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PROJECTIONS OF PERSON AND BODY IN A VIDEO GAME CONTEXT

An anthropological study of the relationship between virtual bodies, game environment and social landscape on a multiplayer video-game server

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Abstract

This thesis is based on ethnographic fieldwork done on a multiplayer server in the video game *Garry's Mod*. The multiplayer server centres around roleplay and building. The game takes place in a 3D-modeled city with apartments, roads and parks. Players can take on different roles, such as regular citizens, police and various criminal roles. The way players move within and interact with the game environment has been a main concern in the study. For example, body language and building-projects are investigated. The main argument is that the concept of the body can be redefined in different contexts. In this case the context is a virtual game environment, within which the player's body is virtually represented as the in-game avatar. The concept of embodiment is used to investigate this. Players' engagement with the virtual game environment is also explored. The social landscape on the server affects how players interact with the environment, particularly as they build bases to protect themselves from one another. Using movement theory, the thesis explores how the virtual body and game environment are experienced in relation to each other. Social interaction between players is investigated through the lens of playful virtual violence and transgressive humour. Methods used include interviews, which have been conducted over voice call and chat messages, as well as participant observation within the virtual 3D environment in the game. The paper is written in English.

Keywords: video games; embodiment; virtual environment; roleplaying games; playful virtual violence

List of contents

1. Introduction 5
1.1 Aim and research questions 6
1.2 Background 6
2. Previous research and theory 8
2.1 Embodiment and virtual avatars 8
2.2 Place, environment and embodied space 10
2.3 Performance and roleplay 11
2.4 Playful virtual violence 12
3. Material, methodology and ethical considerations 13
3.1 The field 13
3.2 Participants 14
3.3 Data collection 14
3.4 Challenges 15
4. Ethnographic discussion 17
4.1 The body in-game 17
4.1.1 The social virtual body 18
4.1.2 Eye-contact – body-communication as second nature 19
4.2 Players and the virtual game environment 21
4.2.1 Sensory experiences of movement in the game environment 22
4.2.2 Base building 23
4.3 Player interaction in a non-serious game context 28
4.3.1 Roleplay 28
4.3.2 Violence 29
5 Conclusion 32
References 34

List of figures

Figure 1. An avatar. The player is playing as a thief. 17
Figure 2. Areas on the server. 22
Figure 3. Holding a traffic cone using the physics-gun. 24
Figure 4. Building section in Q-menu. To the left is a list of categories to choose from. 25
Figure 5. Bases coloured in opaque red and black. 26

1. Introduction

In the 2006 computer-game *Garry's Mod*, players can move freely and interact with the game environment. There is the option of playing alone on a private server, or on a multiplayer-server with over a hundred other players. By default, Garry's Mod lacks story and objective: "There aren't any predefined aims or goals. We give you the tools and leave you to play", states the studio behind the game (Facepunch n.d.). This means that it is up to the player to decide what to do. The player-community creates content for Garry's Mod consisting of downloadable in-game items, roleplay and multiplayer servers. It is on a roleplay-oriented multiplayer server I have conducted my fieldwork. It uses a gamemode called *DarkRP*, which on the Garry's Mod-community's wiki page is referred to as a "*non-serious* roleplay gamemode" (GMod Fandom n.d., my emphasis). This contrasts some other Garry's Mod communities that for example roleplay historical events and value accuracy. This is not to say that players on this multiplayer server do not take playing on the server seriously; some are very committed to progressing in the game and log on regularly. Established server rules have also been put in place and are enforced by a server staff team. "Non-serious" does, in this case, not mean unregulated, meaningless, or that players are uninvolved. I rather interpret non-serious as meaning that commitment to roleplay is loose and not intended to be true to real life. Transgression of social norms and humour is also an aspect of this. These aspects set the tone for social interaction on the server.

With an increased cultural relevance of video games follows and increase in scientific interest. Much of scientific concern around video games focuses on the mental health consequences of gaming and when gaming becomes problematic; *video gaming disorder* was added as a diagnosis in the ICD in 2022 (WHO n.d.a.; WHO n.d.b.). Other research also examines gaming as a stimulating activity, that does not necessarily negatively impact mental health (Danielsson 2022). Health in relation to gaming is an important topic, however, more can be said about gaming also as a cultural phenomenon. Anthropological writing like Tom Boellstorff's *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008) and more recently Jeffrey G. Snodgrass' *The Avatar Faculty* (2023) exemplify alternate perspectives when researching video games and gaming: games can be a forum for social interaction and cultural meaning. When discussing what is usually called 'real life' in comparison to video games, I instead use the term *actual life*. I have seen this in other anthropological papers on video games (Bareither 2020:7). I have adopted the term, because games are not imaginary – they hold real environments, relationships and experiences. I feel this is important to realize when conducting anthropological research in game worlds.

While I sometimes draw parallels between actual life and the game context, this is not a comparative study. Comparisons are rather intended to emphasize meaning in players' behaviours.

This essay is based on an ethnographic study done on a multiplayer server community in the game Garry's Mod. I examined the players' interactions with each other and the virtual environment, meaning, how they conduct themselves in the game world. Using the embodiment concept, I also studied their relationship to their virtual bodies. A distinction is made between character – what and who the player portrays during roleplay – and avatar – the virtual body, or the player embodied in the game.

1.1 Aim and research questions

This study aims to understand what makes a non-serious gaming experience interesting, specifically on a multiplayer roleplay server. The focus lies on the body in the game context, players interaction with each other and the virtual environment, and what the interesting and rewarding aspects of playing on the server are.

Research questions:

- How is playing on the server an embodied experience?
- How do players interact with the virtual environment?
- What is social interaction like in a non-serious game context?

1.2 Background

Garry's Mod is a sandbox-game created as a modification of the 2004 game *Half Life 2*. Sandbox is a game genre where the player is left mostly to their own devices in terms of purpose and activity. Building is a big aspect of Garry's Mod. The game provides prop-furniture and building blocks for the player to use, which means there is at least some suggestion of activity to the player other than exploring the virtual 3D-environment. While Half Life 2 is a story-based game where the player navigates their way through an apocalyptic world being undertaken by an alien species (Steam n.d.), Garry's Mod is much more open-ended. The aesthetics and environmental designs of Half Life 2 are used as building blocks for Garry's

Mod, but the story and objectives have been removed, leaving the player in a world of empty homes and grotty streets to do what they wish.

Players create their own goals and objectives in Garry's Mod in the form of props, virtual 3D environments, and games within the game – endless content has been made by the player-base for other players to download and use. Multiplayer servers are another example of these community creations. Simply put, multiplayer servers are a space where the player loads into the game like in a singleplayer world, but so can other players. Each player has a 3D in-game avatar, meaning every person has virtual incarnation in the game. On the server of focus in this study, there is also a voice chat function, where players can speak to each other in real time while playing. The server is also organized by a staff team and managers, rules for players to follow, and roleplay providing incentives for players to perform actions and behaviours. The server is open, meaning anyone can join without any passwords or invites. The server uses a game-mode called DarkRP, which, according to the Garry's Mod-community's wiki-page, "is normally designed to mirror normal life but is normally exaggerated with simplicity" (GMod Fandom n.d.). DarkRP focuses on roleplay, where players take on various roles including law-enforcers, criminals and regular citizens. As previously mentioned, the game-mode is "non-serious". This means that players do not need to fully commit to their roles and that transgressive behaviour and humour are big aspects.

