

Power Games

Rules and Roles in *Second Life*

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Blekinge Institute of Technology

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Introduction:

Structures, Rules and Norms Affecting the Role-Play in *Second Life*

Described by the role-players as a relaxing, lighthearted pastime as well as a completely and totally immersive endeavour, simultaneously exhilarating and exhausting, the role-play communities in an online 3D worlds such as *Second Life* (often abbreviated *SL*) draw a large number of people from all over the world. In interviews, blog posts, forum discussions, and articles many of the role-players describe the make-believe web of stories that emerges as the most important aspect, and for some of the participants the role-play becomes the very reason for them to log in on a regular basis. Collaboratively these role-players create an ongoing and emergent live performance filled with individual quirks and unexpected twists and turns. *Second Life*, from which all four examples — the *Nekos in Second Life* forum, the Midian city community, the *Second Life* Gor groups, and the Independent State of Caledon — of role-play communities in this dissertation are taken, provides its residents (as the “inhabitants” in *SL* are called) with a virtually empty playground, on which they can be creative in almost any way they want. Some people log in to design and build, others prefer to use it primarily as a social platform, yet others are using it as a work tool in various ways.¹ Role-play might be the most popular activity, however, and the number of active role-play communities inside *Second Life* is high. In his 2009 list, Salvatore Otoro counts 73 different ones and he divides them into five categories: dark RP², Gor RP, Superhero, Science Fiction, and other types of role-play. Only three of the role-play groups in which I have gathered³ the empirical material are represented in Otoro’s list, however. Gor can be described as a typical role-play environment, as can the dark play communities Midian City. My findings among the

¹ I will not go into any detail about what it is like for a beginner to enter *Second Life*. More about this can for instance be found in Tom Boellstorff’s excellent *Coming of Age in Second Life*.

² RP is an often used abbreviation for the word role-play.

³ The methodology I have chosen will be discussed in further detail in chapter two.

Nekos was taken from the more casual discussion and playful bantering on the *Second Life Nekos forum*. The fourth group, Caledon, cannot be found on Otoro's list, but it provides an example of a comparatively old social/role-play environment in *Second Life*, which adds significantly to the diversity of the role-play environments in general and is therefore included in my dissertation. Theoretically I am relying primarily on performance theorist Richard Schechner, sociologist Erving Goffman, as well as post-structuralists Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. My methodological stance has its origin primarily within literature studies as text analysis is my preferred method, but I also draw on the (cyber)ethnographical works of T.L. Taylor, Celia Pearce, and Mikael Jakobsson. In this introduction I will describe the framework of the role-play communities mentioned above, and outline the *Second Life* context and the contexts of Massively Multiplayer Online environments (MMOs). I will subsequently move on to place *SL* with reference to digital game theory and social network theory, and explore the laws and norms that govern it, since these deeply affect and constrain the manner in which the role-play communities evolve and are governed. In this dissertation my focus is thus the relationship of the role-player to their chosen role especially in terms of the boundary between being in character (IC), and as such removed from "reality," and the move to being out of character (OOC), which instead highlights the negotiations of the social, sometimes make-belief, roles. Destabilising and problematising the dichotomy between the notion of the online as virtual and the offline as actual, as well as the idea that everything is "real" regardless of context, my aim is to understand role-play in a digital realm in a new way, in which two modes of performance, dramatic and social, take place in a digital context online — or inworld as many *SL* residents call it.

Community

Community, culture, and groups are concepts that have proven difficult to define. Ferdinand Tönnies introduced the concepts *Gemeinschaft*, community regulated by common norms and ideas about appropriate behaviour, loyalty and shared beliefs, and a "unity of human wills" (Tönnies 22), and *Gesellschaft*, a civil, organised society based on individuals acting separately from each other in their own best interest, without any wish to help each other except when gaining something by doing so (Tönnies 52). The dichotomy inherent in the concepts has been criticised, but this word pair has nevertheless functioned as an important distinction of the boundaries of a community within the fields of sociology and ethnography. Community, or *Gemeinschaft*, thus implies closer (emotional) ties between the community members, whereas civil society,

Gesellschaft, indicates more distant relationships based on "equal trade-off" (Tönnies 52, emphasis in the original).

A similar value-laden dichotomy can be found in a related, but not necessarily similar, concept: the binary opposite of (main) culture and subculture. Exploring various meanings of culture throughout time, Dick Hebdige defines culture from an anthropological, sociological or ethnographic point of view as the "manifest appearances of an 'everyday life'" (7) from which norms, values, and ideologies can be elucidated. The power relation implied in the concept of main culture points to the hegemony of the majority and subculture thus becomes "an Underworld," which "suggests secrecy" and "mystery" (Hebdige 4) and attempts to undermine the hegemony of the mainstream.

All of these concepts are valid in the context of *Second Life* as many inworld groups define themselves as communities, networks, cultures and subcultures in various ways. In *Second Life* "groups," which are programmed into the *SL* interface, are primarily an organisational and communicational unit. Groups are formed for various reasons, for instance to facilitate communication among those who belong to the group, to manage land ownership and building permissions, or as a venue for advertising, but they also function as social units clearly distinguished from other groups or individuals inside *Second Life*. Since many groups describe themselves using terms like community, thus indicating emotional bonds between the group members, this becomes the primary reason for me using the concept.

Governance and Performance

A side-effect of these role-play groups is that they need to be administered and maintained, which, it can be argued, introduces a performative social layer separate from the dramatical one, that of the community administrator, leader, or, sometimes, the politician. In their case the performance is aimed at formulating the structures, rules and norms of their community, which can support and to some extent steer the role-play and safeguard its boundaries, but it might also involve the negotiation about these rules, customs and boundaries, and perhaps also a make-belief performance intended to influence decision-makers in a particular direction. Make-believe and make-belief are central concepts in this dissertation. Introduced by Richard Schechner, who stresses the context of a performance, the concepts focus on the intention and aim of social as well as dramatical performances:

Performances can be either ‘make-belief’ or ‘make-believe.’ The many performances in everyday life such as professional roles, gender and race roles, and shaping one’s identity are not make-believe actions (as playing a role on stage or in a film most probably is). The performances of everyday life — ‘make-belief’ — create the very social realities they enact. In ‘make-believe’ performances, the distinction between what’s real and what’s pretended is kept clear. (Schechner 42)

Schechner thus points out that make-belief performances are intended to create and sustain an image, and perhaps add to the credibility and authenticity of a person or a role, and as such they become tools to create “reality.” Make-believe performances, on the other hand, highlight their own inauthenticity. Schechner’s distinction is supported by the empirical material I have gathered. On the one hand my findings highlight the make-believe role-play, in which the role-players act out events in the life of (fantasy) characters of their choice, and, on the other hand, the findings show how the structure or apparatus around the role-play is created in a context with potentially “real,” if not physical, social consequences, which are influenced and maintained in an often make-belief manner. The trajectories of power influencing both the dramatic role-play and the social roles are in focus.

***Second Life* — a Virtual Arena?**

Since the late seventies, at first single player computer games and later MMOs such as fantasy environments *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* as well as explicitly social worlds such as the *Sims Online* and *Second Life*, that do not feature a specific, single game narrative, have provided new and exciting spaces in which people can relax and play.⁴ Traditionally gamers have often been portrayed as loners who interact with computers rather than with people, but this has changed significantly with the emergence of MMOs. One of the most fundamental and exciting aspects of MMOs is indeed the social dimension (Ludlow & Wallace 30). All MMOs share this feature but unlike the previously mentioned *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft*, being in *Second Life* also involves building the context of your choice or sharing the ones that have been built by other residents. *Second Life*, which opened to the public in 2003, is often described as a digital world with its own market, with possibilities to create, and sell, user-generated content, which, in turn, might create revenue enough to live on, as some lucky residents have discovered

⁴ The age limit for entering the *Second Life* main grid is sixteen for students accompanied by a teacher or adult in a similar function. Previously there used to be a *Second Life* teen grid available for teenagers under eighteen, which had no access to the adult grid and vice versa.

(*The Economist*). Since its start, *SL* has developed into a multifaceted and extremely varied digital playground with a large number of communities and groupings, all of them with their own rules and decision-making processes. Indeed, from the beginning *Second Life*'s San Francisco-based owners and creators, the Linden Lab, portrayed *SL* as a virtual arena that was open to anyone, where anything and everything was possible as well as allowed (Silverstein). Everything was up to the individual, just as the slogan "Your World. Your Imagination," which was used until recently on the *Second Life* website, suggested (*Second Life Web*). The slogan indicated that anyone who decides to join in, has the possibility to fulfil their dreams or act out any fantasies they might have on the *SL* platform, but many people have noticed that these dreams might prove difficult to realise and that the world not necessarily is theirs (Duranske 219). Being as social and collaborative as *SL* is, it often proves difficult to act out fantasies that might seem too disturbing or egocentric to fellow residents. In the early years, the Linden Lab underplayed the communicative and fundamentally social aspect of *Second Life*, the community, the collaborations — and the negotiations. This has changed with the most recent version of the website and the Linden Lab now simply offers you to "join the Internet's largest user-created, 3D virtual world community" (*Second Life Web*).

The idea of virtuality, as in virtual reality or VR, in a digital information and communication context has often been exemplified by the "helmet-and-glove" technology-enabled immersion in a digital realm. Another image that often springs to mind is the boundary between what is described as virtual, and therefore make-believe, and what is framed as "real," which often implies face-to-face interaction. A third definition of virtuality can be seen as a bridge between the actual and the metaphysical inspired by Deleuzian notions of the virtual in the process of becoming (Deleuze and Parnet 2006: 112-15), in which "[c]onceptions of the world are also *perceptions* of it and concurrently forms of *production* which execute the extraction of clear *relations* within it" (Murphie 11). In this third sense virtuality thus refers to the process of becoming and influencing the actual.

Due to this spill-over between definitions, I have chosen clearer terms more appropriate to my study. In most cases I prefer not to use the word virtual to describe this social, online space, because of its connotations of fake or make-believe, a static "almost reality" distinguished from reality only by its online-ness. Although a world such as *Second Life* is in a digital realm, much of the interaction taking place here would be described as actual, with the possibility of real, if not physical, repercussions, in the same way as most interactions are in a social context offline. As indicated above, I have therefore decided to

use the performance-related terms, make-believe and make-belief, both of which can take place online as well as offline, thus attempting to destabilise the dichotomy between the two.

Play, Games, and Rules

Despite having their feet firmly planted in the sand of non-digital playgrounds and ritualistic sites in their mapping of play and games, Dutch linguist and historian Johan Huizinga, with his 1938 book *Homo Ludens*,⁵ and the French anthropologist Roger Caillois, with *Les jeux et les hommes*,⁶ are regarded as seminal writers by digital games researchers. What ludologist Espen Aarseth finds intriguing in their writing is the idea of games having their origin in the fundamentally human wish to play and engage in friendly competitiveness, which Aarseth considers to be the driving force of gaming.⁷ Huizinga, on the other hand, who primarily has focused on various aspects of play, argues that the "first main characteristic of play" is that "it is free, is in fact freedom" (103). In this sense, the freedom of play is contrasted with the competitiveness of gaming of Aarseth's description. Additionally, according to Huizinga, play equals perfection since it creates pockets of order in a chaotic and uncertain world. However, and somewhat ambiguously, Huizinga also points to the rules of play and claims that "an absolute and peculiar order reigns" (105) inside that space and subsequently his notion of play is brought closer to the rule-based games Aarseth has in mind. Economist Edward Castronova, who has focused primarily on the economies of online worlds and games, also highlights this tension, and adds the element of achievement: "Utility always rises when constraints are relaxed, yet people seem to prefer a world with constraints to a world without them. Constraints create the possibility of achievement, and it is the drive to achieve something with the avatar that seems to create an obsessive interest in her well-being" (825). This seems to be at odds with popular characterisations of *Second Life*, which I will get back to later on.

As becomes obvious above, Johan Huizinga and Edward Castronova seem to have slightly different takes on the word rules. Huizinga seems to envision a play space where rules provide both order and enchantment in a primarily social manner. Castronova, on the other hand, seems to refer to rules as an incentive for achievement and progression, and as such rules primarily become an issue for programmers and game designers. This is

⁵ "Man the Player"

⁶ Published in the French original in 1958. The English translation *Man, Play, and Games* was released in 1961.

⁷ What Espen Aarseth refers to is primarily gaming in games of progression.

accentuated further by game theorists Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, who rely on game designers such as Greg Costikyan, Staffan Björk, and Jussi Holopainen, as they underline the fundamental role of rules (10-12). Game theorist Jesper Juul continues on the same thread:

Why be limited when we can be free? The answer to this is basically that games provide context for actions: moving an avatar is more meaningful in a game environment than in an empty space; throwing a ball has more interesting implications on the playing field than off the playing field; a rush attack is only possible if there are rules specifying how attacks work; winning the game requires that the winning condition has been specified; without rules in chess, there are no checkmates, end games, or Sicilian openings. The rules of a game add meaning and enable actions by setting up differences between potential moves and events. (19)

Hence, these notion of rules brings us closer to the conventional computer game experience, in which one or more players interact with the programmed game in a way that enables them to progress — “level up” — when the players have successfully accomplished certain tasks. The rules that govern this type of game space are often programmed into the code and they create a non-negotiable and absolute framework for the gameplay. “A game’s gameplay is the degree and nature of the interactivity that the game includes, i.e., how the player is able to interact with the game-world and how that game-world reacts to the choices the player makes” (Rouse xviii, Juul 87). The gameplay can only be facilitated or accelerated with the help of cheats or walkthroughs.⁸ Games of progression is not the focus in this dissertation, however, whereas digital arenas for free play, of which *Second Life* is an example, are.

Categorising *Second Life*

My aim is not primarily to give a descriptive overview of *Second Life* as a medium, a tool, or an arena for whatever people choose to do. Excellent contributions have been made by for instance Tom Boellstorff, Peter Ludlow, Mark Wallace, and Edward Castronova in this regard. Instead my focus lies on a specific group of users, the role-playing residents, and how they negotiate and interact socially as well as dramatically on this digital platform. Returning to Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, who this time rely on game inventors and

⁸ Cheats are methods that can make a game character stronger or more able to fulfil the tasks at hand. Walkthroughs are information about what to do to get to the next level in a game.

designers Stephen Sniderman and Ralph Koster, highlight the social negotiations of rules in a game context (11). The role-play enacted in *Second Life* is a perfect example of this. For many of its residents it is an arena for free and playful interaction in line with Johan Huizinga's notion of play. *SL* has its social rules and regulations, and the communities and groups all have their own versions, but these regulations are often intended to provide freedom for a specific type of play. Negotiation of these rules take place both in a general and a specific social sphere in the tradition of the text-based MUDs and text/image-based MOOs of the 1990s. Although *SL* has developed out of these and has visual 3D predecessors like the social and educational platform *Active Worlds*⁹, MMORPGs such as *Ultima Online*¹⁰ and *EverQuest*¹¹, *Second Life* is the first online 3D platform which has managed, on a larger scale, to merge a lack of a game-narrative (there is no story or plot to explore, no path to follow), the possibility, indeed encouragement, for user-generated content with a sufficiently sophisticated graphic environment. With its almost thirteen million accounts, out of which approximately 65,000 are in use simultaneously at any given time¹², *SL* has developed into a melting pot of people from different socio-political backgrounds from all over the world.

After a slow start, with around 500 residents, the *Second Life* community grows to around 70,000 in the autumn of 2005, and then to one million accounts in late September 2006. By 2007 *Second Life* becomes a household name as it increased the number of accounts almost tenfold. The median age in *Second Life*, 33, is higher than in most comparable platforms (Zee Linden). In an attempt to categorise *SL* in relation to game studies I turn to Roger Caillois, who has identified four different categories of games:

- *Agôn* highlights competition and is based on acquiring or showing skills (131) and “presupposes a desire to win” (132). This category can be exemplified by football, billiards, or chess but also the games of progression played on a computer.
- The second category, *alea*, is chance-based and the outcome relies on fate or luck. The player is passive (133) and *alea* can be exemplified by roulette or lottery.
- The third category, *mimicry*, is characterised by simulation, disguise, and the acceptance of illusion (135), be it playing pirate, Nero, or Hamlet.

⁹ *Active Worlds* was first launched in 1997.

¹⁰ *Ultima Online* was also first launched in 1997.

¹¹ *Everquest* was launched in 1999.

¹² Log-in data collected in March 2009. The number of accounts does not equal individual users, since a user can have as many accounts as he or she likes.

- Callois's fourth and last category, *ilinx*, is often described as physical and involves vertigo, the production of, and surrender to, a state of dizziness and disorder/disruption and an enabling of alternative viewpoints. Ilinx can be exemplified by whirling dervishes, carousels, and amusement parks.

The last two categories are closer to Huizinga's definition of play than the two former, but *Second Life* might in fact operate in accordance with all the four game categories on different levels. For instance, although it has not been specifically programmed to be an overall feature, *Second Life* shows aspects of *agôn* when residents enact a swords' fight or a shootout which one party eventually wins. *Alea* can be found inside *Second Life* in the shape of games such as Slingo and various other "Casino Games" that have existed in *Second Life* but are, as of July 25, 2007, banned or regulated (Robin Linden). Mimicry, on the other hand, can be regarded as the main category in an environment such as *Second Life*. Simulation, role-play, and the acceptance of an alternative illusion are core activities for many residents, and this group is indeed in focus in this dissertation. The possibilities to fly, dance, and teleport, that *Second Life* provides, even if it is in a digital body, might give breathtaking examples of the fourth and last category, *ilinx*. I will thus argue that *Second Life* as a digital platform can be described in terms of all four of Caillois's game categories, even if *Second Life* cannot be seen as a game in and of itself. The versatility and open-ended quality of *Second Life* ultimately leads to the residents using it in a wide range of ways, some of them more game-like than others.

Roger Caillois further adds to Huizinga's definition of play by arguing that material gains that might be had from play in the form of "gambling houses, casinos, racetracks, and lotteries" (124) does not constitute real play, since "[p]lay is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often money ... As for the professionals ... it is clear that they are not players but workers.... [P]lay must be defined as a free and voluntary activity" (125), and this is exactly what the role-play in the digital playground of *Second Life* offers. Furthermore, Caillois states that "[a]n outcome known in advance, with no possibility of error or surprise, clearly leading to an inescapable result, is incompatible with the nature of play" (126). Again, the open-ended role-play I am exploring here fits very well with this description.

Additionally, each of Callois's four categories operate on a *paidia – ludus* scale, where free improvisation, carefree gaiety and uncontrolled fantasy stand in opposition to an arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious convention (similar to grinding¹³ which is

¹³ Grinding refers to the act of performing repetitive tasks in order to gain access to the next level.

common in many video games) (130). Paidia is thus improvisational, primordial and joyous like a cat's play with yarn, whereas ludus refers to the institutionalised and civilised, but also refined and enriched, rule-based play, such as hide and seek or kite-flying (141). Games researcher and ethnographer Celia Pearce applies this to MMOs like this:

The primary distinction is that ludic worlds present the player with a prescribed overarching goal while paidiaic worlds do not. Ludic worlds have a formal structure of objectives and a set of constraints that dictate how those objectives might be met, whereas paidiaic worlds provide players with a range of activities and options for social interaction" (28).

Second Life's open and non-descriptive structure might best be described as paidiaic, but *SL* offers possibilities for both paidiaic and ludic play. Some role-play communities spend a significant amount of time on goal-oriented raids, such as some of the *Star Wars* groups, or on building whole villages or cities, such as examples from the democratic experiment Neualtenburg/Neufreistadt (*Second Life Wikia*) or Caledon, a 19th century steampunk community, which will be presented more thoroughly later on, will show.



Grazing deer on Japan Tempura Island.

As an aside Roger Caillois introduces the Chinese concept wan, which highlights the contemplative and meditative aspects of play:

The reservoir of free movement ... seems in this case to be oriented not toward process, calculation, or triumph over difficulties but toward calm, patience, and idle speculation. The term wan basically designates all kinds of semiautomatic activities which leaves the mind detached and idle, certain complex games which are part of ludus, and at the same time, nonchalant meditation and lazy contemplation.... When joined to the term nao, the term wan connotes any exuberant or joyous behaviour.... [Wan] is not used for competition, dice, or dramatic interpretation. (146)

Wan seems to be an appropriate way to describe spaces in *Second Life* in which people can slowly explore and relax, such as for instance the Zen Center in the Teal sim¹⁴ and the Japan Tempura Island (image on the previous page), which has a sim all to itself. I have thus outlined a few of the very different possible uses offered in *Second Life*.

Although some of the role-play communities, the main focus in this dissertation, provide places or contexts in which it is possible to relax and explore, the most important reason for their existence is generally something else. In these cases the rules are not there to distinguish between winning or losing, but rather to ensure that the illusion of their playground is maintained and the role-play is facilitated. Indeed, according to Caillois, rules create fiction — with the exception of rules without a “real” counterpart such as chess, polo or baccara (127). It is when rules are created with the intention to distinguish the virtual from the real that fiction is created by rules, and this is what happens in some of the *SL* role-play communities. The rules in these communities, as will be discussed in detail in the upcoming chapters, are predominantly intended to safeguard the collaboratively built illusion. Roger Caillois argues that play should thus be free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules and make-belief (128). The *Second Life* environment provides an extremely versatile and multifaceted digital playground and fits this description. Nevertheless, even playgrounds tend to have rules and constraints, which often relate to the norms and rules of the surrounding community. I would like to explore these rules with the help of lawyer Lawrence Lessig, who uses four different types of modalities — laws, norms, market and architecture/code — to identify various aspects of ways to regulate behaviour in “cyberspace” (123-24).

¹⁴ A sim is a region or “simulators,” an area hosted on a Linden Lab server, often with its own characteristics, rules, and themes.

Laws

Lawrence Lessig defines law as a “command backed up by the threat of a sanction” (340) and gives examples of laws that might influence MMOs: copyright law, defamation law, and obscenity law (124). “This particular aspect of law provides a well-defined constraint on individuals within the jurisdiction of the law giver, or sovereign. The constraint — objectively — is the threat of punishment” (340). To date there has been very little direct regulation of digital space by formal law, but more and more voices are raised to change this. The government of digital environments and the manner in which security is maintained in online environments has for instance been of interest to the United States congress. On April 1, 2008, Philip Rosedale, then Linden Lab CEO, was summoned to Washington to attend a hearing on virtual worlds (Duranske), in which members of congress asked questions about security in general and the dangers of child sexual predation in virtual worlds in particular. Blogger and lawyer Benjamin Duranske reports that Rosedale was also asked about the dangers of “terrorists ... using virtual worlds for training, recruitment, and fund transfers” and although Duranske thinks the congress representative overstates the danger, he clarifies, in an update, that “New World Notes¹⁵ points out that a team of anti-terrorism investigators does try to track jihadists in *Second Life*, so it’s not an absurd point or as discredited” as he thought. Using MMOs as training facilities is something economist Edward Castronova points to as well (233). *Second Life* was created in a fundamentally liberal tradition, where the heterogeneous circus, the spectacle, the “out-of-the-ordinary,” was both allowed and encouraged. Underlining this and at the same time offering an explanation, Tom Boellstorff point to Philip Rosedale’s roots in “Calefornian Ideology” and “creationalist capitalism” (207), which furthers “’prosumption’ where capitalist subjects produce what they consume, turning consumption into a form of production” (Boellstorff 208). The idea relies on residents taking charge of their own “second lives,” taking advantage of the possibilities to make money on their creations, and the type of liberal community this brings. However, since the time *Second Life* was launched, Linden Lab has realised the need for regulations and governing ideas, and in some cases these have been added to the general rules of *Second Life*, as the following blog posts on the *SL* blog show: Age and identity verification was suggested in May 2007 and implemented in 2008 (Robin Linden), in July 2007 gambling and casinos were made illegal (Robin Linden), in October Linden Lab began to charge VAT to Europeans, and in November ageplay was disallowed (Ken D. Linden). In January 2008 inworld banks were prohibited (Ken D. Linden) and in February “ad farming” became

¹⁵ A *Second Life* online magazine/blog.

regulated (Jack Linden). Additionally, lawsuits for copyright infringements have now resulted in the exposure of real life identities (Reuters). The above sources show that the “virtual” world of *Second Life*, where anything was allowed and distanced from the “real” world, has increasingly become more and more structured and controlled, and its ties with offline control systems are being strengthened.

Some positive voices, like Benjamin Duranske’s, have been heard: “So far, you’ve had no way to know the real name, geographic location, gender, or age of the person controlling ‘Benjamin Noble.’ That’s about to change, and I couldn’t be happier about it”. The main issue is credibility, as Duranske continues:

The people who will most benefit from this are business people and professionals who have been limited by an inability to prove who we are, know who we are talking to, and make enforceable agreements in-world. That all changes, once verification goes live. The long-term possibilities are huge.

The age and identity verification system proposed by the Linden Lab is controversial, however, and although Robin Linden states that it is done in an attempt to facilitate the building of trust and credibility inworld, just as Duranske points out above, this is questioned by blogger Grace McDunnough:

Anyone that has spent any reasonable amount of time participating in on line communities knows that trust has to be earned over time, it is not merely a factor of your name, age, sex, or location; it's about who you are and what you contribute in the context of the community. I would argue that if you start with a person's age, sex, location as a basis for trust you are more apt to be fooled or lulled into some false sense of security by a "verification" tag.... IDV does not assure your avatar is who you say you are, it merely indicates that the data you provide to Integrity matches data that is publicly available.

Also *Clickable Culture*'s Tony Walsh sees the development as negative and he highlights the discontinuation of the laissez-faire policy as the main reason:

This is a major move for Linden Lab, with major ramifications for Second Life residents, who up until this point have been enjoying a combination of Wild West meets Roman Orgy meets Sesame Street since 2003. Clearly this is an avenue the company was forced to take in light of the increasing public interest in its seedier side, catching the attention of

The Authorities. It's not the direction founder Philip Rosedale, who has compared his virtual world to Burning Man¹⁶, probably wanted to go. ... Later this month, a cold, dry Second Life experience will replace the old, sloppy, Burning Man-style Second Life experience.

It took some time for the age and identity verification to be implemented in *Second Life*, partly because of problems on an international level where residents from some countries had problems providing the type of information for verification that Linden Lab required, partly because this was, as hinted at above, a controversial issue inside Linden Lab as well, and partly because of the massive lobby against it.

Some residents have taken resistance to Linden Lab a step further. The rhetoric of the "SL Liberation Front" (SLLF) is sharper than most. The group charter states that the goal is to "cast aside the yoke of oppression foisted upon us by the imperialist running dogs known as the Lindens" (*Second Life* search). *The Generation: Gamerz* describes how the SLLF, formerly known as the Second Life Liberation Army (SLLA), "was formed as the 'in-world' military wing of a national liberation movement within Second Life" and the reason for the revolt: "As Linden Labs is functioning as an authoritarian government the only appropriate response is to fight." A similar stance can be found among the grievers.¹⁷ In *Second Life* grieving is not always linked to organised violence or ideological or political conviction, but surprisingly often that is indeed the case. Griefing might be explosions, attempts to entrap someone, harassment, or "denial of service" attacks.¹⁸ Admittedly, griefer attacks are not physical. They cannot harm anyone, to date not even your

¹⁶ The "Burning Man" festival or the "Art, Fire, and Community festival" is an annual week-long event taking place in the Black Rock Desert in California at which the participants are to express themselves creatively in any way they can. It was brought into *Second Life* under the name "Burning Life" for the first time in 2003 and has become an annually recurring event at which residents gather to create individually or together with other residents in *Second Life*. (Burning Man, Second Life Wiki)

¹⁷ Grievers differ from typical players in that they do not play the game in order to achieve objectives defined by the game world. Instead, they seek to harass other players, causing grief. In particular, they may use tools such as stalking, hurling insults, and exploiting unintended game mechanics. Griefing as a gaming play style is not simply any action that may be considered morally incorrect. Though the staff of each online game defines griefing in a manner that best fits their game, certain criteria must be met for an action to be considered griefing. An act of griefing involves the following three types of actions to be considered grief play: The unfair use or abuse of a game mechanic that was not intended by the game's developers; The inability of the victim to exact some means of retribution beyond utilizing similar unintended game mechanics; The intended purpose of an act of griefing must be to negatively impact the game play of another person. (Wikipedia)

¹⁸ "Denial of service" attacks, when grievers attempt to overload a sim by sending images or objects that multiplies at a fast pace are common tactics in order to destroy the inworld experience for other people (Reuters).

computer. To most people inworld such attacks are not a frequent, and yet, as many people testify, they are both an upsetting and annoying experience. Griefer attacks make it difficult or even impossible for someone to create, buy or upload things. They disrupt social interactions and the “denial of service” attacks can make Linden Lab’s servers crash. These outbreaks are impossible to control for affected residents, which seems to be the main reason why the attacks are perceived as annoying and sometimes even threatening. Additionally, our physical brain is used to categorising a blazing fire, being caged or bombarded with objects as acts of aggression, and therefore we react in a physical manner even if the perceived threat is digital.

Causing Linden Lab servers to crash is indeed the goal for griefer groups such as W-Hat, which built the first “doomsday device” (Felten) intended to bring as much damage to the servers as possible. One of W-Hat’s members is Patrick Sapinski, who joined *Second Life* in January 2005 as Plastic Duck. He became legendary as a member of the griefer group and was subsequently banned. In November 2005 he was reborn as Griefer Overlord (according to his profile and a persistent myth, he was, ironically enough, greeted by Philip Linden with “welcome to SL, griefer” upon arrival), and in May 2006 he was reborn again as Gene Replacement (Nino, *Second Life* search). Sapinski’s grieving tests the boundaries in the online world and is clearly aimed at Linden Lab. He elaborates on his view of the online world:

When I started, Linden Labs always used to pride themselves on how everyone belonged in SL — the content creators, the sexual deviants, whatever ... But what I saw was a small company trying to babysit thousands and thousands of adults. And I just thought, “What happens in three years, when there's millions of SLers and they can't babysit them all anymore? That's not going to work.” (Whyte)

In the same article from March 2007 written by Murray Whyte, Catherine Smith at the Linden Lab comments on the growth of the platform and agrees with Sapinski about the difficulty that lies in monitoring the behaviour of millions of residents: “It's been a huge scaling challenge, certainly.... There's no way we can police it – and we don't really have a desire to.” Smith’s point of view has been backed up by other social media experts, but, as seen above, this laissez-faire approach has been re-evaluated by Linden Lab since then, adding to the rules and regulations residents have to follow. In the article Whyte also notices that “Linden Lab hasn't quite let go. Users like Sapinski have been banned – that

is, his user account has been deactivated – for bad behaviour several dozen times. ‘But I always find a way back in,’ [Sapinski] says” (Whyte).

Similar to the rhetoric of the SL Liberation Front, Sapinski argues that his actions are harmless and mainly intended to be funny and satirical. However, a recreation of the 9/11 attacks as well as denial-of-service attacks using flying, self-replicating penises have not exactly endeared him to the Linden Lab — or the majority of fellow residents.

Sapinski was allegedly also a “part of a group that built a gleaming campaign headquarters for a fictional presidential candidate, John Edward – not to be confused with Senator John Edwards, a real-life candidate whose SL headquarters is next door” (Whyte). Primarily, Sapinski protests against Linden Lab’s tougher rules that, in his mind, are “a far cry from the initial idea ... [Linden Lab] said SL was for everyone. They said they weren't going to ban anyone. And then 60 users got banned at the same time. And that was around the time they stopped advertising themselves as a welcoming community” (Whyte).

Microsoft is one of the companies that have reacted strongly against grieving and it has posted a list of ten tips on how to deal with cyberbullies and griefers. The company acknowledges the possible economic impact for the companies: “Although they are only a small percentage of the video-gaming community, griefers have some gaming companies concerned about losing subscribers. As a result, many game sites and providers are becoming less tolerant of griefers and are employing new methods to police for them and otherwise limit their impact” (Microsoft). In the testimony before the U.S. Congress Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet, Philip Rosedale also seemed to have realised the importance of the monitoring and prevention of grieving: “We actively and proactively have involved the FBI in looking into cyber-crimes where people have tried to deny service” and the hearing reveals that Linden Lab and U.S. law enforcement have collaborated on previous occasions (Reuters). Linden Lab is clearly well aware of the fact that grieving can be hazardous for a company that attempts to profile itself as an innovative arena for business or education, a threat that is underlined by the fact that the U.S. Congress takes interest in these issues. Linden Lab has indeed taken notice of the griefers, and their response is to create new rules and regulations.

The reactions of both the *Second Life* community and of the Linden Lab show a common reaction towards the griefers. The new laws are a reaction to the griever attempts to destroy the experience of residents who are happy using the online world in a more mainstream way. It resembles the conflict between Manuel Castells’ techno-meritocratic culture, with its root in “academia and science” and belief in “the inherent good of scientific and technological development” (39), and the innovative and open source-

oriented hacker culture (42), with virtual communitarians and Internet entrepreneurs being caught in the middle. The techno-meritocrats, in this case the Linden Lab, have developed and own the technology, while the hackers, the griefer, who are usually equally skilled at programming, attempt to take away their power. The account above shows that subversive hacker/griever tactics in most cases fail to reach their objectives, not because they are not skilled enough, but because the majority of residents in *Second Life* often find themselves targets of griever attacks and thus become less inclined to sympathise with the griefers. In fact, as long as they have space and freedom enough to do what they want, the majority of residents do not seem to be interested in questioning or wresting power away from the Linden Lab. Discussing the reactions of mainstream *Second Life* as they defend their colleague, Prokofy Neva, who had been banned from the *Second Life* forums by the Linden Lab for being too critical vis-à-vis them and the privileged "oldbies," virtual journalists Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace are forced to admit: "It seemed that many people, whether they realized it or not, preferred a world in which the unpopular were silenced." (231). Virtual entrepreneurs and virtual communitarians seem to primarily want a reliable platform where they can conduct business or interact socially in a peaceful environment and they do not seem to strive to have more than they already can have and are willing to pay for. Nevertheless, regardless of the griefers' ideological standpoint, the battle between the techno-meritocrats and the hackers is likely to go on as long as the techno elites, in this case Linden Lab, has a financial interest in securing — sometimes by law — the digital environment it has created for the majority of residents who use it in a communitarian or entrepreneurial way, but at the same time they have to be careful not to alienate the large portion of residents who wish to keep the reasonably free space that *Second Life* still is, and this has bearings on the situation of the role-play communities that are my focus.

Norms

In a social context most people are expected to "behave nicely." This is a part of the social norms and the need for more or less clearly expressed rules for social interaction in the large and varied *Second Life* community is clearly visible. The most fundamental and overarching rules in *Second Life* are the "Bix Six," the community standards formulated by the Linden Lab (*Second Life Web*):

Intolerance

Combating intolerance is a cornerstone of Second Life's Community Standards. Actions

that marginalize, belittle, or defame individuals or groups inhibit the satisfying exchange of ideas and diminish the Second Life community as a whole. The use of derogatory or demeaning language or images in reference to another Resident's race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation is never allowed in Second Life.

Harassment

Given the myriad capabilities of Second Life, harassment can take many forms. Communicating or behaving in a manner which is offensively coarse, intimidating or threatening, constitutes unwelcome sexual advances or requests for sexual favors, or is otherwise likely to cause annoyance or alarm is Harassment.

Assault

Most areas in Second Life are identified as Safe. Assault in Second Life means: shooting, pushing, or shoving another Resident in a Safe Area (see Global Standards below); creating or using scripted objects which singularly or persistently target another Resident in a manner which prevents their enjoyment of Second Life.

Disclosure

Residents are entitled to a reasonable level of privacy with regard to their Second Life experience. Sharing personal information about a fellow Resident --including gender, religion, age, marital status, race, sexual preference, and real-world location beyond what is provided by the Resident in the First Life page of their Resident profile is a violation of that Resident's privacy. Remotely monitoring conversations, posting conversation logs, or sharing conversation logs without consent are all prohibited in Second Life and on the Second Life Forums.

Adult Regions, Groups, and Listings

Second Life is an adult community, but "Adult" content, activity and communication are not permitted on the Second Life "mainland." Such material is permitted on private regions, or on the Adult Continent, Zindra. In either case, any Adult content, activity, or communication, that falls under our Adult Maturity Definition must be on regions designated as "Adult," and will be filtered from non-verified accounts. Other regions may be designated as either "Mature" or "PG." For more information on how to designate land, events, groups, and classified listings, please carefully read the "Maturity Definitions."

Disturbing the Peace

Every Resident has a right to live their Second Life. Disrupting scheduled events, repeated transmission of undesired advertising content, the use of repetitive sounds, following or self-spawning items, or other objects that intentionally slow server performance or inhibit another Resident's ability to enjoy Second Life are examples of Disturbing the Peace.

These community standards “apply to all areas of Second Life, the Second Life Forums, and the Second Life Website [and if they are not followed it will] result in suspension or, with repeated violations, expulsion from the Second Life (*Second Life Web*). The “Big Six” have been slightly altered over the years, but especially number one, two, three and six remain almost in its original form and can simply be summarised as a — more detailed and explicit — request to “be nice,” whereas rules number four and five are intended to safeguard against exploitation.

Depending on the context inside *Second Life*, additional social frameworks and norms have been adopted. Some areas in *SL* are more regulated than others, but there are, in general, very few rules except the basic “Go shopping!” and “be nice” in the commercial areas. Grievers who deliberately set out to cause disruption might try to cause havoc in these environments, but not much can be done that makes any lasting damage, and, if anyone becomes too annoying while trying, the response is generally banning¹⁹. Another, slightly more regulated, community is the Independent State of Caledon. Caledon uses its covenant²⁰ to give information about the primarily visual rules that are applicable in their context, whereas they do not aim to regulate the visitors' behaviour, and this will be studied in greater detail in chapter six of this dissertation. Yet another step towards more regulation can be seen in environments intended for role-play. As a means to maintain or safeguard an illusion or a fantasy, these rules often aim to regulate the social space and the manner in which people behave. Covenants, such as the one used in the above-mentioned Caledon, have to be looked up and are basically intended for builders or settlers, whereas notecards can be handed out to all visitors upon arrival in the role-play environments, which is particularly useful since the sim management often wants people to be aware of the aim of the environment and be careful not to disrupt any ongoing role-play.

¹⁹ An administrator puts the individual up on a list of banned people, which makes it impossible for that avatar to visit that piece of land again until the ban has been lifted.

²⁰ Covenants, or land contracts, are written in order to regulate how a land is to be used and these covenants often details the type of buildings that are allowed or what can be done on a land.

The following quotation is taken from a notecard that was handed to me as I entered the *Star Wars* sim Little Mos Eisley:

By entering Little Mos Eisley, you agree that you are over the age of eighteen and agree to abide by these rules. By [sic!] Little Mos Eisley, you agree that you are not offended by violence, adult language or sexual content, and will not hold the owner of the sim, or its legal participants liable. ... Your entrance to this sim, declares that you understand and agree to these terms; if you do not understand and agree, do not enter this sim.



Little Mos Eisley is a part of the Star Wars role-play in Second Life.

Visitors must wear clothes that fit the *Star Wars* theme, wear an observer tag if they are new, or a so-called DCS2 RP meter if they are a part of the role-play. The sim managers clearly separate their social space from *SL* in general when they state: “This is a private Sim and we enjoy sharing it you and other residents as long as you follow OUR rules. You don’t [sic!] like it? Please leave” (Little Mos Eisley). The “exit argument” (156), as Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace calls it, permeates the above rules as well as the rules of many other role-play communities in *Second Life*. The social norms of Little Mos Eisley and the above *Star Wars* sim are in no way unique. They even have their *Second Life*-wide counterpart in the *Terms of Service*, the

”Big Six,” to which each resident has to agree every time additions or alterations have been made upon entering *SL*. If a resident does not agree, he or she is not let in. Similar sets of rules can be found locally in Midian City, which will be discussed in chapter four as well as in the Gorean sims discussed in chapter five. Nevertheless, law professors Dan Hunger and Greg Lastowka consider the exit argument ”weak” from a legal perspective because of the ”great deal of money and social capital many people have tied up in their online environments” (Ludlow & Wallace 156). Hunger and Lastowka point to the contacts and the good reputation of a player as important assets in this digital context, and the tendency many people experience as they click ”yes” to something they in reality do not wish to commit to simply because they do not feel they have a choice. As such, it might be difficult to make a case based on the exit argument in a legal context. Nevertheless, the features programmed into this environment allows the Linden Lab as well as the sim owners to ban any visitor who does not act in accordance with the code of conduct, the norms, of that space, if he or she does not leave on his or her own accord.

Edward Castronova draws our attention to a set of tools a game owner or designer might decide to implement, which can facilitate the governing of a digital environment. What we have seen above are examples of these. Contrary to elected leaders in the offline world, community leaders in MMOs are usually not granted ”access to any tools that can provide effective governance. Castronova maintains that these tools do not exist in contemporary synthetic worlds. The leader cannot tax. The leader cannot sue. The leader cannot commandeer or seize. The leader cannot levy a police force or an army. The leader cannot arrest, try, or imprison. The leader cannot deport. The leader cannot attack” (215). Castronova contends that this has ultimately led to anarchy in many of the synthetic worlds he has encountered (213) and he points out that ”life in most PvP²¹ worlds, in [his] personal experience, is nasty... brutish... [and] short” (212), which are ”exactly the conditions that Hobbes²² used to describe life in the absence of government” (213). This cannot be said to be the case in *Second Life*, however. There are indeed places in *Second Life* where violence is allowed, but very little serious damage can be done to other residents and their avatars through the violence that is possible in *SL*. An avatar cannot die (unless the Linden Lab deletes the account) and if the avatar were to be hit badly it will only be teleported back to the place that has been set as home.

If a resident uses weapons in areas where this is not allowed, or if someone has

²¹ Player vs. player. Players do not fight non person characters (NPCs) but rather turn on other players for the thrill of it which has resulted in specific PvP servers or shards.

²² Castronova is referring to Thomas Hobbes and his novel *Leviathan* (1651).

violated the “Big Six” in any other way, an abuse report can be filed and if the RESI (Resident Experience Support Inworld) team receives reports from multiple people, the RESI representatives “can access logged information inside *Second Life*, and review what Residents said or did at the time the report was filed. They then decide on an appropriate response” (*Second Life Wiki*). This might result in an official warning, but if “a serious abuse issue occurs, the RESI Team may issue account suspensions or permanent bans.... The length of a suspension is determined by the nature of abuse, previous violations, and how many people were affected” (*Second Life Wiki*). In these cases Linden Lab has thus formed a central unit, which is supposed to function as a combined police force and juridical system, addressing all issues that are regarded as violating the norms and code of conduct in SL. The RESI team can thus commandeer as well as seize, it can levy a police force, arrest and try as well as deport. There are even stories about a form of prison in *Second Life* — the infamous corn field to which naughty avatars were sent in the early days (*Second Life Wiki*). Centrally handled are also tax and land ownership issues.

In other matters, governing is decentralised in *Second Life*, as I will discuss in the upcoming chapters. As indicated above, everyone who owns land, or is a part of a group that does, has the right to influence what happens on this particular piece of land. A landowner can of course report incidents to the RESI team like everyone else, but he or she also has a few more possibilities to execute power. If a visiting resident behaves in a way the landowner thinks is inappropriate, he or she has the ability to throw that visitor out. A visitor can also be banned from a land²³ and not be allowed back in until the ban has been lifted. But there are definite limits to a landowner’s power, which has of course also been decided upon by the owners and designers of the platform, the Linden Lab. A landowner cannot ban someone from the entire *Second Life* and he or she is also unable to stop someone from logging in on one alternative account after another and continue his or her bad behaviour. The RESI team’s only possibility to stop that kind of behaviour is to issue the comparatively rare “hardware ban” in which the resident’s computer is banned, which makes it impossible for the resident to log into *Second Life* on alternative accounts. Hence, serious offenders can be shut out of *Second Life*.

It is not always easy to stop griefers, however. Luskwood²⁴ founder Michi Lumin describes common scenarios while actually dealing with a griefer as I interview her:

²³ Land refers to a digital territory or an area in *Second Life*, which usually is owned by someone.

²⁴ Luskwood, a furry space founded in 2003, is one of the oldest communities in *Second Life*. It has approximately 30 000 members, all of them choosing anthropomorphic avatars as representations inworld. “A furry ... is an avatar that has both human and animal qualities. An example is a fox that has five fingers and walks on two legs in a bipedal fashion” (Orange Island).

Right as I'm speaking to you, I just had a rather infamous griever IM me trying to start a 'conversation' as to why he's banned. Even though he knows full well why. But that's the game, to them. And he's in the mood right now to play that game.... I'm not. Fact is, whatever his reasoning is, he's not coming here to be friends. He's not coming here to hang out. He's trying to cause problems — he knows that; and he knows that I know that.... but he's going to try to play the game. See if he can get a reaction out of me. See if he can cause me a little 'intellectual' grief, since he can't do it on the land itself.... I try not to engage them. You have to be mechanical. You can't be emotional. That's their fun. That's their justification, their entertainment, and their "metric" that they've indeed gotten to you and “succeeded.” Oh, they try though even if you don't. They try for days, weeks, month, years - every angle they can possibly try. They don't give up. But you still can't give them the reaction.

Michi Lumin thus provides information about the experience of being a victim of griever attacks, as many as two or three per day. Her account also shows how actions, that are considered progressive and “cool” and the preferred type of role-play by the small group of griefers, simply are perceived as annoying and even threatening to others. The norms are not shared, which often results in violent discussions and havoc. These types of actions usually become an issue for the “police force,” the RESI team, which has to evaluate the seriousness of the offence and the appropriate kind of punishment. Some of the tools needed to maintain order are thus present in *Second Life*.

Market

As indicated above, with parallels to Manuel Castells, the *Second Life* inworld market with its active and vocal entrepreneurs, provide an important incentive for the Linden Lab to keep their world in check. For the Linden Lab much of the revenue is created by people who buy or rent land in order to sell their products. Edward Castronova makes a case that the economies linked to synthetic worlds are larger and more important than might be considered at first glance and establishes that these economies are as authentic as our economy is offline, since time is scarce in all game worlds, just as it is offline, and since some people will always be willing to buy themselves out of tedious tasks (173-74). Many MMOs were not designed to have economies that stretched into the external world, however, but as more and more inworld items can be found for sale on eBay it becomes clear that the boundaries between online and offline economies are indeed very porous (Castronova 150). The temptation to make money fast has also led to attempts to copy

the creations of designers and builders in *Second Life*, which caused major outcries from those afflicted and became a controversial issue for Linden Lab (Robin Linden). Several bloggers argued that copyright infringement ought to be viewed just as seriously inside *Second Life* as it is outside of it (Lim, Neva, Barbosa). Edward Castronova addresses a similar issue, but does so from an entirely different angle, when he pointedly asks: “For what, then, distinguishes my sale of a magic wand for \$10 [in an MMO] from my sale of a T-shirt [offline] for \$10? And yet I have to pay tax on the latter transaction; why not the former?” (165). This idea is something the tax authorities seem to have picked up on, however. The European Union has also pushed for, and as of September 29, 2007 gained the possibility, to charge VAT from European Citizens (Robin Linden). This tax is paid on everything Linden Lab charges its European residents, subscription as well as land tier (*Second Life Web*).

From the beginning Linden Lab has emphasised the importance of the inworld economy by highlighting of the possibilities to buy land, clothes, and objects (*Second Life Web*). *Second Life*'s “business plan allows anyone on the outside to buy some of their virtual land and use their scripting language to build things on it. *Second Life* also allows users to retain property rights and, as an effect profits on the things they create” (Castronova 167). The amount of money spent inside *Second Life* is quite substantial. On August 5, 2007 at 11.30 am — a normal day — the inworld equivalent of 1,150,607 USD had been spent in the previous 24 hours (as shown on the *Second Life* website on Aug 5, 2007 at 11.30²⁵). The possibility to make money has drawn companies into *Second Life* — from well-known multi-national corporations and smaller companies that already have a sound footing in the physical world to companies and creative individuals originating inside *Second Life* — that would like to try their luck inworld. Today it has become clear to most companies that mere presence in *Second Life* does not automatically function very well as a tool for added revenue or goodwill (Anderson), but rather that they, if they want to get established in *SL*, will have to have something more than just a nice build to offer digital visitors. The companies that are successful inworld today are generally geared towards socialising, creating meeting points where people can gather, and avatar “improvement,” be it clothes, hair, skins, or shapes. The *Second Life* shopping malls are indeed important for many of the role-players and allows them to assemble the appropriate avatar look. As such the role-players become a part of the large *Second Life* economy. Some of them are gifted content creators as well and might decide to open their own shop and sell items catering to the specific needs of their community.

²⁵ This type of information has since then disappeared from the website.



The Alley Shops Mall on the Vancouver Island sim.

