Chapter 13
Strategies and Tactics in Digital Role-Playing Games: Persuasion and Social Negotiation of the Natural Order Doctrine in Second Life’s Gor

Christophe Duret
Université de Sherbrooke, Canada

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this chapter, the authors examine the strategies and tactics of persuasion used by the players in the Gorean role-playing games organized in Second Life, which is a video gaming adaptation of the series of novels The Chronicles of Gor by John Norman, games in which a doctrine is both defended and contested. These strategies and tactics fall into six different categories of closure conveyed in Gorean role-playing games: institutionalized enculturation, informal enculturation, hermeneutical closure, sociotechnical closure, narrative closure, and legal closure. The chapter shows that the PRPG-VE is an inadequate medium when it comes to conveying a persuasive message to a target, but it can be useful in the context of a media critical education program.

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BACKGROUND

As a communicologist, I am particularly interested in sociocriticism, reception theories in general and hermeneutics in particular. It is with this dual focus that I feel particularly suited to the uncovering of social meanings embodied in video games and which brings me to focus on the study of role playing in Second Life. I have defined these games elsewhere (Duret, 2014) as “Participatory Role-playing Games in Virtual Environment” (henceforth “PRPG-VE”). Of the PRPG-VE, it is the Gorean role-playing games which have caught my attention, for two reasons: firstly, they are the videoludic adaptation of a work of fiction where the ludic activities they embody concretely reflect the appropriation of the work by the players; secondly, they convey an explicit doctrine (which already exists in the original work) which the players defend or challenge, and which they either apply literally or subvert in their role play. Thus, it is a role-playing game with a subverted doctrine that I present here. It is not as a player or as a member of an organization or a producer, that I will approach this atypical object, but as a researcher attracted by its complexity, for its uniqueness and for the enlightenment that it offers regarding role playing and video games in general.

SETTING THE STAGE

I will discuss the Gorean role-playing games in the light of the transmission and challenge of a doctrine in a participatory environment in which persuasion is no longer the privilege of a single author, but of the players. To do this, I shall first describe the Gorean role-playing games and their characteristics as subverted doctrine. Then I shall describe them as texts, after which I shall elaborate a typology that will allow me to classify the strategies and tactics deployed by players to support their perspective on the doctrine conveyed by the game. Finally, in conclusion, I shall show how my analysis of the strategies and tactics of the players is enlightening for anyone interested in games as a medium of persuasion and as a learning tool. The case study I present here is based on an exploratory study conducted in the summer of 2012 on Gorean role-playing games. I later analyzed the documents produced by the players in an extrinsic play situation (posts published on the forums Gor-SL.com and The Gorean Forum, as well as blogs, fanzines, online journals, wikis, game scenarios, game narratives, etc.). In addition, during the same summer I dedicated my time to a non-participatory observation role in virtual Gorean environments.
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