2. Previous research and theory

In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the landscape of anthropological video game research along with other anthropologists' research in traditional non-virtual fields. I combine this with a description of the theoretical frameworks of this essay.

2.1 Embodiment and virtual avatars

For a long time, the body was neglected within anthropology and was instead handed over to the natural sciences, according to Margaret Lock (1993:133). This shifted in the 1970s, as the body became a more interesting topic through concepts like *embodiment*. The body was no longer a universal, biological and objective thing. The body-mind dichotomy and the idea of the body as non-cultural were questioned by embodiment-thinkers (Ibid.:134-135). Even in virtual contexts, Tom Boellstorff questions the assumption of the body as purely physical and sees that embodiment can exist also virtually. Physical, social and cultural impressions, as well as technology, are all experienced through our bodies (Boellstorff 2008:134-135).

Anthropologists have also emphasised that the body is not separate from the world it inhabits. Thomas Csordas (1990) uses Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas about perception to explain the body's relation to the world around it. Perception, claims Merleau-Ponty, emerges from the body, as it is through the body that we see and feel the world (Csordas 1990:9). The body is not separate from the environment, but a part of it, which in turn affects perception: "The body is a 'setting in relation to the world,' and consciousness is the body projecting itself into the world" (Ibid.:8). Our understanding of the world depends on the body's relation to the world – both world and body affect a person's perception. To draw a parallel: it is through a video game avatar (the virtual body) that we see, feel and perceive the in-game world. Csordas also reflects on Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of practice and habitus. The premise is that the body is cultural; cultural practices and social values are manifested in the body (Ibid.:11).

Player-avatars in Garry's Mod are by default in a first-person perspective and the game world is in 3D. With this in mind, we could say that the player's perception in the game world depends on the avatar's (the body's) relation to the virtual environment. In anthropological game research, the avatar has been inspected as the medium through which the player experiences the virtual, and the avatar is seen as the player embodied in the game (Boellstorff 2008:129). Jeffrey G. Snodgrass describes people having avatars as an ability to project consciousness into

"second selves" and alternate realities (2023:15-16). He defines the avatar as a self-object, or an alternate self or body, through which the person can claim alternate identities (2023:37). Through avatars, players can dissociate from everyday life and *immerse* themselves in the game, which is an important component in making the game feel real and invoke emotions (Ibid.). In short, I claim that the player's experience of the virtual game world depends on the avatar (as a virtual body) in relation to the game world or virtual environment.

Social scientists have utilized the embodiment-concept to discuss the relationship between people and tools in so called *embodiment relations*. The tool becomes an extension of the body, which anthropologist Christoph Bareither suggests adds to the gaming experience (2020:15-16). Bareither's focus is on computer gaming, and his point is that the use of tools (mouse and keyboard) helps the player become immersed in the activity. Bareither also writes about the *bam-effect*, which he has named after the exclamations gamers sometimes make at moments of impact in games, such as punches (Ibid.:15). He illustrates the bam-effect by describing how German youtuber Sarazar exclaims "Bam!", expressing a sense of impact when shooting a video game villain (Ibid.:16-17). Sensory input from games are important components in the immersion; sound and visual effects as well as the game's response to the player's use of motor skills contribute to a realistic experience (Ibid.:14, 15-16).

To compare these ideas and what they mean for this study: Boellstorff focuses on avatars as the player embodied in a game. Snodgrass has a similar perspective on what an avatar is. He compares the avatar in game contexts to that of the spiritual avatar, where people get possessed by and embody a spirit: avatars are "material embodiments of consciousness, which, as second selves, allow humans [...] to accomplish things in realities alternative to their own" (Snodgrass 2023:1). Snodgrass' point is that there is a resemblance in the cases of spirit possession and video game avatars, where avatars are the medium by which the self is projected into alternate realities. This in turn resembles Boellstorff's take on the avatar as the medium through which a player experiences the virtual world. In contrast, Bareither writes about the body-practices that go into gaming and the sensory experiences of games. To liken his reasoning to Snodgrass and Boellstorff, Bareither writes about the players *sense of being in* a virtual world. To merge these viewpoints: along with rendering the avatar as a medium for projection of self into alternate realities, we can narrow down "alternate realities" and instead simply say virtual game environment.

2.2 Place, environment and embodied space

Tom Boellstorff (2008) highlights the role of places and place-making in virtual contexts: "Place, above all else, makes virtual worlds what they are" (2008:91). He considers place to be an interactive environment which affects, and is affected by, people. Boellstorff discusses the experiences of virtual places in the multiplayer game Second Life, and states that *visuality* is an important constituent of a place. He illustrates this with a situation where a player had created a building that did not suit the established aesthetic of surrounding buildings. This caused conflict among players, many of whom considered this build to be "hard on the eyes" (Ibid.:90). The situation shows how, even within 'arbitrary' games made to be played for fun, there can be a status-quo with clear expectations for what and how a place should be. Further, Boellstorff quotes Castronova:

> A user can log into [a virtual world] from any computer on the Earth.... The screen turns into a window through which an alternate Earth ... can be seen.... The window by which your computer is depicting the world is, in fact, the surface of somebody's eye, and that somebody is *you* (Castronova in Boellstorff 2008:92, emphasis in original).

Here, parallels are drawn between what is seen – environment, surroundings, place – and the body itself, specifically the eye. In a similar vein, Setha M. Low gives the example of Harold Searle's schizophrenic patient, who states they are "looking at the world through square eyes" – which Searle claims refers to the windows of a room (Searle in Low 2003:10). These examples should not be seen as exceptions to the 'normal' or correct way of perceiving – the body being separate from its surroundings – but rather as an example of how the body's boundaries might be arbitrary and contingent on the environment in which it exists.

In anthropological theory, *place* has been made abstract and distinct from locality. Sarah Pink (2012) looks at everyday life practices and their role in the constitution of place. Pink sees place as an abstract concept where the focus is on practice and movement rather than structure or geography. "Practices too, conceptualised as activities, involve movement", explains Pink (2012:27). She bases her ideas on Tim Ingold's theories on place and movement, where inhabiting the world is not static but rather a process (Ingold 2011:147). Ingold sees places as a meshwork of paths; a path is the movement of someone or something, and we are all "continually on the move" (Ibid.:150). If each lifepath is a thread, each place is a knot (Ibid.:149). What makes space a *place*, distinct from other places, depends on what people do within them and their ideas towards them (Pink 2012:25). Pink focuses on places in the

domestic sphere. An example comes from the informant Paul's kitchen: a stain on the wall above the trash can has formed as a result of his and his housemates' habit of throwing teabags from a distance, splashing the wall behind the trash can (Ibid.:59). Here, Paul's kitchen practices have "intersected with those of the other housemates" (Ibid.), as well as the placement of the trash-can, and left traces of these actions. The idea is that people do not simply act *upon* or *in* the environment (place) but are a *part* of it (Ibid.:25). Following Ingold, Pink states places are constituted through *movement* of human and non-human actors; within and between the places, by actors' paths crossing (Ibid.:26) – practice happens through movement. Similarly to Pink and Ingold, game researcher Richard Bartle notes the importance of movement to the video game player's experience and understanding of the virtual world (Bartle, 2003:370). It is by traversing through a place that the player can orientate themselves in a virtual environment (Ibid.:372-373). Though Bartle more strictly refers to moving the virtual body, the avatar, rather than abstractly seeing practice as movement, it illustrates the relationship between the person and body and the surroundings. The places and environments we encounter are not detached still-images; we inhabit worlds along paths (Ingold 2011:148).