Architecture/Code

When Jesper Juul and Edward Castronova talk about the rules of games above, they primarily seem to refer to rules made up by game designers, the game architecture that has been inscribed in the code of a game, and although these types of rules are more visible in games of progression, they also set the boundaries for play in MMOs. In a 2006 interview with Lawrence Lessig, Philip Rosedale points to the aim of the *Second Life* founders:

[W]e should aggressively move into code anything we can, because of the enhanced scalability it gives us. And we should execute policy outside of code only when absolutely necessary or unfeasible. There are things where we look at them and we say, “Well, we’ll be able to do that in code some day, but for today, we’re just going to do it by hand.” (Lessig 114)

Since then it has become increasingly obvious that the aim to put everything in code has not been fulfilled. Instead, and this leads in the opposite direction, more and more “laws” are being issued. The land and sim owners and the RESI team are playing an increasingly important part in upholding the rules and norms of the digital community.

It is easy to understand why Philip Rosedale et al at the Linden Lab would have preferred a solution in which code had taken care of the social and emotional aspects of governing a digital world. Juul refers to the coded or programmed rules as game rules and claims that these rules “are designed to be above discussion ... they describe what players can and cannot do” (55) and construct a “state machine ... that responds to player action” (56). The way these game rules are coded into the game is similar to that which Celia Pearce refers to as “world rules,” which govern the interaction within MMOs, but not are as encompassing as the coded rules Rosedale seem to have in mind. According to Pearce, world rules are:

- *Communication protocols* Does the world rules allow for synchronous or asynchronous communication (or both)? Is it possible to communicate at a distance? Does it facilitate individual or group communication? Does the communication happen in speech or text?
- *Group formation protocols* “How are groups formed?” Is it possible to belong to more than one group? What is the basis of group affiliation? What are the benefits and communication possibilities?
- *Economics* What are the possibilities for ownership, currencies and currency conversion, and trading? Are my belongings protected?
- *Land/home ownership* What are the possibilities for land or home ownership and how can I control that territory?
- *Avatar creation and progression* What race, colour, hair, face or body features can I choose between? “Can my avatar die?”
- *Geography/terrain/transportation* What are the possible modes of transportation? What vehicles are available? Is it possible to fly or swim? (29-30)

All these set the framework for the game and the play experience. Moreover, they shape interaction in a digital environment on a very fundamental level. In order for an online world to be truly social there must be protocols facilitating communication and interaction in various ways. All these rules are the same for all residents.

We have learned to view protocols such as these as self-evident in online social environments, but the decision on how and what to implement belongs to the owners and designers of that space. In *Second Life's* case it is the Linden Lab that has decided what kind of profile it wants for its digital world and they have implemented solutions to all of Celia Pearce's points above. In *SL* both synchronous and asynchronous communication is

possible. A resident can communicate with another resident from a distance and both individual and group communication is possible. Text is seemingly the most common mode of communication in *SL*, but speech is also possible and in some circles even preferred. Any resident can invite other residents to join a group he or she has created and it is up to the founder to decide on a group's purpose. In *SL* it is currently possible to belong to 25 groups at the same time, and the reason for belonging to one is primarily practical: to disseminate and receive information. Information can easily be exchanged, both in a synchronous group chat and through group bulletins that can reach group members who are offline as well. *Second Life* is built around its economy and market, and groups are sometimes created by a shop owner in order to facilitate advertising among a group of people who have already shown interest in his or her products. Groups also makes it possible to jointly own and control land. In *Second Life* it is possible to build, design and create and to buy objects made by someone else or sell objects created by you. The control over copyright and ownership is strong in *SL*. A resident's avatar can be tweaked to look like anything you could ever imagine but it cannot die (unless the man or woman behind the avatar decides not to use it anymore). Various modes of transport are available. In *Second Life* it is, for instance, possible to teleport, fly, swim, run, walk, ride a car or fly a helicopter, an airplane or a pig. The terrain of *SL* is either decided upon by Linden Lab or by private owners on their own sims.²⁶ These features can be regarded as the basic infrastructure in *Second Life* and as such they shape the possibilities for the owners to govern and utilise their role-play sims, and subsequently they also shape user and role-player experiences.

All of the variables presented in this chapter contribute to setting the scene for the role-play going on inside *Second Life*. In the upcoming chapters I study how people on the *Second Life Neko forum*, in post-apocalyptic Midian City, in the Gorean groups as well as in the Independent State of Caledon explore and negotiate the boundary between being in character and being out of character, and I will outline how these communities understand and frame the role-play going on within their borders, the existing structure or framework, as well as the power struggles inherent in a make-belief process, which aims to visualise and attempt to create a different or contrary structure. Chapter one elaborates on the theoretical framework, focusing primarily on theories originating within performance studies and on various issues of power, while chapter two discusses methodological approaches, in this case combining the methods of textual analysis and ethnography.

²⁶ An ethnographic study of *Second Life* outlining many of these features in detail is Tom Boellstorff's *Coming of Age in Second Life*.

Chapters three to six explore the role-play in four different communities that have developed inside *Second Life*. The very open *Second Life Nekos forum* with few rules is in focus in the third chapter. These often independent and self-reliant Nekos (cat people) form a loosely knit community in which the common characteristics include feline ears and a tail and strong ideas about the identity of Nekos. Chapter four highlights the Sim City-like, dystopian role-play community in Midian City with four sims, several groups inside *Second Life*, and a forum on the Internet. The role-play is not hierarchical per se, but the fast growth of the community has led to changes in the way Midian City is governed and maintained. In focus in this community is the line between role-play and out of character interaction. The fifth chapter studies the Gorean sims in *Second Life* that function in an almost feudal way, but without a formal “king” or central government. The management of the entire Gorean community is thus not formalised, but the role-play, based on John Norman’s *Chronicles of Gor* and featuring a harsh and extremely hierarchical society with slaves, masters and outcasts (usually slaves who have fled), is. The clash between the residents who are living the Gorean lifestyle on a full time basis and other residents who only view it only as an enticing fantasy can be violent. The Independent State of Caledon is in focus in the sixth chapter. It consists of a cluster of sims governed by Desmond Shang and was founded in early 2006 with the aim to create a Victorian steam-punk environment which was visually coherent and where people were behaving in a civil way. Many of the residents seem happy in the Caledon context, but, judging by many of the blogs linked to Caledon, they seem to be far more critical of Linden Lab’s governance of the entire *Second Life*. The conclusion ties all the chapters together by focusing on two types of performances, make-believe and make-belief, and the power they harness.

Chapter One:

The Role of Power and the Power of Roles

"The thing called power is characterized by immanence of field without transcendent unification, continuity of line without global centralization, and contiguity of parts without distinct totalization: it is a social space."

Gilles Deleuze (27)

What is power? Gilles Deleuze argues that power really is a social space, and as such it does not lend itself to anyone in particular, except those who seize it and those who oppose it. If we elaborate on Deleuze's definition of social power, I interpret his description as something that is inherent in all social fields and all social situations, but it is not centralised or unified. It is constantly being negotiated and discussed by actors such as political parties, companies and individuals. Deleuze claims furthermore that power in itself "has no essence; it is simply operational." (27). From Deleuze's point of view, power is thus neither exterior nor super-structural, it is a possibility for every individual in every situation, and as such it is neutral and something that will be negotiated — in a social space. He maintains that power cannot be separated from the arena in which it is discussed. It plays out in various social interactions and roles in various contexts. The meaning of the word "power" is complex and is used in many different contexts, however. In *Merriam-Webster Online's* definition, power is "the ability to act or produce an effect" as well as the "capacity for being acted upon or undergoing an effect" and as such both resemble Gilles Deleuze's description. *Merriam-Webster Online* also defines it as "legal or official authority, capacity, or right" and a "possession of control, authority, or influence over others." In a transferred understanding it also refers to someone "having such power" or "a force of armed men" focusing primarily on "political control or influence." All of the above refer to various manifestations of social power. According to *Merriam-Webster Online* the word power also refers to "a source or means of supplying energy" such as

electricity or motive power and it is used in various ways in the natural sciences, but this is not the definition in focus here. For Michel Foucault the exercise of power and the experience of freedom are mutually exclusive (1982:790) and he describes power as the "way in which certain actions modify others" (1982:788). Somewhat in contrast to Gilles Deleuze's image of a diffused field of power, Foucault makes a case that power does in fact not exist on a permanent basis, but as a possibility which can affect permanent structures (1982:788) and he continues:

This also means that power is not a function of consent. In itself it is not a renunciation of freedom, a transference of rights, the power of each and all delegated to a few (which does not prevent the possibility that consent may be a condition for the existence or the maintenance of power); the relationship of power can be the result of a prior or permanent consent, but it is not by nature the manifestation of a consensus. (1982:788)

According to Michel Foucault power cannot be given away or delegated. In itself, he suggests, consent builds a more or less permanent structure, as does physical constraint — "slavery is not a power relationship when man is in chains. (In this case it is a question of a physical relationship of constraint)" (1982:790) — and that which can influence both structures is the quest for freedom, a "reciprocal incitation" or "permanent provocation" (1982:790), which he sets up in a rather complicated dichotomised relationship to power:

[T]here is no face-to-face confrontation of power and freedom, which are mutually exclusive (freedom disappears everywhere power is exercised), but a much more complicated interplay. In this game freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power (at the same time its precondition, since freedom must exist for power to be exerted, and also its permanent support, since without the possibility of recalcitrance, power would be equivalent to a physical determination). *The relationship between power and freedom's refusal to submit cannot, therefore, be separated.* The crucial problem of power is not that of voluntary servitude (how could we seek to be slaves?). At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. (1982:790, my italics)

The will to be free is thus the "opposite" of power in Foucault's view, and he does describe his theories of power and repression primarily as instruments for studying "power relations" (1982:778). In his research Foucault focuses primarily on the effects hierarchical

power can have on its subjects, and he distinguishes between three forms of power struggles or quests for freedom:

either against forms of domination (ethnic, social, and religious); against forms of exploitation which separate individuals from what they produce; or against that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way (struggles against subjection, against forms of subjectivity and submission). (1982:781)

Thus Michel Foucault maps the trajectories of power he sees. He outlines the manner in which social power manifests, and the role of primarily authoritative or oppressive power in society. Gilles Deleuze, on the other hand, seems to foreground the negotiation and subsequently also the subversion of power, that which Foucault calls power struggles or the quest for freedom, and the possibility to influence and change power hierarchies. Most commonly, political and social power have been studied as a class struggle with property and ownership as the signifying aspect by Marxist theorists, but, following Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, I view power as a continuous development of strategic positions, which might be described as performing on a more individual level:

As the postulate of property, power would be the 'property' won by a class. Foucault shows that power does not come about in this way: it is less a property than a strategy, and its effects cannot be attributed to an appropriation 'but to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings'; 'it is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the "privilege", acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions.' This new functionalism or functional analysis certainly does not deny the existence of class and class-struggle but illustrates it in a totally different way, with landscapes, characters and behaviour that are different from those to which traditional history ... has made us accustomed. We are shown 'innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, of an at least temporary inversion of the power-relations.' Instead of analogy, homology or univocality, we have a new kind of possible continuity. In brief, power is not homogeneous but can be defined only by the particular points through which it passes. (Deleuze 25)

The Technology of Power

Power and the use and possible abuse of power in these online environments correspond to Michel Foucault's theoretical response to power and repression. He concludes that

discipline in itself is not identified with either “an institution” or “an apparatus: it is a type of power, a modality for its procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a ‘physics’ or an ‘anatomy’ of power, a technology” (1984:206). This “technology of power” has been put to use by the authorities to discipline and control dissidents and disruptive elements, or, in this specific case, to facilitate what the Linden Lab seem to consider its platform’s core purpose — people being happy about spending time in *Second Life* and creating revenue while being there. To achieve this aim, Linden Lab has to control their domain. The control apparatus was, according to Foucault, created by the state to provide the most economic way (both in terms of money — as little spending as possible — and from a political point of view — as little resistance as possible) to control subjects, to make the most out of the effects of this social power, and to maximise the output of state controlled education, army, industry or health care (1984:207). In *Second Life* there is no army, no industry and no health care, and only the short “education” describing how *Second Life* works cannot be regarded as a serious socialising effort. However, this minimal infrastructure is adequate since the entire platform is owned and regulated directly by a privately owned company, the Linden Lab. There are no elected representatives or rulers, no decision-making processes, and no transparency. Ultimately, *Second Life* is private property, and the company can use any means available to get rid of unwanted elements.

But as I have shown in the introduction, *Second Life* is not immune to influence, either from the outside in the form of laws or governmental input or the inside in the shape of resident protests or grieving. In order to safeguard their revenue, they need to keep their customers as well as the government happy. Foucault contends that the efficiency of the authoritative and totalitarian system depends on the docility of the populace and is vulnerable to dissidents or unwilling cogs in the machine, and this is what I especially would like to draw on in the *Second Life* context. As I will show later on, the groups and communities I have examined are more or less authoritarian and controlled, and more or less effectively governed, with evidence of both docile acceptance and rebellion in the groups. Foucault’s critique of control and surveillance becomes relevant especially through his development of Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the panopticon.²⁷ A prison guard, unseen by the prisoners, can survey a large number of them from his tower in the middle, and the prisoners in their cells, unaware of if and when the guard is looking, are fostered to believe they are constantly being watched. Subsequently, and in line with

²⁷ Panopticism, means roughly translated, seeing all. This is a concept Michel Foucault elaborated on in his chapter “Panopticism,” which originally was conceived of by Jeremy Bentham.

the idea of conditioning,²⁸ the prisoners start to behave as if they are indeed being watched at all times. This has parallels inside *Second Life*: Facilitated and enabled by the code, Linden Lab has made surveillance possible, from relatively harmless visit lists, with which the owner of a land can see the names of all guests arriving at his or her place, to complete control over another avatar, either by using scripts²⁹ or an alternative viewer.³⁰ Foucault is mainly talking about institutionalised power, but I will also try to illuminate how this type of power plays out on an individual and personal level, where a small group of people decides on what rules are going to become institutionalised and how their decisions affect the rest of the group, providing a space for relationships that can be controlling, empowering as well as abusive.

Subversion and Griefing

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's idea of the nomadic war machine and their concepts smooth and striated space (34-36) suggest a way out of the structured control apparatus Michel Foucault describes, and their ideas can work both on the level of institutions and individuals. Movement in smooth space is considered to be "nomadic" (51, 53), "heterogeneous ... non-metric, acentered, rhizomatic" (34), and might be seen as uncontrollable, unsafe, and is liable to frighten those who prefer the more controlled movements of the "state apparatus." They feel more at home in the "homogeneous and striated spaces[s] of reproduction" (38), which are relying on clear definitions, walls and enclosures (51), and strive for homogeneity and consensus (41). Striation aims to bring the smooth under its control (59), while the smooth uses its tools to subvert the same control (60). To give an example related to *Second Life*: by using inventive and unexpected tools outside conventional categories,³¹ or by acting in a way that disrupts situations and environments — griefing — some residents in *Second Life* attempt to create

²⁸ Conditioning has its origin in Ivan Pavlov's experiments with dogs. They were conditioned, by repetitively using various stimuli, to unconsciously behave in certain ways (Encyclopædia Britannica).

²⁹ Scripts are pieces of programming, written in the Linden Scripting Language (LSL), and used to make an avatar perform certain tasks in *Second Life*.

³⁰ A viewer is the "web browser" through which *Second Life* is viewed and explored. Linden Lab open sourced it on Jan 8, 2007 (*Second Life Blog*). An alternative viewer has been distributed within the Gorean community, the "Restrained Love" viewer. This viewer makes it possible for a Gorean master to completely control his slave ("Restrained Love Viewer").

³¹ Unconventional categories could be related to for instance gender or race, or anything else that attracts attention and is seen as inventive or unusual. Many conflicts between groups in SL often centers on whether residents prefer a human form to furry (animal avatars), fantasy shapes or objects such as fire bolts or toasters.

a smooth space in which they can live out their wishes or fantasies. Linden Lab with their RESI team, on the other hand, works on an institutional level and is in the position of the prison guard, the police or the juridical system as has been described in more detail above. It is in the territorialisation, de-territorialisation and interaction between the authority (both the overarching and the local) and the single individual that the tensions, processes and consequences of power are revealed. Smooth and striated are thus in a continuous battle, a continuous “becoming,” and, as Deleuze and Guattari shows in the following example highlighting the “quest for freedom” to use Michel Foucault’s terminology, the smooth can be transformed into something striated and vice versa: “There is a schizophrenic taste for the tool that moves it away from work and towards free action, a schizophrenic taste for the weapon that turns it into a means for peace, for obtaining peace. A counterattack and a resistance at the same time. Everything is ambiguous” (88-89). All four groups studied in this dissertation have the possibility to be arenas where power hierarchies and authorities can be discussed, questioned and subverted; the tension and ambiguity of counterattacks or resistance are the tools for a possible transformation.

Technology and Institutionalised Play

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome, new media researcher Alexander R. Galloway attempts to give a nuanced image of the Internet and the technology behind it:

The story goes that the Internet is rhizomatic. On the one hand, the Web is structured around rigid protocols that govern the transfer and representation of text and images — so the Web isn’t “an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system” as is Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome. But on the other hand, the Web seems to mirror several of the key characteristics of the rhizome: the ability of any node to be connected to any other node, the rule of multiplicity, the ability to splinter off or graft on at any point, the rejection of a “deep structure,” and so forth. (61)

The technology is governed by the people programming and overseeing it. The digital networks are built around the negotiation of “dominance of certain flows over other flows” and Galloway points out that protocols enforce this hegemony (75). It is the protocols that can be used to control in which manner the information flows, and it raises questions about who is in charge of these protocols. Digital playgrounds such as *Second Life* make use of this technology. Governing, the execution of power, in the digital playground *Second*

Life thus happens as a result of various decisions on policies and laws made by the Linden Lab. Tom Boellstorff takes this even further and highlights the potential threat of surveillance perceived by some *Second Life* residents: "[I]t was broadly assumed that Linden Lab had total control over their virtual world. For instance, it was widely believed that there was, as one resident put it, 'no privacy in Second Life.' Residents knew that every word they typed, indeed their every movement, was potentially recorded and stored on Linden Lab servers" (220-221). Linden Lab is not alone in its discussion and deliberations, however, as governments or people with technological as well as economic interests might have reasons to try to influence the rules governing the arenas for play made possible by the company. Play on the *Second Life* platform has thus taken on an "institutionalised" tinge. A resident in *SL* can be described as taking part in institutionalised play, since, as Roger Caillois remarks, "[r]ules are inseparable from play as soon as the latter becomes institutionalized" (141) and institutionalised play thus can become transformed "into an instrument of fecund and decisive culture," but the quest for freedom and the strategies of subversion influences and alters the institutionalised play as well as the culture that emerges in various ways. The Linden Lab has indeed also been influenced by reactions from the users, which has in some cases changed policies previously implemented by the company. The framework of rules creates a structure for the community and establishes the common cultures that are in focus here. This is the role of authoritative power in an online world such as *Second Life*, and the social roles that emerge on each side — those of the owners, the Linden Lab, the outside lawmakers and the residents who wish to influence their inworld situation — take part in the negotiation of this framework, which indicates the power of the roles. The Linden Lab and outside lawmakers are usually taking on authoritative roles intended to safeguard structures and values, the "institution," that have already been built or agreed upon. As will become clear in the upcoming chapters, individual residents or groups of residents who wish to alter the institutionalised structures in *Second Life* take on subversive roles in their quest for freedom — the type of freedom they prefer. These primarily social roles, which sometimes are influenced and reinforced by their dramatic roles, are positions in a continuous battle for identity construction and power. The quest for freedom seems to be the primary engine behind subversive movement and Michel Foucault articulates the crucial question in this regard: "how could we seek to be slaves?" or perhaps *perform* as slaves.

What is Performance?

At the intersection between the make-belief and the make-believe, the relationship between different actors and roles, as well as the power relations and battles that ensue, become visible, as do the differences and similarities between what can be referred to as social roles and the in character roles found on formal stages as well as in various role-play communities, and their implications on the power balance. I will begin by focusing on what performance is, and move on to discuss the social power it can bring as well as its traps. *Merriam-Webster Online* lists several definitions of performance. Not only does it refer to “the action of representing a character in a play,” “a public presentation or exhibition” and “the manner of reacting to stimuli: behavior,” the word might also indicate accomplishments or “the execution of an action;” “the fulfillment of a claim, promise, or request;” “the ability to perform: efficiency;” “the manner in which a mechanism performs: engine performance;” as well as “the linguistic behavior of an individual: parole” and “the ability to speak a certain language” (*Merriam-Webster*). As indicated above, performance is not only enacted text from a play. Richard Schechner offers his view: “[p]erformance must be construed as a ‘broad spectrum’ or ‘continuum’ of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media, and the internet” (2). Ethnographer Celia Pearce distinguishes between three different types of performances. She draws parallels to Victor Turner and Richard Schechner by studying the role of performance and ritual as something “outside of the everyday” (58-59), but she also draws attention to “the theatrical performance of ethnographic texts and narratives, often with audience participation” (59), which highlights the interaction and negotiation of spaces and rules. Pearce also points to a third type of performance “in which the ethnographic method of participant observation is itself framed as a performance [since play] can only be adequately understood through immediate and direct engagement” (59) and the ethnographer’s role in participant observation becomes a social role linked to certain expectations.

Researchers like sociologist Erving Goffman and performance studies scholars Richard Schechner and Philip Auslander would indeed argue that the social persona is just as constructed, and these constructions are sometimes linked to the expectations on various functions or roles within a community. In functions that involve power, people are expected to act in certain ways, fulfil certain roles and as such they become a part of an ongoing power game. Violating these expectations might lead to discussions, rebellion or

even mutiny. Richard Schechner describes the continuum between non-performing and performing, as well as the role of the performance studies field, in the following way:

“Being” is existence itself. “Doing” is the activity of all that exists, from quarks to sentient beings to supergalactic strings. “Showing doing” is performing: pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing. “Explaining showing doing” is performance studies. It is very important to distinguish these categories from each other. “Being” may be active or static, linear or circular, expanding or contracting, material or spiritual. Being is a philosophical category pointing to whatever people theorize is the “ultimate reality.” “Doing” and “showing doing” are actions. Doing and showing doing are always in flux, always changing — reality as the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus experienced it. (28)

Being is thus separated from performing, but, as Schechner also claims, “[t]here is no such thing as unperformed or naturally occurring real life. The object of the actor’s ‘real life study’ is also performing, though she may not be fully aware that her behavior is codified” (220). In Schechner’s view, all behaviour is “twice-behaved,’ made up of new combinations of previously enacted doings” (220). This twice-behaved or restored behaviour “is the key process of every kind of performing, in everyday life, in healing, in ritual, in play, and in the arts. Restored behavior is ‘out there,’ separate from ‘me.’ To put it in personal terms, restored behavior is ‘me behaving as if I were someone else,’ or ‘as I am told to do,’ or ‘as I have learned.’” (Schechner 34). Restored behaviour can be described as “marked, framed, or heightened. Restored behavior can be ‘me’ at another time or psychological state — for example, telling the story of or acting out a celebratory or traumatic event” (Schechner 35). Highlighting its interactive nature, Schechner describes restored behaviour as “symbolic and reflexive. Its meanings need to be decoded by those in the know” (Schechner 35). Hence, restored behaviour requires an audience. It requires an audience that can decipher the cues and translate the symbols. As a result, Richard Schechner makes a case that

[t]here are limits to what ‘is’ performance.... Something ‘is’ a performance when historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition say it is. Rituals, play and games, and the roles of everyday life are performances because of convention, context, usage, and tradition say so. One cannot determine what ‘is’ a performance without referring to specific cultural circumstances.... From the vantage of the kind of performance theory I am propounding, every action is a performance. But from the vantage of cultural practice,

some actions will be deemed performances and others not; and this will vary from culture to culture, historical period to historical period. (38)

Social Performances

Sociologist Erving Goffman also uses a terminology derived from the performance field, thus invoking the notion of make-believe and the “artificial” construction of personas and events. “Goffman ... approaches social life as theatre, an interplay of behaviors where players with different motives rehearse their actions, maneuver to present themselves advantageously, and often perform at cross purposes with one another” (Schechner 207). Goffman defines the different spatial aspects and uses the concepts of stage and “front regions” (109) and puts it in opposition to backstage and “back regions” (114). He contends that mixing the two, the public stage spaces and the private backstage, might lead to a growing disrespect for private space (117), leading to a need to constantly “wear” a public persona. Drawing parallels to *Second Life* I find that this digital environment is in many ways even more stage-like than the social everyday context Goffman is referring to, thus making his description of the performative setting even more applicable.

Additionally, Goffman also uses the concepts of performers and audience (97), further highlighting the performative aspect of interaction. He also draws parallels between performance and formalised events such as “a funeral, a wedding, a bridge party, a one-day sale, a hanging, or a picnic, [when] the director may tend to see the performance in terms of whether or not it went ‘smoothly’, ‘effectively’, and ‘without a hitch’ (101-102). He thus draws our attention to the fact that these “performances” can be rated and judged. This implies that there is a strict protocol on how certain events ought to be carried out, as well as on how the various “teams” and actors ought to behave. It is a performative and often hierarchical game with its own rules. Goffman gives an example: “[T]here is often a strict rule that one superordinate must not show hostility or disrespect towards any other superordinate while in the presence of a member of the subordinate team” (94). As a result, group members or actors on the same level are supposed to avoid anything that might indicate individual differences when encountering people on a different level. The actors perform a role, and they are supposed to help save each other’s faces. They are called on to perform their given parts in the power game.

Erving Goffman points to the importance of all the different roles in a team that works together towards a goal. “Those who have the time and talent to perform a task well may not, because of this, have the time or talent to make it apparent that they are performing well” (43), and he gives an example: “[I]t is reported that some nurses like to

work in an operating-room rather than on a ward because in the operating-room measures are taken to ensure that the audience, whose members number only one, is soon oblivious to the weaknesses of the show, permitting the operating team to relax and devote itself to the technological requirements of action as opposed to the dramaturgical ones” (213). It becomes clear that playing a role at all times is indeed an undertaking in itself. Goffman indicates that actors, in order to do “real work,” feel the need to sometimes drop any “dramaturgical requirements” and focus on the task at hand. This highlights the point when the theatre performance analogy halts. Drama has to give way for “technological requirements of action” and “getting real” becomes a necessity. As Goffman concludes in an attempt to draw the line between the staged and the real: “A character staged in a theatre is not in some ways real, nor does it have the same kind of real consequences as does the thoroughly contrived character performed by a confidence man; but the successful staging of either of these types of false figures involves use of real techniques – the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations” (247). German poet, playwright, theatre director Bertolt Brecht, on the other hand, stresses the impact inherent in performative acts. By using the technique of alienation, intended to encourage the audience to inquire and critique, Brecht attempts to influence his audience and thereby also the surrounding society. In Brecht’s view a theatre performance ought to provoke and make people reflect. A performance is intended to be political and it can therefore become a tool or a weapon in the battle for power (136).

The social roles we play, or the different sides of ourselves we decide to display, may differ from one context to another. Erving Goffman quotes William James: “We may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups. Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his ‘tough’ young friends” (57). The different sides of our selves might thus be very similar or very different, depending on the patterns in which an individual finds him or herself or the audience that s/he addresses. Goffman points out that this practice indeed poses problems for individuals and groups when the roles contradict each other: “Problems sometimes arise, however, in those social establishments where the same or different members of the team must handle different audiences at the same time. If the different audiences come within hearing distance of each other, it will be difficult to sustain the impression that each is receiving special and unique services” (138). Goffman’s advice is thus to separate the audiences as much as possible “so that the individuals who witness him in one of his roles will not be the

individuals who witness him in another of his roles” (137), but perhaps a merging of the different roles might lead to a socially less damaging and more long-term solution. In his definition of performance, which shows similarities to that of Richard Schechner, Erving Goffman stresses the wish to influence the social context in which the performance takes place:

A "performance" may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.... Defining social role as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that each of these different parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audiences or to an audience of the same persons. (15-16)

According to Goffman, performance is thus a fundamentally social strategy used to influence a context: “The performers of these actions intend to change things, to maintain the status quo, or, most commonly, to find or make some common ground. A revolution or civil war occurs when the players do not desist and there is no common ground” (29).

The role-play environments explored in this dissertation have been shaped in a similar manner as other communities in *Second Life*, but the role-players do have a few more choices, since the range of make-believe roles often is wider than that in a conventional social space. While in character, I might choose to play the role of a villain, acting out all the darkest imaginable impulses a person might have, or go for the role of saint by aiming to do good deeds on every possible occasion. Both extremes, and everything in between, are ultimately about creating a role and staying true to the idea of what the character is like. Nevertheless, while doing this, the performers are in a position to influence a fictional as well as an actual power balance. Bearing this in mind, there is still a certain acceptance when people create really “nasty” characters as a part of a fictional power struggle but still remain “nice people” out of character in the actual social interactions, but in character and out of character sometimes also blend, which often stirs reactions among fellow role-players.

Performing or Not? — The Quest for Authenticity

Both Richard Schechner and Erving Goffman thus claim that most behaviour is rehearsed or performed in some way, although it, to the individual, might not seem to be. He or she might view their behaviour as simply “being themselves.” Schechner explains how this

can be both “being” and performing:” “To ‘be myself’ is to behave in a relaxed and unguarded manner — but to another, even this kind of easy demeanor may come across as a performance” (171). To create or boost one’s image is nevertheless one way to perform oneself, to cast or be casted in a role: “To ‘perform myself’ means to take on the appearance (clothes, demeanor, etc.), voice and actions of Mother or Friend, Plumber or Doctor, and so on” (Schechner 171). Joshua Micah Marshall provides the following example describing the “creation” of George Washington:

From an early age, he submitted his entire persona to the most rigorous discipline, shaping everything from his physical bearing to the degree of intimacy that he allowed himself with friends and associates. By the time he took command of the Army, outside Boston, in July, 1775, there was little about him that was not the product of years of conscious artifice.... [H]e was finally handed the role for which he had been preparing all his life: himself. (87-90, Schechner 209)

Some people take on society’s roles, and the power they bring, more or less voluntarily by accepting the roles of mayor, senator or judge, whereas others happen to find themselves in the role of “Survivor of Catastrophe, Grieving Parent, Lottery Winner, or even King” (Schechner 171), thereby becoming a part of “a network of expectations and obligations” (Schechner 250). Schechner continues, describing how “[e]ach participant expects certain things to happen and wants assurance that other things won’t happen. And each participant is obliged to play by the rules — or at least appear to do so.... Knowing the rules or conventions is how one understands and also interprets the game or aesthetic performance” (Schechner 250). Knowing and acting in accordance with the conventions might not result in an authentic appearance, however, but how this performance is perceived might differ depending on expectations and “genre.”

The quest for authenticity, which is visible in various ways in online environments such as *Second Life*, further complicates the distinction between performance and non-performance, which is linked to the difference between the foregrounded inauthenticity of make-believe performances and the often intentional and carefully crafted appearance of authenticity in make-belief ones. Most people recognise the difference between performing and being, or “fake” and “real,” and they also seem to be on their guard against someone else’s performed or inauthentic behaviour. When authenticity is required, for instance by people in an authoritative or public position, perceived inauthenticity usually leads to disappointment. Philip Auslander borrows an example from the music industry

which highlights the dichotomy between pop and rock (73) and he draws the conclusion that authenticity in the pop culture is not the same as in the rock culture: “While rock culture can accommodate multiple definitions of authenticity, the concept of authenticity has also always been exclusionary.... The name most frequently used for rock’s Other is ‘pop’” (79). As Auslander points out, it is possible to distinguish the former from the latter by drawing on their historical roots or by discussing musical styles, but, quoting Shuker, Auslander asserts that “the designation of rock music is more of a sociological than a musical one” (Shuker 247, Auslander 80) and that

the way rock fans define the music is principally ideological, not stylistic. The ideological distinction between rock and pop is precisely the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic, the sincere and the cynical, the genuinely popular and the slickly commercial, the potentially resistant and the necessarily co-opted, art and entertainment. (Auslander 81)

At first glance the distinctions seem to be comparatively clear-cut. Rock music and rock musicians are, according to this view, per definition authentic, and pop music and its musicians are subsequently commercialised and inauthentic. In these cases, authenticity itself is seen as something absolute, which Auslander elaborates on:

Taken on its own terms, rock authenticity is an essentialist concept... In my own discourse, however, I treat rock authenticity as an ideological concept and a discursive effect.... I posit that the creation of the effect of authenticity in rock is a matter of culturally determined convention, not an expression of essence. It is also a result of industrial practice: the music industry specifically sets out to endow its products with the necessary signs of authenticity. (Auslander 82)

This “culturally determined convention,” which authenticity has become within the rock music context, shapes, but is also shaped and reinforced by, the advertising strategies within the music industry. Auslander establishes the performativity of authenticity in his discussion above. In a similar way, the discourse of authenticity stresses the importance of liveness, the immediacy of the live performance. Its dramaturgy — rock shows are in many ways the prototypical live performance — is intended to enforce or reclaim that aura or authenticity. As Auslander concludes: “[s]eeing is believing” (85), an assertion just as relevant in music as in leadership performances.

Performance scholar Peggy Phelan takes the discussion of authenticity a step further when she contends that “the basic ontological fact of performance is that its ‘only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance” (Phelan 1993: 146, Auslander 44). In other words, an authentic performance is per definition ephemeral according to Phelan. “Performance honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience which leaves no visible trace afterward” (Phelan 1993: 149, Auslander 46). As Philip Auslander concludes: “In a very literal, material sense, televisual and other technical reproductions, like live performances, become themselves through disappearance” (Auslander 50). Walter Benjamin argues from a similar point of view: “To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose ‘sense of the universal equality of all things’ has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction” (Benjamin 32). Auslander draws parallels to Benjamin’s notions of the loss of “aura” and thereby also draws our attention to its lack of, but also its yearning for, authenticity (95). Auslander seems to regard this as slightly misleading in today’s context, however, and again points to the dramaturgy of the Milli Vanilli debacle:

The Milli Vanilli ‘scandal’ was not a real scandal at all but rather a scandal effect used by agencies of power and capital to ‘regenerate a reality principle in distress.’ Power requires for its working a matrix of significant oppositions and ‘capital, which is immoral and unscrupulous, can only function behind a moral superstructure.’ Simulation threatens the structures on which power and capital depend by implying that moral, political, and other distinctions are no longer meaningful. (Baudrillard 1981:27, Auslander 109)

The “agencies of power” Philip Auslander is referring to are primarily the TV channel MTV. The scandal effect created around Milli Vanilli, he asserts, essentially is about creating and sustaining MTV’s own credibility and authenticity (122). As such, authenticity has become one of the most sought after of qualities, desirable and highlighted by companies, in advertising, in politics, as well as in human relations, and therefore it must be concluded that it would also be one of the qualities most commonly performed. Jean-François Lyotard expands on the danger of performed power and its legitimising effect: “Power is not only good performativity, but also effective verification and good verdicts. It legitimates science and the law on the basis of their efficiency, and

legitimizes this efficiency on the basis of science and law. It is self-legitimizing” (Lyotard 47, Schechner 129). This self-legitimation makes it even more difficult to influence set hierarchies or systems.

Performance Studies in a New Digital Media Context

Richard Schechner reminds us that the study of performance is not limited to the study of synchronous interaction only, whether it takes place on or off stage: “A performance studies scholar examines texts, architecture, visual arts, or any other item or artefact of art or culture not in themselves, but as players in ongoing relationships, that is, ‘as’ performances” (Schechner 2). According to Schechner, relationships between players, animate as well as inanimate, are thus performed and it is this interaction that is being studied within the performance studies field. Acknowledging the importance of new digital media, Richard Schechner has commented that:

The number of people using hypertext communications is growing exponentially....
Email, cell phones, blogs, instant messaging, and wi-fi are transforming what it means to be literate. Book reading is supplemented and to some degree supplanted by a range of ideas, feelings, requests, and desires that are communicated in many different ways. People are both readers and authors. Identities are revealed, masked, fabricated, and stolen. This kind of communicating is highly performative. (Schechner 5)

The possibilities of alternate and fluctuating identities are thus foregrounded, as is the performativity of these media. Peggy Phelan continues on the same thread and draws our attention to the difference between acting as if common social categorisations do not exist and between actually erasing them in the digital setting:

Thinking of performance in the expanded field of the electronic paradigm requires that we reconsider the terms that have been at the contested center of performance studies for the past decade [since 1988]: simulation, representation, virtuality, presence, and above all, the slippery indicative ‘as if.’ The electronic paradigm places the ‘as if’ at the foundation of a much-hyped ‘global communication,’ even while it asks us to act ‘as if’ such a network would render phantasmatic race, class, gender, literacy, and other access differentials. (Phelan 1998:3-5, 8 in Schechner 13)

Both Schechner and Phelan thus establish new digital media as performative arenas. They seem to agree with Tom Boellstorff's distinction between online and offline as well as with Johan Huizinga, who maintains that play is set apart from the "ordinary," or "real life," a "temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (103) and that it, as such, resembles the performative space created in many digital games. Huizinga points to the separate or fenced in playground, the magic circle that provides the "spatial separation from ordinary life," as one of the most important features of play (113). They might all agree with Walter Benjamin, since they all seem to view technologically and digitally mediated performances as less "live" than its non-digital counterparts. T. L. Taylor, on the other hand, reacts against Huizinga's somewhat dichotomised view and how it has been applied in the field of digital games. She suggests that

[t]hinking of either game or nongame space as contained misses the flexibility of both. If we look at online spaces historically, for example, we find people negotiating levels of self-disclosure and performance, multiple forms of embodiment, the integration of dual (or multiple) communities, webs of technologies, and the importing of meaningful offline issues and values into online spaces. (152)

Taylor thus advocates a view that incorporates a more flexible stance with regard to the inside and the outside of a game, which links to our previous discussion on offline versus online and the presence and possibility of virtuality in either context. Media researcher Nick Couldry proposes two new forms of liveness which take advantage of and rely completely on the digital platform: "online liveness" and "group liveness" (356-7).

Online liveness: social co-presence on a variety of scales from very small groups in chat rooms to huge international audiences for breaking news on major Web sites, all made possible by the Internet as an underlying infrastructure.

[G]roup liveness[:] ... the 'liveness' of a mobile group of friends who are in continuous contact via their mobile phones through calls and texting.

Philip Auslander points out that liveness, "[u]nderstood in this way, ... is not limited to specific performer-audience interactions but to a sense of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated co-presence with others known and unknown" (60-61). This is contrasted to the more traditional division between audience and performers found in theatres or on stages:

[T]he experience of theatre (of live performance generally, I would say) provokes our desire for community but cannot satisfy that desire because performance is founded on difference, on separation and fragmentation, not unity. Live performance places us in the living presence of the performers, other human beings with whom we desire unity and can imagine achieving it, because they are there, in front of us. Yet live performance also inevitably frustrates that desire since its very occurrence presupposes a gap between performer and spectator. (Auslander 66)

Performance in a digital setting is in a position to close this gap, however. The performer is someone else's audience. In fact, the audience can turn into performers. Invoking Erving Goffman, HCI researcher Brenda Laurel, as well as new media scholar Janet Murray, Celia Pearce states that "the Internet is perhaps the largest stage in human history" (58) and she continues "[o]nline games and virtual worlds, with their fantasy narratives and role-playing structures, are arguably the most dramatic instantiations of the digital stage. While all the real world may not be a stage, it can be argued that all virtual worlds most definitely are" (58). Although similar to stages, it must be stressed, as T.L. Taylor, Mikael Jakobsson, and Nick Caudry do, that "virtual worlds" in this case does not necessarily equal something unreal or insignificant. Relying on Brecht's notion of actual power emanating from interactions and events on a stage, I find that events and interactions in an online world can indeed have an extensive and sometimes even life-changing impact on the people involved, as I will show in the upcoming chapters.

The Levity or Weight of the Medium

Although digital media thus are regarded as having a large potential to provide new arenas for live performances in which the gap between performers and audience does not exist — and this indeed has become a common feature of digital worlds — it must nevertheless be remembered that other activities are taking place there as well. Relying on Brecht's ideas above and borrowing Marie-Laure Ryan's term, referring to the Internet but just as valid in this context, indicating that there are "pockets of virtuality" (85) everywhere, and the same must subsequently be true for reality. Indeed, as foregrounded by Mikael Jakobsson, there is no significant difference between the level of reality or virtuality between the "worlds," but he uses the concept of levity to indicate a certain "lightness" of the medium, in which distance from everyday life, fantasy and playfulness are core components. He labels this characteristic levity: "Levity is related to the use of avatars and the displacement into a virtual context and manifests itself as a kind of lightness in the way

participants approach the interaction” (Jakobsson, abstract), but he does not imply that this necessarily involves role-play. The levity effect might have a large number of causes, but Jakobsson attributes it mainly to the aesthetics of the 3D environment and concludes that levity is thus primarily in the hands of the game designers: “There is something about being immersed in a world that has the look and feel of a cartoon that makes the participants start behaving a bit like cartoon characters. The environment evokes a certain state of mind. The look and feel of the environment is not a given, it is the designer who sets the tone” (133). *Second Life* can indeed be perceived as a cartoon world, and as such it might be placed in the same category as comics or cartoons on television often, at least in a Western context, aimed at child viewers. Subsequently it gives people yet another incentive to view offline life as reality and online life as fantasy, which might lead them to treat interaction inside the *Second Life* community as irrelevant and even worthless. If anything, it is regarded as an escape or outlet from the pressures of everyday life. The opposite scenario, when a person is viewing his or her *Second Life* existence as primary, as the place where the most important interaction and communication happens, the image of the make-belief or cartoon world becomes problematised. This is not a very common stance, but it can be exemplified by interview statements made by *Second Life* resident Todd Wair, who describes how he lost the safety net he used to have offline when his mother died and says that he had been alone for several years by the time he discovered *Second Life*. Inworld he has now found a supporting family who also chats with him outside of SL and helps him on various issues: “You do get to know them as family and I feel so happy and wished now my family was like it in rl” (Wair). He continues: “they do change me lots in the way I think about life here... it is easier here”. Wair thus puts a lot of weight into his *Second Life* interactions. The view of people like Wair might lead to great disappointment and confusion when encountering people who do not value online interaction as highly. People’s commitment to events that happen in *Second Life* varies and to point to the cartoon-like character of SL in an attempt to avoid responsibility or accountability might, for some people, be an easy way out. The fact remains, however, there are real people interacting and chatting by their computers, not cartoon characters. If they want to they might indeed build a family, as in Todd Wair’s case, or a community, and in this case the idea of levity as an inherent attribute of the medium will be incorrect.

Sherry Turkle encountered similar issues while doing research on MUDs. Although she anonymously maintains a number of different “alts,” alternative avatars, all with their different names, routines and friends (15) she expresses confusion and insecurity when someone else creates a character called Dr. Sherry, which seems to be a mirror of Sherry

Turkle herself. When seeing this she tries to convince herself “that this virtual appropriation was a form of flattery” (16) but she is clearly not happy about it, and it becomes an even bigger issue when a friend suggests that Dr. Sherry might indeed be a bot (a computer program designed to appear human). Turkle is forced to acknowledge the importance of identity construction and interaction in an online world, but she does not seem comfortable with this realisation. For Turkle, offline is prioritised over online and a clear indication of this is the way she builds the credibility of her work by promising that her “formal studies” are being “conducted offline in traditional clinical setting where [she] spoke face-to-face with people who participate in virtual communities” (16). Turkle links being online to anonymity and illusion, while being offline is seen as tangible and therefore trustworthy. This seems to be an effect of how she herself has decided to “play the game” as well as the early days of the medium, but in this way she does acknowledge the difficulties of balancing levity and weight online. The same difficulty is clearly highlighted in Julian Dibbell’s “A Rape in Cyberspace,” in which he recounts the upheaval a digital rape causes in the community at LambdaMOO. Using words alone, a MUD participant has managed to create havoc and instigate protests to the extent that the MOO administration decide to ban this character.

Events in MUDs and MOOs are thus not necessarily frivolous or light, and neither is interaction in online 3D environments. Huizinga’s magic circle, which I referred to above and by which play is intended to be protected from ordinary life and kept free in a “temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (103), resembles Jakobsson’s ideas around levity, but as the discussion above shows, the walls of the magic circle would be more or less transparent or porous depending on the individuals taking part. (As I will show below, there is little consensus between the role-players on where to draw the line between being inside the magic circle and being outside of it.) When comparing the concept of the magic circle to his own concept levity, Mikael Jakobsson explains that levity implies a subtler mood factor, which does not imply an outside/inside, but rather adapts to various levels of socio-technical situations. Levity might be used to illustrate an attribute describing aspects of gaming or interaction in 3D environments, whereas the magic circle is intended to categorise and discern the particulars of the gaming platform, as well as the activities of game or play, and distinguish them from the “real world.” On the aspect of realism in online worlds, Jakobsson comments in the following way: “virtual worlds are real in terms of everything from interaction to objects. We have also seen that people will create social structures and hierarchies simply because there is a social need for them“ (174). By using the term levity, Jakobsson accentuates the

“social need” for social structures and hierarchies, but in highlighting the aspect of levity he also stresses the fantasy and free play interwoven in online environments, which we will explore further when look more closely at the role-play communities in *Second Life*. As the discussion above indicates, the characterisation of *SL* as “real” is not self-evident, but neither is the notion of it being a complete fantasy. *Second Life* is a medium in which “pockets of virtuality” are indeed possible.

Play, Deep Play, and Dark Play

Richard Schechner bases some of his thinking on rituals and play and their links to performance on Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois’s work: “Ritual has a seriousness to it, the hammerhead of authority. Play is looser, more permissive — permissive in precisely those areas where ritual is enforcing, flexible where ritual is rigid. To put it another way: restored behaviour is playful; it has a quality of not being entirely ‘real’ or ‘serious’” (89). He thus suggests that performance — or restored, twice-behaved behaviour — takes on a playful quality: “Play is intrinsically part of performing because it embodies the ‘as if,’ the make-believe” (Schechner 90).

But Richard Schechner also highlights other aspects of play, and by doing so he highlights other aspects, and rules, of what Caillois refers to as mimesis, imitation or role-based play: “Both child play and adult play involve exploration, learning, and risk with a payoff in the pleasurable experience of ‘flow’ or total involvement in the activity for its own sake.... Playing can be physically and emotionally dangerous” (92). Schechner refers to this as dark or deep play and elaborates on what is needed in order to make this type of play possible in a performance context: “Because it is [dangerous], players need to feel safe, seeking special play spaces and play times. The perils of playing are masked by asserting that playing is ‘fun,’ ‘voluntary,’ ‘ephemeral,’ or a ‘leisure activity’.... In fact, much of the fun of playing, when there is fun, is in playing with fire, going in over one’s head, engaging in ‘deep play’” (92). By exemplifying deep play in such a manner, Schechner highlights one of the great strengths of play and performance and the difference between those and non-play or reality: “It is easy enough to see how comedy and farce, circus and stand-up comedians, music and dance are playful. But why is tragedy playful? Why are violent videogames playful? Because these arts and entertainments refer to that which, if real, would be painful” (103). Why do we choose to play tragic or violent scenarios? Schechner elaborates on the potential reasons:

Assuming a new or alternative identity, even briefly, is very important. Masking, cloaking one's ordinary self just to get away from the humdrum, is also important. Much role-playing over the internet is this kind of dark play. Sometimes a person puts herself at risk to test her luck, to prove her value, to enact a special destiny. In life-risk play such as crossing the street without looking, one's 'immortality' is tested. In dancing on the edge, one leaves behind the mundane, hears it screaming and begging, and soars toward a 'communion with some Other.' In disguise-play such as talking in an invented language, alternative selves are given license. The gratification and thrill of dark play involves everything from physical risk-taking to inventing new selves to engaging one's inner self to communion with the Other. There is something excitingly liberating about this kind of playing. (121)

Securing the Magic Circle

The liberating influence of this type of play comes at a price as Schechner indicates above. A player needs to feel safe. The play space needs to be protected and this is when the rules of play emerge. The rules are intended to safeguard the magic circle that has been created. The spoilsports or the griefers are often seen as the main threat against this magic circle and player security. Johan Huizinga underlines the crucial importance of rules in the play-concept and the effects it has if these rules are broken:

All play has its rules. They determine what 'holds' in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt....The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a 'spoil-sport' The spoil-sport breaks the magic world, therefore he is a coward and must be ejected. (106)

In a role-play in *Second Life*, the spoilsport may not be a coward, but rather an unknowing resident who happens to walk right into a delicate scene being played out, unwittingly saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. When the magic world is violated in such a way, a player engaged in emotionally dangerous play is left vulnerable. But in some cases the violation might be deliberate. The spoilsport concept above is underlined and expanded on by Roger Caillois:

[I]f a cheat violates the rules, he at least pretends to respect them. He does not discuss them: he takes advantage of the other players loyalty to the rules. From this point of view, one must agree with the writers who have stressed the fact that the cheat's dishonesty does

not destroy the game. The game is ruined by the nihilist who denounces the rules as absurd and conventional, who refuses to play because the game is meaningless. His arguments are irrefutable. The game has no other but an intrinsic meaning. That is why its rules are imperative and absolute, beyond discussion. There is no reason for their being as they are, rather than otherwise. Whoever does not accept them as such must deem them manifest folly. (126)

The concept of spoilsports can be related to Mia Consalvo's idea of cheating. In her book of the same name, she explores cheating and cheaters and she arrives at the conclusion that cheating is

a practice, particularly one that is ludic, situated, and iterative in its expression. As players themselves explain, cheating can be enjoyable and playful, both in the act of getting ahead as well as perhaps in the knowledge of besting other players in some way. Many such players see digital games as a space apart from "real-life" consequences, and so cheating is divorced from the fallout of what would happen if the person cheated in some way in daily life. Even players who may not draw such distinctions see cheating as enjoyable in some way or as part of the game they wished to play.

