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Exploring Possibilities
(Runes of Magic)

Abstract: The challenges and opportunities associated with role-playing deceased persons inside virtual worlds are so many and diverse that this initial chapter aims to introduce their typical features rather than extreme variations as in some later chapters. It is a reconnaissance of a technically fine but somewhat bland virtual world, Runes of Magic, using an avatar based on a deceased person about whom we have at present only limited information. As the word avatar was adapted from Hindu religion by computer programmers years ago to describe the virtual reflection of the user, we suggest adapting the Hindu-Buddhist term sattva to name the purified essence of a person, which defines the character of an avatar. Surviving unpublished writings by the person represented in this chapter define his literary orientation toward fantasy and death, and the mythos of Runes of Magic considers its virtual world to be an evolved form of a book. The chapter shows the series of steps a user must go through to create an avatar and develop it through the early levels of experience inside the typical gameworld, including a variety of activities subsidiary to the main theme of adventures gained exploring an exotic world.


W. S. Bainbridge, An Information Technology Surrogate for Religion: The Veneration of Deceased Family in Online Games

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Sattva: The purified essence of a person, which defines the character of an avatar.

The challenges and opportunities associated with role-playing deceased persons inside virtual worlds are so many and diverse that an initial reconnaissance should avoid unnecessary subtleties. Therefore our first memorial avatar will be based on an interesting but rather remote individual, Ernest E. Wheeler (1876–1955), inside a technically fine but somewhat bland virtual world, Runes of Magic. Ernest was not only a Harvard-educated New York attorney, but also a cantankerous joker, who used to debate the minister in church during sermons, and who transformed the real historical murder of his father’s best friend into a story of mythic proportions. The special wiki devoted to Runes describes its virtual world: “Taborea was once a book in which the creation of a simple world of flora and fauna was supposed to be recorded, but today it is full of myths and legends. The continents are covered by baffling and cryptic traces of time long gone. In the Age of discovery the people of Taborea are now on a quest to find out about their mystical past.”

Ancestor veneration

Across the millennia, humans have practiced a wide range of rituals to manage the existential problem of death. That diversity reflects the fact that we have as yet found no perfect solution, but it also results from the fact that death is a swarm of problems. When a member of one’s family dies, one may feel guilty that one did not do enough to save that life. One may still have unpaid debts to that person, even just in the form of thanks for the help they offered during the survivors’ childhoods. The people close to us serve as mentors, and we may wish the lessons to continue after the demise of the teacher. Survivors need to manage their relations with each other, in the shared dislocation caused by the loss of a member of the group. The death of someone near to us implies that death is approaching us as well. One of the classical theories of the origin of religion is that it consolidated from the consolations people shared at the deaths of loved ones, initially in the form of rituals of ancestor veneration.²

The term “AVA” describes an avatar based on a deceased person. Originally, this is the acronym from Ancestor Veneration Avatar.³ Ernest