These authors focus on the meaning people find in places, what makes a place distinct and maintaining a status-quo. What I take from the literature is the body's relation to the space around it – people and their bodies do not exist idly in a vacuum of a static environment (Pink 2012:25). I also apply Pink's ideas on the relationship between practice and place. Boellstorff's points on vision is used to complement the other authors' conclusions on movement. In the case of video games, vision is a main indication of movement; a person playing a game sees on the screen that their avatar moves in a virtual environment (Boellstorff 2008:92).

2.3 Performance and roleplay

As mentioned, roleplay is a central aspect on the multiplayer server. Roleplay is in some ways a performance: somebody takes on the role of a character and acts it out. At the same time, the actual person is always present – it is never purely the character acting. Markus Montola (2010) writes about how "extreme", violent roleplay scenarios are experienced as gratifying to players. His focus is on roleplaying games where no props are used, and players are given a booklet on which characters to play and what these characters are like (Montola 2010:2). The games tackle heavy subject matters and evoke strong emotions, even physical stress responses, in players. Despite this, players consider these negative roleplaying sessions to be powerful experiences

that provide a sense of insight and accomplishment (Ibid.:4, 8). Montola's point is to challenge the idea of games as purely fun experiences through what he calls *positive negative experiences* (Ibid.:1). What I mainly take from Montola is what he says about *bleed*, which is where a character and player influence one another through a double consciousness (Ibid.:2). This weakens the barrier between game-actual, leading to a more emotional, intimate and real experience of the game (Ibid.).

Richard Schechner (1985) writes about theatrical performance, which includes both religious ritual and stage performances. Similarly to Montola's use of the bleed-concept, Schechner describes the liminal nature between the identities of the actor and the character they are performing (1985:6). His example is of a Yakui deer dance, where the performer wears a deer head on top of his own, not hiding his human face (Schechner 1985:4, 6). Schechner demonstrates that the performer is somewhere in between man and deer, and states that "multiple selves coexist in an unresolved dialectical tension" (Ibid.:6). While there are some key-differences between roleplaying games and theatre – one is a playful activity where the players themselves are the target group, while the other is an act intended for an audience – the performance-aspect is central to both. The performer takes on a role and attempts to emulate it as genuinely as they can, though the person acting or playing is still there, bleeding through due to incomplete transformation (Montola 2010; Schechner 1985:4).

2.4 Playful virtual violence

It is not uncommon for players to perform violent acts on the Garry's Mod server. Some examples are players breaking into houses or killing each other, within the context of the game. Bareither (2016) writes about simulated violence. In contrast to Montola's positive negative experiences of extreme scenarios, he looks at the humour and entertainment in video game violence. He calls this *playful virtual violence*. By 'violence', Bareither means physical violence – damage to things, people or animals in games (2016:112). His point is that violence is inappropriate, but that transgressive behaviour can be humorous in the video game context where no actual damage is done. At the same time, what happens in the game is not independent, but rather is a strong reference to actual life – it *implies* actual violence (Ibid.:112, 115). Playful violence is common in video game contexts, and it is an important aspect of social interaction on the multiplayer server.

3. Material, methodology and ethical considerations

Here, I summarize the approaches I have taken to this fieldwork. As I am aware that video games might be an unfamiliar area for some, I start by describing and defining the field. I then go on to describing who the participants are, followed by methodological approaches. Lastly, I retell some challenges I encountered during the fieldwork. Ethical considerations are recounted throughout the chapter.

3.1 The field

The field of my study is the game itself, on the multiplayer server. The server is owned and organized by a network with a staff team of administrators and community managers. Some of their tasks include rule adjustment, rule enforcement, banning and unbanning players from the server. Outside of the in-game server, the community has affiliate spaces in the form of a forum and a Discord server.

In many ways, Garry's Mod attempts to emulate actual life: every player has a 3D-modeled avatar, which by default is viewed through a first-person perspective and works as an in-game body. It is possible to view the avatar in a third-person perspective from behind, but this requires manual adjustment. The game world is an interactive 3D space in which players move freely, in this way similar to actual life. In addition to an in-game text chat, the server uses a voice chat based on proximity, meaning the volumes of players' voices depend on the distance between their in-game avatars. Voice chat is not affected by walls between players. Using voice chat requires a microphone, and the function is either constant or activated when the player presses a key on their keyboard, adjusted for personal preference. The voice chat function aided interviews and conversations with players and provided indicators of tone and interjections that would have otherwise been lost in text chat. Worth noting is that not every player utilizes the voice chat functions. I myself used both text and voice chat in different situations.

The forum is a space for the multiplayer server's community to share thoughts on the server, staff team or other issues. These discussions have contributed to my personal understanding of various subjects related to the server but will not be used as a form of data. I decided on this since the forum is a place where players raise personal opinions and have intra-communal conversations. I felt it would be difficult to inform everyone of me collecting data from their posts. I ended up focusing on official forum posts and documents from the staff team instead. The forum contains official guides on how roleplay works and what rules and punishments

apply on the server, which provide context for the server's social landscape. Discord (a messaging and voice call application) is widely used among gaming communities today. I have used it to communicate with my players and staff team members. The Discord server has contributed to my understanding of the community and server functions through the text chat. Though, like the forums it is a space where players speak freely, so I have disregarded data-collection here. My data mainly comes from the in-game server and direct-messages and calls via Discord.

3.2 Participants

At the start of my research, I made an announcement about my study in the Discord server's text chat and asked for participants. I got into contact with a few players and staff members this way. I had received permission from the community manager to do this, although sometime later I discovered that my message had been deleted. I felt that continuing to post similar things would not be appreciated. Consequently, I met most of my participants while playing on the server. Whenever I interviewed, talked to or did observations with someone, I confirmed they were above the age of 15, according to Etikprövningsmyndigheten's guidelines (2023:39). Because ages of players were mixed and difficult to identify, and because informing every player of my study was impossible, I have refrained from collecting personal data on players who did not have the ability to consent. Intercommunal recognition is a risk. For this reason, I am not using participants personal names or their online usernames. Any names used are pseudonyms. To further lower the risk of recognition, I have switched the genders as well as positions (such as player, admin, manager) of participants in certain ethnographic examples. I have strived to do no harm (American Anthropological Association n.d.) to participants or the multiplayer server – ethical reflection has been ongoing throughout the project, as advised by the AAA (Ibid.).

