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The Iron Law

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Abstract

Star Wars: The Old Republic and *Fallen Earth* are two of the many recent online gameworlds that depict disintegrating and conflict-ridden societies, in which the very legitimacy of the law is in doubt. Thus they become vehicles for critique of real modern society, and intentionally or unintentionally reflect social-scientific theories of social disorganization, institutional functionality, and the origins of law. This essay examines these examples in terms of the Iron Law of Oligarchy proposed a century ago by Robert Michels, and related classical theories that either contradict or extend it.

1. The Iron Law

Virtual worlds are simulations of real human societies, and thus potentially offer insights to the social sciences and the theory of law (Bradley and Froomkin, 2004). Massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) can be faulted for being bad simulations because they are fantasies, yet real society is also a socially constructed fantasy (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1967). The myths supporting "real-world" societies tend to be far more optimistic than MMO myths, and thus in important ways less realistic. Practically all popular adult MMOs depict worlds in which government is breaking down, thereby raising questions about the long-term viability of law in real societies. With occasional references to other examples, this essay is based on extensive ethnographic research inside two MMOs, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (SWTOR) and *Fallen Earth* (FE).

Many kinds of research can be performed in MMOs, including surveys and interviews of players, experiments in virtual laboratories, and statistical analysis of data already collected by the game companies. The approach here is primarily ethnographic, in which I document the cultures created by the game designers, through running avatars up through the games while making game decisions based on what course of action would provide theory-relevant information. The theory that best fits the phenomenon is the Iron Law of Oligarchy, proposed a century ago by Robert Michels, a student of Max Weber, one of the founding fathers of sociology. It implies that the purpose of law is to consolidate the dominance of a ruling elite, in a dynamic balance between democracy and tyranny, between justice and injustice. The best contrast with this theory is the Functionalism of Talcott Parsons, also a Weberian, who argued that laws evolve to increase the functionality of societal institutions, for the benefit of all citizens.

1.1   Star Wars: The Old Republic

For the past decade, the 25,000-year-old Galactic Republic has been disintegrating, under pressure from the resurgent Sith Empire, across a galaxy that also contains independent societies such as the Hutt and the Voss. The Jedi knights, exemplified by Luke Skywalker in the original 1977 *Star Wars* movie, are an elite monastic order, allied with the Republic, using the magical Force to support a somewhat diverse political structure. The Republic is ruled by a senate, yet the senators who are the heroines of the two trilogies of films are aristocrats, Princess Leia and Queen Amidala. The Sith who lead the Empire are also a religious order, but using the Force to increase their own power, within a feudal political system.

Thus both factions in SWTOR are political power structures, neither of them democratic, establishing laws from the top down, to serve the needs of the societal elite. For my SWTOR research, I ran four primary avatars all the way to the level-50 experience cap, taking about 250 hours per character, but one will represent them here, my Jedi knight, Burroughs. He was explicitly based on the early science fiction author Edgar Rice Burroughs, whose ten novels about the planet Mars were imitated to produce both *Flash Gordon* and *Star Wars* (Searle, 2011). The chief character in his novels, John Carter, was a former officer in the Confederate army in the US Civil War, and he was the archetype of alienated nobleman, adrift from any society that might impose formal laws, yet following a strict personal moral code.

Quite reasonably, much of the recent scholarly literature on virtual worlds considers them in the context of the surrounding society's laws, rather than those that exist inside the worlds (Fairfield, 2008; Humphreys, 2009; Lastowka, 2010). Intellectual property rights are an active area of debate, and two kinds of property right were endangered with the very launch of SWTOR. First, a highly regarded

MMO, *Star Wars Galaxies*, was forced to shut down after eight years of successful operation, because Lucasfilm that held the rights to the entire *Star Wars* franchise anticipated greater profits from SWTOR. Second, ten houses and many spaceships I "owned" in *Star Wars Galaxies* were destroyed when it shut down, leaving me without compensation or legal recourse. Here, I focus not on the laws of the wider society, but the virtual laws within the gameworlds. Laws are encoded into gameworlds at various levels (Lastowka, 2009; Pearce, 2009), and we can discern these five especially in SWTOR:

1. *Universal rules hard-coded into the software and database, such that no player can violate them, without accomplishing some technically demanding hack.* An example is the impossibility of looting from the corpse of a player-operated avatar, after defeating it in player-versus-player (PvP) combat. Originally, the early MMO *Ultima Online* permitted looting in such situations, but most later games prohibited it. Like many other MMOs, SWTOR limits PvP to consensual duels, or particular areas and Internet servers but only outside the low-level zones where players learn the game. As of April 30, 2012, 217 separate Internet servers operated independent versions. Of these, 129 or 59 percent, prevented one player from attacking another without consent, outside special PvP areas. When first accessing a PvP server, players get this disclaimer: "...action and situations that can be resolved through PvP are not considered harassment and will not be enforced as such."

2. *Particularistic norms developed by the players themselves, emerging from their interactions with each other.* Players will come to cooperate with each other, establishing conventional norms of mutual help, whether by creating formal guilds of many players, or through developing dyadic friendships. Depending on the general mythos of the gameworld and the software tools provided for managing guilds, these groups may become hostile toward each other. SWTOR is standard in these respects, like *World of Warcraft* limiting a guild to one of two opposing factions, thereby balancing cooperation against competition. Guilds compete with each other to attract members, although they almost never observe the formalities of democratic voting, and tend to be ruled by an individual or a small group of comrades. Both *A Tale in the Desert* and *EVE Online* are extreme in having systems through which players vote for changes in the game, the former being highly cooperative in spirit, and the latter stressing cutthroat competition. At present, SWTOR lacks democratic institutions, and the mythos emphasizes power struggles within the elite.

3. *Specific rules promulgated by one of the competing virtual factions, for example expressed through the requirements and reward structures of the story missions.* It is possible but difficult to advance in SWTOR without doing many formal missions. Burroughs was by nature an *explorer*, one of Richard Bartle's (2004) four categories of game players and expressing the central quality of the Mars novels, in which exploration of exotic lands is the primary attraction. Thus, whenever he arrived on a planet, he would first explore as much of its territory as he could, earning a few experience points for doing so, and others by hunting wild beasts. But this was a very inefficient way of progressing, so he would take on missions for beleaguered local groups of non-player characters (NPCs), giving lower priority to the formal missions set forth by the Galactic Republic, which seemed to him both corrupt and incompetent. In so doing, he temporarily adhered to local legal customs.

4. *The normative system expressed through the Light Side and Dark Side moral judgments of player behavior.* At various points in major missions, the player is given a choice among three actions or verbal responses, some of which may award either Light or Dark points, which at advanced

levels allow an avatar to use high quality equipment associated with one or the other. This is the dimension that features in the movies, as Darth Vader turns to the Dark Side in using magic to advance his selfish purposes, and his son Luke Skywalker subordinates his personal desires in using the Force only for good. Being a Jedi like Luke, Burroughs reached the maximum experience level 50 with 5700 Light Side Points, and only 150 Dark Side. Not all ethically significant actions confer points on either side of this scale, suggesting the scale is not really about objective good versus evil. On the planet Corellia, one may slaughter helpless refugee NPCs, gaining experience points and occasional loot, without incurring Dark Side points.

5. *The valuable affection generated in secondary-avatar companions, by having the primary avatar perform behavior the secondary is programmed to approve of.* For example, if a Jedi knight primary avatar spares the life of a defeated enemy, the secondary avatar Doc will gain affection for the primary, while the secondary avatar Lord Scourge will lose affection. Thus, the game creators have programmed different values into individual secondary avatars who assist the primary, but the player can decide which one of a set of secondaries to take on missions, balancing their technical effectiveness against moral judgment. Two other sources of affection are giving gifts to the secondary, and completing missions in collaboration with the secondary. The higher the affection score, the more effectively the secondary avatar helps the primary, thus symbolizing the interpersonal bonds on which all laws ultimately rest.

