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SOCIAL COOPERATION WITHIN VIRTUAL WORLDS. OLD SOCIAL PHENOMENA EMERGING IN NEW ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT. The world we live in is expanding its borders by letting the "virtual" become part of our lives. Digitisation equally pervades the public and the private sectors and transforms interactions between individuals, and between individuals and the state. For instance, the UK government is now in the process of digitising a whole range of processes and interactions with its citizens, through the Governmental Digital Service (GDS). In this article we aim to prove that virtual worlds provide a playground for social engineers, legal researchers and philosophers, for two reasons. First, virtual worlds offer confirmations of social theories of cooperation, they illustrate that cooperation among individuals emerges spontaneously where there are no established forms of governance and decision. Secondly, virtual worlds offer sandboxes where the peculiarities of online interaction can be observed.

Keywords*: virtual worlds; digitisation; online communities; social contract; legal reform.*

This article has been written after the tumultuous research in the realm of virtual worlds. We approached this topic with enthusiasm and much curiosity, for two essential reasons. Firstly, because we where interested in the nature of social cooperation among individuals, especially in the absence of a higher authority. In virtual worlds, although the company is the highest authority, it usually choses not to interfere with the inworld phenomena. Theorists in game theory have assessed that cooperation for a common good *does* emerge between rational agents, but this kind of theory is hard to test in the real world. Secondly, because virtual worlds constitute now a hot topic among scholars from various fields. Partly because they are environments created with the latest technologies – namely the Internet – which offer opportunities inaccessible until now: high speed, low cost and interactivity.

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Partly because they offer a sandbox in order for social engineers and philosophers to imagine new social structures, new legal systems, new communication patterns, that were not tested in real world.

This research is particularly timely as digitisation has not just impacted private communication (through social media), but is also widely implemented in interactions between individuals and the state. In the United Kingdom, the Government Digital Service is in the process of digitising a whole range of civil service processes. In the justice sector, the HMCTS Reform Programme might implement the HM Online Court in the next five years. This might mean that the entire justice process would take place in virtual settings within the next decade.

In order to tackle the wide range of peculiarities and features of online interaction in virtual worlds, this article has five main parts. In the first part we present the characteristic *features* of virtual worlds, especially in opposition with computer games. Virtual worlds are much more akin to real-life, 'serious', interactions, and are more open-ended than what is traditionally believed of games. The second part presents the concept of avatar and how it might reflect, but it is not identical to the real user. It then emphasizes the emergence of social groups within the virtual worlds and their relative causes. In the third part we analyze communication within virtual worlds as instrument for cooperation, at several levels: individual, group and mass communication. The fourth part focuses on the legal aspects of the discussion: the nature, the sources and the characteristics of law, as it is created and applied in virtual environments. Lastly, in the fifth part we analyze governance structures that emerged within virtual worlds.

By presenting the complexity of virtual worlds, we hope to show how fruitful this new field is from a scholarly standpoint. We believe that virtual worlds can be used as sandboxes for testing social, political and legal hypotheses in a way that was not possible in our world until now. They also offer lessons for policymakers who are currently digitising processes and interactions.

I. Introduction to virtual worlds

What is a virtual world? MMORPG.

The term MMORPG stands for massively multiplayer online role-playing game. A computer-based RPG (role playing game) takes place in an online virtual world with thousands to millions of other players.

The user handles a client to connect to a server, usually run by the publisher of the game, which hosts the virtual world and memorizes information about the

users. The client allows the user to gain a sense of their position in the virtual world and the laws that the developers have endowed it with.

The user controls a character represented by an avatar in the virtual world, which he directs to interact with other characters, acquire items and so on. We shall discuss more aspects of the user-avatar relation in the following section.

Virtual worlds have their roots in online, text-based adventures, which existed as early as the 1970s. The first real MMORPG, Meridian 59, was released in 1996, but it wasn't until the following year that Ultima Online highly popularized the genre. Both games were played on a pay-by-month basis, as are most modern MMORPGs. The genre surged into popularity throughout the late nineties, finding especially welcoming markets in Taiwan, South Korea, and America.

Around 2000, virtual worlds began to attract the attention of academia (psychology and economics) and non-gaming publications. Reactions ranging from praise to distaste are common, with some critics saying that such games turn us into lifeless zombies, and others celebrating them as a fascinating new way for us to interact with each other.

The basic role-playing aspect is really just the tip of the iceberg. It is when users band together to form groups that the virtual worlds become a grand-scale strategic drama. However, it is up to each user to decide the level of involvement. Virtual worlds leave ample room for continual progress and variety in all its solo playing aspects. The competition is made up of other human users who will sometimes employ every method at their disposal and possibly invent new ones within the worlds' design to gain an edge over the rest.

Some virtual worlds have developed sophisticated economies with equipment, currency, and characters within the game being exchanged online for real money. This has led to the study of “synthetic economies” and how they relate to real world economies. As the worlds become increasingly more realistic and entertaining, they will continue to permeate further into the mainstream, attracting both positive and negative reactions from all sides.

Attributes

Virtual worlds are different from non-networked single player games in many aspects. First of all, the worlds they create are *persistent*. The worlds exist independent of your presence and basically the “game” never ends. Secondly, they are *dynamic* as your actions as well as others' that can permanently shape the world. Of course, more advanced users that have seen generations come and go have a more clear understanding of these game dynamics and can handle them better. Thirdly, most virtual worlds are open-ended environments, there is no *end-goal* and there are no

victory conditions. Their only goal is to facilitate complex interaction between the users and granting them the freedom to express themselves. According to Hunter and Lastokwa "the virtual worlds are *artificial*, *fictitious*, *imaginary*, *intangible* and *invented*" (7). But that does not mean they are insignificant. Laws, values or language share some of these traits yet nobody would dare call them insignificant. New forms of social regulation could be explored in the confined realm of cyberspace. As their users spend more and more time in the virtual worlds it would make sense to hold the items and values they hold dear in cyberspace just as important as they do a certain TV star or pop idol.

Why MMORPG is not simply a game

Although the simulation of a virtual world is relatively similar to a computer game in terms of 3D graphics and sometimes content, the differences strongly outweigh the similarities.

Once an avatar is created, users choose the way in which they interact with other users. This *interactivity* is practically the main goal of any virtual world, putting people together in ways they didn't even deem possible before. There are hardly any games that allow the kind of creativity in customizing avatars to the extent of any MMORPG even though this is where the trend originated. There is no sense in doing so when only computer controlled agents will see the way you look in a single player environment. In virtual worlds such as the one created in Second Life this extends to more than simply avatars but the environment itself.

