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**MMORPGs, Transnationalism and Alternative Migration:
An Online Micro-Ethnography**

By

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Dedication Page

To Julia

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MMORPGs, Transnationalism and Alternative Migration: An Online Micro-Ethnography

Hussein Kobeissy

ABSTRACT

Alternative migration, such as migration for love and kinship, is an understudied pattern of migration that has recently gained some attention within the literature. In parallel, the interplay between ICT and transnationalism seems to be a pivotal factor for the formation of virtual communities and online ties. Through deploying an online micro-ethnography and a/synchronous text interviews within an ICT medium, this thesis has explored the potential of alternative migration processes as well as their hindrances within an MMORPG. To scrutinize the role of the MMORPG as an inaugural site for migration, this thesis has investigated the formation, cessation and evolution of online ties within the game into something meaningful enough to warrant physical mobility. The thesis has found that transient virtual migrations and/or visits are key components for the subsequent success of long-term patterns of migration. In addition, it has found that the hindrances faced by alternative migrants may assume an intersectional design, which may further exacerbate the potential for migration.

Keywords: Migration, MMORPG, ICT, Transnationalism, Visits, Hindrances.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| Chapter | Page |
|---|-----------|
| I- Introduction | 1 |
| 1.1 Rationale | 1 |
| 1.2 Thesis Contribution | 3 |
| 1.3 Transnationalism Within the Scope of this Thesis | 4 |
| 1.4 Encountered Limitations | 5 |
| 1.5 Thesis Configuration | 7 |
| II- Literature Review | 8 |
| 2.1 Overview | 8 |
| 2.2 ICT, Transnationalism and Virtual Communities | 9 |
| 2.3 Online Networking and Migration | 11 |
| 2.4 Alternative Migration Patterns | 13 |
| 2.5 COVID-19 and the Virtual Transition | 15 |
| 2.6 Reiterating the Gaps | 17 |
| III- Methodology | 20 |
| 3.1 Study Design and Research Methods | 20 |
| 3.2 Sampling and Data Collection | 21 |
| 3.3 Data Analysis | 23 |
| 3.4 Ethical Considerations | 23 |
| 3.5 Methodological Constraints | 25 |
| IV- MMORPG Online Ties: Formation, Cessation and Evolution | 27 |
| 4.1 The Formation of MMORPG Online Ties | 27 |
| 4.2 The Cessation of MMORPG Online Ties | 33 |
| 4.3 The Evolution of MMORPG Online Ties | 41 |
| V- MMORPG Alternative Migrants' Hindrances | 49 |
| 5.1 Immobility and the Selectivity of Migration | 49 |
| 5.2 The COVID-19 Pandemic | 50 |
| 5.3 Issues of Trust, Security and Safety | 51 |
| 5.4 Gendered Concerns | 53 |
| 5.5 Cultural and Familial Barriers | 55 |
| 5.6 Policies of the Country of Destination | 57 |
| 5.7 Alternative Migrants' Final Expectations | 59 |
| VI- Discussion | 61 |
| 6.1 MMORPGs, Alternative Migration and the Literature | 61 |
| 6.2 The Social Reality of MMORPG Alternative Migration | 65 |

| | |
|---|--------------|
| VII- Conclusion | 72 |
| 7.1 Recommendations for Future Research | 72 |
| 7.2 Concluding Remarks | 73 |
| | |
| Bibliography | 75-79 |

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MMORPG: Massive multiplayer online role-playing game.

ICT: Information and communications technology.

Chapter One

Introduction

Ever since the first break of dawn, games have been at the heart of entertainment. Driven by the remnants of antiquity, contemporary games have expanded their terrain to include the virtual realm. While retaining a sense of challenging entertainment, ludology – or the study of games – has shown that online games have also been shown to alleviate psychosocial difficulties within individuals as well as strengthen existent bonds (Kowert et al., 2014). Among the many of the pairings that one could analyze, it is interesting to observe whether the social interactions within contemporary online games can generate any migratory patterns. As such, being able to integrate a passion of leisure with graduate migration studies and scrutinizing it using the theoretical lens of the latter becomes both a worthy scholarly goal and a blessing.

1.1 Rationale

As an avid and contemporary gamer, I often find myself immersed in a world that not only allows me to assume control of a curated realm, but also permits others to socially partake in the process – both physically and virtually. Amidst a globalizing world, technological advancements have inaugurated and augmented the aforementioned social interactions. Complementary to that, migration networks and

transnational channels, for the past few decades, have also revolutionized patterns at the behest of technological demands (Castles et al., 2014). This combination has essentially led to the rise of virtual communities and networks whose existence is not only facilitated by advancements in information and communications technology (ICT), but also reproduced and altered by the fluctuations in the social ties that members may exhibit (Vertovec, 2003).

Subsequent narrowing has yielded an emphasis on online gaming communities within massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) as potential sites for transnational as well as national online ties of kinship or love. In addition, there seems to be the possibility that these ties could potentially induce the physical mobility of people, particularly those who have not previously sought to be migrants. As such, through online micro-ethnographic research, this study employs an online community within an MMORPG as a case study to not only demonstrate the formation and cessation of online ties, but also their potential evolution into something meaningful enough to warrant migration. Furthermore, the study has sought to identify the external and/or internal hindrances that prospective and successful alternative migrants have faced amidst their migration decision-making. To analyze these phenomena, I have created the following key research questions:

- 1) When do online ties – whether transnational in nature or not – of kinship or love within MMORPGs lead to physical patterns of migration?
- 2) Are individuals within MMORPGs prone to any hindrances pertaining to their prospective or successful physical patterns of migration?

The first question directly addresses the topic of alternative and understudied patterns of migration that are often overshadowed by more prominent patterns such as labor migration (Mai & King, 2009). Furthermore, it explores the potentials of virtual and physical mobility patterns within an online medium that exemplifies the interplay between transnationalism and ICT (Yoon, K., 2016). The second question tackles the factors leading to delayed mobility or even immobility that prospective migrants in an MMORPG may face. Both questions have been generated as a direct reflection of evaluating the strengths and gaps of the pertinent literature.

Through exploring these questions in further depth, this research contends that MMORPGs may serve as transnational sites that exhibit the potential for migration patterns amid the virtual and social interactions between their players. Because there is no universal definition or scale for the concept of transnationalism, one should consider its dimensions pragmatically and inductively (Tedeschi et al., 2020). Thus, in this sense, both migrants and non-migrants can form transnational bonds online, which makes it interesting to observe if these bonds lead to migration, remain static, or cease to be. Furthermore, this research seeks to contend that the COVID-19 pandemic has proven detrimental for MMORPG induced alternative migration, in addition to already prevalent hindrances such as the economic capability to migrate.

1.2 Thesis Contribution

This topic can be deemed rather novel and innovative, which invariably contributes to the significance of the field. Thus, the main objective behind this research is to

identify, describe, and analyze understudied patterns of migration that have not yet received major scholarly attention within the literature. Given the rising interplay between ICT and transnationalism (Tedeschi et al., 2020), the temporal relevance of this study can be crucial for observing induced migration patterns and processes, especially ones pertinent to the formation of online identities and communities.

Moreover, the study's interlinked research questions have generated productive findings that contribute to the scholarship through filling the gaps within the literature. Overall, both research questions have provided novel insights into the complexities underlying the salience of human mobility (Castles et al., 2014) at the micro- and meso-levels such as migration for love and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, trust, safety, gender, the selectivity of migration among many others.

1.3 Transnationalism Within the Scope of this Thesis

Within the context of this thesis, it is important to define the term *transnationalism* as the concept is a key component of the cross-border and social interactions between players within the MMORPG. It is also a testament of their ability to form and maintain transnational ties. While there is no universal definition for transnationalism (Tedeschi et al., 2020), many definitions have been attributed to the term across the disciplines. For the sake of brevity, this thesis shall align itself with the definition that considers transnationalism as a set of cross-border activities and social processes as follows:

‘Transnationalism’ broadly refers to the multiple ties or interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states... these system of ties, interactions, exchange and mobility function intensively and in real time while being spread throughout the world. New technologies, especially involving telecommunications, serve to connect such networks with increasing speed and efficiency (Vertovec, 1999: 447)

Through utilizing this definition as a framework, this thesis further considers the term as relevant to the online cross-border interactions of migrants, possible migrants as well as non-migrants and the formation of online communities within the virtual space. By doing so, it allows for the deliberation and probable exoneration of the term from spatiotemporal restraints pertaining to the rise of networks (Vertovec, 2003).

Furthermore, Vertovec (2003) stresses that social ties are constantly altered and reconfigured within a given network. Therefore, it is safe to consider that while transnational ties may prove quite intense at times, transnationalism may nevertheless assume a transient nature in the long run (Jones, 2020; Vertovec, 2003).

1.4 Encountered Limitations

1.4.1 Online Nature

This research focuses on an online medium and the online presence of the respective community within it. Thus, the main limitation underlying it is its sole focus on the

online personas of individuals, which could significantly differ from their offline ones (Bryman, 2015; Watkins, 2009). Furthermore, besides overlooking the offline lives that the participants may be engaging in, this research completely excludes people who lack the infrastructure – such as devices and the internet – needed to access the MMORPG.

Another limitation is the need to conduct virtual and online a/synchronous text interviews. Interviews of the sort are known to decrease rapport between interviewer and interviewee due to the elimination of body language and/or feedback (Bryman, 2015).

1.4.2 Graduate Studies Time Constraints

Given the time constraints associated with graduate studies and graduation, the research has been designed as a condensed micro-ethnography rather than a fully-fledged one. This entails scarcer time spent during the data collection phase and the ensuing possibility of missed opportunities.

1.4.3 Issues of Infrastructure

This limitation has arisen due to the multifaceted and intersecting crises that Lebanon is currently facing. In essence, electrical and internet outages have indeed proven to be quite onerous as far as the research process is concerned. These issues of infrastructure have also substantially reduced the time allocated for data collection by reducing the ability to maintain an online presence.

1.5 Thesis Configuration

Following the introductory chapter, Chapter Two: Literature Review, will address and evaluate the major strengths and gaps within the relevant sets of scholarship. Chapter Three focuses on methodology, laying out the study design and providing a detailed overview of each phase of the research process. Chapters Four and Five introduce as well as elucidate the findings of the research through exploring alternative migration within an MMORPG and its hindrances. Chapter Six: Discussion provides a deep analysis of the findings by interrelating them to the existent literature as well as generating hypotheses aimed at addressing the research questions. Finally, Chapter Seven: Conclusion reiterates the significance of the study by summing up its key ideas and directing future research within the field.

