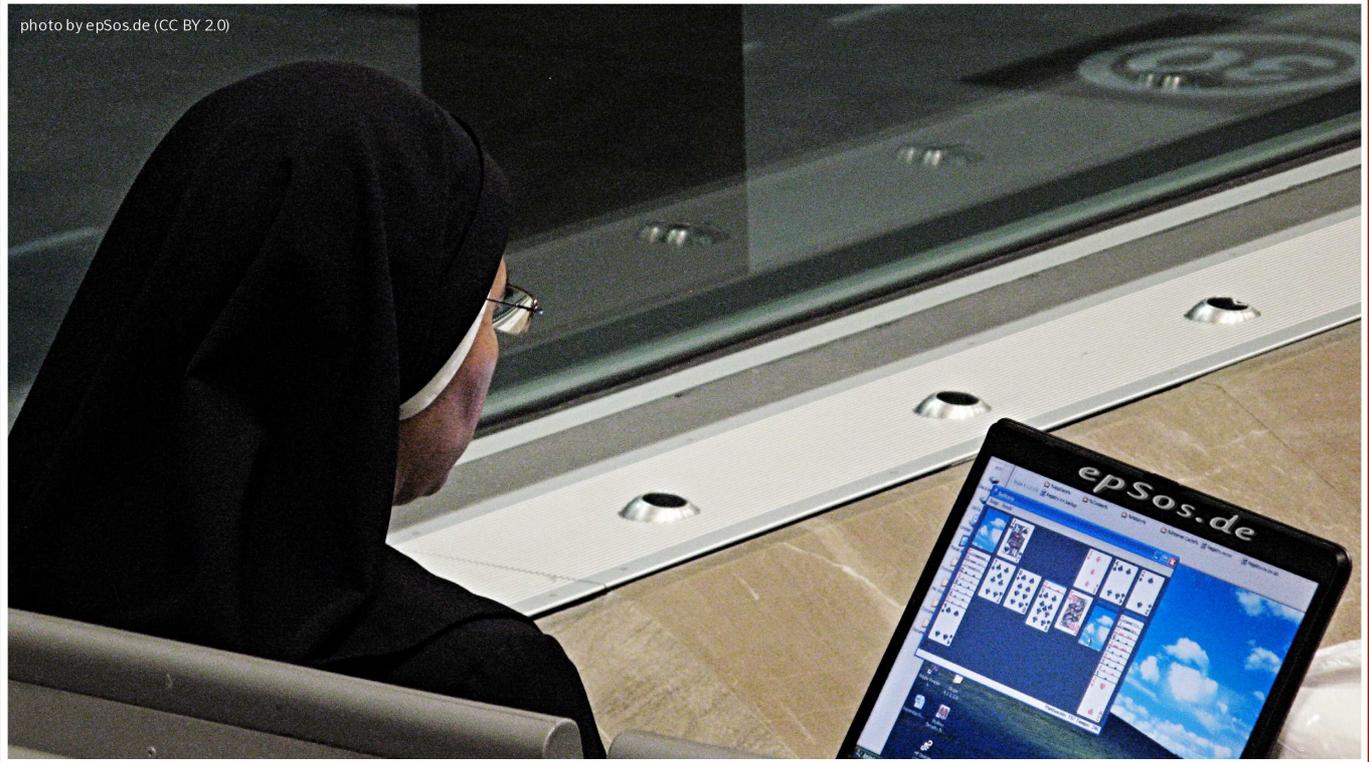




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Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, Jan Wysocki (Eds.)

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Immersion Into the Field

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# **Living the Phantasm of Demediation**

## **The Priest-Kings and the Technology Prohibition in the Gorean Role-playing Games**

Christophe Duret

### **Abstract**

This article will cover the Gorean games – online role-playing games designed by and for the players in a participatory logic (Jenkins, 2006) - in the Second Life virtual multi-user environment. This is the gaming adaptation of the science fiction novels “The Chronicles of Gor”, which depict a religion whose consequences are both diegetic and ludic.

The inhabitants of the planet Gor are artificially maintained in a pre-modern state of civilization through religious prohibition preventing technological development, decreed by the Priest-Kings, their gods. The result is a society in which the mechanisms of evolution are unrestrained. The law of natural order underlying these mechanisms is inspired by a Darwinian doctrinal intertext (Suleiman, 1983). It promotes the emergence of a race of warriors and widespread slavery. This law also structures the gaming community into two antagonistic subcultures, one of which is the defender and the other, the detractor. Their clashes take place both at the diegetic level as well as at the level of designing the game mechanics.

### **Keywords**

Heterotopias, neomedievalism, non-places, participatory culture, participatory role-playing games in virtual environment, phantasm of demediation, PRPG-VEs, religion, sociocriticism.

