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Recreating Ancient Egyptian Culture in Second Life

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***Abstract*—We present the cases of two role playing communities in the virtual world Second Life. We examine the process of creating culture as educational recreation and discover whether the culture the communities set out to create is in fact successfully realised. Some of the difficulties encountered in the reproduction of ancient Egyptian society are examined. We discovered that although the prevalent discourse among these communities is one of desiring authenticity, there is in fact a high level of resistance, both conscious and subconscious, to establishing authenticity.**

Keywords—Second Life; Egypt; virtual world; role playing; religion; reconstructionist pagan religion; educational recreation

I. INTRODUCTION

While Second Life is itself not a game[1][2], many types of games take place inside of Second Life. Research attention is already focused on formal pedagogy and learning a variety of skills in shared virtual environments[3][4][5] as well as learning through electronic and online games[6], however, the implications for learning by means of the social and cultural activities in online role-playing game communities have not been so well documented. Communities developed for the purpose of role-playing games proliferate in Second Life. However the number of successful, enduring communities is quite small. Among the pressures on these communities are: financial management, development of the environment (including terrain, architecture, clothing and storyline), the acquisition and retention of members and the development of a workable community management structure. In this paper we look at ancient Egyptian role-play communities, and consider how they seek to construct culture and whether their stated aims are realised.

We will describe how role playing communities are formed in Second Life, how the two we studied developed, the strong concern with authenticity, the gap between perception and history, and the impact of management concerns on the community. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for future research.

It is important to note that these communities were not established by professional educators or academics (although some participants were academics) as part of a curriculum, but were created by residents of Second Life with a stated desire for self directed, experiential education. Although the communities often did not evince the abilities Kolb defined as necessary for experiential learning[7] this type of learning was clearly what they sought.

The operators of Second Life explicitly define avatar-based actions and communications as public performance for purposes of research and legal ethics[8]. Private communications (called Instant Messages in Second Life) referred to in this paper are used with the explicit consent of the parties involved. The primary author has obtained ethics approval for this research.

II. THE COMMUNITIES

In order to establish a community in Second Life one must first obtain a venue. Land in Second Life must be bought or rented either from Linden Lab (the creators of Second Life) or from private landholders[9]. Land may be owned or rented either by an individual or by a group. A minority of role-playing groups utilise publicly accessible land rather than renting or purchasing but the majority acquire their own land. This paper focuses on the activities of two role-playing communities in Second Life, both of which sought to replicate ancient Egyptian society. The first was owned by a single individual, who also filled the role of the Pharaoh, whose word was law in both in- and out-of-character situations. Having established the community, originally with a number of partners, but later alone, he ran it for the rest of its life. This first community entered a period of instability and upheaval which was driven by tensions between those players who expressed a desire to focus on authenticity and those who wished to integrate other non-authentic cultural aspects. At the climax of this instability the

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Figure 1. Members of the first community undertaking a virtual funeral for the ex-pharaoh.

owner suddenly stopped appearing and the rest of the community was then informed (by his closest female friend) that he had died. Consequently a funeral was held for him inside Second Life, with a large number of people attending. The subsequent absence of his financial support resulted in the community ceasing to exist.

The second community was founded by refugees from the collapse of the first. It was ostensibly to have group ownership, having been founded by those residents of the first community who had been most unhappy with both the autocratic nature of its management as well as the level of authenticity there. However, due to a number of factors, this second community also ended up being the possession of a single member, who was soon running it on an autocratic basis. This led to the failure of the second community, for exactly the same reasons as the first.

Some members of both communities professed to be members of reconstructionist pagan religions in meatspace. (The term 'meatspace' distinguishes the physical, offline environment from the virtual, online one. Its use seeks to avoid the a priori implication of the term 'real world' that interactions in an online virtual environment are somehow unreal or unserious.) At least two residents stated they were members of Kemetic Orthodoxy. Kemetic Orthodoxy is a reconstructionist pagan religion, which claims to be the direct inheritor of the religion of the ancient Egyptians. (It obtained legal recognition from the State of Illinois in 1993, and from the United States Federal government in 1999[10].)