This fifth category of rules suggests something akin to democracy, but within an essentially feudal power structure. Before it is anything else, the law is a codification of the wishes of people, beginning with the tacit agreements based in friendship with a single individual. Friends in MMOs are typically other people, interacting through their avatars, but an increasing number of MMOs provide entirely virtual friends as well, NPCs with whom one cooperates repeatedly, forming a relationship seemingly based on trust, thus illustrating the origins of law. In some MMOs, notably *Guild Wars*, *Star Trek Online*, and *Dungeons and Dragons Online*, one can operate an entire team of secondary avatars, working with the primary avatar, allowing a player to complete group missions when human friends are not available (Bainbridge, 2010; 2011a). SWTOR allows just one secondary at a time. Table 1 lists the secondary avatars belonging to Burroughs at the end of his ascent up the 50 levels of experience, along with their personal values and how much affection they wound up having for Burroughs, on a scale with a maximum of 10,000. Subsequent to this point in the research, all but C2-N2 were taken up to 10,000, to learn the life stories they tell as they gain affection.

Table 1: A Jedi Knight's Secondary Avatars in *Star Wars: The Old Republic*

Secondary Avatar	Likes	Dislikes	Affection
Kira Carsen, female human	confidence, bravery, kindness, morally correct actions	bullying, killing innocents, evil actions, extortion	10,000
Doc, male human	looking like a hero, romance and flirtation, helping those in need	looking bad, hurting the innocent, refusing to help	6,205
T7-01, astromech droid (robot)	Jedi, morally correct actions, defeating the Sith Empire	bullying, killing innocents, disrespecting authority	1,716
Sergeant Rusk, male Chagrian	killing Imperials, protecting the Galactic Republic, motivating others to fight	avoiding fights, weakness, disrespecting authority	149
C2-N2, humanoid droid (robot)	none	none	0

Secondary Avatar	Likes	Dislikes	Affection
Lord Scourge, male Sith Pureblood	using power against the weak, power, anger, revenge and spite	greed, acts of mercy, Jedi and Republic authorities	-140

Following a script provided by the game designers, at level 10,000 of affection Burroughs married Kira, but Jedi are not allowed to love, so their marriage was a secret known only to them. Every personal relationship between humans is a rudimentary conspiracy, possessing its own norms that do not accord perfectly with external law. Within feudal oligarchies, every family is a potential faction. After their marriage, Burroughs kept Kira safe in their spaceship and took Doc along on all his missions. Doc was a normative contradiction, a cad in his romantic relations, even once admitting he had killed people to advance his own plans, yet a compassionate medical healer dedicated to the Hippocratic oath. Rusk was a decent enough fellow, but not very useful, while Burroughs considered both of the robots to be tools rather than people. Burroughs despised Lord Scourge's sadism - which steals from others to cause them pain, not because of greed - and thus had no use for his considerable talents, an example of the tension between abstract values and practical utility, two competing principles expressed through laws.

1.2   Fallen Earth

FE differs from SWTOR in being independent of any pre-existing mass-media franchise, not requiring a player's avatar to belong to any faction, and lacking secondary avatars that might diminish the autonomy of the primary avatar. A plague devastated the human population, causing the collapse of civilization. Survivors in the year 2156 can scavenge the wreckage of an advanced society to make valuable gear, such as vehicles and weapons. The setting is a thousand square kilometers around the Grand Canyon in the former United States, where a large number of groups compete under conditions of anarchy. Aside from the rules coded into the game program, laws prevail only within tiny areas controlled by a single faction. The groups all need to deal with the fact that civilization has fallen, developing idiosyncratic theories about why it happened, and radical plans for what to do about it.