This view of griefers and cheaters can be problematised further by drawing on Consalvo's study of cheating in digital games. She views attempts to change the game environment as one of the reasons for cheating. Although focusing primarily on games of progression, single player as well as multi-player, Consalvo's argument is convincing as she explains:

Players offered multiple reasons for such behavior, and most acknowledged that it was wrong or at least illegal to cheat in those ways. Several players admitted to doing such things as using aimbots and hacking the game code for the fun of causing distress and anger in other players. Others pointed to an already cheat-filled situation, and claimed that their own cheating was only to level the playing field. (101)

Consalvo lists a number of additional reasons for disrupting games: "boredom, difficulty, limited scenarios, and rough patches or just bad games" (95), all of which might be relevant in a *Second Life* context. Furthermore, Consalvo concludes with a remark that highlights the perceived levity of a game space: "Many ... players see digital games as a space apart from 'real-life' consequences, and so cheating is divorced from the fallout of

what would happen if the person cheated in some way in daily life. Even players who may not draw such distinctions see cheating as enjoyable in some way or as a part of the game they wished to play” (127). In *Second Life* there are many ideas of how one wishes to play, and this often leads to clashes between different dreams or fantasies. The rules of play in a *performance* context are often extremely rigid and can indeed be perceived as authoritarian. The structure around them can be very hierarchical, since the rules are there to sustain and safeguard the role-play as well as the role-players against people who might not realise the impact interruptions can have on the people involved. But the rules can also be debated, since people often fail to agree on one specific way to play the game, which might lead to the renegotiation of rules. Anthropologist Victor Turner outlines four phases in a conflict:

Social dramas are units of aharmonic process, arising in conflict situations. Typically, they have four main phases of public action These are: 1. Breach of regular, norm-governed social relations.... 2. Crisis during which ... there is a tendency for the breach to widen.... 3. Redressive action [ranging] from personal advice and informal mediation or arbitration to formal judicial and legal machinery, and, to resolve certain kinds of crisis or legitimate other modes of resolution, to the performance or public ritual.... 4. The final phase ... consists either of the reintegration of the disturbed social group or of the social recognition and legitimization of an inseparable schism between contesting parties. (37-41, Schechner 75)

Rules of play are, especially in a context where dark or deep play is the norm, indeed taken seriously enough to invoke fights over their interpretation. Play becomes organised and subsequently there are rights of interpretation and subsequently power to be fought over. The make-believe setting easily becomes an arena for a make-belief negotiation of boundaries and the rules create the environment they are set out to regulate.

Performance and Gender

Seemingly far away from play contexts, gender issues are often viewed as being firmly rooted in social reality, but many feminist theorists have argued that gender roles, just like roles in a play or a game, often are constructed with power hierarchies and/or subordination as an accompanying factor. Moreover, these theorists assert that this type of construction is a part of a continuous process:

When Beauvoir claims that 'woman' is a historical idea and not a natural fact, she clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity. To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (Butler 1988:522)

Basing her discussion on gender construction and performance on Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray's notions of becoming woman, the process of growing into a female role, and gender asymmetry, Judith Butler highlights society's expectations on the individual to conform (Butler 1990:8-12). "[G]ender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence... gender proves to be performative — that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler 1990:24-25). Indeed, as Butler claims: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its result" (1990:24-25).

In his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* from 1959, Erving Goffman gives several examples of how the role of wife is constructed. The following is taken from one of them:

In our society, when husband and wife appear before new friends for an evening of sociability, the wife may demonstrate more respectful subordination to the will and opinion of her husband than she may bother to show when alone with him or when with old friends. When she assumes a respectful role, he can assume a dominant one; and when each member of the marriage team plays its special role, the conjugal unit, as a unit, can sustain the impression that new audiences expect of it. (84)

Goffman never problematises this type of performance, but rather seems to take it for granted, which I assume mirrors the attitudes towards gender roles in the late fifties. I nevertheless would like to point to his description of the wife's choice: she can perform the role of a devoted and subordinate wife expected by a society built on people playing this type of polarised parts, or break the rules by contesting the dominant role of her

husband. Doing so she would thereby reveal the private side of their marriage, which, as Goffman puts it, would not be appropriate for a “new audience,” and her actions would subsequently brand her as a rebel. The primary role and goal for a wife and woman, according to the portrait that Goffman paints, is to underline and boost her husband’s authority as well as superiority, which effectively preserves the skewed power relations between husband and wife.

What Goffman also hints at is that masculinity is equally constructed. Hegemonic masculinity, defined by R. W. Connell as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 77, Kendall 72), further underlines the power inherent in the male role. Lynne Segal identifies various forms of male power and links it to control: “the power to assert control over women, over other men, over their own bodies, over machines and technology” (Segal 123, Kendall 73). A recent example of gender roles related to technology has been provided by Laurie Kendall, who, in her research on the BlueSky MUD, points out that the kind of male power most commonly negotiated is that over machines and technology, but there is also another type of hierarchy being negotiated and renegotiated between the men in her study. The mud owner, Corwin, is clearly one of the authority figures, but so is henri — “henri’s introspective disposition, his long history of very active mudding with the BlueSky group, and his place at the emotional center of the social group.” The men know their rank and their role, and adjust to this, within the BlueSky hierarchy, as do the women who become a part of the community. The fact that someone as highly ranked and thought of as henri takes interest in Kendall and her research effectively opens the doors for her and facilitates her work. henri is also one of the few who takes the job of peer-reviewing Kendall’s writing seriously, and she is clearly grateful for his support, which indicates that his approval strengthens her as a female researcher in a community primarily run by men.

Although Erving Goffman seems to adopt a rather essentialist view of identity in the sense that he views identity as something static and the roles we adopt in a social context are exactly that, roles we take on because they are appropriate in a social context without any real effect on the already established identity, but he nevertheless gives indications to how identity construction is carried out. Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir, who both have a more constructivist view of identity formation, point to a continuous creation of the self, and they maintain that gender roles are constructed. Likewise, hegemonic masculinity must be reaffirmed in order to continue to exist, just as

subordination is a choice that has to be selected over and over again. The same can therefore be said about subversion. These are all positions in a continuous battle for identity construction and power.

Power, Performance, and Playing the Game

Power can be taken, avoided, discussed, and contested in virtually any context with opposite camps of any kind, and Richard Schechner describes the political stance of performance studies as a research field, which is in no way neutral, in the following way: “performance studies is sympathetic to the avant-garde, the marginal, the offbeat, the minoritarian, the subversive, the twisted, the queer, people of color, and the formerly colonized. Projects within performance studies often act on or act against settled hierarchies of ideas, organizations, and people” (Schechner 4). Performance studies has thus chosen on what side it wants to be and what role it wants to play. It has created an identity as a research field. This choice is similar to that of the wife in the previous section, where she can choose to adjust to, take on the subordinate role, or attempt to subvert the hierarchy by taking on the rebellious role, thus taking her identity as a woman and a wife in different possible directions. These types of opposition are indeed a requirement for control and power to work: “Power requires a matrix of clearly defined oppositions in which to operate and will create the appearance of oppositions in response to the implosion of a previously operational system. [P]ower is absolute only if it is capable of diffraction into various equivalents.” (Baudrillard 1983:134, Auslander 123).

As Philip Auslander has established above, an attribute such as authenticity can be constructed by companies, individuals or organisations as a means to boost their own image. They create a story about who they are. They perform that story. There is a power inherent in being perceived as nice, of creating the nice guy or company persona. Erving Goffman links this type of performance to information control. It becomes essential to have the power over any information that can be obtained either about a context or a person, since information can become both an important weapon as well as a tool that can be used to make someone perform according to one’s wishes: “Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him” (13). Goffman describes how people and organisations interested in gaining or preserving power therefore also are interested in learning more about someone’s “socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude towards them, his competence, his trustworthiness” (13) in order to know what to expect from him. Goffman thus points to how information can be used to manipulate: “Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in

mind and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interests to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him” (15). To “play the game,” and to sustain the “nice guy” image, becomes a matter of power, of knowing more than the other people do, and of safeguarding the impression a person gives to other people (Goffman 25). It becomes an issue of controlling the information (Goffman 141).

The main reason, according to Goffman, why we try to control information in this manner, is that “[s]ociety is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way” (24). We are afraid of the consequences of having a bad reputation, something which is equally true in the realm of online worlds. As Goffman points out, performances can be classified as either cynical or sincere which brings us back to the idea of authenticity discussed above: “When the individual has no belief in his own act and ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term ‘sincere’ for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance” (28). As audience to someone else’s performance, people are, in their attempts to distinguish whether this performance is to be taken as genuine or not, looking for “unmeant gestures” (60), but, as Goffman also asserts, people sometimes have a tendency to believe in the performance and sometimes ignore signs of cynicism on the part of the performer, which increases his power. “[T]his sign-accepting tendency puts the audience in a position to be duped and misled, for there are few signs that cannot be used to attest to the presence of something that is not really there. And it is plain that many performers have ample capacity and motive to misrepresent the facts; only shame, guilt or fear prevent them doing so” (65). At the same time the reaction is often strong when trust is breached. “The individual tends to treat the others present on the basis of the impression they give now about the past and the future. It is here that communicative acts are translated into moral ones. The impressions that the others give tend to be treated as claims and promises they have implicitly made, and claims and promises tend to have a moral character” (242). If someone has gained a good reputation and has shown that they are indeed trustworthy and sincere this becomes the basis of how people treat him or her, until, perhaps at some point, this individual makes a mistake and his or her reputation becomes soiled and he or she becomes morally condemned — at least to that group of people in that specific context. His or her power is then diminished. This type of behaviour can, according to Erving Goffman, diminish the power of an entire group, if the group does not distance itself from the person who has been disgraced: “If one member is exposed and causes a scandal, then all lose some public repute” (164). This could happen

due to open rebellion within the group if that rebellion becomes apparent to the outside, and for better or worse influences how they view the group as a whole (172). Goffman gives yet another example taken from a hospital context: “[W]hen a surgeon and his nurse both turn from the operating-table and the anaesthetized patient accidentally rolls off the table to his death, not only is the operation disrupted in an embarrassing way, but the reputation of the doctor, as a doctor and a man, and also the reputation of the hospital may be weakened. These are the consequences that disruptions may have from the point of view of social structure” (235).

Most spaces have some kind of structure or body of rules and regulations, to which the theories of Goffman, Deleuze and Foucault, as well as my discussion of the negotiation of rules in games might give an indication. Negotiating power in a context in which structures already have been drawn up might be more difficult than in an environment with few existing rules or customs. Digital environments such as *Second Life* were initially thought to provide something that comes close to a clean slate. Inworld, people were able to build in accordance with their fantasies and personal wishes without anyone opposing or initiating a power struggle. As more people arrived taking on various social roles in their wish to have an input and influence the already existing framework, the negotiations for power became more common, and the newcomers were forced to interact with the already formalised web of norms and conventions. What is left to the individual is to carve out a social role within the existing structure, and this is where power, rules and roles converge. The people who use and abuse strategies and manoeuvres to gain power, the characters and the roles they take on, the rules and the negotiations about rules are in focus when I attempt to trace the particular points through which power passes. The wish of individuals or organisations to appear authentic and trustworthy by creating the proper image or role, intended to enable them to gain or sustain positions of power, makes performance studies an appropriate lens through which both performance and power can be explored.

Chapter Two:

Reading, Analysing, and Exploring: Methodological approaches

"Reading, whether done 'closely' or politically, is in its finest manifestation capable of examining evil, or whatever else we call the bad, sad self-inflicted things of this world, capable of turning the spotlight on it in an attempt to freeze it, so as better to bag it."

(Andrew DuBois, 32)

To "read" closely as well as politically, as Andrew DuBois describes it, in an environment as steered as the digital one might be considered desirable and perhaps even necessary. Andrew DuBois's stance that critical readings ought to expose "bad, sad" things, which, even if it might appear to be quite a task to take on, resembles my own overarching idea when I do research: to examine and expose the inequalities I might discover and explore strategies used to fight oppression and power concentration. Perhaps it is possible to point to ways in which to render repressive acts impotent, to "freeze" them and "bag" them, as DuBois puts it. As I read and analyse — in fact, in a literary analysis context the act of reading equals analysing— my aim is to read politically as well as closely. Through my literature studies my main interest has been to study how authors describe various contexts and developments and my goal has been to elucidate the world-views that become apparent through the eyes of the fictional characters in these fictional works. My background studying English and American literature has inspired my initial research method of textual analysis. As my research path has taken me into an entirely different field — massively multiplayer online environments, which, somewhat paradoxically since they are highly visual in their character, are filled with textual sources and these texts are not necessarily fictional or literary, but they are texts and therefore possible to analyse.

Combining Textual Analysis and Ethnography

A large quantity of text is being produced in highly visual, three-dimensional MMOs such

as *Second Life*. Resident profiles, notecards on various topics, land covenants, group charters written by residents and groups all provide information inworld about the 3D environment, its residents and their ways of “playing the game.” In addition, plenty of textual sources give information about inworld matters outside of *Second Life*. The ideas behind *Second Life* can be found on the *Second Life* website as well as on the Linden Lab website. Newspaper and magazine articles, books, blogs and comments provide insights into how and what residents experience in their “second lives.” In the beginning of my research studies, while using the method of textual analysis, I studied groups and communities in *Second Life* from the outside. I did not participate in any of the interactions and in most cases I only received second hand reports from the participants through blogs and articles, and the authors were not aware of my interest. Using primarily literary methods, I have also hesitated to engage too much with images or visual material, which in itself can prove problematic in a visual environment such as *Second Life*. Additionally, using literary methods only might also be regarded as too indirect a way to study contexts in digital worlds and make it difficult for me to engage with people directly and ask them about their opinion on issues such as power, authority and hierarchies. Realising this has led me to explore ethnography, which, in addition to analysing the more fixed textual sources mentioned above, enables me to engage with the community of which I am a part. As an ethnographer I have become far more visible among the community members. I have interviewed and met with people under less formal circumstances and experienced situations I might not have seen or discovered had I only relied on other people’s accounts of what they experience in the community. In my research material there are subsequently texts in which I as a researcher have had no input, but I will also refer to synchronous and asynchronous dialogues in which I have taken part. These dialogues have been saved in the form of chat logs or forum discussions and I have also conducted and saved interviews (also in the form of chat logs) with various community leaders and group members. While continuing to analyse these chat logs, in effect treat them as texts, I am also viewing them through the lens of ethnography.

My Role as a Researcher

Both textual analysis and ethnography are primarily qualitative methods that can provide good insight into certain aspects of group and community building in *Second Life*. A mapping of all the varying views, or to read texts written by all possible subgroups, would indeed be a gigantic and difficult undertaking. The size and multifaceted character of

today's *Second Life* which would make such an extensive charting virtually impossible. The selection of sources can also be viewed as a problematic aspect, since it is an inherently subjective choice, but I have searched for information on the Internet about the issues in question to see possible angles. I have browsed prominent inworld magazines and newspapers, and I have followed the blogs of well-known *Second Life* resident and the comments and discussions these have generated, both those in favour of and those opposing the blogger's views in order to put together as unbiased an account as possible, but this type of study can never be completely neutral. It is a reflection of myself as a researcher and person. That being said, the text from individuals and group I do find — and choose to follow — are, from a textual analysis perspective, written in a context not created especially for research, and that which has been written has not been tainted by any relationship between interviewer and interviewee, researcher and respondent, which might be considered a plus.

The material I gather from participant observation and interviews, on the other hand, can, as I indicated above, provide an in-depth view and allows me to experience the environment first-hand and I become an actor and participant in my own study. In some cases it has even resulted in the community taking on the role of fellow researchers, asking questions on a meta-level both of each other and of me. We become partners in our quest to learn more about the community we are in the process of shaping, and this process provides yet another piece of the puzzle to how it is organised and maintained. Following a method description originally written by anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, online ethnographer Celia Pearce, who has written about the Uru diaspora in various MMOs, indeed describes “ethnography itself is an emergent process, and thus is uniquely suited for studying cultures of emergence in online games and virtual worlds” (55). Pearce characterises online platforms as open-ended, nonlinear, participatory, unpredictable and labile, and she claims that they as such “require an agile and responsive approach to research” (55), which she, as indicated above, argues that ethnography provides. Ethnography as a method thus seems to be ideally suited to capture the more interactive, immediate, spontaneous and process-oriented aspects of my research, whereas textual analysis can provide a more in-depth interpretation of underlying rules, regulations and power structures that shape the communities. Hence, my aim is to examine how the findings from each field correlate or enhance each other in an attempt to increase the reliability of my findings and interpretations in a way that resembles Pearce's use of crystallisation which she sees “as an interpretative strategy, ... a postmodern response to

the traditional notion of ‘triangulation,’ which provides a framework for analysing data from different angles, different subjectivities, and at different scales” (200).

The Analysis of Language and Text

Let us go back and take a closer look at textual analysis. As a method it takes a stance in semiotics and Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce’s theories of language and meaning. de Saussure concludes that there is no meaning “behind the sign” but rather that the meaning resides “in the sign and nowhere else” (Belsey 10). He divides the sign into two parts: *signifiant* (the signifier) and *signifié* (the signified). The signifiant refers to the “sound or the visual appearance of the word, phrase or image” whereas the signifié represents its meaning (Belsey 11). The link between the two is arbitrary, however, since, as de Saussure points out, different languages often come up with different signifiants for the same signifié. A chair is for instance called a *Stuhl* in German, a *chaise* in French, and a *sedia* in Italian. The relationship between the signifiant and the signifié might not be stable in other respects either. A signifiant might ambiguously refer to several different signifié, which means that the understanding of that word is context dependent. The literal meaning, “a direct specific meaning as distinct from an implied or associated idea” (*Merriam-Webster Online*), of a word is referred to as denotation. A word’s connotation, “the suggesting of a meaning by a word apart from the thing it explicitly names or describes“ (*Merriam-Webster Online*) points to its ambiguity, which often is — again — context specific, and in taking both denotation and connotation into account in the analysis a more nuanced idea of what is expressed can be formed. Language thus becomes deconstructed. What becomes evident is that stable meanings — and understandings — of language do not exist, or in DuBois’s words as he paraphrases literary critic Paul de Man’s “two basic points of the deconstructive theoretical program . . . : communicative transparency does not exist; and texts are profoundly indeterminate” (DuBois 36). This might explain the need for textual analysis.

A type of textual analysis, close reading, can be described as critical reading, to read independently and critically, to read “with special attention” (DuBois 2). A reader who is reading closely might discover recurring indications of underlying ideologies, preconceived ideas or contradictions, and as a consequence he or she becomes better prepared to evaluate the credibility of the text and its author. Jan Van Looy and Jan Baetens point to what the close reader’s attitude towards the text ought to be and stress the transformative possibilities of the method: “there is a sense of hostility between the reader and the text. The text is never trusted at face value, but is torn to pieces and

reconstituted by a reader who is always at the same time a demolisher and a constructor” (10). In a sense, the close reader might be creating a new version of the text, a version in which several possible interpretations might be discussed. Frank Lentricchia and DuBois define what it takes to become accomplished close readers: ”persons who wish to preserve and sustain their independence are good close readers” (preface). Textual analysis looks for various types of tensions, such as ambiguity, irony or paradoxes.

It Depends on the Context

Jacques Derrida points to the hierarchical, binary oppositions that, according to him, Western culture depend upon and is organised by (Belsey 75). Binary oppositions are word pairs, in which one is privileged over the other — such as male-female, speech-writing or white-black — but at the same time dependent on the other since its implicit value would not be visible without its counterpart. Barthes, on the other hand, highlights the process of naturalisation and maintains that “certain concepts are not ’natural’ [in their essence] but have been naturalised, and are thus the product of a historical writing, which must be subjected to critical reading” (DuBois 23). DuBois, along with Roland Barthes, problematises what is seemingly natural and self-evident: the universal, the objective and the inherent (24). In doing this DuBois again points out the goal of his project: In learning to attack these terms we “must learn too that the job is effectively done only when we alter for the better the structures, systems, and beliefs that have generated the terms themselves” (24), and he continues: “In reading politically, the reader may find a more elaborate or compelling articulation of what was otherwise only felt. This process can make the initial felt politics more effective, since what is felt needs articulation to allow for practical collective action” (DuBois 31). In this way, the political reading enables the reader to find cues in the texts that imply as well as spell out underlying, more or less openly expressed attitudes and opinions. But, as literary theorist Paul de Man suggests, political readings based on political theories are not necessary to reach that goal:

Mere reading, it turns out, prior to any theory, is able to transform critical discourse in a manner that would appear deeply subversive to those who think of the teaching of literature as a substitute for the teaching of theology, ethics, psychology, or intellectual history. (24)

de Man thus concludes that textual or literary analysis is, per definition, political — and as such it is also more or less argumentative in its character.

Analysing a Game as Text

New media scholar Susana Pajares Tosca provides an example of how a game can be read as text. Her example is a game of progression, *Resident Evil*, in which the path of the player progresses when he or she succeeds in completing assignments which allows them to move on to the next level to complete a new set of assignments. Tosca's close reading is more descriptive than political, however. She uses textual analysis from a reader response perspective and analyses how a player makes sense of the game context. She thus bridges the gap between a traditional literary method and game studies. Navigating the minefield of the narratology/ludology debate of the late 1990s, she, at the same time, carefully distinguishes between the two media: "The reason for this crucial difference between texts and games is that games need more than interpretation in order to be played games and other digital works cannot be exactly equated with literature, and ... there are some dangers in the literal application of theories that were born for an entirely different medium" (Tosca 1). Having said that, Tosca nevertheless stresses the viability of close reading as a method in a game context: "We hope to have demonstrated that a close reading of a computer game is not only possible, but it also yields interesting insights about how the game functions as a cultural object" (Tosca 8). Tosca thus defines the computer game itself as a cultural object, and online worlds might in fact be regarded as cultural objects from several angles. The platform as well as everything that has been created on it — be it avatars, buildings, objects or environments — are example of human cultural expression and as such they are possible to analyse with the help of textual analysis. Tosca is "aware that the analysis ... is very determined by the genre to which *Resident Evil-Code Veronica X* belongs" (Tosca 8) and this is a valid comment to my analysis of *Second Life* as well. As an open-ended platform, *Second Life* is an example of a different genre of digital game spaces, and, with the help of ethnography and the theoretical lenses through which I study my material, I will adapt the method of textual analysis to suit the research I conduct in *Second Life*.

Ethnography and "Being There"

In the examples taken from *Resident Evil*, Susana Pajares Tosca thus uses textual analysis to describe the intricacies of game play. Ethnographic analyses can be descriptive in similar ways, as online ethnographer Lori Kendall asserts as she borrows anthropologist Clifford Geertz's term to describe her approach to performing ethnographic studies: "thick description" (233). Her aim is to "create a feeling of 'being there' by providing 'thick descriptions' ... of places, objects, bodies and interactions" (233), and in so doing she

highlights the “odd congruence” (233) between her researching MUDs in this way and the MUDs themselves, since they grow out of, indeed exist because of, the writing of the mudders. Christine Hine points to yet another aspect of Internet ethnography, the exploratory one, highlighting the possibility to follow and analyse processes:

An ethnography of the Internet can look in detail at the ways in which the technology is experienced in use. In its basic form ethnography consists of a researcher spending an extended period of time immersed in a field setting, taking account of the relationships, activities and understandings of those in the setting and participating in those processes. The aim is to make explicit the taken-for-granted and often tacit ways in which people make sense of their lives. The ethnographer inhabits a kind of in-between world, simultaneously native and stranger. They must become close enough to the culture being studied to understand how it works, and yet be able to detach from it sufficiently to be able to report on it. (2000:4-5)

The fact that Christine Hine has called her method “virtual ethnography” indicates a perceived distance to “real” ethnography, however, which Hine attributes to what she considers the virtual, or not entirely real, nature of the medium:

In using the phrase “virtual ethnography” ... the aim was to signal an ambivalent relationship with the ethnographic canon.... meaning to hint that it was almost the real thing, or good enough for practical purposes.... In pointing to the “virtual” nature of the methodology I aimed to maintain dialogue with established ethnographic principles and practices whilst opening up space for methodological innovation in directions that would be more troubling for that tradition. (2007:666)

This indicates the somewhat strained relationship between traditional ethnography and what has been labelled (cyber)ethnography, and there are indeed clear differences. The textual character of traditional ethnography, which literally means “people” and “writing” or “writing about people,” and mainly seem to refer to the outcome of ethnographic studies, the report, stands in sharp contrast to the preferred method of field observation in which “places, objects, bodies and interactions” are the key objects for investigation. Ironically enough, field operations in a traditional ethnographic sense are often impossible in a digital environment since the main part of interaction is carried out in writing. As Kendall summarises: “An online ethnography ... is in part writing about writing” (233).

Just like Hine, Kendall seems to feel that she as an ethnographer would consider her research to be more “real,” and perhaps also more valid, if she had more face-to-face meetings with the mudders on the BlueSky MUD and could take a larger part in the interaction as well as be able to watch the others interact. A clear indication of this is that, when conducting interviews for her study, she travels all over the United States to meet with the 32 interviewees and study the physical environment of which they are a part. Even though she gathers a lot of textual material in the form of chat logs throughout the entire study, it becomes evident that this is not her preferred research material for her as an ethnographer. These researchers are in fact acting out one of Jacques Derrida’s binary oppositions in favouring speech over writing.

The Influence of the Digital

Sherry Turkle creates the same binary opposition between online and offline visible in the works of Hine and Kendall, where being offline, “real,” is favoured over being online, “fake.” As mentioned earlier, this perceived opposition becomes problematic as Turkle conducts research on several online MUDs. She anonymously maintains a number of different characters, all with their different names, routines and friends (15), and she draws on her experiences on the MUDs in her research — but this does not seem to be evident to the people she interacts with online. Highlighting the dichotomy, Turkle describes her “formal studies” as being “conducted offline in traditional clinical setting where [she] spoke face-to-face with people who participate in virtual communities” (16). Turkle clearly links being online to anonymity, illusion, and make-belief, while being offline is seen as tangible and therefore trustworthy. This seems to be an effect of how she herself has decided to “play the game” and of how these types of digital environments were thought of at the time when she did her research on the MUDs, since this stance does not seem to be as common among new media researchers today. Inworld journalist Mark Wallace is fascinated by “the interplay between people’s real lives and their virtual ones. Wherever possible, he ask[s] his interview subjects about the details of their earthbound lives. He soon realize[s], though, that short of visiting them in real life, there were few ways for him to confirm that what they told him was true... At times it felt almost as if the virtual world was more real than the real one” (Ludlow & Wallace 222) or at least more easily confirmed from an inworld perspective. Similarly, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff makes a case that although it

might seem controversial to claim one can conduct research entirely inside a virtual world, since persons in them spend most of their time in the actual world and because virtual worlds reference and respond to the actual world in many ways. However ... studying virtual worlds "in their own terms" is not only feasible but crucial to developing research methods that keep up with the realities of technological change. (4)

Mikael Jakobsson, who has used (cyber)ethnographic methods, agrees — "I have defined the context of my studies as the virtual world itself" (69) — since his focus lies in the digital environment itself, and while he does not exclude information about the participants' lives in the physical world, he also does not actively look or ask for it. The avatars and persons the respondents have chosen to be and how they portray themselves in the online environment, with the username of their choice, is enough, Jakobsson believes, to create and sustain research credibility, and this is a view that I share. I think it is fair to stress the increasing acceptance of online environments as suitable sites for research in their own right. Stable identities have never been self-evident in online environments, but, as will be discussed in the following chapters, creating an illusion of a stable identity is something that increasingly is required for interaction in groups and communities in *Second Life* over a period of time. To build and maintain trust becomes just as valuable in these contexts as it sometimes is in the physical world and this fact increases the possibilities for reliable research material and conclusions.

However, that online worlds can function as good research environments in and of themselves must not be confused with ideas that findings can only be applicable inside the same online worlds. T. L. Taylor stresses that research inside these environments can indeed give "more fundamental insights into issues that are independent of games" (11), that researching online game cultures explores more than just the game environment itself. She has noticed that the way people approach this type of environment might also give clues to "the relationship between work and play, gender identities, the use of technology in our lives, and our complicated relationship with commercial culture" (11). T. L. Taylor agrees with Christine Hine's assertion that the goal of online ethnographic work "is to make explicit the taken-for-granted and often tacit ways in which people make sense of their lives" (Hine 5). Tom Boellstorff expresses similar thoughts: "virtual worlds do have significant consequences for social life. Drawing upon the meaning of virtual as 'almost' ... not quite human — our humanity is thrown off balance, considered new, and reconfigured through transformed possibilities for place-making, subjectivity and community" (5). Hence, studying game environments is fundamentally about studying

people and their context. Perhaps today's online 3D spaces, although similar to the MUDs of the 1990s in terms of modes of communication, nevertheless can provide the researcher with additional visual information about the context of the people and groups being studied in a way that makes the links between online and offline more obvious.

Perspectives from the Inside

As indicated above, participant observation — to live, talk and work “with and among the community members (T.L. Taylor 16) — over an extended period of time is a core method in the field of ethnography. T.L. Taylor emphasises this further by wanting “to make a strong case for the role of this method, and of ethnography, participant observation, and interviewing, in understanding the richness” (16) of online spaces. With this method the researcher is able to study processes, reasons and consequences, while receiving input both from what they see for themselves and from what other people tell them in interviews. As Celia Pearce puts it: When being a researcher in an online world, the “ethnography is a mystery to be unraveled, and the identity we form in this context is at once a scientific discipline and an art practice” (60). According to Pearce, we, as researchers, take on the task of studying the real people populating the “consensual hallucination” (67), to use William Gibson's term, and being a part of this, as Pearce calls it, “performative and productive act” (60). We stand outside, but are also a part of, the magic circle. It is indeed ironic, as Pearce states herself, that “one of the outcomes of this research was that in playing this role, [she] eventually became a ‘real’ ethnographer, and acquired a doctorate along the way. In the process [she] also became a legitimate participant of the group” (198). Underlining the aspect of process even further, T.L. Taylor stresses the differences between what the games was, but perhaps also seemed to be when she first began, and what it has become over time: “The game I began playing is not the same game that exists now. The experiences I had that first week, month, even year, were only a slice of what life was like in the space over the long run. Deep qualitative approaches methodologically foster this kind of layered understanding” (17). One of the Nekos, multicultural Cat Wildpaw, on the *Second Life Nekos forum* revealed a strong fear of labelling and misrepresentation on the part of ethnographic or anthropologic researchers. What she wanted me as a researcher to think about was this:

I have to say that, with two of my ethnic backgrounds, I also have a lot of experience with the notion of people who do culture studies (anthropologists) telling me what my culture is, and then telling me I am wrong about who I am and how I live when I say their claim is

incorrect to my life and the people I know of my roots. They even go so far as to claim I am not actually doing what I claim to be doing... Personally, I hate anthropologists... I see them as a form of outsider cultural genocide - to filter our cultures through white-eyes and then make us conform to their understanding. I mention that because it's made me wary of where "research projects" like these lead. It's fun to write all this and have this discussion, but the end resulting paper will probably result in a lot of quiet frustration if it is widely read. Even if its author has the best of intentions. (Wildpaw)

As a researcher there is always a danger of simplifying complex contexts. My aim is to show the multitude, to let as many views as possible be visible in the finished text. The deep qualitative approach will hopefully help me achieve that.

The lack of distance between the researcher and the studied community brings yet another bonus, which is not an ethnographic method per se, but nevertheless a contributing factor. When T.L. Taylor researches "the game itself, [she] find[s] [her]self playing too, which brings with it affectivity and unguardedness. This method of participation puts the researcher in the interesting methodological position of being, both in practice and emotionally, deeply embedded in their world of study" (6). The dual role of the researcher participating in online role-play or game-play while observing might bring a certain awkwardness and distance to the situation, for group members and researcher alike, but T.L. Taylor stresses that the play element in itself helps diminish that type of distance. Playing together seems to create a common ground and subsequently a sense of community. As someone with a background in the detachment of textual analysis, my initial fear was that of becoming too involved in the people I study, of not feeling that I am allowed to write about what might be considered negative aspects because of a sense of allegiance to the community of which I have become a part. But, as Mikael Jakobsson indicates, ethnographic study "completely lets go of the notion that there is a vantage point anywhere where contextualised human behaviour can be studied objectively" (64) and Erving Goffman even values personal engagement: "If you don't get yourself in that situation, I don't think you can do a piece of serious work" (126). Hence, I have realised that the danger I perceived initially — a danger of shifting from "objective" to "subjective" — can be considered a strength. As I move between textual analysis and ethnographic methods, the level of involvement, interaction and engagement are indeed major differences between the two.

Credibility and Appearance

In ethnographic studies it is thus not only the trustworthiness of the respondents that is in question, but also the trustworthiness of the researcher. T.L. Taylor points out one important aspect: “avatars and play choices are inextricably tied to the research process” (15). The choice of avatar has implications for any kind of role-play, but, as T.L. Taylor stresses, this choice also becomes a distinguishing factor for her experiences as a researcher. Her female gnome necromancer avatar has been chosen on the presupposition that it is the best fit for her personally, but at the same time it singles her out as not necessarily as social or active as she might have been had she chosen differently. “Had I been a Warrior regularly grouped who got healed by others and therefore had little downtime, my experience of an EQ play session would have been vastly different” (16). But even if Taylor had selected differently, it would still have been her own choice of path and her study would have reflected that. Methodologically, the important part is to highlight the selections, just as T.L. Taylor has done, in order to shed lights on her own angle as a researcher. Like all avatars in *Second Life* (and in many other online environments), my own avatar is a creation.



My own avatar in Midian City, Second Life.

Visually my avatar is, in the context of *Second Life*, a fairly neutral female that resembles the physical me in many ways, except for the fact that she sometimes wears cat's ears and a tail. She is dressed slightly more conservatively than many of the residents using female avatars, both from what I have seen personally, but also from what other residents testify to. Matteo Capezzuto (a "cat person") and fellow member on the *Second Life Nekos forum* discussed this in an interview with me. He describes his reaction when seeing a girl in a store who "was almost nak[e]d" and continues to underline that this is not an uncommon sight: "Like 90% of the female nekos." My own response was: "I've met quite a few who are dressed" and he countered: "You met 3. At least." And then he mentions three names: Olive Peressini, whom I have interviewed as well, the founder of the *Second Life Nekos forum*, Stacia Villota, and myself. I would like to point out that the dress code in *Second Life* differs significantly between different communities. It is quite common to see female avatars in tiny skirts, bikinis and variations on this theme and the Nekos are not unusual in this regard, but the dress code is varied, also within the Neko group as will become evident in a rather heated discussion in the upcoming Neko chapter. The reason for me not wanting to be the "typical SL female" are perhaps apparent already, since the clothes people wear (also in a digital environment) do send signals about who they are and how they would like to be perceived. My aim for my own avatar is for her to be "transparent" in the sense that I do not hide behind additional role-playing layers. The fact that I am a researcher is always mentioned, clearly stated in my searchable profile and at my inworld research centre. My intention and wish is that the people I talk to can feel my presence as an actual person and as a real researcher, that I am dependable and that I am taking what they say seriously, which leads to the second important aspect to conducting ethnographic research: to simply be there, "taking the crap" (Jakobsson paraphrasing Goffman, acknowledgements) together with the community, which creates possibilities for a common ground. It also implies that it is not really possible to see things from someone else's perspective until you have walked in their shoes, been a part of their context, and seen and perhaps faced what they face. The comment "[e]thnographic studies are inherently subjective" (Jakobsson 64) is the result of this. Ultimately, the stories told to the researcher are subjective, his or her own experiences are subjective, as is the analytical process, but all this hopefully mirrors the experiences of, and is recognisable to, the majority of the people in the community.



Meja Milosz Research Centre in Pheosia, Second Life.

Handling Sources

An ethically-related difference I have noticed between text analysis and ethnography is that most textual sources, such as blogs and forum comments, are written by an author who intentionally posts his or her views for an unknown number of equally unknown readers to read, similar to an author of books or a writer of song lyrics, whereas group chats inside *Second Life* are only aimed at the residents within the group and do not have the open and public quality of the previous examples. Blogs and comments are written by somebody who, in most cases, realises that they are posting something that can be read by anyone with an Internet connection, even by people who might not know or understand their context. Forum discussions on password-protected sites, on the other hand, are limited to usually already known group members and they are thus given a more private and inside status. While this type of material might provide more inside information, and as such it can be more valuable to me as a researcher, it nevertheless can put the group members on the line. Therefore it becomes more important to ask permission to use any material gathered among the groups and communities inside *Second Life* and, as Mikael Jakobsson stresses, protect the identity of informants, even if they are exclusively known by their usernames, and anonymise personal data that can be "linked to a physical

person” (71-72). Jakobsson, just like Lori Kendall, treats usernames as personal data that need to be protected. The issue of anonymity is problematic nonetheless. Kendall tells the story of PAL, who at one point blows up, storms out, and decides he wants to “erase all traces of [his] existence” (175) on the BlueSky MUD after a fight with the MUD administrator, Corwin. This is of course impossible, since everything happening on the mud is logged by Xena, the MUD robot, but also, as henri rightly points out — “TOO LATE BUDDY YOU’RE IN CH’S THESIS NOW” (177, 236, caps in the original) — since the transcript of the dialogue is printed in Kendall’s book. This incident highlights two things; firstly, that digital information seldom is lost simply because an individual wants it to be and, secondly, that the BlueSky group is very aware of being observed, which might “potentially change participant relationship” (236). For Kendall this is the main reason to anonymise all participants in her study, which ironically is something the participants themselves find rather amusing. They even create and post a list of all the pseudonyms and to whom they refer, but this list is taken away on Kendall’s request. The importance of maintaining the anonymity of the mudders is evident, since “people invest in their pseudonyms the way they invest in their real identities within a physical community” (241-42). In this dissertation I will use the real user or avatar names if these have been used on searchable websites or in comments that are open to anyone with an Internet connection. I will anonymise them if I quote from inworld chat logs or password-protected forum discussion. When I do interviews I always ask if I’m allowed to quote the interviewees and in the interviews for this dissertation, everyone has kindly agreed. In some cases parts of the discussions have been of a sensitive nature, and in these cases I will again make sure that the sources are anonymous.

In Conclusion

There are of course a number of possible methods I could have selected when conducting research in a digital environment such as *Second Life*. Some researchers might prefer a completely different literary or ethnographical method or framework than I have selected for my dissertation. To some people it would have seemed more suitable to study the online world using one or more methods common in game studies. Other might choose to incorporate a film studies framework, methods from media studies, sociology or something completely different. My choice of method reflects my own path within academia as well as my dual interest in people and power, in how they think, discuss, and negotiate their context, as well as in their deliberate or non-deliberate choice of actions. I have found these methods, textual analysis and ethnography, to be the best ones for me personally to

answer the research questions I have posed and shed light on the contexts in which I am interested. The research methods I am combining show similarities as well as differences, and although they might contradict each other in some ways, this might actually prove to be a strength. Sherry Turkle advocates this type of contextual reasoning (58) and bricolage style of looking for meaning and common features, which she, as a student in France, learns is not the correct way to do research but she realises that she by trying to alter her ways in a sense betraying her own gut feeling and she admits to finding inspiration in the “long, messy process of trial and error followed by the final, frantic scramble to rationalise the results” (58) of the ethnographers. In my dissertation, my aim is thus to weave together the two methodological approaches I have sketched above, and to explore, compare as well as contrast an inside to an outside view. Using textual analysis means that I as a researcher can be more anonymous, relying on already existing and available, although second-hand, accounts of events, with limited possibility for more elaborate explanations. Textual analysis highlights the importance of the textual aspects of *Second Life* and it also allows for a more political analysis of the situations I encounter. Ethnographic methods require a more participatory, and therefore less anonymous, involvement with the community I am studying, but it also gives me the possibility to learn more about the context of the groups and their ways from the inside, with visual aspects taken into account and with the possibility to ask questions about anything I might find confusing or puzzling. It also allows me to simply be a part of the community and share the quest for knowledge with my fellow community members. I would like to stress that the main difference between textual analysis and ethnography seems to be found in the early part of the research process, the gathering of information, but that the process of analysing seems to be very similar. Both methods are relevant in the study of online worlds, and the people that inhabit them, and that they easily can be used together to provide a broader, “crystallized” view.

Chapter Three:

Being or Performing Neko?

"It's like trying to herd cats through a waterfall."

Anonymous

Browsing various blogs I discovered the Neko community in September 2009, and found myself immediately at home. I became a part of the discussion on the Internet-based *Second Life Nekos forum* and it became easy to apply ethnographic methods as well as methods of textual analysis. Unlike some of its Neko role-play counterparts, for instance the Ulthar Woods sim or the Catwalker faction in Midian City, both of which were listed by Salvatore Otoro and mentioned in my introduction, the Neko forum is no self-evident arena for role-play in itself. Although seemingly highly performative with regard to the looks of their cat-inspired avatars with ears and a tail, and the fact that the Nekos become Nekos only in the somewhat removed context of *Second Life*, the discussions taking place in this environment nevertheless primarily give clues to the formation of roles among them, which in most cases have social functions that are simultaneously both make-believe and make-belief. These "kittehs" do not necessarily pull in the same direction, however, and parallels can be, and have been, drawn to the difficulties of herding cats. One thread has in fact been dedicated to this topic on the *Second Life Nekos forum*, and the comments there underline the independent streak among cats and Nekos alike. Forum member Keshia Arras³² explains: "[T]he community feeling in SL as far as Nekos go, there is very little of it. Outside of a few RP sims you don't really see Nekos gathering together. I know a few people who have tried 'Neko clubs' and most have ended up in failure with very low attendance because as someone said, it's hard to herd cats." Keshia Arras is certain of her point of view, but the discussion continues and I will get back to this below.

³² The avatar names of forum members on the *Second Life Nekos forum* have been exchanged with pseudonyms for the sake of anonymity.

Based on sources as varying as for instance Japanese manga fiction, Egyptian mythology, Batman's Catwoman, the musical *Cats* and common conceptions of what cats are like, the Neko culture has become one of the most visible subcultures in *Second Life*. The cat-inspired avatars look like hybrids of (primarily) female-shaped humans and cats, with cat's ears, tails and, less often, whiskers and cat skins in various colours. "At its most basic, wearing a pair of Neko ears and a tail will classify you as a Neko in Second Life circles" as Stacia Villota,³³ the most well known organiser and proponent of Neko "culture," initiator of the Neko forum mentioned above, and author of the *Virtual Neko* blog, affirms.



Relaxing Neko.

The Nekos were previously called "catgirls," but as Villota suspects: "the term Neko may have come about as more and more Japanese joined *Second Life*; they seemed to take the whole concept of dressing and being Neko to a much higher level." Following a Japanese animé role-model or perhaps wearing more Western urban street fashion, these *Second Life*

³³ Stacia Villota is a *Second Life* avatar name. As a leadership figure, she is well-known under this name and she also uses this name on her *Virtual Neko* blog. The offline name of the person behind Stacia is not known to me. The avatar/forum names of the other Nekos on the forum have, since the forum is a closed one, been exchanged with pseudonyms for the sake of anonymity.

residents live out the fantasy of who they might have been had they been born as felines. As a matter of fact, some, such as Karima Famy, testify to wearing Neko-inspired outfits even outside of *Second Life*, which leads to various reactions: “[I]t's not very easy to wear cat ears every day in RL..would you think I'm crackers if I told you that one weekend I did just that? I had an amazing pair of cat ears that I thought looked great, so I wore them everywhere...the crunch came when I was filling up the car at the petrol station..I got so many glares that I thought perhaps I'd overdone it a bit” (Famy). Perhaps the people who role-play as Nekos simply gather strength from idea of the playful quirkiness, individuality and independence of the cat, regardless of the reactions this might provoke. Within the context of *Second Life*, the Neko forum is a loosely knit community or interest group. Indeed, the Nekos usually come and go as they wish, speak their own mind and act in ways that show their individuality and Stacia Villota was put to the test as a cat herder, when she, in May 2010, moved the forum from one forum provider to another, from Ning to Spruz. Relying on the 74 responses I received before the *Second Life Nekos forum* moved from Ning to Spruz, and the fourteen I have received after the move, and the thirteen interviews³⁴ I have conducted with Nekos, I will, in this chapter, primarily explore how this network of Nekos discuss the role of the Neko, and power and leadership among the Nekos, in a social as well as in a dramatic digital context. However, at first I would like to outline the origin of the Neko community and highlight various aspects of the group or culture. Additional material have been taken from the forum discussions, which I will get back to below.

What Is a Neko?

I suppose Neko characteristics were a part of my personality before I knew Nekos existed. When I discovered *Second Life* in 2005 I early on created the outfit above for myself: a stylised leopard skin, white with grey circles. Then I created my first pair of ears and a tail. My shape was human and I remember enjoying the feeling of freedom and playfulness the hybrid appearance inspired in me. I did not know that I, by doing this, could be categorised as a Neko. At that point in time I had never seen anyone that might taken for

³⁴ In 2009 I contacted Stacia Villota, asking her for an interview. She agreed and encouraged other Nekos to expand on the Neko "way of life." Some of the Nekos approached me and thirteen up to two-hour interviews were conducted in *Second Life* in the autumn of 2009. The interviews, saved as chat logs, were comparatively free in form with the following questions as a starting point: What is being a Neko to you? What is a real Neko? Do you see having a Neko avatar as role-play? In that case, how would you describe that role-play? What is most important to you about your Neko avatar? What is your "reward"? Are you a part of a Neko group or community? In that case, what does it look like and how is it "governed"? What keeps it together? How would you characterize different types of Nekos? Do different Neko groups interact or are Nekos more often "strays"?

a cat person inworld or heard of Nekos. I simply like cats and the creation was merely a way of expressing myself. Since then I have learnt that I was not alone in creating a cat avatar at that point, but they were simply called cat girls (and perhaps also cat boys) then. The label Neko was introduced later. Thalia Willwerth provides an overarching definition of a Neko: “To be overly simplistic, it is a cat in a humanoid body. To elaborate further, it is a person who finds that they relate to the behaviours and mannerisms exhibited by felines.”



My own first cat avatar.

Halina, on the other hand, considers the cat-like personality to be the most important feature for a Neko:

Once a person with said personality type realizes how much the personality of your typical house cat (or even wild cat) matches their own, they may try to express their personality with parts that display their, uh, cat-hood. I think some people are neko at heart and either never figure it out, or are afraid to express themselves that way, and so there are nekos out there on the grid that lack ears and tail. Although, some cats might find out about their

cat-like personality by putting on the ears and seeing how their attitude changes. So I disagree with those that say just putting on the ears and tail by default make you "a neko". I actually believe that a person can have both, and completely not be a neko at all, while the person standing next to them could be in an unskinned newbie avatar, and be 10 times more neko than the one with the parts.

When I first used my feline avatar, some people asked if I was a Furry, and as such aligned with the Luskwood community mentioned in the introduction. My immediate answer was "no," without really knowing why the distinction felt like a necessary one to make. But the same distinction has been made by many Nekos: Nekos are not Furies. As I was invited into the *Second Life Nekos forum*, I initiated a discussion asking about how they define a Neko, what they enjoy about being a Neko and how their Neko community or group functions. The responses I have received indicate that the views indeed are varied. Differentiating between Nekos and Furies, forum member Vita Hoge believes that: "Neko are humans with some feline characteristics. Feline furies are cats with human characteristics. Cats are cats.... with human brains and some choose to speak human while other's ONLY mew & purr by choice." On the whole Keshia Arras agrees with her stance as she suggest that the tails and the ears primarily function as playful signals:

A lot of people tend to lump Neko's in with the Furry community but other than a few furies who play cat creatures they are a very different thing all together and have different roots. I tend to find people who play neko's look at their tails and ears as more of a fashion accessory or a mark to show that they are playful fun people... that they enjoy dressing up.

Stacia Villota accentuates the feeling of belonging among the Nekos and not among the Furies: "I agree we are wholly separate from the furry crowd, and I think the furies would say the same about us. If I'm at a live music event and see a neko, I'll almost always IM to say a shy hello... just... well.. just cuz. I don't do that with a furry, cuz furry is not 'my tribe,' Neko is." (Villota) Although Hoge, Arras and Villota do not describe Furies per se, they nevertheless draw attention to the perceived difference between Nekos and Furies in an attempt to define where Neko-ness ends.

