GAMEPLAY POLITICS
IN MASSIVELY MULTI-PLAYER ONLINE ROLE PLAYING GAMES
(MMORPGs)

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. WHY 'GAMEPLAY POLITICS'?

This thesis is an attempt to explore the gameplay politics of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) specifically analysing *why* politics has been incorporated into online gameplay. MMORPGs are persistent virtual worlds populated by digital representations of actual people who communicate with each other and a computer game system. As long as someone is logged into the game, the world is active and because the digital representations are in actuality thinking communicative people, we can consider these worlds as having populations and as with all populations, politics of behaviour and power manifest.

The difference between virtual and actual populations is that the digital representations of people are not always behaviourally or aesthetically truthful. Therefore these virtual populations are formed from the digital representation's behavioural social identity and history, which is a combination of the actual person controlling the digital representation's interaction with the online system and other people. When the online system has a game structure rules of play apply, as well and the online population is as much ruled by the game architecture as the social population and software system.

In the first half of this thesis I intend to analyse a population that is ruled by a game architecture, software, social systems and system moderators. Through an empirical study of The Sims Online I have looked at the different roles players have on a gameplay and societal level and how these are interconnected.

In the second half I attempt to interpret the player's feeling of ownership within these online gaming worlds. MMORPGs carry a participatory culture, mostly because of their gaming structure, because it encourages immersion and activity in building and contributing to the online world, but mostly because these worlds are *games*. Players therefore become attached

to evidence of their participation as it resembles stature, history and identity within the population. It is this attachment I contemplate and look at the different aspects of how ownership obtained in a virtual world, through gameplay can be considered user-generated content. My motivation here is to prove that players are contributors to a society and are therefore essential building blocks that should have some say on the structural power that manages the population.

1.2. GAMEPLAY

Throughout this thesis I will be using the word 'gameplay' extensively, by gameplay I mean the direct interaction between the player and the game structure. The word *play* has been widely studied within academia. Roger Caillois' *Man, Play, and Games* (1962) and Johann Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1955) are central in cultural study and sociology research on games. Huizinga's definition of play, for example is:

> "A free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious, "but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings, which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means."
>
> Huizinga, p 13, 1955
>
> Salen and Zimmerman, p 75, 2004

This can be disputed on many levels, for example, sports. Playing a game can lead to profit and can be 'serious'. Caillois then goes on to describe four patterns of play:

- Agon – games of competition
- Alea – games of chance
- Mimicry – games of simulation
- Ilinx – games of vertigo

Caillois, 1962

He also recognises that there is a difference between free creativity and rule-bound play by creating 'Paidia' which defines improvisation and 'Ludus' which describes rules.

When trying to infiltrate these theories into MMORPG analysis I found that all are represented in some form. It would be interesting to have an in-depth discourse of all elements of play within MMORPGs, but for the purpose of this thesis I was more interested in what was being produced *by* play than *what* type of play. I therefore use the word gameplay to describe a player's interaction with the rules of play designed into the game software and structure, it is the direct interactivity relating to the 'rules of play'. Other 'rules of play' are evident on a societal level and this level is often independent of the gameplay level.

1.3. PARTICIPATORY MEDIA CULTURE

I believe there's a new commodity which has been spurred by the Web 2.0 generation and that is our online identities and personalities which ultimately is exemplified by our online reputations.

In "Requiem for the Media" Jean Baudrillard while contemplating the social nature of media, such as TV, writes:

"There is no response to a functional object: its function is already there, an integrated speech to which it has already responded, leaving no room for play, or reciprocal putting in play (unless one destroys the object, or turns its function inside out)."

(Baudrillard, p. 281, 2003)

What happens when the receiver can respond? But respond within the confines of rules and regulations of responding. There are media spaces online which are corporately owned and require the receiver to respond and interact with the space and the others inhabiting it. A lot of these spaces come in the form of games, such as Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. As T.L. Taylor describes Everquest:

"As a media product, a game, and a technology, EverQuest is constructed through the joint practices of designers, publisher, world managers, and players. This collective construction of the space across multiple actors is key, but often it seems to fall out of the narrow IP formulations that circulate."

(Taylor, 2006)

The construction of these spaces is thoroughly regulated by the corporations behind the design and maintenance of the space, but the space is also dependent on inhabitants – players. As Taylor suggests, it is a collective construction, but it can not be categorised within the Web 2.0 generation because everything that is associated with, created within and experienced within the space is owned by the 'designers, publishers and world managers'. This is reasonable and fair because the players themselves consent to an agreement with the company before they enter the space. The relationship between players and producers is generally harmonious, because it is in both interests that the world should be peaceful and prosper. That is, until something goes wrong – somewhere along the line communication channels can falter and this usually entails expulsion where the player is denied access to the world. This usually infuriates the player, it is the intention of this thesis to investigate why players become so passionate about this playing space!

1.4. ITINERARY OF THESIS

I wish to first introduce the array of methods that Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games are using to govern player behaviour. Some are within the world and others flow into the actual world. In chapter 3 I discuss some of the methods of analysis and research that I've used to come to my conclusions, I then go on to explore what MMORPGs really are in Chapter 4, can we call them games or should we acknowledge them as worlds? In Chapter 5 I submerse into The Sims Online, what the gameplay structure is and how the players are playing it and forming their own groups of identities. With the typology of identities intact I go own to discuss the ownership of these identities in Chapter 6, whether the participatory act of gaming can be a just clause for ownership rights. And in the end, the conclusion I wish to revisit the governing of players by discussing the arguments I have elaborated in this thesis.

2. GOVERNING PLAYERS

MMORPGs have become intricate systems and are challenging the way we define games, virtuality and reality. These 'games' have become so complex that they have their own economy, their own laws, political parties, court rooms, and some even have their own elected government. When the players of these games are becoming so involved with the 'world' they are playing in, is it time for us to start considering fundamental civil rights like the right to defend oneself when caught doing something wrong?

When eight percent of MMO players spend 40 hours a week playing are they not qualified to be defined as citizens of a virtual world?[1] Nick Yee and Edward Castronova's research into Sony's Everquest, found that twenty percent of the players considered themselves to be living in Norrath (virtual city in Everquest) and forty-four point seven percent devoted more time to Norrath than work.[2] These games cannot exist without the players; they are completely dependent on them for creating gameplay, value, economy and politics, much like the 'real' world. So do the avatars themselves qualify for certain virtual civil rights as well? Now there are over 12 million active subscribers of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games world wide and the numbers seem to be steadily rising.[3] It is a relevant force to be reckoned with.

MMORPGs are run by privately owned corporations, so the avatar, our 'vehicle of self' in MMORPGs is in fact owned by the corporation. But do they or should they own the avatar's creativity, communication and gameplay experience as well? Is it possible to say that when you are in-game, the corporation owns you and everything you do? If you bring your interests outside of this game space, be it a relationship, a creative thought or an observation you want to share does the corporation have the right to own these? The experience of gameplay starts to become a valuable commodity, both to the game producers and the players. When personal experience is a commodity will we inevitably end up in the dystopic world portrayed by Bigelow and Cameron in the movie *Strange Days*?[4]

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games are dynamic social systems. Some of the governing systems are built into the software, some are taken care of from the game producer's customer service and other systems are actually created by the players themselves. Since these are such dynamic worlds with real sociality a prerequisite to joining the gaming

community, it is only natural that conflicts of interest should occur, both between players and game producers and amongst the players themselves. How are these conflicts best resolved? Should the game producers be granted authoritarian power to decide who does or does not belong in the world or what does and does not constitute legitimate gameplay? And if so, should the players not have an opportunity to defend themselves before being kicked out of the virtual gaming world that they contribute so much of their time within? The game producers are judge and jury on cases of player expulsion – their main power of governmental force is the ability to suspend or kick out 'unwanted' players.

As Timothy Burke observes:

> "Imagine if anti-globalization activists and multinational corporations could both pray to deities, asking them to spontaneously alter the laws of physics and the basic determinants of social relations in their favour and actually have a reasonable expectation that their prayers might be heard and answered. The ether between Heaven and Earth would buzz incessantly if so.
>
> This is exactly the situation as it stands in persistent world MMORPGs."

<div align="right">Burke, p. 17, 2002</div>

Complain to the Game Master (GM), who is the coordinator of gameplay, the overseer of the gaming society, the customer service representative who is there to take care of complaints and problems, and another player or incident will be looked into. If the player does not complain, an incident may go unnoticed to the game master, incidents need to be forwarded to the Game Master and in more cases than not, the complainer's request will be granted. Requests are forwarded to the Game Masters from the players and the game producers and all requests are to a large extent granted, but if something is not requested, the Game Masters will make no effort at contributing legislation. Also, a Game Master's decision is final, there is little room for discussion unless the Game Master has requested input.

2.1. DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO REGULATING AND DEMOCRATISING PLAYERS

Some online role-playing games, however, do actually deal with in-world problems, in-world.

2.1.1. VOTING

A Tale in the Desert has an elaborate democracy, they have laws that need to be voted on. Firstly a player has to get enough signatures to petition a new law, actually they also have the ability to suggest and vote for new features in the game as well. This is as democratic a gaming society as you can get, but some find it too democratic. So much time is spent building the democracy and world, that some players find it dull and nothing like a game at all.

2.1.2. POWER TO THE PLAYERS

Sociolotron is another MMORPG with an embedded democracy. It is more of an adult gaming community and gameplay is rather sexual and vicious, which makes it a difficult community to govern. When a crime is registered a detective is put on the case to investigate the crime and when the detective is satisfied with sufficient evidence the file then goes "…through the justice chains and is handled by the prosecutor, the judge and the jurors, all of which are player run offices which are occupied by regular players who were elected by the other players. Finally, when the criminal is convicted, a warrant for his arrest is issued". [5] Sociolotron encourages a new level of gameplay within the prison but at the same time are protecting 'the good' players from them by keeping them in a prison. There's also an interesting biological dynamic in Sociolotron, an avatar can, for example become infected with diseases, which can either be cured by medicine (which can be addictive) or you can die, and death is truly a fascinating system. The players can ensure heirs by impregnating the females. These children, when they're born are shipped off to university and are not really 'living' until the player dies and has bequeathed all her possessions to the child, which she then takes over. Or, if the player has not produced a heir, she will end up in hell, which has a whole new gameplay and social system. The problem with such an elaborate social system, however, is that players will have to want to take responsibilities in society. There has to be a desire to play 'protector' within the game. If no player actually wants to play detective, juror or judge, the governmental system is fragile for it would be unfair if the game masters (GM) were to take on each of these roles, because then the society wouldn't truly be involving the players.

2.1.3. PUBLIC HUMILIATION

Other punishment systems in MMORPGs include crucifixion, as exhibited in Figure 1, in the game Roma Victor. [6]

Figure 1 Crucifixion of Griefer in Roma Victor – picture from www.roma-victor.com

Griefers, players who disrupt society, caught by the game masters are crucified and left hanging publicly for seven days. [7] The game masters or the Roman Victor customer service is the judge and jury, the 'victim' is given little room for self defence, but is given a second chance and not instantly thrown out of the game. It also helps other players relate to the griefers reputation. The humiliation of being caught and then publicly crucified is damaging for a player's reputation and may well prove to work, but the danger of a player group considering this a gaming goal is also very real, but it is a worthy attempt on behalf of Roma Victor.

2.1.4. PRISON

Second Life has also tried a punishment method with griefers, but Linden Lab, the creators of

Figure 2 Second Life Cornfield

Second Life went for boredom tactics instead of public humiliation. When caught griefing the griefer would automatically be transported to a deserted corn field, as pictured in Figure 2, with an extremely slow tractor and a black and white TV that only shows 'a presentation of the 1940 film "Boy in Court", about a troubled teenager on probation trying to avoid a life of crime". [8] The player has the choice of not playing for the suspension or staying in the cornfield. Some may argue that this will just encourage griefing behaviour to create gameplay that will suspend them to this cornfield, it functions well as a protection service for other players. If many chose to have fun with a different form of gameplay within the cornfield space, it is half of the fun of being in a game. As long as the majority who 'play by the rules' are protected against harmful play.

2.2. MAKING HASTY DECISIONS

Sometimes the Game Masters (GMs) in control of who can play and who can not, face an angry mob for their decisions. In January 2006, Sara Andrews a player in Blizzard's World of Warcraft was suspended and sanctioned for abusing a Terms of Use agreement within the game. She was reprimanded for "Harassment – Sexual Orientation" because she had started a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transexual (LGBT) friendly guild and was recruiting for it on an official World of Warcraft forum. The World of Warcraft Terms of Service clearly states:

"When engaging in Chat in World of Warcraft, or otherwise utilizing World of Warcraft, you may not…[t]ransmit or post any content or language which, in the sole and absolute discretion of Blizzard Entertainment, is deemed to be offensive, including without limitation content or language that is unlawful, harmful, threatening, abusive, harassing, defamatory, vulgar, obscene, hateful, sexually explicit, or racially, ethnically or otherwise objectionable, nor may you use a misspelling or an alternative spelling to circumvent the content and language restrictions listed above". [9]

In these online role-playing games it is a common figure of speech to say that something is 'so gay' or 'you're a fag', it is not meant as figurative, it is just a common way of expression. A case can certainly be made that this is rather uncomfortable for homosexual players as we don't exactly detach ourselves from our actual life identity because we are represented by an avatar. This however, is not something that Blizzard deems necessary to regulate, although it clearly states it is not allowed in their Terms of Service. So when Sara Andrews was reprimanded for expressing that her guild was LGBT friendly a media uproar entailed. An organisation called Lambda Legal that is 'a national organization committed to achieving full recognition of the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people and those with HIV through impact litigation, education and public policy work' involved themselves with the case and issued a very interesting official letter to Blizzard. [10] In the letter, Lambda Legal states that:

"Online environments are public accommodations, subject to regulation as such. Butler v. Adoption Media, L.L.C., 2005 WL 1513142."

and

"Insisting that LGBT persons not discuss their sexual orientation or gender identity can constitute discrimination under California law. Erdmann v. Tranquility Inc., 155 F.Supp.2d 1152 (N.D.Cal. 2001)(in which an employee who experienced a hostile environment at his worlkplace, including being instructed by a supervisor to "keep [his homosexuality] in the closet while he [was] at work, "stated a cause of action for employment discrimination").

See attachment 1

Blizzard retracted the reprimand and apologised, because they are mostly interested in keeping their customers happy. However, could Lambda Legal have argued the case in a court of law, referring to these laws? "Online environments are public accommodations"? Online environments where you pay a fee to inhabit and participate in are not 'public accommodations'. They also use employment law. Can we protect player's rights of

expression with laws that protect employees? Even if this were possible, which laws would apply; EU, American or Asian? Are the game producers really protected by the fact that the players are there voluntarily and are free to leave any time – it is not a work place that provides an income at least not legally.

Blizzard tried, rather foolishly to protect themselves from outside attacks by forbidding all such acts of expression. Blizzard's response in a World of Warcraft forum was:

> "To promote a positive game environment for everyone and help prevent such harassment from taking place as best we can, we prohibit mention of topics related to sensitive real-world subjects in open chat within the game, and we do our best to take action whenever we see such topics being broadcast. This includes openly advertising a guild friendly to players based on a particular political, sexual, or religious preference, to list a few examples. For guilds that wish to use such topics as part of their recruiting efforts, our Guild Recruitment forum, located at our community Web site, serves as one open avenue for doing so."

If we consider that over 6.5 million people play World of Warcraft, is this the wisest governmental structure? [11] 'Shut up or face the consequences'? The consequences are only dealt with if someone complains to a game master or a game master 'accidentally' observes something unlawful. We seldom read about players being reprimanded for uttering discriminatory words like 'so gay', because it is a generally accepted word, if Blizzard were to suddenly enforce such a prohibition, would the players continue to be faithful to the game?

A few years before this, The Sims Online (TSO) saw an expulsion incident which revolved around an issue that happened *outside* of the gated gaming community. Peter Ludlow, a Linguistics professor at the University of Michigan played TSO with his avatar, Urizenus and started an online newspaper for the virtual TSO city of Alphaville, The Alphaville Herald – which was an independent website. He wrote an article about in-game prostitution and questioned whether MAXIS/EA, the corporation that produced and own the game, should have some form of age limitation, as sexual favours were being exchanged by under age players, for 'real' money. [12] This caused some outside media interest in The Sims Online, which might not have been in MAXIS/EA's best interest. [13] Shortly after this, Peter Ludlow was suspended from the game for unclear circumstances. Many believe that it is because of this article that he was suspended from the game although MAXIS/EA maintains that they were in their right to expel him for a various reasons, such as advertising his newspaper and that several other players had complained and labelled him a 'griefer'. Little proof of this

has been released from MAXIS/EA, which makes it difficult to pin point what happened, but it seems that the game producers are within their right to suspend anyone they want to. The one thing that keeps them within reason is they want people to play their games. They need a good reputation and the players need to feel important, as if they have a say. One of Alphaville Herald's readers, named 'cantsay' posted a comment stating; "Personally I think your rights to free speech have been violated and if it happens to me I am getting a lawyer after I contact all the major gamer mags".[14]

I have no evidence to prove that it was because of Peter Ludlow's published interview and the media attention it received that led to his suspension, although I find the media bickering between Ludlow and Electronic Art's Vice President for Corporate Communications, Jeff Brown quite questionable. Particularly when Jeff Brown issues press releases containing statements like; "First, if Professor Ludlow is a journalist then I'm a railroad tycoon because I play Monopoly".[15] Peter Ludlow's newspaper was created out of the game and it was a paper/webzine that reported on incidents within The Sims Online, Peter Ludlow was not playing that he was reporting on these incidents, he actually was.

In a media age where user-generated content is so essential it seems ridiculous that MMORPG companies should be so much against expressionistic statements which make players even more involved within their gaming world. In many ways they're not. A new field of media, called Machinima has sprung out lately. It existed before MMORPGs became so popular, but MMORPG games have spurred a more massive enthusiasm. Machinima are short films made in games, what makes MMORPG Machinima even more impressive is that it is filmed in real time and a player is always behind each avatar. MMORPG companies could claim copyright, but I have yet to see any of them do this.