Now that an overview of the thesis and its components has been discussed, the next chapter will deal with exploring the pertinent literature and its gaps. As will be shown shortly, the literature on the subject matter is rather scarce but significant enough to warrant exploring.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Overview

Few direct migration patterns have been attributed to the online relations that are invoked within massive multiplayer online role-playing games, MMORPGs. As a result, the literature provides few direct insights that serve my research interests and satisfy my main research question. These insights are exemplified through the literature's theme pertaining to the interplay between ICT, transnationalism and virtual communities (Castells, 2000; Chen, 2013; Ehrkamp, 2020; Jones, 2020; Kavoura et al., 2016; Portes, 2003; Recchi & Favell, 2019; Tedeschi et al., 2020; Waldinger, 2013). Another theme is that of online networking and migration (Boyd & Nowak, 2012; Dekker et al., 2016; Isabella, 2007; RapidVisa, 2019; Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013; Watkins, 2009; Yoon, T. & Cheon, 2014). Furthermore, alternative patterns of migration (Mai & King, 2009; Miller et al., 2016; Walsh, 2009) and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic (Allan et al., 2020; Coulson et al., 2020; Gallucci et al., 2020; Kriz, 2020) are important themes worth exploring. Holistically, these themes contribute to the emergence of a pattern pertaining to online ties and migratory patterns within MMORPGs. The pattern has the potential to yield significant data upon further scrutinization and field research, which this MA thesis seeks to fulfill.

2.2 ICT, Transnationalism and Virtual Communities

While the interplay between ICT and transnationalism is a phenomenon that has bloomed rather recently (Tedeschi et al., 2020), its frameworks and speculative theorization may be traced back to the late 1990s and early 2000s. Manuel Castells's *The Rise of the Network Society* presents a pioneering archive of the early research pertaining to the role of the internet as a vehicle for the rise of virtual communities and cultural expressions. Furthermore, the communications system underlying them is linked to the spatiotemporal transformation of the online medium into a space of flows and temporal convergence of timelines (Castells, 2000).

These virtual communities are formed of a collective of people who are linked together based on “shared multidimensional interests” and support (Castells, 2000). Castell (2000) also considers the interactions between people within the virtual and the real worlds as not only inseparable, but also crucial for the facilitation of social connections and experiences between individuals that may reach a point of meeting one another at the local level (Castells, 2000). Nevertheless, Castell (2000) presents correct speculations at the time of writing in which he links the evolution as well as further accessibility of the internet – due to globalization – to the further development of virtual communities and the ensuing physical encounters that extend to the national and/or international levels.

About two decades have passed since this inaugural research and the more recent studies within the literature on the subject matter can be deemed barely adequate at best. This is due to the fact that while a plethoric amount of attention has been paid

to ICT, ICT influence on mobility and immobility within networks has nevertheless remained quite unexplored (Ehrkamp, 2020; Tedeschi et al., 2020). My research seeks to directly fill this gap by investigating these undermined aspects of ICT and subsequently unraveling novel nuances pertaining to mobility and immobility.

Amongst the research that does explore the interplay between ICT and transnationalism, telecommunications are considered inherently transnational due to their ability to connect people across vast spaces (Waldinger, 2013). As such, as iterated by Tedeschi et al. (2020): “telecommunications and transnationalism mutually reinforce each other through various products, practices and imaginations.” This set of literature showcases that despite the ubiquitous usage of the internet nowadays, certain digital stratifications that are based on socioeconomic status, gender and geography persist (Chen, 2013). Consequently, the wealthy, young and multilingual are more apt to successfully lead a transnational digital lifestyle than their counterparts without such attributes (Recchi & Favell, 2019). Furthermore, great attention has been paid to the individual’s overlapping imagination within online social networks to maintain and reproduce transnational customs (Kavoura et al., 2016).

Most important to my research is the work of some scholars regarding the sustainable association between virtual migration and physical migration (Portes, 2003) and worth highlighting at this point. Accordingly, scholars note that the consumption of certain media may allow for the virtual migration and exploration of spaces prior to actual physical migration (Tedeschi et al., 2020). In essence, Recchi

and Favell (2019) contend that while intense virtual connections may be sufficient for some, their limitations often induce physical migration patterns that are facilitated by preconceived notions at the behest of preceding virtual migrations. This clearly demonstrates the often fluctuating and non-linear nature of transnational ties where they may be quite intense at some times, but very much transient at other times (Jones, 2020).

2.3 Online Networking and Migration

While scholarly research has tended to overlook MMORPGs as sites for potential migration, it has nevertheless focused on the compelling roles of the internet (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013) and social media (Dekker et al., 2016) as information and communications technology (ICT) mediums that may encourage human mobility through online social interactions and transnational networking. Within the literature, social networks are considered links that transcend spatiotemporal constraints that subsequently not only coincide with and reinforce the definition of a cross-border community, but also facilitate migration decisions (Boyd & Nowak, 2012). From what has also been postulated, it is worthy to note that a recent data set accumulated by RapidVisa on fiancé visas reveals that 2.3% people of the studied sample between 1988 and 2018 met over online multiplayer games (RapidVisa, 2019). While this report partially considers online multiplayer games as potential sites for relationships and migration, a more nuanced and focused study on the subject matter is needed. For instance, exploring the reasons as to why and how these relationships start as

well as evolve into something meaningful enough to warrant migration is beyond the scope of this report.

A 2007 ethnographic study of online role-playing games has observed the online and offline circular influences that are generated within these games (Isabella, 2007). The author takes notice of the expansive and boundless nature of the virtual world as well the offline implications that the players may be either exhibiting or withholding.

According to the author, these implications depend on the social backgrounds of each player (Isabella, 2007). Isabella (2007) emphasizes the need for ethnographic analysis to oversee the strong relationships that people may form in the online medium. The author iterates that these ties of kinship and love have indeed led to physical meetings in the form of gaming conferences and even marriage (Isabella, 2007). However, Isabella's work merely scratches the surface pertaining to these nuances and only mentions their existence rather than exploring them in further detail. Consequently, my research seeks to follow in her footsteps and untangle these physical migratory patterns that are induced within MMORPGs in much greater depth.

Moreover, another study on multiplayer games has considered multiplayer games as a breeding ground for a multicultural and "hybrid" transnational exchange that socially connects gamers across the boundaries of narratology and ludology (Yoon & Cheon, 2014). This is preceded by research from 2009 that stresses that gamers within MMORPGs not only partake in the action socially by maintaining strong, weak or temporary ties, but also relate to and creatively influence the dynamics of

the virtual world they ‘inhabit’ such as avatar customization, fluid gender selection, virtual persona capabilities and open-ended nature/endgame (Watkins, 2009). In his research, Watkins (2009) also emphasizes the value of trust in building solid virtual relationships and successful game objective completion. Nevertheless, the previous two studies do not consider the potential for migration within multiplayer games and halt at the social and cultural interactions between gamers as their extremities.

Now that the intersection between online networking and migration has been explored, the next section shall deal with accentuating the nuances underlying alternative migratory patterns, which are a sheer reality within the online medium as well.

2.4 Alternative Migration Patterns

Another set of literature that directly relates to my thesis topics focuses purely on alternative and understudied patterns of migration such as migration for love, emotion, kinship, and sexuality (Mai & King, 2009). Within this literature, notions such as a migration studies ‘*sexual turn*’ and ‘*emotional turn*’ are prevalent amidst the growing prominence of the malleability of *queer theory* (Mai & King, 2009) This body of literature is crucial for the evolution of the field as it attempts to shift the focus from the traditional contingencies of labor and/or displacement toward a more nuanced and expanded understanding of the complexities underlying human mobility. Among the same preceding journal issue, a subsequent article tackles the capability of transnationalism to perpetuate ties of love and kinship among British

couples, families and friends in and across Dubai (Walsh, 2009). While Walsh (2009) purposely strays away from the romanticization of transnationalism, she succinctly responds to a severely neglected aspect of human mobility in her research by shedding light on the interplay between space and the socio-cultural relations that forge as well as perpetuate intimacy among individuals. My research seeks to capitalize on Walsh's insights, which have paved the way for exploring transnational ties of love and kinship as precursors for subsequent human mobility – within an MMORPG in the case of this thesis.

Further review has revealed the coalescing and convergent nature of online and offline relationships that are “developed and sustained through integrated...interaction” (Miller et al., 2016: 100) This aforementioned 2016 study also elucidates that utilizing online interactions leads to cultural or identity negotiation and given adequate ‘*scalable sociality*,’ online relationships over social media may become warmer than their offline counterparts (Miller et al., 2016).

While this set of literature does not consider online social games at all, linking it to the previous sets of literature raises a pivotal pattern, albeit to an imperfect extent. By filling this gap, my research would provide nuanced and much needed insights that may aid in perfecting this emergent pattern pertaining to online social games.

Irrespective of the identified gaps within the literature, it is safe to assume that the dimensions and theoretical grounds present in these studies do indeed aid in guiding the scope of my chosen topic. For instance, Vilhelmson et al. (2013) find that a balance between life opportunities and stability are key factors for migration that are

only enhanced by the internet and social media. If we were to classify online social games as a subcategory that falls under social media, then this definition becomes quite encompassing. Furthermore, Dekker et al. (2016) note non-migrants as prospective migrants within the transnational spheres of online media and migration networks. Lastly, Yoon and Cheon (2014: 472) differentiate between three different types of gamers: '*gamer as producer*,' '*gamer as subject*' and '*gamer as mediator*,' which tend to overlap and coexist. The latter is of interest to my research given its definition as an individual who "meets people and builds [online and offline] relationships through [usually distant] game worlds."

2.5 COVID-19 and the Virtual Transition

The final set of examined literature is the one pertaining to the transition from the real world into the virtual one amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic. As demonstrated by the literature, the pandemic has indeed restructured sexualities by leaving a trail of uncertainty and precarity in its wake (Allan et al., 2020). The authors argue that novel forms of corporeal intimacies are also being formed with strangers through distance. The following quote quite succinctly puts things perspective: "In the process of creating more distance between bodies, we are simultaneously, in some instances, becoming closer" (Allan et al., 2020: 6). This is especially telling for the virtual transition and manifestation of intimacy and sexuality online. Given that MMORPGs may serve as sites for virtual sexual behavior and intimacy, it is crucial to take notice of these nuances while examining the implications of the pandemic on MMORPG induced migration patterns.

A study from 2020 examines the physical and virtual world – in which the latter can be subcategorized into *gaming* or *non-gaming* worlds – positioning of gamers within multiplayer games by considering measures such as “life satisfaction,” “identity” and “attachment” (Coulson et al., 2020). According to this study’s findings, the migration of gamers between both worlds fluctuates and is dependent on ‘*place attachment*,’ ‘*social bonding*’ and ‘*place affect* (i.e., feelings of belonging and sense),’ where the former two measures favor the real world and the latter one favors the virtual world. Thus, it becomes interesting to observe if *social migration* between real and virtual worlds is sufficient for some gamers as means for attachment or if physical mobility in itself is warranted for the fulfillment of others, which goes beyond the scope of this study.

While the Coulson et al. (2020) study just discussed also does not consider the implications of the ongoing pandemic, it does provide valuable insights.

Nevertheless, further research compliments this study by incorporating the impacts of the pandemic on both the real and virtual worlds. In a paper to scrutinize gaming – as a tool for distant learning – in the reality of the ongoing pandemic, Willy Kriz explores the dimensions in which people have utilized both analogous and digital games as means to consume time, socialize, and de-stress through *escapism* (Kriz, 2020). He further notes that in an ironic turn of events, the WHO has changed its perspective on online gaming as an addictive and harmful medium to consider it beneficial during these unprecedented times of lockdowns and restrictions. This has been apparently bolstered by online gaming platforms that have tried to raise

awareness themselves via a shared initiative and the hashtag, *#PlayApartTogether* (Kriz, 2020).

