the Escapist

Virgil
\<escapist\>

Romodred
\<escapist\>

Phoenix
\<escapist\>

DON'T EVER TAKE SIDES AGAINST THE CORP AGAIN
by Mark Wallace

UTOPIAN SEDITION
by Joe Blancato

From AI to HI:
A BATTLEFIELD TOO FAR?
by M. Junaid Alam

THE SYNDICATE
by Sean "Dragon" Stalzer

ALSO:

EDITOR'S NOTE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NEWS BITS

GUILDS:
WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?
by Laura Genender

EDITOR'S NOTE
by Julianne Greer

"Well, let me know if you need anything."

It's another whisper from a guild mate in *World of Warcraft* offering help. This is just one in a long chain of them:

"Need an enchantment on your staff?"

"Want me to take you through WC?"

"Hey, I'll help you get your flight paths."

World of Warcraft being my first in-depth experience with an MMOG, I had never before experienced guild life. I had never experienced the familiar waves in unexpected locales from guild mates. I had never experienced the spontaneous dancing that broke out when a handful of our members found themselves standing around near each other.

I had never experienced all the random offers of help.

Eager to stretch my legs in a new environment, I often turned down help. Occasionally, I wasn't feeling like going it alone and I toddled along after my much higher leveled guide. Or, from time to time, I'd speak up in guild chat if an item of particular use came up for grabs. But mostly, I kept to myself and, every now and then, joined in the banter going on in Guild Chat.

That's when my guild mates just got creative. They'd send me what I affectionately refer to as Care Packages of a few gold or some healing potions. Or they'd "bump into me" somewhere in game, build a cozy fire next to a lake in dangerous territory, catch a fish and cook it, giving me a chance to restore some health and reapply potions and magic spells of protection.

Sneaky.

But, that's what the guild is all about. And later, once I built my character up a bit, I sent out my own care packages to "younger" guild members. I went to visit other players in their newbie areas. I'd help others in the guild as those before me had done in this and many other games. It's a kind of continuity that provides comfort on many levels.

And it is these organizations that provide the subject of this tenth issue of *The Escapist*. Mark Wallace returns to speak about guilds and their role in integrating new players into *Eve Online*. Sean Stalzer gives us a look at The Syndicate, an "uber guild," one of the huge guilds that has the power to influence the success and course of a game. Last, Junaid Alam uses *Battlefield 2* as a backdrop for a discussion on why he enjoys playing multiplayer games, despite the technical and human drawbacks. Find these articles and more in *The Escapist.*

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: I love your web magazine. Just plain love it.

Tough, like many of your readers, it seems, my mind is not set on your layout. On odd days, I just find it gorgeous, on even days gorgeous but cumbersome and slow to load (here, at least). Still, the answer already exist, and I'm surprised you're not advertising it much more: that little "text" link at the bottom of every article, which displays a printer-friendly version that's also quite comfortable to read "weblog-like."

But, there is still a little problem: Schematics are incrusted in the full-colored layout, and they don't make it into the "text" version (see "Death to the Games Industry, Part II", for example). That's (a little) bad. Do something about it, you will have a magazine pleasing to everyone!

Emmanuel

To the Editor: Mr. Costikyan's piece is a valuable contribution to the game-developer zeitgeist; he makes strong, well-defended points. Kudos to you for publicizing his work.

That said, why not use *The Escapist* as a platform to bring more light to the underappreciated, community-based, under-marketed games he recommends? Even without a traditionally-inspired "reviews" section, you could run a weekly feature linking to reviews (or websites) for smaller games. I want to play more indie games, but I don't know where to find them. I'd like to have a reliable aggregator.

Dan Davies Brackett

To the Editor: I guess I am one of the first "indie aesthetics" Greg Costikyan talks about in his second part of "Death to the Games Industry". I have not bought a game at a retail store in three months (last one was *GTA SanAn*) even though I consider myself a hardcore gamer and spend at least two hours a day on games. I even write game

reviews for a small website (gamefreaks365.com). What do I play? Here is a list:

Chromadrome, Democracy, Global Defense Network, Bike or Die, Arvale, Gloop Zero

I have not had this much fun playing games since my family got the first PC back in 1998. I can only recommend people to join me. You probably did not notice but half of the games I mentioned are handheld games that I play on my PalmOS gaming PDA, the Zodiac from Tapwave (dead for 6 weeks now).

In the PalmOS scene I have seen how online distribution can go bad: Two huge ESD sites are controlling the market and taking away 50% of the money you spend on a game just for selling it online. Advertising costs extra! I just thought people should be warned before they wish for central market sites on the Internet. Everyone will stay a heartless capitalist with independent games, too.

Ortwin Regel

To the Editor: It's quite refreshing that a "true" game development magazine exists. I've been feeling the same things towards the industry and I'm glad that your team of researchers and writers have the opportunity to openly discuss them.

I've been an independent game developer for around 2 1/2 years and currently on the very final stretch of releasing my company's first project, *The Adventures of El Ballo* for the Mac operating system. Our game hopefully demonstrates your discussion of developers choosing to push the "indie" label into the hands of the players. Yes, we are using AmbrosiaSW as our publisher, but even the film and book "independents" need a publisher to push their content to the media.

My company is very focused on bringing high-quality, yet smaller-scale (indie) games to the market via the Mac platform. Yes, we may be old-school in thought, but still feel that there is an inherent magic to games released only for one platform.

In addition, you can count on us to bastardize games in all the indie-level glory. We plan on slapping the censorship critics in the face. Please check out http://www.elballo.com and look at the star of the game on the front page to see what I mean.

Casey Gatti

To the Editor: Games need a revolution and I celebrate the article published from Mr. Costikyan. When I heard his views on the industry at the last GDC, I felt for the first time the need to do something about it, for real.

We need to start spreading the idea that Games are, above all things, Culture. A genuine form of expression in the digital era. And not just toys for kids or superficial entertainment.

Let me compare our young industry with movies: Today, it is common for us to think of movies as the Seventh Art. But back in the ages of pioneering film makers, in the same sense that today happens with videogames, movies were considered just a mere entertainment. It

took a couple of decades for the movie industry to get its technology mature enough so to become a major form of expression, and so, to be seriously considered as Art.

Developers must try to change the rules of this industry like independent filmmakers did back in the 20's when after years of fighting, the Supreme Court of the US declared that films were a cultural expression that needed to be protected by the first amendment. When that happened, big studios that controlled all the movie-theatres suddenly found that they no longer had that control.

I would like to invite all readers of *The Escapist*, the staff of your magazine and anyone who really cares about games, to a site specially made to work as a Think Tank and place to express our views on the industry, share development experience and games made, and change the industry for good: GamesAreArt.com

Santiago Siri

To the Editor: The problem with RMT in MMOGs is not that people are trading in virtual items. It's that the outside world encroaches on the fantasy. It's the inevitable sense of inequality that this creates for the "simple people" in the game. People who can afford to buy their way to greatness in the game are the Old Money of the game world, and they create a sinking feeling for the rest of us that they got there unfairly, not through hard work in the game-world, but by having money in RL.

So yes, you have the entrepreneurs that managed to use their skills and gain fame and property through in-game channels, but for the "middle-class" of the game world, the "Old Money" players are a constant reminder of the realities outside the game world, of their own disadvantage as players who cannot afford a $150 suit of armor or a $500 ass-whooping sword.

The game world is an escapist frontier, and it has no room for 19th century-like Old Money, just like the Wild West had not a place for those not willing to strap on their boots and work for a living.

I don't know how common this feeling is, but it's very strong for me whenever I play an MMOG. It's a feeling that the one place where skill and craftsmanship should have mattered most - a true manifestation of Adam Smith's vision - was changed completely by the introduction of RMT.

Dubi Kanengisser

To the Editor: I really love this magazine. The articles are insightful and the quality of the writing is refreshing in a world where game marketing passes for game literature most of the time. Well done!

With regard to the web version of the magazine, I really dislike the way the navigation bar at the bottom right gets in the way of the text. I use Firefox as my main web browser, and I increase the font size so I don't have to squint at my high resolution display. Your web page doesn't make it easy, and I end up having to change screen resolutions to read the page comfortably without constantly increasing and decreasing the font size and squinting just to read the paragraph or two that get obscured.

Could you at the very least move the nav bar to the top so that increasing the font size won't pose such a problem? It would at least solve that issue for readers, and I won't feel that printing out the PDF is my only recourse.

With regard to the articles, can we please refrain from referring to paying and potential customers as "consumers?" With all the recent talk about abolishing the old publishing model, we sure stick to the same thought processes easily enough. When you call a person a consumer, you are basically relegating that person to an unthinking creature suitable for commercial exploitation. Is that who we really want as our gaming public? I would think we would prefer smart, savvy customers who appreciate a good game and won't salivate over the latest blinking light show.

Also, is there a reason why the editorial calendar is available only in an Excel document? Why not just convert it to an HTML or PDF document? It would be way more web friendly in either format compared to Office documents.

