

## RAGNAROK ONLINE, REALITY OF VIRTUAL PHENOMENON

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### Abstract

*Originated from South Korea, Ragnarok Online is an entertainment product in comics and games which is popular in the world especially South-East Asia. Ragnarok in Nordic Mythology described as the doom of the gods. In the case above, Ragnarok is used as a background setting of a comic, which created, by Lee Myung Jin and Ragnarok MMORPG based on that comic.*

*Internet is described as a many-to-many medium. Games turn out to be one of the first popular settles in the Internet among e-commerce, portals, free advertisers, and sexual exploitation sites. Online Game becomes a new frontier that could connect people to interact and play similar game on the same time and Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game of Ragnarok is one of the best and successful Online Game worldwide. It is one of the phenomena in online gaming today. Recently, official Ragnarok Online Characters (NPC, Monsters and Players Characters) have developed in quantity approximately 200 and still have possibility to increase. In international Ragnarok Online provider, more than 120,000 customers connected in 12 servers on real time basis at the same time everyday and this exclude local Ragnarok Server provided by several countries with similar number of player.*

*Ragnarok Online is a virtual representation of reality, it creates and represents visual social semiotics, which became very important element of communication in recent years. As one of visual product in modern culture, the distance between reality and virtual realm become closer and sometimes it blurred and formed new realm. A new dawn of community born in virtual realm and develop in some way that many though it would consume the community it represented. Is it possible that the characters and environmental design, which is built, really has the enormous attraction? Or is there something else work behind the surface such as the representation and online culture. Although there are many contradictions about the impacts of Ragnarok Online, this paper is endeavors a new insight of Ragnarok Online, which may have not being researched by others. The combination of online culture and virtual media design with interactive and inviting visual interface may open wide the possibility of encountering new methods and keys of success in designing digital media through descriptive analysis.*

**Keywords:** Internet, Digital Media Design, Online culture, Virtual Reality

## 1. Introduction

Games have a strong impact through the community as good as any other media, such as 2002's *Vice City Grand Theft Auto* (Terry Donovan) which sold 11 million copies is packed with moral ambiguity outraged parents and politicians, even Joseph Lieberman said that game caused "perverse antisocial behaviour." GTA's *Vice City* is a game of a drug dealer who roam the city --which the sets very close to Miami City-- doing various tasks such as delivering drugs, "whack" some people, car robbery, bank robbery, and other mission that may all categorized as criminal acts.

Introduction of game in computer technology since 80's until now surfaced an urge to acquire new technology that will surpass the previous. It could be considered that, games are the first application of newest technology. In late 90's when Internet become worldwide, games find its new purpose to pursuit. Internet as the media that allow individual users to select the content they wish to see and allow them to interact with other users. Internet is described as a many-to-many medium. Games turn out to be one of the first popular settles in the Internet among e-commerce, portals, free advertisers, and sexual exploitation sites. Online Game becomes a new frontier that could connect people to interact and to play at a same time. [1]

Ragnarok Online is one of the Multi Player Online Community Game (MPOCG) from Korea that played through the Internet originally created by Lee Myung Jin in *Manhwa* (Korean term for Comic). MPOCG is one of MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Game) that has been developed to focus on social relationships in virtual community of online gaming. MMORPG itself defined as a game with massive number of players logged on at a same time into the same virtual world of game.

The comic adopted the Norse Mythology about Ragnarok, which is Armageddon of gods or the battle between gods and the evils that ceased them both in the end. In *manhwa*, the story tells about a group of teenagers caught up in a long and exhausting war between gods, humans, and demons. Yet, the story in Ragnarok Online MMORPG focuses on community building among players. Usually each Local Ragnarok Online Game providers, offers at least 3 servers, but in international Ragnarok Online provider, they offered 12 servers and each server consists of more than 10,000 customers worldwide connected on real time basis at the same time everyday. There are at least 27 millions of people registered in Ragnarok Online and more than half of them connected online on real time basis as seen on table 1-1. [2]

Country	Number of Users	Commercial Date
South Korea	3,300,000	August 2002
North America (US)	640,000	June 2003
China	6,940,000	May 2003
Japan	2,800,000	December 2002
Taiwan & Hong Kong	3,570,000	March 2003
Philippines	2,290,000	September 2003
Malaysia & Singapore	590,000	April 2004
5 European Countries	150,000	April 2004
Indonesia	460,000	November 2003
India	5,000	(Beta testing)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>27,245,000</b>	