3.3 Data collection

The methods used for this study are participant observation and interviews. Participant observation allows me to grasp everyday gameplay on the server; what players do, how and when. The method often produces different answers to questions compared to survey-style questionnaires, which might offer a narrow perspective. For example, had I asked a player to explain their house-building process I might have gotten a brief, non-detailed description.

Participant observation allowed me to walk along players as they explained their builds while seeing them myself. As Göransson points out, it is important to be actively involved with participants so as to avoid getting a distant picture of them (2019:110). Participant observation also helps establish a connection to participants and allows the researcher to get immersed in their world (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw 2011:3).

I logged onto the server for around 30 days, some days I logged on several times. Sessions often lasted between 2-4 hours. At other times, I scrolled the forums or chatted with players on Discord. A typical session of participant observation started by logging onto the server, having a look at players' activities and talking to them. Some days I planned to look at specific themes, but due to the fast paced and unpredictable nature of the field things rarely went according to plan and my attention was drawn elsewhere. My fieldnotes have been taken digitally – first in a Word-document on my laptop, in front of my stationary computer. I later switched to taking fieldnotes on my phone, which took up a lot less space on my desk. My notes were clarified and re-written directly after the observations or the next day – many observations were conducted late at night in Sweden, as the server community is mostly North American.

Interviews complement participant observations (Göransson 2019:120) and provide informants' own personal thoughts and perspectives. I have conducted three semi-structured interviews. I had a list of topics to ask about, though interviews regularly diverted from it depending on what the participant wanted to talk about. These planned interviews were recorded, transcribed and sent to the interviewee to read through. Participants were informed of their anonymous participation and their ability to retract anything they said if they so wish. Interviews were conducted over Discord calls while the interviewee and I were logged into the server. This allowed for effective communication, as the in-game voice chat can be unclear. Other interviews and conversations were held spontaneously via asynchronous text messages on Discord. This allowed me and the participant to respond at a comfortable rate across time-zones. This may have contributed to informants not providing 'instinctive' answers that anthropologists often seek; I found that, while internet- and community specific terminology was used, written answers were sometimes noticeably thought-out and carefully worded.

3.4 Challenges

One challenge I encountered was the unreliability of the field, in terms of recurring access to informants. As gaming is a free-time activity, the server is not a place players *have* to enter

regularly. I found that this affected access to players. While I have had continuous contact with staff members, players have been either less interested in my work or less accessible due to the game's fast-paced and transient nature. This means I have been unable to build deep, trustworthy relationships with most participants, in turn leaving certain data out of reach. Players I have had contact with through Discord eventually stopped responding to my messages or take a long time to respond. I have had better luck talking to players spontaneously while on the server. Most of my interactions with individual players have been brief or isolated to one online session – many I have never spoken to twice. One player I wanted to interview and observe suddenly stopped responding. To solve this issue, I decided to join the server and find someone else who was interested in answering the same questions. In these situations, it helped to remind myself that to players it is just a game. They have no obligation to play, which is also good context to have about players' relationship to the server.

An ethical problem during fieldwork was that both players and staff members are very relaxed about me conducting research. An example is from when I asked a player if I could photograph their base (house), to which they responded: "I really don't care". Few demands were made by players and staff, which gave me a lot of freedom. Though, as a researcher, I felt this created potential ethical problems as I worried participants were unaware of the realness of my research, even if it is a bachelor's project. It has been my responsibility to inform them of their anonymity and rights as participants, despite them not asking for these clarifications. Players moving from one activity and place to another often caused our chats to be cut short, meaning I could not properly inform them of my study. This contributed to my ethical dilemma. I have combatted unethical research practice by asking for permission from higher-up staff members to do certain things. I have asked them questions similar to what I ask other informants, to give them an idea of what kind of work I do. I also focused on recurring behaviours among the general player-base and I have avoided personal, identifiable data. The players' and staff members' relaxed attitudes say something about the context of the server: it is not a formal space, and most personal information is not relevant. In fact, I know very little about the participants – most of my data consists of events and generalized behaviours that are not indicative of a specific person.

4. Ethnographic discussion

This chapter presents the ethnographic material that was collected during my time in the field. The first section revolves around the avatar and how players engage with it as a virtual body. The second one focuses on players' relations to the virtual environment. The final ethnographic section discusses the social climate of the server, specifically roleplay and playful virtual violence.

4.1 The body in-game

Here, I reflect on the player's relationship to their *avatar* and discuss how they behave through it. As clarified in the introduction, avatar refers to the 3D-model of a player-character's body. It is the embodiment of a player in the game context.



Figure 1. An avatar. The player is playing as a thief.

4.1.1 The social virtual body

> A group of players are standing on the street outside a small base, a player-made stronghold, having a conversation. Three of them stand huddled close together, chatting eagerly to one another. Decimetres apart, they are attentively facing each other's avatars as they speak. A fourth player stands next to the huddle, and a fifth stands on top of the low roof of the base chiming in with comments while squatting up and down with his avatar. Every now and then, a player will take a restless step out of the circle and quickly step back in as the fervorous conversation flows between them, almost like they are leaning further into the discussion. As more players join in, the group splits into several. At this point, it becomes difficult to keep track of what is said – a number of different conversations are being held in the same spot, meaning every player's microphone sits at about the same volume. Equally excited voices blend together and become hard to differentiate from where I am standing, overwhelmed on the sidewalk.

This scene is from one of my early observations on the server. It depicts players interacting with each other using their avatars, through a sort of virtual physicality. Prominent is the proximity between their virtual bodies. To the individual player, what they see is another player in front of themselves, behaving as if it is an actual person. Even in this scenario where actual bodies (and consequently, tactile experiences of closeness) are not present, proximity and being close is still of significance in social interaction. Bareither states that in-game virtual bodies are treated by video gamers as actual bodies, making virtual bodies meaningful (2020:16). In this way, Garry's Mod players also take their own and each other's virtual bodies for granted, behaving and interacting through them. In the scene, they are standing quite close to one another, at a virtual distance that would resemble 20-30 centimetres apart. While closeness serves a social function, the limited tactile experience makes closeness less serious than it often is in actual life. The intense conversation seems to be a situation in which *personal bubbles* (Low 2003:13) are small, allowing for players to get close to one another. Of course, the fact that players are aware that they are not in each other's actual faces but that they are looking at each other's in-game avatars also lessens the intensity of closeness.

