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The Gorean Community in Second Life:
Rules of Sexual Inspired Role-Play

By Tjarda Sixma, The Netherlands

Abstract

Gor is one of the most successful role-play themes in the Virtual World of Second Life (SL). In this theme, player-characters act out a barbaric world of sexual slavery that is based on the novels of John Norman. Norman's narrative comes alive in privately owned 3D simulations (SIMs) that depict settlements in Roman, Viking, or tribal style. This paper gives insight into the construction of Gorean role-play and positions it within the discourse on role-play in Virtual Worlds. The role-play was studied by undertaking an ethnographic participant-observation. Moreover, the rules of the city of Veroda (a pseudonym) are analyzed in detail. The analysis shows that Veroda's rules aim at immersion in the role-play experience and are concerned with the power structure of the SIM, as well as with the personal power relationships of its members. Gorean SIM communities are closed or semi-closed social groups that act as real communities "living" in a particular shared online place. Whereas within gaming worlds the play occurs under the rules of game-design, Gorean role-play groups in Second Life construct their own social rules and play. In doing so, they create and maintain a vibrant community life.

Keywords: virtual worlds; Second Life; role-play; rules; sexual play.

The Gorean Community in Second Life:
Rules of Sexual Inspired Role-Play

By Tjarda Sixma, The Netherlands

Figure 1. Fictive Map of Norman's Planet of Gor (with SL SIMs Represented by Dots) on the Wall of a House (November 2007).

Sexually inspired role-play is a popular leisure activity in the fast growing Virtual World (VW) of Second Life (Linden Lab, 2003). One of the most successful role-play themes in Second Life is Gor, where approximately 2 to 3 thousand player-characters act out a fictive character based on the novels of John Norman. Norman – the pseudonym of John Frederik Lange, professor of philosophy – describes a barbaric planet of "natural order" where men are bold masters and women are either frigid mistresses or sexual slaves (Norman, 1967, 1977). Multi User Virtual Environments (MUVEs), such as Second Life, There, and Active Worlds, provide an ideal platform for sexual, fetishist role-play because they offer a 3D graphical interface and facilities that allow user-creation using built-in tools (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2006; Biever, 2006; Nobel, 2006). In Second Life, the latter means that players can design the look of their avatar, create visual scenery, and make 3D interactive objects that can simulate sexual actions.

The aim of this paper is to give insight into player attitudes and the rules of Gorean role-play in Second Life. I will map the different rules that players use to regulate their role-play and classify them in categories. A secondary aim is to position Gorean role-play within the scientific discourse on role-play in VWs.

Role-play has been investigated in several online game worlds including Multi User Dungeons (MUDs) and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) (Chee, Vieta & Smith, 2006; Copier, 2007; Turkle, 1995). However, little attention has been paid to role-play in VWs that are not games, such as Second Life. Moreover, research about sexual play has often been limited to motivations for taking part in cybersex leaving the role-play as such undiscussed. Yet Gorean role-play is more than cybersex alone. It is the creation of a "shared fantasy," or a communally constructed imaginary world (Fine, 1983).

In Second Life, the Gorean fantasy comes alive in SIMs: enclosed pieces of the grid with one theme that depict a settlement described in Norman's books. Against these 3D user-created decors, player-characters bring the Gorean narrative alive by using Norman's fictive Gorean language, playing scenes from the Gor books, and impersonating a profession. The enactment is realized by typing out chat (imitating speech) and emoting (imitating emotions and actions), as well as through avatar positioning and animations.

Figure 2. A Capture and Collar Scene Acted Out in a Gorean SIM (December 2007).

To study the role-play closely, an ethnographic participant-observation method was used. The fieldwork took place over a two-year period from 2006 to 2008. Taking up the role of "Free Woman" created the opportunity to observe role-play in several SIMs, whereas playing the role of "kajira" (slave) helped to understand how, for example, rules for slaves should be understood. To keep some distance to the object of research, I only played a city-owned slave; when my player-character was "for sale," I revealed my research intentions and returned to playing a Free Woman. Together with conversations and informal interviews with players, as well as reading online supplementary information, this developed "an empathic understanding" of the influences at work (Copier, 2007, p. 29). By analyzing the rules of the city of Veroda in detail, it became clear what categories of rules there are to be found in a typical Gorean SIM. SIM and avatar names have been changed to protect the privacy of players.