III. The Quest for Authenticity

In both communities, the prevalent discourse expressed a desire to make the environment, which includes the terrain, architecture, clothing, religion and social interactions, as authentic as possible. This discourse was the overwhelming consensus expressed at meetings of the group held to discuss how the community should be run, and in individual conversations between participants. An area of the community near the entrance was set aside for the provision of information for members and visitors, and this was considered to be a vital part of the activities of the community. While some of this information was well researched material, much of it was taken from Wikipedia. Such information as background on the culture, the appropriate type of clothing, the rules and mores of the community, and how to go about joining the group associated with the community was provided, either by a visitor receiving an automated message triggered by their arrival, or by their interactions with informative objects around them. Such objects could take the form of maps, statues, artifacts or information notecards.

One of us (Leigh) held the role of high priest in both of the communities we studied, and as such, it was expected that she would attend to the task of providing information pertaining not only to the historical accuracy of the religious aspects of the community, but also to various other matters; dress, architecture, food and general culture. After having undertaken appropriate research she would report back to the group to share that information with the community. This information would be provided in various formats; textual notecards (which she either handed out individually or made available from various points in the community), by means of giving talks to the group, in individual conversations with residents, or by means of interactive games designed to be instructive. She would also use this information as the basis for the development of her resources; clothing, buildings and other items; for example, she built a replica of an ancient Egyptian building based on plans from an archaeological survey.

Residents would often come to speak to us seeking specific information. Almost invariably this would be information that we had already provided to them through the various means mentioned above. Though some members of the communities did apply themselves to genuine learning, they were a tiny minority and we soon discovered that most of the people in the communities were not prepared to do any reading, even if it was an abbreviated summary given to them in a notecard, one person saying "I will not devote myself to reading books on Egypt for something that is supposed to be fun"[11]. Despite this unwillingness to engage in research, residents of the two Egypts we studied would engage in frequent and vociferous debates on the minutiae of ancient Egyptian religion and culture. This kind of behavioural dichotomy (expressing a desire for authenticity and then rejecting it in practice, stating education as a primary goal but being unwilling to do research) was exhibited in relation to all aspects of the religion and culture of ancient Egypt, most notably in relation to the matter of gender relations.

Gender relations in many role-play communities in Second Life have been heavily influenced by Gorean culture. The Gorean subculture has its origin in John Norman's series of novels "Chronicles of Gor". Many of the residents in the Egyptian communities included aspects of Gorean culture in their role-play. The most prevalent expression of this was the misogynistic, and in fact openly sadistic, treatment of females. In Gorean culture females are treated as slaves, expected to dress in skimpy clothing and to address males as master. It is important to note that the residents with female avatars willingly participated in this behaviour. Most of the female avatars in the ancient Egyptian communities accepted the cultural standards of the Gorean subculture (to one

degree or another). In fact, many insisted on it, although those who participated in the formation of the second community expressed a desire to strongly reject any aspects of Gorean culture. Nevertheless Gorean culture was in fact frequently seen in that community.

IV. Preconception Versus Authenticity

People were very attached to their preconceptions of what ancient Egyptian religion and society was like. This led to the development of what we characterise as 'Disney Egypt'. Despite their avowed expression of a desire for authenticity, almost without exception, the participants in the Egyptian themed communities actually developed their communities along the lines of their preconceptions. These were generally based on the presentation of Egyptian culture in the popular media, although many of them were expressions of the culture in which the participants lived and which were subconsciously expressed in the culture of the community. It is interesting to note that even once they had been provided with information that indicated that a particular cultural more was not accurate for the time period, and keeping in mind their expressed desire for accurate reproduction of ancient Egyptian society, the participants seemed to be unable, or unwilling, to not use the cultural patterns of modern societies, or of their own personal preferences, for example Gorean, in their inworld social behaviour. It was as if they wished to bowdlerize the more alien aspects of ancient Egyptian culture, and instead replace them with their own desired social expressions or the cultural norms of the meatspace society in which they lived.

