

the Escapist

Casual Friday

THE CONTRARIAN

GROUPS 'N' GAMERS

The Gaming Club

MEET THE TEAM!

ATTACK of the Parasites

by Allen Varney

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

I frequently get letters to the editor in which people say things like "my *Escapist*." When talking to people outside of the office about the magazine, I often say "my writers" or "my readers." When I play *World of Warcraft*, I talk about "my server". And I admire MySpace.com, a whole business built on "my." In short, there's a whole lot of ownership floating around. Where does this ownership come from?

Some people feel the internet is impersonal. But that's only if you let it be. If you want community you can find it everywhere and on everything – whether on a social network like MySpace, a massively multiplayer game like *World of Warcraft*, or even a Yahoo! Group on gardening. The ability to reach people all over the world increases the chance of meeting others who think, believe and act similarly to yourself. Many people would not find others with whom they share so much commonality were it not for the internet. Is it any wonder that those who do find such a group of people with such similar interests become tight-knit communities?

And when these communities do become so important, is it a surprise that people feel a sense of ownership over them?

The internet is still young and finding its way – often compared to the Old West in the United States. We aren't really sure how to govern it and we aren't really sure of the amazing potential this medium holds. But we are seeing the internet has an amazing ability to support communities, whether they are one club in one school, or international organizations. This ability will continue to be one of the major functions of the internet, even as our "real lives" become more hectic and distant from each other.

This issue of *The Escapist* focuses on communities, both real life and internet. In "Wanna Be My Friendster?" **my** writers speak about those communities related to games. After a short vacation from us, Allen Varney returns to tell us about casual games portals and the communities (or lack thereof) that surround them. Mark Wallace shares some new avenues of exploration in the world of internet security and personal identification. Bonnie Ruberg discusses what happens in online communities "After Sex" becomes a common thing.

Find these articles and more in this issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: I love reading your articles, and enjoy your open format in web design. I recently searched your archives for stories involving MUD's for I am still an active mudder and I would love to know where you guys think the genre is going. It could be an interesting story.

-**Vhadakhan**

From The Lounge: [Re: "Great Zombie Depression," by Joe Blancato] Very good article. I am a first time reader, brought here by *Stubbs*. *The Escapist* now sits proudly on my rss list.

I specifically liked the part where you played again at the end. Sure *Stubbs*

might be filled with meaning, and political statements and such, but that is just an underlying bonus. It's the sort of thing you read about in a magazine after you have played through, and then have a nice sit and think about.

The conformity vs. more conformity argument never really struck me, but it is a bit amusing. *Stubbs* is really just changing zombies into zombies. Either



the Escapist

way you look at it, it sucks to be the people of punchbowl, at least as far as various forms of expression are concerned. The bottom line though, is that it is good to be Stubbs. At least he finally gets what he wants.

I found it interesting that the band Cake was specifically mentioned, because this article read a whole lot like a John McCrea interview I once read. Soell and McCrea have a similar view of their work in that they hide a whole lot of meaning in an artistic package of some sort. What sets the two apart is their expectations of the audience. McCrea expects his audience to see the (often ambiguous) meanings that he has stuffed into his songs, and enjoy his music for the meaning, as well as the musical quality. Matt seems more than content if his readers love his game for being an excellent game. No meaning is being forced upon anyone in *Stubbs*, and for those that look for it, that makes finding something deeper all the more worthwhile.

-Ninj

From the Lounge: [Re: "Duck and Cover," by Russ Pitts] The author of the article really captured my feelings as

well. As a matter of fact I was bound and determined as a child to get my parents to put in a fallout shelter. (They never humored me, however) And many of us felt the same anxiety, I think.

I had much the same reaction to *Fallout* also. To this day if someone asks my favorite game of all time, I say *Fallout* without hesitation. It got so many things right, that one couldn't help but to enjoy it. I remember everyone going on about *Baldur's Gate* the following year (or so), and after playing it thinking "that's a great game, but it's no *Fallout*."

Great article. Really hit home with me.
-Jon D.

