

Judah Perez
Anthropology 301

Healing in Virtual Worlds

Each culture has some way of dealing with illness and disease. Virtual worlds are no different. The world may be different but real people live there and share a culture that transcends the physical world. First off, what are virtual worlds? As written in “Designing Virtual Worlds” by Richard A. Bartle, “What are virtual worlds? In this context a *world* is an environment that its inhabitants regard as being self-contained. It doesn’t mean an entire planet: It’s used in the same sense as ‘the Roman world’ or ‘the world of high finance’” (1). Not every virtual worlds deal with injury and healing but quite a few due including the subject of this paper, Final Fantasy XIV. Released in 2010, Final Fantasy XIV is an online virtual world shared with thousands of other people, persistent, continuing on even when players log out, high fantasy with elves, magic, dragons, and other tropes common in fantasy. The main reason why this virtual world was selected for study was because the author has experience in it compared to other virtual worlds like World of Warcraft. People come to the virtual world for fun or recreation but have a shared culture and expected behaviors. Culture as defined “Cultures are traditions and customs, transmitted through learning, that govern the beliefs and behaviors of the people exposed to them” (Kottak 2). Two parts of this paper is explaining how anthropology works in a virtual world and the other is working in the context of the world how healing is practiced.

First off, how is anthropology performed in a virtual world? Anthropology is the study of people and their culture and with the rise of the interconnectivity of the internet, new cultures have emerged within the digital medium. These people not only participate but live within these newer worlds. “In his influential book *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Tom Boellstorff argues

that virtual worlds ought to be understood in terms of their own logic as enclosed spaces separates separate from, but related to, the actual world” (Golub 144). Anthropologists must join the culture in the virtual worlds to study them like any other culture. Some examples of field work in virtual worlds have been compiled by Alex Golub in *The Anthropology of Virtual Worlds: World of Warcraft*. World of Warcraft, or WoW, is a virtual game that is shared, persistent, massively multiplayer online game, or MMO. It is a virtual world with a rule structure like a game, paid to access, high fantasy setting with elves, orcs, wizards, and dragons (Golub 136). This world is shared by many since 2004 and has seen population explosions, cultural change, and even medical epidemics. The article covers three ethnographies, the first is *MY LIFE AS A NIGHT ELF PRIEST* which covers life of a character as the player. The next, *LEET NOOBS* covers education and how the culture handles the training of new members of society. The last ethnography cover in Golub’s article is *THE WARCRAFT CIVILIZATION*. This covers not only the virtual world but the community that forms around it in subspaces such as online forums/bulletin boards, chat servers and the real world (142). These virtual worlds already have distinct cultures and only will be more defined as they mature and are studied. “Simply because virtual worlds exist and humans form relationship within them, virtual worlds are a valid field for research. Anthropology aims to explore human interaction in all kinds of environments, and virtual worlds are one of them” (Kerschbaumer 105). As humans have more socialization with digital devices, these spaces become filled with unique identities and people different from who they are in the real world.

Final Fantasy XIV is the fourteenth entry of the Final Fantasy game series and the second virtual world in the series. Themes are shared but the worlds are separate so even though Final Fantasy XI and Final Fantasy XIV are virtual worlds, they have different cultures and settings.

The virtual world of Final Fantasy XIV is has magic naturally occurs in the world and is used for healing and fighting. People interacted with the world through characters they create known as player characters or avatars. These avatars can be male or female and a selection of races including human like Hyur, Elezen which are like tradition fantasy elves, cat like people called Miqo'te, fantasy dwarves called Lalafell, a giant race called Roegadyn, and a race related to fantasy dragons called Au Ra. Each race has different styles depending on where they come from in the world. "Avatars are viewed as a social representation of the player in the space and create a sense of presence in the world by locating the player" (Hutchinson 91).