## **1 Introduction**

Video games, *massively multiplayer online games* and participatory role-playing games in virtual environment (henceforth “PRPG-VEs”) that proceed from neomedievalist culture, from *The Elder Scrolls* to *World of Warcraft*, and passing through *Dark Age of Camelot*, along with the related

literary and film productions, testify to the public taste for a Medieval Age perceived as being both more authentic, less complex and closer to nature than the contemporary world. These games that become, if not utopias, at least heterotopias<sup>1</sup> for the players, are crossed by what we call the “phantasm of demediation”, a desire to have an experience that is free from filters and dehumanizing intermediaries (over-mediation) of over-modernism (technology, media, intangible economy...) able to drive the consumption of neomedievalist type media content.

This phantasm of demediation underlies Gorean role-playing games – online role-playing games designed by and for the players in a participatory logic (Jenkins, 2006) - in the Second Life virtual multi-user environment. The Gorean role-playing games are gaming adaptation of the science fiction novels “The Chronicles of Gor”, which depict a religion whose consequences are both diegetic and ludic.

The inhabitants of the planet Gor are artificially maintained in a pre-modern state of civilization through religious prohibition preventing technological development, decreed by the Priest-Kings, their gods. The result is a society in which the mechanisms of evolution are unrestrained. The law of natural order underlying these mechanisms is inspired by a Darwinian doctrinal intertext (Suleiman, 1983). It promotes the emergence of a race of warriors and widespread slavery. This law also structures the gaming community into two antagonistic subcultures, one of which is the defender and the other, the detractor. Their clashes take place both at the diegetic level as well as at the level of the formal structure.

Using such a framework, we will put forward a perspective of sociocriticism (Duchet & Maurus, 2011) – which seeks to understand the inclusion of sociality<sup>2</sup> in the formal structure of the games by analyzing their text – in order to analyze the ways of subverting the technology prohibition and the natural order. We reach the conclusion that this subversion occurs when the diegesis of Gorean games as heterotopias is contaminated by its formal structure as non-places.

As most of the analyses in the field of *game studies* focus on the social representations involved in the games as values, ideologies, and stereotypes (Aldred & Greenspan, 2011) (Brand, Knight & Majewski, 2003) (Crogan, 2011) (Dill, Gentile, Richter & Dill, 2005) (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter 2009) (Ketchum & Peck, 2010) (Langman & Lukacs, 2010) (Mou & Peng, 2009), they tend to omit the mediations between their social context and their text; this results in somewhat mechanical sociological perspectives. In addition, these analyses focus on elements of content without questioning the inclusion of sociality in the formal structure of the games (its rules and socio-technical devices). Finally, they neglect the way the player interacts with the values and

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1 See 5.1. “The Gorean PRPG-VEs as heterotopias” for a definition.

2 According to Duchet, sociality is “a way of organization of the social or a socialized form of the reality” (cited in Duchet & Maurus, 2011, p. 19).

sociality of the games, and in doing so, how the player themselves may introduce them. However, sociocriticism of video games is able to fill the above gaps.

We based our analysis on documents produced by members of the *Second Life* Gorean community that indirectly reflects their gaming practice. We have predominantly worked from a corpus of nearly 5,000 notes taken from 70 threads posted on the *The Gorean Forums* and *Gor-SL* discussion forums. We have also analyzed player blogs, screenshots, video captures of game sessions, online encyclopedias, amateur journals devoted to Gorean PRPG-VEs as well as *The Chronicles of Gor* novels.

This paper is divided into four parts. Firstly, we will give a short description of the Gorean role-playing games. Secondly, we will portray the religion of Gor and what do the Priest-Kings represent for the characters of the players. Thirdly, we will describe the phantasm of demediation as it appears in the neomedievalist culture as well as in the Gorean role-playing games. Fourthly, we will analyze the depiction of space in the Gorean role-playing games in a sociocritical way.

## 2 A short description of the Gorean role-playing games

The Gorean role-playing games are participatory role-playing games in virtual environment (PRPG-VEs) organized on *Second Life* and inspired by the fictional universe of the science fiction novels *The Chronicles of Gor* by John Norman. The setting for these games is the planet Gor which was summed up by Tjarda Sixma (2009) as a “barbaric planet [...] where men are bold masters and women are either frigid mistresses or sexual slaves” (p. 5).

The PRPG-VEs are multiplayer role playing games in which players take on a role through an avatar in multi-user virtual environments (MUVE) which may or may not have been specifically designed for such activities. The PRPG-VEs are representative of the participatory culture, as understood by Henry Jenkins (2006), insofar as the players contribute to the development of the avatar scripts<sup>3</sup> and accessories as well as the game mechanics, the virtual environment, the rules of the game and the game world (the diegetic frame) of the role-play<sup>4</sup>.

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3 In *Second Life*, the scripts are lines of programming that achieve certain effects: changing the appearance of an object, how it moves, its interaction and exchanges with avatars, etc... (Second Life Wiki, 2009).