From The Lounge: [Re: "Retro Like You've Never Seen It Before," by Pat Miller] Now this was an interesting read. I've been a fan (though not a hardcore one) of Shmups since I was young, and when *Ikaruga* came out I snatched up a copy. These games of Kenta Cho are quite superb. I've downloaded about three already and each one is excellent. I particularly like how their control scheme is standardized. The learning curve is lower that way.

I could go on further, but I don't want to bore anyone. Thanks for bring these titles to our attention.

These and the likes of *Geometry Wars* might just bring a resurgence of these simple but addictive genres ... if they catch on with the general public that is.
-Jeff Staple



ATTACK OF THE PARASITES

Casual game portals all look alike
-- and soon, so will their games

by Allen Varney



Many online game “communities” feel like those housing subdivisions spreading around every American city like carcinomas on a pancreas.

I live in one such suburban wasteland in northwestern Austin, Texas. Milwood has no mill and few trees. After five years here, I know the names of the couple next door, but nothing about anyone else on this street. No one knows anybody. There’s nowhere to meet, and no reason; the nearest market/bar/bus stop/anything is two miles away. The streets are twisty mazes, the houses endless reshufflings of a dozen bland elements, their plans generated randomly in some nameless architect’s CAD/CAM program. A Texas subdivision looks like Connecticut, which looks like Idaho and Georgia. Built by developers without taste or imagination, these soul-dead burbclaves ignore the human-centered design principles in Christopher Alexander’s landmark *A Pattern Language*. Such ugly, sterile, crass 1950s Chamber of Commerce concrete-asphalt provincial whitebread booboisie burgs count as “communities” only if you believe their marketing literature.

You get the same vibe off the most popular gaming sites in the English-speaking world, the casual game portals: EA’s Pogo, Miniclip, Yahoo! Games, Microsoft’s MSN Games, RealNetworks’ GameHouse, Big Fish Games and many more. These lookalike sites are “portals” because they aggregate dozens or hundreds of casual games from many indie designers. Some big portals are mere front ends for faceless distributors like Oberon Media or Boonty.

The portal formula can work like crazy. On the big portals, at any hour, day or night, tens or hundreds of thousands of players gather to play Hearts, Spades, Canasta, chess, backgammon and a zillion shareware match-three games. No one knows how big the casual downloadable market is, but it’s growing. RealNetworks just announced record fourth quarter and 2005 results, including year-on-year games revenue growth in Q4 of 52%, to \$15.7 million; annual games revenue was \$56.3 million, a 63% increase over 2004. Miniclip claims 27 million unique users each month. Club Pogo has 780,000 paying members. Some other companies

are growing the same way, like all those housing sprawls. Phil Steinmeyer estimates today's market at around \$200 million annually.

Leaving aside the unadorned shopping sites, a few portals make cosmetic attempts at community building: chat, buddy lists, forums, profiles and avatars. Sometimes, these use off-the-shelf middleware like GameFrame. Grab.com does better, with player blogs and pages of kid and dog pictures. But portal social scenes are, at best, low-key. You can't tell one community from another.

And increasingly, you can't distinguish the games they sell.

Volume, Volume, Volume!

Casual games look alike, not just because all the portals carry the same games (though they do), but because the portals encourage straight knockoffs of current hits.

Of course, every new game builds, to greater or lesser degree, on earlier designs. And of course, category leaders inevitably spawn imitations. Everyone recognizes the virtues of studying

precursors, fixing their mistakes, and making a clone to try out new wrinkles on established ideas. But more and more casual look-alikes zoom beyond "imitation as sincere flattery" and screech to a halt just inches short of plagiarism. They're not clones but parasites. The portals love them.

Last summer, an upstart three-person French company, FunPause EURL, made an attention-getting business case for parasitism. FunPause scored two quick successes with exceptionally blatant clones: first, *Atlantis*, a copy of MumboJumbo's mega-selling *Luxor* (itself a close imitation of *Zuma*, which derives from Midway's 1998 *Puzz Loop*); next, *Fairies*, an unashamed point-for-point re-skinning of Raptisoft's successful *Chuzzle*. Each copy took FunPause about two months to engineer, start to finish. (Saves time when you don't have to playtest.) For *Fairies*, they even lifted their fairy model straight from a free-software rendering app, DAZ|Studio. Both games show considerable polish, though saying so is, as *Comics Journal* writer R. Fiore remarked in another context, like complimenting a shoplifter for her taste in clothes.

