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Leadership in the role-playing community Midian City in Second Life
Suggested track: Good Case Stories (empirically grounded analyses)

The dark and often violent role-play in Midian City in the online 3D world Second Life takes its stance in the story of a former leper colony island and nuclear test site called Midian, which has been almost forgotten by a surrounding world preoccupied with the aftermath of yet another world war. Radiation created a wasteland and the surrounding waters became a "chemical soup of decaying seafood" (Midian City Rules 1.0). Slowly being re-colonized by people as well as half-breeds, Midian has now a population of approximately 4,600 role-playing residents of which approximately a third is role-playing regularly. "[F]ar from the gaze of polite society and elected law, a new colony of sorts has arisen, except this time the lepers are of the social kind and the disease is corruption" (Midian City Rules 1.0). The role-play is set in the 21st century, in a chaotic and post-apocalyptic future in which nobody is safe and different factions are constantly fighting each other (Midian City Rules 1.0 and Midian City Forum). Although the role-play itself might seem violent and disruptive, the organization enabling it is not. Midian City, its rules and its leadership are described in detail side by side with role-playing instructions in the welcoming area. This information is intended to ease a newcomer's way into the community. The interplay between rules and role-play is thus foregrounded as soon as a visitor arrives to the sim, and it is this interplay I will focus on in this paper. Relying on researchers such as Richard Schechner and Erving Goffman in the area of performance, Lawrence Lessig in the area of rules, and postmodernists such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari regarding the subversion of rules, my hypothesis is that leadership and rule formation in this digital environment is forced to build upon, but also reconsider, terms such as anonymity and artificiality, as well as transparence and interaction/communication. I would argue that this has led to leaders in role-playing communities constantly negotiating opposing ideas about presence, role-playing, and decision-making processes, as well as conflicting notions of the essence of the medium, and it is this discussion I will try to describe.

There are several layers of presence operating in a role-playing community such as Midian City. The first layer constitutes the people from all over the world sitting by their computers. Their worldview might be shaped by the physical, social and cultural environment of which they are a part and the languages they speak, but is also influenced by what they have encountered inside Second Life and their

expectations on the medium. If they view offline life as reality and online life as fantasy, this might lead to them treating interaction inside the Second Life community as irrelevant and even worthless. The opposite scenario, a person viewing his or her Second Life existence as primary, as the place where the real communication happens, might lead to great disappointment when encountering someone who does not value online interaction as highly. This might invoke essentialist arguments about the nature of the medium, the online environment, and the two sides often fight for preferential rights of interpretation. In Second Life, which has been advertised as an environment in which everyone can live out their fantasies, Midian City has been defined as a role-playing community with its own fictive history which all role-players have to relate to and in which they have to carve out spaces for themselves, and as such the individual resident's fantasy has to bow down for the pre-decided theme of the role-playing space. This framework of rules might not be viewed as constraints, however, but rather acts like a magnet drawing people interested in the same theme. Every single person from anywhere in the world, behind his or her computer, thus has the possibility to engage with a community consisting of people from all over the world as well as with the fictional history and role-play of Midian City and decide whether they prefer to remain anonymous or open about who they are and where they come from while interacting with other people making decisions on the same issues. All these variables might lead to very different conclusions and subsequently also potential sources for clashes and this is something the leaders of Midian City will have to address.

The second layer of presence is more directly linked to role-playing and the border between being in character (IC) and out of character (OOC), echoing Schechner's theories of performance and acting, but at the same time diverging from them in this improvisational context, which moves us closer to Goffman's ideas about performance in everyday lives. Midian City has comparatively clear rules about not mixing what happens in character with anything that happens out of character, but this has also proven to be a difficult distinction to make and most conflicts within the community are sparked as a result of these types of discussions. One type of conflict arises between two types of role-playing. Midian City favours an "emoted" type of role-play, which involves writing everything that happens. A role-play can thus be viewed as a collaboratively written story, in which thoughts, dialogue as well as battle are described rather than enacted visually. The goal is not to "win" but to tell, and be a part of, a good story. This way of role-playing stands in opposition to the more goal-oriented role-play often favoured by game-players with a background in first person shooter games (FSPs). The finality of an FSP-like win leaves the emoting role-players with a 'Now what?' and a difficulty to seamlessly continue the role-play. As admin Auntie describes it: Midian City "is for RP which simulates LIFE." Game-players might thus see it as good sportsmanship to lose once in a while, which makes it easier for storytellers and game-players to get along and play together, but game-players might also find it annoying if a storyteller attempts to completely control an outcome in order to further his or her own story. As Janeiro Renard points out, the role-play in Midian City, as well as elsewhere, thrives on active collaboration, but this might be difficult if egos get in the way and collaboration around a story becomes impossible. The conflict sketched above is a common one and it ultimately has its origin in what kind of presence the residents' prefer, a collaborative effort to create history and community or a more short-term instantaneously gratifying win, and their view of what the environment ought to be like.

What the Midian City environment is like is not entirely up to the individual

role or game-players, however, and this leads to a third layer of presence: the regulation of online behaviour OOC as well as IC. Although restricted by design and policy decisions made by Linden Lab, the government, by various offline laws and regulations, as we all are online as well as offline, Midian City owner Jade Steele has made her vision of a dark and engaging community in which people are welcome to join in and contribute a digital reality: "I realized that the more people can take ownership and pride in something, the more they will want to be involved…. I just make sure we keep to the initial vision, while allowing room for things to grow and evolve." Steele expresses no wish to be a dictator, but since its start in 2006 she has indeed had the final say on all matters in Midian City and she is keenly aware of how necessary rules are to make an environment like this work. She is the owner of the four Midian City sims — Midian City, Apocalypse, Quinntukhat, and Leviathon — and she does not hesitate to set her foot down if she is not happy with the way things progress.

A new leadership structure was set up in the autumn of 2009 and in a notecard Steele lists the reasons for this change: to delegate in order to ease her own workload, to clarify the roles of the management (which has become a group of people), and to address issues of admin abuse and impartiality by establishing better delegation of duties, transparency and accountability. This new leadership structure is intended to facilitate collaboration and joint decisions, but this type of change also highlights the need for clear rules and regulations, since these have to be possible to enforce in a fair and consistent way by a group of individuals who might not think completely alike. In one sense these rules ought to mirror as well as institutionalize the norms of the community, such as the division between being in character and being out of character, or the preference for emoted role-play, but they are also intended to facilitate the running of the sim. Following Lessig and his model of influences — law, norms, market and code — I explore the framework of rules and norms of the Midian City community. Relying on Deleuze and Guattari I also address the subversion these rules evokes.

Role-player Captain Jenna Gravois cherishes what she perceives as the freedom of the Midian City rules and links them to the high quality of the roleplay, but I would argue that she feels like this mainly because the current type of role-play fits her. If it evolved into something she would not be as happy with, she might decide that it is time to leave, just like some of the game-players have decided to do. This is one of the ways in which it is possible to see the link between the rules, the "laws," of a digital space and that which happens in it — and the result it brings. These rules can be thought of as the boundaries of a magic circle, enabling and facilitating the role-play as well as attempting to restrict OOC drama. But the magic circle is porous, the discussions about the essence of the medium, the rules and the code, and how to play in the "correct way" constantly continues.

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