Neko's Japanese Roots

Neko is the Japanese word for cat, and forum member Yasuda Chie describes the origin of the Japanese Neko in the following way:

It originates from the Japanese Neko-Matta³⁵, meaning "Cat Person" and plays a role in Ancient Japanese Mythological Culture. Starting as a regular house-cat, once they hit a certain age, they begin the process of walking upright and their tails split. The more tails, the older the Neko-Matta. The older the Neko-Matta the more powers over the dead they possess. Interestingly enough, there is a comparable role for felines in the Ancient Egyptian culture as well as guardians of the dead. Moving from that, Neko didn't really have much impact until anime exploded and Neko-Mimi, meaning "Cat Ears" was born. It became quite popular for young girls, and boys, to put on ears and go to cons to meet the writers and animators as a way of showing their fandom. There is a very close association between anime, sci-fi, fantasy and Second Life. In fact many of these categories have gotten boosts -because- of Second Life from the instant communication between people and cultures around the world with this online 'network'.

Adding yet another Japanese influence, Stacia Villota points to the 2002 movie *The Cat Returns* as a milestone for the Nekos. It tells the story of a schoolgirl being abducted by the prince of the "Cat Kingdom." Before the shotgun wedding she begins to transform into a cat, but before the transformation is complete she is rescued and the girl is left in human form but with the addition of cat's ears and a tail (Villota). The movie has inspired a large number of fans to dress and act like the schoolgirl; the Neko schoolgirl uniform can be found in various Neko malls inside *Second Life*, and sometimes this look has pronounced sexual connotations, which I will return to below.

Nevertheless, many *SL* Nekos, including myself, have chosen a Neko avatar for other reasons. Min Doege is one of them. She lists her influences from primarily Western-oriented literature, musicals and movies, and describes herself as tapping into "the proud heritage of the Siamese, such as Ko-Ko and Yum-Yum of Lilian Jackson Braun's *Cat Who* novels, *Pyewacket of Bell, Book and Candle*, and even Si and Am, famous for their singing abilities in *The Lady and The Tramp*" (Doege). These images of how cats might act have shaped her idea of the Neko. For other Nekos, the simple "I like/love cats" are enough as a

³⁵ "In Japanese folklore, any cat that lives over thirteen years old, reaches one kan (3.75 kilograms) in weight or is allowed to keep a long tail can become a bake-neko (化け猫) or cat monster (Addis 2001). A bake-neko is a cat that gains paranormal powers after certain circumstances. They also have the ability to eat (bigger or smaller) anything in its way, no matter what it is. Poison is its main food, for example, a certain type of snake (unknown to man). It is rare to see people with a 'bake-neko' though some people have been known to see it. The breeding of the Japanese Bobtail may have some connection with this superstition. After a bake-neko tail grows long enough it forks into two tails, then the bake-neko is no longer called a bake-neko, but a neko-mata. Other forms of bake-neko are Maneki-neko (Addis 2001). Most of the stories about the bake-neko are told orally in Japan." (Wikipedia)

motive. In this case they can basically be described as fans of cats, not of the Neko of the Japanese tradition. In a Neko discussion on Flickr, Dea Carvalho ties her own “Neko-ness” to common perceptions about cats: “For me being a neko is linked with having an attitude.... Everybody can see that cats are symbols of attitude, elegance, superiority... why [should we not] try to be like them?” Owner of the Ulthar Woods role-play sim, Thaddeus Capasso, takes a similar stand: “Now I’m sure many told you what a neko is, for me I would have to say that above all is about embracing that feeling felines transmit to us, about being independent, playful, mischievous and so on so forth.”

In the Flickr discussion mentioned above, Amara Parmalee states that she likes the possibility of dressing up in various ways and how the style is enhanced and made unique by her Neko-ness: “I love cats.... The thing I like about neko culture is its uniqueness. You can be decked out ear to toe in urbanwear or refined in an evening dress with the tail to match. It’s fun and flirtatious, and there is no one way to appear, aside from the base ears and tail.” The style Parmalee describes as “urbanwear,” is often called grunge. It is a style based on edgy and sometimes torn clothes, usually in dark colours; the hair is often wild; the skins sometimes have scars and bruises, and the outfit might include punk-version ears and tails with safety pins. In the same Flickr discussion, Matty Luminos expresses similar ideas, but concludes that it matches well with the style of his choice, the emo: “I went neko because I like cats Neko culture also seems to go hand in hand with emo fashion, which is a very distinctive look that I quite like.” The attitude of the cat is clearly important, but when these people “go Neko” they might also spend a significant amount of time and money on creating the perfect look and they focus a great deal on the way the perception of their avatars changes because of the cat attributes. What an authentic Neko is has initiated a lively debate on the *Second Life Nekos forum* as well and this will be discussed further later on, but at first I would like to highlight various ways to play Neko.

Performing Neko

In June 2010 on the *Second Life Nekos forum*, the forum member Gabriella Montondo has lost a loved one and is in need of some comfort. As a sign of caring, Stacia Villota initiates a joint expression of support as she “*herds all the kittehs to pile on Gabriella for comfort*.” She is soon followed by other forum members, and over the next three days Montondo is given several examples of playful Neko support. The following short example exemplifies both of the language of lolcats, lolspeak, which has been adopted by many Nekos in *Second Life*, and the often playful as well as, in this case, soothing banter on the forum main chat:

Vita Hoge: 😊 *huggles Gabriella gently*

Adela Suza: *hugs Gabriella*

Kit Caiben: *makes a sad face and gives Gabriella a tight kitty hug* its hard to lose a loved one, furkid or not 😞

Jeanette Litherland: *gives Gabriella a huggle and a nuzzle and sends a prayer to ceiling cat for the beloved Cookie who will be greatly missed*

Claris Conti: *gets some fish-treats for Gabriella to try and make her feel a bit better*

Gabriella Montondo: can has mouse flavoured?

Claris Conti: *digs in pockets*... here you go 😊

Gabriella Montondo: *pounces on the mousy treats* now where's my favourite mouser...

Kit Caiben: *nuzzles Gabriella* don't you worry, ceiling cat will take care of Cookie [Caiben adds a url to a movie clip featuring the "Ceiling Cat"]

Jeanette Litherland: that was so beautiful Kit! *sniffles some happy sniffles*

Gabriella Montondo: It's going to be a busy place when I get there.

Adela Suza: *grabs the closest thing without looking and wipes her eyes*... dat was byootiful, Kit...

Although the intention of this dialogue is to support Gabriella Montondo, the playful tone indicates that the interaction nevertheless is framed as a make-believe one. The cat-like behaviour is heightened and the whole interaction is framed as a performance, but the feeling of real support is nevertheless conveyed. Sometimes the *Second Life Nekos forum* becomes transformed into a space for role-play, as the example above indicates, but it is also a place for discussion and interaction. Some Nekos enjoy the role-playing element, whereas other Nekos prefer a more low-key, but also more visual, type of performance.

Some Nekos inside *Second Life* seem to simply enjoy watching their avatar perform the role of the cat on the screen; to other people the main focus lies on what becomes possible when donning cat's ears and a tail. Thalia Willwerth explains it in the following terms: "I think it's safe to say on a more general basis that the enjoyment from being a Neko comes from the sense of being whole when one sees themselves on the screen; they're looking into a mirror, and they're seeing their true selves." Halina has experienced something similar, but adds that she in fact seems to be more accepted in her Neko shape than she is in human form: "Without my neko parts on ... strangers don't understand my personality, they think I'm weird. I put the ears and tail back on, and suddenly, everyone understands. In summary, I can't really say that for me being a neko is about enjoyment, but about proper expression of my personality." It might be correct to describe their

approach as a yearning to expand the normative role to incorporate aspects that are usually constrained in the role as a human and as such they can construct their identity incorporating more unusual traits. In itself, the Neko shape signals deviance from the norm in a manner that appears playful and friendly. Subsequently it can be argued that they, by using a Neko avatar, are sidestepping the striations of power inherent in normative structures, in situations when such an indirect declaration is necessary. Many Nekos feel, just like Halina, that more aspects of their personality are allowed in their role as Nekos, and as such their behaviour is restored or twice-behaved to use Richard Schechner's terms. They have noticed that a type of behaviour, which they have tried before, is frowned upon or stopped for some reason, but when they behave like this again, this time in Neko form, the behaviour is suddenly accepted, since they have already signalled that they are acting outside the norm and as such they are posing no threat or are not aiming to take over the power.

Subsequently, although the signalling of a non-threatening attitude is possible to achieve in human form as well, many of the Nekos describe that their hybrid avatars lends them the power to act in a more independent and self-reliant manner, which indicates that being or performing a Neko plays a part in identity construction in a make-belief fashion. In the discussion on Flickr, Cynthia Wheeler describes that she loves "the space being a Neko still allows for individuality." For Nekos like her, the relevant questions seem to be: "What would a cat do under these circumstances?" and "How does it have the power to alter the conditions of everyday life?" but also "How can I enhance my freedom to be the person I want to be?" BlazeThursday elaborates on this in the following response on Flickr:

The Neko way of life...well I think it is so appealing because it has so few constraints...u [you] can pretty much choose how far u wish to take it. The style is so versatile, from the cute kitties to the warrior like cats to the grungy, blood soaked emo nekos. But it is far more than just wearing a tail and ears and thinking you look cool. Neko is choosing a way of life, but one that is broad and inviting. Personally I chose to be a Neko because I craved an identity which let me show different sides of me.....and I love that whilst Nekos adapt well to community and social behaviour they too don't look out of place hanging about alone exploring.

There are many descriptions of how Nekos are dressed and shopping tips are available on the *Second Life Nekos forum as well*. The creative aspects of shaping a cat avatar are indeed

an important part of what might be described as a Neko culture, and the creation of an avatar is closely linked to shaping an identity or a persona, a role, which resembles Erving Goffman's description of the shaping of social roles and of attempting to control how other people perceive you. Coralie Bostow enjoys her "inter-species" Neko persona and the way it allows her to be "aloof, chatty, playful, sexy, combative or charming if I want to. I can do it all in one line of chat! I don't think SL offers a purist form of neko by far but that's not important. It's about how you feel and how you want others to see you." If a Neko stresses the individuality and independence of the cat as an important trait in their social role, this can subsequently lead to a performance of power, the role of an independent Neko, which in turn might become an aid for this resident to break patterns that hold him or her back. As such Neko-ness becomes a tool for identity construction, for individual change and progress, a tool to take power, not necessarily over someone else, but rather over his or her own life. It becomes a make-belief performance, intended to facilitate change and transformation.

Performing to Explore and Discover

This possibility is taken advantage of by some Nekos who become "pop cosmopolitans," to use Henry Jenkins's term. They are "tourists" who sometimes explore the Japanese elements of the Neko culture, as Stacia Villota does when she tries on the role of a Geisha kitty or role-plays Samurai games on the China-inspired Mao sim featuring the Great Wall of China:

So there I was, a little Neko in the middle of a snowy field at midnight. Since I'm not a killer kitteh, I decided to have some cosplay [manga-inspired performance] fun. But which character... O-Ren Iishi [from Kill Bill] in her (in)famous white kimono, katanas crossed menacingly? Or the more elegant Lady Snowblood [a vengeful manga assassin], a long dagger tucked artfully into the sleeve of her silk kimono? Mmm... when in doubt, a cosplayer can always start with katanas [Japanese swords].

Henry Jenkins indicates that pop cosmopolitans indeed can use what they learn in a global fan culture to escape their local communities and gain a broader cultural experience by embracing cultural difference (155). Perhaps Japanese culture ought to be the first choice for a catgirl exploring other cultures, but it becomes clear that some of them do not stop there. Exploring might mean something as basic as changing skin colour as Lyliana Sierota, who also has a light-skinned human avatar, describes it in the Flickr discussion: "I

decided to have a black skinned Neko because I've not seen many black skinned avs, especially Neko ones.... Having a Neko means I can explore other places where my other av[atar] wouldn[']t go." In a blog post, Ersatz Charisma, on the other hand, explores what it might have been like had she been the cat goddess Bastet in ancient Egypt. Contemplating the hardships of being a beloved goddess she "sigh[s] heavily, and watche[s] the night fall over her land, Egypt....She turn[s] around and scratche[s] the divan in frustration... then immediately [feels] better after having done that....then slip[s] into the night, to do what cats do best. She [sits] under the Pharoah's window yowling until he [throws] a bucket of cold water over her." Thus Villota, Sierota and Charisma visit exotic cultures, learn facts about them, perhaps explore a few of those more thoroughly, engage in depth with even fewer as they then move on to explore the next culture. Henry Jenkins describes this as one of the dangers of pop cosmopolitanism: "The pop cosmopolitan walks a thin line between dilettantism and connoisseurship, between orientalist fantasies and a desire to honestly connect and understand an alien culture, between assertion of mastery and surrender to cultural difference" (164). Villota, Sierota, and Charisma are identity tourists, and thus make-belief role-players, when they explore other contexts than their own, they might indeed learn something about other cultures from their "visits" in a other contexts than their own, but what strikes me the most is the level of performance that becomes is evident in both Villota's and Charisma's descriptions and the cosmopolitan air that becomes a part of the Neko role.

Japanese Okubo Sanako, who now lives in the U.S., has taken on the role of Neko in *Second Life* from a slightly different angle, which builds upon her experiences when cosplaying in Tokyo. Her Neko role-play is thus shaped by the conventions of her kawaii³⁶ cosplay, norms that might or might not be familiar to the audience she encounter in *SL*:

I've always had a certain affinity with Nekomusume³⁷ from when I was a young girl in Japan. I've cosplayed Neko on many occasions along with my friends on Takeshita street

³⁶ "As a cultural phenomenon, cuteness [kawaii] is increasingly accepted in Japan as a part of Japanese culture and national identity. Tomoyuki Sugiyama, author of "Cool Japan", believes that "cuteness" is rooted in Japan's harmony-loving culture, and Nobuyoshi Kurita, a sociology professor at Musashi University in Tokyo, has stated that "cute" is a "magic term" that encompasses everything that's acceptable and desirable in Japan. (Kageyama) On the other hand, those skeptical of cuteness consider it a sign of an infantile mentality. In particular, Hiroto Murasawa, professor of beauty and culture at Osaka Shoin Women's University asserts that cuteness is 'a mentality that breeds non-assertion ... Individuals who choose to stand out get beaten down.' (Kageyama)" (Wikipedia) What is not discussed as often is the image of the Kawaii Hentai Neko, the "sexy Neko" often related to Japanese porn imagery (Hentai Neko).

³⁷ The "daughter of a cat."

in the heart of the Harajuku district, Tokyo. For the majority of us while cosplaying, it was always, the more kawaii the better. For me it wasn't just all about cuteness but it was a way of life at that moment. It was a certain attitude that surfaced once those fluffy ears and tails were added to our costumes. It was so extremely funny for a group of us to walk down Takeshita street and you hear nothing but bells.

My neko avatar gives me a sense of nostalgia and it really takes me back. I try heavily to perfect and enhance my neko more and more everyday. I am merely a hybrid like most kittens here. I am not a full fledged kitty. Like many others here my ears and tail are NEVER detached unless I'm moving them from one attachment point to another and when that happens no one ever sees that. I am very particular about consistency in my look. When you see me as neko today you can count on seeing me as neko every single time thereafter.

Sanako's norms and way of role-playing might not be shared by the majority of Nekos in *Second Life*, but this is her standards and her way of recreating her memories of the cosplay she misses. In this manner, Sanako can be described as attempting to keep the cosplay persona she has previously created.

The Midian City Catwalkers and Their Ties to the Nekos

The Midian City role-play community will be discussed more extensively in the next chapter, but I would like to draw attention to the role-play among the Catwalkers, the cat people, there. The Catwalker faction is a Neko-related group designed to incorporate and expand upon Neko features within the Midian City context and overall story:

A blip in the human genetic code has given birth to these half cat half human anomalies. Seldom seen on the streets, these "CATWALKERS" can be found perched high above the city on the many catwalks, upon which they are forever roaming, watching, and waiting for a chance to pounce. They love to toy with their prey. Fun loving kittens, easily amused, they just as readily squash those things that come to bore them. They are jokers and night creatures and just love to play, just like the cats they resemble. (*Midian City Forum*)

The role-play in Midian City is based on an image of human and cat hybrid that does not originate in the Japanese manga tradition. In general, the Catwalkers look grungy, wild, fierce and more adapted to the street life, which is in line with the general story of

Midian. In fact, to some people the role-play itself is more important than “being a Neko“, as Karissa Lineberry confirms: “mostly [Catwalker is] a character I play online, something different, ‘better’ perhaps, than the normal person I am in everyday life. The Catwalker part, I’m actually still getting used to ... I’m still on initiation of sorts.” Catwalker Erica Woodward confirms the importance of the role-play, which resembles Okubo Sanako’s dedication to creating a believable performance above, and underlines the general norms regarding role-play in Midian City, which will be elaborated on in the next chapter, “people who seriously RP put alot of thought into it... we create a world of our own... to some extentWe don't just come here to goof off so to speak.. we .. goof off seriously we come here to create.” Catwalker Giovanni Milla continues on the same thread, as he asserts that role-playing in Midian City is “a way to develop my character. It gives 'Gio' much more dimensions. He's gone through pretty much the whole gammet of feelings and experience in RP, having fallen in love, and fallen out of love, made friends, as well as enemies. It's something like what novels do for readers, but much more interactive, and the consequences much more 'real' to an extent.” The make-believe aspects are in these cases more important than any make-belief ones, but the Neko identity can play an important part as well, as both Giovanni Milla and Erica Woodward testify to:

[A]t the beginning ... I wanted to try something different from being just human.... I... found my first neko skin... the skin grew on me, it essentially became part of my in world persona.... I RP as neko, but it's also my SL persona. Some can “shut off” being a neko when out of RP, or RP different things. For me, it's more or less I'm comfortable with this persona. (Milla)

I found out about Second Life because I tumbled across a blog of a Catwalker. I have always loved RP and the whole Idea of being a hybrid fascinated me... and as I continued to roam about the world I found that being a Neko embodies my playful, cuddle-some adventurous, curious-ness... I find it very awkward to not have some kind of ears and tail on me. (Woodward)

The Neko role-play in Midian City has developed into a generally darker and rougher collaborative story-telling experience than what is common among Nekos in general in *Second Life*, one in which primarily the more urban or grungy Neko characteristics are visible, which brings us to a core discussion among the Nekos: What is a real Neko?

A Real Neko

The looks of a Neko seems to be the topic that creates the most discussion. Many of the Catwalkers in Midian City represent the “grunge Nekos,” and the style is also common in other Neko contexts, as we have seen in some of the comments above. It is indeed easy to get the impression that the grunge look is a must for all Nekos in *Second Life*. Shops advertising Neko merchandise often carry typical street fashion as well, and the tough, scratched and street-smart Neko is a popular look. This inspires a counter-reaction in Vita Hoge, however, who belongs to a group of “Japanese” Nekos:

When I arrived in SL my idea of *neko* was firmly cemented after a decade+ of anime/manga/doujinshi etc. exposure... Neko was the personality.... So my interpretation of neko is solidly built on the Asian aesthetic... I mean Tokyo street style to Kyoto class combined with high end European designers on the back of my Neko form.... this entire discussion has created SUCH a sense of relief in me because I really despaired that people were determined to cement the name neko with one of two looks.

But the reaction against the counter-reaction can be equally strong, as Lily Adley shows:

Why did I have such a strong reaction to reading, "grunge is NOT Neko"??? This is weird.... I wonder if it is because it is like saying, "blue is not three". The two concepts are totally different for me, totally apart. But I do know what you mean ... far too many people associate Neko with grunge or urban - especially vendors. But I don't think that means that Nekos aren't into grunge or urban. I have known very few male Nekos, but all of them were into the grunge or urban scene.

Just like Adley, Kaye Zonia attempts to give room for variation:

Because there are so many different types of us who choose to be neko for whatever reason, there is no way to pin down neko fashion either. Our styles are as diverse as the people who inhabit the avatars. There are grunge nekos out there certainly, and nothing wrong with that. Nekos are just as likely to enjoy the grunge style as anyone else. But not more so. Which is where I think a lot of people, and designers, get it wrong. I have a fun, sexy, varied style. A good friend of mine ... has an Asian/fighter style but is not strictly confined to it. Another neko friend has the sweet kawaii thing going, and yet another has an Asian punk influence. My non-neko friends are just as varied.



Grunge or kawaii Neko?

Cat Wildpaw is next to jump into the discussion, and she attempts to describe the reasons for the mix-up regarding the role of a prototypical Neko by pointing to the dangers of categorising too rigidly. She draws parallels to her real world experiences as she points to the expectations and stereotypes of the outside world as a contributing factor to negative comments about what is or what is not considered to be “proper” Neko:

[G]runge is not really Neko - but they [people outside the Neko culture] think we are all grunge. So they say we are doing it wrong. They never bother to see what we are actually like.... As a multi-racial minority born and raised in the USA (Chinese / Amazonian / Cherokee), I have a lot of experience with -that- phenomenon. You could say its the story of my life, and those like me - to be constantly labeled one way, told I'm not acting that way, when I'm acting a third way, which might very well be the way people of that background act, yet getting labeled 'off' as a result. If you match reality rather than a stereotype - people can refuse to notice you are not the stereotype, and lambaste you for their applied stereotype even though you do not fit it anyway... And they can even lambaste you for failing to meet their stereotype, all while still failing to see what you are actually doing / being. (Wildpaw)

For Wildpaw the formation of Neko roles clearly has a make-belief quality. She battles with the constraints put upon her by real world categorisations, and draws our attention to the Neko role and its importance in an emergent and rapidly evolving social context. Although the Neko role is firmly placed in the online context of *Second Life*, Wildpaw points to how this role can be constrained by considerations similar to those limiting the social roles of minorities outside of *Second Life*, and it is clear that this is the very opposite of what she wants. She fights against being put in a box. Wildpaw prefers a Neko avatar primarily because of the freedom it brings and does not wish to see it more defined:

It expresses an inner feeling freeing my curiosity and freeing my sense of sensual expression. As a neko I can be a lot less serious, without having to dumb myself down. As a Neko I can say and do things without having to 'stand so solidly' behind them. If I'm wrong, I can kitty shrug it off and move on. I don't have to be taken seriously, but I can still be felt seriously. I can be flirty and unattached, and still emotional and caring. In my First Life I do not have the luxury of being as poly-amourous as my feelings actually are - as a Neko in SL, it is just a natural extension of being a kitty.

Richard Schechner and Erving Goffman both stress that all behaviour is rehearsed or performed, although it, to the individual, might not seem to be, and this often happens in the Neko context. The discussion on the forum shows that Neko-ness can be viewed as a rebellious, cute, fun-loving as well as light-hearted, make-believe performance, but it can also be a more or less intentional and serious attempt at identity creation and a renewal of how an individual wishes to be perceived. As becomes visible in some of the comments above, the forum members often describe that being a Nekos reflects who and what they essentially *are*, thus suggesting an identity that suddenly becomes whole as they don cat's ears and a tail, which echoes Erving Goffman's notion of a coherent identity. People on the outside might view Nekos as grunge — which fits a few and alienates others — but for those who take on the role of Neko it might mean something entirely different and more personal. For whatever reason, people want to feel good when they take on the role of Neko. They wish to feel at home, as if being a Neko enables them to "be themselves" in an unguarded manner. In this case it is the idea of a freedom from constraints that govern their performance as well as their identity construction. Power is not present, and somehow power is not allowed to be present. For many people inside the Neko community, Neko personas are created to take advantage of the playful character of the Nekos, and, for better or worse, by doing so the freedom and playfulness is highlighted

even more. In this way it can become a set role to play which might not those who did not have that aim, and as such it might, at some point, become a burden, as Cat Wildpaw implies. Labels might seem limiting, even one that is founded in the happy-go-lucky atmosphere of “a real Neko is always mischievous and playful.”

The Sexy Neko Discussion, or the Battle between Eastern and Western Neko

A similar battle to avoid labelling and highlighting variation is initiated by Stacia Villota: “If the rumors I'm hearing from the more Asian/Eastern Nekos are true, this grunge style is quite the opposite (and possibly somewhat offensive?) to the way they think of Nekos.” Vita Hoge's response below triggers a more detailed look at Neko-ness and sexuality:

I think the biggest difference between Asian and Western Neko is the latter overtly sexualizes the feline nature while the latter tends to tease the way Japanese fashion often does. West = almost naked and wonton. East = layers, often cute, that tease you with a glimpse.... rather like the nape of the neck of a woman is considered sexy in Japan, hence geisha could wear 7 layers of heavy cloth but the dip of the collar at the back to reveal a make-up enhanced neck drove men crazy. (Hoge)

Hoge's assertion thus highlights the varying ideas and expressions of sensuality and sexiness in different cultures. Judging by their way of dressing, looking sexy — cute or dangerously so — seems indeed to be important to many female Nekos. It is one aspect of the story they construct about themselves in a Neko context. This is common, as one of the male Nekos, Matteo Capezzuto, points out as he describes the difference between male and female Nekos in the following way:

The first time I saw a neko, it was a female, she was standing in a store, and looked uhm interesting (to say the least). The first time a saw a male neko I kinda thought neko was being defined by 'how much shit can a person wear in SL.' [He was wearing] enough to completely cover every inch of his body. And funnily enough the girl was almost naked. Like 90% of the female nekos. (Capezzuto)

To some degree confirming Capezzuto's view, and explaining her choice of a more sexy Neko avatar, Min Doege acknowledges the “sensual element to the Neko - the catgirl as sex toy to some degree, vs. the sensuous sway of Demeter and Electra in the play Cats,” as does Lily Adley: “I have two Neko friends and a Neko twin sister and our styles are all

very different, going from really cute to very grungy, to sultry and sexy.... I guess partly it is the sensuality, the sinuousness, the puuurrrrrrrrrr” (Adley). All of these Nekos seem to agree with Vita Hoge’s view that especially Western female Nekos tend to foreground their sexuality.

Cat Wildpaw, however, reacts against the description of Western Neko-ness as more sexual than its Japanese or Asian counterpart: “My impression of ‘Japanese Neko’ seems bondage linked” and she shows several images of scantily clad animé Nekos as evidence. She describes how her ”first contact with the Japanese concept of ‘catgirl’ came about from stumbling across ‘hentai/yuri’ neko images online.” Having had some experiences with dominant/submissive role-play, Cat Wildpaw continues with a comment that generates an even larger discussion:

I've often noticed with confusion that Japanese Neko imagery is usually of a collared submissive.... The Neko in me finds D/S³⁸ and BDSM³⁹ to be a terrifying concept. Either as a sub or a dom.... To me it is impossible to have care or love in any relationship that has a power dynamic to it — real or pretended. They are completely opposite. For me, care and love are about freedom and independence, not 'managing' or 'giving over control'. For me, that's the heart of my Neko-nature; being a free and independent, yet loving spirit.

The collar Wildpaw refers to is scripted and can convey information about the bearer, or be used by the dominant part to control the movements or actions of the submissive part, which will be further discussed in chapter five. *Second Life* designer Cassandra Bishop provides her own point of view as “collared”:

I've often thought of the collared Neko Community in the same imagery you would see a white tiger lounging by its owner with a diamond collar. For those of our kin who like being “collared” and having their master. I don't know if they see it in the same light, but I do know not all have a combination of the collar plus the bdsm.d/s. Occasionally I wear a collar while roaming the grid with my hubby but it doesn't limit anything, simply tells each other when we are in game and when we log off and contains a few animations. We have discussed at times the added features of the more detailed collar scripts, but he has no desire to have such a "heavy hand" on what I'm doing, seeing or talking to.... I think most would agree it's whatever is in your comfort zone, whatever makes you happy.

³⁸ D/S = dominance/submission

³⁹ BDSM = bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism

Bishop describes herself as “a combination of both western and Japanese versions, [which she] guess[es is] the true spirit of the neko, it just depends on what [her] fancy is at the moment.” Bishop’s main aim is to explain and demystify certain aspects of being collared and she questions the ties Wildpaw has noticed between Nekos and people who prefer to explore BDSM or dominant/submissive lifestyles:

On a personal level I don’t think dominance and submission aspect of the ‘collared lifestyle’ really has a deft connection to the nekos. For some it's just a preference, I think the people who fancy it, would be involved regardless if they had the neko characteristics or not. It's easy to connect the two I guess since a lot of us do run around with collars and for the master/slave community that's what it represents.

Vita Hoge is of a similar opinion and encourages a more nuanced view:

While I agree that there is a connection between the Japanese *cute* and the Western *feral* idea of neko — this is the first time I've EVER heard of the element of dominance and submission associated with neko.

That's not to say that it isn't a scene, which a portion of the population of neko associate with, but it most definitely doesn't apply to all neko. It depends upon the individual (neko or not). Besides, there are many examples in Japanese pop culture of both sub and dominant neko (male and female) so it would not be wise drawing any lines in the sand regarding this subgroup. In other words *cute* does not automatically mean domesticated and self-reliant does not mean it can't be cute.

Thalia Willwerth attempts to chart the reasons for the perceived connection between Japanese Neko, which, as Cat Wildpaw has pointed out, originates in animé and manga, and what is described as a submissive role-playing style. She links the pornographic nature of such images to its intended audience, which, she suggests, primarily is male and subsequently graphically minded. Willwerth suggests that it therefore ought to be irrelevant for today’s Neko culture in *Second Life*: “To get a better view of what a culture’s views of a Neko is, it is better to leave out all sexually suggestive content altogether. Firstly, it is easily misinterpreted, and secondly, such content is NOT LIMITED to Neko; under all likelihood, there is probably similar content for just about anything the human mind can think of.” Stacia Villota agrees and links it to what she sees as the nature of the medium: “At least in my experience, there's no direct (or consistent) connection... and

sub/dom relationships can be interpreted (and carried out) in a variety of ways too. My best SL gf plays allllll kinds of roles... I think it's one of the beauties of SL... that we can explore every facet of our characters, imaginations, and dreams." Willwerth as well as Villota thus attempt to defuse the issue and further an image of Nekos, which does not include sexually suggestive connotations. Instead, Villota posts another explanation, which is underlined by Kageyama's article on Japanese cute, to the difference between the Japanese kawaii phenomena and the seemingly more independent and self-reliant Western version. According to her, there is no wonder that a Japanese audience does not recognise "their" Neko in the "assertive, street-savvy, feral" Neko that is so common in SL." Stacia Villota stresses the mixed origin of the catgirl phenomenon and suggests that the creation of the global and multi-cultural *Second Life* is the main reason why differing ideas of what cat people and Nekos are like clash today:

I think when SL came along, it was as though we all came out of our respective neighborhoods into a big open plaza for the first time, twitching our ears at each other. "Hmm, you have ears and a tail, but you don't act like a Neko from my country," and "Hmm, you have ears and a tail, but you don't look like you'd survive well on the streets of Midian City." SL was kinda like "first contact" for most of us. Just like humans come from different countries, we cat people (with "Neko" being our increasingly globally adopted term), all have different interpretations, clothing, and attitudes. Just like..... cats.

Vita Hoge, who initiated the discussion about "sexy Neko," underlines the dangers involved in generalising and labelling in general, but she also says that this discussion has made her realise "that the term [Neko] itself has taken on a globalized interpretation as well as being regionalized. SL neko to the Western crowd obviously leans heavily on sexuality, which it defines as, assertive, independent and undomesticated." Hoge continues to ponder the cultural differences that can be seen in the perception of "cute:"

What confounds me is that cute/kawaii is automatically tied to the idea of domestic and dependant. The Japanese for all their love of cute are hardly dependant. They just love cute things. You can be standing on a Tokyo subway platform and see the most dashing business man in a crisp suit, or perhaps a fashionable young man out on the town suddenly pull out a cell phone dripping with adorable Hello Kitty cell toggles.... that's the way it is over there. Similar but different. We must not make the mistake of assuming that what we see them do is done for the same reasons or judge it by our cultural experience.

Underlining the make-belief quality of Neko performance as well as the discussion above, Hoge continues: “This group [the *Second Life Nekos forum*] has taught me that in fact — this is not the case for all neko. It was a relief to discover that not all neko prowling around SL are just cat-eared versions of the human bimbos,” and she continues to describe her experiences when attending a Neko event at an SL club, where she “spent a lot of time watching the neko as they popped in. Neko of every almost every kind I might add and it was an epiphany to be in a room FULL of my fellow felines and not one of them was on the make — they were all just busy chatting and dancing up a kitty storm. WHAT a nice surprise :) I learned a lot that dayand it was all good.”

The multi-cultural nature of Nekos and how the Nekos (or cat people) are perceived and perceive themselves thus remains, although the name being used is in Japanese. Adopting new words or using words in a new context is indeed very common, an effect of the constant interaction between people especially in the global context of *Second Life*. The above discussion shows how multifaceted the Neko concept is. Among the Nekos on the *Second Life Nekos forum*, none of these “kitteh” having different ideas of what a Neko is — feral, grunge, kawaii, Western, Eastern, or anything else — have been given the preferential rights of interpretation.

The Difficulty of Herding Nekos

The possibility to “herd” any group of human beings depends on whether the group defines itself as a group or not, and the discussion above indicates that the Nekos might be too diverse to be defined as a coherent group or community. Additionally, several of the Nekos do question the very notion of a Neko community:

From a Neko's perspective on the Neko community in SL, I would say there isn't one. It's more like a commonality - we see other Nekos and notice something in common with them, but there isn't a community per se. Many of us have very different interests.

(Wildpaw)

I agree with Cat about the community feeling in SL as far as Neko's go, there is very little of it. Outside of a few RP sims you don't really see Neko's gathering together.. I know a few people who have tried "Neko clubs" and most have ended up in failure with very low attendance because as someone said, it's hard to herd cats. (Arras)

There really is no such thing as a neko community, kinda like it's rare to see more than a handful of RL domestic cats sharing a space. It's not so much that we don't like the company of our own kind (in fact the opposite is true), but I think, and I can only speak on personal experience here again, that most of us prefer the company of small tight-knit groups of friends, and lots of personal space outside of that tiny group. And this, I think, is precisely why there is no one unified idea of the consummate neko. (Halina)

I'd say [the Neko community is] as vast as the human community; Nekos that share interests will group together, ones that don't share interests will likely find a sort of kinship for being Neko, as for instance an Asian seeing another Asian, but apart from that, Neko are part human, so our communities or niches or groups are as, if not more varied than our non-feline counterparts. (Willwerth)

The individuality and diversity of Nekos can thus be regarded as an established fact and it might be interesting to take note of the tendency to identify with their role as Nekos. The Neko roles are constructed using input from various sources, but in the vast majority of cases the forum members talk about their Neko identity in first person singular. That, in combination with the difference between Eastern and Western notions of Nekos, the different ways of dressing, the varying ideas about what Nekos do, paints a picture of the multi-faceted role of Neko, and gives hints to why sloppy generalisations are taken personally. Moreover, as Halina implies above, in *Second Life* the Nekos do not seek each other out, as other groups of likeminded tend to do, and perhaps that is because they are not perceived as likeminded. Above, Vita Hoge expressed her perception of other Nekos as only interested in clubbing/sex/cuteness/BDSM/grunge, and she can serve as an example of how perceptions can severely limit the possibilities for a Neko community. An "other," an object, is created, which efficiently defines the boundaries for the subject's own personality and individuality, the role as themselves, but this othering does not seem to readily lead to power struggles among the Nekos. They seem to prefer to simply walk away from a fight in the making.

Leadership on the *Second Life Nekos forum*

The interviews show that, to use Nick Couldry's term, synchronous online liveness such as interactive role-play, is not particularly common among the individualistic Nekos. Having said this, it is also important to stress that some of the Nekos do meet regularly inside *Second Life*. They might go shopping together or they might just sit and talk. However, the

popularity of the *Second Life Nekos forum* points to the preference of other venues and other modes of interaction. The asynchronic forum becomes a space in which the Nekos can discuss anything from where to find the best tails and ears to elaborate on various aspect of being a Neko in a playful and noncommittal way. On the forum they might role-play stealing each other's muffins without actually being online at the same time, or they might try to console a sad fellow Neko as the dialogue above shows. The "physical" presence of the 3D *Second Life* medium somehow requires more than these Nekos are inclined to give, but interaction can be lively on the forum. Playful banter is very common. Photos are shared and commented on. The tone is most often light-hearted, but, as indicated above, serious discussions take place as well. As its initiator, Stacia Villota describes the forum and its aim in the following way:

This website is for Neko, catgirls and catboys who exist in the online virtual world called Second Life.... The purpose of this website is to provide a place for Second Life's Neko to find each other, connect, interact, ask curious kitteh questions, blog if we feel like it, post our favorite Neko photos, share Neko tips, events and sales... all in the spirit of having our very own place to call "home."

In this way Stacia Villota takes charge, and her values promoting kindness and gentleness set the scene and tone for interaction on the forum, and the atmosphere there is furthered by her manner of welcoming new members, of initiating, encouraging and summing up discussions, as well as of attempting to build bridges between differing opinions: "I think I tend to set the personality tone there, simply because I started it, I greet each person, and they have usually found this community through my blog, so I'm sort of the default 'head' of the group (though I prefer to stand on the side and let them all play, lol) (Villota, interview)." Villota's efforts seem to be very appreciated. In line with her values, at times she asks questions about aspects of Neko-ness she would like to know more about and finds answers to questions raised both by herself and other people. All this sets an example of what interaction is supposed to look like in the forum context and the fact that communication is asynchronous might indeed be a plus. In this regard Villota's leadership is a make-belief performance.

As the comments above show, it is not self-evident that Stacia Villota has the mandate to become a leader for the Nekos outside the forum just because she is an appreciated leader on the forum. The comments of these Nekos show that they do not consider themselves to be a part of a more defined Neko group, that no coherent Neko

culture or community exists, and that they do not regard the *Second Life Nekos forum* as such a community. These comments can in fact be regarded as examples of performative utterances intended to affect the views of the other forum members to ensure that a more tightly knit community will not become a reality, and as such they are examples of a make-belief strategic, ideological or even political performance. The individualistic Nekos, as Richard Schechner might put it, have no wish to become a part of “a network of expectations and obligations.” Power is distributed, not centred on one particular leader or group of leaders, and the main goal is freedom to be whoever and whatever you want. Nevertheless, the game for power exists just as much in this group as it does in most groups, but it is, since the mandate for an organisation is weak, a power that battles the oppositional forces of collaboration and individualism, and the latter has proven to be the most prominent. As Halina pointed out: “it’s rare to see more than a handful of RL domestic cats sharing a space.” Does the identification with cats, and what cats represent to the vast majority of the community members, lead to a weaker sense of community? Or does the identification primarily function as a shield of their privacy against anyone attempting to claim power, attempting to take on the role as a cat herder? The rules and conventions required for a community to work involve a control that individually minded and freedom-seeking Nekos seem reluctant to give away voluntarily, and in an online world such as *Second Life*, which is ruled by the company that owns it, this might not even be necessary. This might point to yet another reason why the *Second Life Nekos forum* is no more organised or structured than it is: The forum group does not own any joint land in *Second Life*, which would warrant some type of organisation around payment of land ownership fees and would increase their obligations vis-à-vis the Linden Lab. The reason why the forum moved from the Ning network to Spruz was indeed that the latter does not charge for its services, and rather than attempting to organise some sort of collaborate fund-raising event which would cover the costs, Stacia Villota decided to find a new space that would remain free of charge. Indeed, Villota sees the purpose of any collaborative effort in *Second Life* as being shaped by two different mindsets, “we are just being’ versus ‘we have a purpose to attain’,” which would lead to two types of organisations, one that is laid-back and one that is goal-oriented and focused on fulfilling some kind of quantifiable goal. The dual values in online games are underlined by Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace: “It only tells half the story (the economist’s half) to say that virtual currencies are worth real money because we’ve agreed it is so. The other half of the story (the gamer’s half) can be discerned in the fabric of the rich and intricately textured virtual worlds that users, by their very presence there, help create” (69-70). The laid-back feel to the *Second Life Nekos*

forum reflects the latter and might indeed be the reason for the comparatively small amount of bickering on the forum: “well, that could come with time... after all... our ‘creators’ are those silly ‘humans’ in first life you know... Perhaps it's because we are not ‘roleplaying a purpose’. We are simply a community. When there's a purpose, egos can get caught up sometimes.” (Villota, interview). Stacia Villota thus points to the human factor but her comment also makes it evident how reluctant she is to take on a traditional, hierarchical leadership role, and the playful “kittehs” on the forum are equally reluctant to suddenly find themselves in a hierarchical community structure. Enjoying themselves while making their comments, some of the forum members perform a smoothing procedure intended to level out power and striations, to use Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s terminology, and help create the relaxed social reality of the *Second Life Nekos forum*. Additionally, while indicating the relaxed role the forum members would prefer Villota to take on, and playing the smooth, stress-free roles they themselves feel comfortable with, I would argue that the Nekos, by doing this, do create a common culture. In this way they perform their social roles in a make-belief manner.

This is a culture Stacia Villota supports as well, and she is aware of the possible implications of her decisions as a leader. Her experiences as a consultant have led her to draw conclusions about various types of corporate cultures: “I interface with LOTS of different companies.... The personality of a company all starts from the top. Got a paranoid owner? You'll have a paranoid company culture. Got a greedy owner? You'll have the same type of employees. It plays out.” These types of realisations has made her reflect on her own leadership role on the forum: “So maybe there's more to my personality, influencing the ‘evolution’ of this community, than I realize... That makes me feel a bit nervous about my responsibilities” (Villota, interview). Stacia Villota’s leadership style and role is thus shaped by the expectations, values, and wishes of the forum members and her own values and ideas about how to lead. Within the boundaries of the leader she wishes to be and the leader she is allowed to be, Villota takes on the role of a cat herder. She does not portray herself as an expert. She is eager to learn. She seems to have no wish to define the Neko concept herself and her aim seems mainly to be to facilitate a discussion that might create common ground, while at the same time open up for an acceptance of differences. After having followed the discussion in the forum thread, she addresses the entire forum:

I just wanna say to you all, I can't tell you how much I'm loving reading all of this. If nothing else, it's a relief to know I'm not the only one who has been observing, and

pondering, and wondering about all of these thoughts... the more I read, the more I realize we share far more underneath than most “non-nekos” have any idea. I know this may make me sound like a complete dork, but I truly feel a strong, underlying connection to the neko community. It's like I've "found my people" at last, if that makes any sense. And because of this kinship, I'm sooo determined to give something back, to make something for all of us... whether it's my silly resource lists, or just a place like this forum where we feel like we can finally come together... albeit in our own independent cat ways. (Villota)

Stacia Villota’s comment shows her acute awareness and acceptance of the quest for freedom among Nekos, while at the same time accepting the responsibility she has taken on as a forum creator and initiator. The individuals, who have been drawn to Villota’s forum, are very diverse. They primarily shape make-belief roles for themselves that are creative and resourceful in many different areas — be it content creation, role-play, or identity building, while drawing on inspiration from a number of cat and Neko role-models — and this blend has led to a multi-faceted and individualistic community. As will be shown in the upcoming chapters, the *Second Life* Neko community and its forum creator perform their power game in a slightly different manner than they do in the other communities, and the roles they play often seem to merge with their own identities. The line between being a Neko and performing a Neko character is easily crossed, but communication tends to work well despite this, primarily because basic rules of social interaction are upheld.

Chapter Four:

Negotiating the Roles Midian City

Role formation is equally important in the post-apocalyptic role-play sim Midian City. The main aim of Midian City is to provide a stimulating and versatile platform for people who choose to role-play in this type of environment and contribute to the evolving story of Midian. The dark and often violent role-play in Midian City grows out of the story of a former leper colony island and nuclear test site called Midian, which has been almost forgotten by a surrounding world preoccupied with the aftermath of yet another world war. Radiation created a wasteland and the surrounding waters became a “chemical soup of decaying seafood” (*Midian City Rules 1.0*). Slowly being re-colonised by human as well as half-breed characters, Midian has now a population of approximately 4,600 role-playing residents of which a third are returning to role-play on a regular basis. “[F]ar from the gaze of polite society and elected law, a new colony of sorts has arisen, except this time the lepers are of the social kind and the disease is corruption” (*Midian City Rules 1.0*). The role-play is set in the 21st century, in a chaotic and violent future in which nobody is safe and different factions are constantly fighting each other (*Midian City Rules 1.0* and *Midian City Forum*). Although the role-play itself might seem violent and disruptive, the organisation enabling it is not. Midian City, its rules and its leadership are described in detail side by side with role-playing instructions in the welcoming area. This information is intended to ease a newcomer’s way into the community, but also to clarify the boundaries for the role-players and create a common platform for discussions and decisions. The interplay between rules and role-play is thus foregrounded as soon as a visitor arrives to the sim, and it is on this interplay I will focus in this chapter. Role-play itself is structured in this community. There is a clear line between being in character in a make-believe manner and interacting out of character in a sometimes make-belief way, and most of the Midian City role-players seem to be well aware of this distinction and shape their role-play accordingly. Changes in leadership nevertheless triggers discussions

and invokes thoughts about the relationship between the role-players and their roles, as well as the relationship between the role-players and the Midian City leaders, a discussion I will attempt to give a glimpse of here.



The Midian City main street.

The Origin of Midian City

Inspired by the cityscape of *Hard Alley* the Midian City role-play was initiated in early 2006 by *Second Life* builder and designer Baal Zobel (Hazlitt). Jade Steele, who is the owner and facilitator of Midian City, remembers that she had told a “friend how neat it would be if there were a sort of roleplay in SL that was like the movie *Sin City*. *Sin City* had just come out at the time. I hadn't even seen it yet, only the previews, but was fascinated by the dark, gritty, dirty atmosphere portrayed in the previews” and she was thrilled when hearing about Zobel’s vision. “It was going to be a roleplay place and the design he showed me was unlike anything I had ever seen before in SL. It had that dark, gritty, ominous feel ... much like I had hoped I could find in SL” (Steele, interview), an environment that invited mimicry and role-play. When Midian City opened she was there to run one of the factions, but without warning or explanation — only two weeks later — Midian City was completely gone (Steele, interview). The creator Baal Zobel had been

overwhelmed by the enormous interest his creation had generated, since it had “skyrocketed to the top of the Popular Place list” (Steele, interview), and had simply decided to take it down. This is not uncommon, as Daniel Pargman points out in his description of *SvenskMud*; being a creator or “God” in this type of environment also involves being a referee (85) or “magician,” the one who ensures that the players act in a manner that is in line with the general idea. Additionally they have to play the role of “prime mover” (Pargman 85), and sometimes come up with new game ideas or further already existing ones, but the task of administrating this type of environment sometimes also takes its toll. Most of the “Gods” are working many unpaid hours to keep the community and the role-play afloat, and if that does not seem “fun or rewarding ... a magician can leave with but a moment’s notice” (95). When Midian City was about to take off, Jade Steele then offered Baal Zobel a deal in which he would build and she would take care of the managerial aspects, and after a while Zobel accepted: “We built the trust needed and set about making it happen ... and Midian City opened up full island a week before Christmas in 2006” (Steele, interview). Since its start, the leadership in Midian City has grown and now encompasses several levels of administrators, and this I will discuss in further detail below.

Categories of Role-Players

Not everyone is role-playing in Midian City for the same reasons. Midian City sim manager Lourdes Clibon⁴⁰ has noticed different viewpoints and norms among the role-players and she suggests that these norms influence both how they role-play and how they interact within in the Midian City community. She groups them into four categories. The first category consists of “hobby writers,” who only want to have some fun after work, without taking the role-play too seriously. The members of the second group, the “serious role-players,” are their opposite in the sense that they are online “24/7 with no understanding of people ‘not taking care of storylines’ or for being inconsistent.” The “communitarians” belong to a third category mainly interested in meeting real friends and the building of a real community. Clibon comments that these are “most inclined to hit drama due to that thinking and false hope of things being ‘real’,” whereas a fourth group is mainly “in for their ego-boost, plain out to replace things they are lacking in RL.” It might be suggested that categories one and four value the levity of the medium, whereas the other two ascribe more weight to the interactions taking place in Midian City. Looking at

⁴⁰ The avatar names of role-players in Midian City have been exchanged with pseudonyms for the sake of anonymity.

the four categories from a different perspective, it might be concluded that the first and second categories are formalists interested in the different ways to tell a story through role-play, whereas the third and fourth might be described as more culturally or socially inclined, whether it be about furthering a community or engaging in a power struggle.

