

Free Radical

Redefine the Grind: Sociolotron and the Atypical Gamer

Shawn Rider

Baby Girl was made to be raped. Wearing a pink thong, barely hidden by a scant chain-mail miniskirt, a gold and pink bustier, and golden cuffs, she was only 50% covered, and her genitals were more than 60% exposed. She strode down the streets of London in thigh-high riding boots, and she'd sell herself to anyone for five dollars.

But Baby Girl wasn't really interested in selling herself. She did that a few times, just to try it out. It was as she expected. As we expected. No, she was after something much more compelling, disgusting, and exciting. She wore flouncey outfits and trod unsafe paths in the dark, working hard to entice the thugs and gang members from their shadows. Baby Girl wants to be raped. More precisely, Baby Girl was made to be raped.

I've never been able to ascribe real world desires to my manufactured characters, even when the game-play dictates that those desires motivate the character's behavior. But here there was no role-play involved. I did not want Baby Girl to be raped; rather, she was supposed to be raped, according to the lore I'd heard about post-apocalyptic London.

On my first night in London, a woman caught up to me in the streets. I was not Baby Girl. I was Gorehound, a male avatar named after my private term of endearment for journalists, scholars, and researchers. I was barely accustomed to the stilted dynamics of the world, eyes still murky from the birth of a new character, and she caught up to me in the street. She told me she would help me if I dropped my guard. I did. Even then, I was more interested in the violence I'd heard about when I first read about *Sociolotron*. Here, on my first night in London, I thought I'd found a quick way to get some juicy details (good gore) for a brief game preview.

I was wrong. The woman took me to her husband's workshop and gave me a chastity belt and French pants. She said, "I was raped like three times my first night here! LOL!" She took me to a public workshop to show me how to blow glass to fulfill government contracts, and we saw an NPC (non-player character, one controlled by the computer) "harvesting" used sperm on an "obscene altar" in the corner of the workshop.

Since that first encounter, I found that there was no need to really work at upgrading my character. *Sociolotron*, it turns out, was not unlike a virtual New Orleans, all steamy and exotic sounding, but in reality slow moving and fairly low-key. And here I was, getting by just fine on the kindness of strangers like some kind of southern belle with a golden codpiece. I made plenty of money and goods by simply talking to those around me. Sure, I saw all kinds of "freaky-deaky" activity, but I never ran into any trouble.

That's why I made Baby Girl. At that point in my game-play, I'd long since bored of actually playing *Sociolotron*. I'd experienced the grind of character advancement, the thrill of cheap and kinky sex. I enhanced Gorehound's penis and buttocks to transform him into a high-class male prostitute. I visited hell and consorted with demons, attended human sacrifices and bare-knuckles fight clubs. Not once, after over four months in London, did I encounter a mean person or fall victim to any kind of accosting or molestation.

So I made Baby Girl. I walked her from one end of London to the other for over a month. It takes a long

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time to move in *Sociolotron*, which is constructed as a set of rooms with exits to the north, south, east or west. Movement is performed in the point-and-click style, and maps are scarcely available. Once one becomes proficient at navigating the world, the walking only happens so fast, and repetitive brief loads slow things down even more. It's not exactly a pleasure to control your avatar or to move about in the game world. I considered it an investment that would add some needed spark to my game experience. I badly wanted to confirm the widespread existence of rape and pillaging, as I'd heard about.

I had no luck. Baby Girl was neither raped by player characters (PCs), nor was she raped by the roving gangs of NPCs, who supposedly will occasionally bend weak avatars. I can only assume that everyone is not lying to me, and that somehow I've had a singular experience. But what I found in *Sociolotron* was quite the opposite of what I was supposed to find.

There's not much reason for me, as a gamer, to play *Sociolotron*. In almost every respect, there is another game that does what *Sociolotron* does, only better. Better graphics. More exciting combat (*World of Warcraft*). More in-depth character options (*Morrowind*). A deeper economic system (*EVE Online*). But what *Sociolotron* did to make itself radically different from all of the better-known massively-multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) is not an "addition" or "feature" as much as it is the dogged pursuit of removing any obstacle to character actions. So actions like rape, theft, and general assault or mayhem are possible, and character's "social" interactions range from basic sit / stand positions to sexual activities ranging from intercourse to analingus.