It is also the *freedom* and lack of a specific goal that allows users to express themselves on a really profound level, instead of chasing through the levels of a predefined world, however interesting the storyline may be. Virtual worlds have taken the concept of *re-playability*[1] to a whole new level because, even if users choose not to evolve, the virtual world around them is constantly changing. "People come to virtual worlds because they find there much more than games [...] Players come to MMOs to interact with other players and in that way MMOs are a very special form of interactive entertainment in that they derive their value mainly from the fact that there are other players there" (Ludlow & Wallace 72).

The next thing to take into account is the amount of money revolving around virtual world. Their *economics* have caught the attention of Ivy League scholars and some publish periodical reports of their economical development. The industry

[1] Re-playability expresses the fun a gamer will have playing the same game a second and third time; it usually relates to aspects specifically designed into the game to make it more entertaining when you have already finished the main objectives and simply want to explore the game further.

surrounding user-created content and its spin-offs has grown so high, that some realms of virtual worlds have generated more income (GDP per capita) than that of a real-world country[2].

Lastly, users of virtual worlds create social structures that depart from the objectives of a regular game; and LambdaMOO (whose case study we shall present in the last section of this paper) is in this sense a beautiful illustration: "Games have rules, but who ever heard of a game with a Supreme Court and a complex legislative system? In this sense, formalized law becomes a mechanism by which LambdaMOOers can prove that they are engaged in something grander than a role-playing game, that they are participants in a full-fledged virtual world" (Mookin 271).

II. Users, avatars, and social groups

While we have already established that MMORPGs are not simply games, it might be confusing that the concept "player" is still widely used. This might be seen as a reminiscence of the prejudice just mentioned, and this is why scholars use alternative terms such as "user" or "typist" for the person that enters a MMORPG. We shall use the term "user" for not contributing further to the confusion.

Still, it is only a part of the user's personality that is salient in the virtual world: the user's *avatar*. That is why in this section we consider it is necessary to draw a distinction between the user and his avatar and to discuss the possible overlapping between the two, not only in terms of representativeness but from the point of view of responsibility as well. How much (if so) is the user responsible for his avatar's actions? How much is the user responsible for the well-being of the virtual world? How much of the responsibility for real-life crimes should be transferred in the virtual world? These are only some of the questions we shall address here.

Perhaps an even more interesting aspect is the emergence of social groups within MMORPGs. As we shall see, many MMORPGs have not been designed to give birth to social groups, yet that doesn't stop the latter to be created by users. We shall therefore analyze the causes of this phenomenon while giving some examples in the process. We believe that these examples illustrate not only the users' creativity but their needs as (virtual) social beings: "avatars are the manifestation of actual people in an online medium, and that their utterances, actions, thoughts, and emotions should be considered to be as valid as the utterances, actions, thoughts, and emotions of people in any other forum, venue, location, or space." (Koster 269)

[2] The GDP per capita of Norrath, a realm of EverQuest, is equivalent to that of Russia (Ludlow&Wallace 68).

The user and their avatar - an organic connection

There is clearly a distinction to be made between the typist and their avatar(s). The avatar is a "persistent extension of the user within that world, allowing him or her to exist in that virtual place and communicate with others" (Hunter & Lastowka 64). Avatars act as "representational proxies" between users. Their design is of the users' choice and may or may not reflect a person's real appearance. They can be richly customized and are designed with social interaction in mind. Currently, avatars communicate in various ways in virtual worlds (as we shall see in the following section). Users also express themselves through the avatars' appearance. You can choose the face, clothes, and body shape of your avatar and in some cases even communicate with others through body language. As not all the gestures people expect are implemented in all virtual worlds, users sometimes come up with surrogates.

Once you have your virtual persona in place, you can start to live your virtual life in the virtual world. But what exactly does it mean to live in a virtual world? Millions of users interact real-time in 3-dimensional simulations. But no one actually *lives* there. There are differences between having a location and living in a place, and the main difference is that, while "living in a place" implies a geographical reference, "having a location" might also be a logical reference. Similarly, a corporation could be located or have a "domicile" at a certain address, and yet it would be illogical to believe that the corporation itself "lives" at that address3.

The relationship between the user and his must be understood as very intimate. The personality of the user influences a usually large number of specific choices in terms of avatar attributes. This in turn may lead to slightly different game play or a whole new experience altogether. There is no way of telling how much the avatar you see on your screen is a representation of the user behind it. Your conversation partner might be right next to you in an Internet café or across the ocean, a couple of hours behind you due to time zones. They might be a single mom who accidentally entered her son's PC and does not know how to quit the game or they might be a griefer trying to cheat you out of some virtual money.

Some users have *alts* (short for alternates) and choose to develop each character separately as well as use them for different purposes. The use of the word *character* seems very effective once you consider the fact that users may actually be pursuing different traits of their own personality, their own character – this is

[3] "If a corporation, which has no physical body and legally is separate from its shareholders and directors who do have physical bodies, can be said to be domiciled in a certain location, then certainly a MMORPG player, who has a physical body and who is directly manifested in the MMORPG by his avatar, can be said to be domiciled in a MMORPG, especially if the player operating the avatar spends more time in the MMORPG than anywhere else" (Jenkins 10).

also why we call in the "role-playing" feature of the virtual world. And in this pursuit, new features are added. "Acclimating to your virtual world can be a tricky business. Unlike a science-fiction story in which your consciousness is suddenly transplanted into someone else's body, it's more like your body has been extended into a new environment. There is no disconnect, no sense of being the ghost in the machine. Rather the avatar simply becomes an extension of yourself that enables you to interact with this new world, much like a new pair of eyeglasses that require some getting used to, but that fast becomes so much a part of you that you don't even notice they're there." (Ludlow & Wallace 31).

Issues of social responsibility

It is up to the user to decide how they want their avatar to behave as they are the "puppeteers", the ones behind the avatars' actions. While some actions can be *scripted*[4] this is not the norm as it would obstruct interactivity. Living in virtual worlds consists of actions which put you in direct contact with those around you. MMORPGs are more like clubs or community associations. Interaction is the norm. Getting back to the idea of character, some traits of character might not be so welcome in virtual worlds. *Over-sharing*[5] may be your last concern in a virtual world teeming with pirates and choosing your conversational partners wisely is a *skill* nobody can teach you in a world where violent warfare is inexistent.