Though Lourdes Clibon categorises the role-players and not the power structure of the sim, her categorisation resembles Manuel Castells's categories of actors on the Internet, except for the fact that he also includes the techno-meritocrats, the leaders or creators of an environment created by technical means. The leadership in Midian City might show the closest resemblance to his category of techno-meritocrats, but this expanded category can also include the storytellers, those who role-play in accordance with the rules of Midian City, and in Clibon's categorisation they can be exemplified both by the hobby writers and the serious role-players. Midian City does little to highlight any entrepreneurs they might have within their ranks, but Manuel Castells's category of virtual communitarians corresponds very well with the communitarians in Clibon's classification. Castell's fourth and last category, the hackers, shows some similarities to Clibon's disruptive ego-boosters. The hackers attempt to subvert the medium and its rules, an aim similar to that of the griefers in *Second Life*. They might try to boost their ego, as Lourdes Clibon suggest, but they might also prefer a different *SL* or a different Midian City or they might simply do it "for the lulz," for a laugh, or, to cite Mia Consalvo, as a way of making the activity of role-playing more interesting. The above reasons might play a part in the choice of the ego-boosters in Midian City as well. All these different viewpoints might invoke essentialist arguments about what the medium and the online environment "really" is, and the different sides often fight for preferential rights of interpretation. The leaders of a community such as Midian City are forced to decide on and specify the boundaries: "the management has to be constantly aware of who's in for what — some people will always cause drama and problems simply cause they like that stuff.... the main priority is to keep things enjoyable for the majority of people and stay true to the sim theme and concepts" (Clibon).

Rules and Constraints

Midian City has been promoted as a role-play community with its own fictive history which all role-players have to relate to and in which they have to carve out spaces for themselves. In this regard the fantasies of the individual residents have to bow down to the pre-decided theme of the role-play space. Rules in Midian City are not there to "create the possibility of achievement," as Castronova suggests. Instead, and more in line

with Huizinga, they provide both order and enchantment and are intended to govern both the social and the performative interaction. Moreover, in Midian City this framework of rules might not be viewed as constraints, but rather acts like a magnet drawing people interested in the same theme. Every single person from anywhere in the world, sitting by his or her computer, thus has the possibility to engage with a community consisting of people from all over the world within the framework of the fictional history and role-play of Midian City. While interacting inside Midian City there are rules and norms affecting the role-play, however, and following Lawrence Lessig's categorisation of rules regulating online 3D environments, I would like to begin by pointing to some of the effects outside laws and regulations have had on the role-play space. The previously mentioned laws against for instance age play and the call for identity verification and subsequent adult classification has in fact led to the loss of some regular role-players: "[W]hen Midian converted to an 'ADULT' sim, where you needed to be age verified to enter, we lost a few people.... I think Midian lost maybe 7 or 8 regular people, who could not verify" (Goodhart). Identity verification is not the same as age play, however. Identity verification intends to secure that the person behind the avatar is over 18 years of age. Age play refers to the look of the avatar, regardless of the age of the person behind it. In *Second Life* age play has received connotations of child abuse, and to many people, who have avatars that look like children, are viewed with suspicion. Child avatars are not welcome on many other sims, but they are in Midian City, and since this digital city attempts to mirror a real one, it has a fairly large child population. Sim manager Dionne Goodhart stresses the difference between role-playing a child and age play as well as the importance of responsible leadership: "all our child avatars are LONGTIME players and know that" limit. Dionne Goodhart continues: "It is my HIGHEST PRIORITY HERE and any age play is an IMMEDIATE BAN" (caps in the original). The laws of countries such as the USA, where Linden Lab has its base, and the residents' countries of origin, are thus to be reckoned with also in the digital environment of *Second Life*, and these become a part of the norm in the Midian City community. Additionally, spending time in Midian City exposes a visitor to a range of additional social rules and norms, which are more specific to the community, and these norms will be the main focus of my exploration of leadership and community below. As indicated above, the market forces are not particularly visible in the Midian City context, and in the context of this paper it might suffice to say that it influences the role-play community mainly by the fact that Jade Steele, as its owner, with the help of some donations, has to pay the monthly fees for the

sim to the Linden Lab⁴¹. The effects of the architecture and code of the space are slightly more noticeable. Sim manager Scott Suto is responsible for the technical maintenance of Midian City and his job is to: “assist in keeping ‘time’⁴² in the different midian sims, as close to real time as possible, mostly through watching lag on stuff, and advising other admins on decisions which may impact the sim.” Suto is also an adviser on all types of technical issues in Midian City, and he often is to set — and keep — the boundaries as well as facilitate the role-play: “[T]here was an event which was supposed to create a large group of people for some sort of dance... so I had them setup the vendors/booths for the event on both sides of each sim, to spread the population of the event across two sims instead of one.” This simple solution makes it possible for more people to attend, since there is a limit of approximately 40 residents on a sim at the same time, but for this event Suto made it possible for 80 people to attend instead. The maximum limit for avatars present is reached quite often in Midian City’s case, as are other limits: “[T]he technical limitations of SL are already stretched thin here [in Midian], for example of the 15,000 prims⁴³ we are given for the sim, 550 are left, and that is after several cleanup efforts.” Role-playing in Midian City is thus constrained by a large number of factors outside the role-play, factors the residents learn to take for granted and adjust to, since these are non-negotiable and absolute. In other, and most often less absolute, regards it is indeed the residents who decide whether they view the *Second Life* platform as a tool to create and sustain a fantasy, such as Clibon’s “hobby writers” and “serious role-players” are likely to do, or a medium with which to interact and communicate, as the “communitarians” and “ego-boosters”, or both. They make decisions on the levity or weight they ascribe to the medium, i.e. how serious they take interaction both IC and OOC. Additionally, they decide whether they prefer to remain anonymous or open about who they “really” are and where they come from while interacting with other people making decisions on the same issues. All these variables might lead to very different conclusions and subsequently also potential sources for clashes, which both leaders and role-players in Midian City have to address.

⁴¹ The set up fee for a private full sim is USD \$ 1,000.00 and the monthly maintenance is USD \$ 295.00, on which VAT is charged for residents living inside the European Union (Second Life Website).

⁴² If “script time” gets too high (above 22) on the control panels accessible to sim managers, it will lead the sim to start lagging and it will look as if the avatars walk around in sirup: “[I]t can't keep up with everything and so "time" inside the sim will get behind time in reality, and eventually you'll feel a jump as we catch up, which can be you lagging when you walk” (Suto).

⁴³ The number of building blocks, prims or primitives, available on a piece of land varies with its size. A whole sim, such as Midian City, can have up to 15,000.

The Midian City Community

Highlighting its interactive and communitarian character, Jade Steele describes Midian City in the following way: “Midian City is a community within the SL community ... in a similar sense, it’s a fictional city setting where people act out a character IC but also connect (or argue) with one another out of character, or OOC.” Steele thus categorises Midian City as a social arena in which role-play is emphasised as the primary activity. The out of character communitarian or social aspect is valued highly by Danielle Cartelli and Tenille Browy who are both role-playing in Midian City. They point to the friendship that has emerged between them both IC and OOC: [We are r]eally, really close friends, despite the fact that we'll likely never go out for coffee or meet for dinner. We're on other ends of the country (Browy). Their friendship influences their role-play: “I absolutely LOVE my RP with [Tenille], everything we do, even when we fight, because OOCly, I totally trust her and we only have each other's best interests at heart. I think that's a rare thing and something I treasure. And it makes our RP that much better. :) We can throw them [the avatars] into any insane situation and know that we're OK, OOCly” (Cartelli). It is very common to form groups, just as Cartelli and Browy have done, in which the group members have similar role-playing styles and a similar attitude to the role-play, and these groups get together to role-play over and over again creating interactive stories that might go on for several years. “Midian City is a collaborative RP.... While there are dozens upon dozens of smaller individual stories, there is also a collective story being told. More layers“ (Champoux). But the aims and goals of individual as well as collective stories are very diverse and might not suit nor make sense to everyone.

Emotional Investment in the Role-Play

A sign of decreased levity is that many role-players are unwilling to simply let things happen to their avatar, even if it ultimately is “only” a digital character. The emotional investment and identification is often high. Subsequently, to ask for consent to role-play with someone is essential in Midian City and the role-players always have the right to decline. As Catwalker matron (faction leader) Joline Champoux points out, “Midian City is a consent-based system; you don't RP with anyone you don't want to...you typically do seek consent before doing someone major damage, or before damaging a faction HQ.” This is a very important point in the Midian City rules, primarily since unwanted types of role-play can cause “OOO drama” and severely disrupt the community IC as well as OOC. The main reason is that engaging role-play can be draining as well as rewarding, to which several of the residents testify, and since consent primarily is based upon both OOC and

IC knowledge — or lack of knowledge — about how other people role-play this might lead to rather conservative choices about whom to role-play with. Newbie role-players might struggle and sometimes fail to become a part of the Midian community, often because they realise this type of role-play does not suit them, but also because they are sometimes not invited by senior role-players. Other residents might come to Midian City with an idea of it being a fantasy world in which they can act out anything they want without repercussions. Their aim might indeed be to disrupt the role-play or perform actions that are not in accordance with the Midian City rules and, in that case, they would get a warning and might even be banned. The role-players are often protective of what they see as the essence of Midian City. Sim manager Dionne Goodhart gives an example describing their battle against “tech weapons” and she primarily points to the coherence of Midian City story as a reason to ban these weapons: “realistically in a society such as this, you wouldn’t be able to have the most modern, up to date tech stuff... but people kept insisting on it,” but “I tell them SL was never intended to be that, otherwise it would be called ‘SECOND GAME.’ [T]his is for RP which simulates LIFE and I have always fought to keep Midian like that” (Goodhart, caps in the original). The leadership in Midian City thus attempts to safeguard the role-play community by describing the normative role-play and by referring to the established rules and regulations, which are also intended as an aid to role-players who might feel empowered by the rules if they are in a situation when they feel forced to consent to role-play scenarios they do not like. The role-play is given a lot of weight, as we will see even more clearly in the next section.

How to Role-Play

The role-play and the border between being in character and out of character is what I intend to explore next. Of importance here is Richard Schechner’s difference between “doing” and “showing doing,” between the acts that happen without conscious planning and those that are premeditated or “directed.” Echoing his theories of performance and acting as well as Erving Goffman’s ideas about performance in everyday lives I will try to describe the improvisational — “scenes” are often sketched in advance, but open to input from the role-players — and more long-term — the “stories” might go on for months or even years — role-play going on in Midian City. The Midian City role-play can be described as very literary and, as indicated above, freeform in the sense that most interactions are not scripted, but it nevertheless happen on the fly (Goodhart). Interaction is emoted, which means that the role-players are describing what is happening rather than saying things. Dionne Goodhart describes it in the following way:

[I]f I walk up and see you, I would say something like, “noticing a lady she has never seen, approaches her to introduce herself.” I wouldn’t say, “seeing Meja [my own avatar name] walks over to say Hi” as even though I see your name, we have not met.... and never be a mind reader, like I might say noticing the lady, wonders if she is a killer or a nun... also notice since that is a THOUGHT, it is not “like this” but you would not know that as it was a THOUGHT, not a direct question.... [T]houghts are emoted like this: Dionne Goodhart: sees the lady and wonders what her story is. Walks over and says “Hello, I am Dionne Goodhart. What is your name?” [Y]ou can see where the thought is and then the direct question. (Goodhart)



The Midian City skyline.

The role-players are thus not supposed to “meta game,” to use information they might have received from outside the role-play, but to use what information they have in that specific setting. A role-play in Midian City can be described as a collaboratively written story, in which thoughts, dialogue as well as battles are described rather than enacted visually. The goal is not to “win” but to tell, and be a part of, a good story. The role-player behind the avatar Tenille Browy describes her way into Midian City, which was her

first experience with RP. The build caught my attention and drew me in and made me want to play. I started Tenille with a very simple backstory and just plunged in. I kept things as vague as possible at first and tried to mold her to the environment in Midian — [t]he background story ... [and] the characters already in play on the sim.... I found the longer I played her, the more I found out about who she was. Almost like I was learning about her rather than creating her.

Browy's friend, the role-player behind the avatar Danielle Cartelli, has a similar story to tell:

For me, I created Danielle a few months before I ever started RPing. I entered Midian with another friend of mine, and after poking around the city for a bit and finding a niche of sorts, we created a shared history for our two characters and kind of just threw them in. Like Tenille--the fundamentals of Danielle have never changed, but her story was vague and I let the city/characters shape it.

Both Browy and Cartelli describe the leap between “doing” and “showing doing.” In contrast to the people mentioned above, who come in with the aim to disrupt the role-play, Browy and Cartelli take the environment and the role-play seriously and begin by founding out what the framework of Midian City is like, create a fitting background story for their avatars, begin to interact with fellow role-players and are then ready to take part in the performance. As becomes evident from their accounts: even in the “showing doing,” the role-play, there is a certain amount of surprise at how their characters turn out to be, which adds to the playful attitude to, and the feeling of levity in, the role-play. Character formation is a collaborative effort in Midian City. Browy elaborates on this:

Things that happened to her [the character or avatar] shaped her. There are honestly times when I want her to go left and she refuses. I don't know how she'll react to a situation until it happens.... Tenille stared out as a meek, shy, quiet Neko. But as she was beaten around by the city it was either get stronger, meaner and faster or die. And yes, sometimes it comes out situationally and sometimes it comes out when someone asks about your character's childhood. Suddenly you discover something about them you didn't know or even better, something you thought you knew proves to be false.

The long-term role-play that is possible in an environment such as Midian City is fairly unique. Many of the role-players have repeated interactions with each other and Cartelli describes her encounter with a man who raped her character a year and a half ago: "That RP profoundly shaped Danielle's history, and even tonight, in that brief exchange, it was rich and interesting because there was SO much history between them." Danielle Cartelli sees it as a wonderful bonus to be able to continue the stories and interactions over time: "I've been lucky in that so many of the people I've RPed with have stuck around — but I've got two years of really intricate, complicated RP with so many characters, it really is like a living thing, and I think that's why Midian is the draw that it is." Even though the role-play is important, and highly immersive, in both Browy and Cartelli's cases, it can be concluded that the social interaction over time, IC as well as OOC, is the main attraction for them. They can be characterised as communitarians who enjoy the result of the role-play just as much as the role-play itself.

"Biomass reclamation" — Role-Play Chat Log

To give us a glimpse of what role-play can be like, acting Midian City mayor Nell Slaight provides a scene, an example of the role-play she has experienced in Midian City, in which she had taken on the role of an accountant in the administration of the previous mayor, Darin Davie. Silver Coddington is a non-human "Skinwalker" who can shape-shift. In the following somewhat abbreviated scene he is a Midian City park manager:

[11:13]⁴⁴ Silver Coddington's heavy boots *thud* on the carpet as he steps from the elevator and stalks into the office. His featureless helm swings menacingly toward Nell and the vocoder at his throat hisses and pops to life. "THE PARK SERVICE WISHES TO ANNOUNCE A NEW INITIATIVE," it blares.

[11:16] Nell Slaight winces and her coffee cup jumps in her hand at the suddenly blaring sound behind her. "Fuck!" she cringes before she's even turned, and when she does, her eyes widen. Seeing that masked, huge figure before herself she steps back warily. "Park Service?" she asks while she stares. "You're with the.... Park Service? What initiative?"

.....

[11:21] Silver Coddington's helmet swings ponderously up and down.... "THE NEW INITIATIVE WILL BE ANNOUNCED," it intones. "CITIZENS WILL BE ENCOURAGED TO PARTICIPATE."

⁴⁴ The numbers, a timestamp in the chat log, show the time when the entries were written. In this case it becomes visible how long this type of scene takes. One entry might take several minutes to write, and in that time very little usually happens visually that might influence that role-play.

[11:23] Nell Slaight nods in return and somehow manages to set her half-empty coffee cup down on the window sill. "Great. Encouraged. Sure.... I can just take the message now and let him know..." She tries smiling. "Just tell me what it is.. ummm...Manager."

[11:25] Silver Coddington nods again.... "THE PARK SERVICE REQUIRES AN INFLOW OF FIVE THOUSAND CREDITS FOR THE INITIATIVE.... CITIZENS WILL BE ENCOURAGED TO BRING THEIR UNWANTED FETUSES, INFANTS, TODDLERS, AND PRE-TEENS TO THE PARK SERVICE FOR RECLAMATION AND COMPOSTING."

[11:28] Nell Slaight ...just....stares. She stands there for a long, long time with her jaw dropped down....staring. "I see. You propose that the Park begin to take excess ...flow...from the City Morgue? IS that what I am hearing here? Just to be clear? You wish....to fertilize...with decomposing...human...corpses? Just to be clear?"

[11:29] Silver Coddington shakes his head. "THE BIOMASS NEED NOT BE EXPIRED. THE PARK SERVICE HAS EUTHANIZATION TECHNIQUES AVAILABLE."

[11:31] Nell Slaight coughs almost violently. It's fortunate the coffee cup has been set down. "II see.. the Park Service is offering toexpire...any"biomass" that people bring...and to pay a one credit per kilogram fee for the ...opportunity?"

[11:32] Silver Coddington's helmet swings up and down slowly. "THAT IS CORRECT. THE PARK SERVICE WILL ALSO OFFER FERTILIZER AND COMPOST IN LIEU OF CASH SHOULD HELPFUL CITIZENS REQUEST IT."

[11:35] Nell Slaight struggles to control the muscles on her face, failing miserably. She begins to *twitch* as she listens. "Right. Would that be the same ...converted biomass brought for processing? What...if said biomass...objects..to the euthanization or technique?" She flashes what might be a winning smile....

[11:37] Silver Coddington's faceplate remains impassive and featureless. "THERE WILL BE A SENIOR CITIZEN DISCOUNT...." There is a slight pause, as the vocoder hisses and pops. "BIOMASS OFFERING *RESISTANCE* WILL BE TRANQUILIZED BEFORE EUTHANIZATION AND PROCESSING."

[11:41] Nell Slaight can't help it now. She buries her face in both hands, though its unclear if she's stifling a laugh, a scream or weeping. She stands like that for a long while with her hair falling forward and her shoulders tight with quaking. When she finally looks up again she nods.... "Right. Got it. I can't speak for the Mayor's ..um...policy on this new offering. I will have to relay it to him and get back to you."

[11:48] Silver Coddington nods again, slowly. "THERE IS MUCH WORK TO BE DONE. PLANTS AND ANIMALS MUST BE TENDED."

[11:53] Silver Coddington seems to *regard* the woman for a moment before the vocoder hissed and snaps to life once more. "NAMES AND TITLES ARE INCONSEQUENTIAL. WE ARE THE PARK SERVICE." There is a dopplering whine and a burst of static. "...FOR ANY FURTHER COMMUNICATION. CONTACT MANAGER CODDINGTON."

[11:54] Nell Slight grimaces under that blank stare. She just nods quickly when there's a voice once more. "Right. Got it. You'll hear from Mayor Davie *soon* Manager Coddington. Of -that- I am certain. "....

This somewhat surreal, and clearly make-believe, interaction gives a good example of what role-play in Midian City can look like. The time stamps in the chat log reveal that the pace is rather slow and it becomes clear that the performers involved take great pains to create a mood and a setting, which carries the dialogue. Slight's and Coddington's manner of emoting show how emotions and reactions are interwoven with the lines they come up with as the scene progresses, all of this contributing to a more elaborate and nuanced performance. The text might indeed give more information than would have been possible if it had been played out in a "physical" way. I might also reveal that there are no "vocoders" in *Second Life* and its effect in the scene is purely fictional. Similarly, in *SL* breathing cannot be laboured and someone's breath cannot be held or exhaled. This type of information can, on the *Second Life* platform, only be shared in text.

Experimental Role-Play

Some of the role-players attempt to steer the role-play more actively, similar to how Silver Coddington steers the scene above, and in this case the "showing doing" seems more intentional than in the more freeform role-play exemplified above, in order to create different experiences. The role-player behind Rona Pico, a male writer and soldier, created his first avatar, Phil, to understand the framework of Midian City, and after that decided to create an avatar of the opposite gender, Rona:

I reached a standstill in [Phil's] storyline. I wasn't able to develop him any further and it seemed his story had reached its happy ending. It was time to move on to something new and give my creativity something to work with.... I combined that with the fact that I'm a soldier in real life and mixed her past with Phil's.... That's why Rona is a soldier [but] Rona is not me, though I did pour my heart and soul into her. I'm first and foremost a writer. (Pico)

Being both a writer and a role-player, Pico represents another type of resident in Midian City, a resident who takes advantage of the levity of the medium in a slightly different way than more community-minded role-players seem to do. S/he explores and plays with different roles. Following Goffman, the social roles we play, or the different sides of ourselves we choose to display even outside of role-play, differ from one context to another, and it is therefore not strange to see this even more enhanced in role-play environments such as Midian City. Just like Pico, several of the residents have a number of different "alts," alternative avatars, about which the role-players around them might or might not know anything. The role-players' reasons for having alts might vary. Role-playing Neko Erica Woodward: "I have alts that I play that are nothing like I am and it is a challenge. I think I do it because it's a challenge." Woodward agrees that it can be difficult to keep the "real her" away when she does not have a script, but assures that "Erica is easy to play... because she embodies a lot of my own characteristics. When I try to play a different character, I usually spend time before I play contemplating what that person would be doing" (Woodward). In Woodward's case different means planning or "scripting" in order to create a coherent character, which brings us closer to Schechner's "showing doing." Midian City faction leader Vania Canino has a similar take when she role-plays:

I actually have five characters all together, on five different avs. Vania is just my main.... I ... play out different facets of my own personality, and of my creativity. My male alts were a challenge...to see if I could convincingly play a man. And they're much EASIER to play than women. My vampire alt...is just that...so that I can play out darker sides of me...she's also my BDSM character. I have another female who is soft, and gentle and giggly and young and redheaded...sometimes a neko, sometimes not.

Pico, Woodward and Canino thus show examples of more steered role-play, in which the performance itself is highlighted and branded as make-believe, an experimental theatre with few real or make-belief consequences.

Role-players and Their Audience

While, as indicated above, some of these avatars might be created for solely for the pleasure of their owner, it is more common that they are created with the aim to interact with other people. Even the people behind the avatars Rona Pico, Erica Woodward and Vania Canino, who are more interested in the role-play per se, in "showing doing," require

an audience, someone who can “be shown.” Goffman uses the concepts of performers and audience (97) to highlight the performative aspect of interaction and in Midian City the residents are indeed each other’s audience, as well as, in some cases, their own, as they sit by their computers watching their avatar perform in third-person-view on the screen. Goffman distinguishes between having an audience and not having one, exemplified by the nurse in Goffman’s example, who, when she does not have an audience, “relax[es] and devote[s her]self to the technological requirements of action as opposed to the dramaturgical ones” (213). The difference between the two signifies a break, which, in this case, takes the performer from “showing doing” to “doing,” and moves him or her into a more realistic framework in which the work, the completion of a task, is in focus. In Midian City the distinction is made in a slightly different way. In line with the argument above, it might be concluded that there is always an audience when performing in an online world such as *Second Life*, whether this audience consists of one person only or a group of people watching as well as engaging in the performances taking place on the screen. Both the theatrical performance and the interactional performance happen in what Goffman would call the dramaturgical sphere, but in *Second Life* this sphere includes both the performance or to be in character, and the moment when the role-players drop the act and interact out of character. Whereas IC role-play mainly takes place in the main chat⁴⁵ in Midian City, OOC interaction takes place on several arenas. The role-players might interact on the Midian City group chat, via the instant messaging function⁴⁶ with people inside as well as outside of Midian City (but still inside *Second Life*), or via the *Midian City forum* on the Internet discussing the role-play and how it is structured. Despite its OOC content it can be nevertheless be referred to as happening in the Midian City dramaturgical sphere. All of them can simultaneously be performers in a make-believe and make-belief manner — as well as a part of an audience. Huizinga’s magic circle can in this case be applied when distinguishing between IC and OOC interaction, but, whereas Goffman’s dramaturgical sphere includes both of them, the magic circle does not. The leaving of the magic circle in the Midian City role-play might happen due to a role-player having to go from being in character to being out of character, i.e. to leave a scene, to come in and disrupt one, or because a scene has been played to its end, or it might include

⁴⁵ “Main chat” interaction is typed in the box at the bottom of the screen. It is dependent on physical proximity and anything written there reaches everyone within 20 metres. “Shout” reaches 100 metres.

⁴⁶ Group chat reaches everyone in the group regardless of them being in Midian City or anywhere else in *Second Life*. The same is true for instant messaging, but in this case for individual avatars.

a constant flickering between OOC and IC modes, but all of these modes happen inside *Second Life*, be it theatrical or interactional.

Negotiating Being In Character and Out of Character

The difficulty involved in leaving the magic circle too abruptly is highlighted by Danielle Cartelli: “I’ve been in scenes like that before and when they end abruptly for whatever reason you can feel lost.” After what Cartelli and Browy describe as an extremely emotionally draining scene, in which Browy had to bring a child who had been in her care to the parish orphanage, Browy “left at the end to go to another scene and didn’t realize until later that [she]’d left [the person playing the child] totally without a safety net.... it took [them] all a couple of Real Life days to recuperate.” Highlighting the weight of the IC interaction, Tenille Browy moves on to describe another, larger, scene in which a group of avatars was trapped in jail. She describes it as emotionally distressing for those trapped but also for the group of role-players who tried to get them out: “People got testy and sensitive and emotional. Left us with repercussions none of us anticipated that some of our characters still feel today and it was months ago. There was a huge debriefing on the forums after.” Browy thus points to two instances in which the tension between being in character and out of character becomes very strong and needs some working through. In these cases the role-play is not taken lightly. It is serious and clearly has OOC repercussions for the role-players involved. The residents attempt to make sense of what has happened within the role-play in OOC mode, and, as Browy indicates, the OOC chats, as well as the *Midian City Forum*, are important arenas for this. Giovanni Milla highlights the importance of choosing role-playing partners wisely, of selecting someone who has a similar idea of what role-play should be like, but he also points to the gain that can be had from stepping out of the comfort zone to reach some of the goals that makes his role-play interesting for him: “The more emotions you allow to be displayed, and the more personal and immersive your RP is, the more vulnerable you become to those around you in the RP community. But then, I suppose that is what gives not only authenticity, but breathes life and provides the most intrigue about RP. As much as we say we don’t want to be hurt, and want a peaceful existence in life, I suppose life would be boring if one was never hurt, afraid, happy, sad — able to laugh or cry at something.”

The Role-Play and the Community

The performers in *Midian City* are simultaneously its audience, and, as indicated above, this requires the role-players to think about performance in a new way. There are no

specified rules or recommendations on how to navigate OOC and IC, “doing” and “showing doing,” except for the basic Linden Lab appeal to “be nice” and a common sense approach. In most cases the role-players of Midian City seem to realise that by listening and by being the audience they themselves would like to have, they also help create an environment in which they can perform in a way that makes it worthwhile for everyone. Many of the role-players highlight the importance of the collaborative work and how it affects them: “I ... love seeing what my friends create with each other. I feel really lucky to have found such amazingly creative people to write with” (Browy). “I put a lot of emotional investment into my RP which I hope makes for a better experience for everyone [I]f something is intense, or goes in an unexpected direction, or your'e left hanging or something ... it definitely shifts my mood [negatively]. And vice versa, if I had really engaging, fulfilling RP” (Cartelli). Sim manager and faction leader Vania Canino sometimes stops to think of her own contribution to the whole: “[I]f we have a fanTAStic RP ... I think, wow, cool, I helped facilitate that.” Rona Pico ponders what she labels her responsibility as a role-player: “I have a responsibility to my fellow RPer's to do my best for them and the rest of the community. I reach out to new people and teach them what I can. I make them feel welcome. I try to make the experience fun for those around me.” Catwalker matron Joline Champoux is thinking along similar lines: “I'm not sure if there is an actual reward [to be had from leading the Catwalker group in Midian City], beyond RPing with a good group of people and watching that RP develop. I guess I don't look at it as "what am I getting from this," but more "what can I give back to this place that has taught me so much." Paying it forward, to new players who come to the sim.” Dispute manager Jong Riegel points out “the friendships you form [in Midian City], IC and OOC can be very rewarding” but at the same time he points out that his work in Midian City is, for him, “more of a career than a leisure activity.... There are a few of us, who work hard at it, and make it a 'job' of sorts, so the rest of the community can enjoy it as a leisure. The reward is a service to our friends, and a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment at helping one of the most creative communities in SL flourish... Plus, we all love Jade.” Giovanni Milla describes a conversation he has had with faction leader Joline Champoux at one point when he OOCly had become fed up with drama in the Catwalker pride and had left the group without telling anyone about his intentions. Champoux begged him to reconsider and pointed to the impact his leaving would have on his IC wife and kids. As faction leader, Champoux establishes the rule that the role-play has to be protected and coherent and if someone acts rashly in this or similar ways, this has to be covered for in the role-play. To many of the role-players it is thus extremely important to act in a way

that promotes the Midian City role-play as well as its community. The sim administrators, such as Dionne Goodhart and Jong Riegel, see it as their duty to provide a stable and creative platform for role-play, and faction leaders as well as many players do their bit to facilitate this. The stance of Jade Steele, the owner and leader of Midian City, to whom Riegel is referring in appreciative terms at the end of the quotation above, is thus crucial in establishing the aim and profile of the Midian City community that can then sustain the role-play environment.

What is Good Role-Play?

I will give an example in which unclear rules, intended to open up the sim for as many people and playing styles as possible, instead provides the starting point for "OOC drama," in this case an argument about the aims and goals of the role-play community. It also shows the seriousness, the lack of levity, with which the role-players approach the issue. Rona Pico highlights the freedom of the rules of Midian City and links them to the quality of the roleplay:

The rules are not constricting enough to stifle RP. We have enough breathing room. I guess that it's only human nature to want more freedoms though.... Unfortunately, if we don't have people to rein us back in...we'll end up hanging ourselves. I've been to free rein RP's and the quality of RP is a crapshoot at best. At least in Midian, the quality RP is usually easier to find.

Pico thus distinguishes between "quality RP" and that which is not. But what is good role-play? In the interviews I have made with people role-playing in Midian City I have noticed two distinct role-playing styles: storytellers and game-players. Giovanni Milla, who in his description of role-play represents the typical role-playing storyteller, explains his views:

From my standpoint, there really isn't that much of a thought to winning or losing, as there is towards 'What is my goal in the RP?' If I can reach that goal, then I suppose that is a 'win', but, even then, there's the question of 'Now what?' So, to keep things from being stagnant, a person is always looking for new goals and other ways to play a role that has little to do with completing a quest, but more to do with filling a role.

This way of role-playing stands in opposition to the more goal-oriented role-play often

favoured by game-players with a background in first person shooter games (FPSs) or games in which players are supposed to “level up.” The finality of an FPS-like win leaves the emoting role-players with a ‘Now what?’ and a difficulty to seamlessly continue the role-play, and the leadership as well as many of the role-players in Midian City clearly favour the storytelling approach, which is also what the Midian City Role-Play Academy teaches. It is the norm. Nevertheless, the rules also state: “Sometimes emoted combat [the storytelling role-play] isn’t practical or desirable” and then the game-player version — combat or action-oriented roleplay — of playing is allowed. But, as the rule continues: “Combat is intended to facilitate good roleplay NOT replace it. Those that come here merely to randomly shoot without being a citizen or a part of any official city group ... WILL BE EJECTED combat isn't for everyone” (*Midian — Rules 3.01*). This type of role-play is thus allowed, but heavily restricted. Midian City might not be the perfect place for combat-oriented game-players, but there are nevertheless quite a few of them who come there and depending on people’s wish to compromise about their own idea of the perfect role-play they might also fit in. As sim administrator Dionne Goodhart describes it above: Midian City “is for RP which simulates LIFE.” Danielle Cartelli appears accepting when discussing the different role-playing styles: “I think there's room for all sorts of RP styles.... Those of us who prefer writing-intensive RP tend to gravitate toward one another, and those who prefer more action, less emoting find each other, too!” Browy expresses a similar stance, but hints at the potential problems as well: “Yeah, I think it's our greatest strength and biggest weakness. There's a lot of diversity in Midian. A lot of different styles and visions.” Murray Lazotte illuminates what the differences between role-playing storytellers and game-players who want to win might lead to if the players are not mature enough to handle the differences:

A game player wins so that others lose. A storyteller can lose, but still win, because they have an interesting story to tell. A game player might accept losing, because playing the game is a reward in and of itself. And know that he has the opportunity to win later. Good sportsmanship. A storyteller will accept losing for the same reason I just gave. But likewise, both archetypes often can break down. If a game player decides to win at all costs, or isn't a good sport, then he can create a competitiveness that isn't productive to the community. Likewise, if a storyteller tries to exert too much control on his environment in order to further his own story, he'll get a significant backlash, and won't be able to tell the story he wants, or, worse, become a pariah, and lose the ability to participate in the story-telling process.... It's a case of people not wanting to compromise.

In both cases, both for game players, and for storytellers, the best results come from active collaboration. The drama cycle, I think, is a result of people failing to collaborate.

(Lazotte, interview)

The conflict sketched above is a common one and it ultimately has its origin in boundaries and rules that are difficult to maintain. It also has to do with the player's view of the environment. Some of the residents highlight the levity of the role-play situation, whereas others take it more seriously. Storytelling role-players seem to focus on the collaborative storytelling that might be the result of quality RP, whereas game-players seem to prefer instantaneously gratifying wins. All of this can be a part of a performance, but perhaps not necessarily the same one. Managing a sim such as Midian City involves setting boundaries, deciding on what kind of environment this should be, and negotiating these various views.

Leadership in Midian City

In a role-play environment such as Midian City facilitating the performance is of utmost importance, and this is being done by the Midian City leaders. Restricted as well as enabled by design and policy decisions made by Linden Lab (the government) by various offline laws and regulations Midian City owner Jade Steele has made her vision of a dark and engaging community in which people are welcome to join in and contribute a digital reality. She describes her leadership philosophy in the following way:

[T]he single most important factor I have found in making [Midian City] and the club [she owned prior to that] successful ... It's involvement and a sense of ownership ... that people feel it truly belongs to them. And I mean seriously, not in some manipulative sense, but that they have a voice, that they have a say ... that the community belongs to them.... I set that tone from day one ... I made it clear that I do not want to be some sort of dictator. And I have stated over and over that Midian City belongs to everyone who actively contributes there.... I realized that the more people can take ownership and pride in something, the more they will want to be involved.... I just make sure we keep to the initial vision, while allowing room for things to grow and evolve.

Avoiding anything that might indicate rigid hierarchy, Jade Steele does not like being referred to as the “owner” of Midian City, but she does indeed own the four Midian City sims — Midian City, Apocalypse, Quinttukhat, and Leviathon. Until recently she has

personally had the final say on any issue that arises on these four sims, ICly as well as OOCly. She does occasionally make use of her power as owner as well. In May 2008 she set her foot down on the *Midian City forum* and threatened to ban people from the forums or even shut the forums down:

Seriously people ... this forum drama needs to stop. Do you want the forums to be a resource for the roleplay or a place for ego stroking, bickering and fighting? Decide now which it is, because if it's the lat[t]er I have no trouble shutting them down.... I don't have time to babysit the forums, having to do so only take[s] away from the many things I have to work on in world. So if I have to, I will start banning people from the forums. I don't care who you are, the faction you may lead or ideas you put forth, if you are causing drama in the forums or berating others then you are not needed here.

Giving everyone seven days to respond in order to be able to post on the forum in the future, 145 residents affirmed their intention to behave nicely. Courtney Montgomery elaborated a bit more: "It is a shame that it had to come to such drastic measures. I am glad, something is being done. Thank you Jade. There are many of us who appreciate your stance on this matter." Slightly shorter, but equally appreciative: "Seriously needed. And aye aye, cap'n!" (Vernon Mendez). In general Jade Steele seems to be well thought of. Nevertheless, with more than 4,600 residents in the Midian City group (Midian City group profile), Steele has found it increasingly difficult to keep up, and a new leadership structure was set up in the autumn of 2009. In a notecard sent out on January 31, 2010, she lists the reasons for this change:

With RL [real life] and the huge growth of Midian City, I (Jade) have personally reached the point where I can no longer effectively oversee every single detail of the sim. In a nutshell, if Midian City is to continue, I must delegate the tasks and get others more involved by filtering out many of the individual requests or disputes that are sent directly to me. Second, to reduce confusion in how sim management works. Third, to help with some of the problems of admin abuse/impartiality in the past by establishing better delegation of duties and accountability.

In the new structure faction leaders (FL) are continuing as the different factions' representatives in the sim management. Game moderators (GM) will continue to help keep the sim griefer free and assist players while making sure that rules are followed.

“GM's have the ability to temporarily remove a player from the sim if they are disruptive” (Steele, notecard). Dispute moderators (DM) are a smaller group chosen from the GMs “paneled to discuss and resolve disputes between GMs and players. DMs as a group have the ability to to impose longer sanctions on players if needed.” (Steele, notecard). The biggest change is on the highest level: SMs or Sim Managers,

are a smaller group which oversee the sim and if needed, enforce DM decisions on dispute resolutions. They retain Estate Manager roles and are responsible for technical related issues to the sims. As a group will review issues brought to them by the DM team and if needed make a final resolution on any potential issue. This group includes the sim owner and decisions made here are final. Their word as a group counts equal to that of the sim owner. (Steele, notecard)

In general this new leadership structure highlights collaboration and joint decisions. Steele aims to

[t]o spread out more of the responsibilities, to have some, like Dionne Goodhart, who get the vision who can make decisions etc. That is the biggest goal ... the second is to avoid past complaints of admin impartiality or abuse. In doing so ... we are striving to get people (the admins) to work more together as a group, rather than a sort of lone ranger. So that decisions made are for best of the sim and everyone involved. I have broken up the structure and have encouraged them to work together as a group — Again a community within the community, but with the overall Midian City community in mind.... So we will see how that goes. More growing pains, but I think it is the best course of action.

Steele thus highlights the need for accountability and a more transparent delegation of duties, and considers the collaboration on various levels as the way to achieve this. In something that can best be described as a constitution, Steele outlines the election processes for each capacity. Faction leaders are elected by each faction, which has “different processes to determine leadership” (Steele, notecard). Game managers are selected among the faction leaders and approved by the sim manager team, but not all game managers are faction leaders. Dispute moderators “will be originally selected by the SM team and will eventually move to a election system within the GMs themselves” (Steele, notecard). Sim managers, on the other hand, will be handpicked by Jade Steele, who has noticed that “leadership can and will set the tone for everything to follow. That is

why I do my best to pick good leaders ... level headed, responsible and drama free people” intended to secure the role-play space. Ultimately the leadership structure in Midian City is hierarchical, but the aim to have transparent decision-making processes and the expressed goal of its owner sets it apart from many of the other communities in *Second Life*: “Set up your authoritarian city and have fun with your small handful of followers, if you wish. I want no part of that. It's not about me at all. I don't want to be in the limelight at all. I prefer to be in the background. In fact, much like before, when I'm not running sim things, I'm usually hiding on an alt” (Steele). Jade Steele thus takes her role as leader of the community very seriously, does not wish to be a dictator and this is spelled out both in the “laws” and in the norms of Midian City. Leading Midian City can almost be described as a job for her.

Clashing Utopias in Midian City

This becomes evident in a discussion on the *Midian City Forum* initiated by Giovanni Milla, which deals with how people perceive Steele’s rule of Midian City. Role-player Murray Lazotte comments that the “rules as they are written are loose enough that you can follow them to the letter, and still have a great breadth of freedom to do more or less what you want.” Darrell Perry nuances the image of Jade Steele’s leadership slightly and elaborates on her role as the owner of Midian City:

I do get what you [Giovanni Milla] said elsewhere on the board, that Midian belongs to all of us because we all had a hand in creating her ongoing story. Jade herself has said that on more than one occasion, that the game belongs to all of us. But the sim is hers, the idea is hers, she foots the bill (minus donations) for this vast, merry playground we have. I do feel free to disagree with her, and I have in the past (with all due respect), but at the end of the day, I abide by her decisions, and so far she's yet to come up with anything that makes me want to pack my bags and head for other RP. When people drag out "Jade's sim, Jade's rules," it's more of a capper than anything else. Feel free to debate, but at the end of the day, Jade's word is law. World without end, amen.

Darrell Perry has since then left Midian City, which I will get back to below, but at first I will turn to one of Midian City’s more outspoken dissidents, who highlights an ongoing conflict of interests, which seems to play out the different stages of Victor Turner’s social drama. Long-time resident J.C. Mellott attempts to describe the stance of the protesters: “I think, in all honesty the 'Jade's Sim, Jade's rules' quote is used when people aren't happy

about something, or feel out of the loop, rather than as a justification. It's like a shrug, acknowledging that they cannot change things, or perceive that they cannot." Mellott expresses his feelings of being an outsider: "I feel any contribution I could make is lost, as I am not part of the inner circle, nor really part of any of the cliques. It is when this gets to me I might say 'Jade's Sim, Jade's Rules'." Despite his disappointment in this regard, Mellott nevertheless points out what he considers to be the strength of Midian City: "The thing that sets Midian apart is the players, who are attracted by what Jade's done, and each other. It is these players and the stories they make, the jobs they do and the like that create Midian and make it special."

In an interview J.C. Mellott elaborates on the views expressed in the forum thread and describes how Midian City, in his view, initially was a "chase and capture sim" full of references to the movie *Blade Runner*. "Midian was a place for the imaginative pervert." Mellott has since then seen the Midian City role-play moving in the direction of the mainstream and towards more control, or from *paidia* (free play) to *ludus* (structured or rule-based play), which has resulted in "core players that progressed [Midian] from that start into a proper roleplay sim" are being driven away, thus indicating that the levity previously characterising both Midian City and *Second Life* has given way to a more controlled environment. Furthermore, he claims that "Midian has almost totally collapsed recently, huge exodus, major discontent, traffic numbers down" and blames this on the choices of Jade Steele and a few of the new sim administrators, for instance the decision to pursue a sim wide storyline "without consultation." Additionally, Mellott makes accusations of nepotism, since Jade Steele allegedly is "promoting and listening to her good friends, and rumoured partners, to the exclusion of all else" and he argues that this "approach, the exclusivity, and the incapability of senior admins rubbed players and junior admins up the wrong way, who questioned why they put in effort to roleplay and develop the sim when the only roleplay that matters is those of a select bunch, seeking to shape sim storylines, and the only people who matter are those that are friends with the owner." Another issue he points to concerns censorship. The "critical threads [on the *Midian City forum*] by people who wanted change were getting closed down by 'Jadeite' admins." In summary, in J.C. Mellott's opinion the Midian City role-play, as well as the community, is brought in a direction much different from what he would have wished to see. Well aware that his comments might sound exaggerated, and thus acknowledging the notion of the levity of the medium but also the emotional attachment that lends more weight, Mellott comments: "All this sounds very dramatic, especially since the city is fictional, but often the friends we had OOC were real, and the effort we put into our hobby was real, and the

lack of respect for that effort and those people is what really had the effect.... for some people [role-playing in Midian City] represents the chance to be something you aren't in real life, and if you impact on someone's fantasy, often they get more upset than if you impact on their real life." Deleuze and Guattari's nomadic and smooth space has often been constructed as an opposition vis-à-vis the controlled and striated, but in reality it is not. There is a sliding transition between the two, since there is always something smooth in a striated space and vice versa, and this smoothness, which can be found in between the framework of rules in Midian City, allows the role-players to infuse the role-play on their sims with their own fantasies and aims. However, when the rules of the game are altered, especially when it becomes more structured or striated, there will always be some people realising that the community is evolving in what they believe is the wrong direction, away from their ideal version of Midian City. In these cases, the role-players might play a game of make-belief, rather than one of make-believe, to influence matters in the direction of their choice — their utopia.

Negotiating Leadership

The importance of a clear vision and clear rules, as well as the articulation of these, has been brought to the forefront by Jade Steele's decision to restructure the administrative organisation. In stark contrast to J.C. Mellott's account above, Lourdes Clibon describes the background to the decision from her point of view as a sim manager: "The way everything was done in the past was a fairly lax form of 'let people do things with utmost freedom' — eventually it led to more and more issues and problems piling up, as everybody has their own viewpoint on 'how things should be' — and added the 'anonymity' of internet on top of that." On a personal level, Clibon has experienced a burnout from being a faction leader and she is currently on a break in which she is only contributing OOC to the Midian City community by trying to "review and re-analyze [and try] to figure out a way how to make things easier and avoid the burnout for future players/admins/faction leaders" and by dealing with issues as a sim manager. For her "the core issue always had been inconsistency," since "many things were never written out... [and] it was very much based on 'keep it balanced and reasonable' so main problems occurred in the player base due to not being quite clear about rules ... — until they eventually ran into somebody who disagreed and were told it's a no go." Clibon appreciates the difficulty inherent in keeping coherence when a single owner such as Jade Steele has to manage an entire role-play community on her own, however, and hopes that

the recent change will improve matters. While arguing for the necessity of the change, Clibon also describes the difficulties implementing it:

we tried to implement rules v2.0 a year back when Leviathon opened, it turned out in a major headache as we worked on the wordings for nearly 5 months ... and it was bashed back and forth by the ... faction leaders, since if they don't enforce things in their factions, no rules would ever be accepted/known by the wide base.

Clibon describes how issues of power, democracy and transparent decision-making processes came to the forefront, while different interests and factions clashed with each other and “high controversy rules were weapon rules, technology and biomech rules.” She contends that the overarching story of Midian City became almost irrelevant in these discussions, and explains that this is something the current sim manager group is attempting to remedy.

Power in Action

Although striations seem to be imposed on the previously smooth space of Midian City, there are still venues for discussions both inside *Second Life* and outside of it. While J.C. Mellott mentions possible censorship on the *Midian City forum*, there are nevertheless ongoing discussions such as the “Jade’s sim. Jade’s rules” thread mentioned above. To what extent unwanted comments are moderated is another issue. Initially the *Midian City Forum* was intended for meta discussions about the role-play, but, as Lourdes Clibon admits, in some cases it has unfortunately become what she labels an “extended war ground” which often is moderated, but Median City residents

DO use the forum as a means of get different opinions, and whenever we make rules, we read respective discussions in the forum thoroughly — but I believe many people are delusive about their importance. [The role-players] seem to think the forum is a democracy that ensures their voice is heard. Which it is not. We filter of course too, and it doesn't matter what one person says, but more the trend and inner core of an issue.... obviously, you can't jump instantly when somebody says PEEP. Let them discuss, see how it flows, how many people think it needs clarification, who are the people who take active part in the discussion and how reasonable are the arguments. Obviously, somebody who is only bashing for the sake of saying something is not taken as serious as some body who

tries to be constructive. So anything that is constructive is usually heard and at least picked up on or replied to. (Clibon, caps in the original)

Residents such as J.C. Mellott try to use the forums as a smooth space in which they attempt to change or influence policymaking. However, Clibon's comment above points out that the *Midian City Forum*, as well as Midian City itself, are not democracies in which people have an inherent right, protected by law, to be heard, which brings up the question of ethics on the part of the leaders since the power balance easily can become very skewed. The Midian City sim is, just like *Second Life*, owned and regulated by someone, in this case Jade Steele. As the owner, she might decide to create an organisation with democratic elections and laws that protect free speech, but this is not what she has done. She has taken measures to secure her vision of Midian City as an interesting and inviting role-play space, provided forums in which to discuss, and declared her intention to have transparent decision-making processes, but she has not promised to act on behalf of any voters or lobbyists. Ultimately it is up to her and any of the sim managers to decide who are to be allowed to play in Midian City and who to throw out. The courses on how to role-play are simultaneously a way to socialise new role-players into the Midian City community. These aspects are not foregrounded on the sim, however, but if a resident behaves badly the dispute and sim managers of Midian City always have the possibility to ban him or her. Dionne Goodhart describes what she does if residents she labels macho players "get abusive to a[nother] player, I warn them, and if they keep it up, I ban them and file abuse reports with SL" (Goodhart). Jade Steele states that she does not like to have more rules than necessary, but, as the discussion above shows, the striations are there even though they are invisible most of the time. Simultaneously, as Steele has indicated above, it is important for anyone in a decision-making position not to get trapped in ego-games. Power is to be handled wisely and good governance is one of her aims. Clibon comments: "I think you have to be realistic about a lot of things in order to do it good. Plus, you have to acknowledge the fact that you are an absolute nobody ... to anybody who arrives in the sim new. Most people who truly stand out do so because of a long-time fairness and reasonable actions." With a laugh, she acknowledges "to me all the time in Midian has been an important lesson... it's like hands-on-training of management skills" which is similar to Steele's learning curve when taking on the task of leading Midian City:

One of my BIGGEST problems and failure in running the place is delegation. I am learning more and more to do that — that it is a must with the size it has become.

Delegating also is a part of my initial vision really ... me not wanting to hold all the reins and dictate everything. But at the same time, when something is 'your baby' you don't want to just throw it out there, unattended or in the wrong hands.... It's tough when you do have a standard you wish to keep, but get hundreds of people with ideas of their own ... It's a balance, I suppose.... You wish for them to take initiative, but within the established framework. The balance of keeping it and open community, of the people, allowing for growth, but while sticking with the standards helped it to become great to begin with. And I do emphasize "help" when I speak of the standards helping to make it great, because in the end, it is the people who make it what it is and make it great.

