suit openings at the head, and the telling tension rip on the rat’s back, as if the suit were too small to contain its cargo. The hands, feet and glimpses of realistically rendered dark fur suggest that “Snivel” is in the suit and is undergoing a transformation and growing in power. “Choose Wisely” is crouched on all fours as if prior to a rise or a spring, a visible gathering in of effort. More than that, its pose speaks of a will to *become* – become what exactly is as yet unclear, but this piece refers to the drastic change that players undergo as they remake themselves through their avatars in a virtual world.

### Underdog Rising

The third and final animal figure of “Snivel’s Story”, “Underdog Rising” is Snivel’s avatar at full strength. “Underdog Rising” features a sturdily built rat, clad in a gas mask and armor, wielding a pistol (fig. 4). It is frozen in the act of leaping forward in midair, as if in continuation of “Choose Wisely’s” coiled power. Armor is a visible demonstration of power and a necessity for defense, much like the gas mask. The

weapon represents the aggressive side of the virtual world, and makes clear that “Snivel” has become able to not only defend himself, but also to attack others. In short, power is freedom. The gold on his gas mask adds a layer of desirability to it and an implication that it is a step above the plain black masks that other rats are wearing. This reflects the precious items that players fight over in the game world, and to possess them is to display the extent of one’s social capital to any who looks at them. “Snivel” has come a long way from his original



**Fig 4**

incarnation. Yet what he wants to become in real life may never be. Just as many who have difficulty succeeding in real life can succeed within a game, “Snivel” has carved a way to vicariously experience the power and control that the physical world might never offer.

#### The Ratworks: Digital video

The video that gives my show its title is a virtual environment in which the same rats featured in the physical piece “Loot Drama” exist as player avatars. I offer a layered reality in which the viewer may experience the sculpted toy becoming part of a digital game. The video loops through endless sewer tunnels, turning so quickly that the viewer soon becomes lost. This references the large virtual worlds of MMOGs. The first-person view obscures the identity of the player character, a move meant to invite viewers to step

into a rat's shoes. The gun carried by the unseen avatar is the same one wielded by "Underdog Rising", a visible and reassuring trapping of power and capability.



**Fig 5**

However, no matter how many times the gun roars and hits the argyle rat running ahead of the avatar, the opponent never once falls, never slows. The avatar is caught in an endless cycle of pursuit, of always wanting more. This too, is part of the allure of a virtual world where the fun is never done. A more cynical view is: When does the fun begin to wear, to feel insurmountable and like work?

### Loot Drama

"Loot Drama" showcases a collection of brightly colored and patterned toy-like rats navigating a terrain of their own packaging, all reaching for the same gilded mask that "Underdog Rising" glares out from (fig. 6). Said mask is held up in triumph by a rat at the highest point of the packaging terrain. The pinnacle of packaging also represents the highest level to which a player can advance their avatar. All of the rats are trying to

get to that stage with  
varying degrees of success.  
The variety of surfaces on  
the same base  
press-molded figure is a



**Fig 6**

reference to player avatars. Each person may choose aspects of their avatar in terms of their appearance, but at core, they all share the same existence as inhabitants of a persistent, separate world. The rats in “Loot Drama” are disarmingly childlike in proportion, with giant heads and tiny bodies<sup>3</sup> calculated to arouse empathy in the viewer. Although players all have different reasons for inhabiting the virtual world, to exist within such a world is, in essence, to abide by its rules. If the rules necessitate power or a certain resource, you can be certain that all players will be pursuing them, preventing others from reaching them, and trying to take them off other players. “Loot Drama”, is a microcosm of this struggle. The Victor, the Hopefuls and those who just cannot keep up with the competition.

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<sup>3</sup> This is also a reference to the Japanese toy style “Nendoroid”, featuring similarly big-headed, simple-bodied characters. Ironically, the name itself is derived from the Japanese term for clay: Nendo. Have we come full circle?

## In Which Argyle Triumphs

Returning to the quiet piece that sits alone and apart, “Argyle” features the same argyle-patterned rat that we endlessly pursued through the halls of “The Ratworks” sewer (fig. 7). “Argyle” is rendered in the same, playfully rounded and adorable style of the rats in “Loot Drama” and is seen emerging from his packaging and stepping off his toy pedestal, the same pistol seen in the aggressor in “The Ratworks” and “Underdog Rising” raised in one triumphant paw. “Argyle” represents the meeting of the virtual and the collectable toy, breaking its bounds to step forth into our world, to fight to exist in our physical space.



**Fig 7**

## Conclusion

I grew up in the rise of designer toy culture and in the shadow of the nexus of Japanese video games and cartoons. At the outset of my MFA journey, I was heavily influenced by realistic animal sculptors who personify animals in the ceramic world like Beth Cavener Stichter and Adelaide Paul (figs. 8, 9). However, as time went by and my

focus sharpened, I made the conceptual leap to tie together aspects of video games,



**Fig 8**



**Fig 9**

collectable toy figures and the ceramic animal hybrid against the backdrop of popular culture. Today, while the animal hybrid in my work remains, my inspiration for imagery to express social comment is drawn almost exclusively from the multifaceted world of games and toys and it is my hope that I can continue to proliferate these influences in the field of ceramics. In many ways, the exploration of what creates a virtual world, and who inhabits them is a subject dear to my own heart and work as I too spend long hours in these worlds. I myself am a shameless people watcher, and seeing fellow avatars in-game scurrying around and knowing there is a real person behind it is fascinating. I want to know what drives them, I will go to great lengths to study their culture to understand them, and I want to share my thoughts on this journey through my artwork.



**Fig 10**

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## Biographical Sketch

Rhonda Chan grew up in Hong Kong, the Pearl of the Orient. She received her Bachelor of Arts Degree in Sociology and Studio Art from Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota in 2009. In the year between undergraduate and graduate school she participated in the Prior Degree Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Rhonda received her MFA from the University of Florida in 2013.



**Fig 11**