

The (Drop) Party Revolution

Egalitarianism, Communitas, and Control in Jagex's RuneScape

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Egalitarianism, Communitas, and Control in Jagex's *RuneScape*

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Abstract

Egalitarianism is an essential prerequisite to, and direct consequence of, experiencing collective joy and Turner's *communitas* during parties. While arguably an essential characteristic of parties, egalitarianism can pose an unwelcome threat to established structures of hierarchy, and those who hold material and social power will often attempt to suppress or control the festivities to maintain the status quo. Interestingly, the threat of party egalitarianism and *communitas* also extends to player-created parties in non-party games, as evidenced by drop parties in the early years of the MMORPG *RuneScape* and Jagex's subsequent attempts to control drop partying. Using the infamous Pay to PK player riot of 2007 and the introduction of the Falador Party room as a case study, this paper examines the powerful relationship between egalitarianism, wealth redistribution, and the experience of collective joy at parties.

Keywords

Party studies; *communitas*; collective joy; *RuneScape*; MMORPG; player riot; Jagex

Party till you drop

The early 2000s was a good time to be a noob¹ in *RuneScape* (Jagex, 2001), one of the most popular massive, multiplayer, online role-playing games (MMORPG) at the turn of the millennium. With many skills to level up, quests to complete, and friends to make, there was plenty for new players to occupy themselves with as they adventured through the charming fantasy world of Gielinor. To improve one's abilities (and gain prestige within the community), players could certainly follow the MMORPG genre conventions of repetitive grinding to level up, such as chopping the same trees repeatedly to increase their woodcutting skill. While this time-

1 A 'noob' is an unflattering word for new, inexperienced players within many online gaming communities.

consuming and monotonous method of player progression was an intentional part of the game's design and was certainly enjoyed by many players – present author included – there existed another, alternative path that could catapult a new player from poverty to wealth with just a few lucky clicks: drop parties.

In their earliest form, drop parties involved one or more wealthy, high-level players manually dropping items on the ground for a group of other (usually new) players to race one another to pick up. Some of these items were common and low value; others were worthless junk. Critically, however, drop parties promised at least some of the dropped items would be extremely valuable: high-level gear, stacks of gold coins, and coveted discontinued items a player could sell for millions. While these early events were largely spontaneous affairs, drop parties eventually gained enough popularity to become daily celebrations across the many worlds² of *RuneScape*, planned in advance by players and advertised on official game forums or in populated areas in-game.

Players hosted drop parties to celebrate all manner of milestones, from their real-world birthdays to reaching max level in a particular skill. One of the most common reasons for hosting a drop party was, in fact, quitting the game; quitting players used drop parties as a method of redistributing the wealth they had amassed over their *RuneScape* journey to lower-level players before logging out for the last time. The practice was embedded into *RuneScape*'s culture by the mid-aughts, and seeking out drop parties became a viable alternative method of increasing one's level and wealth. Players established entire communities centered around drop parties, with the goal of "spreading wealth to lower-level players so they can level up and afford better gear" ('Drop party', n.d.). Invented, popularized, and sustained by players, drop parties were celebratory events defined by the redistribution of wealth between players.

I was lucky enough to stumble upon a drop party early on in my *RuneScape* career – then marked by low levels, poor equipment, and poverty – and the festivities changed the course of my *RuneScape* life forever. I encountered a long train of revelers on the road between the two major cities of Falador and Varrock. At the front of the wandering line was a max-level player, adorned with armor and weapons collectively worth nearly a billion gold pieces, who invited me to join his birthday festivities. After finding a few more partygoers, our leader turned north into the woods. As he and two friends prepared items for dropping, the rest of us talked, drank beer, lit campfires, and cycled through different "dance" emotes. Relegated as I was to the activities and locations typical of lower-level players, this was the first time I socially engaged with higher-level players for an extended period. I had the distinct sense that my newness and lowliness did not matter to the others for once; the other low-level players and I were never condescended for being "noobs" as we often were in other situations.

2 Each server is referred to as a 'world' in *RuneScape*.

We revelers stood together in silent anticipation as the campfires turned to ash. Once the preparations were complete, the leader and his friends began running around wildly – they had begun dropping items. After a minute, the items appeared to the rest of us, and we raced to pick them up. It was chaotic, spontaneous, and undeniably joyful. I distinctly remember the thrill of sprinting through the forest as fast as I could, laughing to myself, grabbing everything from cheap tin ore to a valuable dragon scimitar I was far too under-leveled to actually use. Our group was small enough (and our hosts generous enough) that there was an abundance of items, which meant we all walked away with something of value.

The leader and his friends cheered us on, though they left soon after the race finished; they were going to pick up more items from the bank and change worlds to host another birthday drop party for a new group. All of us were given an open invitation to the next party, but most of us chose to linger, socializing and swapping the items we'd just gathered. I traded the scimitar for things I would later sell to purchase better gear for myself, allowing me to rapidly advance a few levels. More important than the material wealth, however, was the social connection: I added a few usernames to my friends list and later adventured with some of the players I'd met during the drop party. During the (albeit digital) drinking, dancing, and gifting of valuable items at my first drop party, the hierarchies of wealth, skill, and level melted away to create a temporary community of equals. The egalitarian spirit of drop parties facilitated the shared experience of collective joy and merrymaking – a phenomenon the anthropologist Victor Turner describes as *communitas*.