Since the avatar is controlled by the user, of course the latter is responsible for the actions undertaken by the avatar. The avatar does not have any means of taking matters into its own hands other than the physics and features it was endowed with by the game designers. It cannot defend itself when the user is in the game, but AFK (away from keyboard), so the user must take steps to protect their avatar in such cases, otherwise it may suffer unwanted consequences. It is the user who initiates conversations, creates situations, tries to keep his creation in the virtual world complete and, in the case of TSO (The Sims Online), happy. Part of the game consists in fulfilling the basic needs of the avatar, but the biggest part consists of the social interaction with the other ones.

In worlds such as TSO, where all the content is created by the company, one might argue that the company is responsible for the functionality of the structure it created. Yet many virtual worlds have custom-created content that sensibly changes the argument regarding the responsibilty for the virtual welfare. Such is the case in Second Life, where the developers provide nothing more than the ground on which to build. It is up to the users to create their own environment and

[4] Implemented by a certain string of code i.e. automatic, programmed by the user. This means a scripted avatar could act in a certain manner without its "puppeteer" to control him at that moment.

[5] Providing more personal information than is absolutely necessary

express themselves in a graphical form. This has led to magnificent scenery far beyond what a small company such as Linden Labs could ever hope to achieve with only 200 employees. But when you have thousands of users creating their own content, the limits are only in terms of imagination and skill to compete with others for the best looking neighborhood. But it is not only in terms of content creation that the users have a say in the virtual worlds. Some have taken it upon themselves to try and police the world, or find fixes for the bugs discovered in the software, thus recognizing their responsibility for the welfare.

Policing the virtual world is one thing, but things quickly get out of hand when dealing with real-world crimes making their way into virtual worlds. What is there to do when you suspect the user behind one of the avatars you are discussing with in the virtual world has committed a real crime? Despite the fact that your code of ethics binds you to call the police and notify them, what is there to report really? And what authorities do you really have to contact? As we have stated before, the person behind the avatar could very well be located across the ocean and it may well be that their government is not on friendly terms with your own. Avatar responsibility (even for real-world crimes) becomes more clearly defined once we understand the nature of law in virtual space. We shall develop this subject in section 4.

The emergence of social groups. Causes

There is seldom a way for the users to achieve higher goals in the terms of virtual worlds by themselves. This naturally leads to users creating groups. These goals may be enforcing rules in the virtual world, as stated before, or simply manage to overcome difficult tasks, impossible to manage by only one avatar.

The variety of choices in the making of an avatar also comes at a cost i.e. they can not have everything at once. That is to say, while a character may possess attributes such as great personal strength, their dexterity might be encumbered so they cannot operate delicate objects but they can wield large axes. The decisions users make when creating their avatar also makes for a distribution of attributes. In most worlds, this has consequences. Firstly, it will split the players into factions if it is a battle-simulation virtual world. These factions will interact with one another as groups and may share specific attributes that range from a specific coat of arms to a specific language not shared by the other factions. Secondly, users will need to interact with others in order to make up for their short-comings. It is common for a successful group to require up to 7 or more types of characters in order to prove effective. Even if they do not travel as a group at all specific times, players will require the skills of others and will seek each other out for the mutual benefit of all parties involved.

After the basic virtual needs of users have been met, these groups are left with a lot of potential. Some groups look for the good of the community while others try to undermine it to their own advantage. Some choose to spend it attending the virtual funeral of a member of the same group who has died in real life, while others choose to bomb the site of this funeral. Footage of this particular event has been watched over three million times on YouTube. Players of competitive multiplayer games have gained a place among the ultimate media fans. They are certainly "consumers who also produce" and "spectators who also participate".

Groups play a major role in the dynamics of the virtual world. This is why we shall continue their description and features in the next section, by explaining the communicational patterns they use in order to stay together.

III. Communication within the virtual world

The precious features that MMORPGs brought in addition from computer games are *interactivity* and *dynamism*. Players are not only encouraged to create their own saga, but they are encouraged to do it by interacting with other players. There is no single MMORPG player who enjoys the environment in complete isolation: he is either in contact with one or two, maybe more players, he is in contact with a whole group, and some love to stay in contact with the entire virtual world. This permanent contact ensures that the virtual world is constantly changing and, just like in the real world, every new day is different from the last one.

This section analyzes the communicational aspect of virtual worlds. Analogue to real world, communication is done at different levels, it fulfills different aims, and it is done with different devices. We shall present, one by one, features and examples of: interpersonal communication, group communication, and mass communication. Each of them functions upon certain mechanisms that are either created by the company or invented by users. Last but not least, there are also out-of-the-world communication channels used to either supplement or replace inworld channels.

Interpersonal communication. Codes of conduct

In The Sims Online (TSO) there is a specific protocol for interactions. Firstly, there is a special vocabulary, partly borrowed from the netiquette[6], which has the

[6] While other virtual worlds "had borrowed online terms and made them [their] own, Second Life had produced a whole new set of jargon that was unique to this particular virtual world" (Ludlow&Wallace 194).

role to render typing more efficient[7], or the role to keep away the uninitiated. As a beginner, you can find it disturbing that another user doesn't answer your messages; but if his status is "AFK", that only means he or she is away from the keyboard and does not actually see your messages, although his avatar carries on with his work.

Secondly, there is a specific rhythm of communication. Long phrases are usually parsed in short lines, so that the "listener" must not wait too long for you to type the whole idea and can understand it more easily.

Thirdly, since all communication is done in writing, the lack of visual clues (concerning nonverbal or paraverbal features of the dialogue) tends to be replaced by their "translation" into written language, mainly by emoticons.

Since March 2007, the game Second Life has an advanced feature regarding communication: it includes a voice chat feature. This can be used only on lands and only with users that have the voice chat feature enabled. The "spatial voice channel" enables the user to talk to avatars that are positioned within a 20 m radius. A one-to-one voice chat is also possible, with a determined avatar. The attention given to all these rules and mechanisms of user-to-user communication prove that communication is an important part of the dynamics of virtual worlds.

Group communication. Aim: cooperation

In some virtual worlds, group communication is facilitated by the creator as an important part of the game. For instance, World of Warcraft (WoW) encourages players to form groups and guilds in order to fulfill certain tasks. Some groups might only endure for a couple of hours until a certain objective is achieved, such as a *raid*. The user that organizes it states the objective and the location then they wait. When the group's reason to be exists no more, the group is dissolved. On the other hand, guild are long-lasting cooperation structures. Each guild has its own identity and its own communication channel (which you cannot access unless you are part of the guild). Moreover, one user cannot be part of multiple guilds at a time.

In other worlds, group formation has not been projected by the creators, but users have eventually developed structures by forcing other features of the platform. The Sims Online (TSO) is a magnificent illustration[8]: in TSO you are only allowed to form families, by "marrying" another avatar. Yet users employ the family system in order to form social groups based on interests, hobbies or other similarities.