2.3. THE FUTURE

Several academics have started to investigate the rights of the avatar and what these virtual spaces of gaming really are. Peter S. Jenkins, a lawyer and a proclaimed futurologist has studied the rights of avatars by comparing MMORPGs to corporate towns, the problem with such thesis' is that we need to prove that playing in MMORPGs is relatively the same as 'living' in MMORPGs also that Mr. Jenkins uses many American laws, there doesn't seem to be any international law to abide by. If we say that a company is situated in one country

and a citizen from another country is involved in their game, which customer protection rights does the player have – the ones in her country or the ones in the company's? And what of the game producers? Will they have to consider all individual nationality's laws when they design their governmental set up?

Peter S. Jenkins has some juridical examples from what could be argued in an American court (2004). When discussing freedom of speech in company town, he introduces a 1946 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Marsh v. Alabama*, where a woman is arrested for preaching her Jehovah's Witness gospel to the citizens of this town owned by Gulf Shipbuilding Corporation. The judge ruled for the woman because it was not a gated community as it provided several public services, such as post office and shops, therefore the company could not call the County Sheriff and have her arrested, because it was a public space, which Lambda Legal believes MMORPGs to be. Lambda Legal believes this because of a pending case about a homosexual couple wishing to adopt, not being allowed to register on an online site for people wanting to adopt, where the judge (so far) has ruled that the website, Adoption.com, 'must comply with California's non-discrimination laws'.[16] The difference between private and public space online is an entangled issue that needs much more attention than I am willing to give it here. It is interesting to see how the word itself, 'public' is defined from different aspects, but for the purpose of this thesis I will relate to MMORPGs as private spaces.

It is essential that the difference of ontological definitions between an online business and an online game and between an online role-playing game and a virtual world become clearer because GMs aren't always perfect, MMORPGs are getting larger and consumers are feeling an ever growing need for self expression in media. Leaving all the governmental decisions up to the GMs seems irresponsible and it is my contention that only by opening opportunities for the players to get involved, will all parities be happy. 'Gameplay', is the fundamental difference in MMORPGs between all other online activities, but a lot of what we experience online outside of gaming spaces is coming into gaming spaces as well, such as the browser in EVE Online, for example and new social networks.[17] World of Warcraft Guilds are using Second Life as a platform to plan raids and tactics.[18] Second Life has its own Reuters office, but Second Life isn't a MMORPG, it is a virtual world, quite different from MMORPGs, but it just looks similar.[19]

The gameplay in MMORPGs needs to be defined. What are the commodities in MMORPGs? If MMORPGs become the platform for the metaverse these issues will be crucial. Should Peter Ludlow have been suspended from The Sims Online? Does he have the right of Freedom of Speech? It is the intention of this thesis to have a closer look at what constitutes gameplay and what constitutes social evolvement and identity in The Sims Online.   Why is The Sims Online not 'just a game'?

3. METHODOLOGY

To investigate avatar's status and contribution in an MMORPG, we need to define what MMORPGs really are. We define them as an online community, because there's communication between players and it is online. But what really makes Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game an MMORPG as well as being an online community is the game structure. To deconstruct anything virtual entails a thorough investigation of the software, the basic computer program, as well as the community's structure, because each online community has its rules. Rules of interaction, physicality, aesthetics and content are all essential to understanding the user possibilities and understanding. In addition to this MMORPGs have a gaming structure to relate to and this structure has a behavioural and environmental significance. The community is gathered with one common denominator to 'play a game', some consider the game to be secondary to the communication factor and others the opposite and others enjoy both aspects combined or cannot see any clear distinction between the two.

3.1. WHY THE SIMS ONLINE

It was the gameplay politics of The Sims Online which first caught my attention to the existence of MMORPGs, with the media attention focused on the alleged freedom of speech infringement of Professor Ludlow. The uncertainty of where the boundaries of our civil liberties reached within virtual worlds aroused my intrigue enough to investigate the philosophical issue. As this became the object of this thesis, focusing on an MMORPG with social gameplay and had already been subject to libertarian scrutiny seemed prudent.

3.2. PLAYING THE GAME

There were two options as to how to investigate the gameplay politics; observatory or participatory. In order for me to observe it was also necessary to play the game, so I needed to participate in order to observe, and observe in order to participate. Observing someone else playing the game had to be done on the inside of the virtual gaming world in order for me to

understand the interactivness of the relationship between player, software and game structure. I played The Sims Online for 6 months, the first month only about 2 hours a week, second month this increased to 10 hours a week and by the third month I was playing 6 hours a day. To keep track of my findings I kept a log of what players I met, how they played the game, what gameplay they preferred and summed up what our conversations were about also focusing on my own enjoyment and interaction with the game and other players.

Before I started playing I did some background research on governmental groups that existed within The Sims Online where I found evidence of organisations such as The Sims Shadow Government, The Alphaville Government and a corrupt election. I devised a plan of gameplay which was to infiltrate the governmental forces and groups focusing on The Alphaville Police Force or the FBI, or even see if I too, could run for a presidential election. In hindsight, however, I feel this was a form of cheating. I had read too much about the game and the social activities within it. In many ways, I felt my research was nearly done. But as Aarseth states, "While the interpretation of a literary or filmatic work will require certain analytical skills, the game requires analysis practiced as performance, with direct feedback from the system. This is a dynamic, real-time hermeneutics that lacks a corresponding structure in film or literature." (2003). The goal of playing was to understand the way in which players organise themselves, how the game design itself acts as a rule system and what social levels lie within virtual gaming worlds.

Espen Aarseth, a leading scholar on games research writes:

> "Given a newish empirical field, such as computer games, the obvious research question seems to be "How?". How do we investigate, and with what means? Although this question is crucial, and too often ignored by researchers, it is both too late and too early to ask it. Too late, because research using many different disciplines, from psychology to economics, is already well underway, and has been in some cases for decades; and too early because there is another question that should be asked first and never is. That question, of course is "Why?"."

<div align="right">(Aarseth, 2003)</div>

Why should this even be an interest of study? Why is it important to look at the gamer's liberties within gaming worlds? Why is it important to study the expanding world of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games? The question that interests this thesis is why are civil, human and property rights so important within a virtual gaming world? In

order to get anything resembling an answer to these questions, the game had to be played. But how to play a game to answer these enquiries?

I started playing the game by asking questions about the Alphaville Government, police force and so on, but to no avail. Most of those asked had never heard of any such thing, or they saw me as a nosy noob (newcomer) and did not want to answer. I soon found out that I wasn't going to learn anything from asking the simcitizens about their structure of community and self-government, I had to fit in and become part of the community and play the game. It became evident quite early on that neutrality would most certainly become a problem, it was difficult to keep an objective perspective the more I played, in order to get a distance, I therefore quit playing the game after my 6 month period to get a distance and look at the research gathered objectively. In fact, after a 3 month period of playing I still hadn't found any of the organised governmental structures I had read about, it was then considered that I should try and lure these organisations to action by behaving unacceptably, but I did not have the conscience to do so. To me the avatars had come to represent real people and to cause havoc among them seemed just as vicious as if I were to stand in an actual city square and throw abuses at passers by.

3.3.   DEFINING THE GAMING LANDSCAPE

In order to locate the actual game structure of The Sims Online I applied Jan Klabbers' 'The Gaming Landscape' and his game taxonomy (1999), bellow in Figure 3, as a method of deconstruction. Klabber's taxonomy is a system of defining what is the design of the landscape, what interacts with it, how and why using a model of social systems consisting of actors, rules and resources combined with Marshev and Popov's semiotic theory of gaming. According to Marshev & Popov the syntax is the arrangement of elements and rules of a game, semantics is the interpretation and meaning of elements of a game and pragmatics is the design and use of the game (Klabbers, 2003). Kabbers' 'rules as a social system' gave an insight into the game mechanism of MMORPGs when describing the semantics of gaming rules, Klabbers writes:

> "*Cultural, socio-economic situations*: the placement of pieces according to the scheme
> of the game space is the position at one moment in time. It is understood as a particular

state of the social system. Through that state a particular cultural and socio-economic situation is expressed."

In The Sims Online the rule system of the game contributed to social gatherings since several avatars doing the same thing at once caused either faster skilling or more money working on money objects. These rules were open for the players to implement as they were the builders of the game space that influence socialisation. If we then consider that games are goal oriented, could we then consider socialisation a goal implemented within the game design? That creating social places is an actual gaming goal?

Design specifications	1. Client 2. Purpose 3. Subject matter 4. Intended audience 5. Context of use		
Social System	**Syntax**	**Semantics**	**Pragmatics**
Actors	Players Number of Game places	Roles	Allopoietic vs. Autopoietic Steering Knowledge as Acquisition as interaction
Communication			
Rules	Game Manipulation Set Set of game Positions Evaluation functions	Relationships Between roles Cultural, socio-Economic situations Evaluation of places For resource Allocation, and Position within team Of players	Team of game Facilitators Format: rigid-rule Vs. free form Assessment functions
Resources	Set of pieces Game space	Resources Set of places	Paraphernalia Equipment Facilities

Figure 3 – Jan Klabber's Game Taxonomy (1999)

Jesper Juul has three concepts of goals for the player's relation to the game:

1. **Valorization of the possible outcomes**: Some outcomes are described as positive, some as negative.
2. **Player effort**: The player has to <u>do</u> something

3. **Attachment of the player to an aspect of the outcome**: The player agrees to be happy if he or she wins the game, unhappy if he or she loses.

<div align="right">(Juul, p. 35, 2005)</div>

I experimented with this in the game and tried to see if the opposite could be true, could I exist within The Sims Online without being social, and if I could, would I still be playing the game? I bought my own house and went to work all by myself at a robot factory. Firstly it was very boring and I went afk (away from keyboard) several times during the seclusion, the social bar on my avatar started to fade and I soon concluded that I would have to find other avatars to keep my avatar from dying. When I mentioned that it is impossible to survive on your own in The Sims Online to a group of players I was bombarded with protests, because if I worked hard and gathered enough money, I could buy pets and they would keep the avatar's social levels intact.

 When I asked why anyone would want to do that, some answered "Because sometimes you want to be alone" and others interestingly answered that running a business in the virtual city could be very lonely, but the business was dependent on the owner being there and that entailed a lot of alone time with no other avatars around to keep social bars from disintegrating. Through this observation I felt that there were two levels The Sims Online had to be deconstructed with – the gameplay and the societal.

Neither of Juul's three goals satisfied my understanding of an avatar wanting to be alone – this seemed very existentialist to me and had different connotations than gaming embedded within it. Because of the communication factors in The Sims Online, I concluded that I needed to divide the system of the world into two categories; gameplay and societal. I feel this was essential for the purpose of this thesis. Understanding an MMORPG population can not be done with game theory, the societal formations and communications must be considered as well.

3.4. BLOGGING

I initially wanted to keep my gaming log online in blog format but I didn't feel comfortable releasing information that was told me in confidence by my gaming friends. It therefore became a blog where I kept track of my thoughts and which direction this thesis was going. I also used the blog to center and gather all my online information, whether it was online papers, news reports on MMORPGs or blog discussions I felt worthy my contemplation. I was honoured by many prestigious voices for discussion. In chapter 4, where I discuss whether MMORPGs really are games, was first posted on my blog – which was reposted on MMORPG designer, Raph Koster's blog and engaged an elaborate and indebt discussion including several designers and academics. [1]

The community studying MMORPGs is so vast and from so many different disciplines that blogging seems an obvious meaning to discuss our thoughts and our studies, because different disciplines see different things. The blogging community of TerraNova was a welcome contribution for inspiration and insight, specifically when it came to law and economics of MMORPGs, as this was a field I had not ventured in before. [2] I participated in many discussions, and I read blogs of both designers and academics to keep track of the news and what new theories were being thought out. In May 2006, I stopped, however, because it was taking too much time away from this thesis.

Another problem with blogging I found was the constant influences from other academic fields. There are so many different academic disciplines used to analyse MMORPGs and games, that I often felt distracted and over exposed to academic information. I had, for example, made an executive decision not to wander into narratological analysis, but was flattered by Jill Walker's participation and advice. [3]

4. MMORPGS AS GAMES

4.1. A BRIEF HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE EMERGENCE OF MMORPGS

In 1974 Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax launched a new and complex game, Dungeons and Dragons. [1] It was influenced by Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings' but I feel that it also reflects a sign of the technological innovative times. Sherry Turkle, a professor of Sociology, observes that within Dungeons and Dragons the 'constraints are those imposed by rule systems, not by physical reality or moral considerations' (Turkle, 1984). Arneson and Gygax's complete enthusiasm for rules and calculations combined with individual creativity seems to reflect the computer 'mind'. You, as a player, are allowed to use your imagination within very strict guidelines. "There are no computers in the dungeons. But these constructed worlds are permeated with the spirit of a computer program. Their constraints are those imposed by rule systems, not by physical reality or moral considerations…What is required is consistency" (Turkle, 1984). Perhaps then it is not so surprising that so many online computer games and worlds are inspired by Dungeons and Dragons. It seems as though Arneson and Gygax had actually created a game for the computer and was moulding the expectations of the computer generation. "The Dungeon and Dragons universe of mazes and monsters and its image of the world as a labyrinth whose secrets could be unlocked held a particular fascination for many members of the nascent computer culture." (Turkle, 1995). Edward Castronova, an economist studying the online virtual games observed that Dungeons and Dragons was the turning point in the development of avatar games from using wood, cloth, paper to computers (Castronova, 2002). Avatar originates from Hinduism and is 'the incarnation of an Immortal Being, or of the Ultimate Supreme Being'.[2] It has also become a term used to define a virtual persona. Edward Castronova describes the avatar as a vehicle of self (2003) and also brings forward the notion that our biological bodies are also avatars. When our minds experience the Earth, they do so through our bodies.

In 1979 Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle of Essex University created the first Multi-User Dungeon (MUD). [3] The name in itself suggests its relation to D&D, similar MUDS are now often referred to as Multi-User Domains as they do not feel they are linked to 'the Dungeon' world. MUDs are textual based role playing games with several players logged on through the internet. The player is given a character, 'vehicle of self', within the game, which roams

through different textually described rooms. Mr. Bungle's residence in LambdaMOO, for example, is described as: "a tree house tastefully decorated with rare-book shelves, an operating table, and a life-size William S. Burroughs doll". [4] Mr. Bungle himself is described as, "a fat, oleaginous, Bisquick-faced clown dressed in cum – stained harlequin garb and girdled with a mistletoe-and-hemlock belt whose buckle bore the quaint inscription "KISS ME UNDER THIS, BITCH"". [5]

MUDs are persistent worlds. Unless there is a system or server error the MUD worlds never stop evolving. The players themselves are creating the space and atmosphere.
In 1985, F. Randall Farmer and Chip Morningstar brought MUDs into a new visual era with *Habitat*.[6] They created two dimensional avatars roaming in two dimensional spaces as shown in Figure 4. It is in fact here the expression avatar is first introduced to the online role playing world. Morningstar and Farmer describe Habitat as a "multi-player online virtual environment" and the avatar as "animated figures (…) that can move around, pick up, put down and manipulate objects, talk to each other, and gesture, each under the control of an individual player" (Morningstar and Farmer, 1991). Whereas with Multi-User Domains one inhabits a virtual world purely with text, a bodily form had now been created to travel experience and communicate through.

Figure 4: Screenshot from Habitat.

Raph Koster, the chief creative officer at Sony Online Entertainment, states that Habitat was"the first graphical online virtual world that supported lots of players at once – more than

16", but it was completely restricted to Commodore 64 users.[7] Since the evolution of the Internet and its domesticity these virtual gaming worlds have exploded on to the market.

Meridian 59 is generally agreed upon as being the first ever Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game in 1996. The graphics were now 2.5 dimensional and they had approximately 250 players on each of their 12 servers. *Meridian 59* is often given credit for paving the way for larger worlds and games. A year later came *Ultima Online* using more sophisticated graphics available at the time where the player was given a top-down perspective and *Ultima* was already an established brand name ('five million people played *Ultima* games' Vogel) and ended up attracting over 200,000 subscribers.[7] In 1999, Sony managed to release a fully three dimensional game that could support a massive community, *Everquest*.[7]

The MMORPG industry has blossomed in later years and the industry can now boast over 3 million subscribers.[8] The MMORPG games offer software either downloadable or in stores for a set price and a monthly fee for participating. If the player does not pay his monthly fee, he is usually suspended from the game.

4.2. WHAT ARE MMORPGS?

Massive Multiplayer means that over 250 players can be held in one copy of the world. Online, implies that the game is connected to a computer network. Lastly, Role-Playing Games defines the concept of MMORPGs. Firstly that they are games and that the player is playing a role through an avatar. Edward Castronova describes a virtual world as having three attributes; interactivity, physicality and persistence (2001). The interactivity is the opportunity to communicate with others, creating a social network that maps out a certain community that inevitably forms the arena or world in which they are participating their communication. The physicality of the virtual world is through the bodily manifestation of self within the environment. It is bound by the laws of this environment, which is very often relative to the same laws of physics as in the 'real world', such as gravity and the ability to pick up objects from the ground. The player character is given a virtual biological form; it can 'feel' pain. It is bound to this virtual world and cannot wander from one world to the next.

Thirdly, the persistence of these virtual worlds is extremely relevant. A virtual world is not reliant on you, as the player or citizen, to be logged on. It continues to expand and exist without you. While your avatar is asleep, other avatars may be building a city around you. There is no 'end state', unless the host shuts down.

MMORPGs have almost everything the 'real' world has; economy, geography and society. An avatar possesses clothes, money, accessories, weapons and a diverse array of gadgets. The possessions become valuable to the avatar as they establish status within their virtual reality, a status that has cost the player an enormous amount of time to attain. In fact, Castronova calculated that the virtual city of Norrath in the MMORPG *Everquest*, 'the labours of the people produce a GNP per capita somewhere between that of Russian and Bulgaria. A unit of Norrath's currency is traded on exchange markets at USD 0.0107, higher than the Yen and the Lira' ([Castronova, 2001](#)).

Most MMORPGs are Tolkienesque in content implying swordfights and adventure like *[Everquest](#)*, *[Ultima Online](#)* and *[World of Warcraft](#)*. There are also MMORPGs with a more social content like *[The Sims Online](#)*, *[Second Life](#)* and *[There](#)*.