The suspension of hierarchy is a necessary component for the experience of *communitas*. In his book, *The Ritual Process*, Turner argues that human culture cyclically moves between two primary states: structure, which relates to hierarchy, and anti-structure, the latter of which Turner develops into his concept of *communitas*. To understand *communitas*, one must first understand structure. Turner (1969, p. 96) argues that a culture's structure refers to its hierarchies and rules, which construct political, legal, and economic systems within a particular society. Broadly speaking, the structure of a culture dictates the "arrangement of positions or statuses" (Turner, 1969, p. 126) between people. In the real world, one's position within society can be obvious or subtle, built on multiple intersecting social hierarchies with varying degrees of visibility. The digital cultures of MMORPGs like *RuneScape* also construct player status through many different metrics, but most straightforwardly position players by displaying their character's level – there is no avoiding the hierarchical arrangement, as it is visibly embedded into the game's user interface (see Figure 1). Regardless of whether a culture operates in a digital space or the real world, our lives and livelihoods are often dictated by cultural rules and structures.

If structure refers to the persistent, institutionalized, rule-based hierarchies that define a culture or a game, *communitas* is the opposite: fluid, spontaneous, and egalitarian, "emerging where social structure is not" (Turner, 1969, p. 126) and creating a "communion of equal individuals" (1969, p. 96). When we experience com-



Figure 1. Screenshot of *Old School RuneScape* usernames and player levels. © Jagex

munitas during parties, we are no longer segmented into the various structures of culture but instead *with* one another, rather than above or below. I certainly felt as if I was *with* the other players during my first drop party, rather than below them in level and status. Turner theorizes that this ritualized, temporary egalitarianism serves as an outlet for disenfranchised, low-status individuals who suffer under everyday structures of hierarchy.³ Communitas thus keeps a culture “from becoming overly rigid and unstable by providing occasional relief [from structure] in the form of collective excitement and festivity” (Ehrenreich, 2006, p. 11). The drop party inspired this feeling of communitas, allowing us partygoers to temporarily exist outside of the game’s usual structure.

Alas, we could not party forever. The drop party ended and the ecstatic joy of communitas ceded to the game’s hierarchical structure; I returned to my lowly status of noob, but I was a much richer one with substantially more friends. The collective joy created by the drop party may have been temporary, but the increased degree of egalitarianism between me and other players was not. Over my decade-long (2002–2012) *RuneScape* career, drop parties served as a delightful respite of com-

3 This ‘safety valve’ theory of festivals has been echoed by other scholars such as Roger Caillois (1938/1959), Mircea Eliade (1957/1959), and Max Gluckmann (1954), each noting that these festivals, religious rituals, and parties provide people with temporary relief from the structure of hierarchy, making it more palatable in day-to-day life, and directs their passions toward playfulness instead of drumming up revolution. Klaniczay (1990) provides a helpful overview of these theories.

munitas and egalitarianism as I otherwise endured the long, usual grind of the game in my pursuit of increased levels and upward socioeconomic mobility.

Despite the ubiquity of drop parties during the 2000s, they are nearly extinct today. The current player base of *Old School RuneScape* (Jagex, 2013) is markedly smaller than it was in the aughts and is largely composed of seasoned players; the rare drop parties that occur today merely shuffle wealth among the alternate accounts of long-term players rather than meaningfully boost the status of new players. The drop parties of yore now serve as a powerful source of nostalgia for players – visiting the game’s official Discord server and searching for ‘drop parties’ brings up comments from players who remember the celebrations fondly and remark sadly on the disappearance. Similarly, entering the term ‘drop party’ into a search engine now results in forum posts such as “Where all the drop party’s like the old days?” (Alternative_Bank7115, 2024) and “Drop Parties: Do they still exist... I miss the old school drop parties, I was just wondering if they still happen as you rarely see them anymore” (DominoDaddy, 2022). Drop parties do not occur with the same frequency they used to, whereas in the past they “were such a huge thing they happened almost daily” (Disnerd8319, 2018, Official *RuneScape* Discord). It would be one matter if the player-created practice slowly faded away as the culture of *RuneScape* evolved and the player base gradually diminished; but drop parties did not have a natural death.

Marked by developer crackdowns and player riots, the history of *RuneScape* drop parties is a turbulent one and runs strikingly parallel to the fates of many other festive practices in the real world. Festivals and parties have been suppressed or controlled by ruling powers throughout history, a phenomenon observed by historians and anthropologists alike,⁴ since the creation of egalitarianism through *communitas* challenges the rules and hierarchies underpinning our everyday cultural structures. Taylor provides an explanation for this oppressive behavior, noting how “from the perspectival viewpoint of those concerned with the maintenance of ‘structure,’ all sustained manifestations of *communitas* must appear as dangerous and anarchical, and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions” (1969, p. 108). Naturally concerned with the structure and hierarchical rules of *RuneScape* was, of course, the studio that developed the game – and Jagex’s management of drop parties, especially during the infamous “Pay to PK” player riot of 2007, illustrates how the threat of egalitarianism created during festive occasions can extend to player-created parties in digital games.