**Table 1-1,**  
List of Users Worldwide Connected Online (Commercial).

## 2. Method & Theories

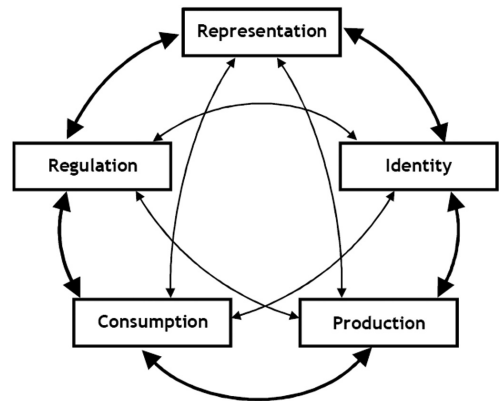
### 2.1 Virtual Reality, Gaming Technology & RPG Genre

The computer works most effectively as an “evocatory object” in the question of “artificial intelligence”— computer is an attempt to simulate human thought as far as possible with the computer, bringing the model as close as possible to the human “original.” The computer raises in a pure form the question of semblance, a discourse which would not be a simulacrum: it is clear that computer in some sense only “simulates” thought; yet how does the total simulation of thought differ from “real” thought? Computer system simulating a reality or “reality simulacrum” or creating a reality, which is known as “virtual reality” in today’s word. [4]

A video or computer game is an entertainment device, which electronically simulates a reality in a more entertaining narrative. With the rapid convergence of all media types into a digital form, games are also beginning to affect, and be affected by traditional media forms. For example, game-like narratives have begun to appear in movies, while games with movie-style plots have become common.

The narrative structure of role-play games is very similar to that of an action movie, with the player as the main character. Most of these games use a point of view interface. This allows the players to see exactly what the main character is seen. Role-play games with multiplayer options, such as Doom and Final Fantasy Online, have become a very popular way to spend time on the Internet.

Role playing games is a type of games that takes its name from the old Dungeon and Dragons style of tabletop games. Players take on the role of a character of group of characters in a large game world, taking on quests, attacking monsters,



**Figure 1**  
Circuit of Culture

and gathering treasures and experience. These games traditionally have a fantasy or science-fiction setting. A typical role playing game can be seen to be constituted of two parts:

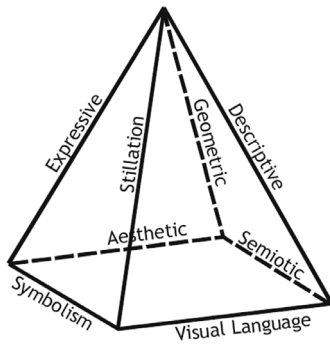
- a description of an imaginary universe called the setting;
- a set of rules to handle events resolution in the setting, called the system.

### 2.2 Culture & Representation

Culture is learned, shared, and transmitted from one generation to the next generation, and is multi-dimensional. Culture is about “shared meanings” and language is central to meaning and culture and has always been regarded as a key repository of cultural values and meanings. Language is able to do this because it operates as a representational system. Culture is constructed and related to decision making through Circuit of Culture. [3]

### 2.3 Visual Language

Visual language is visual appearance which is intended to sending information but it is different with visual or illustration that we know. Visualisation we know is taken in an angle, at one time, and one distance just like camera shot or based on Naturalism, Perpectivism, and Moment Opname (NPM System). Visual



**Figure 2**  
Visual Language Pyramid  
Source:Tabrani.

language is a visual communication that including various angle, distances and relative time, or called space-time-plane (STP) system. The STP System especially become basics of digital editing, multimedia and interactive visual communication for its flexibility and time dimension. [5]