A final study that has been explored deals with the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. This study stresses that lockdown hit regions have exclusively experienced surges in the transition from the real world to the virtual one as a result of myriad of factors, such as loneliness and boredom (Gallucci et al., 2020).

Furthermore, this study emphasizes that ICT and virtual communication provide means for '*social support*' against the psychological implications of the social constraint of pandemic-induced lockdown, which in turn maintains existing offline relationships online or generates new online ones altogether. The study quite succinctly answers the concern that the pandemic has indeed generated an influx of more prolonged and extensive ICT usage. It has also neatly considered participants who have engaged in multiplayer online video games and found that the average of frequency usage during lockdown has increased considerably (Gallucci et al., 2020). Nevertheless, because this study partially considers rather than solely focuses on online multiplayer game usage, further contributions toward the literature are needed.

2.6 Reiterating the Gaps

In sum, the most noteworthy gap within the literature is the little focus that scholars have attributed to online social games and their potential for inducing patterns of migration, especially ones of the alternative nature such as love and kinship.

Consequently, my research seeks to directly tackle this gap by exploring the aforementioned notion within an MMORPG.

Another gap within the literature lies within the interplay between ICT, transnationalism and virtual communities. The impact of this literature is weakened by the limited exploration of the ICT aspects of mobility/immobility and virtual migration/physical migration. My research seeks to utilize an online medium to explore alternative drivers to mobility and seeks to explore the hindrances that have otherwise led to immobility.

The final gap within the literature is that while scholars clearly demonstrate that an influx of people into the virtual world – in response to the COVID-19 pandemic – can be seen, they nevertheless have tended to avoid a premature speculation of whether this influx would ultimately promote or inhibit virtual migration and/or physical migration. I seek to explore this gap through the lens of alternative migration patterns within an MMORPG. It is worth noting that the literature also tends to focus on a heteronormative and mainly binary representation of gender, which undermines the gender field's vast spectrum. My thesis's research seeks to hopefully address these issues through ethnographic investigation.

By linking these holistic sets of interwoven but not farfetched sets of literature, a pattern that focuses and guides my research has emerged. My research aims to better highlight this emergent pattern. While the focus on the potential of online multiplayer and social games as sites that could induce migration patterns is sparse, the literature nevertheless provides important support for this study's research goals.

Finally, there is a consensus and a convergence among the relevant scholars pertaining to the sheer reality, robustness, and plausibility of online socialization at the behest of advancements in ICT. As such, despite its gaps, the investigated literature is a reliable and valid framework that does a superb job at guiding this research given the eclectic methodological variety that its scholars have utilized.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter will elucidate the study design, data collection, data analysis and methodological constraints through exploring each phase in its respective section.

3.1 Study Design and Research Methods

This research is designed as an online micro-ethnographic case study of an online community within an MMORPG. In addition, due to the observation of the alterations in the behaviors of the observed participants over time, the study has attempted to assume a longitudinal design to showcase both the evolution and devolution of online ties within an MMORPG. Consequently, the study's epistemological orientation aligns with interpretivism, while its ontological orientation aligns with constructionism (Bryman, 2015). The study's blended design aids in overcoming separate limitations by spatiotemporally bounding the micro-ethnographic case study and by allowing the exploration of causal links to generate significant findings (Fusch et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the study demonstrates triangulation through the additional use of interviews to deepen ethnographic data collection where applicable. Given that little to no research has been done on this subject, the qualitative design of this study thus

provides a sheer edge to inductively generate pertinent and novel insights (Bryman, 2015).

The micro-ethnography's duration has spanned over two months and encompasses a total of twelve observed participants. Three of these participants have been successfully interviewed in which structured and semi-structured questions have been utilized. Other participants have been observed from afar, casually interacted with or even befriended through several consequential conversations. As such, this online micro-ethnography has employed various forms of ethnographic investigative methods that oscillate between a semi-overt approach and an overt one to collect genuine field data. According to Bryman (2015), this method is referred to as the *study of online communities, with some participation plus online or offline interviews*. This method basically entails the observation of discussions and behaviors of online communities in addition to a mediated intervention – whether overt or covert in nature – by the researcher as deemed apt to mitigate biases and the *observer's effect* (Bryman, 2015). Consequently, this online game is quite suitable for online ethnographic research in hopes of better understanding the intricacies underlying migration in general and alternative migratory patterns more specifically.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Sampling within this research has included theoretical sampling and snowball sampling (Bryman, 2015). Hence, participants have been selected based on their apparent fulfillment of the research questions, the recommendations of reliable

informants and even instances of fortunate happenstance while exploring the online community. Sources of data have included public channels within the game such as chatrooms, forums, statuses, relationship feature and specific gaming activities as well as private channels such as private messages and third-party applications. Being one of its players, and thereby naturally immersed within its settings, I can safely state that the studied game provides its users with a vast array of social capabilities. Not only does it provide them with public and private spheres for personal and group communication, but it also allows them to engage in forum discussions and a relationship feature. The latter feature has been pivotal for determining potential individuals who have undergone – or are at least willing to undergo migration. Furthermore, acquaintances have indeed allowed for the process to become much smoother by aiding in covering as much ground as possible within the virtual space.

As mentioned previously, iterative participant observation and notetaking methods have been used to collect data from the aforementioned sources over the span of two months. Upon finding the most suitable candidates for interviewing, three online synchronous and/or asynchronous text interviews have been employed where semi-structured and unstructured research questions have been administered. In hopes of attaining further theoretical saturation, these interviews have proven pivotal to confirm or modify the ethnographic observations. Lastly, it is worth mentioning that the triangulation achieved through using multiple data collection techniques allows for the reduction of biases, especially those of the interpretative nature (Fusch et al., 2017).

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis encompasses a combination of thematic analysis and ethnographic content analysis that are highly rooted in grounded theory to generate hypotheses. Coding has included classifying phone screenshots into albums of relevant themes as well as comparing the interview questions of different participants side by side. Due to the abductive and iterative nature of the research, data analysis entails the researcher's analysis of the contextual situation as well as the participants' own views in the grand scheme of things (Bryman, 2015). Given that theoretical sampling and constant comparison further facilitate the research process, hypotheses that have been generated through ethnographic field work have been returned to for confirmation or modification once the interviews have been administered. Furthermore, since the utilized interviews are in text format, their transcription and the coding processes required to identify pertinent themes have made the holistic process quite succinct.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Given the need to pinpoint genuine observations and feedback while conducting the fieldwork, I have opted for a semi-overt approach, which entails initial observation that is later followed by the casual divulgence of my role as a researcher through conversation. In essence, this nullifies the need for a detailed informed consent in the online medium, especially among participants of the passerby nature. While the utilized semi-overt approach may seem vague, it allows for ethical reconsideration

since most data has been collected from public and accessible channels. Nonetheless, upon finding the most suitable research candidates, I have switched to a fully overt approach and asked these individuals to conduct interviews that are accompanied with a formal informed consent form.

Despite these measures, there have been two instances with a few participants that may have crossed ethical boundaries. The first instance includes disclosing my role as a researcher to only the gatekeeper of an observed establishment but not the participants in hopes of avoiding bias and collecting genuine data. The second instance includes randomly stumbling upon and conversing with a participant who fit all research criteria but whose psychological state would not warrant disclosing my role as a researcher. This participant is still coping with and bemoaning the loss of the transnational ties he once shared with his beloved. While slightly controversial, these measures have been deemed necessary to safeguard both the participants' overall wellbeing as well as the integrity of the collected data.

Finally, for maximum protective measures, pseudonyms have been utilized within this thesis to refer to all participants and the name of the game will not be disclosed within any section of the thesis. Furthermore, all participants have been verified to be over the age of eighteen and the data linked to them will be ultimately stored on an encrypted device with no internet access. Hopefully, these measures aim to uphold the wellbeing, privacy and confidentiality of the observed individuals pertaining to this research (Bryman, 2015).

3.5 Methodological Constraints

3.5.1 Constraints in Study Design

The longitudinal approach can be deemed rather imperfect due to extremely tight research time. By the time of the conclusion of the research process, one participant has been engaging in recurring migration patterns before opting to settle down with her respective partner. Consequently, I have not been able to neither follow up with this participant nor observe the new nuances that her ongoing engagements might have generated. This is obviously an unfortunate missed opportunity.

Besides that, the micro-ethnographic case study design is limited in the sense of being implicitly embedded, having fewer participants and making the process of transferability quite arduous for future research (Fusch et al., 2017). Furthermore, despite the ‘multi-method’ and ‘multi-modal’ nature of online ethnographies, communities within them can be difficult to trace and scrutinize due to the diffused nature of online ties (Hooley et al., 2012).

3.5.2 Constraints During the Research Process

Several constraints have been encountered during the research process. For instance, two people have dropped out of the interviews while two others have rejected to partake in them. The latter are composed of non-heteronormative couples whose insights would have been extremely valuable for the gendered dimensions of this study. Nevertheless, these individuals have allowed ethnographic observations and conversations to be used within the thesis.

To add insult to injury, I have also found myself at the crossroads of a feud between two gatekeepers who govern over pivotal establishments that I hoped to access. This mishap has ultimately prevented me from joining a popular LGBTQI+ establishment within the game, which also subsequently limits the gendered spectrum of this research.

Chapter Four

MMORPG Online Ties: Formation, Cessation and Evolution

4.1 The Formation of MMORPG Online Ties

4.1.1 A Common Passion

Driven by a common passion for online gaming in particular, it becomes quite apparent that individuals within MMORPGs are capable of forming online social ties of camaraderie, kinship and even love. The MMORPG that this ethnographic research has overseen possesses a set of inherent social capabilities that further serve in facilitating and enhancing such interactions between its players across three spheres.

For starters, within the game's public sphere, players are enticed to interact with one another at several levels that encompass public forums, wall to wall conversations, gifts, profile statuses, relationship union, a tutor/pupil interface in addition to discussion channels pertaining to both gaming and non-gaming expertise. As such, it becomes inevitable for almost every player to interact with other players and form some sort of connection with them. For the sake of exploring research, two pivotal features seem to stand out within the public sphere: the tutor/pupil feature and the relationship feature.

A pupil hires his or her tutor – an individual who is often subordinate to the pupil in terms of game-specific jargon and knowledge – through in-game currency and usually guides him or her across all aspects of the game that warrant attention. Many pupils help their tutors ‘grow’ and protect them from other players while simultaneously forming some form of bond with them. Thus, a pupil within this game may as well serve as a player’s first wave of online social bonding, especially if the former tends to be interactive with and protective of the latter.