Using *RuneScape*’s drop parties as a case study, I argue that egalitarianism is an essential prerequisite to, and direct consequence of, experiencing collective joy within party contexts. To outline the rise and fall of *RuneScape*’s drop parties, I combine the methods of participant-observation – largely conducted during the aughts

4 See Burke, Chapters 7-9; Davis, Chapters 4-6; Ehrenreich, 2006; Stallybrass and White, 1986; Thompson, Chapters 12 and 16.

when drop parties were at the peak of their popularity – with an online ethnographic analysis of official and unofficial game forums, fan wikis, Jagex's update and patch notes, and the game's official Discord server. Much like parties in the real world, *RuneScape*'s drop parties threatened the game's underlying hierarchical rule structure by establishing egalitarianism and were similarly subjected to suppression and control. Ultimately, the fun of a party – both virtual and physical ones – relies on the temporary suspension of hierarchical structure to facilitate shared joy that can only arise within a community of equals.

Parties, status, and resource exchange

Most multiplayer games employ straightforward hi-score and ranking systems, such as multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs) like *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) or fighting games like the *Mortal Kombat* series (Midway Games, 1992–present). Unlike other multiplayer games, MMORPGs like *RuneScape* establish structural hierarchies between players based on multiple intersecting layers. The most obvious structure of hierarchy relates to player level, usually prominently displayed next to their username. However, a player's position within the rule-based hierarchy of an MMORPG can also depend on the strength and value of their weapons, armor, and other items; how much money they've acquired; how large and opulent their house is; the guild or clan they belong to; their reputation with non-player character (NPC) factions; and the titles, items, or rank they've earned through completing quests or challenges. Most of these structural layers are visible to other players and thus communicate messages about social status as well as material power.

While the player's level and status are recorded and displayed by the game system itself in many cases, the social dimension of MMORPGs adds additional complexity to the underlying power structures of these games. In his discussion of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, game scholar Scott Rettberg explains how

a player's performance is also measured informally by his or her fellow players, particularly fellow guild members ... The types of ways players evaluate other players might range from their ability to effectively perform a given task during a raid, to their generosity... or their adherence to complex systems of social mores and etiquette. (2008, p. 8)

Where a player exists within the complex hierarchy of an MMORPG can have serious consequences: for example, *Guild Wars 2* was dominated by competitive guilds with rigid power structures that accepted new players only by application. Once initiated into a guild, members had to achieve a certain skill level and adhere to "in-game equipment standards established by guild leaders" or risk being booted (Perez, 2015, p. 5). These implicit social hierarchies, when combined with the hierarchies codified and made explicit by the game's rules, renders the player's status

within an MMORPG arguably just as complicated as our status within the structures of real life. While this may seem like awfully high stakes, the hierarchical system established by MMORPGs is part of their appeal.

Unlike the real world, where upward socioeconomic movement is often more dream than reality, MMORPGs promise players “a capitalist fairytale, in which anyone who works hard and strives enough can rise through the ranks of society and acquire great wealth” (Rettberg, 2008, p. 3). Money, once obtained, can be used to purchase expensive items, titles, pets, homes, and other prestigious objects, which can be equipped or flaunted as a way of increasing one’s social status. For example, once a player reaches the maximum level in *RuneScape*, they often turn to investing copious amounts of money and time to buy stylish (and sometimes useless) outfits for their avatar as a way of continuing their upward movement in the game’s social hierarchy.⁵ Given the symbolically charged nature of possessing and wearing rare, expensive items in *RuneScape*, the phenomena (and subsequent popularity) of drop parties – where low-status players can acquire expensive, status-boosting items with little to no effort – seems altogether incongruous with the underlying hierarchical structure of the MMORPG genre and the satisfaction that results from working hard to obtain these items within a “capitalist fairytale.” However, drop parties could hardly be deemed parties at all if they weren’t marked by the joyful redistribution of material wealth in pursuit of egalitarianism, collective joy, and social bonding.

Parties, festivals, and other ritualistic social gatherings have long served as methods of facilitating the exchange of resources between people. The Roman festival of Saturnalia began with a grand public feast hosted by the Roman state at the Temple of Saturn, followed by private banquets and gift-giving between friends and relatives (Blake, 2011, p. 366; Miller, 2010). During the Incan festival of Inti Raymi – still celebrated today – the sharing of food and other resources between people continues to support community bonding (Mars, 2010, p. 42). Many indigenous peoples living in the American Pacific Northwest hold gift-giving ritual feasts called *potlatches*, where rich⁶ hosts give away material goods such as food and other items of value to earn status within their community (Barnett, 1978; Boas, 1978). While a plethora of historical examples abound, one need not investigate the past for evidence of the connection between parties and the redistribu-

5 This phenomenon is referred to within the *RuneScape* community as ‘FashionScape’.

6 It is worth noting that the accumulation of wealth among Indigenous people in the Pacific Northwest was done for the explicit purpose of “publicly disposing of wealth... Accumulation in any quantity by borrowing or otherwise is, in fact, unthinkable unless it be for the purpose of an immediate re-distribution” (Barnett, 1978, p. 86). Possessing wealth was desirable only because it facilitated the hosting of festivals (Boas, 1978, p. 74). While the economic structure of these Northwest tribes was markedly different from our modern-day economic system, and thus terms like ‘wealthy’ and ‘poor’ do not convey precisely the same meaning in these differing contexts, I still employ them here for brevity’s sake.

tion of material resources – if you’ve attended a birthday party, wedding, or potluck, you know gift-giving and sharing food characterize most parties. In fact, resource redistribution is considered such a fundamental aspect of parties that failing to provide food for guests or bring gifts for the host is usually indicative of dreadfully bad manners (Post, 1955). Certainly, gift-giving, sharing food, and the general exchange of resources are, and likely always have been, core components of parties and festivals (Masek & Stenros, 2024; Turner, 1982).