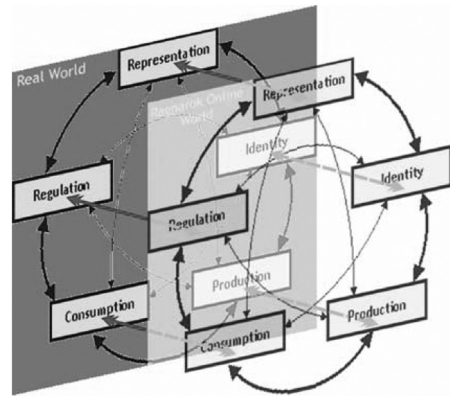
### 3. Results and Discussions

#### 3.1 Interactive & Immerse Gameplay

Ragnarok Online is a combination of two dimensional (2D) character design for avatar (representation of players ID in virtual world) with three dimensional (3D) generated environment. Unlike some other PC games especially online Role Playing Games (RPG), the controlling system of Ragnarok Online Game is the easiest among all. It may be one of the key points of Ragnarok Online popularity because almost all players interviewed mentioned this aspect as one of their preferences in playing this game. [6]

The storyline of Ragnarok Online similar to the Manhwa version, but the difference is the players are the Actors in fighting the monsters and demons in Ragnarok Online's Virtual World. One of the interesting factors in playing this game and any other online games is the players decide their own storyline although the main plot

is on the house, but how a player getting through the game is on their own decision. Some of players are spending more time to chat or interact with other than hunting those monsters and achieving more experience. The possibilities of having more interactions are boosted with update patch and special events carried by local servers which always refers to real life events.



**Figure 3**  
Juxtaposition of 2 sub-cultures

#### 3.2 Interactive Culture & Representation

Game system, which use RPG mode is one of the most favorable type of games beside action games. RPG opens possibility of players to choose and to play a role as a different person. The nature of RPG and Internet is relatively similar, because people could hide their own identity and pretend as someone else just like in "You've Got Mail", a movie where Tom Hanks plays a big bookshop owner that threatens Meg Ryan's bookshop in real world, but in virtual world, he acts as a supportive person that encourages the girl to fight and carry on. The role-playing activities represent in both ways and each of them create their own circuit of culture which evocate each other. The virtual world represents the real world, while real world afterward represents the virtual one such as shown on Figure 3.

Players daily activities more or less influencing

online activities and vice versa. It makes the birth of two sub-cultures towards the game, online sub-culture and offline sub-culture. Each sub-culture influencing each other back and forth encircle endlessly.

Online sub-culture is based on activities and habits, which players do in Ragnarok Online realm. Beside rule of the game and netiquette (etiquette in internet community) that have to be obeyed by players, there is also a social strata which formed by base level, job level and guild. Everyone can choose his/her position and function in Ragnarok Online community. Trading, chatting, conflicting and even courting are some of social activities that could be performed in virtual world of Ragnarok. The outstanding virtual world of Ragnarok even promising for who have slight of naughty and bad habits to take part, so the presence of game master to maintain the virtual public safety and secure positive social interaction is essential as a consequence. Those who established and comfortable with Ragnarok realm, are of course want to set their existence and become addicted.

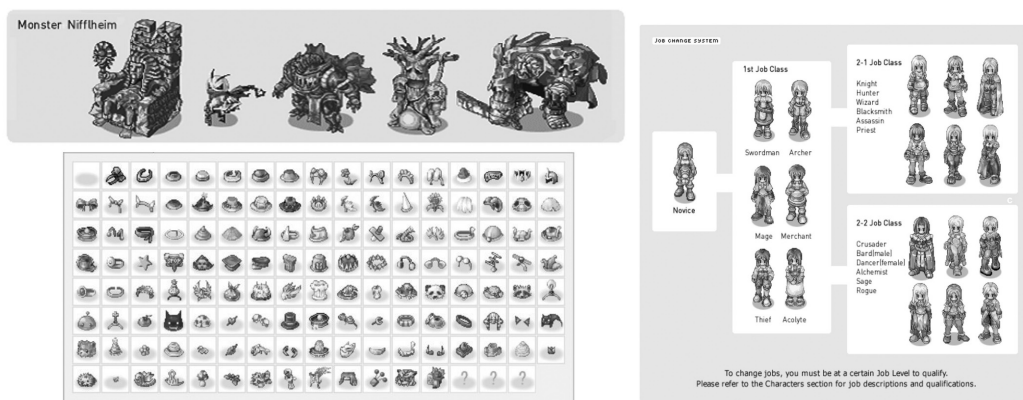
The offline sub-culture is daily activities and habits of Ragnarok Online players are that

brought from Ragnarok Online in online world. The most common examples are topics and usages of Ragnarok Online terminology in discussions among players that enrich the conversation. Even some of them are acting and called with their avatar name from Ragnarok realm because many of their first encounters are through the game. They have been known widely by their avatar name than their real name. If they meet offline, name of their avatar is the best way to eliminate the differences among players because sometimes the age range between players is very wide. If they do this continually, it will past the inner community territory and will spread to wider community that they live in.