Left to Right. Plainsfolk Lalafell, Sun Miqo'te, Sea Wolves Roegadyn, Midlander Hyur, Wildwood Elezen, Duskwight Elezen, Highlander Hyur, Hellsguard Roegadyn, Moon Miqo'te, Dunesfolk Lalafell

Gender does not play an important role in society with sex and gender identity being independent. There are also numerous beasts and creatures that make up the world to drive conflict with players. There are scripted storylines for the player to follow as they learn how to interact with the world and their powers. Each person takes on role for combat in the virtual world as Tank, Dps, or Healer. This system has been around for a long time in previous virtual worlds. Each player can change their role and pick up other skills for gathering and crafting if they want to do more with the economy but the main focus of the world is combat. The world setting has players aligned with three city-states as they unify and fight off an invading empire and keep the powers of darkness at bay. With its high fantasy setting, players get to experience a new world, interact in it, and explore who they are in their own hero's journeys.

Even though the world is virtual, there are still health epidemics that happen and affect people. A well-known virtual epidemic happened in the virtual world WoW in 2005 called the Corrupted Blood Incident. Being a game, the group that created and runs the world setup events for players that changes the world with new enemies to fight, new limited-edition gear, and new storylines to follow. What happened during the Corrupted Blood Incident was unexpected and unintended. A new dungeon with a new boss was released that had an ability to infect players that dealt damage over time until the effect wore off. "Game administrators presumably believed that the short period of infectivity (several seconds), as well as its highly lethal effect, would render the disease self-limiting. This proved not to be the case" (Balicer 260). Even though WoW is not our particular virtual world we are studying, it is closely related and offers an interesting event to look at. It was an outbreak like any other disease but contained in a virtual world. There were several factors for the disease spread including quick teleportation so it could be spread anywhere in the world quickly, virtual animals kept as pets can contract it and spread it, there was no resistance to catching the disease again so it spread back and forth, reinfected and spreading. Non- player characters also harbored the disease without dying from it causing it to linger in populated areas for a long time (Balicer 260). There were also people that intentionally spread the plague to as many people as they could, effectively being terrorists with bioweapons. Cities emptied, the population ran for the countryside away from people to hopefully not catch and die from the disease. The plague may not affect the player's physical body but they still reacted and fled from it. Healers tried to heal others and limit the spread of disease, lower level helpers tried to divert people from entering the cities, and quarantines were set up. It may not be a perfect real world model but people reacted to it as if it was a real risk to

their life. With the short disease time and lethality, very little exists like it in the real world, but it shows that outbreaks can be simulated and tested in virtual worlds with people reacting to it.

Anyone can become a healer in the virtual world of Final Fantasy XIV. Even with initial training and growth in other specialties in the world, any person can decide to pick up healing and start helping others within hours. The skill development as healer is straightforward with structured development of new practices to aid others with. The practical knowledge of how to use the healing comes from mentors, text or video guides, or just practicing techniques. There are many guides on how to heal outside the world on forums, reddit and videos. Many experienced healers help out and guide newer players if they ask. Healing starts straightforward for Conjurers. They start with a simple healing spell that targets a single person and heals a little health. As they gain more experience, they gain stronger healing magic and area healing. With proper rotation, healing becomes quick and effective. Using the smaller healing abilities grants free or cheap uses of stronger healing magic without draining MP or Mana Points. This set of powers is for the most common healing job, the White Mage. In other virtual worlds, the classes can have tiers or branches, but in FF14, classes can be combined into advanced jobs that have specialized roles. Another type of healer is the Scholar. They have a fairy companion that helps with healing. While not as strong in healing as the white mage, the scholar can deal decent damage to enemies. Scholars require more micromanaging with their fairies but their high skill cap is extremely rewarding for some (Pettanko). The third healing class, the Astrologian, is the most versatile using divining decks to channel healing magic. The utility of the deck makes the Astrologian difficult to master but complements the other healing classes very well. All healing done within the virtual world is with magic and nearly instantaneous. While very different from our own world, the practice of healing is important here.