Everything in *Sociolotron* is rendered in basically stock graphics. Users find a wide variety of looks and styles by combining and coloring different base items, but in general, the map tiles that make up the world vary little, the avatars are all based on a couple of types, and the stock text and descriptions that populate the world are repetitive and often full of typos.

The interface is composed of a window that looks more like Dreamweaver than *The Sims Online*: There is a graphic display window that shows the isometric renderings of avatars ("toons" in *Sociolotron*). Beneath that is a text-based chat window. This is where most of the action happens. To the right of the screen is a set of inventory, character status, and action menus, the main control center for the game.

To build up a character's skills and wealth, players generally start out by fulfilling government bulk orders, known as "bulking." To do so, one must venture into wild areas, contend with violent mobs of NPCs (ruffians who constantly attack), collect raw materials ranging from silicone and iron to logs and wheat, then

process the raw materials, then manufacture items to fulfill individual orders for things like shot glasses and dildos.

The development of character is significant, and the role-playing depth extends to mundane, but potentially character-altering or defining, ailments such as syphilis and diarrhea, to menstrual cycles and pregnancy. Pregnancies lead to births, and children share the characteristics of the two parent characters. As the child is in adolescence, the gamers who play the parent characters may choose to play the child character to help develop s/he/it's skills (hermaphrodites are rare, but possible, and popular). In the game world, the child resides at Oxford until prodded into adulthood by one of the players, who assumes full-time control of the adult character.

This game dynamic alone requires significant in-game, and often out-of-game (known as "RL" or real life), negotiations. Prostitutes who are at the right moment of their cycle may be exceptionally fertile, and a john who presses her into service might end up being the father of her child. Likewise, a couple of characters, or gamers, who really like each other can consummate their relationship with the actual birth of a child.

Of course lineage, coupled with economic and political gameplay dynamics, leads to all kinds of interesting social engagements. A poster for player-character Brat Stella's recent bid for Prime Minister features her head superimposed on an image of a nude woman in a classic cheesecake pose. She winks out from under the brim of a purple witch's cap. The wink suggests she knows about the extent to which the term "back-room politics" can take on a whole new meaning in *Sociolotron*.

Players fill all of the roles in government, from cabinet and representative positions to judges and bounty hunters. Businesses are incorporated, as are build-ings, and these shares become connective tissue for characters. Families, whether in the genetic sense or the business sense, grow up in *Sociolotron*, and although they vary widely in goals and interests, they all maintain their bonds through steady social interaction.

Some *Sociolotron* devotees spend 10-15 hours a week playing the game, which, according to figures available from the Entertainment Software Association, is about twice the amount the average gamer spends playing everything else. But many of *Sociolotron*'s most dedicated players spend 10-15 hours a day playing. In a game like *Everquest* or *Everquest II*, it's a bit easier to understand-Sony Online Entertainment is capable of pressing expansion after expansion and an ever-developing global storyline. There is nothing like that in *Sociolotron*. Everything that happens in the game happens because of players, and the notification that



screen capture from *sociolotron*

these things have happened is distributed by word of mouth and player-run newspapers.

The effect is that a large global story spanning a fantasy world, as we see in mainstream MMORPGs, is replaced with intimate narratives focused on individual players in a dystopian city-state. These are the things that made me come back to *Sociolotron*, not to see what the game had to offer me in terms of narrative or perspective, but to discover new characters, hear new stories.

I met Roxanne (last name withheld) in the Twilight Tavern, or, I should say, I met her avatar, David Prescott, in a backroom of the bar. We sat on a pile of pillows and discussed the game, mostly out of character. Roxanne has played *Sociolotron* since late 2002, is 39 years old, and a self-described "butch" lesbian. She plays *Sociolotron* for six to eight hours each day, on average.

"I met a straight lady in The Sims Online and played with her until she found [*Sociolotron*] and we came here," Roxanne explains.

At that time, Roxanne lived with her RL girlfriend of five years in Florida. She met her present girlfriend, "Robin," in *The Sims Online*. "Robin" is a 52 year-old, previously heterosexual, divorcee. Roxanne explains that they felt limited by the gameplay possibilities (especially regarding sexual play) and the mixture of older and younger players. They found other Sims players who shared their interests, and when *Sociolotron* went into public beta just over two years

ago, many of these Sims players moved to virtual London where they are free to act on their most intimate desires.