4 “The diegesis” writes Gérard Genette (1972), “is the spatiotemporal universe designated by the narrative” (p. 280) or, in the context of role play, the space-time universe in which the characters move. Markus Montola (2003) defines the diegesis as the amount of information in the game world, the laws that govern its fictional reality, the verbalizations of the players and game masters during the game, as well as their thoughts, their emotions and their actions. Diegesis thus represents the elements of the game world.

According to the site statistics for the Gorean Meter Support Portal (2012a; 2012b), dated July 15, 2013, there were 9,516 active avatars in 250 Gorean sims<sup>5</sup> between July 2 and 15, 2013.

The Gorean community includes two types of players characterized by their position with respect to the reading of *The Chronicles of Gor*, which is either literal or distanced (Duret, 2014). On the one hand, we find players who want to remain faithful to the novels of Norman in their role play (literal reading position). They call themselves “By the Books” or “BtB”. On the other hand, there are players who distance themselves from the content of the novels to introduce outside elements into Gorean role-playing games. These are the “Gor Evolved” or “GE”. As mentioned in the Gorean game manual *A Brief Guide to Gorean Roleplay in Second Life* (Ghiardie, 2010), the conflict between the two groups mainly concerns the role of women in Gorean role-playing games. The “BtB” say that in the context of the planet Gor, women are not equal to men and cannot be permitted to carry weapons. The “GE” instead state that it is realistic to imagine that the Goreans may have evolved socially to the point where women are considered equal to men and are thus considered capable of fighting alongside them. This view is contrary to that of the author, who writes:

There are no 'female warriors' on Gor. Gor is on the whole an honest, male-dominated realistic world [...] There are panther girls and talunas on Gor. They are unhappy, frustrated, disturbed women, half alienated from their sex. They tend to run in dangerous feline packs. Once captured and subdued it is said they make excellent slaves. 'Bring me into the collar if you can!' Amazon women/Mrs. Conan the Barbarian does not belong in the Gorean world. (Norman, 2001, non-paginated document)

## 2.1 Description of the game as subverted doctrine

*The Chronicles of Gor* assume the specific characteristics of *romans à thèse* (thesis novels), which Susan Rubin Suleiman (1983) defined as a type of novel which explicitly puts forth “recognized body of doctrine or system of ideas” (p. 1) and which has an “unambiguous dualistic system of values [...] rules of action addressed to the reader [and a] doctrinal intertext” (p. 54).

The doctrine defended by Norman is the law of natural order. The law of natural order carries the evolutionary paradigm in a broader sense. It is the justification for why slavery is prevalent in Gorean society. In the framework of Gorean role-playing games, the law of natural order both structures the ludic experience for the players and also divides the community. Indeed, the “BtB” players defend the law of natural order, or at least its validity in the context of the world of Gor,

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<sup>5</sup> A “sim” or “simulator” in *Second Life* is a three-dimensional virtual space hosted on a server. The “sims” are leased to users who may develop and administer them.

while the “GE” question the accuracy and relevance of this doctrine. They challenge it by playing the roles of female warriors grouped into clans: the Panthers and the Talunas.

The Darwinian considerations that dot the novels of Norman echo a more general intertext: that of the outcomes of the evolutionary paradigm and its manifestations such as social Darwinism and evolutionary psychology. What is an intertext? On this subject, Julia Kristeva (1980) writes that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (p. 66). This is called “intertextuality” (“the transposition of a system of signs into another system of signs”, p. 15) and the texts cited constitute “intertexts”. Interviews with Norman on the complementarity of the sexes also raise that of intertextuality. For example, Norman (quoted in Smith 1996) speaks of slavery which he depicts in his novels as “a celebration of the glory of nature and the reality of dimorphic sexuality [...] Ultimately, of course, the male is the master, and the female is the slave” (non-paginated document).

The evolutionist intertext is clearly illustrated in *Tarnsman of Gor*, in which Tarl Cabot writes:

For whatever reason, the larl will always prefer ruining a hunt, even one involving a quarry of several animals, to allowing a given animal to move past it to freedom. Though I suppose this is purely instinctive on the larl’s part, it does have the effect, over a series of generations, of weeding out animals which, if they survived, might transmit their intelligence, or perhaps their erratic running patterns, to their offspring. (Norman, 1966, p. 149)

Or in this quotes from *Priest-Kings of Gor*:

The resemblance [between larl and jungle cat] is, I suppose, due to the mechanics of convergent evolution, both animals having been shaped by the exigencies of the chase, the stealth of the approach and the sudden charge, and by the requirement of the swift and devastating kill. If there is an optimum configuration for a land predator, I suppose on my old world the palm must go to the Bengal tiger; but on Gor the prize belongs indisputably to the mountain larl; (Norman, 1968, p. 21)

### 3 The Priest-Kings

The planet Gor, also known as “Counter-Earth”, is on the other side of the Sun from Earth, which is why it has never been discovered by earthly astronomers. It was transported from star system to star system until it reached ours by an overevolved species of giant anthropomorphic insects called “Priest-Kings”, that live in a nest in the heart of the Sardar Mountains, a sacred place where humans

are not permitted. The Priest-Kings have populated Gor with species from different planets, including Earth. Through “Voyages of Acquisition”, they abduct people from Earth and transport them to Gor by spaceship, as is the case of Tarl Cabot, the main character and narrator of several of the Chronicles of Gor novels.