As for the game’s relationship feature, a player is given the opportunity to choose another player as his or her in-game partner, which is then publicly displayed to others on each of their respective profiles. Evidently, an initial social bonding process precedes engaging in the relationship feature through meetings via game-specific establishments, casual conversations and subsequent deeper interactions. Many players then utilize the relationship feature to publicly display their infatuations and/or close affiliations with other players. It is then expected for individuals engaging in the in-game relationships to have already formed formidable bonds that warrant such a union. Hence, this feature has proven quite valuable for my research goals, especially when it comes to locating prospective and successful alternative migrants within the game.

Within the game’s private sphere, players are given the ability to utilize private messages and engage with others on a personal one-on-one level or at a group level that includes trusted confidants. While the public sphere merely scratches the surface of player interaction within the game, the private sphere harbors the utmost of

intimate and genuine interactions. Thus, it is a medium where sincere friends, pupils, tutors, kin and lovers converge for meaningful exchanges. Simultaneously, for this very reason, it is a rather inaccessible medium to outsiders and requires a substantial amount of trust to uphold. Across the span of my research, I have managed to access the private spheres of a few participants and have engaged them with through conversations and/or interviews related to online ties and alternative migration. The pertinent insights will be explored within the next subsection and onward.

The final sphere of interaction within the game would be the semi-public one. This sphere entails crucial establishments within the game called clubs. Clubs are managed by several gatekeepers who collectively decide on whether the club is publicly accessible or privately accessible to outsiders. A situational blend that mixes both public access and private access criteria – depending on the growth level of the club applicant and his or her connections – also exists. Within a given club, a collection of up to a hundred individuals join forces to take on gaming activities in hopes of attaining rewards such as in-game currencies and avatars. Moreover, clubs are equipped with a semi-public channel in which club members are allowed to converse and arrange announcements. As such, channels of the sort can serve as a breeding ground for collective and mass insights on a specified topic. I have indeed capitalized on these channels to ascertain the inputs of several club members at once.

As anticipated, my research has spanned across the public, private and semi-public spheres within the MMORPG for the very reason that connections may be concurrently formed across all three spheres. After familiarizing the reader with

much needed information to understand the multiple nuances of the game within this subsection, research findings will be explored in further depth within subsequent sections.

4.1.2 The Consistent Buildup of Camaraderie, Trust and Love

Just like their offline counterparts, online relationships require a great deal of commitment to thrive. This commitment entails a consistent and healthy buildup of trust, camaraderie and love within the game as described by the following participant:

Real and virtual are just dimensions containing our various forms of existence. [The club] is a virtual space where people come for sharing, caring, refill, advise, love of gaming, and anything that is healthy. I am lucky to say that I gathered [the] right people under a single roof ... with love toward diversity. Anything [managerial skills] that makes real companies work makes the same virtual teams work.

– Matriarch (2022), the head of a very successful in-game club.

As demonstrated by Matriarch, a thin line governs over the intersections between reality and virtuality. While this research strays away from offline implications, upbringing, culture and aptitude seem to be building blocks that are indeed transferred into the virtual realm. It is very likely that players can perpetuate and/or modify these assets when interacting with other players in addition to possibly forming virtual communities with them. Matriarch's shared insights exemplify the assets of a virtual community, which is clearly brought together by a common passion and often universal acceptance. Through this unification under a "single

roof,” players within an MMORPG begin to strengthen their bonds in which trust, camaraderie and love are allowed to blossom even further. Across time, players may even rise in the ranks by taking on administrative roles within the club that entail management and/or organization. Simultaneously, players may begin to enhance their relationships with other members within their respective clubs while also forming connections with the general player base within the game across the private and public spheres. Through multiple conversations, I have learned that some of these connections have been consistently nurtured for years and seem to only grow stronger as time passes.

Connections that stem between players across multiple clubs may begin to expand into matrixes of cooperation. For instance, some clubs work together to identify and beat a daily gaming objective, which would have otherwise required far more resources for a single club alone. On the other hand, clubs may even very rarely work against each other in acts of rivalry and war. However, while the declaration of war between clubs is a very rare phenomenon, some players have unorthodoxly capitalized on this gaming feature of ill will to demonstrate the antithesis.

This leads us to quite innovative and interesting observations where players have gone the extra mile within the game to showcase their commitment. In particular, these players have organized events labeled as *couple wars* to utilize club wars as an act of prodigious passion and infatuation. These eccentric *couple wars* entail filling up two clubs with players who align themselves with one member of the couple against the other. Afterward, players take joy in attacking one another and wreaking

havoc all in the name of love and in honor of the betrothed lovers. Similar types of wars can be noted for birthday celebrations, anniversaries and events such as battle of the sexes in which a single club is filled up with females while the other is filled up with males. Thus, these eccentric wars holistically demonstrate an extremely high levels of camaraderie and love that pull almost two hundred people together for a single act that defies the intended feature's inaugural design.

Now that the some of the most intimate in-game experiences have been noted, further observations have demonstrated levels of trust that transcend the game and reach third-party applications. Most players tend to expand their connections beyond the game to include other games or third-party social media applications. I have seen this occur firsthand on multiple occasions. In one instance, a player randomly expresses her interest in another game within a club's chat feature. Another player instantly relates to the first and asks to add her on the other game's platform. In other instances, players have connected across social media applications, while some have even divulged trying to bridge the physical distance between them by simultaneously watching streaming services such as Netflix and reacting to them together.

By belonging to multiple atmospheres that resonate diverse cultural and social grounds (Foner, 1997), players validate and magnify their social connections. Thus, revealing their real names, pictures and/or any other form of personal information requires a substantial amount of trust within the online medium. Nevertheless, divulging more information than warranted may put players at a risk of malice and deception. For this purpose, it is common practice for players to impose some form

of discretion within their online interactions. This includes ‘masked online identities’ and ‘webs of lies.’ These findings will be returned to in a subsequent chapter that tackles the internal and external hindrances that potential and successful migrants have faced within the game.

In short, through ethnographic fieldwork, this section has yielded that transparency and consistency are essential for not only forming genuine online ties with MMORPGs, but especially for maintaining them. For the latter purpose, shared gaming passions, activities and achievements seem to aid in strengthening these ties within the game’s terrains or even beyond. Interestingly enough, the reverse of this phenomenon is also true in which some players actually entice their real-world friend/partner to join the game and solidify their relationship virtually as well. This having been said, the next section will present findings regarding the waning and expiration of online ties that are induced within an MMORPG.

4.2 The Cessation of MMORPG Online Ties

The following section will recount the narratives of three observed participants and will also include some observed insights from the individuals who they have respectively cut ties with. The first participant within the first subsection exemplifies the devolution of online transnational ties from the zeniths of infatuation into the nadirs of disdain. The second and third participants within the second subsection demonstrate pivotal cases of prospective MMORPG migrants who have fallen short right at the precipice of migration.

4.2.1 From “Fate Fulfilled” to a “It’s a Culture Clash”: The Death of Online Transnational Ties

Zara, a second-generation migrant in her own right, has proven quite the exemplary participant to observe the cessation of online transnational ties. Over the course of this ethnographic research, Zara has severed ties with multiple individuals who are close to her. While Zara’s traumatic psychologic state can be attributed for the subsequent severance of online ties, her trauma has occurred prior to the initiation of this ethnographic research and will therefore not be explored. As such, only two of the individuals that Zara has cut ties with have been deemed relevant and timely enough for the purpose of this research.

The first individual of interest is Farce whom at the time of observation not only serves as Zara’s in-game relationship, but also as her closest female friend. While the two have been maintaining and trying to salvage a fragile bond for a couple of months, it nevertheless ends in disdain. I have not been able to pinpoint the exact reason for their downfall, but I have been able to witness certain measures taken by Zara to express her alleged frustration. Prior to breaking the relationship between them, Zara has utilized in-game functions such as wall messages, gift exchanges and statuses to publicly demean as well as punish Farce for her supposed lack of devotion. In the long run, Farce has had enough and opted out of the treatment that she has been subjugated to. Afterward, the two rarely exchange and try to maintain a sense of strained formality. This is evident in one of Zara’s public comments:

I find that whilst a broken thing can be fixed, it’ll never be perceived the same by the person who broke it. – Zara (2021)

Shortly after, Zara's next in-game relationship, Godot, arrives at the scene to initially pacify Zara. Upon engaging him for quite some time and then entering in an in-game relationship with him, Zara proceeds to publicly post "fate fulfilled" on his wall.

Unlike Farce, Zara views Godot as a potential suitor and genuine lover. To demonstrate their deep love, Zara and Godot build a club together and deem it their "home," exchange in passionate public wall messages and set matching statuses on their profiles.

But alas, their bliss is short-lived and after a month or so, "fate fulfilled" transforms into "it's a culture clash." To add some background regarding this, Zara is a British-Pakistani while Godot is an Arab. Consequently, she has expressed allegations that her Pakistani heritage has been branded subordinate by either Godot or his family. This has led to their immediate separation, which has left both in melancholy. After the breakup, both Zara and Godot have utilized public displays to recount and solidify their disillusion. Among the most poignant ones are the following:

To think that after all the [things] I've been through in my life, it took love this year to kill me off. It wasn't even the act of falling for someone unobtainable [due to culture clash]... it was going into the real world, turning to spontaneously give them a phone call to chat stuff out, and finding I was deleted. How sad. – Zara (2021)

The moment people come to know love, they run the risk of carrying hate... Yes yes my wall is going to turn into my own little diary. I think I might slowly be losing

[my] mind. You ever go through a phase where you start thinking about all the people in your past life that you miss? But then again, people are different. People will see it how they [want to] see it. Moral of the story? You can't please everyone. Although now that I look at this, I wouldn't class[ify] this as talking to myself since it's here in the open for whoever's eyes. – Godot (2021)

In these quotations, Godot acknowledges their differences but nevertheless denounces Zara's allegedly subjective and one-sided rhetoric in the process. On the other hand, while both partially exhibit symptoms of trauma, Zara does provide pivotal insights on the possibility of transitioning from solely virtual world communication to real world communication. This process has entailed disclosing a significant amount of her personal information to Godot and has fallen just short of realization.

Nevertheless, in a subsequent public message, she collectively denounces her severed ones for their "ill actions" while absolving herself from any and all fault. From an objective observer's perspective, one cannot condone the fact that she may exhibit negative traits as shown in the following:

When someone's hurt me, usually a bit later I got a habit of doing actions to unburden their soul so in the future when they look back at us, they won't feel heavy hearted or disgusted by their own actions. I like to ease peoples['] souls, but I end

up burdening mine. I say this [because] I know that some you [the people who hurt her] relate to this deeply, just know you[’re] doing a good job k. – Zara (2021)

This subsection has found that personality traits mixed with preceding psychological distress are a precursor for instability that leaves no relationship intact – whether virtual in foundation or otherwise. Furthermore, the sheer will of recklessly being disdainful toward another’s culture in such a diverse medium also serves as a breeding ground for the hasty failure of online relationships. Lastly and most importantly, this subsection has found that a form of transition from the virtual to the real world is indeed a plausibility.

4.2.2 Doomed Prospective Migrants

“I found the love of my life on here [this game] and I lost [her] here too.”

– Joe (2022), a former prospective migrant.