Mentioned in the scene are the two players squatting and stepping in-and-out of the circle. In Garry's Mod, the basic movement lies in the keyboard on the W, S, A, and D keys to go forward, backward, left and right respectively. The mouse directs where the avatar is faces. You can also crouch down on the Control key, run on Shift, and jump on Space. These

movement mechanics are the standard in 3D computer games today (with some variations and often options to customize) and are the tools with which players have embodiment relationships (Bareither 2020:15). Moving the avatar slightly while speaking or listening to someone else is a common behaviour on the server, and something I have caught myself doing, too. As if the keyboard and mouse were extensions of the body itself (Ibid.), moving in the game expresses the intensity of the conversation. In an interview, a player explained that during 'monologues' they tend to walk and jump around, still facing and focusing on the person they are speaking to. The word we used to describe this behaviour was *fidgeting* – players will fidget with their movement-keys, and consequently avatars, during conversations and moments that require concentration. In this way, movement is similar to actual life, where people might fidget with their hands, tap their feet or in other ways attempt to alleviate emotion during conversations. The difference lies in how movement is conducted; while the fidgeting in-game consists of big motions (crouching, walking), it requires minimal effort from the player – the push of a button.

4.1.2 Eye-contact – body-communication as second nature

Within the game's confines, players move and communicate by moving their avatars. Because it is a game, body language is limited – there are no facial expressions and, while there are animated emotes (emotions or actions players can have their avatars perform), those are not used to a wide extent for communication. Some movement and bodily communication is specific to the game context – in actual life, repeated squatting would quickly get exhausting, but like the player in the scene earlier, it is a common way of non-verbally expressing friendliness or excitement. The meaning of bodily movement is contextual (Birdwhistell 1970:30, 80-81) and unique to different social contexts. That being said, I have noticed certain body language on the server mirrors that of actual life. In conversations, players use their bodies to indicate that they are listening by turning to look at someone talking. One player ponders the significance of eye-contact on the server:

> Me: Would you say eye-contact is a thing [in the game and on the server]?
>
> Player: Oh yeah, for sure. [...] If I was looking over this way and talking to you-
>
> [she faces her avatar away from me]
>
> Player: -it wouldn't have the same impact as if I was just looking at you when I talk.
>
> [...]

> Player: I think there's something like just second nature about it as well. Like people just subconsciously look towards the player that's talking, it just doesn't feel right if you don't.

The use of the term *second nature* tells us eye-contact feels instinctive to this player. It seems natural to use the body in communication and social interaction, or it "just doesn't feel right", even when the bodies in question are virtual representations of actual bodies. In a social sense, it may be important to look at who is talking in order to show interest and see who is saying what. It is a more or less intentional action; in the virtual, eye-contact seems equally instinctive as in the context of actual life. Applicable here is Bourdieu's idea of *habitus*, where body, mind and emotions are formed by sociocultural identities and values – these aspects become embodied in people (Csordas 1990:11; Low 2003:12). By extension, the in-game body also has its habits that to the player feel natural or second nature.

During an interview, an admin explained her use of body language in interactions with players. If a rule break has occurred and caused conflict between two players, server staff may need to step in to assess the situation and talk to the players involved. In moments like this, the admin states that she will "move in between [the players] to kinda signify who I'm talking to". She illustrates this by stepping left and right, keeping her avatar's face to mine, the imagined rule-breaker, as to maintain eye-contact. Even in the game context, looking at someone can be a way to convey directness, like in situations where an admin needs to be pedagogical and clear, perhaps authoritative, towards players when explaining server rules. This is an example of the body experiencing cultural impressions as well as technology (Boellstorff 2008:134-135). The admin also illustrates that eye-contact may actually be further enunciated by moving your avatar from left to right, something that might be easier to do in a game when no physical power is applied and physical proximity might not be as notable as in actual life.

Besides for in conversation, the eyes and faces of players' virtual bodies can contain more complex meanings. While small and specific expressions of body language (such as a twitching eye, a smile, bouncing a leg) are not accessible in the game, I have observed various meanings to the 'looks' players give. This, despite their avatar's dead-pan expressions. A notable example is when players take on the role of thieves. While some play into the role with a threatening voice, some do not use the voice chat. The server's roleplay rules make it obligatory to in text chat inform victims of robbery that they are being robbed (a common phrase is *drop 10k in 10 seconds or die*). These can be the only words exchanged in an instance of robbery. Thieves would come up to me, let me know I was being robbed in text chat, and then stare at

me expectantly. Anthropologist Ray L. Birdwhistell (1970), who specializes in kinesics, or body motion communication, states that gestures lack definite meaning. Situational context is what determines the meaning of a gesture (Birdwhistell 1970:80-81). While in some cases, silently looking at another player indicates attention, in a different context a stare is threatening and demanding. Although this might seem obvious in an actual-life scenario, it emphasizes that the meaning of body language can be equally specific in contexts that lack the same micro-expressions. My response to getting robbed would be to either compliantly hand over the money, or silently swipe my computer mouse left-to-right, moving my avatar's head to say "no". Saying no would get me killed, but I would respawn while the thief looks for a new victim to stare at.

4.2 Players and the virtual game environment

In this section I explore avatars in the game environment. This goes hand-in-hand with the previous chapter on the virtual body, but here I focus on the player and their avatar in relation to their surroundings, not just the player in relation to the in-game body. The ethnographic examples show how movement in the game environment is a sensory experience for the player, and that movement itself is a practice. But first, I will briefly describe the environment of the game.

As mentioned, the space the player finds themselves in when playing Garry's Mod is that of a 3D modelled environment, or the *map* as it is called among Garry's Mod-players. The environment on the multiplayer server is modelled as a town. It has several tall apartment blocks, a police station and government building, and other types of buildings for players to use. Concrete and brick are the primary materials that make up the town. Between buildings are asphalt roads, parks with benches and fountains. Underground lies a walkable sewer-system. Certain map segments are interactable (players could open the doors into houses, for example), but they are not removable. The map is quite big; there is enough space for players to build their own construction projects.



Figure 2. Areas on the server.

4.2.1 Sensory experiences of movement in the game environment

The openness of the map allows players to move freely. Some make good use of the space by wildly running around the map. Several times I have seen players pass me by as they run along the roads, seemingly with no destination in mind. I once caught one of them, Kim, in the midst of a sprinting-session. When I asked what they were up to, Kim's response was: "wandering". This suggests that movement is an activity or practice in and of itself (Ingold 2011:150). I believe sprinting in this way is a sensory activity within the game. It exemplifies sensory experience of an environment through movement (Low 2003:13). Going for a run in actual life is of course a sensory experience, but a very different one to running in Garry's Mod, which is a mostly visual-sensory experience (Boellstorff 2008:92). In video games, the clearest

indication that a someone is moving their avatar is through visual input. A player's perspective changing creates a sense of motion – body (eyes, both the player's actual eyes and the avatar's perspective displayed on the screen) and environment are related through movement (Boellstorff 2008:92; Ingold 2011:148, 150). Moving is essential to understanding the world players inhabit (Bartle 2003:370). The Garry's Mod-player's avatar moves forwards quickly and effortlessly – it glides smoothly over the wide roads and almost drifts when rounding corners. The map is not just a space within which players' avatars exist; it is an environment with which players interact (Pink 2012:25) and experience in movement, in the form of blurred roads, houses, and crowds of other players.