The Goreans equate the Priest-Kings to gods and worship them through priests called “Initiates”. With few exceptions, Goreans know neither their nature nor their appearance. They are described by the narrator in the following manner:

In its way it was very beautiful, golden and tall [...] It was not more than a yard wide but its head nearly touched the top of the portal and so I would judged that, standing as it did, it must have been nearly eighteen feet high. It had six legs and a great head like a globe of gold with eyes like vast luminous disks. (Norman, 1968, p.75-76)

The divine origin of the Priest-Kings is questioned by some characters, taking the form of a scientific discourse that relegates this pseudo-deity to mere superstition and equates their powers to technological superiority. Matthew Cabot, the father of the narrator, suspected that

the Priest-Kings are indeed men-men much as we, or humanoid organisms of some type who possess a science and technology as far beyond our normal ken as that of our own twentieth century would be to the alchemists and astrologers of the medieval universities. (Norman, 1966, p. 29)

The train of events will demonstrate the latter, as the Priest-Kings will prove to be fallible mortals. In fact, they belong to an evolutionary continuum extending from unicellular organisms to their own species, the Goreans finding themselves in the middle. This is suggested by this Nietzschean intertext, from the mouth of the Mother of the Priest-Kings, the female of the nest, evoking in parallel both the paradoxical mixture of barbarism and subtlety that is the human being: “‘Strange is your kind’, she said. ‘Half larl, half Priest-King.’” (Norman, 1968, p. 195). It is the evolutionary refinement of their species, of their intelligence that ensures their dominance over Gor and their status as gods in the Gorean Pantheon.

Ironically, while they are revered by Goreans, the Priest-Kings are atheists. Life after death is a matter of survival of the species and consciousness is only an evolutionary benefit:

‘Do Priest-Kings believe in life after death?’ I asked.

‘Of course,’ said Misk, ‘for after one dies the Nest continues.’

‘No,’ I said, ‘I mean individual life.’

‘Consciousness,’ said Misk, ‘seems to be a function of the ganglionic net.’ (Norman, 1968, p. 121)

However, if one believes in this other Nietzschean intertext, they live according to the philosophy of eternal recurrence:

“I do not know what we did,” said Misk. “But I think I would now choose to do that action which I would be willing that I should do again and again with each turning of the wheel. I would choose so to live that I might be willing that I should live that life a thousand times, even forever. I would choose to live that I might stand boldly with my deed without regret throughout eternity.” (Norman, 1968, p. 450-451)

The Priest-Kings rarely intervene in Gorean affairs. However, they forbid the technological development of weapons:

incredibly enough, weapon technology is controlled to the point where the most powerful devices of war are the crossbow and lance. Further, there is no mechanized transportation or communication equipment or detection devices such as the radar and sonar equipment so much in evidence in the military establishments of your world. - “On the other hand,” he said, “you will learn that in lighting, shelter, agricultural techniques, and medicine, for example, the Mortals, or the Men Below the Mountains, are relatively advanced.” (Norman, 1966, p. 24)

Offenders are destroyed by the Flame Death of the Priest-Kings. Why this prohibition on technology? The hypothesis of the narrator falls, once again, into the evolutionary paradigm. Beyond (genuine) considerations for their safety, by limiting the scope of arms, the Priest-Kings ensure control over the mechanisms of evolution, promoting the emergence of mighty warriors over the generations. For example, to explain the ban on wearing armor Cabot suggests:

A possible hypothesis to explain this is that the Priest-Kings may have wished war to be a biologically selective process in which the weaker and slower perish and fail to reproduce themselves. This might account for the relatively primitive weapons allowed to the Men Below the Mountains. On Gor it was not the case that a cavern-chested toothpick could close a switch and devastate an army. (Norman, 1966, p. 48)

Hit by the selective technology prohibition imposed by the Priest-Kings, as well as by the weight of its traditions, the Gorean civilization remains frozen in a time equivalent to that of Antiquity and the Middle Ages of Earth.

### 3.1 What do the Priest-Kings represent for the characters of the players?

The relationship of the characters with the sacred is variable in the Gorean PRPG-VEs, as it is in the novels of Norman, which reflect alternative beliefs, such as worship of the sun or the Norse religion. This relationship varies according to caste, level of education, place where the character lives and personal experience. For example, the player JackoS plays two characters who do not devote themselves to the religion of the Priest-Kings, a Paravacci (nomad) and a Torvie (Nordic). He writes:

one was born in the plains, is Paravacci and worships the sky and the clouds... the other is torvie and has delusions of grandeur, he thinks he descends from Odin.” (The Gorean Forums, 2014) (Wed Sep 03, 2014 5:46 pm)

This is also the case of the characters played by Selina, who do not believe in the Priest-Kings:

Well personally, in any of the characters I've played (tuchuk and bond<sup>6</sup>) the PK's [Priest-Kings] were just a myth. Tuchuks worship the sun and the sky, the earth while the Torvies worship the Gods, Odin and Thor, there by disrespecting all that the PK's respresented. (Gorean Shores, 2014) (02 September 2014, 16:06).