Offline sub-culture activity is usually seen and increases significantly when related events occur such as anime and manga gathering, or other visual entertainment exhibition, such as costume play (cosplay) event, where all the attendants are encouraged to mimic a game, anime or manga character's appearance and costume.

### 3.3 Visual Language of Ragnarok Online

There are some similarities in universal spirit of Ragnarok Online Virtual phenomenon with



**Figure 4**  
Various monsters and characters customization

Pokemon[7], which are:

- a. Numerous Characters. Official Ragnarok Online Characters (NPC, Monsters and Players Characters) have developed in quantity approximately 200 and still have possibility to increase. Each monster has classes, base elements, and level, which have difference in dealing with. The players could choose from 6 different class of avatar with possibility of more than 100 combinations of customization. Every class has specification of equipments, weapons, and skills used in battling monsters.
- b. Cute Syndrome. All characters and monsters inside the game have deformed visual appearances that make them cute and appeal to the players. The cuteness of Ragnarok Online characters is making them easy to be embraced, to be remembered, and to be liked not only by the children but wide range of target segments, compare to another less cute characters. Those characters spread the awareness of the game although some of audiences do not play the game.
- c. Safe Factor. All conflicts and fightings are happened in virtual world, which will not damage players physically. But in virtual world, almost all activities may represent in similar form or altered in another. The death of characters or monsters are not visualized in realistic view but more cartoons and comical. Safe factor is also mentioned by Crawford in his writing about game design. [8]
- d. Fantasy based setting. Ragnarok Online does not put a specific location for this earth as its setting, but from another unknown world that enables Ragnarok's reasoning environment to be easily accepted by players. It provokes the curiosity of the children to explore this strange yet familiar and imaginative world although some of environments and situations are

representation of what is in the real world.

- e. Simplicity in character design and story line. The character design and story of Ragnarok Online is simple. The aim of the game is to roam and set their own story with all the existing characters and become the ultimate characters, through an adventurous journey, fighting monsters, trading, completing headgear quests, group hunt and battle among players. The simplicity of Ragnarok characters is made it easily embrace by all segments especially children, as noted by McCloud in his book *Understanding Comics*, the principle of "amplification through simplification" means the more simple of a character, the easier it represents almost anyone without difficulties. [9]



**Figure 5**  
Amplification through Simplification.

Ragnarok Online is designed so that the various characters in this game are so different from one to the other and are specialized. It makes the players could customize to the limit of his or her own characters and make it personal. It is an innovation in gaming activity where we could gather and find new people to play or just chat.

There is also virtual trading feature, making monster as pet, and representation of the world's cultures with varied audio background and audio special effects.

Visual of Ragnarok Online could explore the characters and environment almost 360° without changing camera position (isometric view) and without dilluting player's point of reference in viewing the game giving numerous information and sequential effects which is new for players. With *god mode* point of view, players could see all the process that happened in the



game without having to change their position unlike first person shooter or else. Every object in Ragnarok Online virtual world can be seen without wondering the scale or distance, every objects that in front of a character will be placed below the character and vice versa. There are almost none of a slight information will not be noticed by players of Ragnarok with this kind of visual language.

## 4. Conclusions

### 4.1 Gameplay Design & System

Character Design and Setting Design in Rune Midgard that attracts players are simply yet beautiful visualization. Different from Lee Myung-Jin's original & initial character design, the characters that we played have iconic appearance and in this game. The players have almost full authority to decide and customize the outcome of their avatar appearance with numerous optional combinations of sex, hair colour and hairdo at the beginning of the game. The options do not stop only at the beginning but also along the game, every player could add accessories and other equipment that could make differences in each avatar. Those design and environment setting are constantly updated with newest technology to minimize bugs and errors.

The possibility to customize their avatar's appearance and abundant of secrets and hints, encourage players to endlessly roam Ragnarok's Virtual world. Occasional events and features revitalized the will to explore and find new experiences through their own story. Reading a story is fun, but creating a story is hilarious. In order to do that, players must be given information as many as possible through visual language system.