Gianfranco

DON'T EVER TAKE SIDES AGAINST THE CORP AGAIN

by Mark Wallace

My Brooklyn neighborhood has grown a bit hipsterish lately, with a proliferation of coffee shops, juice bars, high-toned restaurants and suspiciously Manhattan-like clothing boutiques, all patronized by the bright young things moving in, crowding the sidewalk where we who've lived here for a few years have gotten used to walking unobstructed. It's still a mix of old and new, though, with people like me caught in the middle. Here and there you can still find long-time residents, aging Italians mostly, whose families have been around these streets for generations.

It's often on the sidewalks that you spot them, standing around chomping unlit cigars or sitting on folding chairs in front of open doorways. A quick glance inside as you pass reveals some cracked linoleum and maybe a dusty portrait of Garibaldi hanging on a dingy wall. The image that comes to mind, of course, is of Marlon Brando in The Godfather. Somewhere back there, you want to believe, lurks the Don, muttering cryptic platitudes about family and respect – or if not the Don, then at least some local boss, complaining about the yuppies and groping for a bottle of Tums.

My neighborhood in the MMOG Eve Online has a similar feel to it. You can't smoke cigars in your capsule, of course, but other than that, they're much the same. It has to do with how we got there, who showed us the ropes.

At one time, of course, the Italians were the arrivistes. The Italians, the Irish, the Jews – all the waves of immigrants to the United States in the nineteenth century – didn't just appear on these shores with Amex Blue in hand, dial up Craigslist and land a job at a publishing house. They got their start in America the same way I got my start in Eve.

After a couple of months of wandering around Eve's 5,000-plus star systems, I've been making my main base in Piekura, a slightly down-at-the-heels system next door to a sketchier neighborhood (just as the back window of the apartment I've lived in for the last six years looks out over some projects a block or two away, which I make sure not to walk through after nightfall).

Piekura isn't that far from Todaki, where I was first put in my pod, and where new graduates of the School of Applied Knowledge (SAK) show up every day.

You know the type: They still like to buy their own missiles instead of manufacturing them, and think mining in high-security space is the most thrilling way to make some fast InterStellar Kredits (ISK). Just like the people who've been moving into my Brooklyn neighborhood: They still travel to work in Manhattan, of all places, and it's their $800 strollers that are clogging the jump gates – I mean, sidewalks. As far as I'm concerned, the Lonetrek region of Eve and the Carroll Gardens neighborhood of Brooklyn might as well be one and the same.

So where are the aging Italians in Eve? Where is the Don? Where's the dusty social club in which the heads of the families gather after church on Sundays?

They're in the corp chat channel, of course.

When you first become a capsuleer in Eve (i.e., when you enter the game),

AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED, THE LONETREK REGION OF EVE AND THE CARROLL GARDENS NEIGHBORHOOD OF BROOKLYN MIGHT AS WELL BE ONE AND THE SAME.
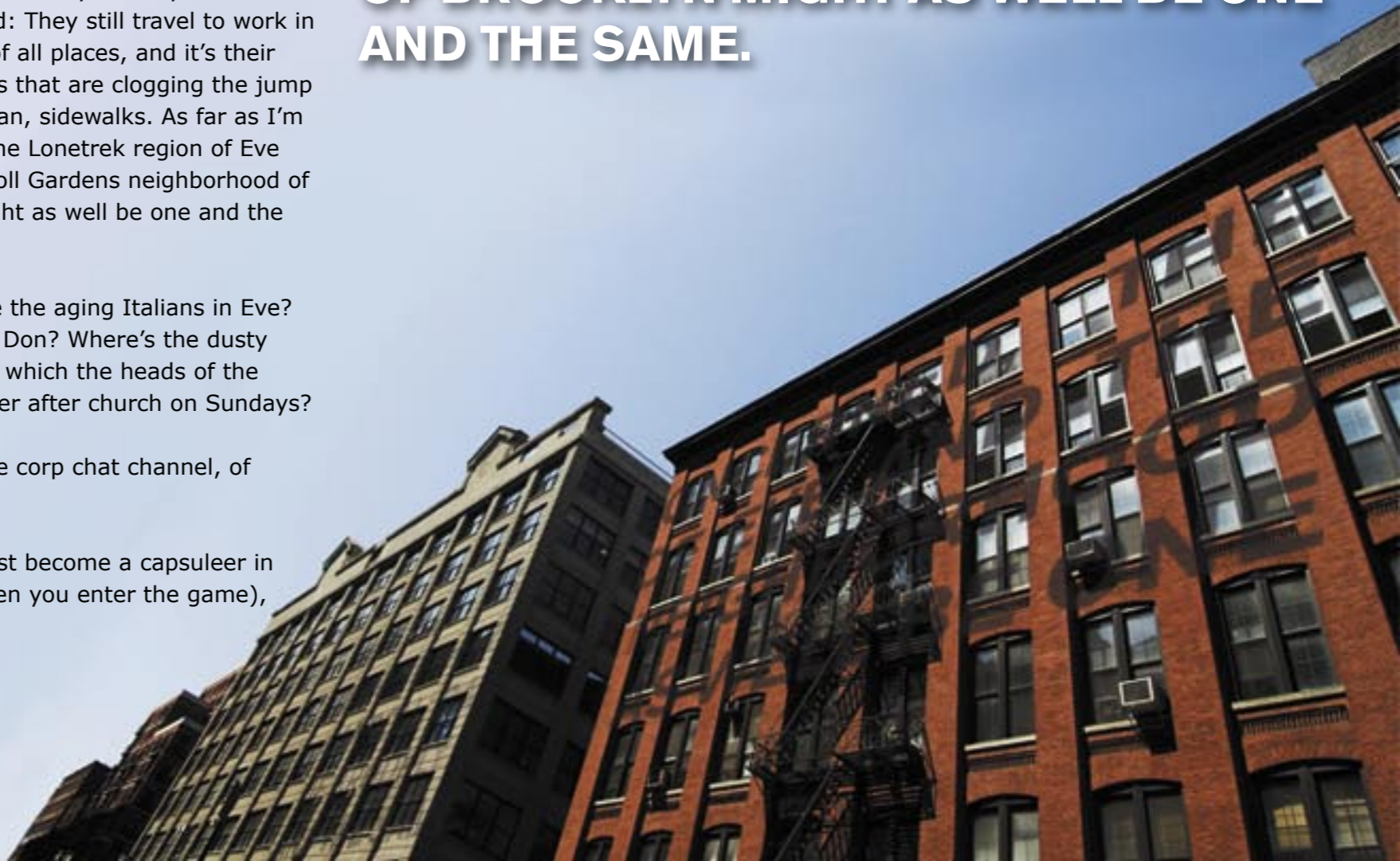
you're assigned to a corporation. At first, you're in one of the newbie corps like SAK. Most of the people on your channel are wondering why their autopilot is telling them they can't get there from here (the autopilot defaults to sissy mode, avoiding the more dangerous systems), or what the best way to make money is (whichever way you most enjoy). It's a far more focused channel than general newbie help, but it still devolves pretty often into discussions of real-world politics, nVidia versus ATI or how Eve compares to Freelancer or Earth & Beyond.

But ask a question in SAK chat and you usually get an answer. In fact, you usually get three or four answers, and though one or two of them may be different, they'll all be technically correct (most of the time). Ask about mining and you're likely to end up in a mining

op somewhere, digging veldspar into jet cans with your buddies without having to worry about ore thieves coming along while you go get your hauler out of the station. Unless you're actively begging for money, people will often donate ISK to your account when you aren't looking. Lament the loss of your kestrel to the former secret agent you were supposed to "pwn" and it's not unlikely that a more experienced player will offer to come to your assistance (if you're not too many jumps away). I once sought help on a mission and then promptly lost my cruiser soon after we warped into deadspace. The guy I was flying with made me a present of a new one, with a better setup than the one I'd had before.

What do the pod pilots of Eve have to do with the Italians and Jews who came to America in the nineteenth century? With the Liberians and Ukrainians and Chinese

MANY OF US GOT OUR SPACE LEGS IN EVE THE SAME WAY THOSE TRANSPLANTS TO THE UNITED STATES GOT THEIR FOOTHOLD IN AMERICA: WITH THE HELP OF AN ORGANIZATION.

...THEY'RE A KIND OF ECONOMIC CATALYST, PLACES WHERE A BUNCH OF PEOPLE WHO WOULDN'T HAVE THE CLOUT TO MAKE IT ON THEIR OWN CAN POOL THEIR RESOURCES...

who came in the twentieth? With whoever else may care to show up in the twenty-first?

Many of us got our space legs in Eve the same way those transplants to the United States got their foothold in America: with the help of an organization. An organization that serves the same purpose as the immigrants' associations, ethnic societies and even mafia families that still help those who are fresh off the boat survive their first weeks, months and years in America today.

Those immigrants' associations served – and continue to serve – an important function, one that's more than the social havens as we usually think of them. They're not just places to hang out and swap stories about the old country, places where you don't have to be bothered with trying to make your newbie English understood. Rather

they're a kind of economic catalyst, places where a bunch of people who wouldn't have the clout to make it on their own can pool their resources, knowledge and efforts and survive together, teaching each other, protecting each other and contributing to the good of the group by making sure each individual is getting by.