The player Ugurusu played the characters of two Initiates and a merchant. The first Initiate actually met the Priest-Kings. He has no memory of the first encounter, his memory was erased, and he went insane after the second meeting. The second Initiate denounces those who equate the Priest-Kings to insects as heretics. The merchant, for his part, has never met them, but he “FIRMLY believes that the Priest-Kings are divine and formless” (Gor-SL, 2012) (02 December 2012, 08:15:48).

Sometimes the relationship with the sacred is dictated not through diegetic reasons, but by specific roleplaying characteristics. This is the case when the player, by virtue of metagaming<sup>7</sup>, transmits or does not transmit to their character that they know the Priest-Kings through having read the *Chronicles* or other documents relating to the novels. This is, according to the player Syndel Daviau, the reason why the characters know the insectile nature of the Priest-Kings: “For the same reason they address you by name without having received that information: bad roleplay skills.” (Gor-SL, 2012) (17 November 2012, 22:54:15).

The cult of the Priest-Kings, while dominant on Gor, is not monopolistic. Moreover, it fits in such a way that it is both diegetic and ludic in the Gorean PRPG-VEs. However, even if individuals

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<sup>6</sup> Tuchuks are nomads. Bond-maids are slaves and live in Torvaldsland.

<sup>7</sup> According to Chapman, Hughes, Hughes, MacLean & Simpson (n.d.), a metagamer is a “gamer who uses outside knowledge or rules knowledge to game” (non-paginated document).

adopt the principles of the law of natural order in their own lives, as in the case of members of the Kaotians sect (The Northern Echo, 2006), none however, as far as we know, takes seriously the worship of the Priest-Kings outside the diegesis of Gor. Yet we see that from a diegetic perspective, the Priest-Kings, by means of the technology prohibition, make the formation of heterotopic spaces possible (the Goreans PRPG-VEs) through which players can experience “demediation”. Indeed, these games are crossed by what we call the “phantasm of demediation”, a desire to have an experience that is free from filters and dehumanizing intermediaries (over-mediation). The “phantasm of demediation” underlies video games, *massively multiplayer online games* and PRPG-VEs that proceed from neomedievalist culture.

So now we will look at the relationship between neomedievalism and the phantasm of demediation, and then we shall see how the Gorean PRPG-VEs promote an experience of demediation to, finally, describe the Gorean PRPG-VEs as heterotopias.

#### **4 Demediation: a neomedievalist seduction**

In “Dreaming of the Middle Ages”, Umberto Eco (1986) notes a renewed interest in the Middle Ages in contemporary Western culture that manifests itself as “a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination” (p. 63). According to Kim Selling (2004), (neo)medievalism “can be described as both an interest in the Middle Ages and a type of social movement characterised by an adoption or recreation of particular aspects of the medieval world” (p. 211).

Anne Larue (2010) approximates neomedievalism to a form of resistance against the disenchantment caused by the backlash that began in the 1980s, a conservative, misogynist and neoliberal movement born as a reaction against the cultural values of the 60s and 70s. This neomedievalism takes two forms: a nostalgic conservatism pinning a fantasy of social stability on its representation of the Middle Ages and a vision of the Middle Ages as an era that was more authentic, spiritual and closer to nature. This vision carries a counter-speech denouncing the ideology resulting from the backlash and projects an alternative world where community and country life are possible, as opposed to an urban, inhuman and mechanized life. Honegger (2010) declared the figure of the knight the perfect incarnation of the Middle Ages, seducing the public and authors of modern fantasy for many reasons:

1. He is a contradictory mixture of barbarism and refined courtesy;
2. He is a non-alienated male whose actions have a direct and observable impact on the world, as opposed to the modern male, who feels the effects of unbridled industrialization;
3. He is closer to nature;
4. He is a member of a society whose laws and government are tangible and based on personal relationships, as opposed to modern laws and regulations which are abstract in nature;
5. He belongs to a society perceived as orderly, harmonious and authentic.

According to Cawelti (cited in Selling, 2004), the neomedievalist vision leads, in fantasy, to the “construction of an ideal world without the disorder, the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the limitations of the world of our ‘experience’” (p. 213). It plays on a “nostalgic longing for a pastoral past and the simpler world of childhood” (Selling, 2004, p. 213), an idyllic past opposed to a deteriorated present, the Middle Ages offered “primitive aspects [...] [that] became positive values, connoting liberty, simplicity, and authenticity of lifestyle and emotion, vigor, and spirit, and the Middle Ages were held up as a yardstick against which modernity was found wanting” (p. 213-214).