Players also enjoy interacting with the environment above ground-level. Climbing onto ledges, jumping from rooftops, and other types of parkour activities are constant. Players sometimes set up long, ramp-like constructions that reach far up in the air, allowing them to see the server from high above ground-level. I believe this is a way of playing with physics and exploring movement in a controlled and risk-free context – jumping from a roof and free-falling through the air would not be worth the risk in actual life. If a players' avatar falls from a height (or sustains injuries in other ways), it will have points taken off from its' health-bar, which can be replenished by consuming healing items or dying. If the avatar dies, it can immediately be revived, or respawned – in Garry's Mod, death is short-lived. This is an important factor in the relationship between movement-practices and environment (Pink 2012:27). Fast and risky behaviour constitutes a substantial portion of the movement-practices on the server. It is not necessary to move in these ways in order to play, but the game-context makes the fast-paced movement possible as consequences are low.

4.2.2 Base building

In the previous chapter I explained the movement in Garry's Mod. Other than for adjusting what direction you face, the mouse is used for the *physics-gun,* a tool originally from *Half Life 2*. The physics-gun works as the player's hand in the game; when holding down the left mouse button, a glowing laser-like line shoots out, which is used to pick up and move objects. Admins are also able to grab unruly players. When right-clicking while holding an object, it is frozen in place, even if it hangs mid-air. The physics-gun is essential to the building aspect of Garry's Mod and plays a big role in players' interaction with the game world. The physics-gun can be likened to an embodiment relation, where tools become extensions of (virtual) bodies

(Bareither 2020:15). Along with the movement mechanics, it sets the boundaries and possibilities of the game.



Figure 3. Holding a traffic cone using the physics-gun.

I previously described the map. Important to note is that, while certain aspects are interactable (such as doors and elevators) players cannot change the map. The map is a static 3D modelled environment and changing it through the game is impossible, even for admins. What players can do is add to the virtual environment by building, which is the most notable way players affect the virtual environment. It is done by generating (*spawning*, as players call it – same as when a someone logs into the server) objects into the game world and sticking them together. When opening the Q-menu, accessed with the *Q* key, the player is met with categorized lists of objects ranging from decorative furniture to building blocks of various sizes. This is frequently used by players to create bases for protection, or other creative building projects. Player-made constructions are a part of the environment, until the player exits the server and their builds disappear.

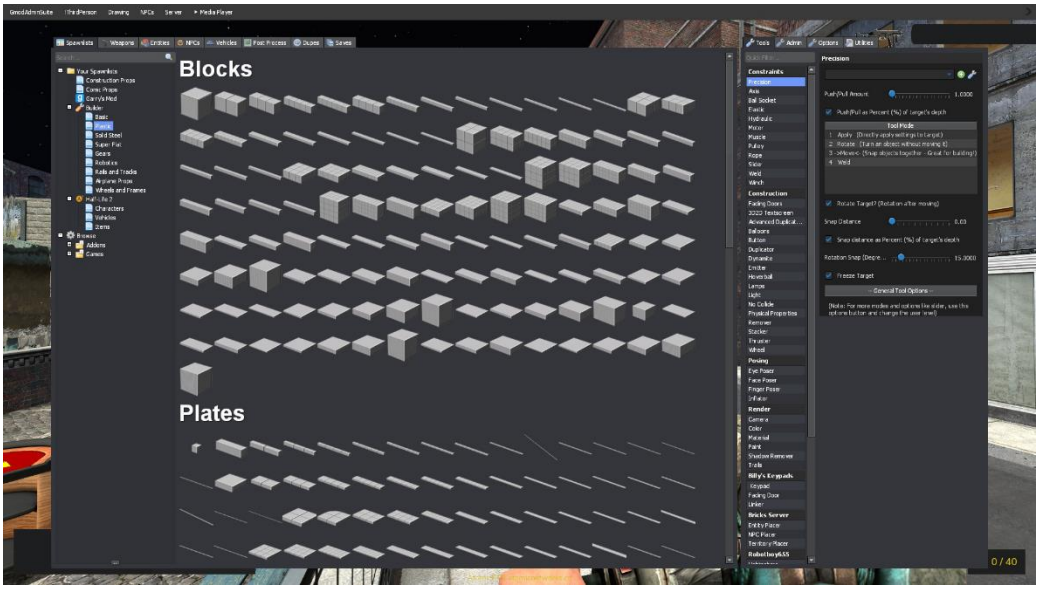


Figure 4. Building section in Q-menu. To the left is a list of categories to choose from.

The most common builds you see around the server are bases. They are houses that function as a player's stronghold. A base is either built from scratch using items from the Q-menu, or a map-properties – apartments, houses, or warehouses – will be used as a foundation and be fortified with building blocks. Properties are rarely left unfortified, unless the property owner intends to have other players enter, for example if they are roleplaying as hotel owners and have rooms for rent. Players put time and thought into their builds – I have seen players start building their bases mid-day, hours before the server's most active phase in the evening and night. One player explained to me that they like to build on a singleplayer server, in order to try things out and build in peace. The base can then be saved with an in-game cloud-like function (called *dupe*, duplication) and later generated on the multiplayer server. Many players regularly allow their builds to take shape on the multiplayer server. In these cases, it is customary to place a sign next to the base-to-be, saying: "building". This way, other players know to not disturb. There is also the *precision tool*, which like the physics-gun is used for building. By clicking on an object with the tool, you move it ever so slightly in a desired direction. You can sometimes hear players fix minute details on their builds by repeatedly using the precision tool – it sounds a little like hitting a hollow metal pipe.

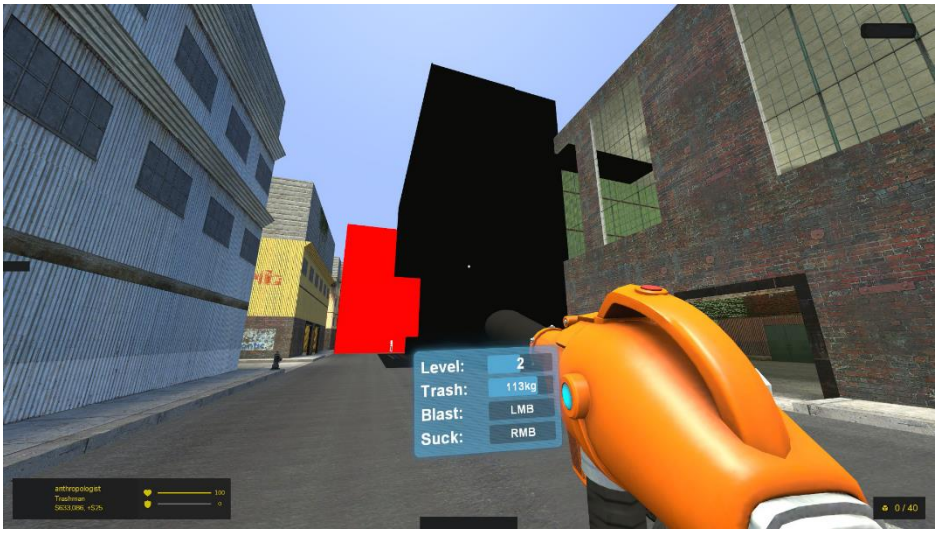


Figure 5. Bases coloured in opaque red and black.