**Little boxes on the hillside,
little boxes made of tickytacky,
Little boxes on the hillside,
little boxes all the same.**

- Malvina Reynolds

the Escapist

Being Chased by Carl Edwards at 550 mph

Skydiving
Hang Gliding

White Water Rafting



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Atlantis and *Fairies* each hit the portal bestseller lists. This in itself was a big payoff for four months' work; a bestselling casual game can earn many thousands of dollars a month for years, though the portals typically pass on only 20% to developers. But FunPause really struck it rich last month, when it was acquired by the fastest-growing portal, Big Fish Games.

The BFG website's tagline is "A New Game Every Day"; they must not have liked "Quantity Over Quality." The FunPause acquisition helps sate this ravenous and indiscriminate appetite. In a Gamecloud interview after the purchase, Big Fish Marketing VP Ken Wells was asked, "How hard is it to create and publish casual games that are different than what has been previously

released?" He answered without a trace of irony:

This is a difficult task because our audience loves established formats such as match-three games. So, the goal is to look at all sorts of games that have been released on all platforms, not just PC and consoles, and come up with ways to make game mechanics that are innovative in the space while still being accessible to the audience. We always try to create a new and unique experience, even if the development is initially costly. So far, the risk has paid off.

I enjoy these portal marketing guys. They're charmingly brazen, like Baghdad Bob during the Iraqi invasion. Gamecloud just interviewed Kenny Dinkin, VP of PlayFirst, a new casual publisher. Dinkin praised PlayFirst's successful game *Diner Dash*, developed by gameLab:

What I love about *Diner Dash* is its innovation – it's the platonic ideal of what we were shooting for – a game that had none of the presumed

necessary trappings of a gamer's game: It has an everyday metaphor, a female hero who's a regular gal, 2-D graphics, humor and even a job where you work a shift!

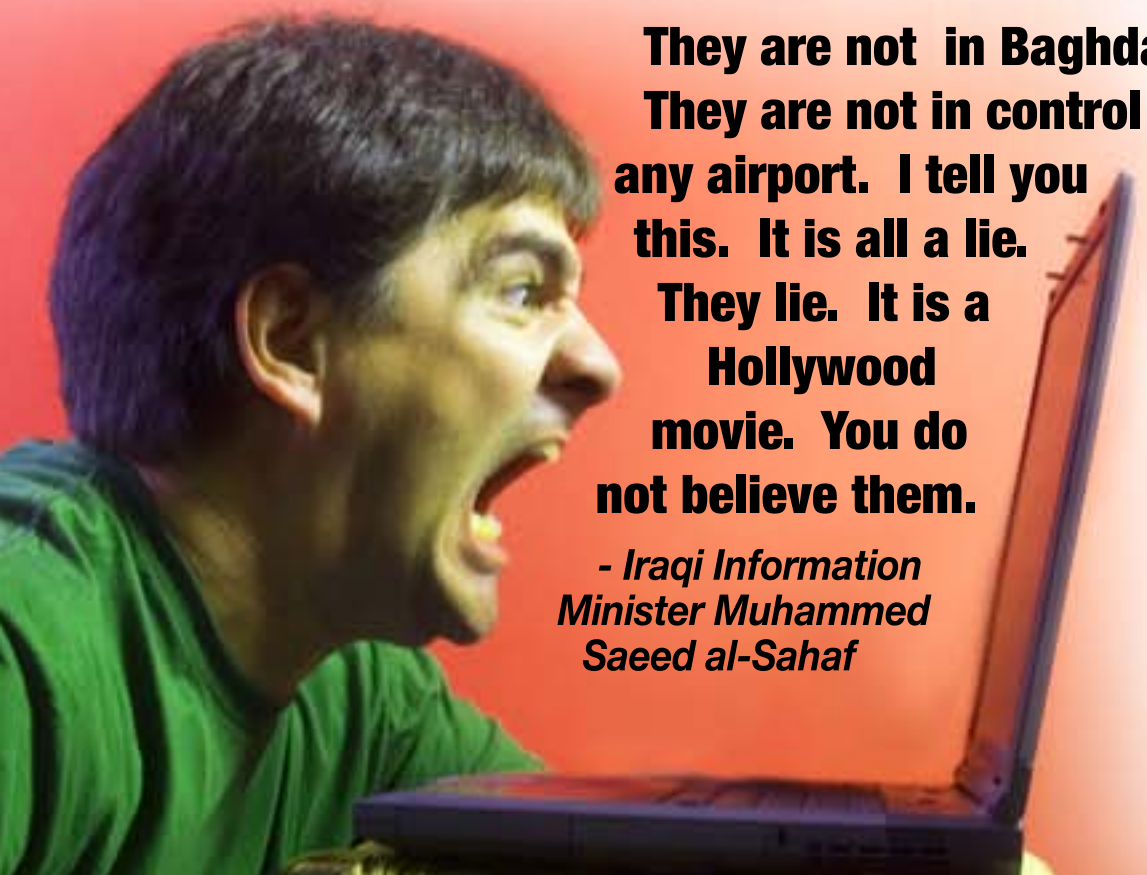
"Innovation"! That's so cute! *Diner Dash* is, in all these respects, a straightforward imitation of *Betty's Beer Bar* by Mystery Studio. (Mystery is a two-man team based in, believe it or not, Uruguay.)