[7] "Onliners type quickly to exchange messages with as little delay as possible. In doing so, they try to capture the essence of speech by using the much slower act of writing. They try, in other words, to speak with their fingers" (Randall 41).

[8] "Much of the activity in TSO was within social structures that were not designed into the platform, but which had been constructed by the users themselves" (Ludlow&Wallace 114).

Interestingly enough, some online families become surrogate families to users who either lack such structures in the real world, or they are not satisfied by what they have. That doesn't mean that virtual worlds are the homes of the socially troubled ones. Studies have shown that those who enter virtual worlds are actually more extroverted than their counterparts and are expanding their communication levels into new territory. Also, as we have seen in the previous sections, virtual worlds can become a source of revenue, or they are regarded simply as "3D graphical chat rooms".

Some of the groups in TSO are called Mafias and they are made of users who are bored by the limitations of the platform and spend their time griefing or fooling "noobs"[9]. This type of group raises questions related to the connection between freedom and behavior. Let us develop the idea. TSO is known for its limitations in gameplay, because the creators didn't want to allow custom created content in this world. In other words, users cannot create objects and cannot diversify the things they could do on the platform. This results in a limited range of actions and outcomes that become boring after a while. This idea is in line with Philip Rosedale's argument that the lack of freedom in a virtual world makes people mean, because they get bored. He suggests that a virtual world (like Second Life), which gives more freedoms than the real world (eg. instant teleportation), might even make us better people[10]. Even though, prima facie, this argument has flaws, it could prove an interesting hypothesis in the field of social philosophy.

Case study: Killing Kerafyrm

Group communication also proves essential in some rare occasions where users get out of their normal behavior and join in view of higher aims. The following case could be a marvelous case study in the field of game or social theory: the slaying of Kerafyrm.

Kerafyrm is a monster that existed in the realm of Norrath, in the virtual world EverQuest. It was conceived by its creators from Sony Online Entertainment as an unbeatable monster, and this was translated into code as giving to the monster ten billion hit points[11]. Then suddenly one day almost two hundred EverQuest players commonly decided to stop battling each other and kill Kerafyrm. How the

[9] Noob is a pejorative term for newbie, i.e. for a beginner.

[10] "What if an online environment offered you more freeedoms than the real world, in just about every way. I assert, by comparison to these historical cases, that we might therefore actually behave better in such a place. We might learn faster, interact more deeply, and therefore become better people, at least on some levels [...] there is such a blue-sky opportunity for doing stuff, that griefing just doesn't make it to the top very quickly." (apud Ludlow&Wallace 201)

[11] In comparison, killing a snake is ten points, a dragon has 100,000 points.

aggregation was done, is not really known. Concerning the reasons why users did it, it is suggested that people did it just because it was something out of the ordinary, something "not supposed to happen".

From our daily existence we know that agreeing to cooperate for a certain end is troublesome, because it involves all agents to establish through debate the desired outcome and to fulfill their part of the deal. Moreover, as the number of agents increases, agreement is much more difficult to attain. From this perspective, what happened in EverQuest is out of the ordinary. One could only infer that the aim was too appealing and communication between the nearly two hundred users was so efficient[12], that they actually managed to coordinate and attack Kerafyrm at the same time.

The battle lasted for about four hours and the result was nearly satisfactory. We say nearly, because what happened was another interesting action worth discussing. When Kerafyrm got very near to be beaten, the programmers from Sony got worried: how can we let the un-killable monster be killed? God projected the world in a way and He didn't like that way to be changed by the governed ones. Therefore the creators reset the game, and the whole four-hour effort vanished. This God-like act dissatisfied the users and proved that unfairness easily arises from arbitrary decisions that overturn popular choice.

The case of Kerafyrm is not the only instance of group cooperation within virtual worlds, but it surely is the most impressive one. Apart from that, users frequently communicate in order to achieve common goals, or goals that wouldn't be otherwise accessible (such as convincing the creators to change code). This and other similar events might be worthy of study, not only from a communicational point of view, but also from a social one.

Mass communication: journalism

Mass communication was first born in TSO along with the creation of the Alphaville Herald on October 23, 2003, by philosophy professor Peter Ludlow. It was the moment when virtual free press came into existence. The Herald was an independent news service focusing on Alphaville, TSO instead of a real world location. The Alphaville Herald real-world website came to feature interviews with griefers, sadomasochists, Sims Mafioso, thieves and members of the TSO shadow government. The Herald was first supposed to observe, record and study the legal, social, and economic implications of life in the virtual world.

[12] Apart from the 200 who fought, it seems there were almost 5000 users who were online, watching and *discussing* the fight (apud Ludlow&Wallace 16).

Over time, as the problems of TSO mounted, The Herald became a guidebook to everything going on in that particular virtual world. After Electronic Arts found out about the stories the newspaper was revealing – such as scams and cyber-prostitution that were taking place within its game, or the company's indifference to reports of real-world violence – they considered that Alphaville Herald was too intrusive and thus banned all inworld mention of The Alphaville Herald. Moreover, the chief editor, Peter Ludlow, was thrown out of the game and his accounts closed down, cutting him off from his Sims.

EA's termination of Ludlow's account made international headlines. Additionally, it only stiffened the Herald's resolve to document the societies and constructs that were emerging in this new realm of cyberspace. The newspaper was reborn in 2004 as the Second Life Herald. It concentrated more closely on the virtual world of Second Life. In January 2005, the avatar Walker Spaight, actually the journalist Mark Wallace, joined the paper as Editorial Director.

Apart from the activity of the inworld newspaper, Second Life Herald, real world journalism is creating virtual bureaus in SL. Reuters, Wired and CNET have already established in this world and they keep the two worlds connected through news. Moreover, major companies hold press conferences in SL. It is believed that Second Life has the potential to break certain doors in open source journalism "if used to harness a wider base of information gatherers" (Howard 4).

Other types of reporting also emerged within the virtual worlds. A round of elections that had place in Alphaville were also covered by an avatar called Oprah Winfrey who started a talk show which resembled the real world counterpart, including an Oprah-like set complete with visitors coming there to watch her live. Other periodicals have emerged within virtual worlds, currently 18 are active just in Second Life (including the Second Life Herald).