Though the exchange of resources at a party often occurs between people occupying similar socioeconomic strata – as many of us can attest to from family Christmases and other holidays – it’s important to acknowledge that parties often explicitly and intentionally facilitate the redistribution of wealth *between* classes. For example, before the economic strain of the Black Death, noble families in Europe would host occasional holiday or celebratory feasts for the peasants who lived and worked on their estates (Woolgar, 2011, p. 15). A modern, familiar example of parties facilitating the distribution of resources between rich and poor are charity balls and galas, attended by wealthy patrons who understand the very pretense of the party means they are expected to donate money to a social cause or charitable organization. However, far from performing an equalizing function, some parties – like potlatches and charity balls – serve as opportunities for wealthy, high-status individuals to exchange some of their material power for increased social power, rather than inspire true egalitarianism. In these instances, parties become tools to accentuate a culture’s structure, rather than subvert it through *communitas*. While the redistribution of resources is arguably a core characteristic of parties, if this redistribution is performed to emphasize rather than diminish differences between participants, the party fails to create the egalitarianism necessary for the experience of collective joy.

I attended many drop parties over my years of playing *RuneScape*, and while I left all of them with a newly full inventory, only some managed to instill that same sense of shared euphoria I felt so deeply during my first. I recall several unfun drop parties spoiled by a spell called Telekinetic Grab, which allowed players to ‘cheat’ by picking up items from a considerable distance, removing the need to run around for items. These drop parties took on a competitive edge, pitting players against one another rather than bringing them together; rarely would everyone in attendance have a Magic level (or the required runes)⁷ to cast the spell, so the playing field was never truly equal. Telekinetic Grab became an unwelcome imposition of hierarchical structure, a reminder that other players had privileges that I did not. In fact, Telekinetic Grab became such a common issue during drop parties that Jagex decided to intervene, creating an empty building in the town of Seers’ Village where the spell was disabled for players to host fairer drop parties. Notably, Seers’

7 Runes (of which there are many types) are consumable items in *RuneScape* used to cast magic spells.

Village is an area exclusive to paying members – free-to-play players did not benefit from this addition and were still subjected to “telegrabbing” spoilsports.

‘Telegrabbing’ was also disabled inside player-owned homes, private spaces only accessible to others by invitation, so some players adapted by hosting exclusive drop parties. Previously, drop parties began with “massive amounts of players following one another in a massive train telling everyone about the drop party about to occur” (RuneScape Classic Fandom Wiki, “Drop party”), where all players were welcomed to spontaneously join in regardless of level or social status. By contrast, drop parties hosted in another player’s home usually required some degree of preexisting connections with higher-level players. For example, a mutual friend invited me to a drop party in the house of a max-level player (level 126), and while I had participated in countless drop parties – my main account was in the mid-70s by this point – the party unfolded in an unfamiliar manner. Rather than chatting with other players as we wandered aimlessly in a line to collect more revelers, my friend and I stood still with a group of strangers as the partygoers teleported in. Our host graciously traded us food and drink as we waited, and some attendees (including my friend) contributed an item to be distributed at the drop party. We were encouraged to wander around and “enjoy ourselves” before the party began; I marveled at our host’s lavish rooms and furnishings. When the drop party began, I quickly realized that every one of the dropped items held considerable value, which lessened the excitement and surprise of picking up the items.

Our host was much like a wealthy philanthropist hosting a charity gala to bolster their social status; sometimes, drop parties were occasions for high-level players to flaunt their wealth, play at magnanimity, and instill awe in others. High-status players, who occupy a privileged position within the game’s hierarchy, were the ones initiating drop parties because they had amassed the required wealth to give away. However, not all drop parties resulted in the kind of wealth redistribution necessary for the creation of egalitarianism. For example, in exclusive drop parties in player homes, guests were typically high-status players themselves and were expected to contribute items to the item pool. In these instances, drop parties merely shifted wealth between rich players, and the occasion primarily served as a method of strengthening the host’s social status. By contrast, the spontaneous, non-exclusive drop parties were open to all players and resulted in meaningful wealth redistribution between high-status players and low-status players. In my experience, drop parties in player homes were not very fun when compared to those I stumbled upon.

What was the difference, then, between the dullness of this house drop party and the thrill of my first? What was the fun of drop partying?

We can't have fun together unless we're equals

Structurally, parties and other celebrations are characterized by a few fundamental elements: music, dancing, the sharing of food and drink, as well as costuming and self-decoration (Ehrenreich, 2006; Turner, 1982). These elements combine to perform a critical function of parties: facilitating social connection and bonding between strangers, family and friends, and with the community at large (Masek & Strenros, 2024). While the presence of these foundational components may define a party (and are often present in other adjacent practices like rituals, celebrations, and ceremonies) they do not necessarily dictate whether the participants find the party fun, engaging, or socially satisfying. It is entirely possible to have a terrible time at a party. What separates enjoyable parties from unenjoyable ones is how well the party performs the function of facilitating social interaction, connection, and bonding. If a party successfully brings a group of people together – or masses of people, as in the case of festivals – they are collectively joyful. The fun of parties is deeply rooted in the joy of being together.