This subsection transcends the previous one by recounting the detailed narratives of two observed participants who have both expressed migratory intentions and attempts to undergo them. The first participant, Joe, has demonstrated a desire to physical mobility, while the second participant, Dom, has demonstrated a willingness to migrate in May. However, the severance of ties with their respective beloveds has killed all aspects of physical mobility.

Up until last December, all seemed to be going well between Joe and his beloved, Emerald. Joe even called her “the one” and expressed his wishes to physically meet up with her by traveling from UAE to USA before setting grander plans.

Nevertheless, their mobility plans were immobilized once Joe committed a crime against their passion by impudently role-playing with another girl in the game. Upon discovering his betrayal, Emerald became infuriated and blocked Joe on every form of social media possible. Months passed by and Joe still felt heartbroken over losing her. He had tried everything up his sleeves to show Emerald that he was sincerely remorseful, albeit to no avail.

Given his severe anguish and frustration, Joe proceeded to randomly inform people within his club about his situation by saying the exact quoted words at the start of this subsection. Upon hearing those words and relating them to this research, I instantly took interest in Joe. While everyone in the club had shown Joe a sense of waning sympathy, I proceeded to befriend him and assisted him in the long run. After several meaningful and insightful conversations, Joe told me that his love had grown stronger for Emerald after losing her and asked me to contact Emerald on his behalf. While reluctant at first, I proceed to play the mediator and sent Emerald a very thoughtful message that was written by Joe. She responded with the following message that insinuated that he has indefinitely lost her trust:

Oh, it’s been months since we last talked and I thought he’d forget about me by now. I’m really sorry he put you in the middle of this. I can only say a thank you for the [attempt] but I won’t be reconnecting with him since he hurt me. Again

I'm sorry about this, you don't have to tell me if he answers back or not. I feel bad that you have to play messenger for this but I wish him the best. – Emerald (2022)

While also unsuccessful, my assistance has nevertheless allowed Emerald to finally respond to Joe, which has instilled him with much needed closure to begin moving on. Given that my data collection duration has ended, it is worth mentioning that Joe seems a happier and has begun interacting with potential new lovers who may successfully induce his physical mobility one day.

The second observed participant, Dom, is in fact an acquaintance of mine who I have connected with prior to initiating my research. Shortly after being acquainted in November 2021, I informed Dom of my upcoming graduate studies research plans pertaining to MMORPG online relationships and migration. To my utter surprise, Dom revealed that his relationship with Mag is in fact leading to his migration from India to Slovenia in hopes of being with her. Things were forced to pause at this point due to IRB research restrictions.

However, upon attaining IRB approval to conduct fieldwork a month later, I reached out to Dom and to my utmost dismay, I learned that Mag had broken up with him. This eventually led to several conversations with Dom in which he disclosed that he was still very much in love with her and did not even know the true reason for her withdrawal. Dom stated that toward the end of their relationship, Mag had turned inconsistent and unaffectionate. While supportive initially, Dom ultimately dropped out of being interviewed as a prospective migrant due to severe emotional pain. He

nevertheless does courteously allow for our conversations to be utilized for the purpose of advancing this research. Among the most important highlights from him are the following:

“Sorry I love my gf [girlfriend] only.”

“She’s the Yin to my Yang.”

So like I was sure what I wanted as in I wanted to be with her and I knew everything was going to be alright but she said she is not sure what she wants and doesn’t feel the same way anymore. I was going to meet her in May.... I was going to do online [graduate studies] from anywhere and go to Slovenia.

“I don’t want to drink again. I am already way into it. “

– Dom (2021, 2022), a former prospective migrant.

Dom is clearly on the receiving end of a severe disillusion that has exacerbated some of his reckless habits. He has even utilized Mag’s specialization in chemistry to set a status pertaining to the significance of certain chemical substances and their combinations, which I find too alarming to share within this study. Nevertheless, he too has slowly begun to move on and has entered a new in-game relationship after months.

Overall, this section has found that despite the lack of physical interaction, formidable online transnational ties with lingering effects – such as loose ties after cessation – can indeed be formed. It has also generated insights regarding the roles of

betrayal, inconsistency and detachment as catalysts for the end of online ties. Finally, this section is the first within the thesis to accurately pinpoint the social reality of MMORPG induced migratory patterns that encompass virtual and physical mobility. This social reality is better captured and explored within the next section that employs interviewed alternative migrants to yield significant findings.

4.3 The Evolution of MMORPG Online Ties

This section seeks to explore the evolution of online ties that are induced within an MMORPG through the lens of three alternative migrants. In particular, it seeks to shed light on the role of the observed online game as a potential site for the formation of online ties – whether transnational in nature or otherwise – and the possible onset of migratory patterns. The latter patterns encompass both virtual migration through emotional bonding and spatial exploration as well as physical migration through mutual visits and resettlement plans.

4.3.1 MMORPGs: A Virtual Site for Migration?

Within the discussed literature, Recchi and Favell (2019) claim that despite the intensity that virtual relationships may reach, their limits may still induce people to practice patterns of physical migration. Thus, it becomes interesting to explore these nuances through the insights of three interviewed participants within an MMORPG. Two of the three interviewed participants, Matriarch and Angel, have married the person they met through the online medium, while the third participant, Empress, is ongoingly practicing mutual visits before setting forth grander plans. On the one

hand, Matriarch and Empress demonstrate transnationalism through their online ties and migratory patterns from Armenia to Syria and USA to Canada respectively. On the other hand, Angel has practiced internal migration from California to Texas within the USA to wed his betrothed.

Hence, can an MMORPG serve as virtual site for physical migration? The short answer to this question is a conceivable yes, while the long answer to this question is that it depends on a certain set of criteria that must be met within the virtual relationship prior to physical mobility:

The first criterion regarding the subject matter is meeting someone through an online medium and developing common passions with him or her. The second criterion is the consistent and genuine buildup of love and trust within the game and beyond. The third criterion is the successful identification of the other person through social media presence and/or video messaging to minimize security risks and fraud. The fourth criterion is practicing further virtual migration (Recchi & Favell, 2019) through online media in order to accumulate spatial and cultural knowledge pertaining to the intended destination. The final criterion is the understanding that reaching the point of physical resettlement may be an arduously slow process that should be preceded by prioritizing temporal patience and unilateral/bilateral visits.

All three of the interviewed participants have demonstrated these collective dimensions within their responses. Upon meeting said criteria, Empress agrees that the game can indeed serve as a virtual site for genuine relationships that may lead to physical migration. On the other hand, Angel has demonstrated uncertainty in his

response. Nonetheless, he does indeed benefit and even exceeds these criteria in his responses to patterns of movement. Lastly, Matriarch provides a succinct and much deeper response to this paradigm:

It is little hard to say, as I have seen both successful and failing relationships which were observed being genuine while being observed through virtual platforms. It depends on the perception of the players and it can be a great starting point for linking. As the players or I refer to them as “virtual entities or connections” play/talk closer and evolve their relationship, game space narrows down for self-expression, so the relationship is being upgraded into another virtual media with more capacities enhancing the audio/video presence of virtual connection. That in turn, is not static, yet evolving: *If genuineness is preserved, it will draw out entities from virtual to real settings*, once the consensus and the mutual strive toward the mutual goal is set. *Migration might not be the ultimate outcome, yet mutual visits and potential meetings may happen.* – Matriarch (2022)

As emphasized by Matriarch, genuineness is a key factor for the essential transition from the virtual realm toward the physical realm. It is also preceded by virtual migration across platforms to accumulate trust in addition to cultural and spatial knowledge. Step by step, the next subsection will highlight the potential migratory process within an MMORPG in further detail.

4.3.2 MMORPG Alternative Migration Unraveled:

4.3.2.1 Developing Genuine Game Relationships and Virtual Migration

As emphasized by previous sections within this research, genuineness, commitment and transparency are key factors for the successful development of online relationships from the virtual realm and toward something more corporeal. Within her responses, Matriarch has emphasized that “anything started online shall be enhanced and carried onward into reality” on the premise of constant interaction and authenticity. In essence, the buildup of love and trust becomes inherently synonymous within this process as the relationship grows stronger and more serious. With time, virtual migration, or the transition into more visual virtual media – other than the MMORPG itself – as well as expanding one’s cultural/spatial repertoire pertaining to the intended physical destination (Recchi & Favell, 2019), becomes a sheer possibility. Insights from Empress quite eloquently put this phase into perspective:

I have been able to meet people from all over the world and build great friendships in the process. I never imagined that this game would lead to me finding someone who was able to support me from hundreds of miles away. It allowed me to meet someone who was going through similar real-life situations where we could both relate to one another. Those conversations led us to care deeply for one another. I think it started as wishful thinking to meet... but as time went on and our bond grew stronger, we knew we had to connect and see if what we were building was real.

The buildup [of love and trust] is pivotal to making a decision as big as travelling to meet someone. If you don't have the love (platonic or romantic) and more importantly if you don't have the trust in the person you are meeting, you are risking so much. – Empress (2022), an ongoing alternative migrant.

Thus, an MMORPG may serve as a great focal point for the inauguration of genuine online relationships and their development across several aspects of the virtual realm. This development is only enhanced by the game's social capabilities and the plethora of activities that permit the exploration of shared passions. Upon reaching the virtual migration stage however, pertinent players become able to visually interact and learn about one another in much greater depth. This process has the potential to perpetuate their love and trust across virtual reality and substantially toward reality.

4.3.2.2 Unilateral or Bilateral Visits

This subsection seeks to expand upon the previous one by shedding light on some spatiotemporal nuances underlying physical mobility. Both Matriarch and Angel have practiced visits prior to marrying their respective spouses, whereas Empress is ongoingly in the mutual visits phase. Unbeknownst initially, plans for unilateral or bilateral physical visits have proven quite essential and may even make or break the transition into grander migratory plans:

A decision as big as migration based on virtual reality might be devastating and unwanted, if not tragic, if the real-life particles have not been assessed and experienced beforehand. – Matriarch (2022)

Consequently, prior to more permanent resettlement, these transient visits allow people to confirm the authenticity of their relationship and whether they should upgrade it to the next level. Based on satisfactory results, mutual visits may then be upgraded to full-scale migration and/or marriage such in the case of Matriarch and Angel. As for the case of Empress, further mutual visits are being planned in hopes of tying the knots afterwards.

4.3.2.3 Disregarding Culture Clash

Interestingly, just like Zara, it seems that culture clash has proven a nuisance even for two of the three interviewed participants. Nonetheless, unlike Zara, successful alternative migrants have chosen to take a ‘leap of faith’ and disregarded culture clash. Given that Angel and his wife come from different Asian ethnicities, culture clash has proven to exist even under their integration into American society. For instance, Angel and his wife have faced two-sided family resistance and linguistic barriers, which aligns with Zara’s perspective quite well. Yet, going through with the chance they have taken demonstrates a higher degree of love between them.

Nevertheless, their relationship still suffers the repercussions of these barriers, both internally and externally at the hands of their respective families.