#### *4.1 The phantasm of demediation*

The direct relationship between medieval man and nature, the observable effect of his actions on the world, the personal relationship between him and society and close friendly ties with his immediate neighbor, on one side. Alienated relationship of modern man to a complex, ambiguous, abstract, technological, dehumanized environment over which he has no influence, on the other. The neomedievalist culture present in literature, cinema and video games contrasts the taste of its creators and its receptors for an idyllic past and the rejection of a dystopian present. This polarization reflects a phenomenon we refer to as the “phantasm of demediation” that carries a critique of contemporary “overmediation.” Here “mediation” is used to signify “that which is an intermediary”, that which intervenes therefore between A and B. In our context, mediation does not serve a facilitator function, contrary to the suggestion of one of its regular meanings, which performs arbitration or conciliation. Instead, it acts as a filter, as an obstacle to a direct relationship between A and B. We thus define the phantasm of demediation as the search for an “demediated” experience of the world, in other words one that is closer to nature, less filtered through symbolic and technological ideas and over which the individual has made a choice. This fantasy acts as both a reaction to the consequences of excesses of overmodernity (Augé, 1992) and to the sense of alienation felt, firstly, to the increasing complexity and abstraction of social organization and its

constitutive dimensions (political, economic, legal, media, technological, etc.) and, secondly, to the intermediaries who stand between individuals in their interpersonal relationships, and between individuals and their environment (media and communicational devices, administrators, law, urban planning, infrastructure, etc.).

The phantasm of demediation is based on the concept of “*médiance*” defined by Augustin Berque (2000) as “the relationship of a society to its environment” (p. 128). It refers to an asymmetric ontological structure that consists of “the bipartition of our being into two unequal ‘halves’, one invested in the environment through the technical and symbolic, the other made up of our animal body” (p. 128). Of these halves, “one internal, one external, one physiologically individualized ([...] our animal body), the other diffused in the medium ([...] our ‘*médial*’ body)” (p. 128) indicates a dynamic identity, but also “an irreducible incompleteness” (p. 128).

Our hypothesis is that the phantasm of demediation comes from the asymmetric structure of the being, from the ever increasing suppression of the animal body in its relation to the environment, benefitting the technical and symbolic intermediaries that give the “*médial*” body a greater salience. This technical and symbolic increase can be attributed to modernity and continues into overmodernity.

#### 4.2 *Gorean PRPG-VEs and phantasm of demediation*

The current popularity of online role-playing games in the *fantasy* genre such as *World of Warcraft* and *Dark Age of Camelot* confirms contemporary interest in the Middle Ages and the neomedievalist vision associated with it. We are entitled to assume that the proven desire of gamers to play a character in the Gorean sims is also accompanied by the phantasm of demediation. At least the text of the Gorean PRPG-VEs translates into a demediated view of the world likely to attract the player.

The technology prohibition of the Priest-Kings makes a civilization that is closer to nature possible. Halting the development of weapons forces warriors into hand-to-hand combat, unlike the soldier of the twentieth century who presses a button to kill from a distance, and this has the effect of giving free rein to a natural selection based on physical strength and naturalizes the human being, which technology and civilization have alienated from their animal relationship with the environment. The means of transport and of modern and over-modern communications contribute to the control of territory by man and of its condensation. In contrast, the Gorean premodern man cannot generally understand the world without entering it, without being subject to natural forces and risking his life.

In Gorean PRPG-VEs, there is an intimate interpenetration of nature and the Gorean habitat. The village is preferred and the city remains on a human scale, retaining modest proportions. Nature is represented in an idealized idyllic manner. The intimate relationship between Goreans and nature is also reflected in the formal structure of the games: For the purpose of the role-playing games, players can equip their avatar with a system called *Nutri Life System*, which makes it dependent on its environment. For the avatar to stay healthy it must be nourished properly. To do this, it picks plants and hunts wild animals unless it is engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry. The *Gorean Meter Craft Hud*, meanwhile, is a system which enables an avatar to manufacture objects using traditional artifacts (weapons, wine, tools...) from raw materials and to improve their skills in this area by doing so. Both systems illustrate the direct relationship between Goreans and nature: they draw the resources necessary for their survival from the environment, which they process directly through the skills they develop through their contact with it.

Gorean society is governed by three principles: the law of natural order, the caste system and the Homestone. We have already described the first principle. The Homestone defines the bond between Goreans and their territory; it symbolizes sovereignty, established by force, and underpins a hierarchical organization of the territory (men have a duty to protect the Homestone, but also their village or city). These three principles reflect a single, stable, predictable and hierarchical social structure. In this structure, the position of each and the nature of the relationship they share with others are explicit - which protects the player from a complex and ambiguous societal state - as well as relations between the genders and the links to the territory and the environment (the law of natural order, based on survival of the fittest, implies the sanction of the environment through natural selection).

All dimensions of the PRPG-VEs described above correspond to neomedievalist representations of the Middle Ages and are likely to feed the phantasm of demediation.