Gorean Role-Play Cultures: Between Fantasy Role-Play and Lifestyle

To create a better understanding of Gorean role-play I will first describe SIM communities in general: the different themes, the way SIMs are networked, and how to become a SIM member. Furthermore, I will explain different role-play attitudes of players in more detail as they influence the overall role-play and the SIM rules.

Themes

Gorean SIMs all have a slightly different setting. For instance, there are Roman style cities with a hierarchical caste system based on guilds, small Viking style villages, tribal wagon camps, and outposts inhabited by mercenaries and outlaws. Depending on the setting, players can choose from different roles varying from Free (master/mistress) to kajira/kajirus (slave). "Frees" in cities usually act out a profession (e.g. physician, baker, brewer, or blacksmith). In general all communities are patriarchies. There is one outsider theme embodied by SIMs called "woods." These woods are spaces where female amazons (panthers) reside with their male or female slaves.
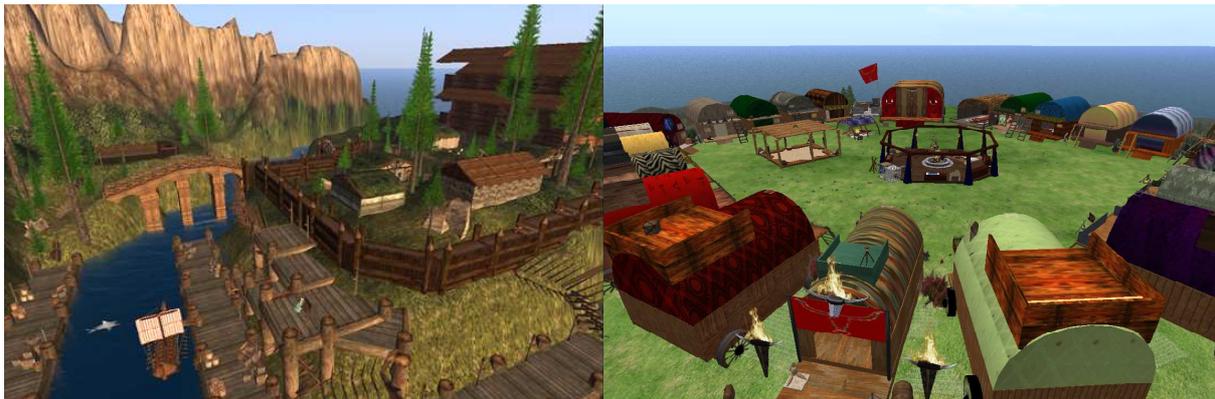
Figures 3 and 4. SIMs Depicting a Viking Style Village and Wagon Camp (July 2008).

Networked Player Groups

Gorean SIMs are also part of a networked subculture that stretches throughout Second Life. Some SIM communities fight each other using scripted 3D weapons and health meters, while others are allies. Typically, female panther groups fight with patriarchal male communities; while in some SIMs they live together in peace and harmony. At the same time, "open to all" role-play events are organized, such as tournaments, "blood auctions" – where a player-character can bring out a bid on a slave and gain the right to "open" (deflower) the slave in role-play – and discussions about role-play.

Membership

Gorean SIM communities are either closed player groups, protected against non-members by an invisible wall, or semi-closed, open to Gorean role-players from other SIMs and/or newcomers wearing a visitor tag. Due to the tightening of the Terms of Service by Linden Lab, which encourages the reporting of offensive content, SIMs are increasingly closed to non-members. SIM communities – called "Homestones" after the founding stones that symbolize loyalty to the city - can be joined in two ways. Players acting a Free can apply for citizenship by filling in an application form that inquires after, among other things, their knowledge of the Norman narrative. And players wanting to play a slave (kajira/kajirus) can walk their avatar into a settlement and go through an initiation rite where collaring (and sometimes branding) is acted

out. The collaring ritual is the act of placing a collar around an avatar's neck, turning him or her into a slave. Consequently, the player becomes a city slave. After joining the SIM community, players are added to the SIM group, thus allowing them access to certain buildings and group communication channels. Slaves, subsequently, go through an intensive training phase where they learn the basics of the submissive role: general communication etiquette (e.g. how to address a Free), performing ritual "drink serves" of Gorean beverages, emoting household chores (several obliged per week), and giving "City tours" (explaining the layout to visitors). Often players earn symbolic avatar clothing after having completed a certain phase.