Matriarch has also cited cultural differences as a barrier that she has managed to adapt to and overcome. She has learned her husband’s language and mended the pieces together to make their union a success. More insights on culture clash will be provided within the next chapter, which disseminates the internal and external hindrances that alternative migrants have faced.

4.3.2.4 Alternative Migration and Temporality

Temporality is indeed a factor that plays a role in the alternative migration process. To begin with resettlement for marriage entails a more permanent form of physical mobility, whereas visits of love and/or kinship assume a more transient form of physical mobility. Moreover, resettlement is a much slower and more arduous process when it comes to its realization. For instance, Angel's relationship with his wife began in 2014 and did not culminate in marriage and his resettlement until 2020. In between this long interval, online dating and several mutual visits can be noted. Furthermore, Matriarch also describes a similar long but fulfilling evolution with her now husband of fifteen years:

The constant interactions, on day-to-day basis, drew us closer and the more we spoke, the more sympathy escalated. Carrying our virtual relationship into reality became our primary focus, but it wouldn't happen for another 3 years, and yet we kept the daily conversations, audio/video sharing... When the relationship grew serious enough to naturally transform itself into marriage, the possibility of resettlement was discussed. Any country of residence, as well as foreign country was considered as a possibility. At this point we were already through 3 years of online dating and a year of offline dating. – Matriarch (2022)

Given that Empress is still in the mutual visits phase, it is interesting but difficult to anticipate her relationship's advancement toward full resettlement for marriage. She has visited her partner last November and expects him to visit her in the upcoming

months after. Nevertheless, Empress is the only participant who has also expressed kinship desires to visit other people she has met across the game:

I know many people I have connected with have expressed their desire to travel to meet others because of this game. I also can say I would never have thought to go and meet a “stranger” before playing this game... and now am looking at meeting a few other friends as well! – Empress (2022)

Consequently, this chapter has shown that alternative migratory patterns for love, kinship and/or marriage have proven quite the sheer possibility within the concerned MMORPG. While a lengthy process that is developed based on the genuine buildup of love and trust among other factors, the end results of alternative migration appear to be fulfilling and endearing. Hence, this chapter has holistically traced online ties – whether transnational in nature – from the moment of formation to the moment of cessation and finally to the moment of evolution into something meaningful enough to warrant a decision as grand as migration.

Chapter Five

MMORPG Alternative Migrants’ Hindrances

This chapter aims to unravel the internal and external hindrances that prospective and successful alternative migrants have faced during their migratory endeavors. It will do so by exploring many aspects of this social reality such as the selectivity of migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, gendered implications among others.

5.1 Immobility and the Selectivity of Migration

While anticipated as a hindrance prior to the conduction of research, the socioeconomic capability to undergo migratory patterns has not actually been stressed on by any of the participants, except for Joe. During his initial plans as an immobile prospective migrant, Joe has stated that he has not been able to momentarily afford visits or relocation but expresses his will to do so once he has accumulated enough capital.

While the majority of this study’s participants seem to be socioeconomically privileged, the selectivity of migration cannot be easily overlooked as a hindrance for other users. Migration is not usually reserved for neither the poorest of the poor nor the socially insufficient (Castles et al., 2014). Thus, even if a substantial bracket of

users may have not been located by this study, hindrances that these prospective migrants might face must be considered. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that other capable individuals may instead choose immobility and opt to nurture their relationships online for many years as an option as well. However, their choice lies beyond the scope of this research.

5.2 The COVID-19 Pandemic

While the literature showcases that the COVID-19 pandemic has indeed caused an influx of players into online games (Gallucci et al., 2020), this thesis will show that the pandemic has nevertheless proven double-edged for prospective alternative migrants. The detrimental aspect of the pandemic regarding the matter lies within international restrictions against physical mobility as well as the risk of contracting the contagion. Empress has expressed that she and her partner have been trying to meet for years but with the closure of the USA/Canada borders due to COVID-19, all their plans have been postponed even further. The similar can be said regarding other users within the game whose migratory patterns of all kinds have suffered from some form of restriction.

On a brighter note, a positive aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic can be noted within the observed MMORPG. As noted by Allan et al. (2020), sensuality has been reevaluated by individuals and distance between them has indeed been unprecedentedly bridged like never before. This has allowed people to become even closer and develop stronger relationships as signified by Empress's response:

I think COVID really just delayed us meeting, however, the extra time that COVID forced us to wait actually paved the way for several of our personal roadblocks to become settled. It allowed us the time to get to know one another even better and to have our love for one another grown even deeper and stronger. I think the appreciation of one another and our willingness to continue to wait proves how real everything between us really is. This really gave us the chance to grow even closer. We were able to connect on so many levels, really discuss our hopes and dreams for the future. – Empress (2022)

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have only delayed the inevitable while simultaneously paving the way for the transcendence of the sensual along the way. This is especially true for nurturing the virtual relationship by elongating the virtual migration phase prior to physical mobility. This in turn has seemingly allowed for more satisfying results in the long run.

5.3 Issues of Trust, Security and Safety

Issues of trust, security and safety cannot be taken lightly, even more so in the virtual medium. The existence of dangerous individuals within the online game is a sheer possibility that includes but is not limited to cyberhackers, fraudulent individuals and even sexual predators. The latter category has flourished within the online medium for some time now especially with the impact of COVID-19 on sensual behavior. For instance, a few months prior to the conduction of this research, one player has caused an outrage within the game when he attempted sexual advances and tried to solicit

the private pictures of an underage girl. Upon exposure, that player has faced the collective punishment and shaming of the gaming community to an extent that has driven him to quit the game. Through her multiple acquaintances, Empress has iterated her thoughts on the risks that can be generated within the game:

In the event you meet/connect those who are deceitful... you can really get hurt in the process when your trust is put into the wrong hands. I believe you need to know without a doubt that the person you are going to meet is who they say they are for your own well-being and safety. Consistent communication (verbal, written and video) needs to be established in my opinion before making the decision to travel.

Thus, her insights have taken us back to the consistent buildup of trust and the safe traversing of the online medium as discussed within the previous chapter of this thesis. As for Angel, he has implied that the chance he has taken in trusting his wife has not been misplaced. Finally, Matriarch provides a detailed elucidation of her internal worries when physical mobility has turned into a possibility:

My internal worries of our beautiful relationship being a perfectly planned and executed **hoax**, were overwhelming. I was on a sharp edge waking up a day thinking my decision was right and the next day that I was making the biggest mistake of my life. And so, I decided to take a leap of faith.

Matriarch's insights demonstrate that issues of full trust and ensuing security concerns can linger on even after years of being in an online 'beautiful' relationship. Her worries would not settle down until the leap of faith has been taken and her expectations of her potential husband at the time have been confirmed.

Hence, it is pivotal for individuals to take some of the described protective measures from the moment of the inception of the online relationship until physical contact is achieved. Otherwise, disillusion or peril might be in store for them in the process.

5.4 Gendered Concerns

Bearing in mind the fluid and expansive spectrum that gender operates on, this research has been only able to capitalize on the perspective of women pertaining to alternative migratory patterns. Both Matriarch and Empress have expressed that while the experience of taking the lead to travel on their own as independent women has been beyond empowering, their heteronormative expectations have not been fully met. In specific, Matriarch also seems to be even displeased with how her gendered expectations have unraveled. Their respective responses provide better examples to further elucidate the crux of their gendered issues:

Now I will say that he said he should come visit me first because he's the guy and that's the way it should be but it's just not the way things worked out for us. It was however extremely empowering though to travel on my own for the first time!
– Empress (2022)

I don't think it [heteronormativity] played a role when the decision [to resettle] was being made but in my anticipation of the future, I thought that my husband will protect me and help me cope with surfacing culture biased challenges, yet I ended up being the one helping myself. – Matriarch (2022)

Consequently, while 'empowered,' both seem to have adhered to pre-ordained gendered expectations, which demonstrates an interestingly paradoxical pattern to the application of human agency. Matriarch's specific intersection with culture will also be a highlight within the next section of this chapter.

In addition to the preceding heteronormative concerns, non-heteronormative individuals will not be completely accounted for within this section. While I have not been able to interview non-heteronormative individuals within this research due to methodological restrictions, it is noteworthy to mention the existence of gender-fluid avatar selection as well as LGBTI+ friendly clubs across the game. Given that the game may indeed serve as a haven for them to express themselves anonymously and safely, the migration of non-heteronormative couples to the real world might prove much more difficult than their heteronormative counterparts. For instance, non-heteronormative individuals may encounter additional gender-based discrimination and stigma within the real world when expressing themselves. In addition, unlike heteronormative individuals, non-heteronormative individuals are expected – even obliged – to meticulously select countries of destination that permit a safe and successful union.

5.5 Cultural and Familial Barriers

Once more, the lens focuses not only on cultural barriers to alternative migration, but also familial ones. The intricacies underlying cultural clash and familial barriers have impacted non-prospective alternative migrants, prospective alternative migrants and successful alternative migrants alike. For instance, Zara's narrative depicts one where culture clash and familial influence unanimously triumph and bring the relationship to a swift end. On the other hand, while not his main hindrance, culture clash is nevertheless stated by Joe as an expected problem. This claim is bolstered through the statement that Joe's reserved parents would neither condone nor support such an act of migration. Nevertheless, unlike Zara, this has not been the reason for the end of his relationship with Emerald.

As for the three successful alternative migrants, they themselves have expressed patterns of cultural and/or familial barriers. To begin with, Angel and his wife have faced strong resistance from both sides of the family regarding their union. Up until today, Angel has stated that the lingering effects of these cultural and linguistic manifestations still plague their relationship. Yet, their union has persevered against the odds and worked out. The same can be said about Matriarch who has expressed difficulties during her initial visit to Syria:

Even though I have visited the country of my future husband and spent a month there being acquainted with his family and culture, yet I had both internal and external obstacles in the process of making the decision. We come from different

value systems, traditions, believe systems and even use the third language to communicate, which were perfect reasons for my family and community to try to back me from the life changing decision I was about to take. – Matriarch (2022)

In the short run, these difficulties have planted doubt into Matriarch. However, in the long run, she has learned to adapt to them and make things work for her and her soon to be role as a successful family breadwinner. Finally, Empress has not faced any culture-based implications because of the shared North American heritage that she shares with her beloved. On the other hand, Empress has indeed faced internal worries regarding familial barriers that have contributed to delaying her visit:

So many obstacles [pertaining to the decision to migrate]! Ex relationships - suffering through divorce and the struggles of coparenting. For myself the internal struggle with how friends and family would see me... or judge me for my decisions. Children - would they be ok with our choices, would they be angry? When we finally were able to travel, we had to wait until the timing with our families was right and eventually it all just clicked! It [migration] solidified the importance of chasing after what you really want and deserve in life. To have faith that family and true friends only want what is best for you and for you to be happy. To have self confidence in your decisions. And to let go of the past so you can focus on your future!

As such, kin and children seem to play a crucial role in migration related decision-making. In the case of Empress, her internal worries have been misinformed and on the contrary to her belief, she has in fact received the unconditional support of her loved ones to commence migration.