Just like SAK.

In fact, whether it's a corp, a guild, a clan or whatever they call it in your favorite MMOG, player organizations that are broader than a quest group or an Eve gang serve the same economic function, leveraging the financial clout that accrues to a group but can't be harnessed by an individual just starting out in a coldly capitalist world.

I'm not just talking about the fact that even your uber-tanking level 60 World of Warcraft warrior would find it impossible

to kill Onyxia without a lot of help. I'm talking about economic productivity here, and the fact that no matter what your level, most people can increase their earning power by working with others.

Let's look at it in terms of leveling for the moment. Nick Yee and the crew at the Palo Alto Research Center's PlayOn site have been collecting some great data in this and related areas lately. What they've found (not so surprisingly) is that guilded players ding faster. The difference isn't insignificant, either. A guilded player in World of Warcraft, on average, takes five fewer hours to reach level 20, six fewer hours to go from 20 to 40 and 24 fewer hours to go from 40 to 60, for a total savings of almost 36 hours of playtime in getting to uber. That's 36 more hours to stand around in Ironforge complaining about how hard it is to get a raid group together these days. If only there were a cigar vendor wandering around the Great Forge (who needs pie?), the picture would be complete.

Note that there's a Don lurking in the back room of SAK's Todaki headquarters.

A guy named Vuotikiura Ohko is supposedly our CEO, but I've never met him and I don't expect I will, but only because SAK, as a newbie corp, is run by NPCs (non-player characters).

It's a nice move on the part of CCP, the Icelandic company behind Eve, to stick new players in an NPC corp straight from the jump. As multiplayer as places like Eve and World of Warcraft are, they can still be confusing experiences for the solo newbie. And it's not just because you're still trying to figure out how to feed your pet. It's also due to all these strangers who are suddenly inviting you to join their guild.

As is alluded to in Ms. Genender's article in this issue, you'll want to be careful here. Some guilds are a better match than others, obviously. In Eve, new corp members are often required to spend hours mining ore for the greater good before they gain full membership and can go off and "get podded" at will.

That doesn't necessarily mean you've joined a crap corp, though. Like immigrants' associations, new entrants to the system are often asked to

IN A GOOD GUILD, THE RISING TIDE LIFTS ALL THE BOATS, JUST AS IT DOES IN IMMIGRANTS' ASSOCIATIONS.

contribute to the organization's accounts before they can start reaping the benefits. That's because the benefits – to both the guildie and the guild – can be great. Free ships, free money, free loot: We mostly think of these things as guild perks that make our characters stronger, but in fact they boost the standings of everyone in the guild. The faster newbies level or the better able they are to complete missions (Eve, thankfully, doesn't have a level grind), the faster they're able to help with high-level quests or goals and start giving their own extra loot back to the people who follow. In a good guild, the rising tide lifts all the boats, just as it does in immigrants' associations.

Even in an NPC corp, this is true. SAK isn't just for newbs; we have our elder statesmen (and women) as well. Most of what I know about mission-running,

standings, research and just plain old space sense I learned from a formidable capsuleer named Princess Buttercup. I always listen when she speaks. Ankanos, a gritty bounty hunter and ship manufacturer, has had much to teach me about outfitting ships and hunting down my foes.

There are other wise men and women as well. These are people who've been in SAK, a "newbie" corp, for up to two years. They command respect (just like the Don), and as far as I've been able to determine, they ask nothing in return. I pay them back by passing on their good advice to the people who've come along after me.

Newb corps account for only a small minority of MMOG guilds, of course. While more than 60 percent of World of Warcraft characters above level 1 are guilded, according to PlayOn's data, something like 90 percent above level 43 are in a guild. In Eve you're always in one corp or another, though there's no data on what proportion of players are in one of the NPC corps versus a player corp. (Nick, get on this!) There are raiding guilds, mining corps, guilds with

just a few high-level friends, corps building outposts in the most dangerous regions of low-security space, explorers' guilds, pirates' guilds, you name it.

Another economic benefit of guilds and corps is that they allow access to parts of the game you just can't get near as a newb, parts that are usually the most profitable. The loot drops in Auberdine, Goldshire and other newb areas of World of Warcraft don't often make it to the auction house. And try getting your newb corp to run a year-long infiltration operation like the one that Guiding Hand Social Club recently pulled off in Eve (a coup that netted them $16,500 worth of another corp's goods). It just ain't gonna happen.

With a little imagination, of course, newbie corps can get up to more trouble than one expects. One SAK member is currently recruiting SAKies to take over a low-sec system, something that only player corps normally do in Eve. Real-world immigrants' associations undergo similar transformations. The Ukrainian Club in Philadelphia, for instance, formerly a watering hole and civic hall for Ukrainian immigrants to the City of

ALL GUILDS AND CORPS HAVE ONE THING IN COMMON: THEY HELP EASE THE TRANSITION INTO VARIOUS STAGES OF MMOG LIFE

Brotherly Love, now finds greater profit in renting the place out to hipsters who need a place to throw a party or put on a show.

Whether it's getting you on your feet, giving you a stable social set or building an empire, all guilds and corps have one thing in common: They help ease the transition into various stages of MMOG life, just as immigrants' associations do for new Americans.

At this point in America's history, such associations still play an important economic role, though it's one that's becoming less central now that places like China and India are starting to boom. It's worth remembering that there are the equivalents of immigrants' associations that serve Americans in those countries, and it's a good bet they're growing these days. In a sense, America is no longer the land of opportunity; now we're the land of outsourcing. Greater potential is seen on the sub-continent and in the Far East.

But if you ask me, there's greater potential still in a place called the metaverse. Whether it's taking over a low-sec system in Eve, raiding a high-level instance in World of Warcraft or making some serious real-world money in Second Life's virtual real-estate market, the groups, guilds and corps that players form in these worlds have an important impact on the kinds of experiences, whether for pleasure or profit, that we get out of these worlds.

Surviving a virtual world can be a tricky business, and profiting from it can be trickier still. But it can be easier with help. So in more or less the words of Michael Corleone: Reader, you are my brother and I love you. But don't ever take sides against the corp again. 🔘

Mark Wallace is a journalist and editor residing in Brooklyn, New York, and at Walkering.com. He has written on gaming and other subjects for The New York Times, The New Yorker, Details and many other publications.

UTOPIAN SEDITION

by Joe Blancato

For a while there, I was part of an elite search and destroy team. We wore all black, flew without a flag. It was our job to find small villages of people, potential threats to our empire, and snuff them out before they had a chance to develop into a real problem.

We were a grim manifestation of the dark, imperialistic side of a socialist society, our existence was tolerated because we helped keep a status quo only a handful of people actually appreciated. Rumors flew about us. We were the secret police. Some sort of rogue Gestapo of bored killers, waylaying people too weak to defend themselves. We were a guild's hit squad.

Shadowbane's early days were one of the grandest social experiments ever applied on a massive scale. Guilds had to form gargantuan nations in order to survive, relying on members and vassal guilds to generate income, which was used to fund the day to day upkeep of cities, which became home to hundreds of people. I was in a very large guild, one of the holdovers from beta who perfected city building two months before the game went live, who had a head start coming out of the gate, who were bent on keeping everyone else from being as rich and safe as they were.

We were proof that socialism works. We'd provide a place to hunt and level and get you all the gear you needed. All you had to do was surrender the majority of the income you made while fighting in guild territory. It was a perfect set up. The city grew rich nearly instantaneously, and its inhabitants were well provided for. Our empire was growing, our ranks salty and well-fed. While other guilds were struggling to build walls around their city to protect it from harm, we were marching 20-deep into their land, obliterating anything in our way, like a plague of flesh-eating locusts. And that's when things fell apart.

The upper brass decided it was time to exploit the fact our enemies were licking their wounds, and began swallowing up the larger guilds as vassals, and leaving the remainder to flounder while our great society shone brightly on their world maps. And it made sense; even with our experience and efficiency, it took almost two months for our city to be finely tuned into perfection. Losing a city in *Shadowbane* was the equivalent of permanent death for a guild leader. Even if you could rebuild, most of your vassal guilds were loyal to your city, not

to you; they'd go on to bigger, better, still standing cities, and you'd be at the bottom rung of a ladder that's very hard to climb. Leaving your city, your status symbol, your **mark on the world**, to something as random as a battle was just crazy.

And so began a long time of peace across a game world whose premise was built upon total destruction. A few upstarts sprouted up, and my group was sent in to harass and demoralize them until they succumbed to the larger guild's standard. It was peace, utopia … boredom. Guilds began dropping like

flies. Players quit the game in droves, because there was nothing to do other than make new cities rich and spread like wildfire across the globe in a wave of Pax Shadowbana.

On one hand, we were witnessing some sort of online gaming world peace, where

no one was without hunting grounds and opportunity abounded. On the other, we realized that world peace is really boring.