Attitudes Towards Role-Play

The various Gorean SIMs not only have a different setting, they also have a particular role-play culture depending on the attitudes of the players and the composition of the group. Although these attitudes are on a continuum and often change over time, there are essential differences in approaching the play. Players with a fantasy role-play orientation (so called "roleplayers") see their participation more as acting in a fantasy world, whereas players with a lifestyle orientation ("lifestylers") see it is a way to express their sexual identity and conservative views on gender roles. A further subgroup includes role-players who are involved in real life (RL) BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and sadism/masochism). The different attitudes are articulated by the following player statements, which were expressed during spontaneous in-world conversations about role-playing.

Jerome (Dutch, male, roleplayer):

> … [*sic*] just like to roleplay [,] it is a way to get away. like a movie except your [*sic*] the star. (conversation in Instant Message, January 2008).

Heralda (USA, female, lifestyler):

> There are some goreans who are lifestylers. [….] If they are properly trained by the book, and able to see beneath the fiction and fantasy there are real ideals, the Master slave [relationship], comes from what many thing [think] of as the Natural Order...which stems [from] the years and years of culture and history on earth. Woman being subseviant [*sic*] to Men. Men being stronger them [than] Women. (conversation in local chat, January 2008).

Thura (USA, female, BDSM-er):

> […] gor is rp for me - i dont think we [player and boyfriend] could ever really live out a gorean lifestyle like in the books or even here in SL... i can be a slave here [,] where in rl i am only submissive - still have a say, still have my rights. (conversation in Instant Message, April 2008).

Lifestyle Versus BDSM

Although many lifestylers do not see themselves as part of the BDSM culture, the Gorean Master/slave theme (M/s) can be seen as the online performance of a Total Power Exchange (TPE) relationship. In real life TPE relationships, the BDSM interests are a basis for the entire relationship and not limited to taking part in "scenes" (pre-scripted sexual interactions). Dancer,

Moser, and Kleinplatz (2006) describe TPE relations as "consensual non-consent," pointing out that both owner (master/mistress) and slave agree to the general power difference (p. 84). For Gorean lifestylers, the sexual domination of women is part of the larger idea of men being biologically predestined to play a leading role in public and private life. Henceforth, they believe a patriarchal society is the logical result of natural sex differences. This conviction is not necessarily held by all BDSM-ers. Research by Cross and Matheson (2006) using internet news groups revealed that BDSM-ers score higher on pro-feminist attitudes – such as breaking free of traditional gender roles - than non-BDSM-ers (p. 146). Moreover they showed that participants in "virtual" BDSM (i.e., chatrooms) are comparable to "real life" BDSM-ers (p. 133). Similarly many Gorean lifestylers in SL have been active in textual, 2D and 3D Gorean chat environments, in some cases for over ten years. Some of them have real-life ties with other lifestylers, others are (or have been) involved in a Gorean M/s relation. Many SL lifestylers from the USA and UK have stated that they are in contact with other Goreans, attending conferences or meeting regularly in resorts.

Lifestyle Attitudes

The beliefs of lifestylers influence their attitude towards role-play greatly. In general, lifestylers see their participation in Gorean role-play not as performing or acting. They experience their character as a manifestation of themselves and as themselves they interact with others. The following player statements express this.

Calhoun (USA, male):

> SL is not a total game to me
> i do not go ooc [Out Of Character]
> i am Calhoun
> Calhoun is me. (conversation in local chat, April 2008).

Jewel (UK, female):

> […] i do like the rp but i'm more imersed [*sic*] than that, i don't play like a game its prettyy [*sic*] real for me. (conversation in Instant Message, May 2008).