Game system will enhance the stickiness of game design appeal especially when the control system and communication system in the game

is user friendly. Ragnarok Online is one of Online RPG game, which has the easiest control system. If the controlling system is complicated, no matter how good or appealing of a game is it will certainly being described as failed.

Other MMORPGs have applied higher technology with higher interface than Ragnarok Online such as Final Fantasy Online, Lineage II, Risk Your Life, et cetera. But none achieve more attention from wider market than Ragnarok Online. The game has accomplished awareness from people across target market border such as children and female because almost all games in the world are created for male teenagers. Some of the games that targeted wider than male customers gain some phenomenal acceptance such as The Sims.

Simple yet fun is the ultimate key of concept that has to obey in developing a game especially online game. Although the development of computer and Internet technology is vast and become more sophisticated, the core concept of successful game is still unchanged. There are so many online games that applied the newest and latest technology but unable to amaze players and make them stay in front of computer a little bit more. The possibility of players to explore more with full of enjoyment within a virtual world will be just a mere concept if that world do not applying human factor as gameplay constraint.

### 4.2 Virtual Community Development

Social interaction among players such as trading, group hunt, virtual disputes, conflicts and other activities are facilitated by Ragnarok Game developer and always updated based on market demands. The phenomenon will not occur only because the fun in virtual world. The representation system of Ragnarok Online game based on altered realistic social life did not stop in virtual world but re-present in real life and

that is the reason of the virtual phenomenon started.

The activities in games, which have interaction between players usually, give some social impact both in their habits and ways of communication in both game realm and real life. The life in game could act as social isolation or social inclusion and depends on each player's decision. It may create new social activities and new form of community, which could be a way to form self-esteem in communication. It may also create social barrier to common social life if a player could not be positioned fluidly.

The virtual sub-culture of the game generates new visual languages and semiotics that accumulate in virtual realm. The circuit of culture using language as central meaning opens the possibility to create values and meanings or visual social semiotics. This visual social semiotics in virtual realm represents through visual properties used by people in virtual realm. Virtual communication limited by bandwidth, resolution of visual interface and hardware to preserve the connection. Therefore to preserve the communication link in virtual world, people create visual meanings and values or visual social semiotics. In Ragnarok Online realm, visual social semiotics are created through emoticons, character properties, and other visual representations in the game.

Sometimes in offline communication among players, those visual representations and meanings transferred without any translation or interpretation. The juxtaposition of two sub-cultures creates a simultaneous transfer of meanings between both worlds through visual properties that creates new sub-culture, which is Real life "virtual" sub-culture. A culture that represents and merge both sub-cultures that some expert says "Hyper-realm" is a condition when people could not distinguished which

realm that they play or live in and mix both sub-cultures.

The activities that referring virtual social interactions and meanings, are brought to life and influence daily activities of online players. Juxtaposition of two realms emerges and may form another representation and started to begin a new circuit of culture. And a game that could give birth to a new culture that represents its virtual world in a real world is better and more likely to create a phenomenon than a game that represents the real social life in a game. It is the reality of virtual phenomenon.

#### **4.3. New Frontier in Virtual Media Design Subject**

Internet as the new media somehow opens the door to the new borderless world to explore. Some new theories regarding virtual media, media design, and media application keep updating and changing. The mix formulation with other subjects such as managements, cultures, and even morale and teology to adept the new frontier of Internet. Games are one of the tools to explore this new world, to expand the knowledge and understanding about this media. The relatively massive changing of this virtual media application needs more measurements system to develop especially in virtual media design interface and system. Certain methodology and terminology seem can not embrace the size of new world. When we talk about Ragnarok Online as one of successful phenomenon in virtual reality, the virtual reality itself has developed elsewhere.

Those combination for formulating general idea or concept to create successful visual entertainment product needs further research from wider spectrum of subjects such as marketing, graphic design, virtual media design, and culture. We may underline *culture* in this subject because this may becomes a basic



foundation for understanding keys of virtue in virtual realm.

### End Note:

- [1] Stewart, C., and Adam Kowaltzke, 1990. *Media, New Ways & Meanings* (p.180), John Wiley & Sons, Australia.
- [2] ---, September 2004. *Game Station Magazine* Vol.107.
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