That Old School Feeling
Processes of Mythmaking in *Old School RuneScape*

World of Warcraft Classic (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019) drew a great deal of attention when it was released. After years of hostility towards unsanctioned private servers hosting 'vanilla' *WoW* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004)—the base game without any of its eight expansions—Blizzard decided to release their own, official pre-*Burning Crusade* (2007) version to much press attention and fanfare.

But one similar endeavour with continued success is *Old School RuneScape* (*OSRS*) (Jagex, 2013b), the surprising longevity of which can perhaps be credited with giving Blizzard a precedent. With both *OSRS* and now *WoW Classic*, a key question lay under debates on their design philosophies: how much, and in what way, should it be updated? *OSRS* chose a 'parallel universe' strategy: simply developing and updating the game as normal, but from its earlier starting point. Over six years after its release in late 2013, *OSRS* is now unrecognisable from the 'main' game, *RuneScape 3* (Jagex, 2013a), from its starting point of a 2007 backup of *RuneScape 2* (Jagex, 2004), and from the *OSRS* of 2013. In addition to reintroducing some of the *RuneScape* content that was added after the 2007 backup— such as the God Wars Dungeon and the Grand Exchange—old questlines have been continued, new ones started, new enemies and bosses added, and even a new continent. Notably, the development process of *OSRS* runs on polling: each change or addition is polled to members, requiring a supermajority of 75% 'yes' votes for inclusion (e.g., Jagex, 2019). Far from being a quick nostalgia-hit with some nice publicity, *OSRS* now boasts between double and triple the membership of *RuneScape 3* (Misplaced Items, n.d.).

In this paper, then, I want to explore what is 'old school' about *Old School*. I will approach the concept of 'old school' as a focal point of community mythmaking. That is, seeing it as a mythologised concept, formed and negotiated by the community in conversation with the *OSRS* development team within Jagex. All sorts of events from the production history of *RuneScape* provide rich material for the mythmaking of players. Distinct 'eras' can be seen in the game's numbering system, for example: while numbers are affixed, these do not refer to different games, but rather to large updates—some better received than others. A veteran Jagex employee known as Mod Ash helped to set *OSRS* up, and players often refer to him as 'God Ash', revered as a founding father and guardian of sorts. And the fresh slate of the 2007 state of the game allows players to retell the stories of unfinished questlines and unmade areas.

By examining what the essence of 'old school' is in this context, I aim to further our understanding both of this relatively recent phenomenon itself (long-running MMOs opening 'classic' servers) and of the mythmaking practices of MMO players. MMOs are a particular site for these kinds of questions due to a confluence of their peculiarities. They are inherently community-based, for example. And they bring into question notions of access: we cannot usually go back and play an earlier version of an MMO and, even if we

can, the circumstances are not the same, not least of all because the playerbase might be lacking. The nostalgia, access and history of these games provide rich materials for community mythmaking.

To analyse the vague notion of old school-ness, I will examine the interplay between playerbase and developer on this issue. That is, how the community talks about old school-ness on popular forums and social media, how the developers talk about it, and how their processes of production facilitate this through, for example, the polling system and weekly Q&As.

This will involve drawing on several strands of scholarship. Maria B. Garda's paper 'Nostalgia in Retro Game Design' (2014) provides a highly instructive foundation for thinking about how nostalgia manifests in different kinds of retro game design. In particular, her distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia is a useful one, and both kinds can be readily found mixed in *OSRS* discourse. In analysing this discourse, I will also draw on the work of Astrid Ensslin (2012).

Likewise, research on myth, mythmaking and communities surrounding myth will be central. For example, I will look to the work of Will Brooker on Batman (2001, 2012), as his analysis of the construction of what Batman is and how that is negotiated between audiences, content producers and the IP owners can be usefully applied here. This will be combined with theories of myth more broadly. My understanding of myth here is particularly shaped by the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes (1957/2009), although due to an increased focus on community approaches to myth by folklorists are also important. Frog, for instance, focuses on mythology and its relation to communal culture, identity and social practice (2014, 2015, 2018).

To ground and contextualise this analysis, I will also draw from production studies. Aphra Kerr's work from this approach on the interplay between developers and players within and across game cultures (2006, 2017) is particularly important here, Likewise, Casey O'Donnell's research on game production, industry economics and their social impact (e.g. 2014, 2017) provides a context for the conditions surrounding the production history of *RuneScape* and *OSRS*.

Keywords

Myth, mythmaking, community, nostalgia, retro, MMORPG, *RuneScape*, *Old School RuneScape*

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