Perhaps because of its ubiquity, the phenomenon of collective joy has been given many different names throughout time. I am using the phrase “collective joy” after historian and author Barbara Ehrenreich, who defines it as the “incommunicable thrill of the group deliberately united in joy and exaltation” (2006, p. 16). She observes how collective joy occurs during parties, festivals, and ceremonies; when the joy extends to all participants, the collective experience results in the creation of powerful social bonds and a strengthened community. Sociologist Emile Durkheim also recognizes the thrill of being together: “the very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation” (1915, p. 217). Though Durkheim’s work is primarily occupied with the social origins of religion, it’s worth highlighting that he also notices how collective joy acts as a vehicle for cementing social bonds and assisting in the formation of new ones. He refers to the experience as “collective effervescence,” which he describes as ritually induced, collective euphoria and exaltation – akin to Ehrenreich’s description. The euphoria of collective joy, in Victor Turner’s view, was a product of specifically *spontaneous*⁸ or party-created *communitas*, “richly charged with affects, mainly pleasurable ones... [it] has something ‘magical’ about it. Subjectively there is in it the feeling of endless power” (1969, p.

8 Turner believes there are three kinds of *communitas*: spontaneous, normative, and ideological. He is straightforward in his description of the latter two, with normative *communitas* referring to that which eventually becomes structure, and ideological *communitas* referring to a purely utopian society. However, he provides a vague, flippant description for spontaneous *communitas*: “approximately what the hippies today would call ‘a happening,’ and William Blake might have called ‘the winged moment as it flies’ or, later, ‘mutual forgiveness of each vice’” (1969, p. 132). While the poetry is perhaps best left up to the interpretation of the reader, “a happening” during the 1960s (when Turner was writing) was slang for a party.

139). Taken together, Turner, Durkheim, and Ehrenreich all point to a few key conditions for the experience of collective joy: first, it occurs during ritualized spaces like parties; second, it relies on a group of people coming together; and third, if it is experienced, it has sincere power, creating strong social bonds between revelers and forming communities.

One of Turner's contemporaries, the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, outlines a fourth and final requirement for the experience of collective joy. In *Rebelais and His World*, Bakhtin analyzes the relationship between carnivals, laughter, and ritual inversion. He calls collective joy "the laughter of all the people" (1965/1984, p. 12) and emphasizes the equalizing function of the experience, writing that "not only does laughter make no exception for the upper stratum, but indeed it is usually directed toward it... One might say that it builds its own world versus the official world" (1965/1984, p. 88). In this world of laughter there is "a temporary suspension of the entire official system with all its prohibitions and hierarchic barriers. For a short time life came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom" (1965/1984, p. 89). Bakhtin views folk festivals, carnivals, and parties as an almost utopian ideal, firmly based in equality and resulting in the "abolition of alienation" (1965/1984, p. 10) between people. Turner, too, realizes the egalitarianism present in playful rituals and the worlds of laughter they create, referring to participants as "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention... [they] tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized" (1969, p. 95). Once again, the ritual suspension of the rules of normal life creates an egalitarianism between revelers. Both Turner and Bakhtin view joyful ritual practices like carnivals, parties, and festivals as expressions of collectivism and community that directly defy the hierarchical structures of socioeconomic power that dictate day-to-day life. When parties do successfully contest normal hierarchical structures, they create a temporary new world in which we can experience collective joy together as equals, and we achieve one of the "highest aims of human existence" – at least according to Bakhtin (1965/1984, p. 9). Experiencing collective joy therefore relies on the creation of a temporary world, one that dissolves the alienating structures of hierarchy and establishes an egalitarian community instead. How is this "utopian" world of laughter thus created?

The creation of a temporary world set apart from normal reality is frequently referred to within game studies as *the magic circle*,⁹ within which the rules of reality

9 While the concept of the magic circle has been subjected to rigorous criticism and reinvention within game studies over the last two decades, and the applicability of the concept to formal, structured games remains contested, it is important to remember that when Johan Huizinga originally introduces the phrase "magic circle" in *Homo Ludens* (1938/2016, p. 20), he does so to emphasize the fact that play and ritual are, in essence, the same. The magic circle thus proves applicable to parties as playful rituals (or, alternatively, as a type of ritualized play).

are suspended and replaced by the rules of play (or, as Turner would likely describe it, the temporary abandonment of structure in favor of *communitas*). In their discussion of the magic circle, game designers Salen and Zimmerman (2006) emphasize that it is players themselves who construct and maintain the border of the magic circle, which delineates between the temporary world of play and the real world. Similarly, experiencing the joy of *communitas* during a party relies on the revelers themselves collectively agreeing on how and where to draw the (albeit imperfect) border between structure/hierarchy and anti-structure/*communitas*. No one individual can create a temporary world, impose it on others, and still facilitate collective joy; a party then becomes a spectacle and a tool of control, rather than a shared experience. The world of a party must be mutually agreed upon and created together, or not at all. The fourth and final condition for the experience of collective joy, then, is the *collaborative* drawing of a magic circle within which hierarchy is replaced with egalitarianism.

When all four conditions for collective joy are met – namely, when a group of people come together to collaboratively create a ritual space within which the hierarchies of normal life are suspended in favor of egalitarianism – we exist in *communitas*, experiencing an exalted, euphoric fun that unites us and forges strong social bonds. A party is fun when it inspires this sense of collective joy; my first drop party was fun because it temporarily diminished the structural hierarchies embedded into the rule system of *RuneScape*. By contrast, the use of Telekinetic Grab and the status-boosting affairs of player-hosted drop parties were unfun precisely because they reinforced the game's structure rather than offering relief from it. When high-status, wealthy players used drop parties as a method of *reducing* their privilege through giving away valuable items, they narrowed the gap between rich and poor and reminded us that we were all equally worthy of status.