We somehow made the game more perfect than the real world, but we also managed to scare away anyone who dared oppose such a notion with the

threat of a strike force capable of hammering opposing guilds cities 24/7 until they lost the will to exist. Our efficiency was our downfall; we were a perpetual motion machine that spun so fast it broke its axle.

The whole episode was a romantic duality of what can happen when players and guilds are given the keys to a universe. *Shadowbane*, from the very beginning, opened the door to guilds to expand their hierarchy everywhere, and even enforce it on others. Massive conglomerations of players rose to the occasion, uberguilds infamous in other games finally achieving dominance over one another. Until the dust settled, the chaos was something you could envelope yourself within. Wars popped up over insults, over out of game arguments, over anything. It was feudal Europe, but when our Renaissance came, we couldn't even burn "heretics" because of a non-aggression pact with opposing guilds.

But it wasn't all bad. Even amidst a crippling peace, the Machiavellian political rivalries glowed with the brightness of a thousand suns. Watching it from the sidelines made me reread *The Prince* half a hundred times. Seeing

We were proof that socialism works.

Even amidst a crippling peace, the Machiavellian political rivalries glowed with the brightness of a thousand suns.

artists of negotiation and diplomacy work their magic more than justified the lasting peace many people had to endure.

And it mirrored much of the real world. During the Cold War, Soviet Premiere Mikhail Gorbachev would consistently position his underlings in a surprisingly cliquish manner: The ones who were in his favor would be close to him whenever in public, while the ones who angered him were on the periphery. Whenever I attended guild meetings and listened to gossip, one of the higher ups would do the same thing. Either he was an International Relations major with a penchant for obscure Russian political scheming, or obedience is rewarded in the same manner, wherever you go.

As the server population dwindled, the cliques grew tighter and more frenzied, the massive hierarchy crystallizing in a super saturated state; there was just too much drama for a community this small. It was only a matter of time before the

unstable solution fell apart, and a couple of friends and I set out to be the ones to destroy *Shadowbane*'s Perestroika.

It wasn't just because we were bored; sure, we were, and so was everyone else. But if it was just boredom, we'd have quit. No, we wanted to undermine our guild because we were tired of being the bad guys. **Their** bad guys. When you're charged with identifying and prioritizing which guilds to destroy, you inevitably wind up playing a cat and mouse game with their defenders. Our Gestapo was a team of stealthy characters, relying on being able to infiltrate cities unseen. When we'd actually come across someone able to not only find us, but kill us repeatedly, we made the mistake of fraternizing with them. A friendly tell quickly turned into conversations, and before we knew it, we started liking the "enemy" more than we liked our "friends."

It started simply. When our guild set its sights on a group of people we liked, we

frantically sent messages to them, warning them of their impending doom. We led groups of warriors into well defended areas. We wouldn't attack our friends, and we'd take a dive against their low level members.

We did nearly anything to give the "good guys" a chance, while our imperialist horde tried yet again to justify their existence by snuffing out someone else. Sure, we were traitors to the guild that raised us, but we also knew we were doing something no one else could do: giving the server a chance. It grew beyond guilds; this was injecting a little anarchy into a perfect status quo. And damn it, it felt **right**. Honorable. Give the enemy a chance to face you on equal footing. What's more, it was working.

A guild a continent away suddenly looked a lot like us. Their city had walls, fully stocked vendors, and high level raiding parties attacking our established cities on that side of the world. My cadre tittered over IMs. Finally, a challenge, a fair fight, something to do. But then someone posed the big question I hadn't yet begun to entertain: Who do we fight for?

We'd been trying to inject some life into the world, and managed to plant seeds of friendship everywhere. We were about to get into a knockdown, drag out fight that we helped brew, but we lost any sense of allegiance to anyone but each other. Our only binding was a terrible secret, and it only served to corner us into having to choose between friends on either side of a war. Out ourselves for what we were, or completely obliterate the opposition and return the server to the boring utopia it was before the revolution we helped support started. We were some weird inversion of victorious revolutionaries; we devolved happy equilibrium in favor of happy violent bloodletting, and we tasted remorse for the first time. We may have been the first small group of players ever to actually change an entire server in an MMOG, and we learned what type of gravity that can have, first hand. Gods of a universe, unable to control the monster they created.

The argument raged for a few days. The fight was just beginning to develop, the new guild not quite organized enough for a run at one of our major outposts. Some of us reeled in their anarchism, while others understood we were the only hope the new guild had. I was going with majority, caught up in the situation, blown away by what we were able to accomplish. Did the developers plan this? Was this part of their vision? A handful of guys with too much time on their hands tipping delicate scales and shattering guilds? It didn't matter which side we chose, because we already won. This was **our** war. The rest of the server was just a group of pawns to the game our mutual boredom created.

And that's when it hit me. It was time to go. Like some chaotic notion that vanishes in the wind, I logged out with no intention of returning. We'd never be able to do what we did twice, and actually engaging in the climactic battle means our beautiful creation would die, and we'd be part of what killed it. I couldn't bear losing the war - not in the traditional sense, but in the way that a victor meant the fun was over. I was abandoning the monster I engineered, sure, but it was still alive, frozen on a server whose outcome has yet to be decided, at least by me. In a way, I'd reverted to the same mentality of the people governing the server. Losing everything I worked for was akin to erasing myself from existence, and I never wanted to understand how the people who brought about the boredom felt. So I took myself out of the race, and left them to their great war.

Joe Blancato is a Contributing Editor for The Escapist Magazine, in addition to being the Founder of waterthread.org.

We may have been the first small group of players ever to actually change an entire server in an MMOG, and we learned what type of gravity that can have, first hand.
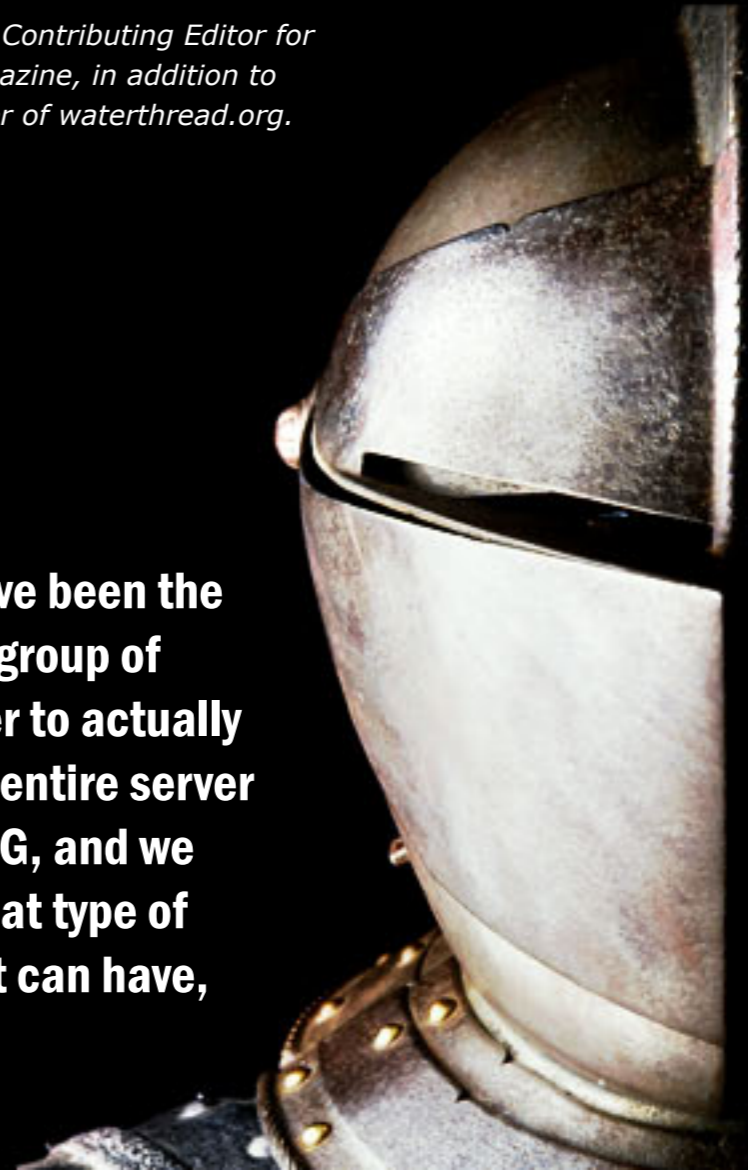
THE SYNDICATE

by Sean "Dragons" Stalzer

Guilds are a staple of the Massively Multiplayer gaming world. Guilds fill a number of important roles in the gaming world, but by and large they are short lived. Several hundred guilds rise and fall on a daily basis throughout the various MMOG universes, and the average lifespan of a guild is less than six months[1].

Nearly every guild will voluntarily close its doors or implode and cease to exist before reaching the two-year point. Less than a tenth of a percent of all guilds reach the five-year point. That is why a guild that has thrived for nearly 10 years, with more than 550 members (the vast majority of whom have been members for more than a year, and some up to nine years) is a noteworthy anomaly in a sea of guild names floating around the MMOG universe.