Junius (USA, male):

> I do not make believe I ride a tarn [virtual Gorean bird] or capture free women...
> I do pretend I am with some folks and interacting with them physically, sometimes intimately. (conversation in Instant Message, January 2008).

As a consequence of this view, some players do not take part in the fighting game or enact a profession. Yet they do engage in role-play such as "pretending to drink," "watching a kajira dance," or "traveling by boat." Other lifestylers are participating in more creative play such as creating storylines. In general, the attitude of lifestylers to their play is one of "being there" or "being the character." Several authors define the identification with a (virtual) character as closely related to the concept of immersion (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2005; Harviainen, 2003). Moreover, total immersion is similar to the experience of presence. Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) define presence as: "the psychological experience of non-mediation, i.e. the sense of being in a world generated by the computer instead of just using the computer" (p. 4). Lifestylers have a highly immersive attitude towards their play and use immersion and presence to interact intensely with players with a similar attitude.

Fantasy Attitudes

The players on the other side of the continuum - the fantasy role-players - are more comparable to role-players such as those creatively acting out a role in MMORPGs. The play of these players has been described by several authors in terms of pretend play (Fron, Fullerton, Ford Morie & Pierce, 2007) or improvisation theatre (Copier, 2007; Turkle, 1995; Mortensen, 2007). For fantasy role-players in SL Gor, TPE is not the core attraction. The creation of a fictive character in an imaginary world (often with a detailed "life story" written in the player's profile), is the main attraction for many of these players. The following statements express this.

Camilla (Australia, female):

> Its got so little to do with slavery to me
> [….]
> its a game
> its fun
> its being a character." (conversation in Instant Message, October 2007).

Scarface (Belgium, male):

> [I am a] role player
> i don't believe in gorean lifestyle
> or the philosophy
> to me it's a fantasy world. (conversation in Instant Message, April 2008).

In general, the play of fantasy role-players in Gor is more of a theatrical nature. As such, it is related to performative role-play in other "imaginary-entertainment environments" such as Live Action Role-Playing games (LARPs) (Mackay, 2001, p. 29). Michelle Nephew (2006) has argued that online role-playing in general is "a performative activity based on erotic desire," and, in particular, the acting out of male sexual fantasies (p. 132). For some players, the general sexual libertarianism in Gor (e.g. swinging, polyamory, homo and bi-sexuality, and more) is indeed a major motivation. This acting out of sexual fantasies is not only attractive for male players, but also to female players, as is clearly illustrated by this statement.

Sagan (USA, female):

> I can be open and flirty and completely flippantly whorey
> without any bad happening
> all the things you want to do in rl but are too proper or shy to do. (conversation in Instant Message, June 2008).

SIM Cultures and Rules

As a consequence of the major role-play attitudes described above, each SIM community has its own distinctive way of interpreting the Norman narrative. A common accusation heard by more lifestyle oriented player groups is that other SIM communities are "Disney Gor," while they themselves play "by the books." An example of such a difference of opinion is that a player acting out a female mercenary will not be tolerated in a lifestyle oriented SIM, as the role is not described in Norman's books. The different attitudes are also reflected in the consensuality rules

of a SIM. Consensuality is very important in real life BDSM (Wiseman, 1996). Often safewords are used to be able to state limits during sessions; in TPE relations the use of safewords is not usual (Dancer et al., 2006). For instance, some SIMs have a "force collar" policy. Thus, a player acting as a Free can – under certain circumstances – be forced to wear a collar and take up the role of slave. Other SIMs stress the importance of consensuality, and have a law stating that before acting out a sexual or violent scene, permission – given out of character in private Instant Message – is needed from both players. These BDSM oriented SIMs are a minority. From the first fifty SIMS, as listed on the site of Gorean.us, only seven have explicit rules about consensuality.

In conclusion, player attitudes greatly influence the way the Gorean narrative is acted out. From the different approaches of fantasy role-players and lifestylers emerge distinct ideas on creative play and social interaction. Insight into player attitudes also provides a better understanding of SIM rules. I will now describe in greater detail how Gorean role-play is constructed by analyzing the rules of Veroda and classifying them into groups with certain objectives.

Case Study: Rules of the City of Veroda

Figure 5. A Kajira Dances Before the Free Men of Veroda (June 2007).