Essentially, drop parties were fun when they facilitated social bonding through the generous redistribution of wealth and subsequent creation of egalitarianism. Games that emphasize differences between players, like *RuneScape*, encourage a degree of competitiveness that is not conducive to egalitarianism and social bonding,¹⁰ but for *RuneScape* players unconcerned with achievement and progression, drop parties established the egalitarianism necessary to serve as “instruments for generating social connection” (Stenros & Masek, p. 84). Drop parties helped fulfill one of the primary player motivations behind playing MMORPGs like *RuneScape*: socializing, making friends, and collaborating with others (Yee, 2005). Player enjoyment and engagement in MMORPGs “is greatly enhanced when the game provides

10 Game designer Greg Costikyan provides examples of such unfun scenarios: “if your older brother always beats you in a footrace, you will quickly lose interest in playing with him. If your friend Jessica always wants to be the princess and insists that you must belong to the supporting cast – prince, ogre, ugly stepsister – and particularly if she never permits a reversal in the story whereby her premier status is overturned – you will want to find another way to play” (2013, pp. 9–10).

opportunities for pleasurable social interactions such as grouping and socializing, resulting in the formation of social ties" (Chen et al., 2006, p. 265). Of course, the social bonding facilitated by the creation of egalitarianism during drop parties openly defied the game's rigid and competitive hierarchical structure. As the founders of the hierarchical system of *RuneScape*, Jagex was understandably preoccupied with maintaining the structure of the game – a structure threatened by the *communitas* of drop parties.

The (drop) party revolution

By all indications, Jagex initially supported drop parties. The introduction of the Seers' Village party hall, where Telekinetic Grab was disabled, proved that Jagex aimed to preserve at least some of the egalitarianism of drop parties. Eventually, Jagex shuttered the Seers' Village space to introduce the Falador Party Room (see Figure 2) in a free-to-play location within Gielinor. Unlike the empty room in Seers' Village, the Falador Party Room had a festive atmosphere, complete with dancing knights and decorations. However, all drop parties held in the Falador Party Room followed the same prescribed format: instead of dropping items themselves, players donated items to a chest and had to spend 1,000 gold coins to start the party. Items dropped from the ceiling within balloons, and players would pop these balloons to acquire a random item placed in the chest. The Falador Party Room structured a previously spontaneous and participatory form of revelry, and drop parties



Figure 2. Screenshot of the *Old School RuneScape* Falador Party Room ('Falador Party Room', n.d.). © Jagex

became yet another victim of the longstanding tradition of ruling powers attempting to control and co-opt festive practices which create egalitarianism.

Historically, the infusion of structure into parties and festivals was a common strategy employed by ruling classes threatened by masses of people united in ecstasy. The “endless power” of these unified communities provided opportunities to reimagine power structures and ways of organizing society, thus presenting a threat to prevailing structures. Turner (1982) explains that during joyous celebrations, “Previous habits of thought, feeling, and action are disrupted. [Revelers] are thus forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain these” (p. 204). The egalitarian world of parties offers revelers a chance to reflect on the norms of real life and assess whether the current structures of society are, in fact, desirable. As parties, festivals, and carnival facilitate social bonding and joy through the creation of egalitarianism, these ritual practices are antithetical to hierarchical structures.

Recall that, according to Turner, structure refers to the “segmented, and often hierarchical system of institutionalized positions” (1969, p. 177) which exists in direct opposition to *communitas*, which is characterized by “homogeneity, equality, anonymity” (1969, p. 111). Boundaries between individuals are dissolved in *communitas* and “a group unity is experienced, a kind of generic bond outside the constraints of social structure” (Turner, 1982, p. 205). For as long as the party lasts, we are “undifferentiated, [a] homogenous whole... not ‘segmentalized’ into statuses and roles” that functionally separate us from one another (Turner, 1969, p. 177), which allows us to “experience one another concretely, and not in terms of social structural abstractions” (Turner, 1982, p. 205). When we experience *communitas* during a party, our individual identities are subsumed into that of the crowd; we exist as a small part of a greater whole, *with* one another rather than above or below. While revelers are still aware of one another’s existence, this dissolution of self into a powerful mass is critically important to the creation of egalitarianism. The anonymity of operating as part of a larger group emboldens people to act in ways they may never attempt to as an individual, such as violating and challenging structural power. To avoid any threat to hierarchy, then, unity must be prevented – and structure, with its emphasis on segmentation and separation, turns a party into a spectacle and a homogenous crowd into an audience.

A crowd participates, but an audience watches – usually in darkness, gaze focused on the bright light of the stage rather than on one another. Individuals within an audience are “unaware of other spectators except as a mass... caught up in the speech, the spectacle, the performance” (Ehrenreich, p. 187). Spectacles are isolating; talking during most performances is considered rude and disruptive, so audience members are discouraged from communicating with one another. Spectacles immobilize us, forcing us to quietly sit in seats or stand aside, watching the show rather than being part of it. A party, however, invites participation and prompts us all to share food and drink, dance, give gifts, and play music. Spectacle is, ulti-

mately, a performance to be consumed by the masses, “designed by a small group of leaders for the edification of the many” (Ehrenreich, 2006, p. 186). Spectacle reinforces social hierarchies, whereas parties, festivals, and the carnivalesque invert and mock these structures (Bahktin, 1965/1984). Though likely unintentional, Jagex’s introduction of the Falador Party Room made a spectacle of drop parties by infusing them with structure.