4.3.   ARE MMORPGS GAMES?

"A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that result in a quantifiable outcome"

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-   Salen and Zimmerman, 2004

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They also introduce Johann Huizinga's Magic Circle (1955) to describe our state of mind and being as we are playing a game. "In a very basic sense, the magic circle of a game is where the game takes place". Salen and Zimmerman's definitions seem to indicate that we leave all 'real world' rules behind, as we step into another 'magic' rule system. A game is then another 'world' where there are different rules of space, existence and play. The player agrees to these rules when entering the 'magic circle'. But what about games that are "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" but the players themselves have the freedom to make their own rules as well? Are

they then creating their own meta game? Edward Castronova, who defines MMORPGs as Synthetic Worlds describe them as:

> "The synthetic world is an organism surrounded by a barrier. Within the barrier, life proceeds according to all kinds of fantasy rules involving space flight, fireballs, invisibility, and so on. Outside the barrier life proceeds according to the ordinary rules. The membrane is the "magic circle" within which the rules are different (Huizinga 1938/1950). The membrane can be considered a shield of sorts, protecting the fantasy world from the outside world. The inner world needs defining and protecting because it is necessary that everyone who goes there adhere to the different set of rules. In the case of synthetic worlds, however, this membrane is actually quite porous. Indeed it cannot be sealed completely; people are crossing it all the time in both directions, carrying their behavioural assumptions and attitudes with them. As a result, the valuation of things in cyberspace becomes enmeshed in the valuation of things outside cyberspace."

(Castronova, 2005)

MMORPGs are playgrounds, not games. In a playground you find several 'systems' of play and you freely (or not so freely) enter into them, but you never leave yourself behind, outside the gates of the playground. Your identity comes with you into the playground, but there are certain rules that attain specifically to the playground space. The same is true of MMORPGs. We bring our emotions and mind with us into MMORPGs, these are not left behind. Rather MMORPGs are playgrounds that contain traditional gameplay elements, just as the seesaw and swings are available for play in children's playgrounds, so is gameplay in MMORPGs.

Some games have been described as sandbox games, such as The Sims because you are given the tools to create within the game and that is what the rules of the game are all about. I feel this is too narrow a view for MMORPGs, because a playground is much larger and sociable. Whilst some are playing with the swings the way they are designed to play others are sitting in the sandbox creating new forms of games. One person may be sitting on a seesaw waiting for someone to come join her in play. Others may just be standing within the playground talking or having a more verbal game between them.

Although the description as a sandbox game encompasses many of the things within MMORPGs I feel that it represents more a component of MMORPG gameplay, because you do not always have to build your own gameplay tools, you can use those provided for you by

the playground builder. The swings and seesaws for example, can be played with how they were intentionally designed to be played with, but within a playground you also have the ability to use your own creativity to take these gameplay tools and play with them exactly how you want to or with whom you wish to!

> "MMORPGs are not a new form of play as much as a new communication medium that affords new forms of social identity and social interaction"
>
> –
>
> – Nick Yee, 2006

Although, Nick Yee makes a relevant point, I don't agree with him. Most MMORPGs still have the 'gaming' factor. It has indeed become 'a new communication medium' but only through the act of playing. Although it is highly possible to enter MMORPGs and focus on the social factor, the act of gameplay is required! One can take on a new identity, but only within the strictest limits of the game space.

So the prudent definition would rather be that these are virtual gaming worlds. 'worlds' in the sense that they have community, economy, politics and citizens; 'virtual' as the common understanding of everything virtual and in real time; 'gaming' as these virtual worlds have an essential software design of gameplay. The citizens come into these worlds because of the desire and expectation to 'play', but not a freeform type of play a more design specific worldly gameplay mechanism.

5. THE SIMS ONLINE

5.1. THE GAME

In 1999 MAXIS, the creators of SimCity started working on a new computer game, the working title was "Sim Doll House" and later became 'The Sims' which was released in February 2000. Game magazine wiseGEEK's evaluation of the game:

> "Game play generally takes place inside an individual household, and players can enter different houses in the city to control the Sims that live in each home. Later expansion packs allow Sims to exit the home to shop, hang out, and meet other Sims in community

lots or to go on vacation. The Sims is a very open-ended game and can be played indefinitely. It does not have a single clear goal or different levels to beat, although there are career levels to advance through for each job track a Sim may have."[1]

The game is based on life development simulation. All the characters are artificial intelligence, you as the player, give them certain traits that will be the basis of their evolution. In December 2002, The Sims Online was released. What happens when this artificial intelligence is replaced by real people? Will Wright, the creator of the game, sees it as a chance to analyze the complex system of 'us'. He expects the back and forth between shopkeepers and customers to evolve into a marketplace, and some basic form of governance (Robert Levine, 2002).

In many ways, The Sims Online could maybe be considered a fusion of online textual social networking, like The Well, and the biological and spatial virtual worldliness of games.[2] It is based on taking care of your avatar's physical and mental needs and these needs are basically fulfilled through basic clicking of options.

5.1.1. THE AVATAR'S BODY

There are eight essential needs that the avatar needs to maintain; hunger, comfort, hygiene, bladder, energy, fun, social and room. When hunger needs are low, the avatar needs food, this is scored by clicking on food objects, for example, if you click on a refrigerator you are given the options of how big a meal you wish to consume, snack, dinner a.s.o. After you've clicked on your desired meal your avatar will automatically start to prepare the meal with the kitchen appliances available (blender, cooking stove), food then appears on a plate on the kitchen counter, when you then click on it you click on the option "eat" and avatar picks up the plate and heads over to a table to then sit down and eat.

While eating, the energy and hunger need levels are reduced while bladder and hygiene increase. There are several rules embedded within the game play mechanics. For example, if your bladder level is running low and another player interacts with you by 'tickling', you may quickly loose bladder control and have 'an accident' – which some players find embarrassing. You're fun and social levels are increased while dancing with another avatar, the avatar's energy levels decrease more rapidly when exercising. There is no point in mapping out the

intricate and vast rule system of The Sims Online for this thesis, these are only examples to give a general idea of the rules of play.

5.1.2. SKILLS AND EARNING MONEY

In addition to the biological needs of the avatar there are skills, monetary values and property involved. It is, however, entirely possible to play the game without focusing on either of these. An avatar can be homeless, penniless, have no skills and still exist, it all depends on how you choose to play the game. So the basic and principal objective of game play is to keep the avatar pleased and alive, the rest is voluntary. Increase your skills, you will increase your monetary wealth and 'money buys individuality' (C. Jason Smith, 2006), because the more virtual money you have the more 'unique' items you can own. There are 6 skills to work on; creativity, mechanic, body, logic, cooking and charisma. There are 21 points for each skill and the more advanced you get the slower you learn, skill points also decay when they're not maintenanced regularly. Players are also rewarded by their commitment to TSO with skill locks where the longer you stay devoted to the game the more locks you are rewarded. These locks maintain a certain skill balance and will not decay. The skills are attained by repetitive tasks that involve repetitive mouse clicking. For charisma skill points you can click on a mirror and your avatar will go to the mirror and start speaking to it, as a rookie, the first skill point can be gained within half an hour and the last can actually take up to six hours.

With your skill points you can now earn money by clicking on 'money' objects. Charisma skill points increase your chances of earning money on a 'telemarketing phone'. You earn more money the more skill points your have and the more avatars around you are doing the same thing. For a more skill details, see attachment 2.

As the chart expresses in attachment 2, the gameplay mechanics become more complex as the avatar advances and becomes more immersed within the virtual world.

5.1.3. THE FICTIONAL REALISM

The appeal of The Sims Online is the 'realism' of social life within cyberspace. Real life rules re-enacted visually and numerically within a digitised world. The numerical equivalent was already available with The Sims, but with The Sims Online, the potential of actually creating 'real' virtual communities, seemed revolutionary optimistic, or even 'playing' as a 'real' other person to see how the community would respond. But the game never became the success that was anticipated. It seemed to promise a new gaming audience and a great way of experimenting with social human behaviour – what humans would do if they were not constrained by bodily functions and aesthetics? Creating a 'new world' from scratch, seeing how creatively we could invent new markets. But something within the game mechanics design or the community made the game flop. Sales peaked in January 2003 at about 105,000 subscribers and dived down to 35,000 in January 2005.[3]

> *"It was like The Sims, yes, but here they were expected to create and micromanage one Sim, rather than a family of them. Moreover, they were expected to raise her up in the classic MMOG model: Doing repetitive things for a meagre amount of money to raise numbers that make doing the repetitive thing slightly easier which would then enable them to possibly get more money. In TSO, however, once the player clicked on an object, all there was left to do was watch and chat.*
> *"Not having a fully functioning economy and more fun activities to entertain players made the game less appealing than we wanted," according to Walton* (Gordon Walton, Executive Producer of The Sims Online

<div align="right">From Shannon Drake interview Escapist issue #55, 2006</div>

I would also like to add that part of the 'fun' with The Sims offline version was the numerical gameplay value of social behaviour. The fact that certain behaviours are rewarded and others are 'punished' is part of the suspense and 'fun' in playing The Sims, The Sims Online, however made social interaction 'real', and from my own experience very tense and boring. The general atmosphere of socialisation was very sugar sweet and friendly. Very many 'I love you's and very little reactionary socialisation. The avatars were nice to each other as an unwritten rule to keep the world peaceful and in many cases overly nice so as not to be misunderstood. This constant fear of offending someone else made for a tense social 'atmosphere' instead of the enjoyable gameplay that socialisation within The Sims provided.

In my opinion, it was a worthy attempt that was ruined by way too many game play rules and an invisible governmental force that didn't have time or resources to manage this place that they had created and a lack of understanding of how the players 'felt' and related to the world. When the 'self' is projected onto (into?) cyberspace the distinctions between reality and virtuality become blurred emotionally and existential questions of law, civility and property become questionable – Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games, such as The Sims Online are opening this pandora's box.

5.2.   SOCIAL HIERARCHY IN THE SIMS ONLINE

Within The Sims Online the social is an emphasis both for gameplay and enjoyment. It is clearly in your best interest to have plenty of friends and to be welcome among many.

5.2.1. SOCIAL GAMEPLAY DESIGN

There are several different gameplay options within The Sims Online. One of which is social status. There are five official social lists that show how popular or unpopular you are in the game. The list seems to be intended to encourage the players to make as many friends or enemies as possible. Through my play research of The Sims Online, I never found a single player who played the game this way.

MAKING FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

Making a friend in The Sims Online is generally pretty easy if you look at the gameplay design perspective. Your avatar offers different forms of interactions to another avatar that either rejects them, accepts them or is forced to endure them. These can be as simple as a wave or as personal as a 'romantic' kiss. The interactions have various degrees of power on the 'friendship scale'.   When you're new to the game you're fairly limited with your interaction opportunities, so you will have to use the more distant types, such as a handshake over and over again before someone is listed as your friend. As your skills grow the interactions become more powerful and personal. A favourite is to serenade another, because it is safe, as the other avatar does not have to accept the serenade and it also upholds

the friendship connection pretty strongly and quick. But in order to serenade one must also have at least 8 creativity skill points. Positive interactions with other avatars therefore give you other avatars as friends according to your personal friends list. These must be nursed frequently, however, or else you will loose friends. The second list is a communal list "Best Liked Sims". This will tell you who is most popular in the game of friends. There are two negative lists; "The Meanest Sim" and "The Most Disliked Sim". When it comes to these, I am not sure. I was only put on 'ignore' once, because when responding to a question on my 'real life' looks I said "I'm short, stubby, hairy (I grow the hair under my armpits) and I'm dark". I didn't pursue the enemy equation of The Sims Online as it made me, quite uncomfortable. I will, however, mention here that one of the negative interactions is to 'Piledrive' (a term and action taken from the World Wrestling Federation) the other avatar. This will cause a negative rift between the two of you, but the receiving avatar has to accept the piledrive so there's plenty opportunity to refuse it, which can be redundant.

As far as I can gather the only advantage of being on the top of the friends list is that you're nr. 1 and it can function as publicity for your house, if you have one! So one of the gameplay components designed into The Sims Online is definitely socialisation, but we see it other places than here as well.

COMMUNICATING WITHOUT PLAYING

Skilling can be a tedious and boring affair but the game is designed so that it is more productive if you do it together with others. For example, when I was skilling logic, I would always look for a skilling house that had several other players as I would gain my logic skill points more efficiently and quickly if the house was full of others doing the same thing, rather than sitting alone, for example in my own house, where it would take 10 times more time. Nevertheless, skilling logic entails placing your avatar by a chess board where she'll play either with herself or someone else. You have absolutely no control over the game itself and no one wins. So you're left with communication to amuse yourself. You either 'talk' to the rest of the room or you can use the TSO Instant Messenger to chat with 'closer' friends where you can have more private conversations and also talk to avatars who are not in the same house as you! In Dekcuf's first weeks in TSO she lived in a house that belonged

to a more experienced player. One day she received a notice that 'Jenna' had moved in to our house, I sent her a personal message welcoming her to our house and ever since we were the closest of friends but our avatars have actually only met once! She is nowhere to be found in Dekcuf's (my avatar) friendship web, but while skilling we often chatted about life, the game and men and I considered her to be a close friend. In fact, when Dekcuf first met her avatar I felt a certain warmth and joy when Dekcuf and Jenna hugged. I was genuinely touched and happy to see her and hug her. I felt absolutely no pressure in doing social interactions with her so that she could be on my friends list, I was just genuinely happy that I was able to interact with her by means of an avatar hug.

> "In multi-user worlds it is not just through the inclusion of a representation of self that presence is built. It is instead through the use of a body as material in the dynamic performance of identity and social life that users come to be "made real"- that they come to experience immersion"
>
> T.L. Taylor, 2003

Our communication had evolved completely outside of gameplay. Time flew by when I chatted with Jenna, which made the act of communication fun and playful, which in turn made the game The Sims Online fun for me. So what happens when a player enjoys an aspect of the game which is not fundamentally a game design mechanism? Or is it?

GAMEPLAY AS WORK

Surely the game designers of The Sims Online understood that skilling would be a task players would find tedious and this would result in other forms of gameplay. This seems to be an essential tool in the game design of MMORPGs. Most are very difficult in the beginning and will very often be considered work!

Julian Dibbell in his case study of Troy Stolle a Dark Age of Camelot player, mentions the same thing. He (Stolle) worked hard all day only to come back home to work even more in MMORPG – "It's not work if you enjoy it" (Dibbell, 2004).

> "…the avatar is constrained by society in the VW (Virtual World), in that social roles are not open to everyone; an avatar must compete against other avatars to fill a role. In

a sentence, avatars in avatar spaces could do no work and still do anything that any other avatar could do; avatars in VWs must work to do anything interesting at all. And, somewhat shockingly, scarcity is what makes the VW so fun. The process of developing avatar capital seems to invoke exactly the same risk and reward structures in the brain that are invoked by personal development in real life.

<center>(…)</center>

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. Moreover, since the VWs are inherently social, the achievements are relative: it is not having powerful weapons that really makes a difference in prestige, but in having the most powerful weapons in the world. In a post-industrial society, it is social status, more than anything else, that drives people to work so diligently all their lives. In this respect, VWs are truly a simulacrum of Earth society

<div align="right">Castronova p. 16, 17 2001</div>

Although Castronova's description may be true of more adventure-combat oriented virtual gaming worlds, I am not certain that this can be used to describe The Sims Online, which is more of a social virtual gaming world. Although instead of weapons we could consider the TSO houses as being the root of social status in The Sims Online. The more Simoleons (TSO monetary unit) an avatar acquires the bigger and better furnished house she can build. The more skill or/and monetary winning equipment she has in the house, the more visitors will come. There is a mechanism designed into the game where only 20 avatars can visit at one time, so that the whole population cannot be lured to one place at any one given time.

This is, however, remedied by a bug, so there is fierce competition in Alphaville for who has THE logic skill house, body skill house, logic money house a.s.o. One could say that social status is attained by having one of the more popular houses within the city your sim is living in and because the sims are so scarce there is a fair deal of prestige in this. As well as having to work hard to attain the finances to build such a house there's also quite a lot of labour involved in keeping these houses. Food has to be available for the visiting avatars, dishes need to be washed, plants need to be watered, toilets and showers need to be cleaned and it is also common that the hosts provide social points. I was asked several times if I wanted to join a house, but to me, it looked like too much of a hassle and the benefits were less than minimal to me, they were monetary and on the occasions asked, I didn't have any particular purchasing goals so there were no clear benefits for me. Although I did have a lot of respect to the owners of the houses I skilled or made money at! One rarely found anyone being rude to the owners of a popular house.

5.3. THE SIMS ONLINE POPULATION

There are several different ways to interact with a virtual gaming world and how to play the game. A player is interacting with a gaming rule system, and within virtual gaming worlds this can be done and interpreted in numerous ways. In order for us to understand the law and rules, we should also try to understand the motivations of the players. When dealing with a virtual online gaming world, one cannot rely on the 'rules of the game' embedded in the software alone. Although this is a major regulatory component, there are also social rules, Electronic Arts' rules (for TSO) and 'real world' rules to consider and the differences between them become rather blurry so the evaluation of them reliant on the eye of the beholder. The intentions of the various parties therefore become relevant. Although a player may have been breaking an Electronic Art's Terms of Service rule, it may not have been her intention to cause havoc for the company or the other players. In fact, her purpose may have been completely opposite. She may also be breaking a rule because everyone else seems to be doing it and not getting caught.

5.3.1. CATEGORISING PLAYERS

Richard Bartle, the co-designer of the first MUD, has perhaps constructed the most used and respected typology of virtual gaming worlds, dividing the players into 4 groups; achievers, explorers, socialisers and killers (Bartle, 1996).

Richard Bartle's "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds Spades: Players Who Suit MUDS":

> "*Achievers* (diamonds) regard points-gathering and rising in levels as their main goal, and all is ultimately subservient to this. Exploration is necessary only to find new sources of treasure, or improved ways of wringing points from it. Socializing is a relaxing method of discovering what other players know about the business of accumulating points, so that their knowledge can be applied to the task of gaining riches. Killing is only necessary to eliminate rivals or people who get in the way, or to gain vast amounts of points (if points are awarded for killing other players).
>
> *Explorers* (spades) delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them. They try progressively esoteric actions in wild, out-of-the-way places, looking for interesting features (i.e. bugs) and figuring out how things work. Scoring points may be necessary to enter some next phase of exploration, but it's tedious, and anyone with half

a brain can do it. Killing is quicker, and might be a constructive exercise in its own right…Socializing can be informative as a source of new ideas to try out…The real fun comes only from discovery, and making the most complete set of maps in existence.

Socializers (hearts) are interested in people, and what they have to say. The game is merely a backdrop, a common ground where things happen to players. Some exploration may be necessary so as to understand what everyone else is talking about, and points-scoring could be required to gain access to neat communicative spells available only to higher levels (as well as to obtain a certain status in the community). Killing, however, is something only ever to be excused if it's a futile, impulsive act of revenge, perpetrated upon someone who has caused intolerable pain to a dear friend. The only ultimately fulfilling thing is…getting to know people, to understand them, and to form beautiful, lasting relationships.