Later in the same interview, Baghdad Kenny continues:

It's tempting to be conservative and copy stuff. But trying new things is what drives us. We're really enjoying incubating the unique vision of each of our developers. And for me personally, it's exhilarating to oversee a growing portfolio of new ideas.

Once More Round the Track

History is repeating itself in casual games. In the 1990s, in the wake of *Magic: The Gathering*, dozens of imitators rushed out trading card games. In the '80s, the boom was in black-and-white comic books; in the '70s,



**They are not in Baghdad.
They are not in control of
any airport. I tell you
this. It is all a lie.
They lie. It is a
Hollywood
movie. You do
not believe them.**

**- Iraqi Information
Minister Muhammed
Saeed al-Sahaf**

roleplaying games. Obscure creator achieves novel success; hordes of opportunists glut the market; the bubble bursts; four or five survivors dominate the field; lots of naive latecomers lose their shirts.

This time, the cycle is interesting for the debate it provokes in developer circles. Many casual games are made by solo entrepreneurs or small teams, who are a diverse bunch. Some are in it for love of the games, others are indies (independents) in pursuit of freedom from company restrictions, still others seek the quick hit and speedy exit. It's your basic cross-section of humanity. The obvious success of FunPause and other cloners has highlighted a lack of total overlap between "casual" and "indie," and the disjuncture has prompted sharp argument on the Indie Gamer forums.

Chuzzle creator John Raptis wrote of *Fairies*, "Look, we all clone. The issue here is that you clone because you play a game, and you say, 'Man, this is fun, but it's missing giant tarantulas that shoot laser beams, and that changes the

gameplay.' Then you write that new version." And in a later post: "I don't really feel that miffed - my attitude was more along the lines of, 'There's all this stuff I didn't put in *Chuzzle*, why didn't you put some of it in?'"

Jason Kapalka, Creative Director of PopCap Games, saw more dire ramifications:

"There is a big difference between a game that adds vital, new, interesting elements to a base idea - such as *JewelQuest* or *Big Kahuna Reef* did with *Bejeweled* - and games where the only changes are cosmetic tweaks to dodge legal ramifications. [...] For the 'indie' game community, supposedly united by a desire to make the kinds of games the big mainstream developers aren't willing or able to do, it's kind of depressing to see such blatant unoriginality; more depressing still to see it being lauded as a good thing.