## **5 The Gorean PRPG-VEs: heterotopias or non-places?**

### *5.1 The Gorean PRPG-VEs as heterotopias*

As part of his theory of social discourse, Marc Angenot (1989) refers to the marginal discursive practices of a given society which “while contemporary, are not only antagonistic but [...] the products of incompatible perspectives, manifesting within an illusory existence the contemporaneity of non-contemporary discourses” (p 107).

Some of these discourses – that Ernst Bloch (1977) calls “Ungleichzeitigkeit” (“non-simultaneity”)- while they remain peripheral in terms of social discourse, today they have the opportunity to become the dominant discourse thanks to the MMOGs, MUVes and the PRPG-VEs, and to direct these societies through the values that underlie them. This is what we found when we studied the Gorean PRPG-VEs. These MUVes therefore act as heterotopias. This concept, which we owe to Foucault, is defined in parallel with the term of utopias:

Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form [...] There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault, 1984, p. 3-4)

The Gorean PRPG-VEs are heterotopic from several angles. They challenge contemporary social space. On the one hand, they offer themselves as places to achieve non-contemporary counter-speech: complementarity rather than equality of the sexes, explanation of the female psyche in terms of evolutionary psychology, biological justification for gender inequality that obscures the possibility of a social construction of genders. On the other hand, and in a manner entirely consistent with the Gorean biologizing counter-speech, the Gorean PRPG-VEs are intended as places of demediation while they challenge a real “overmediated” contemporary existence alienated from nature in which the animal body of the being is muzzled. They both therefore have critical and challenging value vis-à-vis the social space within which they operate. In this sense, they resemble the heterotopias of compensation, in which the space is intended to be “as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.” (p. 8). Indeed, in our case they compensate for the excesses and disorders of overmodernity.

## 5.2 *The Gorean PRPG-VEs as non-places*

The “demediating” and heterotopic character of Gorean PRPG-VEs occurs only in the diegetic dimension. But, as role playing games, the PRPG-VEs are bifid, consisting of a diegetic structure and a formal structure. The formal structure produces, consumes and organizes verbal signs and forms of expression, similarly to how it produces sequences of events when the player interacts with

it. This structure is the instance that simulates the world of Gor and the events that occur through it. It is a set of rules and parameters that govern the actions of the players and simulate the game world, giving it consistency and playability (Dormans 2006) (Fine 1983) (Stenros and Hakkarainen 2003). The formal structure of Gorean PRPG-VEs carries cognitive patterns in the diegesis specific to an overmediated contemporary society. This occurs by reconfiguring the space of the Gorean sims and by dematerializing the body of the characters.

The atopic dimension of the formal structure responds to the heterotopic quality of the diegesis. Non-places (or atopias) were defined by Augé (1992) as non-identity, non-relational and non-historical places. They are avatars of overmodernity, a time (ours) of factual, spatial and individualistic overabundance in which our world is “surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral” (p. 118). As Mario Bédard (2002) points out, non-places “operate [...] across the greater whole and serve a system and an idea” (p. 60). In a more recent text, Augé (2010) returns to the concept of non-places and articulates it more closely to an expansion of communication networks, when he writes:

We thus witness a triple “shift”.

Large cities are defined primarily by their ability to import or export men, products, images and messages [...] In the home itself, [...], the television and computer now occupy the place of the traditional hearth [...] Finally, the individual, in turn, is somehow shifted within themselves. They are equipped with devices that keep them in constant contact with the furthest corner of the outside world [...] The individual may singularly live in a intellectual, musical or visual environment completely independent of their immediate physical environment (p. 171-172).

Non-places are representative of a system that promotes the free movement of men, goods and information flows, a system characteristic of the encompassing phenomenon that Armand Mattelart (2008) refers to as the “globalization of information”, characterized by

[the] widespread interconnection of economies and societies [...] [that] gradually expands the sphere of circulation of people as well as material and symbolic goods [...] [Within it] the communications devices hastened the incorporation of particular societies into larger and larger sets, and have been constantly moving the physical, intellectual and mental borders (p. 3).

Reticular non-places on a global scale are based on an increasingly intimate relationship with information technology: on the one hand, the consequence of this spatial transformation emphasizes the ontological imbalance between the animal and environmental body by multiplying the filters between the individual and their environment while leading to hypertrophy of their technological and symbolic extensions. On the other hand, there is a link connected to what Paul Virilio calls

“non-place of speed”. As Sylvie Douzou (2009) reminds us, in the second half of the nineteenth century a new way to communicate appeared, thanks to the invention of the electric telegraph. This innovation was noted, firstly, for the separation of two formerly indivisible realities, communication and transportation, and, secondly, by the joining of distance and immediacy. Information now travels at the speed with which electrical impulses are transmitted. On an earthly level and in consideration of the limits of human perception, it travels instantaneously from point A to point B, compressing and dechronologizing distances. This new way of communication has led to a series of technologies in which today’s telecommunication networks fit:

The time *that passes* of the chronology and the history is thus succeeded by a time which is *revealed instantly* [...] Thanks to the invisible substance of the cathode ray tube, the dimensions of the space become inseparable from their rate of transmission. Unity of place without unity of time, the City thus disappears into the heterogeneity of the temporality regime of the advanced technologies (Virilio 1984, p. 15).