In *Second Life*, both Clibon and Steele thus hone their organisational and managerial skills as they work for Midian City in a manner that is very far from the perceived levity of the medium, the playfulness and carefree idea of what *Second Life* and the Midian City role-play ought to be like. But both Clibon and Steele are role-playing as they are performing the role of leaders. They are indeed communitarians like Browy and Cartelli who are performing while nurturing and enjoying their friendship. Instead of focusing on the friendship between a few individuals, Clibon and Steele and the rest of the residents in managerial positions in Midian City are focusing on the performance of a community and how to lead the community in the best possible way, a role-play that over time takes them further and further away from the lightness and levity ascribed to both *Second Life* and Midian City. They have taken on roles that can be criticised and debated even more than the question of the best type of role-play, since even more people have ideas about what a good leader ought to be like.

"Are People Having Fun?"

Despite the efforts of the Jade Steele and the sim managers to balance the scales and even if role-players stay and fill the gaps left by the previous faction leaders, dispute managers and sim managers, J.C. Mellott is correct in his claim that quite a few key persons have left Midian City recently. One of them is, as I mentioned above, Darrell Perry. When asked more generally about why people leave communities such as Midian City his response is: "I'd say often it's simple boredom. Tastes change, people move on to do different things, explore different interests — much as they do in RL with changes in hobbies, etc. Sometimes the 'drama' of online communities can be what does it though. I'd say it varies." He does invoke arguments related to democratic ideals, without referring specifically to Midian City, and he acknowledges that politics "have their place in any

kind of RP community. Someone has to be steering the ship. I think drama enters into the situation when the admin structure is used as a platform for furthering admin agendas (NOT sim agendas) at the expense of other players, or when the goal of the admins of an online community isn't clearly defined." He thus highlights the fact that this type of online environment and community are, ultimately through design decisions made by the Linden Lab, structured like companies with a vice president. Someone is and has to be in charge. Perry describes a good leader in the following manner:

[He or she is] more than a figurehead. A good admin needs to be there. Every day, if possible. That's not to say that they need to be there 24/7, and for the times they can't be, they need to have a good support structure.... But the moderators are the advisors. They're there to help the leader stay informed about the role-play in the sim, to offer input on changes and sim-wide decisions — but at the end of the day, the deciding vote should always be the head honcho, the person in charge. And that means that making decisions can't wait weeks and months for a solution.

Hence, Darrell Perry implicitly admits to having limited faith in the current sim manager group structure in Midian City. What he stresses more clearly, however, is what he sees as the most important question for leaders of communities in *Second Life*: "are people having fun?" He continues: "You can tell when the complaints are the same old temper tantrums, and when they're issues being raised by level-headed people, and when the latter stop having fun, it's time to pay attention. And think through a solution." Again, the call for wise leadership is being heard.

Game moderator Cleopatra discusses leadership from a slightly different angle. The challenge, as she sees it, has to do not only with setting boundaries but maintaining them as well:

[W]e have been brought up and conditioned to be fair to a fault. As opposed to earlier years, we are very accepting of all viewpoints. We will bend over backwards to avoid being considered 'closed-minded', and the thought of being considered judgmental is abhorrent to us.... If I realize that I've come to a point ... where I have completely lost patience and respect for someone, rather than acting firmly and decisively my tendency is to withdraw myself and let someone less personally invested make the decision. I think that is fair, but in some ways a weakness.

She is aware of the negative remarks sim administrators usually receive on community forums, but does not recognise herself in their descriptions of “elitist pricks” whose aim is to exclude anyone who does not think along the same lines as themselves, “in fact we are for the most part the exact opposite”. She describes herself and her fellow admins as “very fair and very much bending over backwards to serve as many viewpoints and styles as possible, to accommodate as many people as we can” but she also thinks of this as their core problem:

I am coming more and more to the opinion that it will never improve if we don't collectively change that to a certain extent. We need to realize that this is not a public forum, protected by all the rights of free speech that a public square would be in the US. Just as the Midian sims are not public LL areas that each and every SL user has a right to visit and play in.

Cleopatra thus advocates the right to say “no” but acknowledges that she is not in the habit of saying that. Setting and maintaining boundaries does not come easy to her. Fearing to be seen as a self-serving dictator she has given away her power to limit actions that benefit only an abusing minority: “As a group, we are so conscientious of not becoming that we have lost a lot of the power that we actually have. I wonder if it's time to change that... before things get even worse than they are.” She is not comfortable having this power, but begins to realise the importance of managing it. Both Darrell Perry and Cleopatra thus formulate their expectations on leadership roles, their ideals and the challenges leadership roles bring. With this as a backdrop, they measure the performance of the leadership in Midian City.

Rules and Roles in Midian City

The levity often attributed to online environments such as *Second Life* in general, and role-play arenas such as Midian City in particular, is fluctuating. Some aspect of Midian City role-play is clearly make-believe, and other aspects are make-belief. Whereas the performative aspects of being in character often involve a certain playful distance, it becomes clear that the OOC, or make-believe, interaction often does not. The discussions on the forum as well as among the leaders of Midian City give examples of the power game being played out among people emotionally and socially invested in maintaining the good role-play environment. It is this investment that makes them care deeply about the outcome and effects of policy decisions and how these decisions are taken. It is this

investment by the role-players in Midian City that grants its leaders the power to decide what kind of environment it ought to be, but it is also the foundation for any criticism they might have. As the owner of Midian City, Jade Steele sets the tone. She decides what kind of leadership Midian City should have. She decides whether the rule should be democratic or not, whether the environment should be reality or fiction based, and to what extent the role-players should have a say in any matter, in short: she performs the role as leader. It is a role with a certain type of script, and, as seen above, she has sketched how the role ought to be played out by her, which is similar to how the role-players sketch the characters of their choice. The rules governing this space are decided upon, upheld and enforced by Steele. The recent organisational change brings a new challenge: the team of sim administrators Steele has selected are supposed to perform in line with her leadership ideal. At the best of their abilities, they are to act out the roles Steele has cut out for them. The role of leader can be contested, as J.C. Mellott does. Darrell Perry sketches a different type of leader, one he thinks is necessary in order to perform in the best interest of the community. Both of them are sceptic towards the newly formed group of sim managers. They question the idea of a group being close-knit enough to act the part in a coherent and uniform way. Their critique is a part of the discussion of the script regulating OOC matters and leadership performance in Midian City. Cleopatra is not alone in experiencing fear of being regarded as a dictator, and therefore the aim, leadership, and framework of Midian City sometimes have been perceived as unclear. In general administrators are reluctant to govern or use power openly, except when the transgressions are obvious and apparent to everyone, but is changing with the new leadership structure.

While role-player Rona Pico cherishes what s/he perceives as the freedom of the Midian City rules, this is mainly because the current type of role-play fits her/him. If it evolved into something Pico would not be as happy with, in line with that which J.C. Mellott has experienced, s/he might decide that it is time to leave, just like some of the other role-players have decided to do. This is one of the ways in which it is possible to see the boundaries of the Midian City role-play environment and the link between the rules, the “laws,” of a digital space and that which happens in it — and the result it brings. These rules can be thought of as the boundaries of a magic circle, enabling and facilitating the role-play as well as attempting to restrict OOC drama. But the magic circle is porous, the discussions about the essence of the medium, the rules and the code, and how to play in the “correct way” constantly continues. As a community and playground, Midian City has a strong identity. Its literary and elaborate emoting role-play is fairly well known and

people are drawn to Midian because of that. The rules safeguarding this type of role-play, and giving its group of leaders an idea of the aims and goals of the community and role-play, are simultaneously there to distinguish this particular community from other role-play communities and by articulating these rules coherence and a group identity can be created. There are similar — but often unarticulated — rules for OOC interaction, and this is what often causes the OOC drama. There seems to be a basic idea that power corrupts and that hierarchy is something inherently bad, but it might be suggested that the recent upheavals in Midian City seem to be due to a lack of clarity rather than too many rules. To “be nice” and act in a “fair manner” does not necessarily mean to “withdraw” and “let someone less personally invested make the decision,” as Cleopatra has discovered, and this is a type of learning curve has been described by many of the Midian City leaders. They are learning how to play the part and their performance becomes a part of their leadership identity. The leaders of Midian City, with Jade Steele at the forefront, are indeed performers, and their performance as leaders is perhaps evaluated even more than their role-play. Their audience, as well as their reviewers, consist of the role-playing members of the Midian City community.

Chapter Five:

Second Life Gor from the Outside

Just as it is in Midian City, the negotiation between being in character and acting out of character takes centre stage in *Second Life Gor*. The matter is handled in a slightly different way, however, as will be explored in this chapter. The role-play, especially the often sexually charged hierarchical performance involving masters and slaves, often balances on the boundary between IC and OOC. Whereas the rules in Midian City focus on how roles are to be constructed and played out, the rules in Gor primarily outline societal structures and modes of behaviour which have their origin in the author John Norman's *Chronicles of Gor*⁴⁷, "a series of science fiction books set on Gor, an imaginary planet sharing Earth's orbit but, because it is always on the other side of the Sun, invisible to human observers" (*John Norman's Chronicles of Gor - FAQ*). Notecards given to visitors upon arrival at a Gorean sim relay an impression of non-negotiable striations with regard to interaction and role-play, and few arenas seem to exist in which to discuss and question the quite strict rules and roles of *Second Life Gor*. The more general type of discussion, primarily concerning the relationship of the role-player to the role, is therefore moved outside of *Second Life Gor* onto the Internet, by many regarded as a more "real" arena for discussion than *Second Life*, with its apparent levity, might be. This view is supported by many Goreans in *Second Life* who simply use the exit argument and suggest that people ought to teleport away or log out if the Gorean way of role-playing does not suit them. Some people have experienced negative consequences of that role-play, however, and in the studying of the role-play in *Second Life Gor* the distinction between online and offline, IC and OOC, as well as make-believe and make-belief are put to the test. The way of dealing with this in *Second Life Gor* is underlined further by the aspects of dark play, primarily the incorporation of some BDSM and domination/submission practices, in

⁴⁷ John Norman's novels are described as multifaceted universe, a "counter earth" with its own language, philosophy and history (*World of Gor*).

which the categorisation between fantasy and reality is crucial. One such practice is the use of a "safeword" to stop unwanted role-play developments. This practice does exist in *Second Life Gor*, but is not always adhered to, and there are examples of how an authoritarian ideological base render protests or expressions of unease futile. The role-play in *Second Life Gor* is thus characterised by its focus on power, and, since especially sexual power struggles are often viewed as controversial and are met with resistance among mainstream *Second Life* residents, the community has also to some degree withdrawn from mainstream *Second Life*.

My choice of method and sources reflect this. Other researchers have met with some resistance when trying to do research in *Second Life Gor*. As John Carter McKnight attempts to initiate an anthropologic study, he discovers that his intention to enter *Second Life Gor* both as a female slave and as a male scribe or scholar is met with resistance from his Gorean contact:

But what really brought me to a halt was his opinion that I conceal my identities as an RL male and as a researcher, due to profound prejudices against genderbenders and researchers among the SL-Gor community. He suggested that I might not learn anything, and face great hostility, were I to make those "metropolitan" identities known in the "frontier" community of SL-Gor.

Discussions I have had with other ethnographers or anthropologists have confirmed this and they have hinted at censorship in terms of what is acceptable to study from within the context of Gor. Additionally, since my study of the Gorean community was initiated before I began applying ethnographic methods, the vast majority of my material consists of texts written for other purposes than my study. Textual analysis might even be regarded as the most appropriate given the literary origin of Gor and the preoccupation with texts evident in their community. My aim is to elucidate how the Gorean role-play in *Second Life* might alter the perceptions of make-believe and make-belief performances by following the debate as it plays out on forums, in blogs and two *The Alphaville Herald* article series and in their comments. I will, however, begin by attempting to describe the foundation of the Gorean community and the character of the role-play.

What is Gor?

When trying to define what a Gorean is in a forum discussion, a Gorean who calls himself "Vagabond" borrows the following definition from Wikipedia:

As applied to non-fictional individuals, the word "Gorean" means an adherent of the philosophies espoused in Norman's writings, especially someone who lives a lifestyle based on this philosophy. While the most conspicuous Gorean departure from mainstream modern norms is that Goreans allow and indeed promote sexual master-slave relationships, many who take the Gorean worldview seriously would insist that being Gorean is not necessarily about either sex or slavery, but about the general Gorean philosophy (and so one would not have to participate in a master-slave lifestyle or relationship in order to be Gorean). Some of this philosophy is concerned with "natural order" and the relations between men and women, which may or may not take the form of a master-and-slave dynamic. Where there is a master-slave relationship, the level at which adherents follow the books varies.

The *Wikipedia* quote gives a description of the Gorean structures and power relationships, the "natural order," which can be summarised in the following way: a) any master or free person is to be obeyed by any slave he or she might come across, and b) men rule over women. "[M]embers of a community share a set of values; these values are embodied in rituals, social interactions, and artifacts" as Shaowen and Jeffrey Bardzell (2007:3) conclude when they discuss the Gorean community. The idea of Gor draws many people for different reasons, some of which are sexual, but Shaowen and Jeffrey Bardzell have noticed "that participants view virtual BDSM not as a sexual practice, but rather as a full-blown aesthetic, and that its sexual practices are a part of that aesthetic" (2007:3). The domination/submission power hierarchies, and the sexual tension they often bring, are brought to the forefront as important aspects for the majority of Gorean role-players, but, basing my claim on what I read in and about John Norman's *The Chronicles of Gor*, I would instead highlight the negotiation of power as the ultimate core of the Gorean role-play and lifestyle, which is underlined by the "philosophy of Gor." Perhaps because of the perceived levity of the medium, the fantasies invoked in Gor — primarily the hierarchical power relations between masters and slaves, and men and women — seem to be more accepted in an online environment such as *Second Life* than they otherwise would be, and I agree with the Bardzells' belief that "metaverses such as *Second Life* provide new interfaces to a classic, if taboo, aesthetic."

The Philosophy of Gor

Raddick Szymborska, a male Gorean master, explains the essence of Gorean game-play as he sees it: "Gorean roleplay is harsh. This is a feature, not a bug. I come to Gor to roleplay

like Ghengis Khan, not Miss Manners.” Szyborska’s comment highlights the dominant and violent aspect of Gorean role-play, an aspect that is inscribed in the Gorean canon, the literary source of the role-play in *Second Life*, John Norman’s *Chronicles of Gor*. A widely spread summary and interpretation of Norman’s work entitled “What Is the Philosophy of Gor?” was written by the signature _Marcus_ of Ar in 1996. Seemingly not written for role-play per se, he sets out to define the “basic tenets upon which Gorean philosophy is based” in any environment:

1) Be WHAT you are ... [E]ach thing which exists possesses its own unique singularity. When a thing attempts to be something it is not, problems arise. A man is a man; a woman is a woman.... each person is required to understand his or her basic nature, and to abide by it.... it is assumed that there are needs, desires and activities which are specifically masculine, and those which are specifically feminine.

2) Be WHO you are.... [A] person is free to alter or raise his or her caste on the basis of ability, though it is rarely done, since most Goreans value their familial caste as a badge of their clan identity. But the above principle also applies in regard to freedom and slavery.... each person is born with a desire for freedom, and an innate slave nature. A person's proper place in society is dependant upon how these two factors are balanced within the personality of that particular Gorean....

3) Obey the Natural Order of things.... If a creature is naturally genetically equipped to fulfill a specific function in relation to another, then it is considered fitting and proper that such a creature be allowed to do so, even when such natural predisposition might result in stratification. In regards to human beings, it is understood that stronger, more intelligent, and more ambitious human beings will naturally assume a higher social strata in regards to their interaction with the less strong, less intelligent, and less ambitious. In regard to male/female sexual relations, it is therefore the right of the male, who is genetically predisposed for physical dominance, to control the physical aspects of his relationship to the female. In return, he is expected to behave as the hunter/provider, seeing to the protection of the female to insure the propagation of the race. Females, meanwhile, who tend to be smaller and less physically powerful, are expected to respect the biological truths of their lesser physical stature, while making the most of their genetic predisposition to serve and aid the male, and utilizing their superior emotional empathy and long-term endurance to do so while surviving and advancing the species....

4) Advancement of the Strong... simply refers to the common Gorean belief that strength, whether it is physical strength, mental strength, or strength of will, should be celebrated and set forth as an example. In this way the Gorean feels he advances the human race, adding to its chances for survival and continued existence.

5) Diminishment of the Causes of Weakness... In order that the human species may grow stronger, it is necessary that the weaker and lesser adaptive elements of Gorean society be carefully controlled and encouraged to grow in strength and adaptability. Anti-social elements are to be excised from society...

6) Do what you will... every Gorean is expected to strive within the limits of his or her existence to achieve self-fulfillment and lasting happiness.... each Gorean is expected to strive and achieve something for the collective Gorean society, and struggle to attain perfection within the structure of that society. To the Gorean mind, there are always possibilities for advancement no matter what the situation.

7) Responsibility for One's Actions... basic "cause and effect." It is through the practice of this principle that the rest of the tenets listed above make sense, and function. This is the belief that everyone, no matter how great or humble, chooses the course of his or her destiny. When a warrior draws his sword, he can expect to suffer the consequences. When a Gorean submits to the bonds of slavery, he or she is expected to acknowledge and accept what occurs afterward. In such a way every choice made by every single Gorean is inextricably bound together with the choices of his or her fellow Goreans in a great interlinking web of cause and effect, a massive net of fate which moves the race forward into the future like an unstoppable juggernaut. Do whatever you want to, but expect it to [a]ffect you, either for good or ill. You are responsible for yourself.... If you screw up, take your medicine, deal with the situation and move on to the next thing.... this, in effect, is the explanation for Gorean "cruelty." Goreans are not cruel, they are practical.... Whatever the case, deal with it. Life is not fair, and most Goreans are far to[o] practical to try to make it so. Life sucks. If you get hit on the head, don't waste time crying about it... accept it and next time wear a helmet.

8) Stratification by Natural Process.... Anyone who is stronger will naturally assume a position of dominance, be it mental or physical, over those weaker or less willing to match themselves in human dominance struggles. Therefore, it is categorically incorrect to assign

presumed dominance or blanket superiority over anyone, or any one grouping, within the human condition, since these matters tend to be somewhat situational. (emphasis in the original)

Marcus of Ar concludes that a “Gorean must look within himself for the strength to contain his emotions, so that he may see with objectivity what is needed and required to bolster the Gorean philosophies and maintain his honor through positive action.”

Discussing the Tenets of Gor

On the *Gorean Palaces forum* the person behind the pseudonym Argos of Fortress of Saphronicus is of the same opinion as _Marcus_ of Ar:

To be dominant a man must be confident of his own capabilities. He must be aware of his surroundings. He must have the full courage of his convictions and stand up for them. He must be respectful, but not easily manipulated by others or his own emotions. He must be honest in thought and action to himself and to those around him. He must be an active learner: someone that is not worried about what he doesn't know, or making a mistake because of it, but someone who takes on the unknown with an open mind to learning and the confidence that he can reach the other end.

He initiates a forum discussion about _Marcus_ of Ar's tenets of Gor inviting other men to participate and share ideas. On the whole the forum members seem to agree with Ar's summary of Gorean values:

I believe that Gor is unique and that men are called to be true men as women are called to be women and well all call “bullshit” to the politically correct world we live in. Men and women are not equal. Men and women are not the same. Rejoice in the differences and don't try to be a woman if you're a man, and don't try to be a man if you're a woman. The role reversals will ruin your potential. Therefore it is incumbent on the men of Gor, the honorable men of Gor [whether they belong to a home or not, whether they have a slave or not, whether they have a free companion or not] to lead with respect, honesty and actions that are worthy of setting the example for others to follow proudly. (Argos of Fortress of Saphronicus)

The signature Thandar responds with a list of his own, given to him by his mentor in *Second Life Gor*. As a master in *Second Life*, he describes how he “even in real life” honours the following vows on how Masters are to behave:

- 1) Honor... in all.
- 2) Dominance... Of Himself and those who depend on His command.
- 3) Consistency... With His dealings with Free persons and slaves.
- 4) Strength... Not to be swayed from His principles.
- 5) Self Assured... Not dependent on others for approval.
- 6) Curiosity... To delve into the individual.
- 7) Wisdom... To understand what curiosity has discovered.
- 8) Maturity... To understand but not misuse the power of his Mastery.
- 9) Sensitivity... To have interest in and to listen keenly for the concerns ... of his slaves.
- 10) Compassion... To hear the true feelings of His slaves, to deal fairly with issues raised, within the confines of His principles and command.
- 11) Accountability... To accept the responsibilities for the actions of His slaves, and himself. To accept responsibilities for the safety, and security of His slaves, and to deal honorably with any issues that arise for either concern.
- 12) Courage... To stand up for principles, and honor, and courage to stand and admit a mistake when he recognizes one has been made.
- 13) Advocate... For the endurance and prosperity of Gorean culture.
- 14) Ally... Standing shoulder to shoulder with other advocates of Gor.
- 15) Mentor... To others who have need of His example.

As a fellow forum member, Tor Pharos, whom we will return to, indicates as he “[r]emoves hood and bows slowly continuing eye contact; Brother very apt and to the point granite true.” He thus signals his approval of Thandar’s input in the somewhat archaic language and manner of *Second Life Gor*. The men discussing on this thread thus seem to accept the norms and rules summarized above, and viewing this interaction as a discussion among peers, masters on the same or similar level, they take pains to be civil and nice to each other. When Thandar displays a more rigid attitude to the text than the rest of them, the tone of the discussion changes, however:

Ever since I decided to decipher this [Ar’s tenets] in My own terminology, I have searched the books over and not once have I found the mention of the "7 Tenets of Gor" Therefore

I see this as more misinterpretation, silver tongued, onlinised, bosk dung. Something to mislead, brainwash and fill peoples ears with things that are NOT in the books of Gor. Pretty words and ideals, but not in the books and has nothing to do with the books in anyway shape or form. These so called 7 tenets of Gor are no less than rewriting the books in your own words. A slap in John Norman's face.

Thandar seems to regard John Norman's *Chronicles of Gor* as a law or a sacred piece of writing, which is supposed to be followed to the letter. Argos of Fortress of Saphronicus, who agrees to not having seen these tenets expressed in the books, nevertheless points to anyone's possibilities as well as tendencies to extrapolate, interpret, and assimilate, without making the meaning any less true. Thandar returns to the thread and continues to argue his standpoint: "To state it like it is book based is misleading and falsified. Like I said before. Nothing more than another onlinism. Well written yes, well thought out yes, but NOT in the books" (emphasis in the original). However, not even _Marcus_ of Ar labels his tenets as more than his own interpretation — "Of course, that's just an opinion. I could be wrong." — and Thandar acknowledges this while still maintaining his view of Ar's interpretation as somewhat heretical, which almost gives the impression of religious strife or a battle of egos. In the heat of the discussion, the wisdom and objectivity both _Marcus_ of Ar and Argos of Fortress of Saphronicus hope for as an ideal among all Goreans might prove difficult to achieve. In fact, Argos of Fortress of Saphronicus responds in a manner that fuels the debate: "Is there a reason you keep on keeping on and looking for sensational, drama filled, and antagonistic situations? When things ... reach a moment of tranquility you go on the attack." The battle of words continues as Thandar counters "Oh so now I am drama filled for pointing out the truth?" and he continues by discrediting the author of the tenets, _Marcus_ of Ar, while at the same time implicitly accusing the rest of them of being gullible:

Okay Argos so you would rather post interpretations rather than the truth? By the way did you know that Marcus of Ar and His group use to *on purpose* post things not book related just to see who would fall for it? silksandsteel.com [the website used by _Marcus_ of Ar] use to do it all the time. It was a running joke with them to see just how far some would take it and who had actually read the books. That is "Truth." (emphasis in the original)

This heated interaction continues until the signature Vagabond attempts to pour oil on the waves: "In order to have this discussion, some sort of common ground, definitions and

positions must be obtained. I think at the very heart of this discussion is... What is a Gorean?" The Wikipedia entry, which Vagabond refers to and quoted earlier in this chapter, highlights the very core of the Gorean philosophy, the dominant-submissive master/slave relationship. Vagabond moves on to both confirm and refute some of Thander's claims. He ends his forum post with a long quotation from John Norman, which ends, "So let the Gorean experiment continue," indicating that Norman himself did not view his writing as written in stone, but rather as something that ought to be developed and expanded upon, and Vagabond comments:

[T]he tenets, in the books or not, are as much a part of the evolution of Gor as anything else that Goreans as a group espouse.... Like any other philosophy and principle, not everyone will agree with or endorse the tenets. That makes their existence or relativity no less valid or real. Much like patriotism in our country or any other, there is nothing written to dictate its existence or content, but that does not make it any less a part of our culture and way of life. Gor is about the freedom of finding who you are, not the oppression of becoming what others would have you be. As Goreans, let us each discover ourselves, embrace what we find and allow others to do the same.

This discussion among the Gorean masters shows the serious attitude with which they approach Gor, and in this they stand united. However, the discussion also highlights how different ways of reading *The Chronicles of Gor*, and different practices, can lead to different views on the role-play in *Second Life*, and perhaps even of life in general. It might be worth noting that nothing in the discussion above clarifies whether they view what they do within in Gor as role-play. Nothing indicates that they are performing in character, or are aware of any distance that role-play might bring, as they write their comments⁴⁸. Moreover, there are no indications of an outside, "real" world-view that would stand in opposition to the philosophy and norms of Gor. In fact, Thandar's comment points to the opposite as he admits to the alterations living by these norms and rules have made to his own life. Furthermore, Argos of Fortress of Saphronicus does not seem to be ironic when he refers to mainstream society as a "politically correct world" to which true Goreans ought to call "bullshit." He talks about roles, but not in a make-believe manner signalling their inauthenticity. He appears authentic and credible, he performs his role in a manner that resembles Richard Schechner's description of

⁴⁸ The only exception is Raddick Szymborska's remark at the beginning of this section, but Szymborska is not taking part in the forum discussion about Marcus of Ar's tenets above.

performative actions as a means to influence other participants. He is constructing his identity. The social roles constructed by the Gorean masters seem to be intended to safeguard the advantages they would wish to have, that might not be given to them voluntarily in a “normal” setting outside of Gor, particularly with regard to gender roles. That is primarily what the Gorean philosophy helps to achieve among these sometimes self-proclaimed Gorean masters.

As a bonus, while creating these roles, these masters function as each other’s audience. They correct and reinforce in equal measure. They set out to reassure each other in their roles as dominant males. Their performance can therefore be described as a make-belief one, intended to create and sustain the image, credibility and authenticity of themselves as well as the Gorean community, and as such these masters become the means to create and sustain the Gorean “reality.” They play the game of preferential rights of interpretation, the game of power.

Gorean Contexts

Gorean communities exist in many different types of contexts, non-digital as well as digital. Tor Pharos lists several of the digital Gorean contexts of which he has been a part: “I traveled here through the billboards of the early '90s, then Geo-cities, IRC, IRQ, then yahoo, Palace, Kingdoms, the SIMS and lastly SL where I find many minds that are firmly embedded in Gorean Philosophy and many more that play.” *Second Life* has indeed proved to be a popular environment for Goreans ever since it was developed, and the community is one of the largest on this online platform. According to the *Gorean Meter Support Portal* statistics, recent figures show that 11,126 people, of which 39.6% are men and 60.2% are women, have taken part in the role-play in the last two weeks⁴⁹, which might indicate its scale. The Gorean sims are famous for their fantastic houses, well-built towns and beautiful outdoor environments and they draw people who are interested in role-playing in an exotic and sensual environment filled with adventure and fantasy. The role-play at Gorean Port of Minus is foregrounded by new Gorean physician Shyla Timeless, who recounts her reaction when she discovered and fell in love with the Gorean role-play as she landed in the middle of a slave auction:

Once dockside, I muddled about with my Observer tag and did just that. I observed.

Standing around, listening, watching different characters interact and communicate with

⁴⁹ Checked on October 7, 2010. Combat in Gorean regions in *Second Life* uses the Gorean Meter to keep track of for instance binds, captures and kills. The *Gorean Meter Support Portal* also shows statistics of the number of women, men, animals, and “unknown” individuals using the meter.

one another ... it was refreshing and I was hooked. What compelled me most was the quality of the dialog. Gone were the ridiculous one liners that were all too common elsewhere. No more half-human cats sniffing their butts and no more weirdoes stuck in some goofy dance they were unable to shake from another sim. Sure, the content was raw, brash and at times severe but I knew going in that things were different and that there was good reason for it. The superbly written masterpieces were coming alive right before me ... moving living and breathing creatures taking the story line to new levels. This was Gor!



Gorean City of Vonda.

Role-players in Gor describe the role-play as engaging in a manner that resembles the descriptions of role-play at Midian City, but its scale and its structure is different. Whereas the Midian City role-play takes place on four adjacent sims owned by one single owner, the Gorean role-play is spread out over approximately 300 sims (Au) owned by many sim owners. As a result, having knowledge of one Gorean sim might not automatically give you an advantage, since the role-play on the independently functioning Gorean communities might differ significantly, as Shaowen Bardzell and William Odorn attest: “[A]ll of the many Gorean communities in Second Life emphasize different interpretations of the novels and articulate different emphases for their communities.” The role-play can

thus be very diverse, and the rules may vary depending on the goals and preferences on an even more local level, since every master often has his or her own preferences.

Gorean Customs and Rules

Just as in Midian City, visitors are required to learn about the local rules of a Gorean sim before entering, but whereas the rules in Midian City primarily focus on ways to role-play, the rules in Gor, as indicated above, not only outlines the ways to capture, how to fight, and how the Gorean Meter functions, it might also give details about the accepted dress code and ways of acting. The fact that the Gorean community is very stratified becomes obvious in most notecards. A caste system outlines the roles in the community, and the role-players select from these castes or are selected to play a specific role within the Gorean societal structure. The billboard in the Ar region in *Second Life* lists merchants, artisans, cloth workers, woodsmen, entertainers, administrators (in peace as well as war), scribes, builders, physicians, and warriors, all of which have their own particular characteristics. Bardzell and Odorn have noticed that the administrators in the "Ithaca"⁵⁰ community they studied were "situated at the pinnacle of its social hierarchy, representing the most powerful and influential members in the community. During public events, administrators are typically separated from the rest of the members, seated in elaborately designed chairs facing the central stage. At the same event, free members and slaves are seated on the ground." The advantages of role-playing a higher caste are evident. Somewhat lower on the social scale, but still one of the more respected castes, are the scribes. In *Second Life Gor*, women and men who like studying and writing are often invited to become members of the caste of scribes. They are to be dressed in blue and take on the duty of delving into the *Chronicles of Gor* as historians and record keepers, or of functioning as accountants, teachers, and scribes of law (*The Library of Gorean Knowledge*). Not listed as a caste in Ar is of course also the large group of slaves, that seems to have become one of the most significant aspects of the image of *Second Life Gor* as viewed from the outside. John Norman was influenced by several "Earth cultures" when he decided on the dress codes and the customs of each Gorean region in his novels. These distinctions have carried over to *Second Life*: "The people of Ar would look similar to ancient Romans. The Taharians would look like Beduins, the Torvaldslander like Vikings and so on" (Sirnah). Although differing slightly between the regions, a typical free man wears a simple pair of trousers and a tunic. However, the higher up he climbs in the hierarchy, the more elaborate becomes his dress. The typical free woman wears a long dress and her face

⁵⁰ Shaowen Bardzell and William Odorn anonymised the name of the sim.

is to be covered by a veil. The slaves of both genders wear far less clothing: silks for the female slaves and perhaps a loincloth for the males. All of this has its basis in John Norman's *Gorean Chronicles*. A feature specific to *Second Life Gor* is that visitors are often asked to wear the appropriate clothes, which might be offered for free at the entrance, but this is not always the case, as the notecard given to visitors upon arrival to the legendary Gorean sim Port Cos⁵¹ shows:

Any that wear the Observer Title may dress as they wish, however, they must be in human avatar. Furrries, robots, tinies, or anything non-human is not allowed here even with titler. We have no issue with your avatar or how you wish to play, but it is not part of this theme. Only one (1) species on Gor is allowed to be played in Port Cos— Humans. Anything else will be exiled. Port Cos is a mature SIM, therefore child avatars are not allowed.



Free Gorean clothes in the Ar region.

Human adult form is the only shape allowed on most Gorean sims in *Second Life*, as the profile pictures show when examining one of the Gorean groups, the “Slave’s [sic] of

⁵¹ The Port Cos notecard was given to me in August 2007 and unfortunately the sim does not exist anymore. It was known as a beautiful and lively sim.

Gor.”⁵² A study I performed on the group in 2007 shows that almost all the group members follow the Gorean dress code — and since the majority of the group members role-play as slaves this means that they wear silks⁵³ — and that they are in human form (Bäcke). They are also primarily beautiful — and white — as also Shaowen Bardzell points out when drawing on her findings in a study of members in BDSM groups:

A unique set of avatar attributes emerges from the coding of BDSM resident self- portraits, presenting a picture of residents’ collective consciousness about the self and what constitutes “beauty” and “normality” in the community. The body types depicted in the BDSM group members’ self-portraits are overwhelmingly slender and desirable. Added to that are notions of desirability embedded in race and fashion: 87% of the avatars are white, 2% are of color, 9% are non-human, 66% of the avatars are female and 59% of the photographs depict avatars with long, luxuriously flowing hair.

The Role of the Slaves of Gor

Worth noting is the group charter of the Slave’s [sic!] of Gor, the purpose of the group as stated in the group profile, which is to create a “way for all slaves of Gor to talk and learn and help one another in a world of Men.” This reveals a certain feeling of vulnerability among the slaves of Gor, and highlights the need to discuss the inequalities of the Gorean community among peers. Most avatar profiles in the Slave’s of Gor group are written in a submissive style, however, and the following is a typical example:

Captured and Collared⁵⁴ by Master SirCalis Drake 02.03.07. Restricted White Silk Kajira. this girl is not to receive IM's, notes, gifts, or friendships without her Master's permission. this girl may be punished by any Free if she is found displeasing, any harm depleting her value, compensation will be expected.

⁵² The “Slave’s of Gor” group has 219 members and their group charter can be found through the Second Life search engine (accessed Aug 24, 2007). 206 of the residents have chosen female avatars; there are only thirteen male ones in the group. As many as 174 of the 219 residents have created profiles perfectly in line with the Gorean role-model. 126 of them are members of more than five Gorean-related groups, and in general they seem to be dedicated to Gorean ideals.

⁵³ Silks usually refer to a very short, often transparent dress or a tiny bikini-like outfit.

⁵⁴ The “collar” is a tight necklace, which resembles a dog or cat collar. In the Goran case it both symbolizes and enables the master’s control of his slave. On sims where the capturing and force collaring of a slave is allowed, a SL resident who walks around in a usually female avatar can be collared — made a slave — against her will.

A similar Gorean rhetoric and comparable ideas are displayed in numerous other profiles and the theme of domination/submission returns over and over again, only interrupted by minor adjustments due to personal preferences or dislikes. Almost all profiles are written in character, as a part of the Gorean role-play, and very little disturbs the image of the soft and pliable slave.

The rhetoric is explained by Estrella Canadeo, a former Gorean but still a submissive in *Second Life* and a law student offline, who identifies the mechanisms behind the Gorean role-play: it draws women (or men) who have the need of being submissive, and men (or women) who have the need to dominate. Canadeo continues:

There are stories of [rebellion] happening within the books Norman writes, but it's usually brief as the girl quickly realizes that her only true happiness is when on her knees, and so there's no reason to struggle. SL Gor follows accordingly. Kajirae⁵⁵ are not usually feisty, they follow their Master's orders, quite happily, and those who do not frequently are frowned upon. ... There's nothing wrong with this, in fact I discovered that almost all Masters within Gor truly enjoyed the easiness and acceptance of a girl's submission. And why not? Men, Masters, come to Gor in order to be in control, to be surrounded by the type of women that Norman describes who are very aware of their need to serve. And they've come to the right place, SL Gor very accurately tries to make that point to kajirae. If all the women within Gor constantly challenged this control, it would simply contradict itself, and the attraction that most have to Gor would be lost.

Judging from Canadeo's description above and from the similarities between the profile descriptions, there definitely seem to be a strong Gorean canon to adhere to, a canon the majority of *Second Life* Goreans seems happy to follow. In fact, as Shaowen and Jeffrey Bardzell attest, "the simulation of Gor changes little: there is a caste system, in which there are Masters, Mistresses, and slaves, and there will never be a revolution that frees these slaves and sets up a representative government, which treats all citizens as equal, and enacts laws that ensures all labor is compensated. " The Gorean canon is intended to not only render negotiations about power superfluous, but in fact make them almost impossible, leaving little or no room for the negotiation of power and control, which reflects the overarching idea of Gor. In fact, in the aim to further enhance that power and control, enthusiasts have even custom-built a *Second Life* viewer for hardcore Goreans, the *Restrained Life Viewer*, which can take away the possibility for the slave to dress, stand,

⁵⁵ A kajira is a type of Gorean slave.

and send instant messages to other people (Holyoke). In this manner, the negotiation of power between slaves and masters becomes almost non-existent. After having spent enough time in *Second Life Gor* to learn its customs, Sparrowhawk Perhaps points to what she sees as the only possible mode of expression for a slave wishing to influence her master:

[R]ather than fight I would have created dances to express my feelings. The Gorean dance tradition is the one tool the kajira has to take initiative to express feelings openly to her Master without an invitation. You must understand that the Gorean Master for the most part has little interest in his kajiras, shall we say, inconvenient feelings. This idea is very much at odds with mainstream cultures idea that people create relationships by expressing their feelings and ideas. The Gorean Master simply does not see the world this way, and he is just not interested in what you have to say unless it is pleasing or obedient.

This description is in line with the philosophy of Gor as discussed above.

The Gorean Lifestylers

Another very important group of Goreans — the lifestylers or “true Goreans” — live out the Gorean philosophy in both their online and offline relationships. In many ways these stand in opposition to the role-players, who primarily view the Gorean role-play as an enticing fantasy. The dichotomy posed by these two categories of Goreans might illustrate the difficulty to draw the line between fantasy and reality on a more general level in *Second Life Gor*. Tor Pharos, who was mentioned above, is a scribe of Gor and ACA of Saphronicus. He is not only active as a Gorean in *Second Life* but also a lifestyler. The following quote gives a glimpse of the environment and mindset of a lifestyler, as Tor Pharos describes how impressed he was when watching a Gorean master and his slave girl at the New York BDSM club where he worked. Most of all he was in awe by the master’s treatment of his slave:

In a world of if and maybe, he declared that he worked with absolutes. Called his girl she came after begging to release her leash. He then had her open her mouth, stick out her tongue and crushed out his cigarette on it then commanded her to stool and she knelt on all fours and he placed his heavy black Doc. Martin’s on her back. I was enthralled. His control on her was as he said “absolute”. (Tor Pharos)

Tor Pharos describes how this interaction prompted him to make contact with the master, in the most courteous and polite manner he could manage, and inspired him to learn more about Gor. Tor Pharos continues to describe how this master, whom he regards as a prototypical and true Gorean, was persuaded to initiate him — in a rather violent manner — into Gorean customs and norms. Gor thus represents both a lifestyle and a role-play. It is up to the leaders/masters on each sim in *Second Life Gor* to decide whether to primarily appeal to lifestylers or to role-players, as well as to decide what rules and norms to implement, but the philosophy of Gor is the foundation for it all.

Dominance, Submission, and Subversion

The role of the slave in Gor seems to involve sustaining and legitimising the hierarchy between him-/herself and his/her master. On her blog,⁵⁶ Estrella Canadeo describes an interaction with her master when she has been shopping for animals in *Second Life* without her master's knowledge, a situation which shows her fear of disciplinary actions and her wish to be seen as a "good girl" by him. Her guarded behaviour while waiting for his reaction, as well as her joy when he approves of her actions, underscores the ideas seen above: "When he returned I lead him around the land, pointing out each animal and waiting nervously for his approval. It was surprising, how my life in SL had unconsciously affected my behaviors. ...I was feeling I had taken too much of a liberty. Needless to say I was relieved to hear 'This is amazing Essie! You've made the place so much more alive.'" Canadeo thus notices how her role-play as a submissive in *Second Life* affects her way of thinking both offline and online. She is surprised by her own need for approval, and how her behaviour and subconscious wishes have been altered. Canadeo feels that she is a bad slave when her wishes are not as submissive as they are supposed to be from a Gorean point of view. The next dialogue, which is taken from the blog, gives indications of some of the strategies her master uses to maintain control over her:

My Master: Well, for the most part, I'm following what you stated when you told me how you like being dominated

Estrella Canadeo: I know

Estrella Canadeo: and I'm glad...

My Master: It's my role to push at your boundaries, Essie

My Master: You might sometimes get angry with me for doing so.

⁵⁶ Estrella Canadeo's blog has since the time of writing become password protected.

My Master: I'm prepared for your anger, and I think it's natural. Submission is a trait that needs nurture.

Estrella Canadeo: I don't like being angry at you, you're so kind to me.

My Master: But when you had to deal with the consequences, you felt anger

My Master: Right?

Estrella Canadeo: yeah

My Master: Of course you did. In your real life you're a capable independent woman. Men don't push you about.

My Master: That doesn't have to change in you. The difference is that I'm not "men", I'm your Master. And I'm not pushing you about, I'm exerting control that you've willingly offered me.

My Master: So, feeling angry is natural. But looking past it, and processing that deeper message is where submission, and the acceptance of my control, come in.

It becomes clear that submission does not come naturally even though the "natural laws" of Gor as well as Canadeo herself indicate that this is how it is supposed to be. She is torn, but the Gorean philosophy states that she ought to be happy in her role as a submissive, yet she becomes angry when her master asserts his dominance over her. Canadeo is almost quiet in the above dialogue while the master is defining her, putting what he thinks she feels or ought to feel into words. He tries to distinguish the difference between the way she acts independently in the physical world where men "don't push [her] about," but he then says that *he* should be able to do so since he is her master, and he says that without making it clear whether this is only inside *Second Life* or not. This might give indications of his own innermost wish: to stand above other men, to have control over both situations and people in general and her in particular. And since he is "so kind," it might be seen as self-evident that he should be able to get away with that. Again, it is not clear whether this interaction is intended to be in character or out of character.

It is not self-evident, however, that Canadeo will stay in the submissive role, since she, despite her earlier words of a contradictory nature, admits that she

enjoy[s] the fight now and then ... There will be some days where I am content to be an obedient slave, and other days where I will push at my boundaries. And I think this fluctuation truly mystifies my poor Master as the good little kajira he knew so well will sometimes go out of her way to test his dominance. So why do I do it? I believe there is one most basic and obvious reason. Because there's excitement in the struggle.

Her reaction goes against the Gorean credo that a woman “realizes that her only true happiness is when on her knees” and gives indications that Canadeo’s reasons for choosing a submissive role might not be complimentary to her master’s reasons for choosing a dominant one. If she perhaps decides to try out a submissive role for the sake of (sexual) excitement and tension, and he might prefer the dominant role for the thrill of being in control, of exerting his power over another human being, clashes are bound to happen — clashes that the Gorean power structures are supposed to prevent.

Fighting for Gor

Attempting to generate acceptance and understanding between Goreans and non-Goreans, Estrella Canadeo describes the situation:

I often find myself defending Gor among ‘non-gor’ Second Lifers. The most common question, “Is it true that women can be caged and raped at will?” Yes and no. Women are caged when wandering in a gorean sim in earth [non-Gorean] clothes, but it’s not usual or recommended to rape the girl. In fact most sims have a clause that will protect girls from unwanted approaches. I always tell people who ask that all gorean sims have visitor tags, but if you do find yourself captured and don’t want to be there, explain in an OOC IM to the capture you don’t want to be in gor and tp out. Some sims will ban you after you tp out, which my reply to those who object is “well you didn’t want to be there anyway.”

Canadeo does refer to the possibility of OOC communication, but it seems to be used as a last resort for someone not wanting to take part. Today, some Gorean sims offer visitor’s tags at the entrance, which, when they are worn, indicate that the bearer is new to the sim and only there to explore and observe. On other sims in *Second Life Gor*, exploring without any thought of joining might prove difficult, however, as Canadeo confirms the Gorean role-playing practice of capturing especially female avatars. There are warnings, as Canadeo correctly points out, in the notecards usually stating whether the sim is a “force collar or capture” one. Most commonly, spending time on Gorean “soil” in effect equals being in character, which leaves little room for hesitation or discussion.

Like Canadeo, lifestyler master Tor Pharos seems to have encountered opposition on similar grounds, and at the end of his description of how he chose a Gorean lifestyle he attempts to deflect any criticism before it is put forward: “Be warned I guard this lifestyle very close to my chest and will not tolerate those who will make a mockery over something I live happily with my girl.” He thus indicates the seriousness with which he

approaches Gor and the Gorean point of view, and, at the same time, he attempts to abolish any idea of it being “only” a playful make-believe performance foregrounding its own artificiality. Instead Tor Pharos attempts the opposite. By stressing that it is a lifestyle, not something that should be “mocked,” he dares mainstream society to accept this alternative lifestyle in a make-belief fashion. On the forum, nobody has, to date, commented on his story or given any indication of either approval or disapproval.

A pro-Gorean article series consisting of “Confessions of a Gorean Slave” by humdog and “Gorean Journey” by the slave Sparrowhawk Perhaps,⁵⁷ received many comments, however, as did the anti-Gorean article series “The Problems of Gor” written by former slave Artemis Fate. Both article series were published in *The Alphaville Herald* around the same time in November 2006, and both of them discuss *Second Life Gor*, its philosophy and its impact from different points of view. Sparrowhawk Perhaps is, just like Estrella Canadeo and Tor Pharos, well aware of the negative connotations Gorean philosophy and practise has in the eyes of mainstream society, and she describes how she came to understand

that the struggles I had with and against the collar never originated with my Masters requests. The struggles were always within my inner self, a war of me against me, and me against cultural mainstream values that I had internalized.... Women who choose more traditional lives, well, they require apologists and conservative radio talk show psychologists to tell them that it is really just fine to be who they are, and that mother is not another word for dork.... People define their lives in terms of the importance of what they did or did not achieve in the outside world.... Against the advice of this world, I followed my Master, begged His collar, tried to stuff my enormous pride into a bag, and knelt. It was a politically incorrect act, in the extreme.... I do think that political correctness figures in the debate about Gor.

Sparrowhawk Perhaps thus views the debate between Goreans and non-Goreans as a battle between lifestyle philosophies or ideologies. She stresses the humble and modest aspects of the submissive lifestyle, claims that these are lost virtues in today’s society, and highlights the positive side of these still being adhered to in a Gorean context. She thereby gives a glimpse of Gorean philosophy from a slave’s perspective. What the defenders of Gor are reacting against is the image of the Gorean community as a

⁵⁷ Both signatures, humdog and Sparrowhawk Perhaps, refer to online world’s veteran Carmen Hermosillo, who died in August 2008. Among other roles she took on, she also happened to role-play as the slave of Raddick Szymborska inside *Second Life* (*The Alphaville Herald*).

marginalised and weird culture far removed from the mainstream, but it also represents a culture and community of which they themselves have chosen to be a part.

Gorean Tjarda Sixma points out that “the tightening of the *Terms of Service* by the Linden Lab, which encourages the reporting of offensive content” and, as a result, the Gorean “SIMs are increasingly closed to non-members.” Visitors who might be suspected of wishing to upset their role-play or refuse to follow the Gorean rules will be ejected and/or banned, a tendency seen already in the 2007 notecard at Port Cos:

Port Cos is a private estate created exclusively to role-play the Gorean theme, if you wish not to be part of this, go elsewhere. Any person(s) found being disruptive will be exiled.... This IS a private estate.. if this offends you, it is your responsibility to leave before entering [from the ship, which functions as a welcome area]. Keep in mind, everyone in this sim is here because they voluntarily wish to enjoy this form of role-play. Port Cos does not tolerate griefing, including but not limited to verbal attacks, inflammatory behavior, or intentionally bypassing legal roleplay or the laws of the city by misusing a titler to bypass legal roleplay. The city of Port Cos reserves the right to eject/ban anyone for any reason.

In some cases the Gorean sims have become a legitimate target for various griever groups and for individuals who do not appreciate the Gorean practices of role-play, and the tone is sometimes harsh on both sides. What seems to be considered particularly offensive to some non-Goreans is when Gorean role-play takes place outside the Gorean sims, which the signature Trudy gives an example of:

I am not very impressed when Gor spills over into non-Gorean areas. I think that if they want to be respected, they need to respect our culture just as they wish us to respect theirs when we visit a Gorean sim. A few months back, I was shopping for shoes on the mainland, nowhere near any Gorean area, and – get this – a female Gorean was punishing (verbal humiliation) her half naked slave girl severely, right there in the shoe store.“

In Gorean circles this debate is, in itself, seen as a violation. Gorean Jessica Holyoke expresses the feeling of her freedom of speech having been violated and that her culture has been trampled upon. In fact, Holyoke draws parallels between the 2009 banning of minarets in Switzerland and the discussion about Gor in *Second Life*:

After the Hard Alley protest⁵⁸ of a few weeks back, a few comments were made somewhere else about whether or not depictions of slavery, such as by followers of BDSM or Gor, should be allowed in public spaces and reserved only for private spheres. The fear articulated is similar to the fear articulated by the Swiss, the fact that Goreans or BDSM'ers are in your face or forcing their roleplay onto an unwilling or unsuspecting bystander, even if it is simply the interactions between the Dominant and the Submissive amongst themselves.