"What the current thinking is going to do, if it continues, is annihilate any nascent sense of community in this field. Ask yourself this: If you had a good original game idea right now, mocked up

in a prototype form but not completed, how comfortable would you be posting it in the Indie Gamer forums? Would you suspect - rightly - that rather than getting constructive feedback and criticism, you'd instead be giving a bunch of people a head start in ripping you off?" Kapalka warned that the community could become "increasingly paranoid, cut-throat, and suspicious. You're right that there are lots of other industries where this is already the case... but is it really inevitable for such a young and promising field as casual games to follow suit?"

Paul Timson responded, "Maybe the smaller guys just saw an opportunity to get some income built up too, so they could continue making games at all. It is all very well and good wishing devs would create those strange/interesting indie games that you obviously look forward to, but like you, they have realized for the most part there is no market for them [...M]aybe PopCap could help those devs taking risks and trying new things by starting to publish them too! There's an idea."

The controversy continues to simmer. One Indie Games forum member has started a blog, *1 Good Game*, specifically to call out and publicly shame cloners. It looks like the indie gaming community, if there ever was one, may go the way of “communities” like my soulless subdivision, Milwood.

Still, there is hope for individual creators. Thomas Warfield’s *Pretty Good Solitaire* is a leading indie success story. In a 2004 blog entry, “The Portal Bubble,” Warfield discusses the indies’ fear that “the portals will become just like retail publishers. Royalty rates will continue to drop and eventually independent game companies will become totally dependent on the portals to survive [...] However, as long as game developers do not put themselves into a position of dependence on the portals, this simply cannot happen.


“[T]here is a fundamental difference between retail publishers and the online portals. Retail publishers (and their distributors) control access to the space in retail stores. [...] Online portals, on the other hand, only control space on

their own websites. This space is not limited and it is not expensive to create your own website and compete with them. All they really have, when you come right down to it, is Internet traffic. [But] the portals only have traffic and customers as long as people are finding interesting games there.”

Warfield articulates the portals’ inevitable fate: “Things are going to look great and the market will look like it will expand forever, and then suddenly it won’t. The weak companies will get hit first and a lot of the portals will fail. The market for these games will crash, and when it is finally over only those who have the best games and the best business strategy will survive. Those developers who are dependent on the portals alone for their income will find themselves in a world of hurt.”