Among the many interesting examples is Clerics of Gates, a millenarian cult that wants to destroy the remaining people on Earth, to usher in a reboot age that starts everything on a new basis. Exultant members shout computer commands: "Control C!" "Page Down!" "Escape, Escape!" "Alt-Tab! Alt-Tab!" I believe this is a parody of *The Road Ahead* by Bill Gates (1995), pope of the Microsoft church, and the fundamental idea is replacing all human laws by computer code. Part of an oration by a Gates evangelist conveys the flavor of this ideology:

> For yea, verily shall the Great Net of Life be as a soldering iron unto the circuit board of thy soul. Praise the Net!

> Let these words of mine equal X. If X, then what shall we fear?

> Neither death nor deletion, neither breaking down nor brown outs, neither blown fuses nor fragmentation shall ever separate us from the Net of Life.

> And lo, I did see the Great Net of Life coming on a white partition, with a compiling program girded to its side.

> It shall shepherd its people to a new operating system, which is not like the beta.

Then shall your caches be cleansed, and your memories forever defragmented!

Table 2 lists the six main factions to which players may belong, and outlines their competing ideologies (http://fallenearth.wikia.com/wiki/Factions). It is possible to have positive relations with more than one them, even while gaining others as mortal enemies. Proper use of future medical technologies is central to FE's factional debates. My avatar, Bridgebain, was based on my grandfather, William Seaman Bainbridge, who was a prominent surgeon. The decision to role-play him was a step in the development of Ancestor Veneration Avatar (AVA) methodology (Bainbridge 2013a, 2013b), running an avatar based on a deceased person or the purified essence of a distinctive individual, what I call the *sattva* of the avatar. He was the right choice for this research because in real life he had combined medical research with world-spanning adventures having powerful political as well as scientific dimensions (Bainbridge, 1919, 1925). "Bridgebain, New York" was his 1923 cable address, the equivalent of an email address in his period (Bainbridge, 2008).

Table 2: The Six Major Factions of *Fallen Earth*

Faction	Ideological Focus from:		Bridgebain's Reputation at Experience Level:			
	Fallen Earth Wiki	*Fallen Earth* itself	22	25	35	38
Lightbearers	Society: Sages who seek to restore the old world though medical healing, favorable biological mutations, and spiritual enlightenment.	...mystics, healers, and warriors, united on a quest for harmony and peace	36,230	-75,686	-170,984	-303,447
Vistas	Nature: Environmentalists who believe that nature's law is primary, and anything that damages the natural ecology should be outlawed.	...work to create a harmonious existence between humankind and nature	43,914	-128,232	-144,324	-304,280
Children of the Apocalypse (CHOTA)	Chaos: Anarchists who seek to prevent the re-establishment of stable government, because they believe it would lead to another catastrophe.	...work to destroy the remains of the old world to create a new world where all men are free	-5,642	-67,236	-87,882	-104,999
Travelers	Self: Wandering individualists who place personal economic gain before all other values and resist the constraints of community and law.	...do what it takes to get the most benefit with the lowest cost, even if that means breaking a kneecap or two	-77,064	28,091	71,774	137,994
Techs	Science: Scientists and engineers who hope to tinker the world back together, considering technology to be the fundamental basis of civilization.	Technology. Only by restoring the scientific accomplishments of the old world can the new world be saved.	-90,364	64,116	72,162	152,138

Faction	Ideological Focus from:		Bridgebain's Reputation at Experience Level:			
	Fallen Earth Wiki	*Fallen Earth* itself	22	25	35	38
Enforcers	Order: Militarists who believe they are the primary defenders of law and order, perceived by opponents as the enemies of human freedom.	...labor tirelessly to restore law and societal standards in a world where chaos and death reign	-26,624	21,331	19,799	28,357

As in most MMOS, *Fallen Earth's* virtual territory is organized into a sequence of sectors for avatars of ever higher experience scores. Sector 1 is populated by NPC factions, to give the player time to become accustomed to the gameplay before interacting with the six joinable factions, which happens in Sector 2. Sector 3 is the location of much inter-faction combat, and Sector 4 is a strange land which along with two lesser zones is the focus of endgame competition. Bridgebain entered Sector 2 at level 18 of experience, and by level 22 had developed strong reputations with all six factions, then went through a major realignment over the next three levels.