From the outside, bases tend to be simple and cube-shaped, with smooth single-coloured building blocks. Bright colours make bases stand out among the otherwise beige-yellow palette, and the map's textured concrete and brick buildings. Some bases are fully see-through or have transparent sections. Bases are designed to withstand intrusions, known as *raids*, from other players. A base tends to be a sensitive area. Despite, or perhaps because of, their defensive intent, bases are places of precarious safety: a base exists because there is something of value within, therefore it might be worth raiding. A player who does not have a base is safe from raids. The base being an area of defence and protection affects how players perceive others' proximity – someone coming to close might be a potential threat. In this way, bases are distinct places where safety and defensive practices are implemented (Pink 2012:25). For this reason, certain design choices are implemented. Transparent bases make raiders easy to see, but opaque walls protect *basers* (the base owners) and their property from outsiders. On the inside of bases players tend to concentrate defence. At the entrance of a base is typically a keypad door, which only the baser and anyone else they allow have access to. Sometimes there is an alternate entry: a loose door that the baser can move with the physics-gun to get in and out quicker. Past the keypad door is a corridor, regularly interrupted by up to three more keypads. They can be broken into using explosives, but keypads significantly slow down intruders and leave them vulnerable inside the corridor. Some corridors are designed as mazes, with corners the raiders cannot see around, or simple straight corridors with a couple turns to slow them down. Some lack corridors altogether; bases high above ground instead have long, narrow staircases that raiders fall off easily.

Inside a base is often equipment the baser uses to make money, such as money printing machines. The main point of a base is to defend such valuables. Besides corridors and keypads, basers construct their bases to give themselves the upper hand. Making sure they can see raiders while obscuring themselves is a popular technique. Angles are sneaky a way to do this. According to server rules, if the baser shoots, they must be visible from the raider's perspective. However, a baser who understands the layout of the base has a great advantage: they can sit behind a wall and peak around a corner and shoot, while the enemy does not know where to look. Bases can also have transparent upper floors, which allow for the baser to see the entire base from above, while the raider is vulnerably surrounded by walls on the bottom floor. Players are creatively manipulating and utilizing the space around them to as best as they can perform a desired action. Players and surroundings alike constitute the base, whether practices are successful or not (Pink 2012:25, 26).

Aesthetics are usually not that important to players – generally, function is the absolute priority. Compare this to the situation Boellstorff describes, where a Second Life-player had built a house that others thought clashed with the established style (2008:90). In this case, visuality and aesthetics was of great importance to the community (Ibid.). On the Garry's Mod server, an 'ugly' base is not enough to cause dispute among players – a base is not meant to have a certain style. That being said, plenty of conflicts arise around bases. Buildings are neatly woven into the roleplay on the server; basers want to protect valuable property, which others are interested in stealing. Because of this, official rules around builds and bases have been established in order to create a fair roleplay experience. One rule restricts the number of keypads in a base to four. Another rule regulates the number of angles in the entrance corridor; an entry is allowed to have six corners, so raiders do not have to walk too long to get into the base. Despite the general atmosphere of rule-transgression on the server, players underline the importance of following building regulations. A player advised me to follow the building-rules, as admins are quick to notice when a base does not adhere to regulations. The section on violence in the next chapter provides some context to the need for building-regulations. Building rules are meant to balance out the opportunities for raiders and basers. This is especially important as "it is a lot easier to defend than it is to raid, and as such you don't really get successfully raided very often," according to one player.

4.3 Player interaction in a non-serious game context

This section discusses the social climate on the server, specifically focused on roleplay and playful virtual violence (Bareither 2020). These are unique to the non-serious DarkRP gamemode and play central roles in players interactions with each other.

4.3.1 Roleplay

Roleplay is central to gameplay on the server. Some popular roles players pick include thief, gun dealer, and police officer – fictive criminal activity is prevalent in this roleplay milieu. It is a non-committal roleplay experience; players can change their roles at any time, and playing does not require any character creation or preparation like many other roleplaying games do. I usually played as a trashman. Each role has a brief description of what specific rules and job tasks apply – thieves can perform robbery, and trashmen collect and recycle trash. Performing role-specific tasks earns players in-game money. Player-models (3D-model designs of the characters appearance) differ between the various roles – thieves wear balaclavas and stand slightly hunched over, for example. Roles tend to be picked based on what seems like the most effective way to make money or preferred activity – it varies between players. The roleplay context on the server is non-serious (GMod Fandom n.d.), meaning humour plays a significant part and players do not need to fully commit to their roles. Characters are not usually fleshed out or fully scripted but rather improvised. Players often break from actively performing their roles to chat and hang out. In this in-between consciousness, players and characters are not separate but simultaneous (Schechner 1985:6). At specific moments, players 'tune in' to their characters, mainly when performing roleplay-actions such as tasks. Raids are moments when *bleed* (Montola 2010:2) is especially noticeable: while raids are events performed in the context of roleplay, players get personally invested in successfully raiding or defending their base.

Money-printing is a popular way to make profits but can only be performed by criminal roles, such as thieves, kidnappers or mafia bosses. During my fieldwork, money-printing was always done while *basing*, meaning players stayed in a fortified base to protect themselves and their printers. Other players can raid those bases. During raids, the parties involved are referred to as "basers", the defenders, and "raiders", the attackers. Who is and is not allowed to raid, base or print is stated in the role description – thieves can perform all of these, while those playing as role-less citizens can only base. Some players commit to printing for hours, leaving the game on in the background while doing something else. These players often base with others, taking

turns to keep an eye out for potential raiders. While basers will try to prevent them, raids in a way complement bases. One baser explains:

> I also think that dynamic of raiders coming to kill you and steal your stuff is very important for the health of the server because without that risk of losing your stuff and progress there would be no incentive to build better and nicer bases.

This highlights the relationship between base-building (players' engagement with the environment) and roleplay as player interaction. It also shows that the competitive nature of raiding is an overall positive aspect of the server, according to players (Bareither 2020:26, 27). Not everyone participates in raiding, but as in this player's words, raiding is important to preserving the *health* of the server and maintaining player-activity. We return to raiding in the next subchapter.

Money, meaning in-game money unrelated to actual life money, is an important factor to gameplay on the server. Players are always trying to earn money through role-specific tasks, gambling, and even tip-jars. When asked what money is used for, players mainly mentioned *perma-weapons*, weapons that will remain in a player's possession after they log out, can be bought, as well as some cosmetic avatar-customizations. The continuous strive for more money incentivises players to perform roleplay activities and interact with each other. I find it simultaneously works the other way around; that players roleplay in the name of money, but really it is these activities themselves that make the gaming experience enjoyable. Someone explained to me that no-one plays on empty DarkRP servers, despite them being the perfect climate to continually make money without worry of it being stolen: "Really without the playerbase there is no point in playing". The process itself is enjoyable, not least when it involves other players.