In the search for a healer to interview, I posted a request on reddit was was swamped with healers wanting to interview. I ended up performing two direct interviews and then had other people answers the interview question if they wanted to. Our first healer that was interviewed is a Lalafell named Rihn Valahd. Rihn is self-described as nice and polite with a “nice” personality. Final Fantasy XIV is a roleplaying game which some players get really into to give their characters different personalities from their own. Rihn as the players avatar does so slightly but not drastically from their real-world persona. “The avatar can be viewed partly as a separate body, away from the notion of a single body housing one identity, and partly an extension of the player’s identity into a separate space, which is resituated according to the frameworks of intelligibility that exist in this space. In turn, the player is encouraged to identify with the avatar through this process” (Hutchinson 96). This process makes the virtual avatar a part of the person, putting them directly into the world. Even if the player does not think of the character as them, it still reflects their identity in the virtual space. Rihn entered the world in 2014, not immediately getting into healing. She was first a Bard, which is a DPS based class meant to be one of the main damage dealers in a group. She later switched to be a healer as a Scholar after not meshing with combat. The usual healing class in FF14 is the White Mage which is a very traditional class like clerics in other games. The Scholar is different with a companion helper that aids in healing. Healers are also more in demand so finding a group became a lot easier for Rihn after switching. Rihn also comments there seems to be a shortage of healers compared to other roles people take. It might be the level of support healers have to give to their group. They are not on the front lines and give to their group constantly. There were times Rihn saved the group due to quick reaction and thinking. These usually happen during raids, Normal groups are limited to 4 people with one Tank, two DPS, and one healer. These can be intense themselves but larger raid

groups are on a higher level where two healers coordinate and keep everyone alive. The healer needs to be able to adapt to different situations and has to manage stress very well. The healer has to multi-task often, keep the party alive, check individual statuses, stay out of areas of attack,



and in a larger group, watch their co-healer and coordinate with them. After being asked if healing is stressful, Rihn said only if things go south, otherwise it just becomes a routine of mixing healing with attacking. From my own experience, I would call healing stressful but it might just be the focus it requires. Mistakes will be made during healing, at that can lead to deaths and full group wipes. Death may not be a permanent thing in FF14 but having to retry a few times can cause tension in the group. Sometimes a break is required before making another attempt or tempers can get out of

control and the whole group may disband, losing even more progress. Rihn says hugging and petting her cat helps.

Rihn had some finishing remarks about a lot of people underestimate healing and healers. “Many believed that our job is easy cause we just need to heal. I had people tell me why can't I heal through fights and that all healing should be the same, when in fact healers also need to progress in raids as well -- not just tanks and dps. We need to know when to time our heals and when is a good a time to DPS, cause we don't want to just waste MP on overhealing. Both healers also have to learn teamwork with each other and know when they need support whether

from each other, or even from tank using cooldowns correctly and dps using their utilities.” Like any profession, there is a lot of knowledge that goes into healing, when to apply it and just importantly, when to wait before applying treatment. In a world where wounds can be instantly healed and healing power needs to be conserved for later, overhealing wastes precious MP. MP stands for Mana Points, which is what healers draw on to perform their healing magic. It replenishes over time but it can be used to quickly and once it runs out healers will no longer be able to perform their healing abilities and everyone ends up having a bad time. Rihn has at least four years of healing experience and seems to enjoy it. It is a game after all, but virtual worlds are more than just that.

Another healer that was interviewed was Mare Arremer, another Lalafell. Mare said she does not really roleplay as her character and is a little odd to her. The player behind Mare likes creating characters and trying to bring them to life. She may not be a full extension of the player like our previous interviewee but she enjoys it more as storytelling. Mare first started as a healer in WoW, a different virtual world. She was not looking to get into to support others but to self-sustain herself. She enjoyed combat against other people and wanted to be able to keep herself alive and not really trusting other people to do so. She does have confidence, something some healers seem to lack. A lot of frustration and yelling can get thrown at healers but Mare is able to keep it at a distance. She does like healing people though and wants their time in the world to be enjoyable. She has had her fair share of grumpy people, deaths and group wipes are always stressful but she tries to talk with the group afterward to try to unify and keep the problems from coming up again. Unfortunately, some groups complain when she is not dealing enough damage. “I’ve had one that really made me avoid savage content for a bit when people complained about dps. A healer’s duty should be to heal first then dps. But that’s just me.” There many tactics

healers have to do. Their main job is to heal but they also deal damage so their dual role has them doing many actions all the time. Other roles do not have to do as much. The main tank in the group does a lot to but their multitasking level is not the same. Although, a good tank takes a lot of stress of the healer.