The six factions are divided into three pairs of archenemies: Enforcers-CHOTA, Lightbearers-Travelers, and Vistas-Techs. Each represents an ideological dimension that has implications for society's laws: society versus self, order versus chaos, and nature versus science. Each faction had two allies, plus two enemy factions that are the allies of the archenemy. Bridgebain could have chosen the Tech faction originally, because of its orientation toward science, but the Lightbearers were more concerned with healing. Lightbearers are allies of the Enforcers and the Vistas, so when Bridgebain began to earn reputations, he was positive with all three.

For a time he did many missions for the Vistas, who are allied with the CHOTA, even doing a few missions for a CHOTA NPC located in the Vista town, killing Enforcer NPC spies, and gaining a negative reputation with the Enforcers, despite their being allies with the Lightbearers. At level 22, I decided for research purposes that Bridgebain had learned enough about the Lightbearers and Vistas and really needed to belong to the Tech faction, thus allied with both the Enforcers and the Travelers, even though he then had very bad reputations with them. The general algorithm for awarding reputation points at that time was as follows. Earning +X points with one faction earned +X/2 with each of its allies, -X/2 with its enemies, and fully -2X with its archenemy. Negative reputation with a faction prevents one from doing missions for that faction in order to regain a neutral reputation.

One plan was to move Bridgebain back to mission activity for the Lightbearers, thus slowly building his reputation back up with their allies, the Enforcers, then once he was positive with the Enforcers to do missions for them, thereby building up his reputation with their ally, Tech. However, this looked like it could take a lifetime. Another plan was to build his reputation more directly with Tech by killing their archenemies, the CHOTA, but experience soon showed him he would need to kill more than two thousands of them to achieve his goal by this route. Luckily he encountered a disaffected NPC in New Flagstaff city, who gave him the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to erase all his reputations, giving him a zero reputation with Tech that allowed him to visit their town and begin doing missions for them, achieving by level 25 the results shown in the second column in Table 2.

This simulates a very real phenomenon in human society. Because the oligarchy tends to organize itself into competing factions, it is not possible to obey all the norms. At the extreme, it is thus not possible to avoid being a criminal, merely possible to choose which laws to violate by allying oneself

with a particular faction and following its distinctive normative pattern. People who refuse to violate any norms supported by any faction in the oligarchy, naturally drop down into the underclass, where they can be exploited by all the factions. Societies vary in the degree to which they have a mechanism like the one in *Fallen Earth* for a fresh reputational start, for example via religious conversion or by moving to a new community.

In the spring of 2012, *Fallen Earth* simplified the reputation system and required each advanced avatar to belong to a single faction, because of confusion the complex system had caused for player-versus-player (PvP) competition. Prior to this change, the game developers explained: "Currently the situation can exist where Player A can be allied with Enforcer and Lightbearer while player B is allied with Lightbearer and Vista. Player B can be hostile to Player A but will appear friendly due to the shared Lightbearer faction. It can get kind of messy, and not knowing who will attack you can really put people off of PVP" (http://fallenearth.gamersfirst.com, 2012). Note that this policy change represents something like a research finding: Complex nets of relations between factions complicate individual loyalties with the result that they may weaken.

Perhaps because the game was struggling financially and had little money for development, many missions continued to assume ally relations between traditionally adjacent factions, but now each reputation change affected only pairs of factions that were total enemies. Bridgebain selected Tech as his faction, and his actions through level 29 affected reputations. When he entered Sector 3 he did not receive faction-related missions until reaching level 35, so the reputation changes from 35-38 are shown, in comparison with those 22-25. This also illustrates an observation about factions in the real world: Loyalties and reputations are not formed continuously, but often in distinct episodes, especially early in an individual's history, but also whenever the surrounding society undergoes a phase change.