The city of Veroda is a popular SIM – among the top ten most popular for over a year – with a lively role-play community and a commonplace city theme. Its players are a mix of "roleplayers" and "lifestylers," although the rules express a tendency towards a lifestyle attitude. The rules comprise approximately 4,500 words and are made by the SIM owners, elaborating on existing rules from other SIMs. They are automatically delivered upon entering the SIM.

Veroda's rules (as of July 2007) start with a general description of the Norman narrative and the city theme of the SIM. They state guidelines for visitors and the names and positions of important player-characters, such as the moderator. The actual rule section consists of several main categories, namely common laws, rules for combat, laws for Free Women, and laws for slaves. There is no separate category for Free Men (FM), which underlines the power position of male player-characters.

Common Laws

The common laws start with rules of conduct concerning the role-play for all player-characters residing in Veroda or visiting from other SIMs. In the public chat channel, Out Of Character (OOC) speech (talking as the person behind the role) is discouraged and chat language (using abbreviations like LOL) is forbidden. OOC "drama" - real life animosity expressed in role-play - is not tolerated. Furthermore there are rules about what caste roles are allowed (e.g., assassins) and how a player can enter a certain caste. Besides rules of conduct and rules about roles, there are several laws about conflict resolution (e.g., what steps to take and who has ruling power). Moreover, the punishment for certain role-play crimes, such as vandalism, are described (e.g. banishment from the SIM and death by impaling). In general, the common laws of Veroda are concerned with keeping the role-play illusion alive and defining the limits in dramatic action (enactment). They also set standards for resolving role-play disputes among players, and they explain the power structure of the SIM.
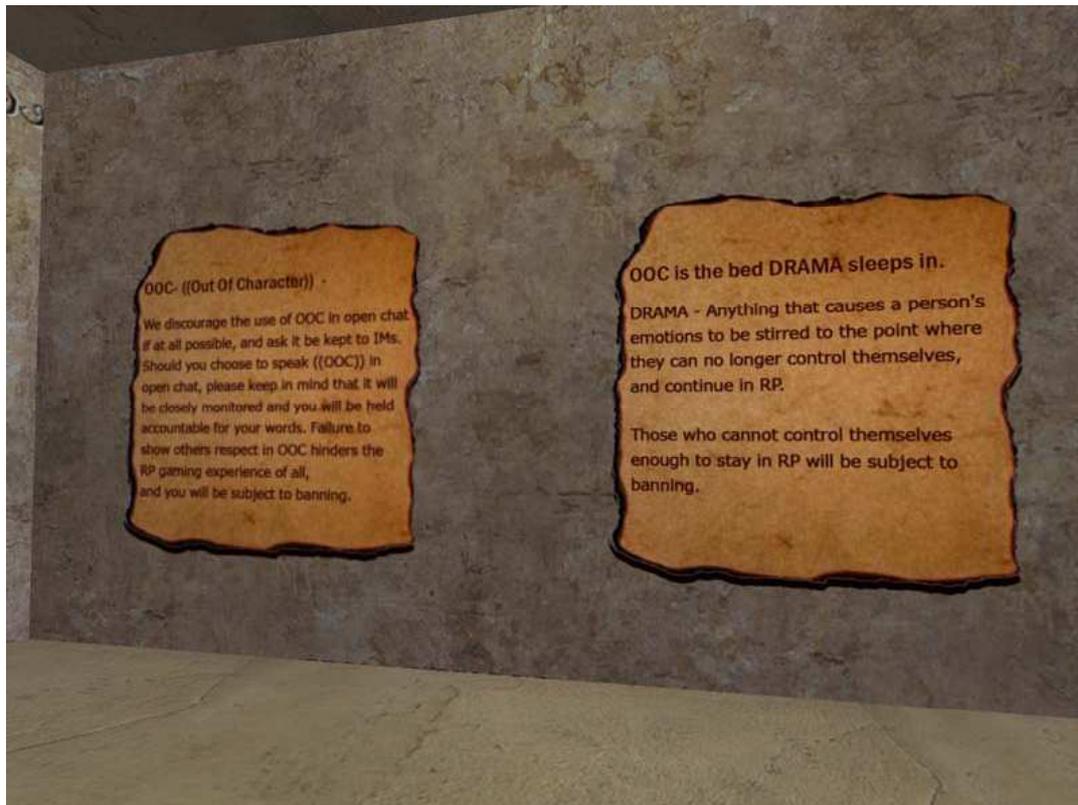

Figure 6. OOC and Drama Rules on the Wall of the Slave Kennel in Veroda (May 2007).