Killers (clubs) get their kicks from imposing themselves on others. [Killers] attack other players with a view to killing off their personae…The more massive the distress caused, the greater the killer's joy at having caused it. Normal points-scoring is usually required…and exploration of a kind is necessary to discover new and ingenious ways to kill people. Even socializing is sometimes worthwhile beyond taunting a recent victim, for example in finding out someone's playing habits, or discussing tactics with fellow killers. They're all just means to an end though; only in the knowledge that a real person, somewhere, is very upset by what you've just done, yet can themselves do nothing about it, is there any true adrenaline-shooting, juicy fun?"

(Salen and Zimmerman, p. 466, 2005)

Richard Bartle further goes on to analyse the different dynamics between player groups, which could be considered a social world balance of power. However, when considering which dynamics would provide a stable MUD, Bartle's third point:

"A MUD where all groups have a similar influence (although not necessarily similar numbers). By nurturing explorers using software means (i.e. Giving the game great depth or mystique", or encouraging non-explorers to dabble for a while by regularly adding new areas and features), the overall population of explorers will gradually rise, and the killer population will be held in check by them. The killers who remain do exert an influence on the number of socialisers, sufficient to stop them from going into fast-breeder mode, but insufficient to initiate an exodus. Achievers are set upon by killers often enough to feel that their achievements in the game have meaning. This is perhaps the most balanced form of MUD, since players can change their position on the interest graph far more freely: achievers can become explorers, explorers can become socialisers, socialisers can become achievers – all without sacrificing stability. However, actually attaining that stability in the first place is very difficult indeed; it requires not only a level of game design beyond what most MUDs can draw on, but time and player management skills that aren't usually available to MUD administrators. Furthermore, the administrators need to recognise that they are aiming for a player mix of this kind in advance, because the chances of its occurring accidentally are slim."

Balance between player types is essential in MMORPGs, but I would rather say that it enhanced the ability to experiment with different play methods, not necessarily interest identity. An achiever may feel more comfortable trying out some of the socializers play methods, but this wouldn't make them a socializer.

Nick Yee, a distinguished Stanford researcher on virtual worlds points out a few relevant problems with Bartle's model in "Five Motivational Factors for Why People Play MMORPGs":

> "One problem with such a just-so model is that the 4 types may overlap. For example, it may be the case that most Achievers are Explorers, because to advance in levels quickly, one has to know about the game mechanics. Another problem is that the types may not be well-constructed, and may include unnecessary traits and exclude important traits. For example, perhaps the Achiever scale should be based upon a desire for power rather than points accumulation. Or perhaps, mapping geography is not that important to most Explorers who are actually much more interested in the game mechanics"

Nick Yee, 2002

This is a fundamental and evident problem when creating a typology of players within MMORPGs, players tend to overlap their player type categorisation. It's difficult to pin point a player identity, as players tend to explore most aspects of play at one time or another. Emphasizing that he had not found a way to 'categorize players into different boxes', Mr. Yee's work found 5 motivations for playing MMORPGs: relationship, immersion, grief, achievement and leadership. Roughly summarized:

> **Relationship:** Players who have good and meaningful conversations within the game both about real and virtual life. "These players also tend to feel that they have learned things about themselves from playing the game, as well as gaining a better understanding of real-life group dynamics."

> **Immersion:** Players who role-play and enjoy experimenting with roles of identity within the game. These players are also storytellers. "They also appreciate the sense of being part of an ongoing story, and oftentimes will think up a personal history and story for their characters".

Grief: Players who enjoy manipulating other players and using them for their own personal gain. This can be subtle or outright. "In either case, the satisfaction comes from some form of manipulation of other players for personal gain".

Achievement: Players who strive for high scores and reaching the goals of the game. Interestingly this only applies within the 'rules' of the game. "The underlying theme is a desire to get bigger numbers. But the satisfaction comes from feeling powerful."

Leadership: Players who strive for leading. Assertive group players.

These motivational factors are essential when contemplating a typology of MMORPG players. Nick Yee and Richard Bartle have certainly provided for a starting point to figure out what these players actually do in MMORPGs. Since these are virtual and persistent worlds, however, we should look at the players through their social groupings and economies. For can the categorisations not simply be categorisations of different forms of MMORPG play? As Timothy Burke states in "Rubicite Breastplate Priced to Move, Cheap: How Virtual Economies Become Real Simulations":

"Richard Bartle's useful typology of multi-user game players has considerable overlap with the categories I will use in this paper, but his categories are more focused on general modes of gameplay rather than the specific way the players interact with the internal economy of the game"

Burke, 2002

When looking at a virtual gaming world population it is important to see that as well as playing the game and interacting with the game rules, there is also a sense of a living community and economy that is in essence tied up with gameplay mechanisms, but often only as a mutual ground to evolve from. We have already established that the actual game design mechanisms of The Sims Online are meant to be sociable, imitating 'real life' community functionality, but that these have a numerical gaming value and are often not an adequate representation of actual community or social value. It is therefore important to analyse The Sims Online population from an economic perspective as well as motivational and game play.

Timothy Burke divides the economy of virtual gaming worlds into three categories; *utility-maximizers*, *the moral economy faction* and *exploiters*.

The 'utility-maximizers' are the power gamers. "Relentless seekers of the most efficient way to accumulate the most wealth in the least amount of time" (Burke, 2002). One of the players striving to have the most powerful house could be categorised as a 'utility-maximizer'. To maximise the income of these houses, it is, for example, attractive to seek room-mates that can play at different times of the day. Preferably from different time zones of the world, but also people who can play while working (this game is very popular with telemarketers). This makes it possible to stay open 24 hours and welcome as many players as possible into the house, which in turn gives more money to the proprietor. These proprietors have to be in touch with recent trends in the game play economy, since they are dependent on their 'customers' to be on top.

One of the most popular logic skilling houses I regularly visited changed after a few months into a creative skilling house. Logic is one of the most difficult skills to preserve on top level 21, which can be a grievance and nuisance, so a cultural wave suddenly spread through the city of Alphaville, those who had enough locks (you gain a certain amount of locks as a reward for staying with the game each month), locked their logic skills. The logic house saw a decrease of players, and did the wise economic decision of changing into a creativity skilling house. This had a massive impact on the creative skilling economy, because there had been several 'smaller' houses tending to this skill, and they were now loosing customers fast. Because these houses were much smaller in scope, with fewer room-mates for management purposes and less capital to expand, they suffered a great 'business' loss and several had to shut down.

Other examples of 'utility-maximizers' in TSO, can be those starting their own businesses beyond the game play mechanisms designed for the game, but remaining eager for the most money and property. Businesses such as banking; charging for converting monetary assets from one city to another. There are several creative businesses created in TSO, but I am hesitant to categorise them all as 'utility-maximizers', for most found their business' 'fun' and a part of gameplay enjoyment not as a fast track to be the best at all cost. One player, for example, offered his services to design rooftops, which are visible from the city view, but he did this because this is what he enjoyed with the game and only asked for money as a type

of symbolism. He never used the money to show his fortune in TSO riches or to gain any gaming advancement.

Since this is a game based on sociability I would also like to categorize those with the most numeric social status within this category. As mentioned earlier, when describing the game play mechanisms of TSO, the numerical value of friends network doesn't necessarily symbolise the 'true' network of friends. In TSO there are several players who will have their avatar perform 'friend' activities with another avatar in order to have her included in their 'social network'.   Very superficial and polite niceties are exchanged in order to attain these statuses. The gain for these utility-maximizers is popularity status and a wider array of avatar vs. avatar social interactions.

Burke's second economic population is 'the moral economy faction', these "assert a simple foundational argument, that these are games and that the guiding question that should govern all players actions should be , "Is this fun"?". These are gamers looking to have fun. There are several examples of this.   I think the best examples are the gamers who are building and hanging out in love and entertainment houses. Some of these certainly do have monetary goals, but some also are just there for 'the pleasure of the game'. Mr Gigolo, for example, built a love house where each room had a different theme. He wanted it to be like a porn film set. It really was unique and he put a lot of work into it, with dirty jokes hanging on the walls, a space room, a class room, a dungeon room. It was very varied and thorough. The intention was for people to have exciting places to have sex in, not to make money. He had two tip jars at the entrance where you could make some contributions if you had enjoyed your stay. But he would never force anyone to pay. Although it seems odd that this was a form of gameplay intended in the design it has become a popular one!

Because of The Sims Online's questionable ability to inspire actual role playing, the communication channels became a tool for expressional play. Again, the game play mechanisms are based on sociability but do not provide *actual* sociability. The 'moral economy faction' takes the sociability of the game seriously and is great at making the game their space for play and enjoyment. The above mentioned roof designer is a part of the 'moral economy faction' as well. He is using the tools and the world provided for him to have fun. Often, in this economy, media outside the game are used to enhance the 'fun' social play, such as websites being created to host live radio programs. The most fun I had

playing The Sims Online was when skilling in a house that provided such a service. We were all listening to the same thing, making requests, talking about the music, our avatars interacting with dance in between skilling and discussions.

Timothy Burke's third economic population is the 'exploiters'. This is perhaps the hardest economy of players to categorise, for generally this group has a negative influence on the community at large, but an exploiter isn't necessarily a negative economy for the general playing population.

5.3.2. THE PROBLEM WITH EXPLOITERS

According to Burke, a mild form of exploiting is using and exploring for bugs. To keep my logic skills from decaying I would often play War Game with Valerenga. There was a bug when we played it in a certain order which increased our logic skills quickly, that way we didn't have to sit by a dull chess table for an hour. But exploitation of bugs can have devastating effects as well, a lesson learned from Morningstar and Farmer's 'Habitat' where a few players detected a bug that left them hundreds of thousands tokens (Habitat monetary unit) richer, which in return messed up the whole virtual economic value. The players had not done this to initially harm the gaming world, but exploited a bug when they saw one for their own gaming benefit.

> "The first faction of exploiters generally argue that they are merely more canny maximizers who seek useful exceptions to the rules of the game, while the users of third-party programs tend to rest on legalisms (if it is not forbidden, it is permitted), or on arguments that poor game design justifies the use of shortcuts to avoid absurd tedium. A last sort of exploiter rarely tries to justify his actions, or admit to them, as they are unambiguously a form of impermissible cheating."
>
> Burke, 2002

The Sims Online designed the game with restrictions on how many avatars can be in a house at any one time, maximum being 20. This however, could easily be fixed by having a room-mate exit to let someone else in, only to return in again, for if they belong to a house they have unlimited access. But this was not the use of a bug, a third-party program or in direct

violation of any game rules; the house owners merely found a glitch in the system and exploited it. Exploiting such glitches therefore does not necessarily categorise them into the exploiter economy, for they are not searching for exploits they are using exploits to maximise.

This seems to be the main difference between the two economies. All three can be using exploits within their chosen gameplay mechanism (economy?). Mr. Gigolo of the moral economy faction, for example, exploited bugs in the game that made it aesthetically possible for the avatars to have sex, both by downloading illegal skins that gave his avatar a naked anatomically correct body and by certain acts that made it aesthetically seem like they were having sex. They're doing this all in the name of 'fun'. The difference is the exploitation of bugs and third party software to make money (both actual and virtual) and the practise of using these opportunities to have more 'fun' within the game. Maximizers, however, are more likely to stay within the boundaries of the game rules and world. They might use a glitch or exploit to maximise their playing rewards, but usually only when they have become culturally acceptable within the gaming community at large.

The exploiter economy is generally an exploring economy, testing the boundaries of the game and finding as many glitches and bugs within the gameplay mechanisms and the world.

There are, however, more 'serious' exploiters, within these virtual gaming worlds. Indeed businesses have been created to provide for exploiters. Software has been designed to create bots, which are automatic programs that control your avatar. While you sleep or work on other things, the program performs certain tasks that result in power levelling or gold farming. In The Sims Online I could purchase a program/bot to possess my avatar. By power levelling the bot would be advancing my skills and providing for my biological needs, without me having to pay attention.

Gold farming in The Sims Online entails pretty much the same procedure only with monetary actions, such as solving geometrical problems on a chalkboard and selling them. This may sound complicated, but it is actually a very repetitive action. Click on a chalkboard, press "Solve Problem" (Figure 5) when your avatar is finished scribbling and dancing with a conquerors delight, click on chalkboard and press "Sell Solution". Because of its repetitive nature the act can easily be taken care of by a computer program or bot.

Figure 5: Boarding in The Sims Online

Although bots are highly unpopular within The Sims Online, I'm not sure that they harm the economy. When Morningstar and Farmer realised that because of a bug three players were extremely rich, they managed to persuade these players to "underwrite a series of treasure hunt games which they conducted on their own initiative, much to the enjoyment of many other players on the system" (Morningstar and Farmer, 1990). This seems, to me, to be the mentality of TSO'ers as well. If you find wealthy players, who have no scruples about using bots, they're usually doing it to fund an idea for game play, whether it is treasure hunts, bingo, dancing competitions or just designing an amusement house. The abundant wealth of certain players often contributes to more creativity and the expansion of the virtual gaming world. Of course, one could argue, that these exploiters contribute to the economy by making an elite of sorts. Because they possess an abundant resource of wealth, they also have the power to dictate trends and the value of property and virtual items.

One of my gaming friends, Tom and I had often chatted about creating our own game, something in the form of a treasure hunt, we knew that we would have to muster up a good deal of money for an end prize which would give players initiative to play our game. Tom invested in a bot and also started a new TSO account to help raise money. I, on the other hand, saw this as a unique opportunity to practice my actual lobbying and marketing skills. People were very generous and I raised over a million simoleons for the cause – which I ended up donating to Tom because my real life was interrupting my gameplay time and he had both opportunity and the creativity to fulfil the project. Using Burke's classifications I would peg Tom as an utility-maximizer and I a part of the moral economy faction.

The problem with bots in TSO isn't so much about ruining the financial economy it is generally frowned upon because it ruins the social fluidity, which, in turn may actually be the essential commodity in The Sims Online. Communication is such an essential component. It is just as annoying and embarrassing speaking to someone in an MMORPG room, loudly (so everyone can see your text bubble) and not getting a response as it is talking to someone in a crowded silent room and blatantly being ignored.

Burke also includes griefers within his exploiter economy. A 'griefer' is a player who plays the game by causing havoc on other players. They can spam them in chat, steal, lie, cheat and bully, basically they are players who don't play 'fairly' or players who have fun at other player's expense. In The Sims Online a griefer can be a player who purposefully looses bladder control in the corner of a house that's hard to get to. Unless such 'mess' is cleaned up, the house will deteriorate and causes the owner a lot of 'grief' by money losses and repairs of house. This can, however, be looked at as a form of gameplay, generally not frowned upon by the 'coding authorities' unless someone complains.

A griefer can also be someone who hassles another player either by lying, cheating or stealing. But these definitions are rather vague and are often construed through the point of view of the complainer and the game master, which again questions the morality of the exploiters, are they good or bad? But they are exploiters. They are not playing the game as it was intended, which I feel is the common denominator for exploiters. Players can unintentionally exploit a bug without them knowing what harm it is causing the virtual world, they mean no harm, but there are also those who do mean harm. The difference can be barely visible or potent.

> "A degenerate strategy or exploit is a way of playing a game that ensures victory every time. Dedicated players and unsportsmanlike players make use of degenerate strategies. In general, degenerate strategies are detrimental to a game. However, within a community of players, degenerate strategies can sometimes act to expand the space of possibility."
>
> Salen and Zimmerman (p. 284, 2004)

When playing The Sims Online I became very annoyed that every time Dekcuf was in the shower her image would become blurred, as if there was some explicit perverse nudity going

on the shower. In order to remedy this I downloaded a so called nude patch that would decrypt the blurring. This is not an EA service so I was in violation of the Terms of Service:

> "You may not modify any part of the Service or any Service Web Site that EA does not specifically authorize you to modify."[4]

The Sim avatars are not anatomically correct, so I didn't add any undesirable content to the game; I only adjusted my view of how the game looked. It had no affect on game play, the download just made my experience of the game more enjoyable, yet it was illegal. This, in my opinion, does not make me an exploiter, for I was not gaining anything other than enjoyment of the game, so am I therefore a part of the 'moral economy faction'? Whilst MAXIS could see me as exploiting a bug, in my opinion I was just playing the game in the manner which was enjoyable or fun for me. The difference of opinion is vast and deserves to be recognised, for if we are to look at the rights of the producers and the players both have equal and ample justifications for their beliefs.

I disagree with Timothy Burke's 'exploiters' economy. For 'exploiting' is an action, a form of gameplay, one which most players use at some time or other, but this does not make them a part of an economic typology group of 'exploiters'. Exploiting gaming methods can be used to increase the fun or to increase levels and upkeep and is not its own group or economy within virtual gaming worlds. But griefers, however, may be. Bartle's *Killers* and Yee's *Griefers* describe this group of players very well. Although, it also needs to be pointed out that there is a difference between 'griefing' and being a 'griefer'. For example, a griefer may be someone who starts a business in order to lure other players to loose all their money.

There are several businesses in The Sims Online that offer money transfers from one city to the next (for that is not actually possible according to the game rules), you had to ask around about reputation to make sure that the business was reliable and trustworthy for there were several 'predators' out there hoping to steal your money. Griefers as an economic group are only out to stir trouble for other players – whether by stealing or conning or bullying other players. However, griefing methods can also be used for 'world peace', as Mr. Burke states:

> "Players sometimes relate to developers as if developers represented the state or government, but in fact, most of the economic functions of a state are absent from the

gameworlds, particularly in terms of protecting trade and making its terms transparent to all participants in the economy."

Burke, 2002

This is true of The Sims Online as well, so the gaming population often finds their own methods of governmental regulation. A group of griefers in The Sims Online achieved fame and fortune when they became an organised group of players calling themselves the TSO mafia, who successfully built up a foundational structure of organised crime. In many ways they became the law and order in TSO. If you had a complaint you could report it to the mafia and for a sum or for a 'favour' they would take care of the problem for you, by griefing. The odd thing with this method is that it actually worked as a structured governmental force.

"Our job is to basically take those complaints from the normal citizens of the game, who can't go to EA because EA won't do anything about it, and do an eye-for-an eye for them." Chase said.