What ensued after the couple's move to *Sociolotron* was a drama of soap opera proportions: Playing a toon named John Fuckwell, Roxanne proceeded to woo and make every female toon she could find.

"Women just need to feel special," she explains, through her avatar, who sits on a couch in a long overcoat, looking like a buffed out Neo. "Even sex in the game gets boring if its just sex all the time-guys don't think of it as much as women and the fact I take the time to bring flowers or take them to a park and give them wine and food impresses women."

These shenanigans involved flings with old Sims Online consorts who had relocated to *Sociolotron*, in-game marriages and marriages for revenge, serious fights, and eventually Robin's toon killed Roxanne's toon. The two worked out their issues in RL as well as in-game, and now live together as a monogamous couple in Ohio as well as in-game. Roxanne has no problem finding reasons beyond random cybersex to play *Sociolotron*.

Sex is an important part of *Sociolotron*. In many cases, curiosity about the sexual aspects of the game is a draw for new players. The game's creator, Patric Lagny, who works as a programmer and developer in southern California, has built in some significant connections between sexual activities and gameplay mechanics.

"I was always hoping somebody would make a game where anything goes but that's probably not possible for big companies who must report to their stockholders and the public, so I made it myself," Lagny explains.

Indeed, anything does go in *Sociolotron*, and because of this, the game is strictly regulated to adults over 21 years-old who register with a nominal fee charged to an active credit card. No fantasies involving children or people pretending to be children are allowed. Other than that, the gloves are, often quite literally, off.

Not only is prostitution a skill, but "urges" such as sado, maso and exhib might compel your toon to involuntary behaviors or outbursts. Likewise, moral uprightness is a quality that must be altered in order to achieve specific goals, such as becoming a demon overlord or a high priestess in the Cult of the Succubi.

For players like Roxanne, the boundaries between the game and RL are negotiated and permeable. Roxanne seems to have no trouble differentiating herself from her in-game characters, but, as she points out, "These are real people playing." Roxanne claims the players in *Sociolotron* are, overall, more trustworthy and upstanding than players of *The Sims Online*, but she still tends to only "trust" her RL partner and a select few whom she has had long-term contact with.

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Danni Wanned, who plays a demon named Aubrielle Shadows, is much more guarded about the boundary between her game life and the real world. A 30-year-old, married woman from Missouri, Wanned plays *Sociolotron* for up to five hours a day, specifically because she enjoys the game and likes to indulge a fantasy life her husband is not interested in.

"There's no way he would do BDSM," Wanned says, "so this takes the pressure off him."

Wanned says she has developed some out-of-game friendships through *Sociolotron*. "But I would never let a romantic or sexual relationship develop from it," she explains.

Before playing *Sociolotron*, Wanned played text-based MUDs and MOOs, such as IgorMUD, which allows users to inhabit avatars in a virtual fantasy world with remarkable freedom and agency. She also played *The Intelligent Agent 5.2*

Sims Online before coming to *Sociolotron* and knows many others who used to play the *Sims*:

"It was too G-rated, plus you always had to worry about if you were messing with someone who was underage, which isn't a worry here," Wanned confirms.

Wanned is not alone in her fairly isolated approach to playing. Many players, it seems, are more interested in personal exploration than making new friends, although, perhaps surprisingly, most of the avatars I interviewed said they told their spouse or significant other about what they do in the game.

For 62-year-old Jeff Zema, a married machinist from North Carolina, *Sociolotron* is partially about the sex, but much more about exploring his own personality. He found *Sociolotron* after playing *Ultima* games for many years as well as the occasional session on *Combat Flight Sim 2*. After 15 years in the military, he was not interested in RPGs that focus on fighting and killing, but on social games that encouraged people to engage in skill development and economic activities. In *Sociolotron* he has found an outlet for these interests, and has enjoyed exploring an alternate persona, manifest in his primary avatar, Ukikara.