The Syndicate is such a guild. In fact, it is the only juggernaut-sized guild that has lasted that long in the history of MMOGs. The Syndicate has spanned numerous gaming worlds in its history including *Ultima Online*, *Everquest*, *World of Warcraft* and brief times in numerous worlds helping to beta test future games. Among the reasons for The Syndicate's long-term success as a guild are its underlying philosophies, its recruiting practices and its structure.

1   Several hundred guilds rising and falling on a daily basis is an estimate based on continuing research done by The Syndicate across the major MMOG gaming worlds. This research began in 1999 and continues to present day.

the escapist

first and foremost we are about our own members and we view every member as a valued friend and teammate.

Philosophy

Every guild needs an underlying purpose and an underlying philosophy about how it will approach gaming, other guilds and its own members. The Syndicate has several core values that compose our philosophy.

First, we are a friend-focused guild. While we do have great relations with many other players and guilds, first and foremost we are about our own members and we view every member as a valued friend and teammate.

Second, we require all members to have a "Guild First" attitude. By that, we mean that it is never acceptable for a member to make a decision that places the guild second or causes harm to the guild. Every member is an ambassador of the guild in his words and deeds, and

we require that those reflect positively upon all of us. We are, after all, a team of friends, and you wouldn't do something to make your friend look bad or stab them in the back, would you?

Third, we are not a power-gamer guild, yet we do participate aggressively in end-game content. Simply put, we enjoy mastering a game but we don't view it as a race against someone else to be first. We don't measure our personal self worth against another guild. We don't brag if we do something earlier or better or more efficiently than anyone else.

Games come and go, and in the long run, pixels are meaningless. Our guild is all about the long-term view and our focus is on building friendships and having fun together. By keeping that focus, and by valuing each member as a

friend and important member of the team, we avoid infighting. We don't have implosions. We don't have mass exoduses of members. And we grow a stable environment where every member trusts every other member.

Recruiting Practices

Whether explicitly defined or not, every guild has a recruiting policy. In some cases, a guild forms simply to be a communications tool for real-life friends. Other times, it can be a chop shop that needs warm bodies to serve the goals of the few in power. Many times a guild's purpose fits somewhere in between those two extremes. The Syndicate is a very large guild. That huge size very frequently leads to the misperception that we have a very open recruiting policy and recruit large numbers of people. In fact, just the opposite is true.

Although we receive more than 4,000 applications to join the guild each year, we chose only a few of those applicants to whom to extend an offer.

It is our experience that a guild cannot become both large and long lasting, if mass recruiting is the norm. More than 80 percent of The Syndicate has been with us anywhere from one to nine years. Because of our low turnover, we recruit only to fill newly open spots in our ranks, usually coming from members needing to leave online gaming for medical, parental/spousal or job-related reasons. Once in a blue moon, we have to remove a member or someone quits for another guild, and we will recruit to replace that person.

To join The Syndicate, we require several things. First, a recruit must share our

decisions are not made in a vacuum. Feedback is strongly encouraged and decisions are made based on that feedback and past experiences.

goals, vision and play style. It would do us no good, and the recruit a disservice, to add someone who was looking for something from the guild other than what we offer. Second, we only add people who are team focused and who are friend focused. Part of why we are successful is that members are just as happy helping a fellow member achieve a goal or in seeing a fellow member winning a piece of loot, as they are advancing their own characters. Third, we seek members who understand the hierarchy in the guild and wish to be in a guild that operates in such a manner. Membership won't last long if the recruit is constantly at odds with how we do things internally. Fourth, we must know the recruit well.

The first three conditions cannot be accurately judged with a simple questionnaire. We must really get to know the person well, often over weeks or months, and then we will consider encouraging them apply to join.

STRUCTURE: In order for a guild to succeed, decisions need to be made and a method for accountability for those decisions needs to be designed. There are a number of different structures a guild can take to achieve that goal. Some guilds use a council. Some guilds use democracy. The Syndicate uses what we term a benevolent dictatorship. In a nutshell, the guildmaster, Dragons, makes all decisions and guild policy, and ultimately takes responsibility should any of those decisions turn out to be incorrect. However, decisions are not made in a vacuum. Feedback is strongly encouraged and decisions are made based on that feedback and past experiences.

Under Dragons are two advisors (Grif and Dargus). In the event a policy decision has to be made, and Dragons is unavailable, they do so. Under them is a cadre of Squad Leaders. Often, but not always, these are long-time members. In all cases, they know the guild inside and out. The squad leaders are charged with enforcing guild policies and helping to
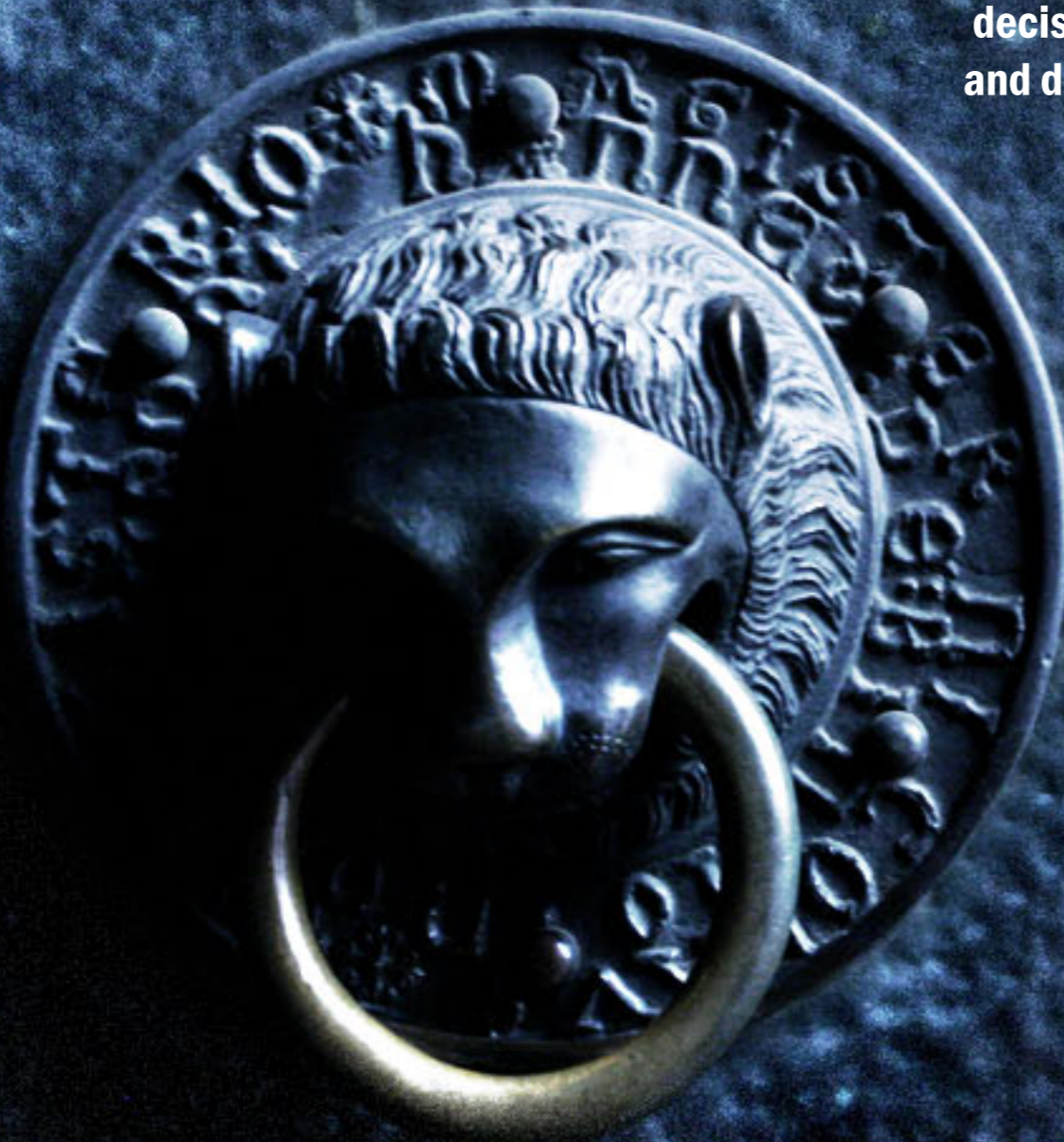
run the guild on a day-to-day basis. Every squad leader has an assigned portion of the guild that they keep informed, help resolve issues for and generally help move toward the guild's goals. The squad leaders are also a primary source of feedback for future policy decisions, as they take the pulse of the guild by talking with their squads on a day-to-day basis.

Creating a guild is relatively easy. Becoming a large guild isn't all that challenging either. Becoming a large, stable guild, which lasts for many years, is an epic achievement in the MMOG world. The Syndicate leads the online world in that feat with more than 5,000 man-years of combined membership. Creating a guild like that is impossible to sum up in a few points or a single article, but the above three factors are certainly huge contributors, when applied in the correct way, to any guild's long-term success. 🎮

Sean 'Dragons' Stalzer is the leader of The Syndicate, one of the largest and oldest online gaming guilds with over 550 members.