4.3.2 Violence

> I am standing above one of the many entryways to the underground sewer system. There is a bright red and green sign urging me to "GO IN SEWER – IT'S SAFE", with arrows pointing to the entrance. I had been led there from the park by a mysterious dotted spray paint trail on the ground. As I sceptically debate whether to do as the sign says or not, a pair of players are already going down together. A moment passes, and I hear a gunshot, then another. As the booming sound effects gradually get more rapid, I realize a fight has broken out in the sewers. Little notifications start popping up in the upper

right corner of my screen. They spell out the usernames of players getting killed, until I hear one last roar of a revolver and everything goes quiet.

This scene depicts a player luring others into the sewers, in order to have a fight. From my bystander perspective, it seemed very dramatic: I couldn't see anyone, only hear the commotion below. I doubt the two players were surprised by the ill intent awaiting them in the sewers – the ominous sign insists it is safe, but a lack of context (rightfully) evokes suspicion, but also intrigue. Violence is common on the server and indeed something many players seek out intentionally. Robbery, kidnapping or even killing another player without specific reason (*RDM*, random death match, as the Garry's Mod-community calls it) are other examples of violence that players engage in – I have fallen victim to these countless times. Although RDM is not allowed according to server rules, it happens frequently:

> Me: Does that happen often? Mass-RDM:ing?
>
> Admin: Last time I had to deal with a mass-RDM was like yesterday.
>
> Me: So it's kind of like a recurring thing?
>
> Admin: Yeah. Obviously, it's gonna happen, of course- it's a DarkRP server, of course!

Mass-RDM is when a player kills 3 or more other players randomly. In cases of RDM, temporary tension between the perpetrator and frustrated victim sometimes arise. Administrators get involved in order to carry out punishments – jail for 5 minutes for a first offence or 2 hours for a fifth offence. Despite regulatory attempts to minimize occurrences, RDM is "obviously" a more or less accepted feature of the non-serious social landscape of DarkRP and the server. Breaking rules is part of the fun, as one player puts it. This is an example of pleasure of transgression, or "the pleasure of breaking social norms" (Bareither 2016:111). Specifically, this phenomenon is called *transgressive humour* (Bareither 2016). Here, the norms in question are both the server rules against RDM:ing, and (social and legal) rules against violence and murder. As Bareither explains, while it is a game, actual violence is implied (2016:112). One of Bareither's gamer participants states, it "is funny [...] because it's so absurd and really mean" (Ibid.:114). Randomly murdering somebody is an extreme and violent action, but in the game context, consequences are low – no actual life is taken. The victim can respawn immediately and continue playing, perhaps more annoyed than before.

Raiding is another form of violence, which illustrates the competitive aspects of playful virtual violence (Bareither 2020:27). I was staying with a player, Sam, in his base, taking fieldnotes, when I suddenly heard explosions. Someone was using keypad-crackers – we were being raided. Sam shot at the intruders; as one of them died, the other complained about the amount of keypads, noticeably frustrated. Raiding can be a tough experience for basers and raiders alike: a baser might die and have all their money stolen, or they have a great advantage over raiders, who get aggravated or discouraged. Despite this, players return to the activity. In this way, raiding is a positive negative experience (Montola 2010). While Montola's roleplay scenarios have a serious outlook on heavy topics, raiding is less grave. We ended up defending the base when the raiders were both killed. When later asked how he feels about raids, Sam explained he gets an adrenaline rush. Raids occurred countless times during my time in the field – they are almost customary. Even when raids are not actively happening, they regularly come up in conversation. Despite, or perhaps partly due to the stir-up of emotion, raids are for many a highlight-activity on the server.

5 Conclusion

To conclude this paper, we have explored the virtual body, environment, and social interaction among players on a multiplayer server in the game Garry's Mod. The ethnographic material illustrates how social aspects influence players' experience and engagement with virtual bodies and game environment. It also shows the relationship between players engagement with the virtual game environment and the virtual body.

The answer to the first research question, *How is playing on the server an embodied experience?*, is mainly the avatar. Embodiment in the server context is experienced by the meaning players see in the virtual bodies – a virtual *representation* of an actual life body is as real in a virtual context. The ethnography shows how the avatar is given genuine meaning as a body in the virtual context. In ways this happens subconsciously, as moving the avatar in the ways exemplified in this paper are not necessarily a calculated intent – it is "second nature" behaviour that requires less thought than simple habit (Csordas 1990:11). Players treat their own and others' avatars similarly to actual life ones, as demonstrated by in-game eye-contact and more or less intentional body language in social interaction. The examples of eye-contact also emphasize how context is really what conveys meaning, even through the non-expressive face of a static 3D-modelled game avatar.

Movement is the bridge between the virtual body and environment – it ties the body and its' surroundings together (Pink 2012:25, 26; Ingold 2011). Both the first and second research question – *How do players interact with the virtual environment?* – are answered by movement. It is in movement that the player experiences the virtual game environment. Visual input is important to note, as visual cues of a shifting perspective communicate to the player that they are moving. Because of this, the movement players see on the screen provide sensory experiences, a *sense of moving*, within the virtual environment. This type of movement-behaviour is continually explored, as the consequences of the virtual body are not related to the actual life body; any injuries acquired are contextual and temporary. This, along with the physics gun, highlights the connection the virtual body has with its' environment. Bases showcase another way players engage with their environment. They illustrate how building is essential in the roleplay, which is the social context. Bases are areas of defence, which affects how players perceive each other – someone being too close might be plotting a raid. This is what distinguishes them in contrast to other places (Pink 2012:25).

Now onto the final research question: *What is social interaction like in a non-serious game context?* As described above, body language through avatars makes up one facet of player interaction. Roleplay is another important facet, which affects body language. The non-serious (GMod Fandom n.d.) roleplay climate allows for loose commitment to character-roles. The distinction between player and character is not clearly defined, allowing players and their characters to exist simultaneously on the server (Schechner 1985:6; Montola 2010). The non-seriousness also makes space for humour and playful virtual violence (Bareither 2020). Roles and a desire for money accumulation incentivize action among players, such as raiding and other forms of violence. In turn, the threat of violence leads players to construct bases. This demonstrates the social climate's impact on how individual players decide to engage with the virtual environment. Social practices and values (roleplay, playful virtual violence and transgressive humour) are neatly intertwined with the role the virtual environment plays in the eyes of players.

As Margaret Lock explains, the presumed idea of the body as objective, purely biological and universal is misleading (1993:134-135). The boundaries of the body can be creatively redefined in different contexts, as this study has suggested; when playing Garry's Mod, the avatar *is* the body. Through it, players become immersed and project themselves into the game world (Snodgrass 2023:15-16, 37). Along with practice and movement, this further helps define the body in the game context in which it exists (Pink 2012:25; Ingold 2011). The multiplayer server has its own social and cultural landscape, in which non-seriousness sets a general foundation for the common attitude. The descriptive word "non-serious" should not deceive us to think it is unimportant or superficial – social and embodied experiences on the server are authentic. Video games and their communities illustrate the plasticity of experienced realities – the experiences of social landscapes, surroundings, and the body itself can be contextual.

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