Bray, 2004

The situation of The Sims Online Mafia is a good indicator for why it is important to define the different groups of players within MMORPGs and to recognise that the players and the coding authorities can have different opinions on what justifies which definition. In accordance to the TSO guidelines, the Mafia were in fact breaking the rules, using griefing methods.

The Sims Online Mafia fit into the moral economy faction, because they were basically protecting the right of other TSO'ers to have fun. Because they couldn't count on the developers to handle disruptive behaviour within The Sims Online, they used the same disruptive methods of gameplay to ensure the protection of players' rights to have fun. One could perhaps argue that this constitutes another economic group of players, perhaps called "protectors", for this organised group of players can just as easily be pinpointed as maximizers or power gamers. Their role as 'protectors' also ensured them a lot of power and they made no claim of being an organisation for the greater good, they wouldn't help without getting something in return and still became a form of government on the societal level of the game.

5.4.   A TYPOLOGY OF THE SIMS ONLINE PLAYERS

A typology of MMORPGs must consider two aspects; gameplay and societal impact on the political and gaming economy.   They are surely intertwined with each other, particularly in The Sims Online, whose gameplay design is based on societal rules from the actual world. Although there are certain rules that need to be followed to play the game, like keeping the avatar alive, it is the gamers themselves who decide how they want to play the game, what forms of play are popular and what rules they wish to abide by.   The Sims Online is as much used as a social space as a gaming space, because of its communication channels.

In many cases one could maybe divide the participants of this virtual gaming world in two groups; those who socialise while they play and those who play while they socialise.

Being bound by a bodily representation of self, the avatar, a player is dependent on engaging with the game mechanics in order to participate in the community – in other words, one cannot engage in The Sims Online community purely by using the communication channels. Therefore one has to look upon this virtual world by first acknowledging the software on which it is based, just as in actual life and the basic laws of physics, and because of its game mechanics fundamental build-up we also have to acknowledge, the game in itself and how players are interacting with it. Furthermore a community is formed – a community where the game is the common denominator.

 Those who log on to the game are there first and foremost to play and in the process a community of sorts springs to life. And as with most communities, roles are given and societal groups are formed. It is my contention that the different player groups and styles also have an impact on the societal level. When some players disrupt this society, defence mechanisms are put in place to guard from this disruption for these mechanisms cannot easily be fixed by changing the software design. The problems that arise can not always be fixed numerically with code, for a community is based on communication, it is this which binds the community together and is also where disruption often occurs and also becomes the community's method of dealing with disruption.

As T.L. Taylor found in her thorough research of Everquest, with the phenomenon of 'trains' (a train of monsters following some players);

"But the fact that there are norms regarding what to do in a train situation also gives the community methods for evaluating the player who caused the problem. Starting trains is a not infrequent method of "griefing" other players (causing havoc), and groups of players often decide fairly quickly, sometimes through public debate, whether or not a train was unintentional but excusable, unintentional but "dumb" (caused by poor judgment and probably avoidable), or intentional and therefore a grievance. Giving other players advance warning of any trouble you have caused is certainly one point that weighs in favour of the player in the court of public opinion".

<div align="right">T.L. Taylor, 2006</div>

Furthermore, the 'coding authorities' use their authority by the threat of exclusion, and sometimes clashes should be confronted within the society. Therefore we see groups of players taking authoritarian control to protect their fellow citizens, like The Sims Online Mafia. Every player takes on a societal role as well as a game playing role, which is why I feel it is important to look at the gameplay and societal impact different players have on the game economy and politics.   Building on the research of Yee, Bartle and Taylor I have developed a typology of five player groups; maximizers, hedonistic auslebeners, griefers, sleepwalkers and protectors. [5]

5.4.1. MAXIMISERS

Gameplay – Accumulating the most points. Figuring out the code. Powergamers. Explorers of bugs that will get them skills and money quicker. Most likely to buy bots. Pretty much the same as Burke's maximizers, but including Taylor's 'power gamers', who exploit third party software and bugs to accumulate the most wealth in friends and finances. In her description of power gamers and their desire to push beyond the boundaries and to comprehend the game on another level, she writes;

"This boundary-pushing is one of the first instances in which my account of power gamers differs from Bartle's consideration of the "achiever". In many ways the achiever fits the mold of the power gamer with the attention to goals. Barle, however, suggests that for achievers, "Exploration is necessary only to find new sources of treasure, or improved ways of wringing points from it" /Bartle 1996,3). By contrast, he posits, "Explorers delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them. They try progressively esoteric actions in wild, out –of-the way places, looking for interesting features (i.e., bugs) and figuring out how things work"(ibid.).

In my discussions with power gamers I have found that this line is not so clear. Certainly there is a goal behind the system exploration that power gamers engage in, but it does not seem to have quite the peripheral "only if I have to" quality Bartle hints at. "

<div align="right">Taylor, 2006</div>

The case of the power gamer also challenges Burke's differentiation of the exploiter and the maximiser, as this group is only finding ways to improve their game but may be using exploiting methods.

Societal – The more cool things you can do and buy the better the popularity. Hardly ever say anything insulting in fact they're more likely to be overtly nice and extremely polite, for their worst fear is to come on someone's enemy list. This group of players can often compare to a teenage popularity contest. They have to be the best at skills, have the best assets and the most friends.

5.4.2. HEDONISTIC AUSLEBENERS

Gameplay – Here, I come close to Timothy Burke's classification of 'the moral economy faction', but I prefer the title Hedonistic Auslebeners as 'ausleben' means 'to enjoy life to the full' in German. These virtual gaming world citizens are those out to have the most fun in the game. In The Sims Online they're the avatars running fun and entertainment houses, either that or they are frequent visitors. They might even make their own games, like

Bingo (Figure 6).

Figure 6: TSO Bingo – created by the players themselves

Societal – Social players, although this does not always appear on their gameplay statistics. They're very active communicators, so rumours and news will most often travel through a hedonistic auslebeners player. They're the keepers of the moral economy and are pretty much in control of what social behaviour is deemed acceptable and unacceptable, they can make or break someone's societal significance or reputation by force of communication via rumours and other news outlets. It's usually a Hedonistic Auslebener who starts third party media outlets, like radio shows and newspapers.

5.4.3. GRIEFERS

Gameplay- Richard Bartle's 'Killers': "Killers are interested in doing things to people, ie. In ACTING on other PLAYERS. Normally, this is not with the consent of these "other players" (even if, objectively, the interference in their play might appear "helpful"), but killers don't care: they wish only to demonstrate their superiority over fellow humans, preferably in a world which serves to legitimise actions that could mean imprisonment in real life. Accumulated knowledge is useless unless it can be applied; even when it is applied,

there's no fun unless it can affect a real person instead of an emotionless, computerised entity." (Bartle, 1996).

Societal- The reputation system that the Hedonistic Auslebeners ensures through their sociability forces griefers to change avatars as often as possible. This is relatively possible in a small MMORPG like, The Sims Online, but in larger MMORPGs this may be hard to control, but a reputation system is frequently discussed as a way to fight griefing in World of Warcraft, for example (Edery and Koster, 2006). [6] Although, formalising a reputation system and embedding it into the actual gaming software may cause problems, for it can also be used for griefing, among many other things. The process of giving an innocent Hedonistic Auslebener a bad reputation could easily fulfil a griefer's gaming needs.

But in a small virtual world like The Sims Online, someone always knows someone who knows someone so most griefers are therefore represented with an avatar that has very little social history, often thought of as beginners, noobs. For has the avatar no history, no skills, no friends on her network list, chances are that she's just been born to this world, either that or she's been reborn (started a new avatar). Griefers go out of their way to destroy the societal rules enforced by the Hedonistic Auslebeners and the game play rules enforced by the coding authorities.

5.4.4. SLEEPWALKERS

Gameplay- Bots and gold farmers who refrain from communicating and socializing. Massively focused on repetitive tasks to accumulate as much wealth as possible. This group deserves its own cultural belonging as they have an impact on the economy of play. In Timothy Burke's "Matchmaker, Matchmaker, Make Me a Match: Artificial Societies vs. Virtual Worlds" he describes gold farming as perching in *Asherons Call*:

> "Perching was one of the chief forces driving the rapid spread of hunting "macros" throughout the gameworld, where players automated the actions of their characters so that the character could repetitively extract resources 24 hours a day using a safe perching spot. This in turn had rippling economic effects throughout the rest of the world, driving inflation, making macroing a more and more constant feature of gameplay, and so on. Developers were forced to spend time identifying and eliminating perching spots within the gameworld terrain and eventually banning macroing itself,

though that came at a point where most of the players who objecting to macroing had long since left the game."

<div align="right">Burke, 2005</div>

This is an interesting example of the harm gold farming can do within MMORPGs. The 'macroing' Burke mentions is what I've referred to as exploits. So when players of *Asherons Call* became aware of these exploits it became a new form of gameplay to search for exploits or to find areas in the game that made it possible for gold farming. This also opens the door for third parties to come into the world merely to make a profit, by virtually conquering certain land and farming for virtual assets 24 hours a day, not actually participating in other gameplay or communication, and then selling these virtual commodities for real money. Which in turn has an effect on the community. An item may loose its value if it is mass marketed and then a gameplay mechanic may loose its importance.

Societal – In Castronova's "On Virtual Economies" he observes the problems these virtual gaming worlds face with real-market trade (RMT), which he here refers to as 'foreign trade':

> "On the one hand, all transactions like this improve the well-being of both parties, and therefore make their enjoyment of the game greater. They are happier customers. On the other hand, widespread foreign trade can ruin the ambience of the game world. Most games seek to give the player a rags-to-riches experience, but the satisfaction of that experience can be significantly lessened if one observes that other players, who ought to be poor like oneself, are instead very well arrayed in expensive equipment that they bought for hundreds of dollars outside the game. Foreign trade therefore erodes the equality of opportunity of game play, and damages the entire gaming environment; the situation is a commons tragedy, where the self-interested trading behaviour of individuals destroys the game's atmosphere, to the detriment of all. Whether or not to allow foreign trade therefore involves deep questions about the purpose of the game, the desired atmosphere, and the interests (economic and emotional) of all players."

<div align="right">Castronova, 2002</div>

The virtual commodities represent skill and gameplay labour. In The Sims Online the avatar's clothes and possessions exhibit the avatar's seniority and experience in the game, if these are bought from a third party, like e-bay or a gold farming industry it is generally considered cheating both by the coding authorities and the gaming public. World of Warcraft, which is the most popular MMORPG at current time, has faced some interesting societal problems due to goldfarming which include actual racism. It is a common conception that

most gold farming companies are Chinese, and in January, 2006, World of Warcraft saw a spur of racism and segregation of players who's English wasn't fluent. [7] If a player couldn't speak English fluently, most likely, she was a gold farmer and would therefore be attacked with racist insults and bullying.

Even though there is very little human-avatar-game interaction with sleepwalkers they still influence the game economy and social structure immensely, which is why I feel that we should consider this to be a player type. They are a unique group of players that influence the world of play and the world of social structure. The players that use bots or that trade with gold farmers may be a maximiser or griefer or hedonistic auslebener, but this doesn't necessarily make them a member – they have their own type of gameplay and they have their own type of societal contribution to this virtual online gaming community.

5.4.5. PROTECTORS

<u>Gameplay</u> – Using whatever available gameplay methods to punish the criminals and reward the good citizens. The Sims Online saw two major organisations of protectors, The Sims Online Mafia and The Sims Shadow Government. Both of these were founded to protect other players of unnecessary griefing and they made it a source of gameplay within the virtual online gaming world. There was even an election held in Alphaville for a president with a 'proper' government, including police, judge, FBI, treasury and so on[4], although it failed miserably. These players found their purpose in the game by protecting others and protecting the game and they take it very seriously. They're not hedonistic auslebeners for they are more focused on the actual protection of fun. If someone feels the game is unfair, they will listen and try their best to compensate the complainer.

When I first reached maximum on my logic skill points I was disappointed because my avatar had been sitting there playing chess for 3 hours and my skill level at 21.99 still wouldn't budge to 22, which is max. When I announced my frustration the room told me that 21.99 was max and that skill points never went up to 22. I was annoyed that the gaming mechanics of The Sims Online didn't let me know that after a whole month of playing and working on getting my logic skill level was now on top and I voiced this out clearly to the room. I had barely typed my frustration when a member of the house approached Dekcuf and offered her a monetary gift as congratulations. I was so touched and thankful that my aggregation subsided

and I continued playing in the same peaceful manner! This player went beyond the general gift economy politics within the world, this was her preferred role in the gameplay system of things.

One could also say that Game Masters (the customer service) are protectors as well. They regulate the rules of play and observe play methods and groups. They participate when in the actual gameplay is causing havoc, they may design bots to help the gaming public, like maids and gardeners (who are Sleepwalkers, ofcourse) – as for who they are playing to protect, that is a different matter, whether it is the gaming company (in our case MAXIS) or the actual majority of the gaming community is irrelevant because they are protectors either way. One of course could argue that they shouldn't be considered as part of any typological grouping in an MMORPG but they contribute so much to the play in these games, it seems almost unfair to exclude them.

Societal – They function as law enforcement making sure that the interests of the population as a whole are intact and are often mediators when a conflict arises. May also be the first to report criminal behaviour to the coding authorities. Many other players may consider these to be rather obsessed with complaining and protection and free speech. Protectors involve themselves with the politics of the gaming world, both with gameplay and societal.

5.4.6. CONCLUSION

These are the typological groups I have encountered through my own gameplay. They are all very dependent on each other and contribute to a growing community, and all are a result of the influence of the other. A typology of MMORPGs most certainly will vary from one to the other, and I am also certain that the more complex and immense these worlds are becoming, both on gameplay and societal level, new groups will emerge. A truly interesting typology of MMORPGs would be to include the software design as a member and player. Even though the software is a common denominator for all players, it is still an active interactive part of play. It is ever evolving and to a certain degree you could argue that the software itself has a personality and preferred gameplay method. It is constantly changing because of the

residents' gameplay and societal formations and is heavily influenced by how the typological groups are interacting with one another.

The divisional method of gameplay vs. sociality has its problems as well. For the societal influences may well became a form of gameplay – and certain gameplay methods may well be a way to influence the societal level, but they will still only function as a societal or gameplay mechanic.

This chapter has been about *how* players behave and organise themselves within this virtual gaming world, the next chapter explores how this population is a participatory culture and why online gaming identities and reputations are important to players.

6. OWNERSHIP

Lauren once came to me in distress because she had spent a good deal of time, energy and money on designing a house in Alphaville and someone stole it. This was Lauren's individual gaming fun in The Sims Online, she loved designing and building houses and then selling them off to someone who liked them, a TSO hedonistic auslebener.

But how could an avatar steal another avatar's house? There's an unwritten code of social conduct in The Sims Online, that whenever you buy something that is designed by another that 'other' is accredited with some sort of tag, as you would in the real world. If you buy a house designed by an architect in the actual world, that architect most likely has copyright to the design and must be accredited in some form if the house is to be duplicated. Lauren had sold her recent creation to a friend she trusted and considered to be close. She came to me upset, because she had recently found out that her friend had copied the house in Alphaville and had the exact same design in The Sims Online city, Blazing Falls without any reference to Lauren. In other words, this 'friend' had stolen an idea from Lauren and passed it off as her own. But 'stolen' is a word used by TSO'ers, not the official game rules, the gamer has no copyright on what they design themselves (except maybe for crafting items) or ownership rights of what they virtually own. [1] Lauren, however, felt violated and cheated. The house and the design was her idea, it had been created by her vision, her thoughts, why did she not have the right to claim the design as her own?

6.1. AVATAR'S PERSONALITY

In other words, maybe she should have been able to copyright the design of the house, making it illegal for her friend to copy it and pass it off as her own. But such laws have no jurisdiction here unless it is actually included in the gameplay mechanics or rules. If actual copyright laws from the real world would be included in our case the magic circle of the game could be broken. The Sims Online is a corporately owned world and they (MAXIS/EA) own all that goes on there and created anything from or because of it having the intellectual property right of anything associated with and in The Sims Online.

MMORPGs and intellectual property rights is a complicated issue. For in the point of view of the game producers, in this case MAXIS/EA, they own everything in and associated with The Sims Online, with complete ownership of the trademark. Rosemary Coombe, an expert

academic researching the field of media and intellectual property law, "writes that 'increasingly, holders of intellectual property rights are socially and juridically endowed with monopolies over public meaning and the ability to control the cultural connotations of their corporate insignias (trademarks being the most visible signs of their presence in consumer culture)" (Coombe 1998, 26) (Taylor, 2006). Just as large corporations like Sony own music instead of the artist, so does the game producer own gameplay instead of the player.

Lauren has no right to claim copyright for the design of her house, because in reality Lauren belongs to the game producers. She has created something within the pixelated kingdom of The Sims Online, it therefore belongs to MAXIS/EA, Lauren does not really have any rights at all. If we continue the sandbox game analogy it would be the same as Lauren making a sandcastle and claiming that she owned the copyright to that particular design, if someone were to copy it, they would have to ask her permission. When described this way, it seems rather ridiculous, because building sandcastles is *supposed* to be fun, it is *supposed* to be playful, if someone ruins our castle we usually have a good cry about unfairness and move on. We don't start complaining to the owner of the sandbox and demanding retribution. Why not? Is it because we see the sandbox as a tool for play and fun, a service provided for us? Why are these issues so important to MMORPG players?

Maybe it is because these really are different worlds that just happen to contain gameplay elements within them. Because there is a societal and gameplay divide within this world's community it becomes hard to differentiate between the two. Is a player contributing to the virtual community through gameplay or is she contributing by using her own personality and societal impact? It becomes a diffuse territory, mainly because these are ever growing communities – expanding or reducing the economy of play, communities and commodities. Castronova's 'synthetic world' (2005) can easily be portrayed as a living organism, which is dependent on contributors and activity for it's survival, but these contributions and activities often contain connotations of a different world, the actual one. Personalities, histories and social realities leak through the pores of the 'synthetic world' membrane.

When contemplating the traditions of academic research on the 'Ontology of MMORPG Beings' Javier Salazar of Tohoku Gakuin University states:

"These studies widely assume that MMORPGs are social spaces, places that allow sociability in their players, which indeed is more than obvious for anyone who has ever played an MMORPG. In addition, if we take into account the fact that a space can only be social of the individuals who inhabit it are carriers of sociability, then as a corollary this tradition usually takes for granted the nature of the individual player as a social being. However , if we assume that the "toons" or "avatars" are the very basic sociability carrying entities of MMORPG's, then we also need to explain the subjective processes that occur in the individual level and that result in the injection of sociability into these entities, a theme that not necessarily appears in Game Studies literature."