Other healers answered the interview questions but I was not able to directly ask them. Most do not roleplay but one did say they play the character as an extension of their self. Most who responded have at least a few years of experience, some over a decade of playing in virtual

worlds. Some got into healing to keep friends from dying, for the challenge, to meet a need in their larger player Guild/Free Company, or to try something new. Some get into healing because of how the healer looks. Fashion is very important in virtual worlds. Caia Freire, a Roegadyn says, “I like the look/aesthetic/theme of the class (Healers' skills in many games are visually striking and beautiful, in FFXIV especially I find the 'Astrologian' job's animations incredible).” Astrologian was another healer classes added



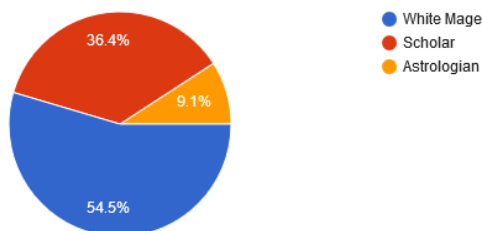
later in a world expansion. There are not as many Astrologians since it takes longer to become one. Each responded a little different to how stressful healing is. The full range was answered from no, sometimes, and yes, very. As White Relanah puts it, it depends on the person and experience. “For beginners in healing in MMOs definitely yes. Players need to get used to the

relations of incoming damages on tank / party / possible outgoing healing. Once that feeling is established it gets less stressful.” Vilty Bellwether agrees with that saying it depends on the content you are doing, and how familiar you are with the tools you have at your disposal. Everyone's going to be making mistakes and its expected. Everyone interviewed are all experienced healers so most probably do not notice the stress anymore or it is nowhere near the level they had when they were learning.

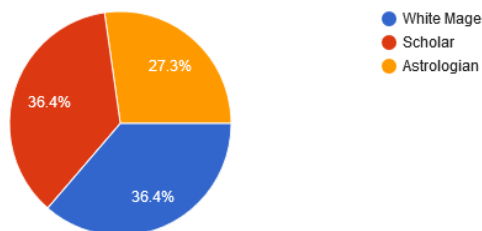
After the interview questions, I asked the healers some simple questions to get a breakdown of how they play.

Favorite Healing Job

11 responses



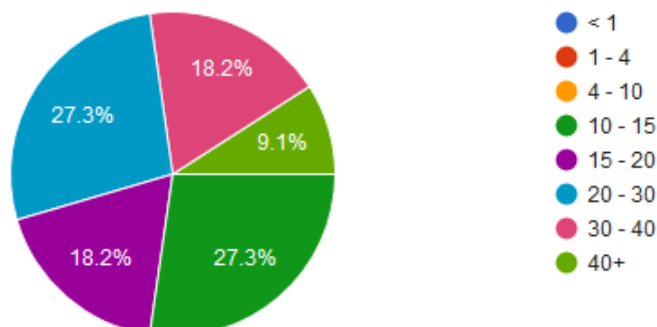
Job (Might be different from favorite)



Interestingly, not all play their favorite class. It is actually the opposite of what I was expecting. The majority have their favorite as White Mage and the least favorite as Astrologian yet their main healing classes are well distributed with Astrologian being slightly less.

Hours you play a week?

11 responses



Most of the healers that responded spend 10 to 30 hours a week in Final Fantasy 14. Practice makes perfect, and some spend as much time on healing as they would a part time job. A few spend more time a week than they would a real job! This time and experience put into a virtual world is not time spent alone but with other people in a shared space, doing something enjoyable. This online socialization is healthy for people, especially as we spend more time online and having less face to face encounters.

Anthropology in virtual worlds will become a larger field in the future as we spend more time online. The study of them is still a new subfield but their importance will grow. Not only the people outside of the virtual spaces but the virtual world itself will be important on what behaviors the inhabits perform. “Anthropological engagement with virtual worlds promises interesting insights into human society and the growing number of innovative virtual worlds supports this outlook” (Kerschbaumer 108). There have been a few ethnographies on different virtual worlds but now it is time to look at the different roles people perform in the world such as healing.

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