Creating a guild is relatively easy. Becoming a large guild isn't all that challenging either. Becoming a large, stable guild, which lasts for many years, is an epic achievement in the MMOG world.

From AI to HI:
A Battlefield Too Far?

by M. Junaid Alam

A massive barrage of incoming artillery, a fearsome phalanx of approaching armor, screaming scores of advancing infantry, the chattering and rattling of mind-numbing machine-gun fire: in short, a whirlwind of weaponry all aiming to gun you down.

That was the visceral, surreal sensation gamers experienced in the single-player campaigns of titles like *Medal of Honor, Call of Duty,* and *Brothers in Arms,* where players were pitted against every last enemy soldier in epic, war-defining battles. From the bloodied shores of Omaha Beach to the stalking jungles of Guadalcanal, the entire story neatly unfolded around a singular warrior who, even when assisted by AI teammates, was almost always the only one left standing while the bodies of his buddies were strewn around him.

Though the tightly scripted AI-driven sequences that defined such titles were memorable, they left something to be desired. After all, one can only revisit a historical battleground so many times, and the surprise of scripted enemy assaults in single-player adventures wears off quicker than the surface of a *Counterstrike* addict's mouse pad.
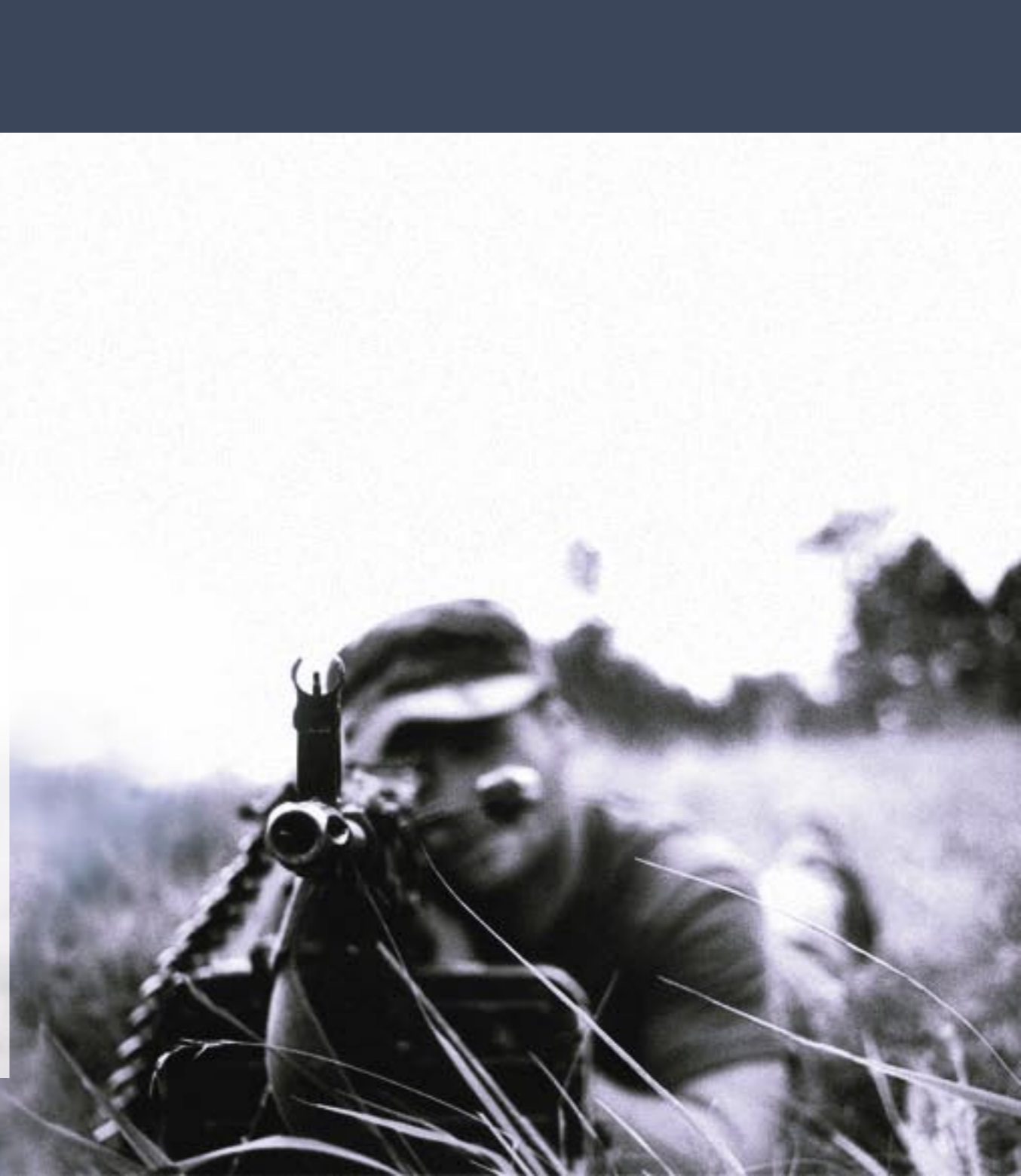
The solution seemed clear: a multiplayer rendition of large-scale military combat. AI, sometimes clunky and always predictable, would be replaced by the human element, with players fighting alongside and against real human teammates instead of coded streams of complex data. It was an easy answer to the AI problem ... right? As it turns out, not quite.

Enter *Battlefield 2*. The latest offering by developer Dice and publisher Electronic Arts in the *Battlefield* series, the game promises "all-out war on the modern battlefield" with anywhere from 16–64 players duking it out as either invading Americans, defending "Middle East Coalition" or "People's Army" forces.

But as I quickly found out, things get very untidy when you throw humans into the mix. In fits of anger, my own teammates start killing each other in the scramble to pilot a precious plane, and players will drive off in vehicles that can carry multiple players without a second thought, even running over teammates on their road to glory.

Peter Breen, a 22 year-old *Battlefield 2* regular from Seattle, Washington, runs

...THINGS GET VERY UNTIDY WHEN YOU THROW HUMANS INTO THE MIX.

into similar situations. He notes that on 16- and 64-player maps, teamwork is a rare commodity since, on the smaller maps, "everyone tends to 'lone wolf,'" and on the larger ones, "it tends to dissolve into mob warfare."

James Caple-Nisby, 23, of Fort Washington, Maryland, says that even when teammates have good intentions, teamwork can fall apart, recalling that players in the special ops class will blow up bridges, leaving their tank-driving counterparts frustrated. "The biggest failure of teamwork is when everyone has a different idea of how to get to that goal," he remarks.

But the general mayhem that sometimes prevails in the game is not solely the fault of players: often, it's the developer's fault. For instance, it's not too unusual for enemies to be labeled as friendlies and vice versa on a player's

HUD. I also learned quickly that heat-seeking missiles magically veer off course to hit friendly aircraft not even within sight. If the game's "guidance" system existed in real life, friendlies who decided to light up a cigarette would find lung cancer to be the least of their worries.

Nisby agrees, labeling the bugs "extremely annoying." Relating his frustration with the tendency of vehicles to make road kill of friendly infantry by barely touching them, he adds, "it's also hard to provide close ground support because you're afraid that you'll [teamkill] a teammate by tapping them with your [vehicle]."

Though the developers did provide some tools for gamers to work cohesively, such as a squad system, a commander position and in-game VOIP, noticeable flaws exist in the setup. One, says Shea

Hawes, 30, from La Grande, Oregon, is that people simply don't join squads as often. "If a sniper forms his own squad and locks it, he is at least tied into the commander," he says, which would allow for the latter to give orders and provide supplies.

"Dice both went too far and not far enough," Breen adds. "They went too far in segregating people into specific squads ... and failed to provide adequate communication tools" to work as a team. Nisby concurs, saying the inability of squad leaders to talk to one another (they can only talk to the commander and their own squad members) "is for the birds."

Given the sobering picture painted above, is the idea of bypassing AI's shortcomings by substituting it with HI – human intelligence – merely a naïve dream? The answer is both yes and no.

WE FLATTER OURSELVES IN ASSUMING THAT HUMAN TEAMMATES MAKE FOR A BETTER EXPERIENCE THAN COMPUTER ONES SIMPLY BY DEFAULT.

ONCE YOU VALUE YOUR TEAMMATES AS REAL PEOPLE INSTEAD OF VIEWING THEM AS THE MERE CANNON-FODDER FARE THEY ARE IN SINGLE-PLAYER GAMES, IT MAKES FOR A MUCH MORE ENLIVENING AND SATISFYING GAMING EXPERIENCE.

We flatter ourselves in assuming that human teammates make for a better experience than computer ones simply by **default**. The potential for more immersion is there, but it requires two things: One, gamers – not exactly renowned for their social skills – need to take a more mature approach to multiplayer gaming; and two, developers, often struggling under severe deadlines, can't look at multiplayer as a cheap and dirty shortcut to nirvana without making sure things work as they should.