Master and slave in the City of Vonda.

Gor and Conditioning

Quite a few are reacting negatively to the pervasive misogynistic motif and prominent BDSM theme in both the novels and the role-play, despite the above attempts to frame *Second Life Gor* in positive terms. The fact that the “Slave’s of Gor” group mentioned above explicitly states that the function of the group is to provide a supportive framework for the slaves in SL Gor indicates an internal need for a subversive force attempting to create a smooth space within the Gorean community, which strengthens the case against the Gorean philosophy and practice among those who might be described as anti-

⁵⁸ In late November 2009, avatars “dressed” in ham protested against the “objectification of women” in Hard Alley, a well-known role-play sex sim (*The Alphaville Herald*).

Goreans. Tales of residents being captured and collared upon entering a Gorean sim add to the image of *Second Life Gor* as too violent and "weird." In her article series, stirring both positive and negative reactions, writer and former Gorean slave Artemis Fate primarily targets the lifestylers and the philosophy of Gor. Fate categorises her first response to the pro-slavery Gorean role-play as "turning on" as she describes herself as initially both intrigued and unprepared. She continues to describe how it took some time, becoming "indoctrinated into the community for months, before [she] managed to take an overall look at what's happened and realised how much [she] had changed." Fate highlights the negative effects inherent in the inequality and striations of Gor as well as the possible negative emotional impact this might have. She is contesting the interpretation and system of roles inscribed in the Gorean philosophy:

As to be expected, the relationship dependency is skewed. Men are encouraged to treat their slaves like objects and women encouraged to give everything they have to men. ... The girl ... is taught to be dependent and totally in love with her Master. To be sold to another so is a form of rejection. This sort of sting can be more mild, with the girl a little depressed at each time she's traded off. However, some have gone into a full breakdown and have inflicted pain on themselves or others.

Fate draws the reader's attention to what she describes as conditioning: "For some slave girls in Gor communities, John Norman's books are mandatory readings. Each book has the repeated theme that women are naturally slaves to men. The moral of every story is that neither men nor women can be happy unless they follow this nature. This is the big lie that is repeated again and again." Pro-Gorean Sparrowhawk Perhaps has a slightly different take on that, which Fate labels conditioning:

The Master, if he is effective, has made it his business to touch her inner self and disturb the hidden ocean floor of her spirit. He is engaged in the act of changing her to suit himself. Now when critics speak of Gor they use words like brainwashing while disregarding the fact that when the critics do the same thing to each other, they use the words adapting and adjusting.

While much of the details in John Norman's vision in the *Chronicles of Gor* often is played down on the Gorean sims in *Second Life*, the most important feature — the one that need to be agreed upon and the one that might be the most difficult to agree upon, if we are to

believe Perhaps, who sees our negative reaction as a result of mainstream conditioning — is the slave-master relationship. As has been indicated above, this is the cornerstone for the fantasy being built in *Second Life* and the most important part of the conditioning. As becomes evident in the dialogue between Estrella Canadeo and her master above, this is an important part in the process of creating acceptance for, indeed institutionalising, dominance and submission. Whether it be called conditioning or adaptation, Artemis Fate describes what the procedure looks like in her experience: “If a slave girl obeys, she is rewarded. If she disobeys, she's shamed and punished. If she speaks her mind or questions the philosophy, then she's threatened with expulsion from the sims.” Fate does not seem to, in this case, differentiate between the lifestyler view she describes and that of the role-players, but elsewhere she does point to the lifestylers as being her main target.

This definition is crucial to Mikal Snakeankle, a slave-owner in *Second Life*, who reacts against Fate's description of Gor. He attempts to correct the widespread — and, from his point of view, misconceived — ideas about *SL Gor* as a space where reality and role-play are difficult to separate:

Do I interfere with my online slaves real life? No. Do I wish to? No. That is their life. ... Do my slaves kneel in non-Gorean or D/s sims? Not unless they are with me. Do they call non-Goreans Master or Mistress? Only if said persons arrive in our land. ... Do I punish them? Yes, when they need it. But what you don't comprehend is this. They come to Gor, fully knowing what is to be expected. If this is what they decide down the road isn't for them. Leave. I won't stop you. You also aren't banned from my land for leaving. You are banned if you leave and then harass, badger, cause trouble through actions, words or deeds. Not uncommon in other lands either. ... If someone caused troubles via words or actions. Yes I will ban. Period.

Snakeankle does not seem to see the impact this type of behaviour might have on someone role-playing as a Gorean slave and he seems to view the Gorean custom of slaves kneeling when in the company of their masters as self-evident.

It's My Land and I Can Do Whatever I Want

Mikal Snakeankle stresses that the Gorean role-play is indeed a role-play, which, in his view, is clearly separated from “real life,” and he, too, uses the exit argument: “if someone does not like it, they can simply teleport away or log out.” Furthermore, Snakeankle underlines the difference between the rules on “his land” and Non-Gorean land, which is

similar to Tor Pharos stance that nobody would be allowed to ridicule or criticise the lifestyle he and his girlfriend are happy with, thus implying that whatever happens on his land or in their relationship is their own business, not to be interfered with by anyone from the outside. Most of Mikal Snakeankle's responses are typical of the Gorean role-playing rhetoric, and this view is supported by people outside of Gor as well, as Jot Zenovka's comments on both the aspect of choice and the difference between Gor and non-Gor shows: "If you don't like the rules, don't go there. ... The Gor notecard I read is explicit in it's [sic] description of non-rules and dangers. I didn't go there. lol. But neither was I offended simply because I didn't understand the gameplay." In yet another comment the signature Noyeh, who role-plays as a Gorean slave, further underlines the issue of consent:⁵⁹ "Unlike the real gor we do not have chattel slavery we have consensual slavery only!!!! Anyone that is choosing to roleplay in Second life as goreans is doing so as consenting adults. At anytime any slave or any Free Person on that list can walk away." The view of Gorean role-play as consensual and confined to some areas of *Second Life*, and subsequently removed from everyday life, is thus self-evident to the role-players.

The Blurring of the Boundary

In her article Artemis Fate describes some practices in *SL Gor* as "cult-like" with regard to the blurred boundaries between IC and OOC, and she is supported by several of the residents commenting on her article as they describe the risks of Gorean role-play resulting in traumatic experiences. In line with for instance Mikael Jakobsson's ideas of online environments being just as "real" as offline ones, Fate suggests that conditioning can affect the mind regardless of environment, and subsequently anything that happens in *Second Life* can have a real impact on a person. A freed slave, Sandra-Dee, provides the following example: "I sat on the dock of one of the Gorean sims and chatted with several slave girls. One mentioned she had entered the Gorean world through the act of being raped while in roleplay. ... Yet when asking her WHY she returned she could not put it into words and just said...it was only her second time back online after the incident" (Sandra-Dee). As a response to people who claim that the solution to the problem is to

⁵⁹ By stressing the importance of consent, they draw on the ties between BDSM practices and Gor role-play, which have been studied by for instance Shaowen Bardzell: "BDSM is a sexual and social practice that involves consensual relations of domination and submission (Wiseman, 1996; Weinberg, 1978). In BDSM fantasy play, whether real-life or virtual, slaves and submissives are docile by definition. They have consented to hand over their autonomy to their Doms (male dominants) or Dommes (female dominants) ... which may include surrender of the body for examination, sexual gratification and even dressing, silencing of the voice, limited mobility and other forms of submission (Abernathy, 1996). In return, Dom/mes are expected to provide protection, guidance, and in many cases devotion (Lorelei, 2000)." (Bardzell)

teleport away or log out, Artemis Fate draws parallels to the physical world, to patterns of abuse within families: “[Women who are being abused] CAN do this [leave], but WILL they do this? It sort of applies to battered women syndrome, a woman CAN walk out from her husband that beats her, but she doesn't.” Following a similar line of thought, the signature Anon highlights the community’s role in the conditioning of a slave: “i was in Gor on SL for 6 months, as a slave, and i always had conflicting feelings about it, and seeing it phrased the way [Artemis Fate has] here is really eye opening. in my experience, most of the ‘masters’ i met in Gorean sims were not smart enough to do the conditioning you speak of. BUT, many of the ‘free women’ and other slaves were very manipulative on this level.” According to Anon, the Gorean community thus plays an important part in the conditioning of people role-playing as slaves, encouraging these to behave in what the Gorean community considers to be appropriate ways. As Estrella Canadeo and other people have indicated, the link between master and slave is often strong. Shaowen Bardzell states: “The practice of BDSM is not merely sexual: there is often a psychological and emotional attachment (such as trust) between the Dom and the sub, and above all, the D/s relationship is based on a system of values, that is, a system of rules that enables such a lifestyle to function.” Bardzell primarily draws on BDSM practices, but a similar conclusion would be applicable to the Gorean community. The requirement is that the rules and the system of values are agreed upon and upheld.

This bond between a master and a slave can make the transition in the other direction, from Gor to mainstream SL, a difficult one to make. Sparrowhawk Perhaps highlights what the breaking of the collar, a slave’s decision to sever the bonds to her master, might entail:

The slave who loves her Master will feel the withdrawal of his affection, attention, and availability to her on all levels. It is a hard thing to explain but anyone who has experienced the withdrawal of a Master knows exactly what this means. The slave then is left to her own resources. She is left to reclaim the self-will that perhaps she is not so well acquainted with now. Emotional confusion and grief may follow.

Sandra-Dee points to a problem which might be linked to the “self-will” Perhaps alludes to, and in her case it highlights the barriers between Gor and the mainstream *Second Life* community. She attests that “[i]t is difficult to reconnect with the friendships that were left to smolder while in the Gorean way of life and thinking. Some of the friends remember you and others are gone forever. It is important to make new connections

outside of Gorean thought and to reinvent your persona in SL.” The signature “Just a thought” gives a friend’s view of the impact of Gorean role-play:

I cannot even remember the number of times I've seen friends get into this lifestyle.... and had it destroy who they once were. ... I've always been there when those friends come back, needing a shoulder to cry on because of something their Mast or Mistress did to them. The part of it that really wrenches at my gut is when they come to me for compassion and support, then turn and go to their master or mistress once it's all over - just like anyone in an abusive relationship.

It becomes obvious from the descriptions above that Gorean role-play in *Second Life* certainly can have bothering connotations both for people who have taken part in it and those who have remained on the outside, and the main reason for this seems to be that the line between role-play and reality is blurred, the Gorean role-play and the Gorean lifestyle becomes mixed up. As a submissive both in the physical world and in *Second Life*, Miraren Firefly, puts it like this:

So, in short, what worries me is this: Roleplaying emotionally problematic scenarios is well and good, if what you're doing is actually roleplaying. However, once you become emotionally engaged, and are channeling yourself through your avatar — which [I] think is what happens with the majority of Goreans, and indeed a large portion (probably a majority) of SLers as a whole — the problematic elements of the Gorean scenario start having an actual impact. Girls form actual emotional bonds to their Masters quite frequently, both in mainstream BDSM/D/s and in Gor, online. Therefore, if their avatar is killed, while they do not die, there is still emotional impact. This emotional impact would not be there in any significant amount if they were truly roleplaying, but quite often it seems that they are only projecting roleplaying elements and personae onto their actual selves. This is dangerous.

The blurring of the boundaries between being in character and being out of character that happens in the Gorean communities is thus seen as problematic in itself and this seems to be the most common cause for criticism.

The comments above show the battle for acceptance of an alternative and controversial way of role-playing — as well as, in for instance Tor Pharos’ case, living. The view that Gorean role-play is a voluntary and consensual agreement between adults

choosing to play out such scenarios in a digital environment, which can be left or shut down at will, competes with the view that Gorean role-play can be dangerous for people not realising what they are getting themselves into. Both of these stances are make-belief and intended to influence the people's view of *Second Life Gor*. Not surprisingly, masters like Tor Pharos and Mikal Snakeankle are the most inclined to defend the philosophy of Gor. They refer to the exit argument, but they do not choose to highlight that, to some people, the hierarchical system and the authoritarian behaviour of the masters and leaders might not be just innocent role-play, but rather a lifestyle affecting the people taking part on a deeper level — sometimes negatively. The somewhat condescending tone used by Mikal Snakeankle in his comment on Fate's article, seems to be aimed at undermining the authority of the author and emphasises his disapproval at being questioned about his role as a master. The tone among the masters discussing the philosophy of Gor is different. For the most part they remain civil and courteous towards one another. They are among peers. The open discussions on the Internet clearly show how Snakeankle's and Tor Pharos' domination strategies do not remain within the boundaries of *Second Life Gor*. They are in a sense attempting to continue the conditioning and enforce the striations on the Internet as well, but the Gorean rules do not necessarily apply in this environment. By writing her article and open up a space for discussion and debate, Artemis Fate succeeds in creating a smooth space where aspects of Gor that might not be possible to discuss inside *SL Gor* can be vented. By commenting and attempting to transfer the Gorean power game and his own dominant role into a non-Gorean arena outside of *Second Life*, Mikal Snakeankle in effect continues to attempt to blur the boundaries between make-believe and make-belief.

Make-Belief Gor

As some of the comments above bear out, Gorean role-play inside *Second Life* can have consequences. Several of the examples above indicate that the wish to explore such roles — dominant as well as submissive — often has a basis in the offline person, and the experiences in the digital world then become personal to a higher level than seem to be the case in many of the other role-play communities in *Second Life*. Something that reminds us of Bentham's panopticism can happen under the gaze of a controlling and dominant Gorean master in *Second Life*. Although consent-based, the rules inspired by John Norman's *Chronicles of Gor* set the scene for the role-play that evolves on the sims in *Second Life*, and function as a way of illustrating and enforcing the acceptance of a system of domination and submission. The rules in the books function as a blueprint for the rules every individual slave owner imposes on their slaves in *SL Gor*, and in this manner the

Gorean power structures are maintained and perpetuated. Some of the masters/leaders are trying to realise their own fantasy, create their own “consensual hallucination” (Gibson 67). Gorean role-play becomes a power game. It is created and sustained through, as well as because of, the power hierarchy it brings. In this manner the *Chronicles of Gor* are used to support a *make-believe* as well as a *make-belief* performance. It is a role-play, but sometimes also a lifestyle. Since the lifestyle is lurking in the shadows, the role-play appears to balance on the edge between performing in character and out of character, between *make-belief* and *make-believe*, and the character formation often ends up more “real” than it was intended.

Chapter Six:

Power Games in the Independent State of Caledon

The "Independent State of Caledon," a 19th century Steampunk⁶⁰ Victorian nation-state spans more than fifty sims inside *Second Life*, is the fourth and last role-play group to be explored in this dissertation. In contrast to Gor, Caledon has no specific model, no movie or novel, to follow and the Caledonians do not necessarily define their community as a role-play one, but, although it is not encouraged or required, there are nevertheless many elements of role-play present in the Caledon sims. Together with a small group of people the founder and owner, Governor Desmond Shang, created and populated the first Caledon sim in February 2006, "[a] small, windswept isle at a temperate latitude with wild creatures, country estate life, and sights and sounds that were common well over 100 years ago" complete with "weather and seasons" (Caledon Covenant). In the covenant, Shang describes that they

have a very *real* society here. Everything from humble shopkeepers, inventors, clothiers, writers, explorers, titled gentry, doctors, tavern keepers... you name it! ... Caledon has been blessed by its residents: deservedly famous artisans, the incredible shopping, the landmark Caledon Trolley. All of this added up to some of the most desirable addresses on the grid — not for being posh, but loveliness and warmth.

Plenty of information can be found about the Caledon community on the library sim, the Caledon VictoriaCity, as well as on the Internet. Additionally, many of the Caledonians are ardent bloggers. Drawing on information on these blogs, the wikis and forums (the *Caledon Wiki* and the *Caledon Forum*), and in interviews, my aim is to give an overview of Caledon itself and the role-play going on within its borders, the role of Desmond Shang,

⁶⁰ Steampunk will be treated in further detail below.

as well as to highlight one of the most prominent and long-term discussions, what I have labelled the "Caledon power game," which has its origin in the often critical attitude towards the Linden Lab, and how this relates to the roles within this community.

The Impact of the Environment

Many of the inhabitants are dressed in clothes originating in the Victorian era and the residents' language is influenced by idea of the more formal and polite 19th century way of addressing fellow residents. The use of "Sir" and "Madam" is not infrequent, and, as programmer Ordinal Malaprop points out, it influences the behaviour of random visitors as well:

There is a phenomenon that is still unnamed I think, where visitors very quickly move to a more Caledonian mode of speech and dress. It has been remarked upon many times.

Someone visits and begins to chat with locals. After a couple of minutes they start to lose all of their text abbreviations, no more '2 u' etc. After ten minutes or so they mention that they feel underdressed, and ask where they can get some appropriate clothes.

As one of the original Caledonians, Ordinal Malaprop, who created and programmed the first Caledon trolley mentioned above by Desmond Shang, points to an interesting side-effect: "This is actually terrific for dealing with... not griefers, but people who are a little 'effusive' shall we say.... I rarely ever have to actually eject anyone. I just ask them if they would kindly not do that, or if I can help them with anything. Of course, people who are clearly being simply aggressive just get kicked out without a word." Malaprop concludes that "the environment *does* affect behaviour, as well as the changes in size [of the environment]. Even visitors change their behaviour quite quickly on visiting without there being any written rules or guidelines shown to them or even mentioned" (emphasis in the original). The dress code is not absolute in any way, however, and neither is the formal manner of speaking. According to the "Visitor's introduction" in the covenant signed by Desmond Shang the Caledon residents encourage "19th century period clothing, politeness, and activities" but consider a visitor, who is just him- or herself "more than good enough." In a forum discussion, Shang elaborates on this, and ties it to the role-play taking place there: "[Y]ou don't have to own land in Caledon to come by and participate in anything we do as a micronation. A bit victorian, steampunk, fantasy — it's all welcome, no dress code required to visit (we just might consider that you are obviously from the future though, we get visitors from the future all the time)." Instead, the building

of the environment is in primary focus and anyone who wishes to take up residence there must adhere to the following rules:

Caledon has a 19th century Victorian theme. Structures are to be Victorian, or perhaps a thatch roof house, old Tudor, castle, Celtic cottage, or maybe a hobbit hole or treehouse. That sort of thing. Inside your home or shop decorate as you like. Try not to let modern stuff be glaringly obvious from the outside. An occasional small Japanese gazebo or that sort of not-exactly-theme kind of thing is okay. Magic, steampunk, and fantasy items are encouraged! (*Caledon Covenant*)

As seen in the above quote, the most important rules relate to visual aspects. Putting additional stress on the visual coherence and consistency of the environment, the covenant also states: “No ‘yard sales’, ‘walking signboard avatars’, outdoor malls, huge signs ESPECIALLY land-for-sale signs, casinos, gambling for \$L, camping chairs &c., scamming, Ponzi schemes, fraud &c., clubs (small pubs ok), racial slurs or hate speech, or combining sexual activities of any kind with underage avatars.”



Buildings in the Independent State of Caledon.

These two quotes might sum up the most important directives guiding the Caledon community. Few requirements are made other than the visual ones. Visitors do not have to be dressed or behave in a certain way, and very little prior knowledge is needed about the community. As a result of the above constraints and indications of priorities and values, the manner of role-playing in Caledon is slightly different from the role-play happening in other groups or communities.

Steampunk Influences

Although no single literary role model can be said to exist, which would steer interaction in Caledon, several of the resident profiles nevertheless refer to, and in some cases quote from, literary works by authors such as T.S. Eliot and Lewis Carroll. In his own profile, Desmond Shang lists the following literary as well as non-literary, “inspirations” to the creation of the Independent State of Caledon: Conan Doyle⁶¹, Miyazaki⁶², Rowling⁶³, Verne⁶⁴, and Ventrella⁶⁵. At least Sir Conan Arthur Doyle, J.K. Rowling and Jules Verne can be described as authors, who, as a setting for their tales, have chosen a Victorian or steampunk environment and the steampunk influences in Desmond Shang’s Caledon is indeed visible everywhere. Steampunk has been described as “a genre AND a design aesthetic AND a philosophy” (*Steampunk.com*). The author elaborates:

Steampunk has always been first and foremost a literary genre, or least a subgenre of science fiction and fantasy that includes social or technological aspects of the 19th century (the steam) usually with some deconstruction of, reimagining of, or rebellion against parts of it (the punk).

The steampunk technology is thus at the forefront. Urban fantasy author Caitlin Kittredge describes the genre on Twitter in the following terms: “It’s sort of Victorian-industrial, but with more whimsy and fewer orphans” (Kittredge). Steampunk novels of various foci are

⁶¹ Sir Conan Arthur Doyle, the author of the Sherlock Holmes series set in Victorian England.

⁶² Hayao Miyazaki, a Japanese director and animator, is mainly known for his movie *Spirited Away*, made in the manga tradition.

⁶³ J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter series.

⁶⁴ Jules Verne, the French author of sci-fi novels such as *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864) and *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865).

⁶⁵ Jeffrey Ventrella is a digital artist, programmer, and researcher. Ventrella was principal inventor and co-founder of the virtual world, *There*, and he subsequently moved on to become a Senior Developer at Linden Lab (Wikipedia).

common, and games such as *Bioshock*, movies such as *Sherlock Holmes*, TV shows, music and art have emerged (*Steampunk.com*). Today steampunk is also visible offline:

People has “steampunk’d” everything from computers, desks, telephone, watches and guitars to cars, motorcycles, and whole houses. These objects can vary from a grungy look of a forgotten antique to the shiny overwrought newness of a Victorian gentleman’s club. Think brass and copper, glass and polished wood, engraving and etching, and details for the sake of details. So, steampunk is also a design aesthetic.



Steampunk in Caledon.

Elaborating on the third facet of steampunk, philosophy, the *Steampunk.com* author stresses the “combination between the maker ideals of creativity and self-reliance and the Victorian optimistic view of the future” and one might add that this is a future which is facilitated and also made possible by advanced technology. The various modes of transport available in Caledon, for instance the trolley, the railway, several ships and a range of airships, which have all been designed and scripted to actually work, reflect this and add to the inventive and quite exceptional Caledon environment. There are thus various role models for Caledon, but they are so many, so varied and ultimately chosen on an

individual level, that it is difficult to claim that there is a correct or an incorrect way to role-play in Caledon and the rest of the Steamlands in *Second Life*.

On the Rights of Avatars

As indicated above, Desmond Shang has taken on the task of administrating Caledon. Additionally, he has taken on the role as leader, as “gumnah.” The execution of his power can be described as a make-belief one; he plays the Governor of Caledon in order to maintain the authority over the digital environment for which he is responsible and ultimately pays. Ordinal Malaprop describes leadership of the Independent State of Caledon as a “benevolent dictatorship,” which is very common in online worlds as well as in MUDs and MOOs (Kendall, Pargman 2003). As would have become evident by now, the entire system programmed and set up by the Linden Lab encourages and favours this type of leadership, and it has often been difficult to sustain a more democratic leadership. Briefly mentioned in the introduction, Neualtenburg/Neufreistadt and the Confederation of Democratic Simulators, originally created in 2004 and early on Caledon’s sworn enemy, are exceptions to this.



Election information in Neufreistadt.

In an attempt to grapple with the problem of making a group and project last longer and become less vulnerable to the constantly changing *Second Life* environment, the Neualtenburg group decided that the solution was to create a governing body and a detailed constitution, establish fixed voting procedures and deal with administrative responsibilities in a democratic way. Even today the four-sim colony have elections every six months, a legislative system and a parliament. The democratic intensions came at a price, however. In June 2006, “a dispute arose between the founders and the rest of the group” (*SL History Wiki*, “Democratic Republic of Neualtenburg”), which resulted in a veritable revolution, and the group was divided into two. The two founders kept the Neualtenburg name, but left the private sim they had set up, while the rest of the group stayed on the sim, which was given a new name, Neufreistadt. The cluster of sims is today called the Confederation of Democratic Simulators (*CDS portal*), and as they still push on with their democratic experiment, it might be worth noting that this is done within the non-democratic framework provided by the Linden Lab.

The risk of a revolution has not appealed to Caledon’s Governor Shang, however, and he has maintained his control of the Caledon community and land. Caledon is regulated by a covenant and Ordinal Malaprop has shown me an early version of the covenant. She points out that Caledon does not have “any courts or lawyers,” and warns that although the covenant is “a very long document” people should not be fooled “into thinking it is a particularly legalistic community ... I imagine most people have never even read the whole thing all the way through” (Malaprop). For landowners it is important to know a thing or two about the policy regarding land parcels, however. According to the covenant, a landowner in Caledon is asked not to build on or right beside property lines, not to have a “home in construction for months,” and not to build over public roads or block original waterways. Ban lines intended to keep visitors out are not allowed and “skyboxes” have to be place at least 512 meters up in the sky, unless they are “in-theme.” Desmond Shang ends this section of the covenant with a plea intended to ensure that no “courts or lawyers” are needed:

Please use common sense. If we end up having to rely on the text here word by word, there are probably ten loopholes big enough to bankrupt all the sims on ‘technicalities.’ If I forgot to write something down like "don't leave junk all over someone's land" — use common sense anyway. Just because something icky isn't spelled out doesn't make it ok.

As a "benevolent dictator" Desmond Shang shows his kindness for instance by stressing avatar rights and freedoms. A list of avatar rights was included already in a 2007 covenant and can also be found in the covenant for the new Caledon crown colony, Caledonia, on *Blue Mars*, a 3D social world similar to *Second Life*. I will quote two sections:

III) Freedom of Speech.

- An avatar may express ideas and opinions without fear of retribution.
- Please note that slander, libel, hate speech (racial, ethnic or gender slurs), scamming, fraud, harassment &c. are not considered free speech and thus not protected.
- Protests are protected speech. The time, place and manner of a protest may be limited in a reasonable, nondiscriminatory manner so as to protect other avatar's rights.
- Methodic, active attempts to lure residents or visitors away from the State of Caledon while on our shores is considered High Treason: a betrayal of the trust that allows you to remain. Heavily promoting foreign region is at issue; a modestly offered landmark to an offshore store in your home or shop is not.

VI) Freedom from Blacklist.

- The State of Caledon will not use lists distributed by other parties or agencies to take action against avatars, especially global or automatic 'ban lists'.
- An avatar banned elsewhere will never find themselves banned here simply because they were 'on a list'. We may, however, take reasonable precaution to protect ourselves should we hear reports of individual griefers of great harm and high notoriety.

On her blog STEAMed, Caledon resident, blogger and role-player Miss Palabra Puddlegum, a "young lady alone in the Steamlands," reflects on these two sections and she acknowledges the paradox inherent in the possibility for avatars to have rights in an ever-changing digital world such as *Second Life*, and "yet, even in a virtual world created and owned by a virtual 'Govnah,' we employ a bill of avatar rights." Focusing primarily on the freedom of speech clause, Puddlegum points to the discrepancy between the rules of Caledon and the *Second Life Terms of Service*, and continues by drawing parallels to the *Bill of Rights*, the ten amendments to the United States constitution. She concludes that

[f]ree speech is nowhere absolute, but on the grid, it is a bit tricky.... Free Speech in Caledon, then, is less free than in the United States as a whole.... To protect everyone's freedom of expression in town square, we must put up with those who express ideas that

the majority of us find loathsome.... In Caledon, things are different. Both the covenant and the TOS restrict hate speech, so the odious K.K.K. has no presence there. That arrangement is certainly more comfortable and less offensive, but it is also much less free and far less equitable.... While it seems that, in theory, our Caledonian freedoms are significantly impeded by the covenant and the TOS, I find one difference to trump all of the rest: I am a Caledonian by choice, but my typist is a U.S. citizen by birth. If one feels the restrictions placed on one's virtual life in Caledon are unfair, one can always seek another estate or carve out a niche on the mainland. If one finds the TOS overly burdensome, then one may jump ship, as it were, and try Blue Mars or any other virtual world. One might even muster the resources and technical skill necessary to invent one's own virtual world. In real life, immigration laws often prohibit one from leaving one's country of origin in favor of a new homeland.... So, perhaps, we Caledonians and denizens of other virtual worlds are even more free here in this aetheric miasma of communication than are our respective typists in the physical realm. We have the ultimate freedom: choice.

Miss Palabra Puddlegum — the formal address is often used — is thus fundamentally in favour of the, from her point of view, more restrictive rules and customs of Caledon, as she highlights the aspect of choice. In a digital environment there are always other options if the restrictions appear too severe.

Residents in Caledon thus have rights in a manner that does not have an equivalent in *Second Life* in general, and governor Desmond Shang is taking the issue of avatar rights further than many other communities. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that these rights are not being given to the Caledonians by any supreme power other than their governor, as MMOG-programmer Raph Koster points out in a parallel discussion about the rights of MUDders. The rights in Caledon have not been sanctioned by the Linden Lab or by the United States' First Amendment, since "local rules" such as these, concerning digital avatars within a digital space such as *Second Life* created by a private company, are not covered in either of them. There are, as of yet, no laws taking possible rights of avatars, which in effect equals human rights in most aspects apart from the physical, into account, although Koster and Terra Nova writer Dan Hunter, as well as well-known *Second Life* debaters such as Prokofy Neva, Gwyneth Llewellyn and Tateru Nino discuss the matter thoroughly.

Promoting Social Stability

In his covenant, Desmond Shang protests against yet another aspect of the global SL rules: the market economy promoted by the Linden Lab, especially in the form of land speculation. The Caledon society has created its own rules and restrictions in this area: “Don’t use the State of Caledon for land speculation. I have a long track record of keeping parcel prices ridiculously low to foster an accessible community. ... For decent, honest folk simply trying to move around or leave, I am happy to help connect them with interested parties waiting to get Caledon land. That’s a ‘win-win’ for everyone” (Caledon covenant). Although the covenant text primarily focuses on the visual aspects of the Caledon landscape and land ownership control, which in effect means steering the visual environment by influencing the landowners, since only landowners — or anyone he or she trusts with the same permissions — have the possibility to build and thereby contribute to the visual coherence of Caledon, there are ulterior motives for Governor Shang’s decision. Ordinal Malaprop explains the ideas further:

The content and banline restrictions are less about the theme, really, more general rules for a pleasant environment.... Land transfer restrictions do keep sims more stable socially, preventing high land turnover, and also stop speculative purchases by people who have no interest in community life.... a lot of it is in Desmond's commercial interest, he doesn't have to worry about land speculators coming in and exploiting his sims but it has positive effects for residents as well. Speculators are not conducive to community life in my judgement; they do not contribute, and they raise prices for everyone else.

The coherent Caledon environment and a civil community life within their own make-belief framework are thus the aim. In general, the individuals are free to be as inventive as they like, and wild discussion on various topics is encouraged, which, together with Governor Shang’s stance on land ownership, foregrounds “the Caledon power game” vis-à-vis the Linden Lab. However, nothing, neither in the covenant nor in the interview with Ordinal Malaprop, is said about make-believe role-play and how it is done, and this is what I intend to explore next.

Foregrounding the Roles and the Play

Role-play is, despite the lack of formal steering, a common feature in the Independent State of Caledon, and studying the resident profiles in some of the groups in Caledon gives indications to the form of this role-play. The group I have selected, the “Imperial

Navy of Caledon,” is quite small, but the resident profiles in the group point to the general aim and attitude in Caledon as well as how the different roles are defined. In their profile pictures most group members are dressed in typical 19th century clothing and present themselves in a Caledon context. The group charter can be said to set the scene:

The Imperial Navy of Caledon's sworn duty and responsibility is to guard, defend and generally hang about on the seas, ponds, rivers, lakes, streams, wellsprings, waterways and oceans of the Independent State of Caledon in boats whilst wearing big hats. Really big hats. It is while wearing bigs [sic] hats that our daring, resolute and courageous Naval Force shall at all time encourage fantastical, jolly, and enjoyable maritime shenanigans.

The tone of the group charter is playful and an equally playful attitude becomes evident in the member profiles: “Circus strongman turned Professor of High Adventure. Owner of a flying circus and possibly the first steam elephant with a taste for people” and, a little bit farther:

An all-too-curious, flighty-and-silly, very-very-serious mechanical girl who likes hyphens-and-things. 'Cornelia' stands for Central Operations Repository for a New Entity (Capable) of Love, Intelligence, and Awareness. Fond of song, dance, fine literature, pretty dresses, clunky gears, black taffy, people in masks, fuzzy monsters, etc. Oh, and hyphens.

The role-play visible both in the group charter and in the two profiles is foregrounded in a manner similar to that which Richard Schechner labels twice-behaved. The playful tone of these texts is in itself a marker of a performance signalling the make-believe character of what is about to happen. It reveals, points to, underlines and displays. As “restored behaviour” it is marked, framed, and heightened. The group charter for the Imperial Navy of Caledon juxtaposes expressions such as “sworn duty” with more mundane phrases such as “generally hang about” and tops it all off by mentioning the really big hats, framed as a requirement when enjoying as well as encouraging the maritime shenanigans they are there to create. This playful, make-believe quality can be found in the individual resident profiles as well. The circus strongman is the owner of a flying circus as well as a self-proclaimed professor of “High Adventure” and he invokes the steampunk elements by mentioning his steam elephant as well as creates a stage set apart from the ordinary by mentioning his elephant’s taste for people. Cornelia’s performance is equally removed

from everyday life as she frames herself as a mechanical wordsmith who likes dresses as well as clunky gears. She is clearly a steampunk character.

The above quotes from the resident profiles also foreground the textual nature and the Caledon community's flirt with literature. Continuing on the literary thread, the following quotation, taken from Rudyard Kipling's "The Palace," was found in one of the resident profiles: "When I was a King and a Mason—A master Proved and skilled, I cleared me ground for a palace Such as a King should build. I decreed and cut down to my levels, Presently, under the silt, I came on the wreck of a Palace Such as a King had built!" Some of the residents thus borrow lines from literary works in order to highlight or chisel out certain aspects of their characters. In this manner, the Caledonians are building their online personas. The profiles are in themselves, in most cases, much more elaborate, and perhaps also more "literary," than the member profiles of other groups. I will give you two more examples. The first one sets up juxtapositions between high and low in a manner similar to the examples above, whereas the second back-story is more straightforward but nevertheless written in a "Caledon mode:"

I came from a distant land to see what the world had to offer to a young pixie with a taste for adventure. I found a very nice circus strongman to look after me (well, more like the other way around, but you get the idea...) and a mad scientist to tease (yay!). And I've only killed him once, so far... I mostly wander about in Caledon (a truly wonderful, friendly place) when I'm not helping NN with the Circus. I like it here, there are far fewer things that eat pixies.

Wife to the handsome, talented and charming NN. Countess of Primbroke, in Caledon. Originally from Upper Canada, a colony of Great Britain, My explorer father took my mother, brother Gunnar and I into Rupert's land at a young age, where he met with an untimely end. Our mother remarried to Mr. Eclipse, a learned man with a wandering foot as well. On an expedition, they contracted typhoid and died, leaving their children to their own devices. Now residing in the Oregon Territory.

An Example of Caledon Role-Play

What can be seen below is a more coherent example of role-play in action. It is not a chat log from role-play inside *Second Life*, but rather a continuation and summary of such a role-play continued on the blogs written by the two "main characters." On her blog, Miss Puddlegum summarises the role-play in which she takes part:

Miss Palabra Puddlegum opened a now defunct bookstore in Caledon Victoria City. [S]he accepted a loan from a seemingly respectable businessman, Mr. Onyx Plutonian[, who] has been revealed as half-demon and caused Miss Puddlegum nothing but trouble. Currently, Mr. Plutonian seems to be brokering a marriage between himself and the unfortunate lady. Previously, Mr. Plutonian has forced Miss Puddlegum to wear an enchanted ring.

Most of the interactions mentioned in the summary above have taken place inside *Second Life*, but the role-play now continues on their blogs, as Mr. Plutonian, in an attempt to control his business investment and as a prerequisite for giving Miss Puddlegum an extension on her unpaid loan, has indeed given her an enchanted ring and he writes about his intentions with the arrangement, on his blog:

I told Miss Puddlegum that her extension would be contingent upon her wearing a certain ring which I had Gordon present to her. The ring is a relic I acquired some time ago in the course of my field research. It has the sometimes useful property of enabling a psychic link between the giver and receiver.... My intent was to provide a more immediate mode of communication between Miss Puddlegum and my Gordon which I hoped would facilitate their cooperation... Miss Puddlegum did not take the gift at all as I had anticipated. In fact she reacted quite alarmingly. (Plutonian)

The servant Gordon is described as having been an ordinary human male, but was transformed by Mr. Plutonian into a diminutive female mechanical doll/slave often, which Mr. Plutonian has the habit of dressing up in pretty dresses. Mr. Plutonian consequently refers to Gordon as a “she,” whereas Miss Puddlegum prefers the pronoun “he.” The psychic connection established by the ring between Miss Puddlegum and Gordon has unexpected consequences, however, as Miss Puddlegum recounts:

Gordon and I participated in one of our strange little aetheric communications by way of Mr. Plutonian’s damnable ring. During the course of the conversation, we discovered that Gordon had been courting a certain woman — or, rather, her father. His goal in the spice trade was not merely to make his fortune for fortune’s sake, but to earn the blessing of this father to court and marry his daughter. As it happened, the father was a baronet located in the Highlands. He was my father. This, it seems is how my parents proposed to provide for me, and the interference of a certain cat demon is the reason for which their plan failed. It is not without concern that I receive this information. I know nothing of what Gordon

was like prior to becoming the property of Mr. Plutonian. Perhaps he was a dashing gentleman. Perhaps he would have made a pleasant sort of husband. I find it more than curious that Mr. Plutonian has meddled with my once intended and now does so with me. I cannot fathom what his designs against us might be, but I entertain no doubts of their nefariousness. The man must be stopped!

Appalled about this "dollification," Miss Puddlegum indicates how it is carried out as her friend Miss Wendyslippers Charisma pays her a visit, while at the same time commenting on the laws and customs of Caledon:

Miss Charisma, I should note, is a "doll." She is sort of a clockwork person accustomed to being a plaything for others. Naturally, then, she is ill accustomed to Caledonian custom and law pertaining to the equality of all avatars. It is illegal to discriminate against avatars for their physical forms, be they human, humanoid, furry, mechanical, or other. She is also a bit taken aback by our custom of formality between strangers and casual acquaintances. We call people by their proper titles or by Mr., Mrs., or Miss. Dolls, by contrast, call those who play with them by their first names or even by endearing nicknames.... [Miss Charisma] is a dollmaker by trade, and it appears as though the devilish Mr. Plutonian has sent more than one of his underlings to her for transformation. I shudder to think what his designs against me may be. I am just glad to have sold the store. Now, I can repay the demon and be free of him. Perhaps that is the best news of all!

The last comment gives an indication to what has happened to Gordon, and alerts Miss Puddlegum further with regard to Mr. Plutonium's plans for herself. It also indicates her own strategies for escaping the man, which becomes further explained here:

I still fear [Mr. Plutonium's] reaction when I pay him and go on my way.... I endeavor to temper my fear of this demon with reason. Whatever his designs upon me may be, Mr. Plutonian is a businessman. I am certain that he will see the benefit of accepting his loan back with interest rather than remaining tied to a risky investment such as myself.

Mr Plutonium does not seem to agree and he reveals his views Miss Puddlegum as well as his wish to further influence her:

Gordon informed me that Miss Puddlegum's thoughts were becoming increasingly cloudy, so much so that they were effecting my dear maid's clarity as well. I determined that the symptoms were indicative of strong drink, or perhaps an indulgence in certain opiates.... For one, I was concerned for the good lady's health. For another, I feared for her reputation.... I also admit to a bit of selfishness in this regard. My close association with Miss Puddlegum puts my own reputation at risk as well, not to mention my investment in her business. I resolved to confront the lady concerning her behavior upon our next meeting. She is still young, and thus may not consider the wider implications of her actions. With her parents gone and no governess to provide guidance I feel it is only my duty as a gentleman to offer what advice I may.

In his account of their next encounter he admits to feeling...

...ill at ease calling on Miss Puddlegum unannounced, but in some cases one must put aside the strictures of propriety for the sake of safety. She received us rather coldly, but I somewhat expected that she might. Dear Gordon joined us later after having completed her errands for the day. We explained our purpose and Miss Puddlegum admitted the cause of her distress. I will not go into details here. Were they to become known, however, I fear the lady's reputation would be forever ruined. I tried to explain my concerns to her and to offer what assistance I was able, but she insisted that she had the matter well in hand....

Miss Puddlegum's next blog entry reveals her anger and despair after the same meeting. In it she gives an account of their interaction from her point of view, while at the same time confirming Gordon's transformation from a man into a doll:

Anger hardly seems an adequate word to describe the depth and breadth of my rage.... I had the misfortune of being interrupted by the beast and his cohorts just as I was preparing to leave for the Blue Mermaid. He had with him that awful Merricks woman and also Gordon, whom he had bound and gagged in a most shocking manner. Even more disturbing, Gordon's skin shone waxy and his back sported a new brass key. My disapproval of Mr. Plutonian's treatment of his underling prompted me to deny the party entry until they had the decency to remove the poor boy's restraints. I offered them no curtsy and flatly denied them tea or refreshments, insisting that the interview remain short.

Beginning by giving a character description of Mr. Plutonian in a subsequent paragraph, Miss Puddlegum is nevertheless forced to see her strategy to get rid of Mr. Plutonian fail:

Mr. Plutonian ... sat like a sultan upon a throne. He never allows his servants to sit in his presence; they must either kneel or stand about him like a gaggle of harem women. Impatient with his nonsense, I declined to sit, myself. Instead, I marched over to him and handed him double his investment. In cash. I then demanded to be free of his awful ring, which I held out to him most adamantly. This displeased him mightily, although I dare say he was eager enough to see the money change hands. Upon accepting my proffered offering, the monster had Merricks ... cite a passage from our contract. In selling the store without consulting him, it seems that I violated a minor stipulation therein. He began to demand recompense whilst insisting that this was a matter of principal rather than of money.... a rather loud disagreement ensued.

After another, somewhat dramatic meeting with Mr. Plutonian, Miss Puddlegum awakens the next morning in a dazed and confused state, and she attempts to make sense of her experiences:

I received a summons from Mr. Plutonian.... The time was set for 7pm.... The invitation had mentioned no other persons, but I wanted a third party [her uncle] to negotiate on my behalf.... Gordon served tea, as usual, and we sat down to discuss the business at hand.... As I sat and sipped my tea, I began to feel curiously relaxed.... Quite unable to follow the men in their conversation, I found myself smiling languidly whilst tapping my feet and my fingers.... It wrapped me like a shroud, as cool and as comfortable as the silken tent walls that surrounded us all.... I suppose I would have quite drifted away were it not for a sudden outburst on the part of my uncle, who accused Gordon of having drugged my tea.... Confused, I looked from one party to the next for what felt like an eternity until my uncle stood up and grasped my by the shoulders. He pulled me forcibly from my seat and began to lead me toward the exit. Mr. Plutonian then sighed and asked Miss Ember [whom Mr. Plutonium calls Dame Sans Merci] to “enforce his desires” or something to that effect, at which point she ordered me to resume my seat. Quite of their own volition, my feet moved to obey her, and I found myself back in my chair. What happened next must have been a dream, for I recall being hoisted over my uncle’s shoulders as he transformed from his human shape into his leonine form. Mr. Plutonian’s eyes glowed a fiery red as bright, flashing dots obscured my vision. I felt myself torn in body and soul, every fiber of my

being reaching and stretching toward that blasted chair no matter how far my uncle carried me. I heard the sound of a sword being drawn as my head hung precariously between the two snarling beasts. Several times, the word betrothed was uttered.

Exercising some damage control, Mr Plutonian writes a letter to Miss Puddlegum on his blog intended to assure her of his good will, while at the same time indicating the power and influence of Dame Sans Merci:

I pray that you are recovered from your bout of illness the other night. I regret that this happened under my roof and hope you will not let the memory thereof dissuade you from future visits either to Thistle Hill or The Empress... I further regret that your sudden illness cut short our discussion.... It is fortunate I took the precaution of having Dame Sans Merci attend.... Dame Merci is quite adept at calming ones mind. In fact, she can be quite enchanting. She also has at her disposal the means of countering diverse assaults.... By now you should have received the details of the arrangement.... If it please you, consider it but an initial offering, a starting point in our negotiations, as it were.... I can have a carriage sent to conduct you thither. Until then I remain Your devoted suitor...

The betrothal is thus confirmed by Mr. Plutonium, and on her blog, Miss Puddlegum gives Mr. Plutonian the following response:

During our meeting in your offices above Thistle Hill, I found my attention to detail impaired by the contents of the tea that you served. My memory is not what it should be. I desire clarification on a certain salient point: to what betrothal do you refer? I have certainly not given my consent to any such offer, nor have I received such.... I am not your betrothed, nor shall I ever be if I can possibly avoid it.... I desire the opportunity to properly reject your suit whilst I am of sound body and mind, a situation of which it seems that I cannot be assured whilst in your presence. Truly, Mr. Plutonian, I am disappointed in your behavior. To drug a young lady's tea in order to trick her into a betrothal is an unspeakable breach of ethics.

Although she secretly calls Mr. Plutonium "a demon" and wishes to "avoid such an eventuality [marriage]," Miss Puddlegum nevertheless contemplates it. She confesses that she is

frightened of the alternative.... a marriage of convenience seems inviting.... According to Gordon, the beast shall expect little more than my attendance at a few social events per week and a rigorous “keeping up of appearances.” I have never been so naive as to imagine that I might marry for love. If I could convince Mr. Plutonian that we should retain separate households, then I daresay a marriage may prove beneficial to both parties. I was raised to be a wife. To this sort of business, at least, I am well suited. I shall know how to act and what to do.

In her response to Mr. Plutonium, Miss Puddlegum adds the following terms that *may* persuade her to accept the proposal of marriage: An assurances that her mind or her free will are not to be tampered with. She does not want to see herself “poisoned or enchanted or dollified.” She also demands the “[f]reedom from and the dissolution of any prior contracts between us... [t]he legal adoption of my ward, Miss Mary Ruby, to be our joint heir... [t]he right to maintain my residence, separate from yours, in my current estate [as well as t]he guarantee of a public ceremony so that I may be reasonably well assured of its legitimacy and of my own cognizance.” In the ensuing negotiations, Miss Puddlegum is calmed down by the “peace and tranquility” of Mr. Plutonian’s country home, but the negotiations are not completely straightforward:

Mr. Plutonian entertains doubts as to the fitness of my ward as his heir... Mr. Plutonian also insists upon an officiant of his choosing for the ceremony itself. That officiant is none other than Miss Ember in her capacity as the Dame Sans Merci.... I really begin to think that Miss Ember is possessed of a devil... Obviously, I refused this condition. I objected most strenuously to the notion of being married in any sort of demonic ceremony and by the person who poisoned my tea. Thus, we find ourselves at an impasse.

Nothing more is said by Miss Puddlegum about the “engagement,” but in a post dated on October 7th, Mr. Plutonium breaks their engagement negotiations as he has decided to leave *Second Life*. He posts the following letter to Miss Puddlegum on his blog:

Embedded RP:

To Miss Palabra Puddlegum, Caledon

My dear lady, it brings me no joy to inform you that I must depart these lands immediately and for the foreseeable future. I have greatly enjoyed our association and wish you great

good fortune in your future endeavors. I hereby absolve you of all contractual and social obligations to me or my agents. You ... may now remove the ring I gifted you. I ask only that you check in on Gordon now and then as she may feel somewhat cast adrift.

Mr. Plutonium's and Miss Puddlegum's scenario was played out over several months, from the Spring to the Autumn of 2010. Both of them are very clear about when they act in character — an example of this can be seen in Mr. Plutonium's latest entry: "Embedded RP" — and when they post blog entries out of character. Both of them take pains to act in character involving many allusions to the late 19th century, such as hypnosis, the role of women, and both of them adjust their language and use the appropriate way of addressing each other.