Combat Rules

The combat rules state the laws for player interaction during a fight. They list the allowed weapons, the used health meter, and the ratio of attacking player-characters compared to SIM player-characters (2:1), as well as several rules of conduct concerning the role-play (e.g., realistic actions). It is usual that fights are logged and "kills" are validated by moderators of both parties. This is also the case with other captures and collarings. In short, combat rules determine the interaction limits of the fighting game that is part of the overall role-play. As there is no fixed outcome (as in Person-versus-Person fighting in MMORPGs), these rules set standards for winning and losing.

Free Women Rules

The laws describing the role of Free Women (FW) are predominantly etiquette rules: rules about avatar clothing (modest, including wearing a veil), about acceptable locations that can be frequented (e.g., not the tavern) and about how to behave (not showing any sexual excitement in public chat). Moreover, there are rules that are concerned with the role-play interaction between FW and other player-characters. Examples are rules about force collaring (e.g., a FM saving a FW's life is allowed to force collar her) and rules according to sexual role-play (e.g., consensuality between Frees is a prerequisite). Summing up: laws and etiquette rules for Free Women aim to emphasize the "natural order" of the social relations between men and women. They also are a description of the player's duties and rights in role-play.

Figure 7. A Veiled Free Woman from Veroda (used with author's permission, May 2007).

Slave Rules

The laws for slaves are the most extensive of all categories. The first seven articles (of twenty four) are about the possession of slaves: they describe, among others, how to make voluntary ownership of the player-character official – slaves choose their owner, submitting to one player-character. Moreover, they determine the extent of the role-play power of the owner (a slave may be used, disposed of, and destroyed). Other rules are concerned with the punishment

of slaves (by any Free) and etiquette rules (e.g., slaves must ask permission to leave). Also the training levels for female slaves (expressed by silk colors) are described as well as the allowed roles for male slaves (e.g., fighting slave, pleasure slave). There is only one rule concerned with the role-play of sex (called "furring"). This article describes that "white silks" (virgins) can not be forced into sexual play by players other than their owner. To sum up, slave laws can be seen as the rules concerned with participation in online TPE. The slave rules about etiquette are aimed at the establishment of status difference in role-play (Cross & Matheson, 2006).

Figure 8. A Master and His Slave (used with author's permission, June 2007).

In conclusion, the rules of Veroda can be classified under the following objectives:

• keeping the role-play illusion alive;
• defining limits of dramatic action;
• determining the fighting interaction;
• explaining the power structure;
• creating status difference; and
• setting standards for ownership.

Unwritten Rules to Guide Violent Play

Rules about torture are not found in the laws of Veroda. Role-play subjects, such as dealing with violent play (e.g., nonconsensual torture or rape), are discussed Second Life-wide in meetings and on online forums. Consequently certain norms have emerged by which players deal with the usual lack of limits to violent play. Firstly, some players add role-play limits in their profile by stating explicitly things like, "no mutilation, no rape, no more than three days force collar." Secondly, play developing into an unwanted direction can be stopped by writing the code phrase "Fade To Black" in public chat. This stops the scene whereupon the point of continuation is discussed OOC so certain parts of the scenario are skipped but the storyline remains intact. As a result, comfort zones are created in which players can engage in risky play without having to discuss the scene beforehand. The disadvantage of this strategy is that inexperienced players can

get involved in violent play without knowing the codes to safeguard their own limits. Therefore some players will avoid unconsensual violent play on the whole by asking a player's permission in private Instant Messaging (IM) beforehand.