The physical characteristics and the clothing of avatars are two of the especially notable manifestations of this phenomenon. Of the regular resident's avatars in the second community we studied, all males except one were at least two metres tall. The avatars of the Egyptian Pharaoh and the Nubian Prince were 2.5m, the maximum size possible in Second Life. Females were also all significantly taller than typical modern people, and therefore markedly taller than ancient Egyptians. Despite being provided with clear graphical evidence of characteristic ancient Egyptian body shape, skin, and hair, no regular resident's avatar in this community conformed to an authentic appearance. The portrayal of ancient Nubians was of people looking like modern Sub-Saharan Africans, and all the avatars portraying the inhabitants of ancient Thebes were of a decidedly Northern European appearance. The males had pale skins and body hair (it was the norm for ancient Egyptian males to remove all hair). The females likewise had pale skins and nearly all had disproportionately large breasts. High quality avatar skins much closer to authentic appearance are available in Second Life. Breasts were not normally covered in ancient Egypt. Many of the regular female residents were aware of this and left their breasts uncovered. However, this was often the cause of consternation for new female members, with some, even some of the regular female players, rejecting outright any suggestion that they might modify their attire to suit the target cultural norm in this respect.

Below is a transcript of a public conversation between a regular male resident and a fairly new female resident, which demonstrates a typical modern Western woman's reaction to receiving the information that there was something culturally abnormal with having her breasts covered. The scenario in which this conversation was played out was one where the female resident, a jewellery seller, was role-playing in the shop of the community's tailor. HD is the male Tailor and KI is the female customer. One of us (Elwell) played the tailor.

HD: Perhaps you will require a model for your jewellery, in your... condition?
KI: condition?
KI looks to him.
HD: (again uncomfortable)
HD: Surely those are... bandages you wear on your chest?
KI looks down to her chest, then back to him.
KI: bandages? *looks confused, having only her dress on*
HD: Those large pieces of white cloth. They are not bandages?
KI realizes she is covered, unlike the other women, hence the reason for his unrest.
HD: (seems mortified) You are not, are not... deformed in some way, surely, sister?
KI: They are not... they are in fact attached to the dress... a new style apparently. Strangely, it does not hold the warmth in as one might think.
HD: Indeed?
KI: Of course not! Not at all...
HD: It must be very uncomfortable to press rough cloth against such a tender spot.
KI: aah but the cloth is not so rough as one might think....*holds the bottom of her dress to his touch so he may feel for himself*.
HD: (raises one hand absently to his own chest)
HD: (touches skeptically) Ai, even the softest linen must chafe in the heat as one moves.
KI looks to him, frowning a bit.
KI feels self conscious a little, but does not show it... really.
HD: (sits back)
KI: Do you feel it is.... unappealing?
HD: It is... strange, sister
KI had indeed loved the design upon its purchase and had enjoyed it on but now feels a bit awkward as if she will be made a spectacle of.
HD: As a tailor, I find it difficult to understand
HD: The pattern of that dress is exquisite.
KI: yes...
KI: I admit it may be a bit... exotic.
KI contemplates a moment.
HD: (shifts uncomfortably, readjusting the flap of his kilt).
KI: well I suppose there is little to do in way of changing the design...
KI: I should be fearful to ruin it.
HD: Perhaps a new gown, once you have sold some jewellery.