For now however, despite its flaws, I still have a blast with *Battlefield 2* when playing with mature people who know the meaning of teamwork. Sure, unlike single-player military combat games, the world isn't going to revolve around me or make me feel like a superhero – and it shouldn't have to. Once you value your teammates as real people instead of

viewing them as the mere cannon-fodder fare they are in single-player games, it makes for a much more enlivening and satisfying gaming experience.

When people work together, they can overcome the bugs and flaws of the game. For instance, in response to the disproportionately strong armor of the American Blackhawk helicopter, which allows it to fly base to base, capturing nodes unmolested, Nisby has pioneered a technique he affectionately calls "Bombchoppah:" loading up another helicopter with C-4 explosives and ramming it into an unsuspecting Blackhawk, thus saving his team points and providing them all with a good laugh. And to overcome the game's hierarchical VOIP setup, some players use Teamspeak, a program which allows people to chat independently of the game's setup.

But more important, teamwork provides comfort and a sense of belonging even when the game's problems **do** crop up. Playing with mature people using good voice communication, teammates will well understand - and even laugh off - accidental teamkills, instead of going haywire and trying to exact bloody revenge. Given my options, I'll choose mature multiplayer "HI" over single-player "AI" any day: when you achieve victory, it's a collective victory, and when you die, it's not "game over" – but re-spawn, and game on.

M. Junaid Alam is a journalism student at Northeastern University, a political commentary writer for the university paper, and a freelance reporter for The Sun Chronicle in North Attleboro, MA.
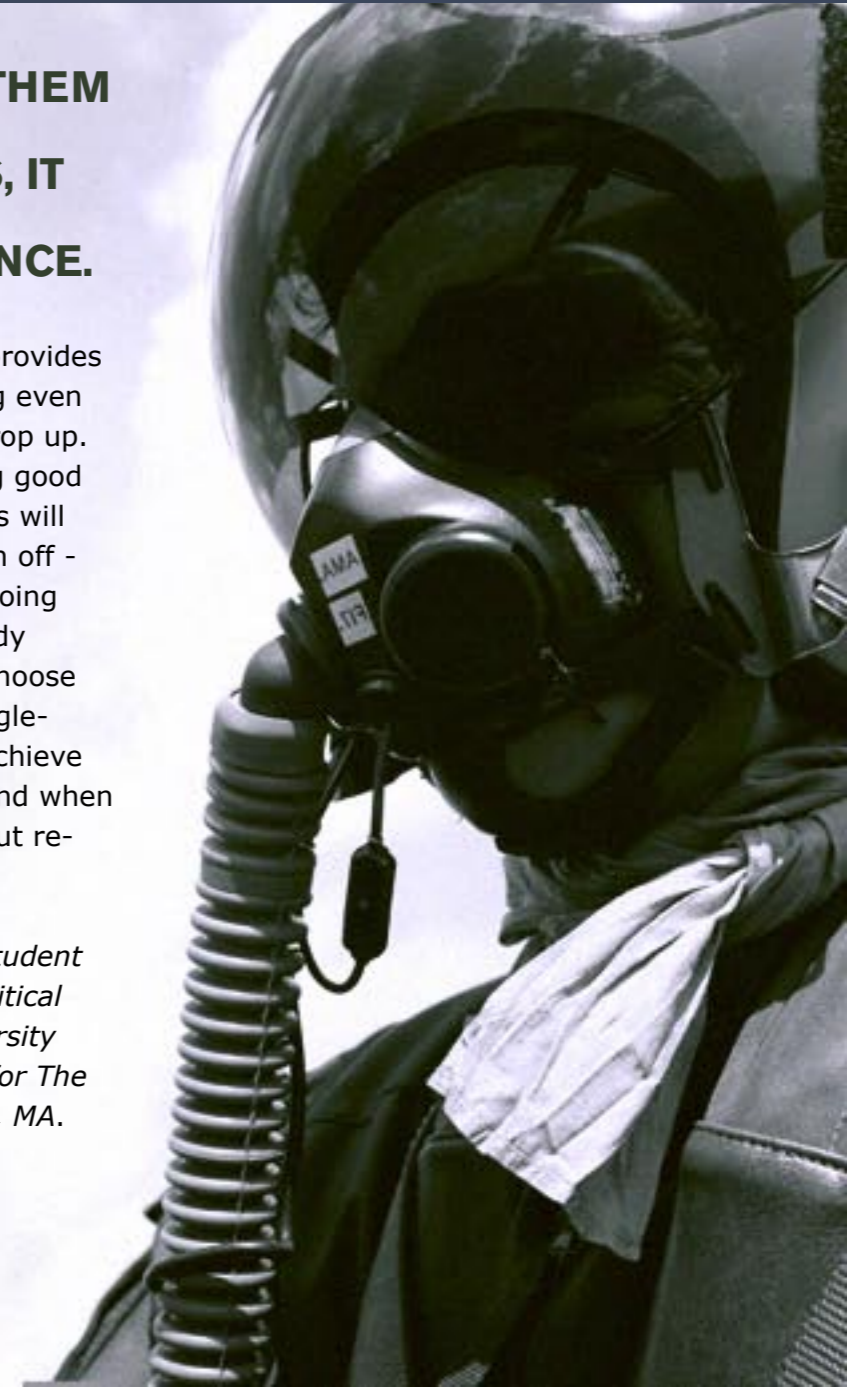
GUILDS: What's in it for me?

by Laura Genender

Though many games are grouped into the Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) genre, time has seen a broadening of the spectrum as games branch out from the original design into more specialized categories. But whether these games are centered on PvP, casual game play, crafting or a dozen other options, few continual threads still link this genre together. One of these long-lasting threads is the needed presence of guilds.

Whatever name you call them - clans, guilds, pledges - player groups are the backbones of an MMOG society. Many MMOG tasks are geared toward guilds, and can only be completed by large numbers of participants. Even when the game isn't built around guilds, players often form groups to work together.

Finding a guild is easy - it's enjoying it and keeping it that's the hard part.

For example, raid bosses in games such as *EverQuest* or *Lineage II* require upwards of thirty people to even attempt to kill, and after you have the numbers they require lots of preparation and planning, not to mention luck. Even in a non-combat game like *A Tale in the Desert*, players are required to work together to build large monuments and teams of two to four are needed to work some machinery.

While this would suggest that finding the biggest, strongest group would be the most beneficial choice, not everyone can be in the most elite guild, and not everyone wants to. Players also form guilds for friendship, companionship, and more specialized goals than simply being "the best."

Finding a guild is easy - it's enjoying it and keeping it that's the hard part. Ferst, a university student who plays a Spellsinger on the *Lineage II* Kain server, spent 67 levels looking for the perfect match. "Basically, I was looking for more than just a clan; I wanted people who were fun."

Spending those 67 levels solo wasn't easy, either. "I really like the PvP aspect of this game, but it was hard; I couldn't pick on big clans or they would attack in force." Ferst tried joining one of these big clans for a while but quickly became unhappy; he felt unappreciated and left to form his own clan, EndlessPariah. While his clan is only mid-sized compared to the competition, Ferst enjoys playing with his friends. "In the end it's just a game I play for fun, and you have the most fun with your friends."

D went through a similar experience in *EverQuest*. He spent a lot of clanless time while he was progressing his character. He didn't feel that he would be a useful guild member or leader until he had reached the level cap, and thus declined all offers until that point.

By the time D reached his goal level, he had accumulated enough friends who had expressed interest in joining a guild that he decided to form one. But even on a non-PvP server, D's new guild had plenty of obstacles to overcome; while they would spend hours preparing for a

relatively difficult raid monster, a larger guild with more firepower would sweep in and mop up the monster in ten minutes. After some time, D left his guild to join one of the larger ones on the server.

The guild he joined, VeaVictus, was the second most powerful guild on the server. He felt that this new guild would give him the chance to experience the high-end content, and friends that had joined the guild before him were prospering. "I almost feel like I got too much of what I expected out of the guild. I was in the guild for a while and we'd go on raids and kill the big mobs but it began to feel like a job … in order to kill one raid mob it would take hours of prep time."

The guild also got a bit of grief from its biggest competitor, the most powerful guild on the server. While they were preparing to attack raid monsters needed to move into new zones or obtain new items, their rival would rush in and steal the kill to keep them from catching

up to their level. If VeaVictus still started getting too close, their rival would help the third-ranked guild catch up to them so they had more competition for targets.

But for all the cons of large guild life, D received companionship and support. Every time he attended a guild raid he would receive "points." Raid monsters would drop amazing and powerful items that guild members could bid for with their points, so the more raids he attended, the more or better items he received.