Outworld communication mechanisms

Communication inside the game is sometimes not enough. Users feel the need to express themselves outside the realm of cyberspace so they go an inch closer to the real world. Web-based forums and bulletin boards are more persistent than inworld chat. They are there for years at a time documenting users' opinions and tutorials. They prove useful for new players and experienced ones alike. Tutorials are especially good for newbies as they bend the learning curve a little. There is, however, concern regarding the exhaustive documentation taking all the pleasure out of the game. Interface add-ons for WoW and websites detailing every aspect of a quest may help the users fulfill their tasks but they often take away from the sheep pleasure of discovering the intricacies on your own. For more speedy means of

communication, users turn to proven instant messaging protocols such as Yahoo Messenger and Skype. For instance, the TSO-based Sim Shadow Government use the Yahoo Messenger system to organize their tagging operations (more about SSG and their operations in section 5 of this paper). Most WoW and Eve Online users prefer Skype for the voice based communication. Group leaders have a way to issue commands more efficiently and this can make a difference in the outcome of a battle.

Even though outworld communication channels exist and they are efficient in compensating inworld communication, the latter remains the main way of exchanging information. From this point of view, we argue that companies have the duty of keeping inworld channels open, regardless of the existence of alternative ways of communicating. The main reason is that virtual worlds are mainly created to establish online communities in which people interact, and action within communities cannot occur without a constant exchange of ideas. We could easily imagine a virtual world where the company decides to close all communication channels and render all users "mute". This would instantly turn that world into single-player games that run simultaneously on a platform, but most of the interactivity and dynamics would disappear[13]. About the duty of the company towards its clients we shall continue in the following chapter.

IV. Rules and laws in virtual worlds

As we have seen in the previous sections, players of virtual worlds tend to form social groups. This happens not only when several players have a common goal, but mainly because virtual worlds' most salient feature is *interactivity*; players enter virtual worlds in order to interact with other players, and they do it in most various ways. Scholars wonder if virtual worlds are destined to be lawless environments, where the dynamics are dictated by social groups, or by their interaction with the creator. Similar questions were asked years ago, when the Internet was at its beginning: Is cyberspace an environment where "anything goes" or will laws eventually emerge?[14] We shall proceed by comparing the features of real and virtual worlds, and how they influence the emergence of law. We analyse the nature of virtual law

[13] Some people support the idea of massively single-player game, because they believe one "gets the benefits of an online game, which is all the people building the world collectively together, without the liabilities, which is that the 14-year-old can kill you or that you've invested all this time in your planet and somebody comes along and blows it up..." (Will Wright, the creator of The Sims, The Sims Online, and the newly-launched Spore)

[14] Lawrence Lessig admitted that he cannot understand why cyberspace is seen as lawless and uncontrollable by the governments, since the very idea of cyberspace is derived from the study of cybernetics, i.e. "the study of control at a distance". "It was doubly odd to see this celebration of non-control over architectures born from the very idea of control" (Lessig 5)

as result of interaction between the code and socially imposed rules. Afterwards we discuss about the legitimacy of creators to be lawmakers, together with the inherent obligations towards users. In the end, we deem necessary to emphasize the importance of virtual laws.

Cyberspace vs. Real World

A discussion about virtual laws logically begins with the question: "Is law possible in virtual worlds?". In this section, "virtual world" and "cyberspace" are used interchangeably because a question regarding *regulability* (i.e. the ability of a legally-defined area of being regulated) is essentially connected to the architecture of the medium – and cyberspace is the medium where virtual worlds develop. There are some reasons to believe that cyberspace could be a space free of any constraint, where total freedom is possible. This idea was poetically expressed by J.P. Barlow in "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" (29):

We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity. Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us. They are based on matter. There is no matter here. The most powerful argument for the independence and freedom within cyberspace is that coercion by real-world governments and legal systems is naturally limited, because they are geographically-bound, while cyberspace is not. This argument is very important and is worth discussing.

David R. Johnson and David G. Post developed this argument in *Law and Borders: The Rise of Law in Cyberspace* by comparing the features of real-world legal systems (and jurisdictions) and those that could be formed in cyberspace. They suggested that we are prone to think about law in geographical terms, because in our worlds the legal systems are superimposed upon the political areas that form national or supranational areas. "All law is prima facie territorial" (146), and it is so because there are at least four important elements that connect law and geographical boundaries.

Firstly, law is created and implemented by the sovereign, which has the legitimacy and the power to do so. It is only the sovereign who has monopoly of power over a territory that can actually impose a certain system of law and apply sanctions in cases of disobedience.

Secondly, law is sanctioning action which is par excellence determined in time and space by an individual. This is why most actions have a determinate (spatial) range of consequences (even though it might be an artificial one), and they are regulated accordingly.

Thirdly, law gains its legitimacy by being created and sanctioned by people that are directly affected by it – this is called the "consent of the governed". This point stands on the assumption that the quality of decision making of the people is proportional to their interest in the matter and to the impact of the law upon their lives.

Lastly, the boundaries of law are usually acknowledged together with a geographical boundary, for instance, between two countries. Borders plays the role of notifying that jurisdictions are changed and thus different laws are applicable[15].

Yet, when entering cyberspace, laws cannot hold their geographical attributes. The main reason for this is that *physical location imposes no constraint upon the cost or the speed of exchanging information in cyberspace*. Communication and transactions are made quasi-instantly and they are difficult to be controlled by territorial powers[16].

Furthermore, although Internet addresses (IPs) are important, there is no necessary connection between the location of the computer and the legal jurisdiction applicable to a transaction. Johnson and Post explain that this is happening mainly because the Net is engineered to work on the basis of logical, not geographical, locations, and trying to control communication from physical location "would be as futile as an effort to tie an atom and a bit together" (150). We could think of at least three reasons why cyberspace in general, and virtual worlds in particular, act as a legally-relevant place: 1. the "entrance" in cyberspace is visible[17] and is made on special criteria (passwords, accounts) that render "accidental entering" impossible; 2. it is a persistent space; 3. just like real-world citizenship, access to cyberspace/virtual worlds can be granted or suspended.

Returning to the initial question, we may conclude that law is possible in cyberspace mainly if we see cyberspace as a distinct place from the "real world", a space with its own (non-geographical) jurisdiction and with its own special emergent laws. Every effort to imposed real-world-geographical laws upon virtual transactions has proven ineffective, and this is not the first example of people trying unsuccessfully to imposed old laws in new issues[18].

[15] Johnson and Post are calling this function the "signpost function" (148).

[16] Johnson and Post suggest that cyberspace "needs and can create new law and legal institutions of its own. Territorially-based law making and law enforcing authorities find this new environment deeply threatening" (145).

[17] A primary function and characteristic of a border or boundary is "its ability to be perceived by the one who crosses it" (Johnson 155).