It is in this sense that we speak of reticular non-places. But to fully understand the relationship between the network, the non-place and the globalization of information, we will call upon Foucault again. In *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, Foucault (1984) writes: “It was this complete hierarchy, this opposition, this intersection of places that constituted what could very roughly be called medieval space: the space of emplacement. This space of emplacement was opened up by the Galilean revolution, resulting in the space of extension. After this, the philosopher tells us,

the site has been substituted for extension which itself had replaced emplacement. The site is defined by relations of proximity between points or elements; formally, we can describe these relations as series, trees, or grids (p. 2).

The contemporary conception of space thus also appears here as a reticular form, as a set of interconnected coordinates. But there's more, Foucault tells us: “the importance of the site as a problem in contemporary technical work is well known: the storage of data” (p. 2). So not only has communication dechronologized the space, it has despatialized it. Of course, the phrase is somewhat excessive. It would be better to say that the space is compressed to the extreme, since it coexists in the same repository as the coordinates allowing two physically distant points to be instantly joined. Thus, “the instantaneousness of ubiquity results in the atopia of a single interface. After the distances of space and time, it is the *distance-speed* that comes to abolish the notion of physical dimension” (Virilio, 1984, p. 19). Obviously, despatialization of the space, as well as its dechronologization, applies only to the communication of information and not the movement of the body and the goods. However, when the space is only informational in nature, as is the case for the

Gorean PRPG-VEs virtual environments, the despatialization of the space has serious consequences.

We will illustrate the overmediation and atopic scope of the formal structure of the PRPG-VEs through the example of teleportation portals. There are not only information flows that circulate in the reticular non-places of the formal Gorean structure, but also (virtually) the characters. Here, we refer to the teleportation portals facilitating the transport of avatars from one Gorean sim to another. There is one sim, the *Gor Hub*, which is part of the formal structure of Gorean PRPG-VEs and which, in *Second Life*, allows players to join all the sims that constitute the game. Its teleportation portal allows others sims to be saved when the corresponding option in an interactive map is clicked on. The network of portals thus covers all Gorean PRPG-VEs. This network presents itself as an exaggerated and reifying form of non-place. The movement of people (avatars) has become instant, their bodies reduced to an information flow. The integrity of the Gorean heterotopias is questioned because of their contamination by a double atopic and reticular logic destroying the hierarchy and the stability of the space of emplacement for the benefit of the site. Furthermore, contamination of the Gor world by the formal structure and its spatial schemes reflect the continued and parallel presence of a disruptive gaming logic, which confuses and subverts the diegetic logic of the PRPG-VEs. Finally, the dematerialized body of the character, transported in a network where space is despatialized and where time is dechronologized, is given the privilege of ubiquity, allowing it to compete with the Priest-Kings. In doing so, there is a subversion of the technology prohibition. The Gorean society, a vast genetic laboratory, is undermined and the characters are being equipped, within the diegetic boundaries of the game, with technological extensions that make them posthumans, defined as beings “whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to no longer be unambiguously human by our current standards.” (Garreau, 2005, p. 231-232).

## 6 Conclusion

The co-presence of the diegesis and the formal structure within the RPGs is rarely smooth and often becomes the place of tension of spatial configurations and of antithetical and incompatible social representations. If both constitute the essential dimensions of the video game experience of the player, their problematic coexistence remains disruptive for it because of the inconsistency that this coupling causes. However, what the game loses in coherence, it makes up for textually, in richness and in depth, being entirely penetrated by sociality. This richness and textual depth are themselves

what prevent any analysis of the sacred aspect within the games, which would be confined to a mere analysis of content, a mechanical reading of social representations.

What we propose here, and which is still at the construction stage, is a sociocritical study of video games. That is to say, an analysis of ways that social representations are embedded and subverted in video games that is not exclusively textualist, but which incorporates their social dynamics and formal characteristics as well as the gaming experience of the player in a global model. In doing so, we try to respond to the approach called for by the wishes of Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll and Jan Wysocki (2014), “a ‘two sided’ view and approach to this issue: a “game-immanent” approach on the one side and an “actor-centered” approach on the other side” (p. 41).

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## Biography

CHRISTOPHE DURET has a Master of Arts in Communication at Sherbrooke University (Canada), where he is currently a graduate student in French Studies. His research focuses on online role-playing games in both sociocritical and hermeneutical ways. In particular, he has interest for the processes of videogame adaptation from novels and in the strategies and tactics used by players in order to understand how they challenge or defend a specific doctrine in their role-play.

[christophe.duret@hotmail.com](mailto:christophe.duret@hotmail.com)