Jagex introduced the Falador Party Room in anticipation of a major change to the game’s structure. On December 10th, 2007, Jagex announced that they were implementing a trade limit, intended to both curb real-world trading¹¹ and prevent “unbalanced” trading. One of the changes introduced with the trade limit related to dropped items: now, only items with a market value of 3,000 gold coins or less would become visible to other players when dropped, so no meaningful wealth redistribution could occur. This eliminated drop parties outside of the confines of the Falador Party Room. Most *RuneScape* players were outraged by these (and other) changes in the update, arguing that the trade limit update prevented “larger gifts from being given to others, and reduces the amount of help that can be provided to fellow players” (‘Trade limit’, n.d.). Players could no longer trade valuable items between their own accounts, gift their friends, or kill one another in the Wilderness¹² to acquire the loser’s dropped loot. The ‘Trade and Drop Changes’ update forcibly removed the mechanism that allowed for the creation of egalitarianism through wealth redistribution and was immediately met with player protest.

The ensuing player riots, now referred to as the ‘Pay to Pk Riot’, remain “one of the largest, longest, and most impactful player unrests against Jagex in the history of the game” (‘Pay to PK Riot’, n.d.), as players protested not only the trade limit, but a whole series of unwanted updates. The riot was dispersed at first, occurring across multiple worlds, although eventually Worlds 18, 66, and 69 became protests hubs; these servers were almost always at the maximum capacity of 2,000 players for the week of the riot with the exception of the first night, when players staged a mass log-off (‘Pay to PK Riot’, n.d.). It was, to my recollection, utter chaos in the spirit of the carnivalesque – and exceptionally fun.

I first encountered the rioters in the city of Falador, a popular spot for trading at the time.¹³ While it was normal for Falador to have a high concentration of players, there was such an enormous crowd of players simultaneously speaking that their words overlapped into unreadable blocks of text. I had to leave the area to ask a

11 This refers to the practice of spending real-world money on virtual in-game items, accounts, and currency. Real-world trading is prohibited in the Terms of Service of most digital games.

12 The Wilderness was a dedicated player-versus-player area.

13 The Grand Exchange (a location in the city of Varrock which functions as an auction/trading system) had been introduced only a few days prior to the riot, and so at the time of the Trade and Drop Changes announcement, Falador city park remained one of the most popular spots for trading.

friend about the crowd, and she informed me of the updates and the burgeoning protest. Without further delay, I returned to join in: we mocked, insulted, and laughed at Jagex, engaging in carnival laughter through provoking those in power. I remember swarming a moderator who dared enter the fray in Falador's main square, berating them for the changes alongside the other players in the mob. Some players set up auto-firing cannons and clockwork toys to intentionally create disorder, while others released origami balloons and dropped a truly absurd number of useless items. Players killed themselves so gravestones would appear through the city, a behavior that transgressed normal day-to-day practices like the initial mass log-off. Within two days, the riot had spread to other cities; players showed their support for the protest by wearing pink skirts or 'full pink', which became the unofficial riot outfit ('Pay to PK Riot', n.d.).

Notably, the riot also had spectacular drop parties; as one player put it in the official *RuneScape* Discord, "Ain't no parties like the 2007 pay to pk riot drop parties" (Tweester, 2020). Since dropped items over 3,000 gold coins no longer appeared to other players outside of the Party Room, all drop parties were restricted to the new building. The drop parties were nearly continuous during the riot in the three protest worlds, and featured the most expensive, legendary items I'd ever seen. Players put billions of gold pieces, party hats (the most expensive item in the game at the time), and other ridiculously valuable items into the party chest. Players were shedding their wealth in unprecedented numbers, as many claimed they were quitting to protest the changes.

The Pay to PK Riot featured wealth redistribution, costuming, transgressive behaviors, carnival laughter, and the temporary suspension of normal day-to-day practices: it was a carnival. Parties, festivals, and carnival are regular sites of social upheaval. Cultural theorists Stallybrass and White note that:

It is in fact striking how frequently violent social clashes apparently 'co-incided' with carnival... it was only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—and then only in certain areas—that one can reasonably talk of popular politics *disassociated* from the carnivalesque at all. (1986, p. 14, emphasis in original)

While many of these revelrous uprisings were spontaneous, intentionally planned revolts associated with carnival and festival practices emerged during the sixteenth century (Ehrenreich, 2006). Parties provided advantageous conditions for those seeking rebellion: dancing, music, and drunkenness created disorder, masking and costuming granted anonymity, and the forbidden play¹⁴ of egalitarianism promp-

14 This refers to any kind of play involving transgressive behavior, often explicitly contesting the accepted and expected behaviors of the real world. Game scholar Cindy Poremba describes forbidden play as pitting the "rules from each 'reality' in collision to each other, challenging the integrity of the boundary between worlds" (2007, p. 773). Poremba explains that this collision usually occurs when the implicit rules of the ludic

ted reflection on the “natural” order of hierarchy. Understandably, when masses of people gathered as equals, joyfully uniting through challenging structures of hierarchy, those positioned at the very top of structural hierarchies found much cause for concern. In Europe, Church authorities, as well as monarchs and nobles, sought to suppress and control any joyful practices that spurred collective joy and, consequently, inspired egalitarianism.