The Social, Make-Belief Power Game

The IC roles in Caledon thus build upon what is considered believable in a Victorian, steampunk context, but, as indicated above, the Caledon covenant primarily focuses on building as a foundation for social interaction, an idea which seems to have spread over the entire *Second Life* Steamlands. As a result, the out of character relationships take the centre stage and are just as important as the role-playing activities, and in Mr. Plutonium's case they even influence the role-play as he leaves *Second Life*. First and foremost it seems to be the line "[a]n avatar may express ideas and opinions without fear of retribution" in the covenant that has been taken seriously by many Caledonians. In the blogs and discussion forums, the leadership in Caledon is generally not criticised, however, instead Linden Lab decisions often become the focus of dissatisfaction. The fact that Desmond Shang as decided to side-step the market place for land ownership arranged by the Linden Lab indicates the Caledon leadership's displeasure with the this aspect of the Linden Lab plan and the wish to find alternative solutions, that are in accordance with the values and customs of Caledon. Ordinal Malaprop explains Shang's viewpoint:

[Desmond Shang's system] does provide a counterpoint to the "let the market decide and everything will work out" attitude that seems to be promoted widely (mostly by, er, market capitalists :D) ... some of the interviews with Philip [Rosedale, then Linden Lab CEO] do reveal a definite philosophical bias. Which I think is being disproved.... There is a sort of crude "libertarian" assumption, that a few simple mechanical laws to do with property rights plus a lack of any regulation will result in utopia which is of course rubbish. And has been proved to be rubbish.... At least in the arena of Second Life.

With Desmond Shang acting as a role-model in this case, the residents in Caledon find no reason not to voice their own displeasure and many of the Caledonians are openly critical of various Linden Lab decisions. In his blog, Otenth Paderborn rallies against both their decision to gain greater control over their trademark⁶⁶, but also against Linden Lab turning off the possibility to comment on the *Second Life Maintenance blog* posts, in a, by Caledon standards, characteristically cheeky and ironic way:

Over on the Official [our favorite virtual world] Blog, they have comments turned off on a post informing us of Group Chat Maintenance:

You may experience temporary disruption in group chat. The disruption will consist mainly of group chats ending and receiving errors when chatting within the group.

Closing the group chat tab and reopening the chat should restore the group chat function.

And that would be different how?

[4/13/08 edit: removed link as well as name, because if they don't want me using their name, they don't deserve to get any search ranking from me, either.]

Similar to Otenth Paderborn's critique of Linden Lab trademark discussions, Malaprop reacts against the lively discussion about copybots — programs that can copy and redistribute, i.e. steal, someone else's creations in *Second Life*.

There is nothing at all *new* about any of this.... as far as I can see, this "copybot 2" is just a simple modification of the "testclient" that is freely available.... There are *no physical countermeasures* - at least, none which will prevent people from copying designs and textures as presented in SL.... The only countermeasures, therefore, are *social* ones. There is the option of relying, instead of on simple product sales, on things which cannot be duplicated - services, customised versions, work on special and personalised products. ... The other part of this is that the Gods of the World, the Blessed Lindens, must actively enforce matters of copyright and duplication, to a far greater degree than they do at the moment. (emphasis in the original)

As a talented scripter and programmer, Malaprop encourages the authority, the Linden Lab, to take responsibility for things that are not working inside *Second Life*. To promote and safeguard copyright policies and market ideologies has been Linden Lab's focus from the beginning, and Malaprop points out that their programming, in this case, is in fact

⁶⁶ In March 2008, the Linden Lab decided to restrict the use of the Second Life trademark.

counterproductive to that aim. She concludes that this issue has to be dealt with by other measures, social ones, which the Linden Lab has avoided as much as possible, since this ultimately involves strengthening a unit within the company to function as a police and juridical system. This unit exists, and it has grown larger and more influential over the last few years, but copybots have not yet led to any results in terms of rules or legislation. Malaprop's interest in the issue, as well as her critical view of it is, in itself, in line with Caledon's history of subversion of Linden Lab policies.

Yet another critical voice is raised in late July 2007 as journalist and editor-in-chief Chris Anderson of the *Long Tail* decides to leave *Second Life*. An article in *Wired* portrayed *Second Life*'s failure "as an advertising vehicle" because of what he labels the "there's nobody there" problem, and the fact that conventional companies usually do not generate enough traffic to their places inside *Second Life* to warrant their presence. Commenting on this, and despite her usually negative attitude towards the Linden Lab, Ordinal Malaprop takes the side of *SL* and stresses the need for interesting content:

I'm a bit tired of people saying "oh we didn't get the response we wanted therefore *SL* is rubbish"... "SL is less 'banner-ad', more 'value-add'".... "Added value", in that, to attract people, you have to offer them something.... I compared it to YouTube. If a video there isn't funny, it won't work. Nobody will watch it or send it to their friends. Complaining that a static build is not attracting visitors is like complaining that your company advert isn't attracting viewers.... Or like putting out one issue of *Wired*, and complaining that people don't keep buying it.... But, you know, the ones who don't get it will just be replaced by the ones who do.

Malaprop's target is the people who are trying to make money in digital environments, but do not seem to understand the medium enough to succeed. It has become clear that many Caledonians are disappointed in the manner in which the Linden Lab is running *Second Life*. Just like Chris Anderson, they even contemplate leaving. Zoe Connolly, a Royal Caledon Air Force member, describes her point of view and her intention to persevere:

As angry and sad as many of us are, Linden Labs will do whatever it does regardless of any of our noisy selves.... Caledon may change but we WILL survive as a nation. And Caledon WILL have the Royal Caledon Air Force as part of her protection and defense.... Whether this Openspace fiasco was a conspiracy or some messy accident, I have little trust in Linden Labs. Perhaps this will change over time.

Other steampunk aficionados, like Otenth Paderborn who used to spend most of his online time in Caledon or in the rest of the Steamlands, has decided to cut down his investment in *Second Life*:

Several months ago I sold my remaining sim in Second Life shortly after one of the two tenants I had left. I realized I didn't want to be a landlord, and the cost of owning a sim had become much larger than the entertainment value it was worth. So I did a cost/benefit analysis of sorts, and I decided how much money I was willing to pay each month for my fun in Second Life.

Taking the many Linden Lab layoffs of the Summer of 2010 into account, Paderborn expresses his increased "sense of unease about the business health of Linden Research" and says that although he does not "want Linden Research, Inc., to go out of business," since he enjoys his *Second Life*, he nevertheless takes the financial aspects into account and compares the costs to what he gains:

[T]he only pleasure it offers, in and of itself, is landscaping and building. Almost all of the joy I get out of Second Life is the result of communities.... This week I became a true resident of Steelhead.... There are several reasons I chose Steelhead, many having to do with the owners.... I've met them in real life and liked them; they are actively engaged in Steelhead socially; and they keep up with the cutting edge of virtual world-related technology, including keeping an eye on alternatives to Second Life. (It is this last characteristic that makes them stand out from my other favorite land barons who share the first two.) And to the extent that I've been socially engaged in Second Life of late, it is with the people of Steelhead.

The community is indeed that which makes many of them stay inside *Second Life*. Anne-Marie Salloum remarks upon the tightly knit community she has found in Caledon:

[O]ne of the things that strikes me the most about Caledon has nothing... to do with its time period.... Caledon is a community. The people there, at least the ones who spend a significant amount of time there, not only know each other, but they know each other's interests and projects and ask after them or offer help.... When I asked people on the chat channel what attracted them to Caledon, only two people brought up the historical setting as one of their major motivators. Most of the answers I received focused on the

people there, the community. They said its residents were friendly, courteous, creative, intelligent, fun. One woman said that her fascination with things Victorian was actually a result rather than a cause of her involvement in the Caledon community.

The feeling of community, which has developed in Shang's Caledon, is thus the main reason why most of these residents decide to stay despite their feeling of losing the fight for influence and participation in decision-making processes vis-à-vis the Linden Lab.

Are the Steamlands Moving On?

The community spirit and the friends they have made are thus what makes them stay, but, as indicated above, many people in the Steamlands are in one way or another dissatisfied with the manner in which *Second Life* is being run, and some of the comments show that their discontent has led an increasing number of residents to contemplate leaving SL. On her blog, Eladrienne Laval comments on the news that the Victoriana region is closing in March 2010:

It is always sad to hear of a major Steamlands region closing and the community of Victoriana will be doing so at the end of the month. Mayor LittleBlackDuck Lindsay cited many reasons, first and foremost being his frustration with Linden Labs and many of their recent policies, oversights and inaction. I do feel for Victoriana's residents, as one does become vested in their community and I am sorry to hear of this happening.

Mayor LittleBlackDuck Lindsay, who claims to have spent over 30,000 USD on his labour of love, the Victoriana project, over the last two years, states the following reasons for actually leaving *Second Life*:

I've been a SecondLife citizen since July 2006 and have seen many wonderful things come (and go) on this grid. Over the past twelve months I can't help but notice the "cons" of living and working on a Linden grid far outweigh the benefits. DAILY grid issues with logins, transactions, inventory and lag, continually spoil everyone's experience. I personally have lost a considerable amount of inventory over the past twelve months alone.... Linden is working hard to improve the experience for new users on the grid, something I feel very passionately about, however in the process of changing their mind on how to achieve this every five minutes, they are effectively hurting everyone involved and destabilising the economy.

LittleBlackDuck Lindsay lists several examples of Linden Lab decisions which has influenced his decision, and I will mention two of them. The first one is the "free homes to Premium members" drive, which enables anyone with a Premium account to claim a piece of land and a house. This has, in Lindsay's words, "effectively devalued any land or sims people have spent their hard earned money on. Why buy a plot of land for a home when you can get it for free?" Land prices in *Second Life* have indeed dropped significantly since the introduction of these Linden homes, and few new residents are interested in buying or renting houses anymore. Lindsay's other example, the mentor programme, in which a team of residents were to welcome new residents and give them information about anything about which they might be confused. He describes how these residents "offered their time for FREE" as well as bought, built and maintained gateways with their own money, only to find out that "Linden is now in the process of dumping the gateway program completely" rendering their work obsolete. Although he was not one of the mentors, he regards this as a sign of bad judgment on Linden Lab's part. As of August 2010 the Community Gateway program is indeed no longer supported by the Linden Lab (*Second Life Wiki*). LittleBlackDuck Lindsay ends his account with the following words: "Thank you for your time, efforts and for generally helping to make Victoriana a fun place for me and everyone to visit. Off to OpenSim⁶⁷ I go." He wishes to continue his contacts with the Steamland community, but not at the cost involved in remaining in *Second Life*.

Continuing on the same thread, but in a manner that does not mention Linden Lab at all, Desmond Shang issues a press release in December 2009 presenting the new Caledonian colonies:

For the first time ever, the micronation of Caledon will establish a Crown Colony on another world. Within a few days, a preview of this colony will open to both Caledon citizens and the native Blue Mars population. The colony has been named Caledonia, a largely forested temperate highland surrounded by the deep waters of this recently terraformed new world. (*Prim Perfect*)

Caledon will, according to Desmond Shang, still remain inside *Second Life*, however, but new frontiers are being explored and discovered. Eladrienne Laval sums up the current mood in the Steamlands in the following way:

⁶⁷ "OpenSimulator is an open source multi-platform, multi-user 3D application server. It can be used to create a virtual environment (or world) which can be accessed through a variety of clients, on multiple protocols. OpenSimulator allows virtual world developers to customize their worlds using the technologies they feel work best" (Open Sim).

I used to love being inworld and creating and blogging. I used to love attending social events and exploring the Grid. I've gotten so tired of hearing about other people's dramas as they rant/complain/gripe their way through their time inworld. Why are you even in SL if it all sucks that much for you? That, combined with my own lack of motivation to create, has been a great source of inworld stress for me and you know what? I've been doing other things instead. I'm sure that it'll kick in and I'll be creative again. At least I hope so. Dia and I have talked a lot about "reclaiming one's SL", whether through downsizing, reinvention or taking a break from it (as I have been lately) to make it fun again. We can't be the only ones that have felt this sense of ennui."

In January 2010 even long-term Caledonian Ordinal Malaprop shocks Caledon residents by announcing her retirement from *Second Life*:

I have removed every building and item of mine from the Grid.... Ordinal Enterprises is no longer a functioning operation. I have not abandoned my land - for the moment I will hold onto it. It just won't contain anything of significance.... I can't think that I will be around much in the immediate future - though I expect I will pop back occasionally.

Although she describes how ideas for new inventions kept emerging, she nevertheless felt drained when logging into *Second Life*:

On the occasions when I entered Second Life at all, I found something to irritate me, and I would become bitter and argumentative and also fail to achieve anything. Quite often this would be a technical issue - rarely a *severe* one (grid and regions used to be far less stable and reliable, believe it or not) more often one that was just *stupid*. Alternatively, and increasingly more so recently, it would be a political or social issue arising from dictat or commentary or mistake or some such event.

Even so, Malaprop is not blaming the Linden Lab for this, but she describes how she has increasingly felt "this world is not for me." After an evening of constant scripting errors and other distractions, Ordinal Malaprop decided to delete everything she had built on her land and all her creations, as mentioned above. Four months later, however, Malaprop announces some news:

I am pleased to announce that I have taken up the position of Community Engagement Operative with Linden Laboratory. Please look out for me under my new name, *Ordinal Linden*, and I would love to see any of my readers at my office hours, which are scheduled for five hours before you wake up on any given Wednesday.

It all turns out to be a typical Malaprop prank, however, published on her blog on April 1st, but in October 2010 she *does* decide to return to *Second Life*, and she lists the lack of another creative outlet, and a curiosity to see whether scripting has become more reliable as her reasons for doing so. She also has a third reason for coming back and she admits that she is slightly reluctant to admit this even to herself:

I have said before that I thought that SL was moving in a direction that not only did I not like but which would end in disaster, but nowadays I have the distinct impression that it has gone very, very far down that particular spiral, and may not recover. And something in me *likes* the idea of being around and involved to see that, and appreciate the last days. I could of course be wrong, and very much hope that I am, but increasingly events suggest that the entire Laboratory [the Linden Lab] is being turned towards the direction that is currently so popular with "Social Networks" - the delusional split between consumer/creator, as previously stated, where consumer-users sit about paying for things made by businesses, hopefully without appreciating that in fact, *they themselves are the only valuable thing in the network.* (Italics in the original)

With these words, Ordinal Malaprop is back. She may still not appreciate all Linden Lab decisions, but she does appreciate the creativity *Second Life* offers and is curious to see in what way it continues to change.

Accounts such as these, as well as the residents' profiles, show that the majority of the residents in the Steamlands are happily inscribing themselves in the Caledon context, and they seem to have little reason to oppose Desmond Shang, perhaps because the covenant does not include extensive regulation for the community. Instead the focus of the power struggle in Caledon is aimed at Linden Lab decisions and strategies. In more or less serious attempts to influence Linden Lab decisions residents like Otenth Paderborn, Ordinal Malaprop, Zoe Connolly, LittleBlackDuck Lindsay, and Eladrienne Laval thus utilise the textual, verbal and argumentative skills so commonly used in the Caledon community. In their blogs they take on, and establish themselves in, the roles of concerned citizens. They are a part of *Second Life*, but at the same time they are open to

experimenting with alternatives and to question the establishment. They take part in debates focusing on the running of *Second Life* and they challenge the Linden Lab to make decisions that can create a better user experience, at least from their point of view. Just like Governor Shang, they are prepared to discuss regulations and policies or negotiate alternative ways of governing, programming or creating new economic structures. All of them are individuals executing their right to criticise the “government” the way they would do in a democratic country with a freedom of speech clause. But as has been stressed above, Linden Lab is a private company. From a Linden Lab perspective the company is providing a service, *Second Life*, to clients, a service brought to them as it stands. Development and programming are mainly controlled by the company and it has not encouraged extensive input from the residents (although a small group of *Second Life* residents was previously invited to give input and Ordinal Malaprop has been a part of this group). Similar to the situation in *Second Life Gor*, there seems to be no real forum for this type of discussion with the “Gods” (as Malaprop somewhat ironically refers to the Linden Lab), neither inside nor outside of *Second Life*, and this might indicate the difference between viewing *SL* as a service versus seeing it as a community or platform for creation, communication, and interaction. This seems to be the main power struggle, the power game, in the context of the Caledon community.

Caledon Roles

The Independent State of Caledon is Governor Desmond Shang’s private idea of utopia sprung to life on the performative, digital platform of *Second Life*. The role-play in Caledon is aided by the coherent visual environment. The role-players draw on any knowledge they have gained in literature or film, but also in the interaction with each other, about Victorian Great Britain and a steampunk aesthetic. As seen in the group charter, in the resident profiles, as well as in the interaction between Miss Puddlegum and her suitor Mr. Plutonium above, the role-play ranges from large events performing naval battles or air shows to more private one-on-one scenes. Regardless of their form, the make-believe roles in Caledon are clearly marked as such. The role-players either use “Victorian” language, humour or simply write “embedded RP” or “in character” to mark what they are communicating as performance. It can therefore be concluded that the boundary between being in character and interacting out of character is being upheld to a point where even visitors “change their behaviour quite quickly” to a make-believe state simply because the environment and the inhabitants of the Independent State of

Caledon invites it, and despite the fact that neither Guvnah Desmond Shang nor the Caledon covenant outline such a division.

In terms of social or make-belief role-play, Caledon has its own way of "playing" which is not necessarily based on establishing or upholding power hierarchies but on providing a open and tolerant arena for whatever is interesting to each resident and does not violate the community rules or *Second Life's Terms of Service*. The Caledonians are not just role-players springing to life inside *Second Life*, they are simultaneously knowledgeable, informed and mature citizens in a physical realm, and they use all their knowledge and ideas when they discuss the future of Caledon and the future of *Second Life*. In this way, Caledon functions as a social space facilitating negotiation and subversion, encouraging opposition as well as discussion in various ways. The social roles that are developed within the context of Caledon stress several of the Caledonian values and avatar rights principles, with the "inherent worth and dignity of everyone" viewing "all as equal" as the primary one, but they also reflect the views of the offline people taking part in the online discussion. The "typists" of these avatars are people, citizens of a country somewhere, with its own laws, norms, and customs, and many of them have varying ideas about the importance and definition of free speech. This makes the third section of the Caledon covenant, "Freedom of Speech," particularly interesting as it renders a discussion about an important, albeit, in the digital realm, controversial, issues possible. Although limited by the Linden Lab term against slander, hate speech and harassment, this clause provides the space for people originating in many different countries to reflect on and discuss issues relating to grid-wide "laws," conventions, and changes. The fact that the Caledonians are discussing issues of democracy and resident participation often leads to the community standing on opposite sides vis-à-vis a profit-oriented, private company such as the Linden Lab. The social roles they take on, especially with regards to the Linden Lab, are make-belief in their nature. The main goal of the Caledonians seems to have been to influence *Second Life* on a general level, to test the Linden Lab's leadership, the boundaries of programming as well as the emerging social rules. If they think they have failed to reach that goal, if they can sense that their voices are not being heard, several of them begin to reconsider their involvement in *Second Life*.

Conclusion:

Make-Believe and Make-Belief Performances

"The Herald took note of the episode as another example of why virtual worlds need to be watched as closely as the real one."

Peter Ludlow & Mark Wallace, 100

Second Life is a medium which provides tools to build games and fantasies as well as an opportunity for identity construction and more direct, actual communication and interaction, which is the reason why some episodes in online worlds such as this one need to be watched, as Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace suggest. The episodes Ludlow and Wallace refer to take place as a result of people interacting, negotiating, quarrelling, or perhaps attempting to establish power hierarchies — exactly in the same way as in any environment, digital, physical, or social — and, as Ludlow and Wallace imply, the events happening inworld may carry just as much weight, and be as important to monitor, as anything happening in the world outside of *Second Life*. It might be worth noting that *Second Life* is a medium with certain characteristics that are suitable for certain types of interaction and activities. Tor Pharos points out that Gorean communities have had a presence in many different media for a long time — "the billboards of the early '90s, then Geo-cities, IRC, IRQ, then yahoo, Palace, Kingdoms, the SIMS and lastly SL" — and several of the Goreans have indicated that the Gorean presence in *SL* is due to Linden Lab's previously relaxed, laissez-faire attitude towards groups, which, in the eyes of the mainstream, might appear controversial. A similar development can be viewed in the Independent State of Caledon and among the *Second Life* Nekos, although the group members of these communities base their decisions on other criteria. If and when *SL*, or, in the Neko case, *Ning*, does not provide the platform they want, many people are willing to reconsider and move somewhere else. These groups select their venues on the basis of being able to continue doing whatever they wish to do, which highlights the

transferability between various media, various "worlds." A parallel can be found in current political events as some Arab countries have, at the time of writing,⁶⁸ foregrounded what is described as the power of social media in what has become known as the "Facebook revolution" (C. Taylor). To date there has been no "Second Life revolution" leading to offline consequences similar to the Facebook one, but these events displays the various ways of meeting, interacting, and the sharing of ideas between the members of the many online communities, and these networks are manifesting in several media simultaneously. It can be concluded that media such as *SL*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, or various other fora on the Internet do not have any power in and of themselves. Instead, it is the organisations and people who use them who strive for positions of power in a make-belief manner, and, by doing so, these people and organisations might be able to affect change online as well as offline. As a result, where there is influence to be had, some kind of control is usually developed and the people using social media in the above manner will most likely be monitored closely, as Ludlow and Wallace suggest.

Second Life as Performative Space

Social media thus have many uses and whereas people do not have to role-play in *Second Life* quite a few choose to do so, which brings us back to the primary focus of this dissertation. It can be concluded that *SL* is both a social and a performative arena, in which make-believe as well as make-belief performances take place and are negotiated within a framework of rules and norms. Out of the millions of people who frequent this digital arena and use it in a multitude of ways, I have decided to focus on role-players and the manner in which they switch between dramatic role-play, in character or make-believe, and social role-play, out of character, which often becomes make-belief. All the role-play happening among the Nekos, in Midian City, in *Second Life Gor*, as well as in the Independent State of Caledon, is carried out in different ways depending on context and focus. The rules formulated by the Linden Lab become the foundation for the various types of role-play. These have, in turn, been influenced by government decisions, primarily in the United States, since the Linden Lab is located in San Francisco, but also by decisions made elsewhere in the world, for example the European Union. These actors shape the basic framework for everything that happens inside *Second Life*, and as such they set the boundaries for how things are done, as becomes evident in the study of the four

⁶⁸ 11 April 2011. We have seen political unrest in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Libya and the protestors have often relied upon social media for their information exchange.

communities I have chosen to focus on in my dissertation. These four share the common feature of being some kind of role-play community, but, as I have shown, they are simultaneously very different from each other, which is the main reason for my decision to study them. Their power hierarchies are different from each other, their aim varies, the manner in which they role-play differ, as do the rules governing that role-play, although all of them are based on Linden Lab's *Terms of Service*, the "Big Six." Focusing primarily on having fun in a manner that does not push any legislative limits, the Nekos do not seem to be overly concerned about this aspect since very little is said about it on the forum, but the members of the other communities seem to reflect upon it in various ways. *Second Life Gor* and *Midian City* primarily discuss these in terms of the way it afflicts their community. Voices in *Gor* express feelings of having been let down by Linden Lab's promises of an open and permissive environment with no restrictions, as more and more inworld "laws" have been passed. The tightening of the *Terms of Service*, which encourages the reporting of offensive content, seems to be the one rule that has been regarded as posing the largest threat to the *Gor* community, since there is a widespread feeling among *Goreans* that their culture would not pass for being politically correct. In *Midian City* administrators have noticed that some role-players disappeared as age verification became mandatory. Although these communities notice the changes and react to them, most of them nevertheless accept the decisions made by the Linden Lab. Another view is noticeable in *Caledon* as they primarily seem to react against glitches in the programming, against what they see as changes for the worse in the Linden Lab work force, and the seemingly unstable general aim for *Second Life* at the Linden Lab.

The people who take part in the Neko, *Midian City*, and *Second Life Gor* communities are primarily virtual communitarians and Internet entrepreneurs. As long as their business or socialising activities are not in serious jeopardy, they seem to adapt to any changes the Linden Lab is proposing, and have no serious wish to rock the boat. While not being hackers set on causing disruption and havoc, *Caledon* nevertheless represents a group of people who previously have worked together with the Linden Lab on for instance programming issues. They are, to some extent, established techno-meritocrats like the Linden Lab, but the company no longer asks for the help of the *Caledonians* in the way they did when *Second Life* was new, and they are therefore not in a position to seriously affect matters in *SL* anymore and have to adjust, like everyone else, to decisions made by the company. The only solution the *Caledonians* have found to this problem is to leave *Second Life*. It might not be possible to create an arena which would fit all these different preferences, ideals, fantasies and wishes. That the slogan "Your World, Your Imagination"

has not survived the changes at the Linden Lab might be an indication of this, but *Second Life* has nevertheless proven to be an interesting arena for studying issues of identity construction and roles on the border between fiction and reality.

Performative Utopias and Their Consequences

In my research I have shown that the overarching goal of the make-believe performances in the role-play communities in *Second Life* is to create what I would call *performative utopias*. These are performative in the sense that creating it is a performative act on behalf of the creator. The act itself is a form of self-expression and the outcome is a space for collaborative role-play, which, as we have seen above, also is performative. Additionally, these spaces are utopian in the sense that they become visual and social realisations of the creators' ideas or ideals, and depend upon the acceptance and cooperation of others. All four role-play communities in my study point to this as the people in leadership positions aim to create the environment of their own private dreams. Jade Steele tells the story of the birth of Midian City, in which a few individuals get together and have an idea of what kind of role-play environment they would like to create. They are eager to see what the idea of their own ideal environment might result in, they visualise and create their own dream, and although they might not primarily create it only for themselves, since they have a role-play community in mind, they nevertheless have their own value system and focus as a guiding star. It is a dream or fantasy which usually incorporates a visual environment, an idea of what people can do there, as well as an idea of what they do *not* wish to see there. These often sketchy ideas create the foundation for their community and the basis of the role-playing rules. They create their own performative utopia imbued with their own ideas and ideals. As other role-players discover this new role-play space, and perhaps like what they see, they might stay and play, perhaps even become involved in the running of the community, thus adding *their* own idea of their private utopia into the mix. However, the more people get involved, the more various ideas of performative utopias need to be negotiated. People might fight to keep their own utopia and unwanted individuals might be thrown out and/or banned. People might settle for someone else's and consider it good enough, but if someone suddenly realises that the community evolves in a direction he or she thinks is wrong, that person might decide to break away and perhaps begin to create their own performative utopia, or try to find another community that might suit them better. Whereas this might prove difficult in the often overpopulated physical realm, this is definitely still possible in *Second Life*. In addition to this, new digital land can be added quite easily. If someone who wishes to create their personal

performative utopia, but does not care for Linden Lab regulations or policies, other online worlds are easily accessible today, which might provide a more suitable environment, which has led to a multitude of new personal performative utopias being created on a daily basis.

A consequence worth considering is the game developer's role and impact on these performative utopias. Let us look at the banning feature Linden Lab has chosen to program into their platform. It has the side-effect that it facilitates a leader's silencing of any opposition and limits unwanted peoples' access using the exit agreement: "You don't like it? Please leave." Both landowners and visitors are fully aware of the power possibility to throw out unwanted visitors if they do not leave voluntarily. Ultimately, this makes true negotiation of social space impossible in *Second Life*. The take-it-or-leave-it approach, "it's my fantasy (and my money) and this is the way I want my space" is easily enforced and defended. Politicians in the physical world confront similar issues and many realise that quick fixes are not viable options, and this is perhaps also what the community leaders, the sim owner, and perhaps also the Linden Lab are discovering. In the past the Linden Lab has attempted to solve social problems with programming, slowly realising that this often results in more problems and that social guidelines are indeed needed. Although not a traditional government, ruling over a piece of physical land, the Linden Lab nevertheless has taken on "government" responsibilities. They have become the "state" in Michel Foucault's terms. Unlike most physical governments, however, the Linden Lab is a company and its main interest lies in generating revenue. They have a less complicated aim than most governing bodies: Their role is to provide, in the most economic way, a platform on which people want to invest their time and money. As any company, they will want to spend as little time as possible on unhappy customers and as much time as possible on harvesting the revenue. From that point of view, it is generally not a problem for them to have residents who role-play in *SL Gor* or in the Independent State of Caledon. Involvement in these communities (any community, for that matter) increases the Linden Lab's chances for creating a prospering company, and therefore they do not usually take a stand if, for instance, Gorean slaves feel abused. A solid financial situation might be too important an incentive both on an individual and governmental level. Money can indeed buy the "perfect fantasy" in *Second Life*. The idea of a "consensual hallucination" (Gibson 67), has a strong impact on most residents, however. What happens if other residents are unwilling to play along, if they are unwilling to create their avatars in accordance with the community rules decided upon by someone in power to do so? There are quite a few empty sims in *Second Life* which in itself raises many questions around governance in the digital

world. What level of control is necessary for a community to function? What level of freedom is necessary for residents to feel creative and be able to fulfil their wishes and fantasies? What is it worth for Linden Lab to have paying residents on their platform? What is it worth for a resident to have other residents to play with and whose rules are to be followed? These questions are crucial in the power game taking place in *Second Life*, and will probably continue to be so in other digital environments as the digital frontier moves on. This scenario uses the Linden Lab and *Second Life* as an example, but both the benefits and the problems of private utopias, and how they are created and maintained, would be applicable in many other digital contexts.

Creating Fiction

An issue dividing the Nekos, the Midianites, the Goreans, and the Caledonians is the manner in which they deal with fiction and how fictive scenarios, instances of role-play, are framed. No underlying fictive level supports the *Second Life Nekos forum* group, as it does in the other three, but it does have a foundation for role-play in the idea of what cats are like. Many of them draw from the playfulness and individuality of cats, and their avatars, as well as the language some of them use, LOLspeak, reflect this idea. The multitude of possible cat role-models make a single coherent Neko role impossible, however, and, as Nekos from all over the world meet and discuss their different ways of being Neko, it becomes evident that the idea of what performing a Neko "ought to" express is extremely multifaceted. This loosely knit network of Nekos states that this is not required either. The creation of the Neko role, and how to perform it, is, except in the organised role-play settings among the Catwalkers of Midian City or in Ulthar Woods, emergent and completely up to the imagination of the individual. Often this results in people role-playing as Nekos who are basically a "catified" or augmented version of their own personalities. For some of them this augmented self becomes a tool to reinvent themselves as more outgoing, interesting, or fun. Performing a Neko avatar in this manner takes on a make-belief quality, as these are more geared towards shaping one's identity in the aim to create a different or more interesting social reality. A similar tendency can be seen in some of the Neko's attempt to deflect attempts to turn what they describe as a network of Nekos, the *Second Life Nekos forum*, into a community with stronger ties. They frame such a community as impossible to achieve or as something they are not interested in, and this becomes a truth within the community: Nekos are as impossible to herd as cats are. The forum initiator, Stacia Villota, supports this description of the Neko community, but nevertheless encourages the forum members to stay in the group, to be

individuals together, by setting an example. She points out the things they have in common and expresses her joy of seeing them all interacting and connecting. It is important to remember that both these assertions are as much an example of performative acts, intended to influence the rest of the members of the Neko group, as statements about the many descriptions and definitions of their own individualistic Neko-ness are. In this manner the Nekos define and shape their social roles, in fact construct their identities, as well as the group of which they are a part.

The Midian City role-players are brought together by a foregrounded common image and interest, a language-based role-play in a post-apocalyptic, struggling future, which heavily influences the role-play itself as well as its participants. A basic story already exists and the role-players all have to adjust their characters to fit this performative environment. However, the pre-construed fiction not only affects the make-believe aspects of Midian City, it also creates the structure for the make-belief, social, roles there. By creating and managing the Midian City sim, inside the already existing structure of *Second Life*, Baal Zobel and Jade Steele have also built the foundation for the political organisation in Midian. The manner in which the administrators of Midian City are controlling the in-character, make-believe, fictional role-play as well as the out-of-character, social, and often make-belief political structure, has been inscribed in the fictional history of Midian City. As time passes, more and more events are added, and more IC as well as OOC reasons for matters being the way they are. Subsequently, if someone is there from the start, he or she usually has the opportunity to have a larger influence on the fictional story, and thereby also the political or social structure, than someone arriving late to the scene. If the spontaneous Neko role-play is to be described as emergent, today's Midian City role-play ought to be defined as a pre-construed narration which then, within those already established boundaries, becomes emergent.

In Midian City the division between OOC and IC is more clearly articulated than in any of the other three communities. This has raised the awareness among the role-players of the make-believe role and the work of the actor or writer behind it. Being able to create a multi-faceted role, and to play it in a nuanced manner, is held in high esteem. Role-players, who master the skill of emoting and are able to collaboratively create an interesting scene, represent the ideal in Midian City, and role-players such as these often cluster together to create more of the same, which in turn develops an elite within the community. Other role-players, who might want to role-play in a slightly different way, often have difficulties finding their context. As organisational structures change, initiating a new social landscape with new people to influence, a fight begins in which

some role-players use any make-belief tools they have at their disposal. Their aim is to ensure that they can have a say in the shaping of Midian City, to be able to push matters in a direction of their choice. Their goal is to create the perfect scene for their own make-believe role-play, and Jade Steele's open and affirmative leadership style suggests that this might be possible, but the news that she wishes to delegate responsibility suggest the opposite, as more leaders often means more articulated and therefore also more rigid rules. The Midian City community and role-play is in a transition phase, and in this situation the role-players' make-belief strategies are plenty.

In *Second Life Gor* the situation is slightly different. Social OOC roles intent on influencing the hierarchical role-play are seldom seen and rarely seem to be discussed. Instead, the fantasy role-play based on John Norman's *Chronicles of Gor* is in focus, and it is not entirely clear whether it is to be characterised as make-believe or make-belief. Identity construction often seems to incorporate both aspects and this adds to the confusion. Admittedly, plenty of activities framed as make-believe role-play are indeed happening on the Gorean sims, and Shyla Timeless is not alone in attesting that the role-play can be fun, interesting and immersive. This is no doubt the most common way of role-playing in *Second Life Gor*, but, as several of the former slaves attest, the implications of the Gorean stratifications and hierarchical constructs built up as a part of the role-play, and the manner in which these are upheld, point to a make-belief streak which has been embedded in what is framed as a make-believe collaborative performance. The fact that some of the people role-playing in *Second Life Gor* are convinced Gorean lifestylers with an accepting attitude towards ideas of gender-based supremacy highlights a potential problem, and the primarily female former slaves' negative reactions towards the philosophy of Gor underline the existence of a blurred boundary between fantasy and reality and its repercussions. Supported by mainstream *Second Life* and sometimes implicitly also by the Linden Lab, these former slaves react and fight against a growing acceptance in Gor for inequality and control with make-belief connotations. They try to point to the dangers of a mixed perception of reality which can lead to very real consequences for the people involved. Sometimes it may seem as if the make-belief assertions of Gorean philosophy are intended pave the way and to create an acceptance for a Gorean lifestyle independent of the make-believe role-play.

Although not formalised in rules or written suggestions for role-play, the in-character, make-believe role-play at the Independent State of Caledon is clearly framed as such by the use of a Victorian era-inspired language, plenty of distancing irony and humour, and the appropriate clothing for a Victorian time-period. Additionally, the role-

players frequently use markers such as "embedded RP" to further highlight the make-believe character of an interaction, and very little of this is done in the intention to bring about change in their community. However, Caledon is also an arena for make-belief, social interplay intended to affect the people in power, but, as in Midian City, this does not seem to be mixed up with the make-believe role-play. Seemingly not interested in discussing decisions made by the Caledon governor Desmond Shang, the make-belief tendencies are mainly reserved for the testing of technical or legislative boundaries posed by the Linden Lab. By using a formal irony of an Victorian era-inspired language, Caledonians create social roles that function as vocal reminders of earlier decisions about the aim and role of *Second Life*. They target the Linden Lab and question their motives, their methods, and their leadership. If the *Second Life* shoe does not fit, they might very well decide to leave and bring as many Caledonians as they can with them.

In the freedom *Second Life* provides, the creation of fiction is thus possible as well as sought-after. The various roles and scenarios in these communities show a multitude of possible settings and outcomes, and indicate the way in which roles can influence both in character and out of character contexts. The level of organisation differs, as does the seriousness with which they view their role-play and their community. The definition and description of their role-play can easily become another bone of contention, but, for the sake of the role-play and the camaraderie, most residents choose to adapt and adjust themselves to the mainstream narrative.

Twice-Behaved Behaviour

Despite all their differences, what all the four role-play communities seem to have in common is primarily two modes of performance: make-believe and make-belief. Some argue that someone, simply by logging into a digital environment such as *Second Life* and creating an avatar through which to interact, situates himself or herself on a stage. Subsequently all behaviour inworld would be even more overtly twice-behaved than it might be in an everyday setting, simply because it involves channeling yourself through an avatar who might appear as a dragon, a cyborg, a member of the opposite gender, or a flash of lightning. To some degree I might agree with this, but, as I have highlighted on a number of occasions in this dissertation, I do not think the distinction is as clearcut as it might seem. In themselves, the dragon/cyborg/gender-bender/lightning avatars represent a basic type of role-play (which is similar to how many of the Nekos view their Nekoness), but this manner of approaching a role is very similar to how identities are formed in an offline context. Most people are aware of the importance of how we carry ourselves, the

clothes we wear, and the image we project. We use restored or twice-behaved behaviour to signal our belonging, as well as our role as dissidents, in our community or group. Similar to the codes used in communication and interaction we have with other people offline, our online conversations tend to be perceived as genuine because we use the social codes for that type of interaction, unless they are specifically framed as role-play or irony. Another dimension is added if the main reason for spending time in this online world is to role-play,⁶⁹ but, as Jesper Juul argues, whereas the story or narrative often equals the fiction or fantasy in a digital game, the framework of (primarily programmed) rules is real. The unwritten and unexpressed social rules govern this type of interaction in either world, which might give indications of them being make-belief, but they do not necessarily have to be. The symbolic and reflexive nature of the heightened or framed twice-behaved behaviour, which needs "to be decoded by those in the know," is used to signal levels of make-believe as well as make-belief in the role-play communities in *Second Life*.

Gendered Performances and Identity Construction

Several examples of gender construction can be found in the four role-play communities, which, as Erving Goffman suggests, can be regarded as a type of performance. The *Second Life* Nekos, among which the majority have chosen a female avatar, have serious discussions about the nature of a Neko. A Japanese-inspired Neko is often described in terms reminding us of a rather old-fashioned female role — cute, cuddly and perhaps submissive — whereas a more Western-oriented Neko often highlights an independent, assertive, and perhaps even aggressive female, which reminds us of more recent movie heroines such as Carrie-Anne Moss's character Trinity in the *Matrix* trilogy or Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman from the movie *Batman Returns*. Two ideals of what women ought to be like clash in the Neko case, and neither of them seem happy with each other's vision of what a Neko — or perhaps a woman — ought to aspire to become. The male Neko role is almost as complicated. Keshia Arras points out that male Nekos are rare in a Japanese context, and that the term, for a Japanese resident, would indicate a feminine or homosexual boy. Male Nekos of a Western type are slightly more common, but in this case the male Neko role usually matches the Western female one in independence and assertiveness. More often than not, these male Nekos are also involved in various types of

⁶⁹ It might be worth noting that the situation might be very similar in an offline context when someone is playing a role on a theatre stage, for instance. I would argue that a theatrical environment on any platform would create a similar removed or heightened behaviour, i.e. twice-behaved, an environment in which whatever happens makes sense in view of its own logic and its own rules. Here I will limit myself and discuss only the offline social sphere.

usually combat-oriented role-play. In this manner, gender roles are negotiated, discarded as well as reinforced in a *Second Life* Neko context.

A digital 3D environment such as *Second Life* allows for gender experiments and quite a few of the residents have at least one avatar of the opposite sex. Many of them take this as an opportunity to explore what it is like to be a member of the opposite gender. Some of the Nekos describe this phenomenon, as does the Midianites. Rona Pico and Vania Canino both have avatars of the opposite gender and both of them find it interesting to explore how a different gender can, in a sense, give their personality more space to express itself. They learn about how a man/woman is "supposed to" behave and what happens if they transgress those boundaries. Sometimes they seem to realise, as Judith Butler concludes, that "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its result" (1990:24-25). In Midian City, as well as among the Nekos, switching gender is not uncommon.

Gender roles are, just like power hierarchies, even more at the forefront in the Gorean communities, and gender-switching is not as unproblematic in Gor as it is in the previously mentioned communities. Resembling the 1950s scenario sketched by Erving Goffman, a Gorean role-player using a female avatar is supposed to demonstrate respectful subordination vis-à-vis a Gorean role-player using a male avatar. Although avatars in *Second Life* can look like almost anything imaginable, the rules in Gor clearly state that these have to be in human form, and as such they reinforce and remain a part of an offline system of gender expectations and obligations. The expectations of a new audience, for which this traditional gender act is played out as Goffman describes it, might be slightly different today than they were more than fifty years ago, however, and the conventional respectful and subordinate role of a woman and the dominant role of a man that was common in the 1950's would in most cases raise questions as well as concerns in a contemporary audience. This is indeed also what is happening with regard to the Goreans in *Second Life*. Their way of role-playing is heavily contested, especially if the role-play is on the verge of blurring make-believe and make-belief as it does in several of the examples I have sketched above.

As the dialogue between Miss Puddlegum and Mr. Plutonium shows, the make-believe role-play in the Independent State of Caledon draws on the situation of women in Victorian society. Their role-play acts out the difficulties of an unmarried woman in those days, who fights to keep her independence. It also illustrates how Miss Puddlegum attempts to rebel against the conventions and measures how far she can go without risking

too severe repercussions, while at the same time reaping the benefits of the same conventions. This is all typical behaviour of someone in a subordinate position. The make-belief interaction taking place within the Caledon community on a social level, does not show any signs of a hierarchical structure based on gender, however. A programmer such as Dame Ordinal Malaprop, female online as well as offline, is as highly revered and appreciated as any male one and the interaction in what I labelled the Caledon power game does not seem to make any gender distinctions. In the Independent State of Caledon gender hierarchies thus seem to be explored primarily in a make-believe context and to a large extent disregarded in a make-belief one.

Especially the examples from the *Second Life* Nekos and the Goreans indicate that male and female gender roles are constructed in equal measure, and this establishes that gender issues indeed are constructed in any social context, as Simone de Beauvoir claims, be it digital or non-digital. Constructed in a similar way, the identities of leaders are put to the forefront in the communities in *Second Life*. They are often forced to learn how to deal with open or covert opposition, just as they also learn how to deal with the power they suddenly have in their hands, and the abilities they learn are often brought with them into their offline contexts. Subversive or dissident roles are learnt in a similar manner, since, as Michel Foucault points out, most of us do not like to be cast in the role of slaves. People who fight against oppression in a make-belief manner or do not agree with the stance of the people in power learn how to use the means they have available to change their situation in their quest for freedom. In both cases, identities constructed as leaders as well as opposition, learn to see and become aware of patterns of power, just like the audience — and the actors — of a Brechtian theatre piece might. Moreover, similar to the gender roles, the roles of leader and follower might, for better or worse, be reinforced and "created over and over again" if the patterns are not being articulated and/or questioned, just as they might offline. Social patterns and identity constructions such as these can thus be built in an online world such as *Second Life*, just as they can offline, and they can just as well be questioned and analysed on both platforms.

Role-Playing vs. Playing a Role

The majority of the role-players in all four communities take on roles appropriate to the goal of the role-play in each particular group. They play them more or less earnestly and more or less well depending on their own sense of involvement, the dedication of their peers, and the norms and rules of each community. Role-play, as it is framed in *Second Life*, always involves make-believe roles in a make-believe setting. Quite extraordinary

events are deemed credible and possible as a part of role-play and generally the performance only has to answer to its own logic. It is possible for the role-players to continue the make-believe role-play as long as these rules are not violated and the make-believe performance is clearly framed as such. As a contrast, playing a role is less well defined in the communities. A role can be social as well as dramatical and the former often answers to entirely different and less well-defined rules. A social role is built on the preconceived ideas and norms of the resident in question. As the example from the *Second Life Nekos forum* shows, there is a discrepancy between how a manga and cosplay-oriented Neko and a grunge Neko take on their Neko roles both from a dramatical and social point of view, which might, as the Nekos themselves imply, have its origin in differing standards and ideals in the society of which they are, or have been, a part. A similar effect can be seen among the Gorean lifestylers, as the attitudes and norms they support offline are allowed to influence the contexts they build online. The offline social and emotional context has a bearing on the online persona they are creating, just as it would in identity formation offline. The non-uniform social rules and norms — most often far more diverse, fragmented, and simultaneously less permissive than the rules governing the role-play activities — invoke reactions within the large *Second Life* community which correspond to reactions offline, as people react against cultural customs and norms with which they are unfamiliar or oppose. Handling these reactions to unfamiliar social behaviour and facilitating integration and tolerance, while at the same time setting boundaries, might be the most common challenges for community leaders who have to decide on what kind of leader role they wish to play on the multifaceted and international *Second Life* platform, a scenario familiar to leaders in our versatile, evolving, and multicultural offline societies as well. It becomes clear that people react in much the same way to similar issues regardless of it playing out online or offline. The perceived levity of a medium such as *Second Life* is most often restricted to the make-believe, role-playing, aspects, whereas my research shows that the social, or make-belief, sphere in *SL* functions in a similar manner as it does offline, and the roles shaped in the context of social and make-belief interactions online should therefore be given the same weight as they have offline. The difference between make-believe, role-playing, and make-belief, playing the social roles, thus becomes even more important, and the distinction might in fact help accentuate and perhaps also clarify mechanisms of community building, leadership and subversion in any social context, online or offline.

Negotiations of Power in the Online Social Sphere

The real, and most often social, rules often become the subject of make-belief discussions and renegotiation. These discussions takes place on a social or perhaps even political level and the negotiation of the argument in question often relies on make-belief strategies. In negotiations of power, make-belief strategies are used to visualise that which the individual hopes to achieve or gain support for. Make-belief strategies can be said to point in the direction in which the individual wishes the rules or framework to be altered. It can thus be concluded that role-players in *Second Life* most often negotiate three different levels simultaneously: offline in a social sphere, online in a social sphere, and online in a role-play context. The first two might or might not involve make-belief strategies, whereas the third most likely is set in a context of fantasy and make-believe, where no real negotiation of power takes place. Although some of the role-players interact with family members or offline friends inside *Second Life*, it can be concluded that the majority of all negotiations inside the role-play groups take place in the online social sphere. It is a social sphere in which individuals can negotiate, gain or perhaps lose power. This power cannot be separated from the online social sphere in which it is discussed, but it plays out differently depending on the rules and the framework governing or evolving in each space.

An authoritative, hierarchical, or repressive social structure uses a technology of power, to use Michel Foucault's term, to control and discipline its subjects. A version of this, built on social hierarchies and stratification, can, as have become evident above, be seen in some of the Gorean communities in *Second Life*, but hierarchies are present in all four communities I have studied. In line with how the platform is programmed: someone *has* to be the initiator or founder, and someone *has* to make the decisions on how the community is to be run. The control might be more or less stifling, depending on the ideals and strategies of the leaders of a community, however. Some type of democratic leadership is more common in the role-play communities, and in these the discussions might run wild, creating havoc once in a while and then often return to a more normalised state, in which the community members go about their business, in this case role-play or interact, in an everyday manner — or they decide to leave. In the more hierarchical type of leadership a proverbial lid tends to shut down protests until matters either boil over rather violently or the structures are subverted by other, and perhaps more covert, tactics, in the attempt to create a more smooth space in which negotiations and changes might take place. Both social rules and computer protocols might seem to constitute inflexible boundaries for individuals wishing to role-play in a manner which situates itself on the boundary of what is allowed, but it should not be forgotten that these

rules are being decided upon and computers are being programmed by humans, which means that there is always a possibility for a negotiable and even changeable space within in the social sphere. In this space rules, laws, community frameworks, and even code can be altered.

This study gives a glimpse of the discussions in four online role-play communities and the role-players who take part in the sometimes social, sometimes fictive, power games in each role-play community. I have explored the behaviour, the characters and the make-believe as well as make-belief roles they take on, and I have attempted to trace the particular points through which power passes. Indeed, I have attempted to watch the episodes in online worlds as closely as any "real world" counterpart. Although my study is over, there is no doubt in my mind that the online power games, so similar to offline ones, continue and perhaps even have to continue. I would even suggest that this negotiation over time is what makes an online social environment such as *Second Life* develop and evolve. This discussion, negotiation, or power game, might lead to strife and even revolutions in the online communities, but it might also lead to dynamic and interesting new ways of interacting and using new technologies, but society needs to be aware of its possibilities as well as its potential dangers. In order to be able to see and talk about the sometimes disturbing effects of events taking place in an online world such as *Second Life*, we need to destabilise the perceived dichotomy between online and offline. If we view everything happening online as well as offline as real we might misjudge the events taking place as a part of a performance clearly framed as such. This is not to say that events framed as performances does not affect the role-players, but rather to highlight the readiness and efforts of a role-play community such as Midian City as the role-players are provided with an articulated framework for their IC interactions, which can give them support OOCly. On the other hand, if we view online as virtual and offline as real, we might fail to appreciate the stress some of the role-players' experience inworld as they find themselves in situations they have trouble coping with psychologically. It is crucial to become aware of performative aspects, make-believe as well as make-belief, online as well as offline, in order to be able to deal with their potential effects, negative as well as positive, in an appropriate way. There is indeed power in both the social and dramatic sphere of an online role-play environment such as *Second Life*.

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