Tau, a friend of D's, learned to take guild support to a whole new level in *Star Wars Galaxies*. While he originally had few intentions of becoming a trader or crafter, the early days of the game saw a large demand for architects. Tau agreed to build a guildhall for a guild in exchange for funding to pursue the architecture class. The deal was beneficial to both parties, and the guild fed him resources and land plots while he skyrocketed through the class until he
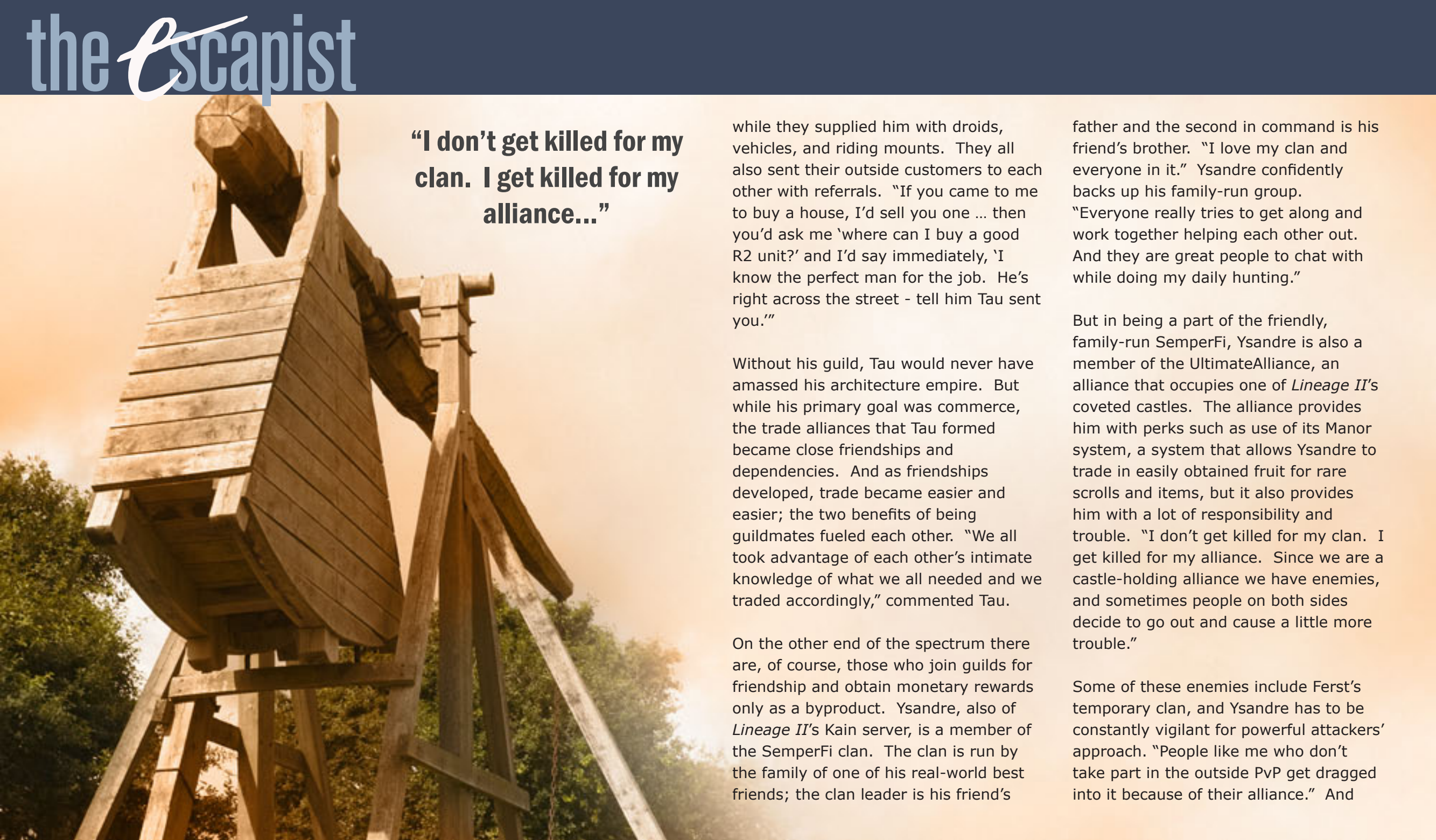
Tau agreed to build a guildhall for a guild in exchange for funding to pursue the architecture class.

could construct the hall. Once the transaction was completed, Tau volunteered to stay on as the guild's private architect. "Everyone needs a house, right?"

Tau supplied the guild with resource harvesters and player housing. He had plenty of customers, and his only real setback was his lack of land from which to harvest resources. This problem was solved by teaming up with a tailor, a crafting class that requires very few resources in comparison with an architect. He harvested resources from the tailor's land, providing her with whatever she needed and keeping the rest for himself. Additionally, the two

supplied each other with their respective final products. "In time I even just gave her houses to use as storefronts for her tailoring business, and in return she gave me all the clothes I ever needed."

Meanwhile, Tau's guild had a similar give-and-take system with their star architect. He provided them with low-cost housing, furniture, and harvesters,

"I don't get killed for my clan. I get killed for my alliance..."

while they supplied him with droids, vehicles, and riding mounts. They all also sent their outside customers to each other with referrals. "If you came to me to buy a house, I'd sell you one … then you'd ask me 'where can I buy a good R2 unit?' and I'd say immediately, 'I know the perfect man for the job. He's right across the street - tell him Tau sent you.'"

Without his guild, Tau would never have amassed his architecture empire. But while his primary goal was commerce, the trade alliances that Tau formed became close friendships and dependencies. And as friendships developed, trade became easier and easier; the two benefits of being guildmates fueled each other. "We all took advantage of each other's intimate knowledge of what we all needed and we traded accordingly," commented Tau.

On the other end of the spectrum there are, of course, those who join guilds for friendship and obtain monetary rewards only as a byproduct. Ysandre, also of *Lineage II*'s Kain server, is a member of the SemperFi clan. The clan is run by the family of one of his real-world best friends; the clan leader is his friend's

father and the second in command is his friend's brother. "I love my clan and everyone in it." Ysandre confidently backs up his family-run group. "Everyone really tries to get along and work together helping each other out. And they are great people to chat with while doing my daily hunting."

But in being a part of the friendly, family-run SemperFi, Ysandre is also a member of the UltimateAlliance, an alliance that occupies one of *Lineage II*'s coveted castles. The alliance provides him with perks such as use of its Manor system, a system that allows Ysandre to trade in easily obtained fruit for rare scrolls and items, but it also provides him with a lot of responsibility and trouble. "I don't get killed for my clan. I get killed for my alliance. Since we are a castle-holding alliance we have enemies, and sometimes people on both sides decide to go out and cause a little more trouble."

Some of these enemies include Ferst's temporary clan, and Ysandre has to be constantly vigilant for powerful attackers' approach. "People like me who don't take part in the outside PvP get dragged into it because of their alliance." And

while his clan quickly comes to his rescue, by the time the cavalry arrives the enemies have long since cleared out. On top of random political attacks, Ysandre has to help his alliance keep their castle. While the castle lords receive taxes and benefits from the Manor system, holding a castle is still an expensive endeavor.

If guild members don't get what they need from their group, whether that need is companionship or gear, they are going to leave it. The guilds that thrive are not the ones that recruit hundreds of members with no common interests - in this case, finding members might be easy, but keeping them would be impossible. Similarly, if players refuse to accept the costs of a guild such as sharing loot or defending castles, the guild will have a harder time functioning as an efficient unit. The guilds with higher rewards and lower costs are the ones that will last.

A guild also needs to know how to be flexible; their focus is in constant flux as new members leave and join, and old members change their priorities. A PvP guild requires players interested in PvP combat, a casual game play guild would

quickly lose members if they started scheduling constant raids, and a crafting guild requires a delicate balance of materials and trade. If Tau had quit and left his guild without an architect, they would have had no way to obtain more harvesters or housing until they replaced him. Guilds are the backbones of MMOGs, but even more importantly, players are the backbones of guilds. *C*

Laura Genender is a Staff Writer for MMORPG.com, and is also an Editor for Prima Strategy Guides.

If guild members don't get what they need from their group, whether that need is companionship or gear, they are going to leave it.

the escapist

NEWS BITS

Violent Video Game Regulation Passes in California

Leland Yee's anti-violent video game regulation bill passed in the California Senate by a vote of 65 - 7. The bill, which requires retailers to label violent video games or face $1000 fines, is the second of its kind to be attempted by Yee, whose previous efforts to require retailers to provide information on the ESRB's rating system was also successful. The bill will go to California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has 30 days to choose whether or not to veto it.

World of Warcraft Subscriber Base to Decline 75%, says Analyst

Michael Pachter from Wedbush Morgan says not only will *WoW*'s subscriber base decline 75% in the next year, but Americans don't like online games.

According to Pachter, *WoW*'s novelty is keeping players enamored, but attention spans will ultimately return to single player games and television.

PSP Sells 185,000 in UK

The PSP is completely obliterating console sales records, moving 185,000 units over the weekend, effectively doubling the DS's opening weekend sales in the UK. While the numbers are staggering, one must note the DS's killer app, *Nintendogs*, hasn't yet reached British shores.

Casual Friday

CHECK BACK EVERY WEEKEND FOR ADDITIONAL CONTENT!

available 09-16-05