When not playing *Sociolotron*, Zema and his wife keep busy with their African Grey parrots and regular real-world details. That is, when Zema isn't at work-he still pulls 10-hour shifts six days a week. His wife does not play, but is aware of what he does in the game.

"She's OK with it because I keep it there-as a game," he says. "I can explore some parts of human nature that no other game offers," Zema says, which is the primary

reason why he plays. "I have been a hooker, and a doctor-no other game allows that. And nobody in their right mind would hire a 60-year-old male hooker in real life."

For Zema, the safety of the virtual world is key: "At my age it has given me a chance to be different than I am ... without the danger or expense of doing it in the real world."

I asked him if any of his toons were ever raped in *Sociolotron*.

"I never had that happen. I know-it's a surprise! But I did figure out that being a hooker is not something I would have liked to do in real life!"

Virtual environments and games are known to offer simulations of all sorts intended to elicit feelings of freedom or omnipotence. In some way, the player must feel embodied in the virtual environment in order to truly enjoy the experience. That feeling of embodied

ment doesn't necessarily result from fancy graphics or control structures; rather, it is much more important for users to be able to intend, execute, and witness the effects of their individual actions on the world and other avatars. In this respect, *Sociolotron* is an excellent case.

John Smith, from Texas, is 53, divorced, and retired. He has had three heart attacks and two pulmonary embolisms. He is diabetic, suffers from kidney disease, and has a genetic blood disease known as THMFR. Generally limited in movement and freedom in his real life, Smith spends on average 10 hours each day playing *Sociolotron*. His avatar is Katsuma Toronaga, the leader of a powerful family within the game.

I meet with Smith in-game, in his family's headquarters, where his in-game slave, Sierra, pours us some virtual spirits. Sierra is played by Judy Benn, a 65-year-old retired teacher from Arkansas. She is married, and her husband is aware that she plays. Both Benn and Smith are clear that their relationship does not extend beyond the game, and that they are not interested in relationships beyond *Sociolotron's* London.

"Sierra is my number four slave," Smith explains. "Sunshine, who is not here today, is number three."

Smith goes on to explain that the "family" consists of people who have shares in their tavern. Three real-life women play five different sex slave toons, and five other toons, male and female, are "associates" of the family, but not slaves.

He hands me a sample share in the company to examine, and I see how it facilitates dividing up the interests of the property. As he describes the economic activities and roles of the family members, the whole thing takes on a decidedly mafia-esque tone. Katsuma Toronaga, it seems, is something of a capo, like Tony Soprano except with magic. He mentions that he loves to "kick ass on 25 year olds."

I return the share to Katsuma. "If I get top billing, then you can keep it," he says. Sierra adds, "You know, he is making you an offer that is hard to refuse."

The family's attitude and Smith's strategic gameplay style illustrate the engagement users have with the less titillating aspects of *Sociolotron*. It's easy to get people interested in sex slaves and prostitutes, and Smith admits that when he first logged into *Sociolotron* he was a "complete horn-dog," but eventually the complexity of the **Intelligent Agent 5.2**

social systems won him over.

But Smith is not completely happy with these social systems. He has serious concerns about the judicial system, for example. "There's no clemency. No retrial. Guilty until proven innocent," he explains. "Even if the real criminal stands up, and there is proof, there just isn't any provision for these issues to be solved. If the decision has been made, it stands."

To many gamers, this level of detail is not necessarily a good thing, but *Sociolotron's* denizens place a lot of importance on details like these. Roxanne, who plays several characters in addition to David Prescott, wishes others in *Sociolotron* who are elected to government and judicial positions would take the game more seriously and behave more ethically.

"If you hold office, you shouldn't let your friends off easy. It's a position of honor and it should be treated as such," she explains. "For example, I had a toon who was a judge and prosecutor, and I had a case come up against one of my [alternate characters]. I had to perform my duties as if it wasn't my other character."

Roxanne's views on the behavior of *Sociolotron's* leaders extends to issues with the social acceptability of public intercourse, for example: "If a toon is running for office, then that toon shouldn't be seen on the train, fucking in public."