[18] The emergence of *lex mercatoria* is a beautiful analogy with the emergence of cyberspace laws. Lex mercatoria is a corpus of laws that emerged spontaneously in transactions on the sea during Middle Ages, where the only available laws were the feudal laws of the land. Feudal laws were created to function solely on the domain (land) of the lord and their extension to sea would have been inefficient. One must emphasize the fact that the new laws didn't replace the old ones, but rather completed them. (see Benson).

This account might answer the following question: which law has precedence in virtual worlds: the real-world law or the law established by the virtual community? The territoriality of real-world law will prevent it from ever being efficient in virtual communities. On the other hand, one can criticise virtual space for not having legitimate structures of law making and implementation. We believe this is only a matter of time, as we shall see further.

The nature of virtual law: code v. social rules

Who makes the law in virtual worlds? The answer to this question might prove that virtual worlds are capable of developing their own legal mechanism. In giving the first possible answer we bring out the philosophical distinction between natural laws and social laws. The laws of nature are given by God, they are unchangeable, and they restrain the range of possible actions. In contrast, social laws are given by lawmakers and they are changeable, so the range of permitted actions might vary in time and space.

Similarly, in virtual worlds there are two types of rules that apply to user's actions: the code and the law. The code is the software written by the creators of a virtual world – and the creators are thus called *wizards* (or even Gods). On the other hand, the law is formulated inworld either by the wizards who act like sovereigns (through their inworld avatar), or by the citizens of that world, in a more or less democratic manner.

Code and law are intertwined in various ways[19]. For instance, there is no need for law for actions that are not permitted by the code anyway; moreover, law cannot impose actions made by the code impossible. But do we really need both types of rules? In real world, natural laws are unchangeable and they allow actions that we deem dangerous. Thus social laws supplement natural laws because we cannot change the latter. In virtual worlds, things are different: wizards could change the code if they want. Furthermore, they can allow users change the code in such a manner that they "program troubles away". Lawrence Lessig gives an interesting example in this sense: rather then entering in a conflict, users might rewrite code, at a microlevel, in order for the sources of conflict to disappear (see the case of Martha and Jones, Lessig 9-14).

Yet this suggestion might not be actually possible. In many virtual worlds the only current rule is code, and this has lead to numerous scams, griefings[20], and unfair practices. "There has yet to be a virtual worlds in which the effective letter

[19] Lessig supports the idea that the interaction between law and code constitutes values (8).

[20] A griefer is a person whose preferred mode of play is to disrupt the virtual lives of others through various tactics.

of law is not defined simply by what that world's software allows" (Ludlow & Wallace 94)[21]. More than that, regulation through constantly changing the code can lead to unforeseen and unwanted effects.

Second Life provides a case for this argument. In October 2005, a user created an object that self-replicated quietly and exponentially, by using a commonplace function of the software (the object inventory). Eventually the object multiplied ad infinitum and made the SL servers crash. Intuitively, this action might be regarded as a criminal act, because it affected the whole virtual society. Apart from banning the wrongdoer, Linden Lab thought that changing the code will prevent similar attacks. Yet the change they made[22] had a great impact upon the positive features of Second Life as well. "Rather than put more cops on he street or find a better way to register and ban individual users, the company chose to eliminate a good in order to eliminate an evil", observes Ludlow (250). This might illustrate the idea that every change in the physics of the world will eliminate both bad and good features, and this happens because no matter how hard the wizards try to eliminate ways to misuse the features of the world, there will always be a person curious enough to find bugs and cracks and exploit them.

Lawmaking in virtual worlds

The influence and power that wizards gain inworld is also relevant to lawmaking. Even when they don't change the code, they seem to have the power and legitimacy to act as sovereigns, mostly because they can pull out the plug anytime. We can easily imagine a world where the wizard decided to render all avatars mute, therefore eliminating an important mean of "civic disobedience".

But how unlimited can the power of the wizard be? One possible answer is given by the exit argument, which is used very often in legitimizing the power of the wizard. Wizards can easily say "if you don't like it, leave", since most worlds can be seen as services that no one obliges you purchase. This is why we have to agree to the Terms of Service (ToS) or to the End User License Agreement (EULA) before entering a virtual world.

The first counterargument that comes to mind is that exiting might prove quite expensive, since users begin investing more and more time and money in order to gain virtual assets. Furthermore, the social network that they create might also count as valuable – and could be lost when the user exits the world.

[21] And there are such worlds, as we shall see in the following section.

[22] They limited the transfer of inventory objects to the land where the object is created.

Yet there are stronger reasons why ToS are not sufficient for making you accept the exit argument[23]. The most important argument is that ToS is a contract of adhesion, a most limitative type of contract, because its conditions cannot be negotiated, only accepted or not. On the other hand, ToS must be seen as a fundamental contract (why not, a social contract), and therefore it must not have hidden provisions or provisions that involve signing away fundamental human rights. From this point of view, ToS may not oblige users sign away their right to free speech, to holding property, to sign contracts etc. even if the wizards wish so.

Scholars have brought attention to the fact that by entering a world whose ToS specifies that "lalala" counts as a waiver of First Amendment rights. Such a waiver must be made "knowing, voluntary, and intelligent" - however the voluntary character is not entirely preserved since there is no possibility of negotiation in this type of agreement.

A similar argument was made in 1946 in the case Marsh v. Alabama[24]. In this case it was decided that a private company (Gulf Shipbuilding Co.) is obliged to act *as a state actor* within a territory that it controls and in front of the population that lives on that territory (Chickasaw, Alabama). This implies that the company must enforce the First Amendment and guard the fundamental rights of the citizens who live there. A virtual world is not much different from a company town[25]. It is not enough that the company offers access to the virtual world under the condition of ToS or EULA. It doesn't have the "luxury" to offer a product "as-is" because the impact that virtual worlds have upon our lives is growing bigger. Virtual worlds are becoming public places[26], which the company is, first of all, obliged to preserve. Similarly, the services that are offered within virtual worlds might be considered public services or public goods, and nor users nor wizards have the full power to change or destroy them.

As we have seen in this entire section, law is possible in cyberspace, especially if cyberspace is seen as a special type of space (i.e. non-geographical). In this way, we are aware that in virtual worlds laws have to be quite different from the real-world laws. Yet many times, our conceptions about legal systems are limited to those that were possible in the real world. This is why virtual worlds can be regarded as testing grounds for new conceptions.

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[23] "The real concern with the exit argument is that it goes beyond the available alternate forum principle and presumes that the player has made a valid waiver of his or her First Amendment rights" (Jenkins 10).