Consequently, cultural and familial barriers as well as expectations can be seen to have diverse impacts on people, especially internally. The intensity of these struggles depends on the susceptibility of the concerned individuals to the influence of those closest to them. As such, it is crucial to address these differences during the virtual migration phase or the transient physical phase prior to permanent patterns of migration.

5.6 Policies of the Country of Destination

Migration and other policies of the country of the destination are an anticipated hindrance to alternative migration. For instance, international border control policies – especially during the peaks of the COVID-19 pandemic – have severely impacted the physical mobility of individuals. The closure of the once free and open border between Canada and the USA epitomizes such hindrance in the case of Empress. While Empress corresponds that the COVID-19 pandemic has proven double-edged for her case, she has nevertheless been forced to restrict and delay her physical mobility. Upon finally embarking on the path to physical mobility, Empress has however faced negligible issues:

Travel was a little more difficult due to Covid and the restrictions put in place but overall not too bad. A few extra pieces of documentation and one cranky border guard and everything was good. Now in looking into ways to become a permanent resident of one another's country it is slightly confusing as to the exact processes that need to be followed however being Canadian and American make things slightly easier. – Empress (2022)

The lack of awareness of the migration policies of the country of destination is thus a pivotal deterrent that may prevent people from going through with the process.

However, Empress demonstrates confidence in the linkage her country shares with that of her beloved and is not seemingly deterred by any policy put in place. Yet again, this demonstrates the selectivity of migration through the political lens of a North-North migration versus a South-North one per se. For example, the same privilege cannot be bestowed upon Joe or Dom as they have exhibit prospective migratory patterns of the latter type.

Lastly, Matriarch's case interestingly sheds light on constellations such as marriage, citizenship and structural racism. Much to her surprise and dismay, the initial cultural differences she has faced amid her physical mobility have perpetuated themselves within policies pertaining to her union with her husband:

I was not familiar with migration policies at that time, but what I found out is that legalization of marriage and the entire registration process was pretty complicated,

if it was happening between different nationals. Without giving proper explanation and law enforcement, we both have been questioned on our marriage motives by “Unknown” officials and entities. – Matriarch (2022)

As such, politics and policy are considerably at the crux of almost all patterns of migration, including alternative ones. Hence, as these findings insinuate, people should familiarize themselves with all policies of the country of destination pertaining to the inception of physical mobility and the culmination of citizenship acquisition.

5.7 Alternative Migrants’ Final Expectations

This chapter’s concluding section is intended to include the final thoughts and expectations that the three interviewees have expressed regarding their experiences. In her endeavor to become a breadwinner, Matriarch has demonstrated robust malleability in her response: “It [overall expectations after migration] was another new paradigm, which I embraced, got along and made it work for me and for my loved ones.” As for Angel, he has demonstrated a degree of apathy and has iterated that his overall expectations after migration have only been met “at times” due to ongoing familial issues. On the other hand, Empress has demonstrated sheer enthusiasm in her responses:

They have been met... and exceeded! This was the best decision of my life and I wouldn't change any part of the process for the world (well I could do without Covid but everything happens for a reason). I cannot wait for him to come up here and we have already planned several more dates for the future! I am blessed to have created a genuine, beautiful, loving connection that I know will last a lifetime and beyond. I am blessed to have met him and never imagined being in the position I am in now. – Empress (2022)

While appreciative and sincere, Empress's enthusiasm may be due to the novelty of her physical interaction with her beloved. Only time will tell if permanent migration would tone down her fervor like it has for Matriarch and Angel, or even possibly enhance it further.

As such, this chapter has presented the major hindrances that practitioners of alternative migratory patterns have experienced within both the virtual realm and the physical one. It has also attempted to shed light on the realistic expectations that such individuals have forged at the behest of the intersection of these hindrances along with the ensuing positive and negative implications. Ultimately, alternative migrants have made sense of such adaptable nuances and upheld their respective cases to make things work out for them in a tangible reality.

Chapter Six

Discussion

Within this chapter, the research findings of this thesis are interrelated to the pertinent literature to demonstrate how the gaps within the literature have been addressed. Furthermore, through triangulation as well as the reliance on an ethnographic/thematic data analysis that is highly rooted in grounded theory, this chapter presents the hypotheses that have been generated through the iterative process.

6.1 MMORPGs, Alternative Migration and the Literature

The following section within this chapter aims to link the research findings of this thesis to the pertinent literature. By doing so, this section will reiterate the gaps within the literature and identify how this research has contributed to both filling the gaps as well as providing novel insights.

6.1.1 A Link to the Literature

The literature provides a vast array of concepts and conceptualization: it collectively raises issues of online socialization amid COVID-19, transnationalism, avatar gender fluidity (Watkins, 2009), escapism, ‘gamer as mediator’ (Yoon & Cheon, 2014) and virtual/physical migration. All these notions are interrelated when it comes to

patterns of alternative migration and have thus been taken into consideration upon conducting field research in hopes of generating novel contributions to the field. For instance, as discussed earlier, gender fluidity amid avatar selection allows individuals to better express themselves online and build personas that may differ from their offline ones. This is especially true for non-conformist and curious individuals who are allowed to express themselves freely and anonymously within the online game. Despite the richness of ideas within the literature, this thesis has unfortunately not been able to paint a more decisive picture regarding gender fluidity due to methodological constraints.

As for other pertinent notions within the literature, Yoon and Cheon (2014) define *gamer as mediator* as an individual “who meets people and builds [online and offline] relationships through [usually distant] game worlds.” In essence, this definition of a gamer, along with the synchronous presence of trust, is encompassing of online socialization as gamers build and negotiate relationships among themselves within an online game, especially when it comes to reaching more advanced stages of the relationship that may warrant patterns of alternative migration.

Lastly, the literature deals with the intensity of transnationalism in addition to preliminary and understudied insinuations regarding the alternation between virtual and physical migration (Tedeschi et al., 2020). This thesis confirms the transience of transnational ties, albeit not to the extents that the literature suggests. The latter point will be tackled in further depth within the next subsection that deals with how this thesis has tackled the gaps within the literature and provided novel insights.

6.1.2 Addressing the gaps Within the Literature and Contributions

First and foremost, this research tackles patterns of alternative migration within an MMORPG, which is a topic that is beyond marginalized within the literature. Only two studies (Isabella, 2007; RapidVisa, 2019) within the literature have merely scratched the subject matter's surface by mentioning the possibility of alternative migratory patterns that are induced within online games. However, these studies do not explore the intricacies underlying the process and leave a great deal of uncharted opportunities. My research has gone the extra mile by exploring these uncharted terrains and providing a detailed depiction of the process from start to finish. By doing so, it has explored the formation and evolution of online relationships within an ICT medium into something meaningful enough to possibly warrant migratory processes.

In addition, this research aligns itself with the literature and confirms the possible transience of online transnationalism. However, it seeks to challenge the literature by contending that the lingering effects of transnational ties are neither innocent nor fleeting, which is demonstrated through the cessation of MMORPG online ties section within this thesis. In particular, the cases of Zara, Joe and Dom epitomize lasting effects long after the relationship has ended. Particularly, Joe and Dom's formidable transnational connections have not easily decreased in strength even after the passing of a considerable amount of time. For instance, both prospective migrants have expressed their lingering infatuation and their inability to move on months after the severance of ties. This showcases a rather particular intensity to online

relations that are built on common passions, which seems to be on par with their offline counterparts.

Moreover, this thesis confirms that online relationships can be as potent as their offline counterparts and may indeed lead to physical mobility (Recchi & Favell, 2019). However, the lacking virtual/physical migration aspect of ICT within the literature does not provide clear understandings regarding the process. This thesis has found that a process of virtual migration and/or mutual visits must be situated in-between in order for long-term migratory patterns to succeed. As insinuated by the literature, this research has identified a crucial component of the virtual to physical migratory aspect of ICT: migration across virtual platforms and experiencing the intended physical space virtually must also be accompanied by mutual visits prior to more permanent patterns of migration. Within this research, alternative migrants have stressed on the sheer importance of mutual visits in making or breaking subsequent patterns of physical mobility. This is a pivotal new contribution to the literature that has been unraveled within this thesis. As such, this gap is the most pivotal one that this research has addressed within the understudied intersection between mobility/immobility and virtual migration/physical migration (Tedeschi et al., 2020).

Lastly, the temporal dimension to alternative migration that is induced within an MMORPG is another novel contribution that this thesis has provided to the related literature. As shown within the findings regarding the culmination of alternative migration, the process may be an arduously slow one that requires a great deal of

trust and patience. As such, other than the virtual/physical spatial considerations that the literature merely tackles, the temporal ones have been quite even more neglected. This finding should hopefully contribute to the literature and pave the way for longer online ethnographies that can trace the process from the moment of inception until the moment of culmination.

6.2 The Social Reality of MMORPG Alternative Migration

Given the qualitative nature of this research, this section aims to highlight the social reality of MMORPG alternative migration through the hypotheses that have been generated during the research process as result of a thematic/ethnographic analysis that is highly rooted in grounded theory. It will first present scholarly understandings of social networks in addition to transnationalism and will then apply the scholarly definitions to the context of the observed MMORPG to generate the results.

Thus, this section argues that the game does indeed serve as an inaugural site for the formation of online ties – whether transnational in nature or otherwise – that may lead to virtual and /or physical migration. As explored within the finding sections, the process of migration depends on the formation and development of genuine bonds, the practice of virtual migration, engaging in unilateral/bilateral visits and possessing the temporal patience to go through with the process. Holistically, these research findings present a sheer social reality for the possibility of alternative migratory patterns within the designated MMORPG. This MMORPG is equipped

with fluid social capabilities that permit an online bond to intensify and evolve into something meaningful enough to warrant the physical mobility of its players.

While alternating between fieldwork and interviews, I have taken note of the nominal and descriptive meanings as well as the potential effects of the following notions and heterogeneities on the virtual/physical migration paradigm: MMORPG online relationships, transnationalism, love, trust, alternative migration, spatiotemporal, infrastructure, COVID-19, safety, gender, culture and policy.

Given that these notions' empirical operationalization is beyond the scope of this research, it is worth mentioning that some form of operationalization may still have been generated along the way due to the malleable nature of conceptualization in qualitative research (Bryman, 2015). This is particularly possible while classifying the dimensions and attributes pertaining to each notion. For instance, a shortly forthcoming analysis of the interplay between networks within an MMORPG, transnationalism and alternative migration entails the expansion of categories pertaining to each concept.

Vertovec (2003) suggests utilizing cross-fertilization between multiple disciplines as well as inter-, trans- and multi-disciplinary approaches to analyze and decipher transnationalism. Within social networks, this predominantly entails the size of the network, the multiplexity of the network, the strength of ties within the network (Granovetter, 1973), the durability of relationships within the network and the frequency of contact within the network (Vertovec, 2003). However, Tedeschi et al. (2020) contend that recent fluid analysis of social networks and transnationalism

within the age of information should focus on intensity, pragmatic relevance and identity formation rather than mere regularity. Consequently, Tedeschi et al. (2020) propose novel variables that are worth exploring: type of actors, type of activities, the degree of incorporation, the degree of cosmopolitanism, the degree of belonging to a country and the intensity of connections. Within the ICT medium, virtual and physical mobilities are also dependent on the socioeconomic status of people, which entails ‘digital divides’ (such as virtual access and resources) that are cleaved based on social status, gender and urban living conditions (Chen, 2013).