2. The Iron Law of Oligarchy

Both *Star Wars: The Old Republic* and *Fallen Earth* can be understood in terms of classic theories in sociology and criminology, notably *social disorganization* theory. In SWTOR, order is breaking down, aggravated by conflict between the two competing factions, and by their often dysfunctional attempts to restore order by force or deceit. In FE, society has already collapsed, and a menagerie of mostly incompetent attempts to restore order has arisen. Early in the twentieth century, American sociology explored the consequences of extreme social disorganization, among which was the tendency of social order on the small scale to emerge whenever large-scale social order breaks down (Anderson, 1923; Thrasher, 1927). Through *differential association*, interactions between individuals and groups establish systems of norms that may be codified into laws late in the process, and form the basis for *social control* (Sutherland, 1947; Homans, 1950; Hirschi, 1969).

The sociological theory that best applies to gameworlds, and also deserves more consideration in the light of recent political developments in the real world, is the Iron Law of Oligarchy, contained in the book *Political Parties* by Robert Michels, first published in German in 1911 and then issued in an authoritative expanded English version in 1915. Michels was a student of Max Weber, one of the "founding fathers" of sociology, whom Weber scholar Guenther Roth (1965) considered the best antidote to Marxism within sociology. Michels was an expert on the history of European socialism, and frequently refers to the works of Karl Marx and his allies. Michels extensively documented his hypothesis that left-wing political movements could never achieve their revolutionary goals. In particular, he reported that socialists begin behaving like the old elites they opposed whenever they gained status or power. Some neo-Marxists in the *world systems* tradition have distinguished primitive rebels from sophisticated revolutionaries (Hobsbawm, 1959; Wolf, 1969), and would describe the game

factions as *primitive rebels*. For Michels this distinction is vacuous, because sophisticated revolutionaries always fail, through either defeat or co-optation.

The Iron Law of Oligarchy asserts that society is always a dynamic system, in which forces for democracy and forces for autarchy constantly work against each other, with the net result of oligarchy. A relatively small elite dominates the majority of citizens and prevents any one of its own members from becoming dictator over all. Throughout history, the exact form of the oligarchy has varied, and European institutions evolved out of feudal systems in which hierarchies of families ruled. In the modern era, the oligarchy is more like a social class, fitting Marxist definitions yet not vulnerable to being displaced by a revolution of the proletariat. If Michels were alive today, he would point with glee at how both of the major Marxist nations, Russia and China, quickly became explicit oligarchies once their revolutionary fervor had worn off. The relevance of this theory to gameworlds is readily apparent in the concluding paragraph of *Political Parties*, especially the final sentence:

> The democratic currents of history resemble successive waves. They break ever on the same shoal. They are ever renewed. This enduring spectacle is simultaneously encouraging and depressing. When democracies have gained a certain stage of development, they undergo a gradual transformation, adopting the aristocratic spirit, and in many cases also the aristocratic forms, against which at the outset they struggled so fiercely. Now new accusers arise to denounce the traitors; after an era of glorious combats and of inglorious power, they end by fusing with the old dominant class; whereupon once more they are in their turn attacked by fresh opponents who appeal to the name of democracy. It is probable that this cruel game will continue without end. (Michels, 1915: 408)

Thus, Michels viewed society as a *cruel game*, in which there were winners and losers, but perhaps no justice. The rules of the game - the laws of the society - were set by the ruling oligarchy and designed to maximize their own benefit. Within the oligarchy, people are constantly forming coalitions, and the oligarchs as a group form coalitions with less powerful groups in the population, adjusting the law to benefit these coalition partners to some degree. This means that fundamentally the law does not have a stable basis for legitimacy. Its primary purpose is to serve the oligarchs, but as a practical matter they must offer enough to a sufficient fraction of the population to hold power. Ideologies about legitimacy, whether religious or philosophical, can serve as supportive propaganda, but they do so by imposing false consciousness. Yes, Marx was right to view society as a painful struggle between classes, in which the elite deceives as well as dominates the masses, but sadly there is no way of escaping this tragic situation.