The strong association between peasant uprisings and parties, festivals, and carnival led to a concerted “wave of repression” beginning in the seventeenth century (Ehrenreich, 2006, p. 97). Until the twentieth century,

... there were literally thousands of acts of legislation introduced which attempted to eliminate carnival and popular festivity from European life. In different areas of Europe the pace varied, depending upon religious, class and economic factors. But everywhere, against the periodic revivals of local festivity and occasional reversals [of structural power], a fundamental ritual order of western culture came under attack—its feasting, violence, drinking, processions, faires, wakes, rowdy spectacle and outrageous clamor were subject to surveillance and repressive control. (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 176)

From Russia to Scotland and further south into the Mediterranean, ruling classes targeted traditional festivities, sports of every kind from football to boxing, saints’ days, and Christian holiday celebrations deemed too unruly. For example, the maypole – long associated with festivities in English and French culture – became such a symbol of defiance against prevailing hierarchical orders that they were regularly torn down before peasants could congregate, experience collective joy, and risk developing egalitarian aspirations.¹⁵ To the common person, “it must have seemed as if pleasure itself had been declared illegal” (Ehrenreich, 2006, p. 100), as “almost every possible occasion for revelry and play” was “denounced and often banned outright” (2006, p. 98). For *RuneScape* players at the end of 2007, the “Trade and Drop Changes” update evoked a similar feeling; no longer could players revel with one another freely, subjected instead to the rigid structure of the Falador Party Room.

world are put in conflict with the implicit rules of reality; in our present discussion, this occurs as the egalitarian rule of parties colliding with the hierarchies embedded into the structure of normal life. Forbidden play thus has “critical potential” to say something about society as it encourages partiers to look back on normal life to criticize it, and in the process of doing so, can disintegrate the boundary between play and the real.

- 15 Beyond the threat of egalitarianism, there were other reasons for the rigorous and extended attempts at suppression, such as the Calvinist obsession with work and conflation of leisure with sin, the increasing work hours resulting from industrialization, and the introduction of bourgeois, rather than entrepreneur, capitalism (Ehrenreich, 2006; Stallybrass & White, 1986; Weber, 1930/2005).

Jagex did respond to the carnivalesque protestations of their players once the riots died down; in the case of drop parties, Jagex acknowledged that hosting drop parties was a “popular activity” and advised players to continue the practice within the Falador Party Room (Jagex, 2007). Players hosted parties there for a while, but drop parties were never quite the same after the riot. Since any player could place items in the chest and the drops were no longer curated by an individual or small group, there was a much higher ratio of useless to valuable items; the Party Room did not facilitate meaningful wealth redistribution between rich and poor players like previous drop parties had. Eventually, dedicated ‘party crashing’ clans formed, and would descend on the Party Room to fill the chest with junk. Finally, depending on the value of the items placed in the party chest, NPCs would announce that a party was going to happen – and when the collection of items amounted to a million gold pieces or more in value, every banker across Gielinor would offer free teleports to the Party Room. This attracted large groups of players, increasing competition and the likelihood of walking away with nothing of value. Jagex had successfully relegated drop parties to a space they had manufactured. No longer occurring in a world collaboratively constructed by the revelers themselves, drop parties became a spectacle, and could not inspire collective joy, egalitarianism, and social bonding in the same way as before.

Gone, but not forgotten

While Jagex did eventually lift the trade limit ban three years later in 2011, drop parties never fully recovered. Undoubtedly, the waning relevance and player count of *RuneScape* in recent years also contributed to the death of the practice. A dedicated fanbase still plays *Old School RuneScape*, a version of the game permanently frozen in the era during which drop parties were held with regularity, but even still, drop parties don’t occur as they used to. Though Jagex supported drop parties at first, their preoccupation with preserving the structure of their game and preventing real-world trading had the unintended consequence of extending the real-world suppression of festival practices into a virtual space. *RuneScape* drop parties serve as a regrettable modern installment within a historical narrative: those holding structural power attempt to control parties, festivals, and joyful ritual practices which spark communitas, redistribute power between social classes, and support community bonding through egalitarianism. Joyful ritual practices are often subjected to suppression and control because of the inherent threat they pose to hierarchical structures of normal life. Regardless of whether the festivities happen in the physical world or virtual world, egalitarianism is an essential prerequisite to and consequence of experiencing collective joy in party contexts.

Feeling some degree of fairness and equality is a necessary precursor to experiencing the collective joy inherent within communitas. Even in situations where some roles are given preferential treatment – such as the marrying couple at their wedding, or the person whose birthday is being celebrated – all participate in its cre-

ation. To experience collective joy, something “rather more than the casual camaraderie of ordinary social life” (Turner & Turner, 1982, p. 205), all revelers must collaboratively create the temporary ritual space of a party to have fun. Once the party concludes, we know its hierarchy will dissolve – and, for many of us, be unfortunately replaced by the oppressive social and material hierarchies that define our current world.

Do these hierarchies *need* to define our world, though? Importantly, partying together and experiencing collective joy prompt us to ask this transgressive question, helping us “look back on everyday life and criticize it and look forward to the process that can re-make it” (Rinzler & Seitel, 1982, p. 7). The world of laughter is one that encourages us to renegotiate the structures that rule over us in our day-to-day lives: this is precisely the reason why party-created egalitarianism poses such a dire threat to those occupying positions of structural power. Experiencing spontaneous, collective joy during parties proves that hierarchies are socially, rather than naturally, imposed – and can thus be undone. Reveling in *communitas* with one another can be a truly revolutionary act: one that reminds us that we all have equal worth, that our joy has power, that we can use our joy to remake a new and better world for all to equally share.

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