For a community to have a constant and continued expression of a desire for authenticity but for that same community to actually realise a 'Disney Egypt' seems an irreconcilable contradiction. We feel this is being driven by both conscious and subconscious motivators. The subconscious being the inability or unwillingness to recognize, or come to terms with, the many differences between a modern, Western culture and ancient Egyptian culture. More consciously, but often not actively recognized, even when explicitly stated, is the conception that role-playing games are merely for fun, and that accurate research does not comprise fun. This however is in tension with the intensity with which the community members continued the discourse of authenticity. We feel this indicates that the community members are driven by a desire for immersion in an ancient society, their preconceptions of which hold deep meaning for them. However, is not only these preconceptions that are meaningful for them, it is also the sense of community identity, both of belonging to, and having status in that community. Sometimes the desire to conform to the stated standards of the community would prevail, but more often the standards of the meatspace community would be in evidence.

V. Financial Management

A substantial driving factor behind the uneven representation of the nature of ancient Egyptian society was a desire to obtain increased membership. Exceptions from the expressed desire for authenticity were frequently granted in order to accommodate the perceived desires of potential members. This was driven by the financial realities of running a community. These realities were especially pressing as a communalist mindset was prevalent, with most residents expecting everything to be given to them at no cost. Combine this mindset with the fact that most people were unable, or unwilling, to contribute usefully to the actual development of the community, and the result is that the small number of productive individuals in the community were under a great deal of pressure to produce sufficient resources and activities to engage the rest. Moreover this communalist tendency was constantly in tension with the need to actually pay the rent for the community. There seemed to be a strange inability to understand that attracting more members is only actually a positive outcome if those members do indeed contribute to the community. It was often the case that those people charged with the financial management of the community would invest a lot of time and resources into attracting new members, and to making concessions regarding historical accuracy in order to do so, but that those new members would never contribute, either financially, or to the social development of the community.

An interesting aspect of this tension between communalist ideals and financial realities was that many members of the ancient Egyptian communities expressed that they thought it was reasonable for people to have to pay for virtual objects that were constructed by other members of the community but that they felt that those members of the community who provided information and teaching, whether it be information about religious and cultural aspects of Egypt, how to outfit one's character or how to build virtual objects, should be expected to give their services for free. Despite their professed desire to achieve authenticity and the claims of many of the participants that their reason for participating in the community was in order to extend their knowledge, knowledge was clearly not truly seen as a value in the same way that goods were. We were never able to obtain a clear answer to why it was acceptable for goods to have to be paid for, but not services. It seems incongruous that a community with a stated goal of education would devalue information in this way

It was usually the case that most of the money for the rental of the community land was paid out of the pockets of the owners. Money was also raised by erecting rental housing in the community, although realistically, the amount of money raised by this was a very small contribution to the overall cost of running the community. Additionally, merchants of virtual products were invited to sell their wares in the community, usually in a marketplace or mall like environment, where the goods were displayed on vendors, (virtual objects which display pictures of virtual goods being offered for sale, and which a resident can click to facilitate the transfer of payment from their account to the account of the seller, and to initiate subsequent delivery of the goods) with the owner(s) of the community getting paid a small commission on the sale of these goods. In a small number of cases in-character sales were undertaken in the second community. For example, there was a tailor who had a shop in the marketplace and whose character sat in the shop in order to sell the clothing that he had made to residents as they came along. This type of sale was generally undertaken as a role play. Considering the low dollar value of each item, usually in the order of one or two United States dollars, this is not a sustainable or efficient method of deriving income. The tailor (Elwell), for example, explicitly engaged in making and selling such items for the purpose of educational recreation.

VI. Conclusion

In this paper we looked at two ancient Egyptian role-play communities, and considered how they seek to construct culture as educational recreation and whether their stated aims are realised. We described how role-playing communities are formed in Second Life, how the two in our case developed, the strong concern with authenticity, the gap between perception and history, and the impact of management concerns on the community.

Given the open-ended, unstructured, and non-competitive nature of the role-playing games in our case, the motivation for the intense time and effort invested by the participants seems likely to be the declared one: a quest for immersion in what they perceive to be an authentic recreation of a historical setting holding deep meaning for them personally.

Our findings indicate that future research should examine and compare other cases of role-playing games in Second Life, and consider what settings, management structures, and game rules and practices tend toward success or failure in providing meaningful experiences for their participants.

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