Except, in the MMO gameworlds, there is an escape mechanism. Roughly speaking, there are three social classes in most MMOs. The real power elite are the game designers and the companies that host them online. Their power is limited by the fact that they must satisfy the second class, namely the players, who always have the freedom to migrate to a competing gameworld. The third class, non-player characters vulnerable to attack from players, are the poor underclass, whose suffering gives the players a feeling that they themselves belong to the oligarchy. And in a real sense, the players do function within a social system comparable to an oligarchy, because they have the ability to work their way up the experience ladder, buy ever-better armor and weapons, and slaughter with ease the vulnerable NPCs. Often players form voluntary guilds, having their own distinctive hierarchical systems and competing with other guilds in the gameworld. In contrast, the NPC peasants can never increase their status, are locked into whatever fictional group they were born into, and cannot migrate to another world.

The chief sociological alternative to the Iron Law of Oligarchy is the Functionalism of Talcott Parsons, who translated into English the famous work by Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of*

Capitalism. Parsons was actually a deeply religious man who never quite explained how the entire system of society could function for the benefit of all citizens, and who drew heavily upon Emile Durkheim's (1915) view that God endows society with a sacred quality. His most accessible comprehensive publication took an evolutionary perspective, arguing that all societies would over time evolve six major features: (1) social stratification, (2) cultural legitimation, (3) administrative bureaucracy, (4) money and markets, (5) generalized universalistic norms, and (6) the democratic association.

When introducing the last of these, Parsons took a much more optimistic position than had Michels: "A rather highly generalized universalistic legal order is in all likelihood a necessary prerequisite for the development of the last structural complex to be discussed as universal to social evolution, the democratic association with elective leadership and fully enfranchised membership" (Parsons 1964: 353). The word *universalistic* in this quote reflects the Functionalist view that the legal order came into being as particularistic alliances between individuals and tribes, but over the course of history became rationalized into a universalistic legal code applying to everybody equally. Weber (1930) himself took a middle position between his two followers, because he connected the emergence of Capitalism closely to the rise of Protestantism, yet said that in the modern world they no longer were united, implying that any of society's institutions might evolve away from the others in future.

3. The Lesson of Virtual Worlds

It is pleasant to believe that Talcott Parsons was right about the world we live in, where the law maximizes the well-being of all citizens. There is little pleasant about the competing formulation by Robert Michels, in which the law is the chaotic result of the oligarchy's attempt to consolidate its own position. Even if Parsons is wrong, it might be better to believe him, thereby living an optimistic dream and dutifully obeying whatever self-serving laws the oligarchy has conjured up.

In such a context, massively-multiplayer online games are a reminder of reality, that may exaggerate but do not lie. One can argue they teach lessons that are either valuable or harmful. On the positive side, these MMOs are an antidote to the naive political ideologies indoctrinated into children in the public schools. Thus they are like an advanced education in ethics beyond good and evil, helping the player graduate to a mature understanding of laws as amoral conditions in society that need to be manipulated for personal benefit. But if that is the "positive" side, the negative side must be really terrible. It consist of the possibility that victory over non-player characters in an MMO represents retreat from the really important combat that constitutes the real world, and submission to a binding set of trivial rules. A real hero would be brave enough to break the iron laws of the cruelest game of all: life.

While the prophecies in science fiction are typically dismissed as trivial or unrealistic, they are often based on significant social theories, including some of high quality that recent social science has ignored. A number of theorists of the late 19th and early 20th century are ignored by contemporary sociologists, often because they did not belong to progressive political movements and expressed considerable pessimism about the real human future. For example, Parsons' predecessor in dominating the Harvard Sociology Department, Pitirim Sorokin, was the nearest thing to a personal enemy Parsons possessed (Bainbridge, 2012). Sorokin used words like *fad* and *foible* to describe the kind of work Parsons and his allies did, and offered his own cyclical theory of the rise and fall of civilizations (Sorokin, 1937-1941; 1956). Even more pessimistic than Sorokin, Oswald Spengler (1926-1928) argued that every civilization has a core principle, that the core principle of Western Civilization is *boundless space*, and now that space has become exhausted Western Civilization will fall. In this, Spengler echoed the theory of Frederick Jackson Turner (1920) that the American frontier gave people room to escape