Finally, while ICT mediums and transnationalism mutually reinforce one another across a wide range of variables, it is worth noting that identifying their causal connection may depend on the concept of imagination with respect to spaces and community formation (Tedeschi et al., 2020). This notion of employing one’s imagination also takes us back to the idea of the collection and facilitation of preconceived ideas pertaining to the intended destination’s space and culture, or what can be referred to as virtual migration (Recchi & Favell, 2019). In this regard, Portes (2003) attributes a positive correlation between virtual travel and physical migration.

Through utilizing the previous definitions as a framework, the observed MMORPG within this research seems to exemplify the aforementioned requirements of the interplay between an online social network and transnationalism to induce the physical mobility of people. For instance, this research has employed players within the MMORPG as actors to not only showcase the regularity of contact between them, but to also bring about the intensification and evolution of online ties to induce

virtual and physical mobility. This evolution has been highly dependent on the social capabilities and the activities that the MMORPG has to offer to maintain a strong player base as well as allow players to integrate within the online community. Such a form of community building, bolstered by imagination, fluid avatar selection and elective anonymity, allows for the formation and negotiation of unique online identities pertaining to each player. For those wishing to take the extra step, migration across virtual platforms can suffice to fulfill the lacking aspects of the observed MMORPG such as visual communication. In essence, virtual migration and spatial-cultural repertoire accumulation regarding the intended destination seem to be prerequisites for potential physical patterns of migration such as unilateral/bilateral visits and permanent resettlement.

The analysis of the interplay between online gaming networks, transnationalism and alternative migration has led to the exploration and expansion of pertinent categories. For instance, virtual migration has been explored not only as migration across virtual platforms to improve communication between the concerned parties, but also as a process of accumulating cultural as well as spatial knowledge pertaining to the intended physical destination. Moreover, transnationalism has been explored through the lens of cross-border activities and social processes that are attributed to migrants, potential migrants and non-migrants within the MMORPG. Lastly, alternative migration has been explored as the possibility for migration for love and kinship at the behest of genuine relationships that have been nurtured within the designated MMORPG.

As such, through an iterative and comparative ethnographic process that is bolstered by interviews, the following hypotheses arise:

- If an MMORPG offers inherently consistent social capabilities and activities, then it could serve as an inaugural site for the formation and development of genuine online relations – whether transnational in nature or otherwise – of kinship or love that might subsequently increase the possibility of alternative migration.
- In order to adequately meet the expectations that have been set virtually, potential alternative migrants should utilize virtual migration and/or transient physical visits as prerequisites for the improved likelihood of more permanent patterns of physical mobility.
- The hindrances that potential and successful alternative migrants may experience during the process could assume a constellational design, which would further exacerbate the chance for alternative migration.

The first hypothesis is generated as a result of the direct and main argument that this thesis seeks to propose: MMORPGs may serve as online sites for potential migratory patterns. The dependent variable within this hypothesis is the likelihood for alternative migration and the independent variable is the existence of persistent and genuine online ties. A causal relationship between the two heavily relies on the pertinent utilization of the imagination – as described by Tedeschi et al. (2020) , as an intervening variable. Furthermore, other intervening variables could be the

capability to access online resources as well as other digital divides and socioeconomic contingencies.

Given that the imagination is a potent driver to comprehend the interplay between ICT and transnationalism (Tedeschi et al., 2020), the second hypothesis presents the notion of virtual migration, which permits the exploration of virtual platforms and physical destinations through the imagination (Recchi & Favell, 2019). The dependent variable within this hypothesis is the improved likelihood for alternative migration. The independent variable within this hypothesis is the utilization of virtual migration and unilateral/bilateral visits. A causal link between both variables is very likely given that all three interviewed alternative migrants have emphasized virtual migration and visits as precursors for the success of more permanent patterns of alternative migration. Nevertheless, based on the findings of this thesis, alternative migration seems to be an arduously slow process that requires temporal patience as an intervening variable.

Lastly, the third hypothesis brings about the possibility of an amalgamation and intersection of the hindrances that potential and successful alternative migrants have faced during the process. This intersection seems to put the relationship between people to the ultimate test by possibly delaying the likelihood for alternative migration as in the cases of Matriarch, Empress and Angel or even ending it altogether as in the cases of Zara, Joe and Dom. Thus, the dependent variable within this hypothesis is the further exacerbated chance for alternative migration and the independent variable is the intersection of the multiple hindrances that have been

explored within the previous chapter of this thesis. For example, given the intersection of gendered, cultural, interpersonal and political hindrances in the case of Matriarch's migration, a causality may be safely insinuated within this hypothesis.

Consequently, this chapter has interrelated the thesis findings to the pertinent literature, provided novel contributions pertaining to the ICT aspects of mobility/immobility as well as virtual/physical migration and finally generated pertinent hypotheses on the subject matter. It has thus holistically presented valuable analysis and discussion regarding the interplay between ICT mediums, transnationalism and alternative migration.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

7.1 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research on the subject matter is advised to explore the nuances underlying alternative migration within an ICT medium over longitudinal intervals that far exceed a micro-ethnography. In essence, this would better depict the process of alternation between virtual and physical mobility from its inception until its conclusion. In addition, future research should draw a firm line between the online and offline presence of individuals in order to identify any missed aspects as well as interrelate an intersection between both domains, if any.

Furthermore, it is recommended for future research to attain the insights of non-heteronormative and non-binary individuals in hopes of generating gendered considerations that transcend mere binaries and benefit the vast spectrum that gender operates on. Moreover, another group that future research should consider is that of the socioeconomically underprivileged individuals who are unable to transform their online relationships into physical mobility.

Lastly, future research should consider in greater analytical detail the intersections between the hindrances that alternative migrants have faced and how these intersections may further exacerbate the process. Utilizing a pertinent methodology

that allows for the better operationalization of the intersections would permit the generation of novel insights to not only comprehend them better, but also hopefully minimize their effects on patterns of physical mobility. This is particularly true for legal state measures that test the genuineness of alternative migrants when it comes to marriage and citizenship acquisition.

7.2 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, this thesis has explored the contingencies underlying the interplay between an ICT medium, transnationalism and alternative migration. It has done so by scrutinizing the formation, evolution, and cessation of online ties that are induced within an MMORPG. In a synonymous comparison to their offline counterparts, MMORPG online ties appear to face similar fluctuations in intensity that are amplified through the genuine buildup of love, trust and camaraderie. Furthermore, upon reaching a transcendent state that permits the physical mobility of people, these ties – whether transnational in nature or otherwise – allow the observed MMORPG to potentially serve as an online site for the realization and exploration of migratory patterns.

The thesis has found that given the adequate social capabilities of the MMORPG, the initial process of transient migration entails ‘virtual migration’ and/or unilateral/bilateral visits, which are pivotal processes for the success of permanent migration patterns that may follow. The thesis has also found that the hindrances that potential and successful alternative migrants have faced during the process may

delay it or even render it terminated. Furthermore, the emergence of constellations between these hindrances may further exacerbate the process, albeit not to necessarily insurmountable extents as demonstrated by some of the participants within this research.

In essence, this thesis provides contributions that are relevant to the discussion pertaining to the interplay of ICT, transnationalism and alternative migration within the age of information (Tedeschi et al., 2020). It contributes novel findings to the field through its exploration of mobility/immobility and virtual/physical migration within an ICT medium. As such, this thesis adds to the reconceptualization of transnationalism in the modern world (Tedeschi et al., 2020) in terms of imaginative and cognitive virtual travel (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016) as well as the respective interconnected pathways (Sánchez-Querubín & Rogers, 2018).

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NOTICE OF IRB APPROVAL

To: Mr. Hussein Kobeissy
Dr. Jennifer Skulte-Ouaiss
Associate Professor
School of Arts & Sciences

APPROVAL ISSUED: 25 November 2021
EXPIRATION DATE: 25 November 2022
REVIEW TYPE: EXPEDITED – INITIAL

Date: November 25, 2021

RE: IRB #: LAU.SAS.JS2.25/Nov/2021

Protocol Title: MMORPGs, Transnationalism and Alternative Migration: An Online Micro-Ethnography

The above referenced research project has been approved by the Lebanese American University, Institutional Review Board (LAU IRB). This approval is limited to the activities described in the Approved Research Protocol and all submitted documents listed on page 2 of this letter. **Enclosed with this letter are the stamped approved documents that must be used.**

APPROVAL CONDITIONS FOR ALL LAU APPROVED HUMAN RESEARCH PROTOCOLS

LAU RESEARCH POLICIES & PROCEDURES: *All individuals engaged in the research project must adhere to the approved protocol and all applicable LAU IRB Research Policies & Procedures. PARTICIPANTS must NOT be involved in any research related activity prior to IRB approval date or after the expiration date.*

PROTOCOL EXPIRATION: *The LAU IRB approval expiry date is listed above. The IRB Office will send an email at least 45 days prior to protocol approval expiry - Request for Continuing Review - in order to avoid any temporary hold on the initial protocol approval. It is your responsibility to apply for continuing review and receive continuing approval for the duration of the research project. Failure to send Request for Continuation before the expiry date will result in suspension of the approval of this research project on the expiration date.*

MODIFICATIONS AND AMENDMENTS: *All protocol modifications must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.*

NOTIFICATION OF PROJECT COMPLETION: *A notification of research project closure and a summary of findings must be sent to the IRB office upon completion. Study files must be retained for a period of 3 years from the date of notification of project completion.*

IN THE EVENT OF NON-COMPLIANCE WITH ABOVE CONDITIONS, THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR SHOULD MEET WITH THE IRB ADMINISTRATORS IN ORDER TO RESOLVE SUCH CONDITIONS. IRB APPROVAL CANNOT BE GRANTED UNTIL NONCOMPLIANT ISSUES HAVE BEEN RESOLVED.

If you have any questions concerning this information, please contact the IRB office by email at irb@lau.edu.lb



The IRB operates in compliance with the national regulations pertaining to research under the Lebanese Minister of Public Health's Decision No.141 dated 27/1/2016 under LAU IRB Authorization reference 2016/3708, the international guidelines for Good Clinical Practice, the US Office of Human Research Protection (45CFR46) and the Food and Drug Administration (21CFR56). LAU IRB U.S. Identifier as an international institution: FWA00014723 and IRB Registration # IRB00006954 LAUIRB#1

Dr. Joseph Stephan
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED:

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| IRB Exempt Protocol Application | Received 7 October 2021 |
| Thesis Proposal | Received 7 October 2021 |
| Informed Consent Form for Interviews | Received 7 October 2021 |
| Interview Questions | Received 7 October 2021 |
| CITI Training – Jennifer Skulte Ouaiss | Cert. # 41274868 Dated (22 March 2021) |
| CITI Training – Hussein Kobeissy | Cert. #40618303 Dated (24 June 2021) |

