Where the Avatars Roam

By Michael Gerson
Friday, July 6, 2007; Page A15

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For a columnist, this is called "research." For millions of Americans, it is an addictive form of entertainment called MMORPGs -- massively multiplayer online role-playing games. In this entirely new form of social interaction, people create computer-generated bodies called avatars and mingle with other players in 3-D fantasy worlds.

Some of these worlds parallel a form of literature that J.R.R. Tolkien called "sub-creation" - the Godlike construction of a complex, alternative reality, sometimes with its own mythology and languages. I subscribe along with my two sons (an elf and a dwarf) to The Lord of the Rings Online, based on Tolkien's epic novels, which sends its participants on a series of heroic quests. I'm told that World of Warcraft, which has more than 8 million subscribers, takes a similar approach. Some of the appeal of these games is the controlled release of aggression -- cheerful orc killing. But they also represent a conservative longing for medieval ideals of chivalry -- for a recovery of honor and adventure in an age dominated by choice and consumption.

[Image of a scene from Second Life. (© 2007 Linden Research)]

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Second Life, however, is a different animal. Instead of showing the guiding hand of an author, this universe is created by the choices of its participants, or "residents." They can build, buy, trade and talk in a world entirely without rules or laws; a pure market where choice and consumption are the highest values. Online entrepreneurs make real money selling virtual clothing, cars and "skins" -- the photorealistic faces and bodies of avatars. Companies such as Dell, IBM and Toyota market aggressively within Second Life.

The site has gotten some recent attention for its moral lapses. A few of its residents have a disturbing preference for "age play" -- fantasy sex with underage avatars -- which has attracted the attention of prosecutors in several countries.

But Second Life is more consequential than its moral failures. It is, in fact, a large-scale experiment in libertarianism. Its residents can do and be anything they wish. There are no binding forms of community, no responsibilities that aren't freely chosen and no lasting consequences of human actions. In Second Life, there is no human nature at all, just human choices.

And what do people choose? Well, there is some good live music, philanthropic fundraising, even a few virtual churches and synagogues. But the main result is the breakdown of inhibition. Second Life, as you'd expect, is highly sexualized in ways that have little to do with respect or romance. There are frequent outbreaks of terrorism, committed by online anarchists who interrupt events, assassinate speakers (who quickly reboot from the dead) and vandalize buildings. There are strip malls everywhere, pushing a relentless consumerism. And there seems to be an inordinate number of vampires, generally not a sign of community health.

Libertarians hold to a theory of "spontaneous order" -- that society should be the product of uncoordinated human choices instead of human design. Well, Second Life has plenty of spontaneity, and not much genuine order. This experiment suggests that a world that is only a market is not a utopia. It more closely resembles a seedy, derelict carnival -- the triumph of amusement and distraction over meaning and purpose.

Columnists, like frontier trackers, are expected to determine cultural directions from faint scents in the wind. So maybe there is a reason that The Lord of the Rings is ultimately more interesting than Second Life. Only in a created world, filled with moral rules, social obligations and heroic quests, do our free choices seem to matter. And even fictional honor fills a need deeper than consumption.

G.K. Chesterton wrote that when people are "really wild with freedom and invention" they create institutions, such as marriages and constitutions; but "when men are weary they fall into anarchy." In that anarchy, life tends to be nasty, brutish, short -- and furry.

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