from tyranny, thus strengthening democracy both in the Wild West and even back in Europe. That frontier has closed, the socially conscious New Frontier of President John Kennedy seems literally bankrupt in the huge government debts, and the final frontier of outer space never opened (Bainbridge, 2009, 2011b). If John Horgan (1996) is right that we near the end of science, and all possible exploration in intellectual realms is near completion, then we face profound questions about the real human future.

Star Wars belongs to a tradition of science fiction that suggests the form of oligarchy that will dominate future society will be feudal, as was true in the past. In creating this space age mythos, George Lucas drew upon Akira Kurosawa's films about Japanese feudalism and the science fiction novels of both Edgar Rice Burroughs and Frank Herbert (Rinzler, 2007). In *A Princess of Mars*, Burroughs (1917) described a degenerate planet named Barsoom, where science had stalled long ago at a level more advanced than Earth, and civilization had returned to explicitly feudal forms, ruled by *jeds* (dukes) under a *jeddak* (emperor). In *Dune* by Frank Herbert (1965), feudal houses vie for influence, and the story begins on a desert planet named Arrakis, which is very much like Barsoom. Tatooine, the planet where both Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker spent their childhoods, is modeled on both. Luke's sister Leia is raised as a member of House Organa on the Planet Alderaan, the feudal faction that Republic avatars supported on Alderaan 3500 years earlier in SWTOR, and events on that world are framed as a contest between families in the feudal form of oligarchy (Searle, 2011: 23).

Fallen Earth, in contrast, imagines that terrestrial civilization has collapsed all the way, rather than merely regressing to the earlier feudal stage, and its setting is a re-opened frontier in an even wilder Wild West. A few of the many NPC factions have the beginnings of feudalism, such as the town of Barret Manor run by the Barret family. But the chief organizing principle for the primitive societies that abound in this graveyard of civilization is ideology. This actually fits Sorokin's cyclical theory that the fall of a civilization creates fertile ground for new ideological movements to compete, one eventually vanquishing all the others and establishing a new civilization. This wider view places the cruel game of Michels in a cruel tournament of many games, providing a means for a relatively stable oligarchy to emerge from nearly total social chaos.

There is no reason to believe that the creators of SWTOR and FE read authors like Michels, Parsons, Spengler, or Sorokin, but they clearly possess considerable educations and draw directly or indirectly upon a huge cultural corpus. The references in current journals suggest that contemporary sociologists have not read Michels, Spengler, or Sorokin, which is a shame because the bland consensus of recent decades has produced little discernible scientific progress in their field, despite having the blessing of Parsons. We can hope that future social scientists who have played in gameworlds like these will be open to a wider range of theories, and thus free to find the best ones with which to understand our own world in which oligarchies compete with chaos. They might wish to reexamine the largely rejected but more optimistic view of Arnold Toynbee (1947-1957), that a civilization need not fall if its oligarchic elite can respond effectively to new challenges as they arise.

Five philosophically admirable gameworlds I studied have been terminated: *Star Wars Galaxies*, *The Matrix Online*, *Tabula Rasa*, *City of Heroes*, and *God and Heroes*. In each case, low popularity played a role in their demise, mediated by lack of enthusiasm from large corporations that sought economic profit rather than philosophical insight. SWTOR launched with great public excitement, but its population soon dropped, and its rulers responded by collapsing the original 217 servers into a mere 20, giving players no choice about which server they would be exiled to, and blocking a player effort to build population on a particular server that was scheduled for closing. *Fallen Earth* has never been popular, its single server appears just barely viable, and there is no money to invest in significant

improvements. We can hope that the oligarchs running that much larger cruel game named *Western Civilization* will find adequate responses to the challenges it faces.

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