Salazar, 2005

Avatars are 'carriers of sociability' – but they are so on two levels – one is the sociable identity of the avatar and the other is of the player building the identity of the avatar, the player. Lauren is the avatar and someone else is the player of this avatar.   Through T.L. Taylor's research in *The Dreamscape*, a 2 ½ D multi-user world, she encountered that users reported 'a sense that they can't quite control or predict what their avatar will do – what situations or identities will merge' (Taylor, 2006). It is the combination of social factors relating to the appearance of the avatar and the mind of the user, basically creating a different identity. Many of the social constraints imposed upon the player in actuality also exist within virtual worlds, for example language and nationality. This is a key issue when discussing such ontological questions; the ability to communicate verbally and aesthetically whether in the form of gameplay og sociability.

Donna Haraway sees the cyborg as an opportunity to dissolve boundaries, is the avatar a cyborg? A 'hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction' (Harraway, 1985). The avatar cannot exist without the organism, the human or the machine, the computer, the software. However, Salazar feels that the avatar as cyborg doesn't sufficiently cover the essence of gameplay, fiction and economy. "…social reality as well as a creature of fiction" does not unravel the ontological state of the avatar. As Salazar points out, there is a narratological and a ludological level as well as the several social levels, but it is essential to explore the essence of 'self', which Haraway explores finitely:

"The self is the One who is not dominated, who knows that by the service of the other, the other is the one who holds the future, who knows that by the experience of domination, which gives the lie to the autonomy of the self."

<div align="right">(Haraway, 1985)</div>

Haraway proposes that the notion of self as autonomous is a lie. She observes that there is a dualism within the 'self', the true 'self' is dependent of our other self. The purity and innocence of an inner self, independent of social reality and *the other* is an illusion. For one cannot exist without the other. Can the avatar, however express and represent the true self?

T.L. Taylor observes that through having a graphical body to relate to, people feel that they no longer hide the truth about who they are (Taylor, 2006). They do not have the physical to hide behind. They have the ability to recreate themselves and explore different identities. The fact, however, is that players do have 'real life' identity. Although role-playing gives them a forum to explore their true selves, they still have this identity to relate to. The identity of the avatar is being formed as well within a virtual world. She is formed through her physical appearance, her seniority within the world she inhabits, her skills, her possessions and her social network. These are all created in unison between the player, the gaming software and the social MMORPG community.

An essential component to Lauren's MMORPG identity was her reputation for being a good house designer. This reputation was built by the player, the software and social networking within The Sims Online. Her identity was how she played the game, her history, her personality, her social network and last, but certainly not least were her own creative forces in the city of Alphaville – her personally designed houses. When she came to me in distress she felt her own pride and creation had been taken away from her and that her feelings had been trampled on from lack of mutual respect. It was an emotional agony and pain, which vigorously announced their existence. The relationship between player and avatar is therefore not one of friendship, but they rather share an identity, or a soul if you will! As Sherry Turkle's (1995) notion of extension of self, suggests, the identity is a combination of the player's and the avatar's, the avatar's personality is a sum of gameplay history, social networking and possessions.

6.2. OWNERSHIP OF VIRTUAL PROPERTY

The question of property becomes complex because of gameplay. Often, gameplay is considered labour, it is, after all a player's time and effort and interaction with a software system that produces virtual property. Gameplay produces wealth, time and effort produces gameplay, but all of this is optional, which is usually the main argument from game producers when discussing ownership of virtual property. The company is not making anyone do anything, customers choose to play their game and they choose to agree to the EULA or Terms of Service agreement. Yet a serious business market has emerged from trading virtual gaming assets and labour. As earlier mentioned, gold farming companies and virtual current exchange sites[2] are starting up and reporting impressive revenues. Edward Castronova estimated that the commerce flow was at 'least $30 million annually in the United States, and $100 million globally' but his book was published in late 2005 – the amount of virtual world subscribers may well have doubled by now, for as he states 'synthetic worlds are appearing at the rate of Moore's Law'.

Julian Dibbell recently released a book about real-market trade, *Play Money* (2006), which is about how he invested time and effort into the MMORPG *Ultima Online* and sold the items he won on eBay making a total of $11,000, which he then proceeded to report to the IRS as income from selling 'imaginary items'. Generally such real-money trade is against the EULAs or Terms of Service of MMORPGs, a fundamental basis for this is the danger of griefing. It is nearly impossible for the game developers to supervise these transactions because the deal is made at a third place, a website or through e-mail, a buyer may deposit money into the sellers account after a price is agreed upon and then they would meet in the MMORPG to exchange the items or currency. But what if the seller never showed up in-world? Regardless of the social implications and problems of purchasing currency, items and avatars – the buyer has no legal ground to stand on. Customer Service cannot help, instead they will expel the player for breaking one of the rules she agreed on when entering the game, and there is no actual law that will recognise such 'crime' because of this legal binding document that the player has agreed to. Yet Dibbell is able to report his income from virtual merchandise sales to the tax authorities, even though he was in breach of contract with Ultima Online, and technically was doing something that should not be possible. In Korea of the 40,000 computer crimes committed in 2003, 22,000 were online game related (Castronova 2005). The laws vary from where you are in the world, in Korea, for example, where over 90

% of people aged 20 to 30 have an avatar, identity theft of avatars is a common occurrence in games and gamers who try to scam others into buying virtual items for money are charged in the criminal court system. [3]

In September/October 2005, the Korean Fair Trade Commission investigated consumer complaints about 'terms of service' and 'codes of conduct' for the major Korean MMORPGs. And their findings were surprising as they rendered most TOS (Terms of Service) void, in fact eight of twelve were declared legally void. [4] This led to better the player's rights and reduce the authority of the game companies, for example, they could not seize a player's account if they were caught in RMT for the first time nor would it be up to the player to prove innocence. In 2001, economist Edward Castronova, published his study of Sony Everquest city Norrath, where he calculated that 'the nominal hourly wage is about USD 3.42 per hour, and the labours of the people produce a GNP per capita somewhere between that of Russia and Bulgaria' (Castronova, 2001). All of this could be calculated because of real-money trade and market scarcity, virtual gaming worlds get a natural currency rate towards the US dollar because of the trade going on in third places like eBay. Castronova then calculated the amount of virtual wealth produced through the labour of gameplay and how much this wealth would go for in the 'real world' market.

There have been several attempts at stopping all real-money trade, but the players are so intent on trading that they always find exceptions to the rules or at least find ways around the hurdles thrown at them. In 2000 Sony Online Entertainment (SOE), makers of the MMORPG Everquest came to an agreement with eBay and Yahoo! to suspend all trade of Everquest in-game items (130, Taylor 2006). Five years later, however, they started the Sony Station Exchange, where players from all of Sony Online Entertainment games could trade goods legally and under the control of SOE (which they of course offered for a fee).

The media has focused excessive attention towards Second Life and Project Entropia, because several players have accumulated an impressive amount of wealth within these. Mr. Jon Jacobs enjoyed the media spotlight when he purchased a Project Entropia Space Station for $100,000 in November, 2005. [5] The Second Life fashion business generates over $140,000 a month, hasn't escaped the media's attention either. [6] The difference with these two worlds and other MMORPGs, however, is that they are not gaming worlds and the companies that run them openly encourage real-money trade. The players are given virtual property rights,

because they create much of the content themselves and are therefore encouraged to sell and buy as they please. The in-world economy depends on the active trading of goods in the actual world. They are dynamic societies run by capitalism – the market rules the world, not by gameplay.

There is a dual about the legality of real-money trade both for the game producers and the players themselves. Both the game producers and the majority of players strive for equality of gameplay – that each player should start off equally and that there should be no advantage of wealth brought into a virtual gaming world. At the same time, however, there is a feeling of ownership and a certain personal attachment to the avatar and her possessions that the game producers would like to hold on to. The players and the game producers are interested in maintaining their right of ownership, and although they both have a common goal for the gaming world to thrive, they see the rights management from two different perspectives. Eriksson and Grill from the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm have done an interest analyses, looking at the different interests of virtual property for game producers and gamers:

"The game producer's interests are:
1. *Subscription interests* – virtual trade may decrease a game producer's income from subscriptions. If new players buy advanced characters for real money they won't have to spend time in the game (which they consequently would have to pay for) advancing their own avatars. The subscription interest is also affected by the fact that the game producers may get a bad reputation by letting people with more money than time buy themselves into the game, resulting in gamers leaving the virtual world.
2. *Control interest* – developers have an interest in remaining in control over their creation. In part, this may be a purely creative interest, quite separable from the subscription interest. Often, producers wish that their virtual world should remain a game only. The recognition of ownership rights in the virtual world of their game may thus conflict with their wish to control that world. Producers therefore try to establish norms implying that trade in virtual property with real money should not exist.

The gamers have the following interest:

1. *Fairness interest* – many gamers wish for the game to be played in accordance with its original purpose. They do not want other players to be able to obtain success in an "artificial" way (i.e. buy virtual objects for real money).
2. *Labor interest* – this interest represents the thought that you own the product of your labour, for instance the virtual objects produced in the game. Time and labour spent on a game is not principally different from time and labor spent on more concrete things such as handicraft. That the product of one's effort is virtual does not automatically preclude rights in that product."

<div align="right">(Eriksson and Grill, 2005)</div>

In the first game producer's interest, *subscription*, Eriksson and Grill mention reputation as an important factor. They wish to preserve a reputation of fairness, that each player starts off equal and no player is treated differently due to actual wealth because the prospect of buying your way to winning is considered unfair and immoral. I would however want to extend the game producer's definition or interest in preserving a healthy reputation.

Reputation in itself is an important factor within intellectual property rights and can be used to regulate the limits of role-play. In 2000 an Everquest (Sony) player, *Mystere* posted an obscene piece of fan fiction on an independent website. When discovered by Sony/Verant, *Mystere's* Everquest account was closed and his fanfiction was pulled from the independent website. Gordin Wrinn, a representative of Sony/Verant stated:

> "We make determinations based on information at hand regarding who is or is not having a positive effect on *EverQuest*'s community. If we determine that one person's actions make *EverQuest* a game that other people do not want to play based upon those actions, we will exercise our right to refuse service to the extent necessary to provide a reasonable and enjoyable gaming environment"

<div align="right">T.L. Taylor, 2002</div>

In this case it was in the interest of the game developers to maintain the reputation that they wished to 'preserve' by protecting their intellectual property rights because *Mystere* was a product of their gaming world and because his fanfiction was set within the Everquest geography and storyline Sony/Verant were well within their rights to obliterate both the avatar and the fan fiction. They were protecting their brand, their *reputation*. But what

about the avatar's reputation? Is that not the property of the player? And should the player not have the authority to control and own, their own reputation?

Intellectual property law is a relatively popular debate within virtual gaming worlds, 'who owns the avatar', seems to be the general topic of discussion, perhaps because property in the cyber frontier is intangible. Virtual gaming property has immense value to the players, however and although they can not touch or feel their virtual goods they consider them to be very real, perhaps because the time and effort the players put into the game is real and therefore their rewards feel real. Because the gamers spend massive amounts of time and labour on advancing their virtual character, the avatar, they feel a certain amount of attachment to their virtual gaming assets.   In fact, situations where virtual items have been stolen have actually led to murder. In April 2005 an incident was reported in China where a *Legend of Mir 3* player lent his virtual sword to another player, when this player refused to return it, the lender became so infuriated that he actually tracked down this person in real life and killed him. [7]

This could be disputed from different arguments, the ontological state of the avatar, labour of the player and authorship. For although Lauren built her house within the corporately owned world of The Sims Online she has in a sense also contributed to that world so should have some form of rights in accordance to her contributions to society. For if she is contributing to the virtual world with ideas, presence and the geographical environment is she not creating in unison with MAXIS/EA the virtual place that is The Sims Online? She is spending her hard earned money on tools and property and creating. Her labour has earned her Simoleons which she in return has used to buy land which she has developed. She has bought her own tools and furniture and used her own mind and creativity as labour for contributing to the city of Alphaville. If we then say that the monthly subscription fees can be perceived as taxes, can we not say that she has the same rights in Alphaville that she would in any other society? Or if we perceive the virtual gaming world to be fictitious is she not then a co-author of that world?

But what are intellectual property rights? Ren Reynolds, a researcher on virtual communities and law writes:

"...broadly speaking there are two areas of property law: general property law, which deals with physical things such as land or cars or clothes; and intellectual property law, which deals with ideas. (…) That is, for an idea to be covered by intellectual property law it must have at least one expression. For example, the idea for a novel must actually be written down. But when the novel is written down it becomes instantiated in a particular physical object to which general property law applies. Thus if I am the Author of a novel and you steal a copy of that work from my bookshelf you have stolen my book not my novel. If then you reprint the work with your name as author, you have stolen my novel."

<div align="right">Reynolds, 2002</div>

So what applies in Lauren's situation? She has used the content provided for her by MAXIS/EA to create her own piece of work that she is free to sell to another player, but is the actual design property or intellectual property? Ren Reynolds uses Poster's example of writing text in Microsoft's Word;

 "In the case of computer assisted writing, what is it that we really 'merge into'? Is it the computer itself, the word processor, or the words? If we assert that through the act of writing we share an identity with a program such as Microsoft Word and attempt to act upon this assertion – then we might soon end up in court with Microsoft. Also, when we use Word the program remains largely unchanged. So it cannot be with this that we are merging. No, Word is clearly a tool through which we generate text, and it is with this text that our identity merges"

<div align="right">Reynolds, 2002</div>

 But comparing The Sims Online with Microsoft's Word seems redundant, as the program *does* change with her existence and she greatly influences its environment, which can also be seen as the program. Alphaville is largely created by its inhabitants and it is the players themselves who build houses and create communities – they are in control of where gamers will play and what is on offer to them, all The Sims Online provides is the template and the tools to create, it may be the form of a sandbox game, but with permanence.

MAXIS/EA provides the sandbox and the tools to build, but the constructions are not made of sand, they become permanent, therefore the sandbox is forever changed, which in the instance of The Sims Online means that the program is changed. In our particular situation, could we not say that Lauren's avatar is the cursor on the screen and the house that she designs could be the words created on the screen? Does she not then own the idea of the

house so that it cannot be reproduced without her consent and at the very least without at least referring to the creator? And furthermore, just because Lauren has no legal ownership of anything tangible, does that also mean that she has no ownership of her emotions, her personal history created in-world? Her personality and furthermore, her communication both in-world and in real life? Lauren is defined by her reputation within the game, that reputation is built up by the player's actions and words, the player's labour of gameplay in other words.

6.3. GAMEPLAY AS AUTHORSHIP

When I define MMORPGs as virtual gaming worlds, I imply that there is something that is not real. Whereas a playground's sandbox is tangible, we can touch and feel our tools around us, an MMORPG is more an implied space. The world that the game is set in implies that there is a sword, there is a land, there is a being, both the words 'gaming' and 'virtual' cover this. Virtuality is something that is nearly real.

> "Firstly, consider the sense in which a task that is virtually completed is, in an everyday sense, almost completed. The reference to time is clear: the task's completion is just about upon us, but is not yet. In this sense, a reference to the virtual includes future states as a part of the real; the future has a kind of reality which is virtual, but not actual. This is the sense of the 'virtual' that Gilles Deleuze maintains: the virtual is real, but inactual. That is, it has real existence but not in the same way as the things that are actually around us!"
>
> LISTER, DOVEY, GIDDINGS, GRANT AND KELLY, 2003

Could we maybe say that the virtual is the items implied in The Sims Online, your avatar, books, chairs, tables, food – and the game is what these objects do. For example, clicking on a book will give the player the option of reading or learning a skill like cooking which will lead you toward a gaming goal.

It is not a real book. The player as the person sitting infront of the screen playing the game can not read any text, flip through pages or feel the cover which is implied on the screen. But the book carries with it a meaning and a function. If you click on the book your avatar can read its contents and gain knowledge which makes it a resource for the game. In games there is usually some form of semiotic meaning behind resources, rules and general structure of the game. For example, the connotation that books contain text with information makes it

reasonable that by clicking the books the avatar may learn something. It would seem rather silly that she could learn cooking by taking a shower or even if this was the case if the next time she clicked on the shower she learned how to play piano or even that taking a shower became her virtual job and she earned Simoleons by taking showers. Could we then say that these virtual gaming worlds are also worlds of fiction, that there is a storyline behind the design and aesthetics of the game?

The designer, Will Wright has chosen to base the fiction of the world on 'reality' – his virtual reality would have the same 'common sense' as in the real world. You have to eat, be social, shower and sleep in order to be alive. This fictitious 'real' becomes imbedded in the rule system of the game. The fiction in itself becomes a resource for the player. If the virtual world is supposed to be a representation of the real world – the logic of life becomes a rule system. If you want to live, you must take care of your bodily functions. If you want to buy lots of cool stuff you need to earn money. If you want to earn money you must work on a skill that will make your work desirable enough to be paid for your labour (or in fact find someone you can inherit the money from).

In Jill Walker's "Fiction and Interaction; how clicking a mouse can make you part of a fictional world" (2003), she analyses Walton's definition of fiction:

> "A fictional truth consists in there being a prescription or mandate in some context to imagine something. Fictional propositions are propositions that are to be imagined - whether or not they are in fact imagined" (Walton 1990:39)

She further explains that fiction is then the combination of imagination and rules. So as you click on the book and choosing the interaction of reading the book becomes a fictional proposition that you are reading and learning. It is a rule that reading teaches you skills and the actual act of clicking makes you a participant of the fictional world. If the person infront of the screen is in fact imagining reading becomes irrelevant for they are already following the rules of the fiction, which is also the rule of the game. The imagined becomes the act of playing within the guidelines of the rules. "Fiction is not an object, it is a process, a fantasy emerging from the meeting of user and work" (Walker, 2003). In our case this would mean the avatar playing and clicking, interacting with the graphics is resulting in fiction.

If we strip The Sims Online of all the fiction there would still be a game evident. There would still be numerical value in executing these acts. The game could exist with just code and the rules of the game would still exist, but for the player to interact with these rules props are portrayed on the screen to create a fiction. The aesthetics of the game become both a resource and rule for how the game is played. Celia Pearce would call this the 'story system: a rule-based story system or kit on generic narrative parts that allows the player to create their own narrative content; story systems can exist independent of or in conjunction with a Meta-Story' (Pearce, 2002). Is the player creating narrative content and is the game creating a story?