[24] See *Marsh v. State of Alabama*. No. 114. Supreme Ct. of the US. 7 Jan. 1946.

[25] They are both privately owned; virtual worlds are populated by people who spend more and more time of their daily life – and the rules that apply there are more and more relevant; access and exit incur costs; lastly, virtual worlds also assume a public function.

[26] Jenkins offers two reasons why virtual worlds are a special category of public places, namely "designated forums": 1. almost all activities in there are expressive; 2. the expressive activities do not interfere with other activities available in that space (14).

The questions that remain are related to who is making and implementing the law. As we have seen, our fundamental rights (as human beings or as avatars) are limiting the arbitrariness of lawmaking, but that might not be the sole criterion. In the next section we shall see some concrete examples of virtual communities and the structures they created.

V. Governance

This last section is organically connected with the discussion about the lawmaking: obviously the creation of laws must be followed by the implementation of laws. Laws cannot be efficiently and legitimately implemented without a social institution that comes above the interests of every single individual and ensures impartiality. But, except for some cases, there are no governments in virtual worlds.

This section shows some very successful illustrations of a main philosophical idea: that governance emerges many times in spontaneous ways, through social cooperation, especially when it is not already imposed by the creators of the game. We shall start with one well-known example of inworld governance created by wizards, showing both its complexity and limitations. We continue afterwards with examples of emerging governance, with its causes, features and consequences.

Case study: LambdaMOO

Until now, companies have not been very interested in creating legal systems (apart from ToS) for the virtual worlds they founded – and this is mainly because their CEOs are still considering virtual worlds as games. Yet there are some examples that prove such systems necessary for the development and the sustainability of the virtual world[27].

A most interesting example is that of LambdaMOO – a text-based virtual world created in October 1990 by Pavel Curtis, researcher at Xerox Palo Alto Research Center. Initially, in this world the benevolent authority that mediated conflicts between users was Pavel Curtis himself, together with the other "wizards" (their rule is called *wizardocracy*)[28]. In time though, as LambdaMOO was getting larger and its population

[27] Jenkins emphasizes the pressing need for legal system in virtual worlds: "History shows that the legal principles concerning new technologies tend to become set at a relatively early stage" (8). In other words, even though nowadays virtual worlds are still considered games, it will prove too late to change legal principles when they shall be taken seriously.

[28] A similar example is that of the town hall meetings organized in Second Life by the founder of the world, Philip Rosedale (apud Ludlow&Wallace 199).

grew significantly, the wizards realized that they were not able to handle the increasing number of cases.

In early 1993 the wizards announced the installment of a democratic rule: they suggested the creation of fixed laws and limited their own role to that of supporting the platform, without interfering with the social phenomena. They thus created two systems that would replace their "benevolent" rule and instituted a democratic technocracy[29].

The first system was the petition system. Any LambdaMOO user that fulfilled some minimal criteria was being allowed to submit a petition. Every petition had assigned a mailing list where its features could be debated upon. Supporters could have their signatures attached. Eventually all petitions with at least 10 signatures would be vetted (judged) by the wizards, who couldn't vet but by considering five established criteria[30]. Afterwards, it has to gather two thirds of the total votes in a determined period of time.

The petition system ensured complete freedom in suggesting new laws, but it also ensured that the proposed laws are not contradictory and are sufficiently supported by the population. The implementation of the law was nonetheless the job of the wizards, the only ones who actually had the knowledge and the power to make the implementation. This supports the idea mentioned earlier, that code and law are intertwined – this time, in the sense that all laws are to be implemented by firstly integrating them in the code[31].

The second is the dispute resolution system. This system is complementary to the former because it deals with the cases that were not yet covered by the enacted legislation. Any user can enter in a dispute with another player only if he makes the proof of being injured. The arbitrator is chosen by the two parties or randomly selected and a mailing list is open for discussing the arguments of both parties. Apart from the pledges, any other user can post comments on the case or bring additional comments.

There is no higher level of decision, but each decision is reviewed by the other arbitrators and can be overturned. In order to avoid overturning, arbitrators apply two main strategies: 1) they present a draft of their decision and request feedback, thus gaining popular support for the decision or including elements initially overlooked;

[29] This didn't transform LambdaMOO into a democracy for at least two reasons: firstly, the wizards were still appointed, not elected; secondly, there were no checks and balances upon wizards' liability – they chose, for instance, the manner of implementing a petition.

[30] "The petition must be: (1) appropriate subject matter for petitions, (2) sufficiently precise that the wizard can understand how to implement it, (3) technically feasible, (4) not likely to jeopardize the functional integrity of the MOO, and (5) not likely to conflict with real-world laws or regulations." (Mnookin 253)

[31] This doesn't mean that the wizards programmed the world not to allow users to make the crime X, but rather only integrating the text of the law that forbade crime X in the corpus of laws!

2) they use a formalized language. The limitations of the dispute resolution system appear when the decision is issued. Firstly, the punishment is applicable to parties only, and it has no precedential value. Unfortunately "there is no system for ensuring that similarly situated disputants are treated in the same manner" (Mnookin 257). There are neither precedents nor second-order rules that guide arbitrators in judging similar cases in a similar manner. Furthermore, if the disputes illustrate a more profound issue, at a structural level, the arbitrator is limited to resolving that specific instance and cannot take the case to a "higher court" to solve the underlying problem.

Theoretically, the arbitrator could use the petition system to emphasize the structural issue he stumbled upon while judging a case. Yet the two systems are not sufficiently connected: he cannot bring up all the cases that are illustrations of the problem because there are no criteria that show their similarities; even if the petition is passed, he cannot apply it retroactively to the case he started from, nor to future cases that *look* similar.

These limitations have been noticed and a group of LambdaMOO users called the Formalizers shouted for more powerful legal and adjudicatory mechanisms. In spring 1995 they proposed the institution of a Judicial Review Board, whose functions would be that of verifying the accountability of wizards (in implementing law), the accountability of arbitrators and regulating the interpretation of law in judging cases. This movement might be a proof that wishing for the rule of law is a natural phenomenon in any society, but it could be as well an argument for those who say that virtual worlds are a mere reflection of our Western preconceptions about law and governance.

Alternative ways of making justice. User-organized governance structures

The decision made by the wizards of LambdaMOO show a rationale that is used by many other wizards in other virtual worlds: even where there is a minimal set of rules (ToS or EULA), the implementation of those rules is practically impossible because the users-to-wizards ratio is too high. The consequence is that wizards usually stay out of conflicts, and that "places the responsibility for seeking and carrying out justice largely in the players' camp" (Ludlow & Wallace 103). Moreover, the punishments are often inefficient: banning a player cannot stop him from getting another account and entering the world once again[32].