The case of the city of Veroda reveals that SIM rules can be very elaborate and consist of different rule categories. In general, it can be said that they encourage immersion in the role-play, define limits of dramatic action, control the fighting game, and in general, regulate the fantasy role-play. Furthermore Veroda's rules are concerned with the power structure of the SIM, as well as with personal power relationships of the SIM members. The latter type of rules can be regarded as social rules of conduct and guidelines for participation in TPE. Hence, the rules of Veroda reflect the nature of Gorean role-play, which is a mix of fantasy role-play and M/s play in a paternalistic context. The length and content of the rules for slaves shows Veroda's tendency towards a lifestyle orientation. Thus, the power of an owner over his/her slave is far-reaching and even the power of any Free over any slave is large. Moreover, the extensive training points at an immersive attitude towards the play. In the larger context of Second Life Gor, norms have emerged that set parameters for violent play.

Gorean Role-Play Positioned in Relation to Role-Play in Gaming Worlds

In research concerning MMORPGs, it has frequently been stated that role-play groups should be seen as social communities. Player groups have been called persistent "communities of play" because they are characterized by a strong group cohesion, as for example when they collectively traverse play environments (Pearce, 2007, p. 311). Similarly, they have been defined as "tightly knit social networks," as players socially interact beyond the gameworld through forums and the like (Copier, 2007, p. 33). But what exactly is an online community? Howard Rheingold (1994) described early virtual communities as "cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace" (Rheingold, in Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003, p. 1). About ten years later, Lazar and Preece (2002) define an online community as "a set of users who communicate using computer-mediated communication and have common interests, shared goals, and shared resources" (p. 3). The problem with the latter definition is that it leaves out the aspect of a shared space (spatial or symbolic). In doing so, it reflects the idea that online communities are somehow in contrast with geographic communities (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar). Chee et al. (2006) call this stance the "real/virtual community dichotomy" (p. 160). They argue that player groups in MMORPGs are "no less real than communities in the world of flesh-and-blood," since their social interaction is real and difficult to describe in terms of "fantasy" and "play" (Chee et al., pp. 160-161). The Oxford Dictionary of English does not mention a division between real or online communities in its definition of community forms. It defines any human community in three different ways: firstly, as a group of people living together in one place; secondly as a group of people having a common religion, race, profession or other particular characteristic; and thirdly, as the condition of sharing certain attitudes and interests (2003, p. 350). In all three ways, Gorean role-play groups (in SIMs) can be seen as communities. Firstly, they "live" in the same place (at least for the hours they are online); secondly, they have a particular characteristic in common (they are role-players in SL Gor); and lastly, they share certain interests that gives them a sense of community (the interest in acting out the Gorean fantasy). The idea that Gorean SIM communities are real communities living in a particular shared place is also supported by the elaborative rule system that not only consists of play and immersion rules, but also of social rules. However, it would be too easy to say that being part of a virtual community is the same as being part of a real life geographic community.

Further research is needed to find out how Gorean communities are similar and how they are different from geographic communities.

In the discourse about online play in relation to rules, the general focus has been on gaming worlds such as MMORPGs and the way players interact with the game design (e.g., Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Rules in such worlds are the "logical and mathematical structures of a game" (Salen & Zimmerman, p. 6). They are designed by the game company and consequently applied by the computer. Yet, MUVEs such as Second Life are primarily social worlds - places where players come together to interact socially through chat and role-play. Hence, the rules are foremost social rules, negotiated and applied by leading players. Furthermore, Second Life is different compared to gaming worlds in that it offers players considerable freedom to design their own play. Players can do this by making coded visual and interactive objects, but also by defining their own social rule sets. By restricting access to their SIM, owners have a means to uphold their rules. As a result, SIMs are - within the frame of the SL Terms Of Service - virtually self-governing free states.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Second Life Gor is an alternative world, consisting of tight communities with a clear power structure and specified rules. These rules function as a framework for creative fantasy play, erotic TPE play, fighting, and social interaction. As SIM owners have the ability to define access, these rules can actually be enforced. In this respect, role-play in Second Life differs substantially from role-play in MMORPGs. Whereas within gaming worlds the emergent play occurs under the rules of game-design, players in Second Life have the ability to construct their own social rules and play to a great extent. Gorean role-play groups make good use of this ability and thus create and maintain a vibrant community life.

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