 "As Markku Eskelinen argues, "outside academic theory people are usually excellent at making distinctions between narrative, drama, and games. It I throw a ball at you I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories" (Frasca, 2003). But the design of the ball will tell you what form of play it is designed for, using your feet or hands? When you figure out if it is for your hands or feet, what good can it do? What game do we associate this ball to, volleyball, a basketball or a football? The aesthetics of the ball is therefore telling you what to do with it or what gaming rule system it can interact with.

Kim Plowright, SCP New Product Development, BBC iD&E held an interesting presentation entitled "21st Century Folktales: Games, Worlds and Stories" where she stated in reference to Blizzard's World of Warcraft:

> "There's something else worth mentioning about the game world, too; as your character progresses, you're given quests, which will move you from one area of the (huge!) game-world to the next. The quests also deliver you tiny fragments of the story of the world. So rather than being organised as a narrative that you play through, the narrative is organised as a world that you play in. Interesting things happen when you substitute time for space in narrative."
> http://www.mildlydiverting.com/interactivewriting/presentation.shtml

I find her notion of substituting time for space in narrative interesting, which is why I found this presentation useful for this thesis. Although, I am not certain that MMORPGs necessarily are narratives I certainly agree that they contain narratives. And these narrative structures are not linear as in time managed, they are very architectural. The meaning of space in virtual gaming worlds does have certain narrative as well as semiotic, but Plowright is presuming that actual gameplay, the interaction between the game rules is creating narrative or playing through a narrative.

"A narrative descriptor is any component of a game that participates in the game's system of representation. Instructional text, in-game cinematics, interface elements, game objects, and other visual and audio elements are all narrative descriptors. All of these elements must be carefully crafted with narrative experience in mind in order to maximize narrative play"

<div align="right">Salen and Zimmerman, 2004</div>

The book in The Sims Online is a narrative descriptors, according to Salen and Zimmerman's definition, because it contributes to the 'narrative system' of The Sims Online and the system in turn contributes to gameplay. The player acknowledges that these are the rules of play and fiction, she becomes immersed within the fictional world by playing the game. By acknowledging that the book connotes knowledge she is then accepting her role in the 'magic circle' of the game and contributing to the linearity of the gameplay mechanism. She is also accepting the fiction but by doing so is not necessarily contributing to the narrative or playing a narrative. She is following the rules, which leaves little room for creative input into a narrative or story.

"It is not just the graphical representation, but also the rules of the game that project the fictional world. The way a given object or character behaves will characterize it as a fictional object; the rules that the player deducts from the fiction and from the experience of the playing of the game will also cue him or her into imagining a fictional world"

<div align="right">Jesper Juul, 2005</div>

I feel Salen and Zimmerman are a bit presumptuous in describing the book, as in our example, as a *narrative* descriptor, I would rather just define the book as a descriptor of the game which embeds the rules of the game and the fiction. The fiction describes the rules and the space. By clicking on the book and choosing an activity like 'learn cooking' I am playing the game and interacting with its fiction, but am I then participating in a narrative? Or is the book narrating a story? Is a story being told when I interact with the fictional world? Because there tends to be a linearity embedded in gameplay am I clicking my way through a story?

Gonzalo Frasca writes "…games are just a particular way of structuring simulation, just like narrative is a form of structuring representation" (Frasca, p.3, 2003).
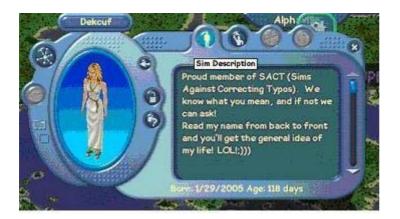
Figure 7: Dekcuf's bio

In my opinion the narrative descriptors in The Sims Online are whatever describes the avatar's personality. Her bio page which informs her surroundings of what skills she has, what social network (numerically) and house she belongs to. There's also an opportunity to write a text about who the avatar is (as shown in Figure 7) what she stands for, believes and what her interests are. This may be considered a narrative as it is describing something that is virtual or not real. It may also portray the person behind the avatar, but there is no clear way of knowing this. This is descriptive and is in fact contributing to the narrative of the fictional world.

As Figure 7 shows my avatar, Dekcuf is a member of an organisation which exemplifies that I find other players who constantly correct their typing to be irritating. My name is also a narrative descriptor, it symbolises my sense of humour, indicating that my actual life is very much like the avatar I am trying to be in The Sims Online. Also, Dekcuf's dress is actually a costume – a toga. Since I choose to be represented this way I am expressing my need to stand out as an individual. My clothes, my text, my name and my date of birth are all narrative descriptors. They are what I have contributed to the fictional world of The Sims Online. The social network may be numerical and an offset of playing with the gameplay rules but they depict how the avatar plays, the same with her skill points.

Is Dekcuf a maximiser, hedonistic auslebener, sleepwalker, protector or griefer? These categories give the avatar a sense of personality, which can also be considered as narrative. It is describing the history of the avatar which gives it a storyline, a past and aspirations for the present. The avatar and her narrative descriptors are contributing to the fictional world, but this does not make the player an author of the fictional world, rather she becomes the

author of her avatar's personality. The gameplay mechanics are unchanged, the rules of the game remain the same, but the agent for carrying out the gameplay has changed. The avatar has been given a personality, a unique expression that other players relate to. Again we find ourselves discussing reputation.

The player is indeed the author of her own reputation. She has contributed to creating this online being and she has done so by creating descriptors of character. The possibility that the player is actually creating an actual representation of herself is also believable. Using the communication channels in The Sims Online, I would often discuss my actual life, not playing any character but being myself. And I'm tempted to believe that those I often spoke with, were not pretending either – but this is difficult to tell. The difference would be if the player is role-playing or not. One day I was bored while 'solving solutions' and clicked on the different avatars in the room to see what their bio read. I came across Butch who had listed one of my favourite bands, Primus, as his. I sent him an instant message (IM) commenting this and we started having an in-depth conversation. After chatting for about half-an-hour he told me that he was undercover, that this really wasn't him, but he liked me so much that he felt he needed to be honest with me. Butch was role-playing and trying to give the impression of being a relatively young hip guy – when in reality he was in his 30s and married.

Butch was a TSO undercover agent – several of these could be found around the city of Alphaville because a demand had evolved from The Sims Online society to have private detectives investigate other players and their activities. This could even relate to spouses from the real world hiring an avatar private investigator to 'spy' on their actual spouses[8]. Butch was unique as he was role-playing for a legitimate business, but there are other role players. One woman I came in good contact with, told me that she enjoyed playing a man and making women fall in love with her. So fictitious identities certainly do exist within The Sims Online and these characters are certainly the invention of the player. The player has created this avatar's history, social network, gameplay method and appearance for the specific reason of creating a character that is not real, but the character's reputation is very real – even though it is fictitious it is created and 'written' by the player and also then contributing to gameplay – but the opportunity for this type of gameplay is already embedded within The Sims Online gaming system so, again, the player is not co-author of The Sims Online, but author of the reputation of the avatar!

But what is happening when Lauren is contributing to this fictional system by creating? Is she then contributing to the gameplay system, the actual framework of the game itself? It is a fundamental game mechanism within The Sims Online that the players create houses but can we call this gameplay? It is my belief that she is changing her ontological status from player to user or author and claims of authorship can be made when the player's own personality and creativity is resulting in new gameplay, but is that what is happening when you are participating in the gameplay by doing exactly what the game has designed for you to do?

6.4. PLAYER VS. USER

Let us look back on Salen and Zimmerman's definition of a game with their more indepth explanations:

"**A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome**. The key elements of this definition are the fact that a game is a *system, players* interact with the system, a game is an instance of conflict, the *conflict* in games is *artificial*, *rules* limit player behaviour and define the game, and every game has a *quantifiable outcome* or goal."

<div align="right">(Salen and Zimmerman, 2004)</div>

They acknowledge that the quantifiable outcome becomes a dilemma for Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games for there is 'usually no single overriding outcome'. I've previously stated that MMORPGs are virtual gaming worlds. They evolve around a gaming system but are also persistent worlds that keep evolving, virtually and added the communication factor in reality as well. But at what point are we a player of the gaming system and when are we users and when do we become citizens of the virtual world? Is it possible to be all three at once?

Second Life (Linden Lab) and Entropia Universe (MindArk PE) are two virtual worlds that explicitly deny being games. If we say that the person infront of the computer screen is an actor controlling an agent (Klabbers, 2003), can an actor be playing something that

specifically is defined as not being a game by interacting with a virtual world. If it is not a game can it still be perceived as fiction? Second Life and Entropia Universe grant ownership of all virtual items to its creators, here the question therefore becomes whether the items created need the imagination factor to foster a fiction or if these creations can indeed be perceived as real. They may not be tangible but they are owned and they have a real monetary value. For example, an island can be bought in Entropia Universe for $100,000 – it has a market value, which makes it just as real as something from the stock market on Wall Street. No imagination is needed here and yet there is in the actual use of the land.

The rule becomes that something 'is', the island for example 'is' but one needs imagination to participate in the fiction that the actor's agent, avatar, is walking, standing or dancing on the island. But this is all code within a system. Although participants own their virtual property they cannot own it outside the virtual world, which is owned by the game designers or are they?

In March 2005, a Second Life citizen, Kermitt Quirk, sold the worldwide licensing rights for Tringo, a game he had designed within the Second Life virtual world[9] to Donnorwood Media and has now been produced to be played on Game Boy Advance.[10] The reproduction of Tringo is not bound by the virtual world code. It is an idea that was made presentable by the software provided by Linden Lab, the creators of Second Life. It was also an idea that was put into action and tested among Second Lifers, much like our Microsoft Word scenario. Microsoft does not own the words written in Word, just because they own the software license. The idea is the ownership of the creator. Similarly, Objects of Virtual Desire was designed to recreate objects created in and for Second Life into 'real' tangible objects, such as a necklace.[11] Here they are copying the 'idea' of the necklace and reproducing it in another format. But if someone copies the code of a Second Life object into another program, there is little legal doctrine to protect them of their property, Linden Lab can only protect and enforce these rights within their world – when the code is stolen and reproduced outside of their jurisdiction the creator is on her own.

This participatory act of creating fiction can be seen as play even though there are no game mechanics. For you are still playing – or in the act of pretending. Just as we play make-believe when acting. Caillois' categorises this form of play as mimicry.

> "Play can consist not only of deploying actions or submitting to one's fate in an imaginary milieu, but of becoming an illusory character oneself, and of so behaving. One is thus confronted with a diverse series of manifestations, the common element of which is that the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another."
>
> Salen and Zimmerman, 2005

In my opinion we are not leaving our own personalities behind in the real world, rather we are bringing these into another world only with a different bodily manifestation. As I can play that I'm a princess with my other girlfriends, I am becoming my interpretation of what a princess should be thus my manner is that of which I perceive a princess should behave. While my avatar is mainly formed from the rules of the system of the world, my personality stays the same – it is the environment that my avatar inhabits that is causing 'make-believe' not the role that I have chosen myself. For if we look at Entropia Universe – if it is my goal to build something and make a real monetary profit – I, myself am building something. It is not because I am 'playing' being a contractor – I am in fact building something that others are willing to use – or can we say that others are willing to adhere to my fictional masterpiece? Or are ready to accept my fictional world?

When entering the magic circle of a game we are also agreeing to a set of rules of play. These acts of playing, however, are dependent on the avatar functioning as an agent for play. It is empowered by the actor to play on her behalf. The activity of creating something for the virtual world, however, is not dependent on an agent, the actor herself is using tools within this virtual world more as a 'user' of software. But at the same time her labour for creating in this virtual world is rewarded in the play mechanism. The option of using your own creativity and ideas to create a house is part of the game system, it is a game rule.

Adhering to these rules does not make Lauren a contributing author of the game fiction, she is simply playing the game as it is designed to be played, it is the game designer's rule system that she is using and therefore they are in ownership of her gameplay. The thing that makes MMORPGs a little different when it comes to ownership of gameplay and fiction, is the communication factor. In The Sims Online you are constantly within an ever evolving social system, a system that cannot be governed by any gameplay rules – there is no numerical rule system embedded to control the communication flows, this has to be regulated by a 'higher' power.

Pearce describes the communication factor in MMORPGs as 'social storytelling' or 'collaborative fiction''.

> "The idea is that the story emerges as a direct result of social interaction. As with the renaissance faire (also a huge commercial success throughout the U.S.), players enter a fully constructed three-dimensional world. Rather generic, but allow players to configure unique characters composed of various traits which they can then evolve over time into a fully developed persona through a system of improvisational collaborative narrative."
>
> <div align="right">Pearce, 2001</div>

Yet, this is not how I chose to play the game. I considered the conversations I had in TSO to be real and the friends that I made there are also very real to me. The relationships I had with the different avatars I encountered was also very real, I didn't feel like we were participating in a collaborative fiction. I was not contributing to the world in any manner, I was contributing to myself and real relationships at the same time as I was playing a game, interacting with its rules and software and in most instances using the gaming software to create real relationships.

6.5. OWNERSHIP OF REPUTATION

Whether we consider the question of ownership from an intellectual property rights or an authorial or an existentialist perspective, I believe it all comes down to reputation. We are authors of our character, just as we are authors of our own identity. Anything that can express who we are and our histories is in a sense our own intellectual property. For who or what else can claim ownership of our memories, our experiences and our accomplishments? Michel Foucault found that we humans have four different techniques to understand ourselves;

> "(1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individual s and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, immorality."
>
> <div align="right">Foucault, 1982</div>

Perhaps MMORPGs have become the perfect forum or technique to truly understand ourselves, for what better way to do this, than through play? During my playtime I encountered several players who had felt betrayed by someone who was not who they portrayed to be. Whether the history, identity and reputation of the avatar is real or not, is of no consequence to the ownership. Lauren lost an essential part of her identity when her design was duplicated and felt actual anguish and something that could have added to her reputation was taken away from her. Her need to have control of her own design was genuine. Even though her design was created in 'just a game', it does not mean that her own creative input and intellectual property was not present, nor if she was playing another role.

Players are indeed creating real things in MMORPGs like relationships and identity. But the fact that you can trade a virtual item outside of the virtual gaming world for actual money does not necessarily make gameplay a form for labour as Lastowke and Hunter do when they investigate the Lockean theories of labor-desert theories which considers the true value of an object is defined by the labour behind it (2003). The voluntary nature of gameplay dampens this argument, however. Can we define something as labour if it is a voluntary act? I think we can when we are creating something, but giving players property rights in a gaming world doesn't seem like the ultimate answer because the gameplay will be so heavily influenced by the outside market and world, where would we draw the line of magic circle? And if I'm not allowed to play viciously within a game without the fear of being sewed, would that really be considered a game?

Lastowke and Hunter also introduce Hegel's 'conception of property as an extension of personality', where Hengel considers that property rights are related to human rights and the identity of self, such as a wedding ring.

The avatar may therefore be considered an attachment of one's identity and therefore one's property, which re-introduces the concept of identity and extension of self. The avatar has a social identity which is clearly tied with her gameplay identity, when something is then created with her name attached enforcing both her gameplay and social identity.

6.6. CONCLUSION

Ownership in virtual gaming worlds can be argued from many different angles, the main argument being that we as actors are contributing to the world with our gameplay and sociability. I specifically wanted to represent Lauren's dilemma in this chapter because I feel it exemplifies the conflict with these issues. Several arguments can be made that virtual goods obtained by gameplay, of interacting with the gameplay structure should also be partially owned by the actors, but I wanted to look beyond this argument of ownership between virtual and real worlds and I found Lauren's case to be unique because it centred around an issue of emotions in-world, which to me portrayed the existence of real attachment within the game and the importance of recognising these. Although the design of the house was created within the game and the 'theft' was carried out within the game, the actor controlling the avatar, Lauren, felt that something she had used her creativity and work on had been stolen. It may well have been a gameplay method and certainly allowed within the game, but she was having a hard time separating between the acknowledgement of gameplay and her creative labour.

I feel this goes to the heart of the matter of ownership within massively multiplayer online role playing games, the issue is not whether players should have 'actual' ownership rights protected by a real world judicial system but that there is a reality to the connection of gameplay contribution and creativity.

In the past two years a surge of academics and journalists have flocked to MMORPGs to investigate virtual worlds where the focus has to a large extent been on real-money trade, the exchange rate between real and virtual currency and the ability to create actual businesses within MMORPGs. When in reality, buying something which is not actual, isn't a new concept considering the stock exchange, for example, what is it we're really selling and buying when dealing with stocks? As long as something has value to a consumer, it has *actual* value, as all real markets are formed by supply and demand, when consumers deem a virtual item as valuable, it becomes valuable. Researching the real-money trade is useful in exploring the reality of value within MMORPGs because of its mathematical nature and language which consists of a translation the actual world can comprehend. Real-money trade is harmful to the economy of these worlds and should be recognised as such, not encouraged. Also, because The Sims Online has so few subscribers, Lauren's design has no value in the

real market, but it has a value to her and it should be kept within the virtual world gaming economy structure.

The issue of contribution is key, whether it is considered authorship, identity or labour. When players are contributing to the gameplay structure using their own personality, creativity, sociability and identities there is a reality to their contribution which deserves to be acknowledged, but I am uncertain if ownership is the correct topic. The discussion of ownership seems to be an effort at constructing experience of gameplay into something tangible, which is prudent, but play is subjective. The more freedom a game acknowledges its players the more variations of play will develop, because the gameplay experience of MMORPGs is not a linear experience, not only because the variations of gameplay but also because there is a societal formation within its world, which is not controlled by gameplay design but rather the freedom of will. This encourages creativity and participation which in turn can offer a forum for playing with identity techniques.

Ownership is a relevant method of analysing the symbiosis between the player and the virtual gaming world because it factors in the creativity of the player and acknowledges that something is concocted through this symbiosis. *What* is concocted and claim to be owned is the fundamental question. When communication between game producers and players is disrupted, ownership becomes the leading argument for describing affliction. Claims of intellectual property rights, authorship and currency are proclaimed, but perhaps these issues would be best resolved within the virtual gaming world itself?

7. CONCLUSION

Through this thesis I have discussed the various forms of gameplay within virtual gaming worlds, specifically The Sims Online and some different outlooks on what ownership within MMORPGs can entail. The importance of separating between gameplay and societal becomes relevant when discussing ownership issues because they help us define what it is we're discussing, what is the actual gameplay, which is the player's interaction with the actual game structure and rules, and of what consequence does this make them in a societal grouping. The player's individuality and creativity becomes an essential role when playing but where is the line between playing what has already been designed and creating? These are essential boundaries when discussing ownership of gameplay and reputation, but these words are vague and hard to define concretely.