This is the point where social groups gain a major importance in the dynamics of the virtual worlds. Just like in real life, the avatars eventually discover that the "eye-for-eye" principle is quite inefficient. With a silent voice coming from the wizards, they gather and create new ways of identifying and punishing the offenders.

[32] This feature has yet to be implemented in real life, according to most accounts...

TSO is, again, a good illustration of a virtual world whose wizards have neither taken the role of judges, nor provided software that would enhance virtual governance. There are no mechanisms that would facilitate addressing to large groups, voting, or mediating disputes. Yet users managed once again to create governance structures by exploiting the current possibilities of the platform[33].

The importance of spontaneous cooperation among users is underlined once more. Cooperation and creativity seem to be the two main ingredients that lead to alternative governance structures in virtual worlds. The independence of virtual governance from outside sources (such as companies or territorially-based governments) and its foundation in mutual cooperation has been prophesied by J.P. Barlow in his declaration about the future of cyberspace: "We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonwealth, our governance will emerge" (29).

The first case is that of Sim Shadow Government (SSG). SSG initially emerged as a result of competition between two users in TSO, but it eventually declared its goal "to keep Alphaville a happy place for Sims" and recruited users who were disturbed by the harassment of griefers and scammers. SSG resembles a real-life governance structures for several reasons.

Firstly, it has criteria for allowing new users to join the organization. Recruiting is usually done user-to-user, preceded by a research on the candidate. Secondly, it contains a ranking system and an organizational chart: at the top there is the Overlord, who leads the organization through departments such as Executive, War, Intelligence, or Community Relations Departments[34]. Thirdly, it has a closed communication system, through the so-called spam lists. This type of system is not provided by the software of TSO, therefore it is built upon outworld structures (such as Yahoo! Instant Messenger). Fourthly, it has a police-like dispatcher (the tagging units) and a list of objectives that subscribe to the central aim of SSG. Among the three most important objectives: to eliminate scammers, to eliminate Mafia groups, and to offer outreach programs for "underprivileged Sims". Lastly, it has its own system of punishing the offenders, and the punishments are often copied from the offenders themselves.

The punishments used by SSG show both the limitation of TSO as governance and legal platform and the ingenuity of users who try to balance these limitations. For instance, the most used punishment is that of red-tagging. Red-tagging was projected

[33] Ludlow believes there is a strong connection between the social dynamic of a virtual community and the emergence of its governance structures: "If the social construction of reality has some plausibility for the construction of the self, it has even more plausibility for the construction of political institutions like *governments*" (Ludlow 4).

[34] The entire organizational chart is transparent, being published on the SSG website.

as [de explicat la ce folosea tagging]. Yet as Ludlow and Wallace note, even though "TSO had been designed as a social game, the competitive nature of the game players" (48) turned it into a race for popularity. In this context the inhabitants of TSO turned the red-tagging function into an instrument of decreasing popularity and fighting rivals[35].

The governance of SSG would not be complete if SSG wouldn't pretend to have monopoly of force regarding the "punishments". Thus they asked all the users that claimed protection from SSG not to apply enemy links to arbitrarily or threaten other users to do so.

Another case of user-created governance is Alphaville Government, which emerged as an alternative to SSG. The government has been initiated by an avatar called Mr-President and it was built on the model of the U.S. Government – it contained a police force, a CIA, an FBI, a judiciary and a military branch. The extra element that Alphaville Government brought in was the idea of democratic election of the governor.

Unfortunately, the actual development of the elections proved the project of democratic governance was only a superficial one. Mr-President organized a series of primary elections and put in place a voting mechanism supervised by the head of one of the most fearful Mafia groups! Nevertheless, the intention of creating a vote mechanism[36] is in itself admirable – especially since this mechanism was not projected by the wizards and the platform doesn't render it possible.

All examples discussed here show that usually the wizards have no interest in governing a virtual world other than by the platform they created. Yet most users feel a strong need for law and order, which in turn gives them an active role in forming governance structures that were not initially projected.

LambdaMOO is a beautiful case for legal anthropology, mainly because one can observe the rise of questions about the status of law that we rarely see in the real world, where the legal systems are already in place. Jeniffer Mnookin declares: "LambdaMOO thus provides an opportunity to see concretely how participants are creating both social and legal order within a virtual sphere" (248).

Both SSG and Alphaville Government have their flaws and limitations, but those are limitations that in time might be overcome.

[35] Apart from red-tagging, the following punishments are used by SSG: banning scammers from houses through undercover roommates, filling complaint reports to the company on every mistake; roommate spamming&expelling; and house demolitions.

[36] The voting platform allowed each IP address to vote only once – which resembles our real-life voting systems that allow us to vote only once, based on our ID card.

Conclusion

The new environment brought forward by the virtual worlds is a perfect example of the technological boom we are experiencing in our lives. The computers in the 80's were nothing but a normal consequence of this common evolution humanity and technology share. Their growing importance in our lives has now lead to a new means of expression for individuals and companies alike. This territory's faith is yet undecided but the debates surrounding its future will hold great importance in our own futures. Humanity is reaching for the stars in a new environment, that of the Virtual. Coupled with the advances made in human - computer interfacing and interaction, as well as the new developments in biology and medicine, systems of virtual interaction are well on their way to evolve into more complicated means of complementing Man.

If you have been amazed by the richness of virtual worlds, then we have reached our goal in this article. Virtual worlds have been projected as games, and our fear was that many people would treat them as such, without glancing at the more “serious” features that can be studied and used here.

This paper is interdisciplinary and addresses to researchers from various fields, starting from sociology, law, political science, continuing with communication and anthropology, and ending with ethics. This is why our greatest challenge in this article was in fact to limit the discussion to only some of the aspects of the virtual worlds. One cannot be but very curios about all phenomena in such new worlds – since these worlds do not work upon the same rules as our real world. Their natural laws can be bent, distance and time are here distorted, and concepts like person, property or dialogue change their meaning.

We focused on three main areas: communication, law and governance, because we considered these are the main dimensions in which phenomena such as group cooperation or public decisionmaking become visible. Those phenomena, already theoretized in political and social philosophy, nonetheless have a special flavour in the realm of virtual worlds – because the latter have their own rules and dynamics. We thus hope that virtual worlds will set new standards in studies pertaining to social structures, legal systems and communication, while proving over and over again, by each instance, that cooperation between agents is possible, especially in the absence of a higher governing institution.

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