Of course, Brat Stella, whose nude campaign poster is featured prominently in her newspaper, available at any public terminal in the game, feels differently about what is appropriate. There are many factions and attitudes in *Sociolotron*, which is part of what keeps people coming back. Players are invested in this world in a myriad of ways, and they dedicate themselves to it with a gusto rarely exhibited for real-world stations of

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Lagny tells me stories of players who have become so devoted to characters that they have messaged and emailed him repeatedly, or called him on the phone, to **free radical.sociolotron.rider.05**

restore a character who has been killed or deleted. "Even I can't do it," he says. *Sociolotron* is designed to be a world where actions have consequences. Rather than relying on a complex artificial intelligence or programming NPCs to react differently depending on a "reputation" ranking, *Sociolotron's* emotional resonance and interactive weight come from the fact that one can do anything at any time to anyone.

If there is a real choice to do something good or bad, positive or negative, or somewhere in between, then there becomes a reason to do one or the other. In typical RPGs, the player might worry about the boss fight, which would follow a lengthy introductory sequence of threats and narrative set-up. But players would never worry about the player character (PC) walking towards them on the street, because in other RPGs there is no way for the oncoming PC to rape the player's avatar. When walking down a lonesome pathway in *Sociolotron*, upon passing a large fellow dressed for battle one does notice a moment of exhilaration and fear: This person could end my avatar's life. Likewise, the knowledge that one could dominate and have any other character, or just steal goods from houses and stores, in some way makes one feel more rewarded for not doing those things. It is an old axiom that we are bound to cooperation by the potential to do each other harm. And what weight do "good" or "evil" monikers have if there is not the potential to do either in the extreme?

The moral and ethical complexity of the game, gained by simply opening the door for users to do the things they can do in everyday life, is compelling for many players, but generally not the crowd that is normally targeted by MMORPGs or the mainstream gaming audience. *Sociolotron* skews the statistics in nearly every way. Over 50% of its 2000 active users are female. All of them are over 21 (by default), and many are quite a bit older. In general, these users are often not "gamers" per se, or at least they would not self-identify as gamers, yet they spend more time in this world than most gamers spend playing all of the other games out there.

Lagny estimates that half of the current features in *Sociolotron* are heavily influenced by user-feedback. His unique position as an independent (as in, mainly just him) game developer has allowed him to work with his users to make the world more complex and satisfying. On more than one occasion, users referred to Lagny, or Player Dark as he's known in-game, as a "genius" and "brilliant."

"A lot of times I was close to giving up because it was all becoming too much," says Lagny, "But the players always build me up again with their love for the game, so I always felt I had an obligation not to let them down since they invested so much time and energy in helping Socio go forward." Lagny would love to get **Intelligent Agent 5.2**

more financial backing and technical support for the game, but he is convinced that no mainstream game company will touch *Sociolotron*.

"When you say 'adult game' everybody thinks of strip poker or jigsaw puzzles," complains Lagny, "I have written to one or two companies who supposedly invest in niche markets, but never even got an email back."

In the current conservative climate of game publishing, where sequels and established franchises reign supreme, it is very unlikely for the game to be picked up by any large publisher. While game development has progressed at an amazing rate, much of the increased game qualities have come by way of conventionalizing videogames to an extreme extent. Formal systems like commonly licensed game engines lend each game a set of similar qualities and capabilities, and games are often designed around these predetermined possibilities. A game like *Sociolotron* flouts any notion of mainstream conventions or burly game engines powering theatrical quality special effects.

The brilliance of *Sociolotron* is that it participates in the "old-fashioned" game development technique of making a game that is meaningful to the developer. This is a technique that has been relegated to the privileged rock stars of game development. Will Wright or Peter Molyneux can make nearly any game they can dream up, but even these luminaries are limited by mainstream constraints. After all, with all the talk surrounding Molyneux's upcoming game, *The Movies*, there's been no talk about whether one will be able to make hardcore pornography. Or even a Larry Clark movie? Odds are that won't be an option.

As game development costs and technical requirements continue to ramp up with another generation of home consoles and the continued evolution of PC power, it becomes less and less likely that games like *Sociolotron* will be made on any kind of mainstream scale. That means that this unique audience, for whom *Sociolotron* is just the thing to get them interested in a videogame, might go untapped by the mainstream industry, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, considering all the things that go on in *Sociolotron*, sometimes it might be nice to have a little privacy.