When looking at MMORPG communities it is important to recognise the gameplay structure that is designed into the software. With The Sims Online several gameplay mechanics were designed to encourage sociability; by earning skills and money faster when in the same room as several other avatars; the more avatar to avatar communication the more interaction abilities; instant messaging; talk bubble; roommates. One may also consider that these tasks were designed to be monotonous in order to get players talking to each other and joining forces to create personalised gameplay, like bingo. There is a behavioural structure designed into the game but there is also a societal structure being formed that goes beyond gameplay mechanics. Although several game mechanics are designed to encourage creative gameplay and social interactions, they do not necessarily lead to this, as we saw with the maximisers. Each player group is dependent on each other for their identity within the virtual gaming world to exist.

I feel both these topics, typology of the player community and ownership go a long way in describing the conflicts that arise within virtual gaming worlds, because they define the amount of contribution brought by the players themselves. This is not a world that a player easily steps in and out of, it is a community that is dependent on each other where players find a social responsibility as well as a goal oriented gaming commitment. Separating the two is solely for the purpose of illustrating the commitment, creativity and effort a player brings into the equation.

The policy of volunteerism; if a player does not like something, they can just leave seems dictatorial and unfair. This is why we're seeing so much gameplay politics flowing into the actual world and mainstream media, because this sense of ownership is so real to the players, they feel genuinely wronged when the game expels or suspends them. I think it is also interesting to note that the game producers act accordingly when players produce material from their gameplay outside of the virtual gaming world.

It is within the interest of the game producers to acknowledge the player's interest in the world. The two cases about 'freedom of speech infringement' discussed in chapter two (p. 16), are two examples of dilemmas that should have and could have been settled in-world. Neither players nor game producers have any interest in such matters being settled outside of the virtual gaming world. When actual laws, lawyers and courts become involved within rights management of players in MMORPGs, a lot stands to be lost of the community that arises within these worlds.

In Will Wright's next project, Spore, they seem to have ensured this with a new concept called 'bragging rights' (Shaw, 2006), which emphasises an awareness of player's attachment to user-generated content and reputation. The key is not to make the virtual gaming items and characters actually 'owned' by the players with intellectual property rights and actual monetary value, but rather to recognise the time, effort and creativity the players bring into the game. It is also important to give the players an opportunity to defend themselves before being expelled from a virtual gaming world, I'm not certain that heavy complex democratic organisation is the best remedy or if this should be a more collaborative governmental organisation.

This thesis is more a stepping stone to argue why further research and exploration into gameplay politics is merited. MMORPGs are a new form of media, companies are advertising within them and players are expressing themselves within them. As these worlds are growing and more commercialism becomes relevant in-world, these issues will be will erupt both between players and game producers, therefore a democratic forum for discussion and debate is essential in order to solve these problems in-world.

8. NOTES TO CHAPTERS

8.1. NOTES TO GOVERNING PLAYERS

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8.2. METHODOLOGY

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2. Excerpt from Wikipedia 02/03/2005 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar
3. Facts are found on http://www.ludd.luth.se/mud/aber/mud-history.html and can be backed up by Richard Bartle's own account of the birth of MUD1 at http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/acloct87.htm
4. LambdaMOO was created by Pavel Curtis in 1990. "The 'MOO' stands for 'MUD, Object-Oriented'." http://www.scara.com/~ole/literatur/mudding.html. It is also renowned for the first ever documented virtual rape.
5. Dibbel's account of the Virtual Rape in LambdaMoo. http://www.mudworld.org/archives/IR/volume2/issue4/rape_cyberspace.shtml
6. From Lessons of Habitat written by Morningstar and Farmer http://www.scara.com/~ole/literatur/LessonsOfHabitat.html
7. An historical account of the origins of Multiplayer Only Role Playing Games in Game Spy http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week1/
8. Latest numbers from Bruce Woodcock's 'Analysis of MMOG Subscription Growth', updated January 2005 http://www.mmogchart.com/, total number does however exclude subscribers from the popular *Lineage, Lineage II* and *Ragnarok Online*.

8.4. THE SIMS ONLINE

1. http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-the-sims.htm (November 6, 2006)
2. The Well "Welcome to a gathering that's like none other – remarkably uninhibited, intelligent and iconoclastic. The articulate regulars in this place include noted authors, programmers, journalists, activists and other creative people who swap info, test convictions and banter with one another in wide-ranging conversations." From: http://www.well.com/ (November 6, 2006)

3. http://www.mmogchart.com/ (November 6, 2006)

4. Electronic Arts TOS: Rules of Play. http://www.ea.com/global/legal/tos.jsp
   (November 6, 2006)

5. Courtesy of Marve Valdemar, 2006 - http://antibiotikum.blogspot.com/

4. A blog conversation between Raph Koster, game designer (Ultima Online, Star Wars
   Galaxies), http://www.raphkoster.com/?p=303 – February 6, 2006 and David Edery,
   research affiliate MIT, http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20060202/edery_01.shtml
   - February 2, 2006.

5. Documented in various blogs.
   a. Joystiq's WoW Insider -
      http://www.wowinsider.com/2006/01/14/discrimination-and-wow/
   b. Game Tycoon –
      http://www.edery.org/2006/01/discrimination-in-world-of-warcraft/

6. This has been covered in main stream and TSO media.
   a. The New York Times:
      http://tech2.nytimes.com/mem/technology/techreview.html?_r=2&res=990CE
      3DB1539F932A35757C0A9629C8B63&oref=slogin&oref=slogin – April 1,
      2004 – Mark Glassman.
   b. MIT Technology Review:
      http://www.technologyreview.com/read_article.aspx?id=13606&ch=infotech –
      May 7, 2004 – Henry Jenkins
   c. The Second Life Herald (earlier The Alphaville Herald):
      http://www.dragonscoveherald.com/blog/index.php?p=182 – April 18, 2004 –
      Urizenus, a.k.a. Peter Ludlow

7. There was an election for President which Mr. President won – soon after, however, it
   was revealed that the election had been rigged by help of The Sim Mafia
   (http://www.thesimmafia.com/), which in turn led to a massive disdain in the game.
   All this happened before I entered into the game which was the following month, May,
   but when I started asking people about this, very few knew. So there had been an
   election which most of the players I met, hadn't even heard about, which would have
   made the office of the President rather redundant, for how can a public recognise a
   government which they do not know about

8.5. OWNERSHIP

1. Although crafting demands a vast amount of time and effort, it doesn't encourage creative effort. But the maker of the crafting object's name will forever be associated with that object. So the effort is rewarded with a sort of branding. The object may be exactly the same as another object within the game, but it will always have your name on it.

2. As well as e-bay there are several websites that trade in virtual items and gold, some examples can be found at http://del.icio.us/dekcuf/RMTthesisnote

3. Taken from BBC's >Click, on Friday, 3 November 2006. "Technology heaven in S Korea" by Spencer Kelly. "While technology companies are targeting home-owners with appliances that can be controlled across the net, younger Koreans are using all that bandwidth for online gaming. Gaming is so popular here that there are two TV stations dedicated to the game Starcraft, at championship level. Away from the home, internet access is equally abundant – super – cool internet cafes, or PC bangs, mean you are never very far from your online life, and what a life it is. Cyworld is an online social network in the same vein as MySpace, but with penetration rates that would make Rupert Murdoch green with envy. An astonishing 90% of Korean twentysomethings have a cute or not-so-cute personal avatar, living in its own 3D homepage."

4. From Terra Nova blog, October 18, 2005 "Re-advent of the DanGun in Korean VW" http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2005/10/readvent_of_the.html

5. From CNET November 10, 2005 "Man pays $100,000 for virtual resort" by Daniel Terdiman. http://news.com.com/Man+pays+100,000+for+virtual+resort/2100-1043_3-5945248.html

6. From The Wall Street Journal September 22, 2006 "Now, Virtual Fashion. Second Life Designers Make Real Money Creating Clothes For Simulation Game's Players" by Andrew Lavallee. http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB115888412923570768-zVZuILNMf6YlpTXqtuGcTAWcrWY_20070925.html?mod=blogs

7. BBC reported on June 8, 2005: "A Shanghai online gamer has been given a suspended death sentence for killing a fellow gamer. Qui Chengwei stabbed Zhu Caoyuan in the chest when he found out he had sold his virtual sword for 7,200 Yuan (£473). The sword, which Mr Qiu had lent to Mr Zhu, was won in the popular online game Legend

of Mir 3. Attempts to take the dispute to the police failed because there is currently no law in China to protect virtual property."
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4072704.stm

8. I also wrote a blog post April 6, 2005: http://dekcuf.blogspot.com/2005/04/killing-for-virtual-property.html

9. Private detectives have become rather popular both in-game and for outsiders looking to see what their loved ones are doing in-game – as revealed in this interview from Second Life 'Watching the detectives", March 22, 2005. Found at http://secondlife.blogs.com/nwn/2005/03/watching_the_de.html (found November 6, 2006).

10. From The Second Opinion, March 3, 2005, "Tringo Fever – Catch It" Resident-made in-world game licensed to real life new media company" Found at: http://secondlife.com/newsletter/2005_03_03_archive.php (November 6, 2006)

11. From Gamasutra, September 19, 2005, "Tringo – From Second Life to Game Boy Advance?". Found at: http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=6568 (November 6, 2006)

12. Objects of virtual desire. "This project explores immaterial production in a virtual world, and if and how this can be transferred into an economy of material production." http://www.objectsofvirtualdesire.com/wp/wp/?p=19 (November 6, 2006).

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10. GAMES

- Asheron's Call (Turbine) http://ac.turbine.com/
- A Tale in the Desert (eGenesis) http://www.atitd.com/
- Anarchy Online (Funcom) http://www.anarchyonline.com/
- Entropia Universe (Mindark PE AB) http://www.entropiauniverse.com/en/rich/5000.html
- Everquest (Sony Online Entertainment) http://eqplayers.station.sony.com/index.vm
- Roma Victor (RedBedlam Ltd.) http://www.roma-victor.com/
- Second Life (Linden Lab) http://secondlife.com/
- Sociolotron (Sociolotronics LLC) http://sociolotron.amerabyte.com/website2/
- Star Wars Galaxies (Sony Online Entertainment) http://starwarsgalaxies.station.sony.com/
- The Sims Online (MAXIS/EA) http://www.ea.com/official/thesims/thesimsonline/us/nai/index.jsp
- World of Warcraft (Blizzard) - http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/index.xml;jsessionid=0F2A87DEFC2A0D664666461088B92513.08_app01

11. ATTACHMENTS

11.1. LETTER TO BLIZZARD FROM LAMBDA LEGAL

Dear Mr. Mohaime and Mr. Rigole,

Lambda Legal is the nation's oldest and largest organization dedicated to achieving full civil rights for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender persons, and people living with HIV through impact litigation, education and public policy work. We recently have been in contact with Greg Wu and Sara Andrews, who are customers of Blizzard Entertainment, regarding their concern that certain employees of Blizzard Entertainment have discriminated against World of Warcraft ("W.O.W.") players based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

As we understand it, on January 12, 2006 "Tirauka," a senior account administrator with Blizzard, issued Ms. Andrews a warning claiming that Ms. Andrews' public announcement of an LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) friendly gaming guild for W.O.W. players violated the W.O.W Harassment Policy. When Ms. Andrews asked how the mere mention of an LGBT-friendly guild could violate the W.O.W. Harassment Policy, Blizzard's account administrator "Gorido" followed up with correspondence seeming to argue that because other players may choose to harass LGBT players, the mere mention of an LGBT-friendly guild violates the World of Warcraft terms of service.

Subsequent statements to the media made by Blizzard's representatives seem to confirm that Blizzard's official position is that LGBT gamers may not mention their sexual orientation or gender identity using the game's chat functions. Blizzard's online message boards include a post apparently issued by Blizzard stating, in pertinent part,

To promote a positive game environment for everyone and help prevent such harassment from taking place as best we can, we prohibit mention of topics related to sensitive real-world subjects in open chat within the game, and we do our best to take action whenever we see such topics being broadcast. This includes openly advertising a guild friendly to players based on a particular political, sexual, or religious preference, to list a few examples.

We are very concerned that Blizzard's policy, as expressed in the foregoing statement, discriminates against LGBT gamers. Although preventing harassment is an admirable goal, a requirement that LGBT people remain invisible and silent is not an acceptable means of reaching that goal.

Mr. Wu is the guild leader of "Stonewall Champions," the largest LGBT-friendly guild in W.O.W. Ms. Andrews is the guild leader of "Oz," an LGBT-friendly guild on the Shadow Moon Server. As leaders of LGBT-friendly guilds, Mr. Wu and Ms. Andrews are both very concerned that Blizzard's policy will hamper the guilds' ability to provide a safe and supportive gaming environment.

We agree that World of Warcraft's Harassment Policy, which clearly states that players may not refer to the sexual orientation of others in an "insulting manner," is laudable and legal. Indeed, we applaud Blizzard's efforts to create a congenial gaming atmosphere where people of all sexual orientations and gender identities can interact without fear of harassment or insult.

Although Blizzard is well within its rights to insist that players avoid referring to other gamers in an "insulting manner," Blizzard cannot issue a blanket ban on any mention of sexual orientation or gender identity. There is nothing "insulting" about identifying oneself as gay, lesbian or transgender, nor does the announcement of a guild for LGBT gamers constitute "harassment" in any sense of the word. If other players react insultingly to the mere presence of LGBT gamers, then Blizzard should discipline the harassers, not attempt preemptively to silence the potential victims of harassment.

Online environments are public accommodations, subject to regulation as such. Butler v. Adoption Media, L.L.C., 2005 WL 1513142 (N.D.Cal.). Discrimination against LGBT individuals in the provision of public accommodations is clearly prohibited by California law. Id., see also, Cal. Civ. Code 51 et seq. It has been so for more than fifty years. Stouman v. Reilly, 234 P.2d 969 (Cal. 1951). Insisting that LGBT persons not discuss their sexual orientation or gender identity can constitute discrimination under California law. Erdmann v. Tranquility Inc., 155 F.Supp.2d 1152 (N.D.Cal. 2001) (in which an employee who experienced a hostile environment at his workplace, including being instructed by a supervisor to "keep [his homosexuality] in the closet while he [was] at work," stated a cause of action for employment discrimination); see also Gay Law Students v. Pacific Telephone & Telegraph, 595 P.2d 592 (1978) (same); Henkle v. Gregory, 150 F.Supp.2d 1067 (D.Nev.2001) (discussing students' right to discuss their sexual orientation at school); Colin v. Orange Unified School District, 83 F.Supp.2d 1135 (C.D.Cal.2000) (addressing students' right to use the word "gay" in the name of their school club).

In the few short years since the advent of multi-user dungeons, the world of online gaming has grown from a niche hobby enjoyed by a small community of enthusiasts to a phenomenon shared by millions. We understand that the rapid growth of the online environment has created challenges for companies like Blizzard, who are striving to ensure a civil and enjoyable experience for a large and diverse body of gamers. We hope that you will realize that silencing LGBT gamers, and requiring that they remain invisible to their fellows within the online gaming world, is not an acceptable means of advancing that end.

We understand that Blizzard has recently withdrawn its citation of Ms. Andrews for allegedly violating World of Warcraft's harassment policy. An e-mail from "Thor Biafore," the head of Blizzard's customer service worldwide, acknowledges that the action taken against Ms. Andrews was based on an "unfortunate interpretation" of Blizzard's current policies.

In order to avoid any similar incidents in the future, we ask that you inform all of Blizzard's system administrators that they are not to discipline any players for mentioning or discussing sexual orientation or gender identity in a non-insulting fashion. We also ask that Blizzard confirm that LGBT-friendly guilds are allowed to announce their existence in the same manner as any other guilds. Of course, Lambda Legal would be more than happy to offer any advice we can to assist Blizzard in crafting a nondiscriminatory clarification of the terms of service for W.O.W., or in providing guidance to the administrators enforcing Blizzard's anti-harassment guidelines. We ask that you respond within thirty days of the date of this letter to avoid the need for further action.

Very truly yours,

Brian Chase
Staff Attorney*

Jennifer C. Pizer
Senior Counsel

* Admitted in FL and LA, not admitted in CA.

11.2. THE SIMS ONLINE SKILLS CHART

Skill Details:

	Body	**Charisma**	**Cooking**	**Creativity**	**Logic**	**Mechanical**
Skill Object(s)	Bench press, dance cage, bull	Mirror, bird	Bookshelf	Piano, guitar	Computer, chess table, telescope	Bookshelf
Solo Job Object(s)	Piñata	Telemarketing machine	Canning station	Easel, typewriter	Chalkboard, potion table	Gnome table
Group Job	Pizza,	Pizza, Maze,	Pizza	Band	Code, Maze	Code

Object(s)	Band, Code	Band				
Career Track	Nightclub Dancer	Restaurant	N/A	Nightclub DJ	Robot factory	Robot factory
Emotes	Jazz Dance Flex Body Break Dance Bench Press Pile Drive	Vogue Sexy Wiggle Kiss Hand Pop Star Tango Smoke from Ears	Psych Cabbage Patch Sissy Fight Why Me?	Showing 'Tude Rap Give Gift Serenade Jitterbug	File Nails Nyah Nyah Latin Steps Primal Scream Evil Laugh	Wipe Brow Eye Poke Hand Puppet Head Spin Swallow Sword
Advanced Emote(s)*	Lure	Teach Give Cookies Lure	Give Cookies Make Smoothie	Change Batteries Make Smoothie	Teach	Change Batteries
Crafted Objects	Coffee Table Double Recliner	Rustic Double Bed	Pet Painting Coffee Table	Pet Painting Rustic Double Bed	Computer Double Recliner	Gothic Stereo Computer
Advanced Crafted*	Sprinkler Bouncy Ball Foot Massager Mounted Plasma TV	Trellis Vine Flowers Give Cookies Irrigation System	Trellis Vine Flowers Pest Motel Everfull Pet Feeder	Bouncy Ball Foot Massager Carnivorous Vines	Sprinkler Water Sprayer Everfull Pet Feeder Irrigation System	Pest Motel Water Sprayer Carnivorous Vines Mounted Plasma TV

(from The Sims Online Stratics http://sims.stratics.com/)