

# Rules and Roles in Online Communities

Online communities only flourish with the existence of shared and learned rules and roles made available by the **social construction of a shared reality**.

*“A rule is a function of mechanics.  
A role is a function of theater.”*

(Meadows 2008: p.34)

**Rules are guidelines** for social living – codes of ethics, morality, law and so forth – that help us to live together peacefully. They impinge on personal freedoms, but enhance group cohesiveness.

**Roles are the parts we play** in the interactive narrative, or game, of life. There are clear expectations, or scripts, for many aspects of our social roles.

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## 1. Rules

a. **Rules offer objectives, challenges, and methods for playing games.** The rules are there to be discovered as the game is played. This is what most classic “video games” are about. Generally speaking, if you follow the rules of the game, you achieve the goals of the game.

a. **Rules define the boundaries of the community in terms of conformity and deviance.** Social control is maintained through public pressure to conform and to the TOS (terms of service) and EULA (end user license agreement) that nobody reads (these are the ultimate bridge between the virtual world and real life, a bridge built and made possible by those who define legality – and normalcy -- within our society: lawyers and judges).

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## 2. Roles

- a. **Roles are the behaviors expected within certain social positions inside the community.** They define and control the behaviors of individuals within some degree of flexibility (more so in virtual reality).
- b. “Social worlds are socially driven systems in which a player tries to achieve social position under emergent rule sets. Avatar-based social world systems, such as Second Life, have roles to be played... **Roles are** slightly less distinct [than rules], slightly more flexible, and **almost entirely social. They offer community, goals, commerce, and a structured method of interacting** that allows players in virtual worlds to understand what needs to be done... They do not earn points, other than the invisible benefits of societal living. **How well you integrate into your little society depends on how well you play your role. Roles are there to frame interaction with the community.**” (Meadows, p. 34-35).

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## 3. Rituals and Archetypes.

- a. **Rituals provide a common ground** for the consecration of community activity. **“Rituals [are] built out of rules and roles”** (Meadows, p.44).
- b. **“People put on masks of ritual and role and build new kinds of culture.** A culture, like a city-state, is a group identity that **sometimes needs to be defended.** But the **definition** of that culture, like that of any city-state, **happens not only outside the walls but inside them as well.**” (Meadows, p.44).
- c. **“Archetypes... are created by behavior, as well as appearance... They are personalities and identities we can point to and identify because of their [stereotypical] behavior.** Avatar designs, both visually and in terms of how they behave, tend to orbit archetypes of one sort or another: “The Hero,” “the Baby,” “the Guide,” “the Child,” “the Sage,” and so on. Avatars represent an archetype of a very personal sort, and these archetypes are linked to the rituals that avatar groups build. The cultural rituals of Gor, Fur, and the other cultures I came across were dominated by archetypal avatars.” (Meadows, p.45)