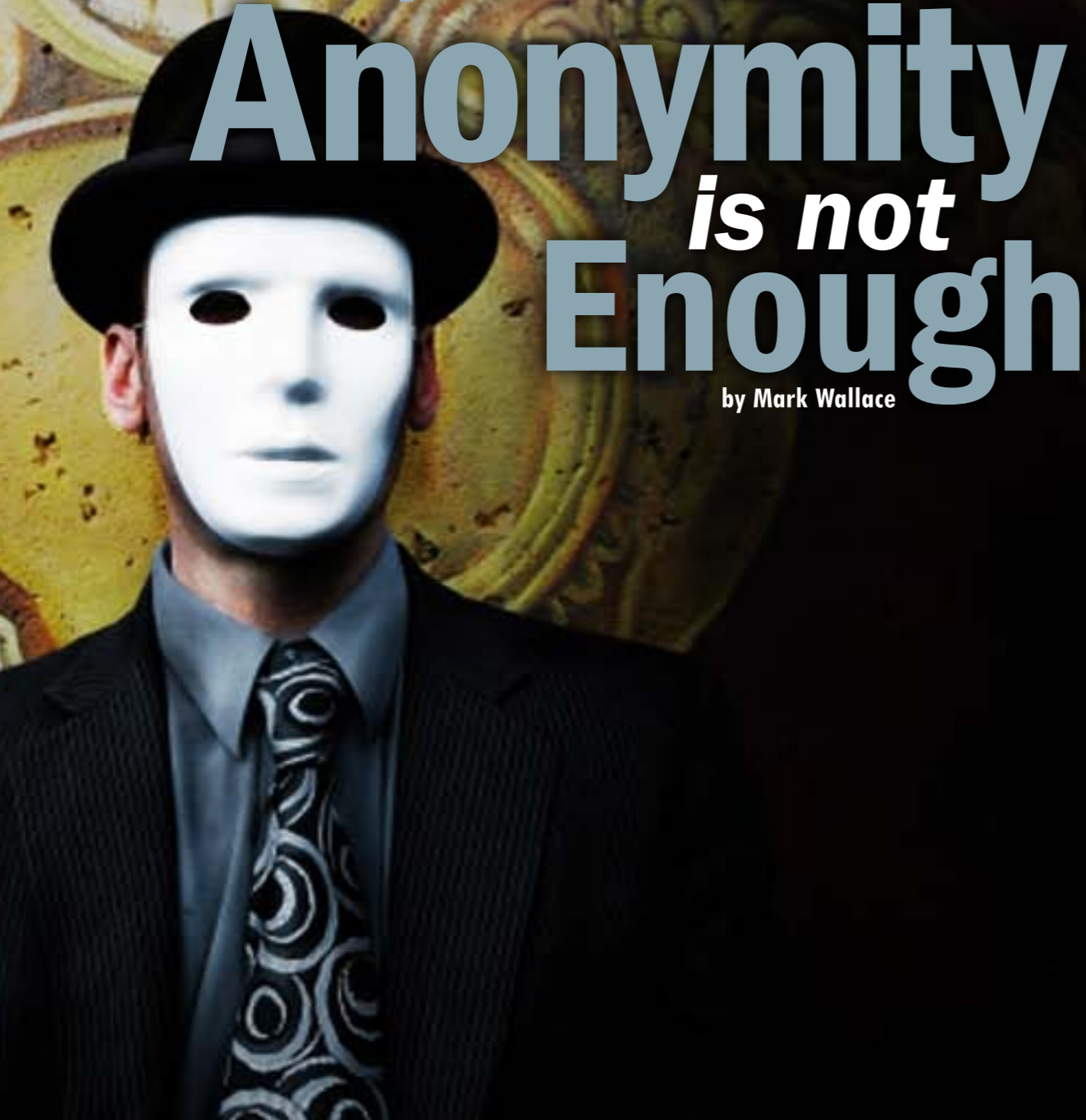
[COMMENTS](#)

Allen Varney designed the PARANOIA paper-and-dice roleplaying game (2004 edition) and has contributed to computer games from Sony Online, Origin, Interplay, and Looking Glass.



There are only two of three human stories and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before.

-Willa Cather



Anonymity *is not* Enough

by Mark Wallace

Boston, the Harvard Faculty Club, a snowy morning in February. About 30 technologists, encryption experts, academics and corporate execs, plus a handful of journalists, sit facing each other around a long horseshoe arrangement of tables. The assembled luminaries include leading developers from IBM, Microsoft and Mozilla, not to mention former FCC commissioner Reed Hundt; Esther Dyson, the founding chair of ICANN; Marc Rotenburg, president of EPIC, the Electronic Privacy Information Center; and Doc Searls, editor of Linux Journal and an author of the Cluetrain Manifesto.

It's cold outside, but the faculty club has laid out coffee and pastries for breakfast. It's a good thing, too, since it's going to be a long two days here, talking out the issues, approaches and possible solutions to the problem of how we create identities on the internet and, once created, how we keep them safe. Phishing, stalking, secure desktops, one-way hashes, *World of Warcraft* and the Department of Homeland Security will all come up over the next 48 hours. It's

pretty obvious nothing's actually going to be solved in this room, but it's an impressive collection of talent nonetheless. What does it have to do with the future of online games and virtual worlds? Quite possibly, everything.

One of the best things about the internet, in the minds of many people, is the anonymity it affords. For gamers, that anonymity comes into play nowhere more than in massively multiplayer online games and virtual worlds, where the disconnect between our physical and digital selves gives us a chance to take on new roles and experiment with different aspects of the combined persona that bridges the gap between the two realms.

But that anonymity can also be one of the internet's great drawbacks. Freed from accountability for their actions, some players seek to experiment with the more annoying sides of their online identities, becoming in-game griefers or forum trolls. On a more serious level, some use the protection of the screen to pull off scams that can cost unsuspecting

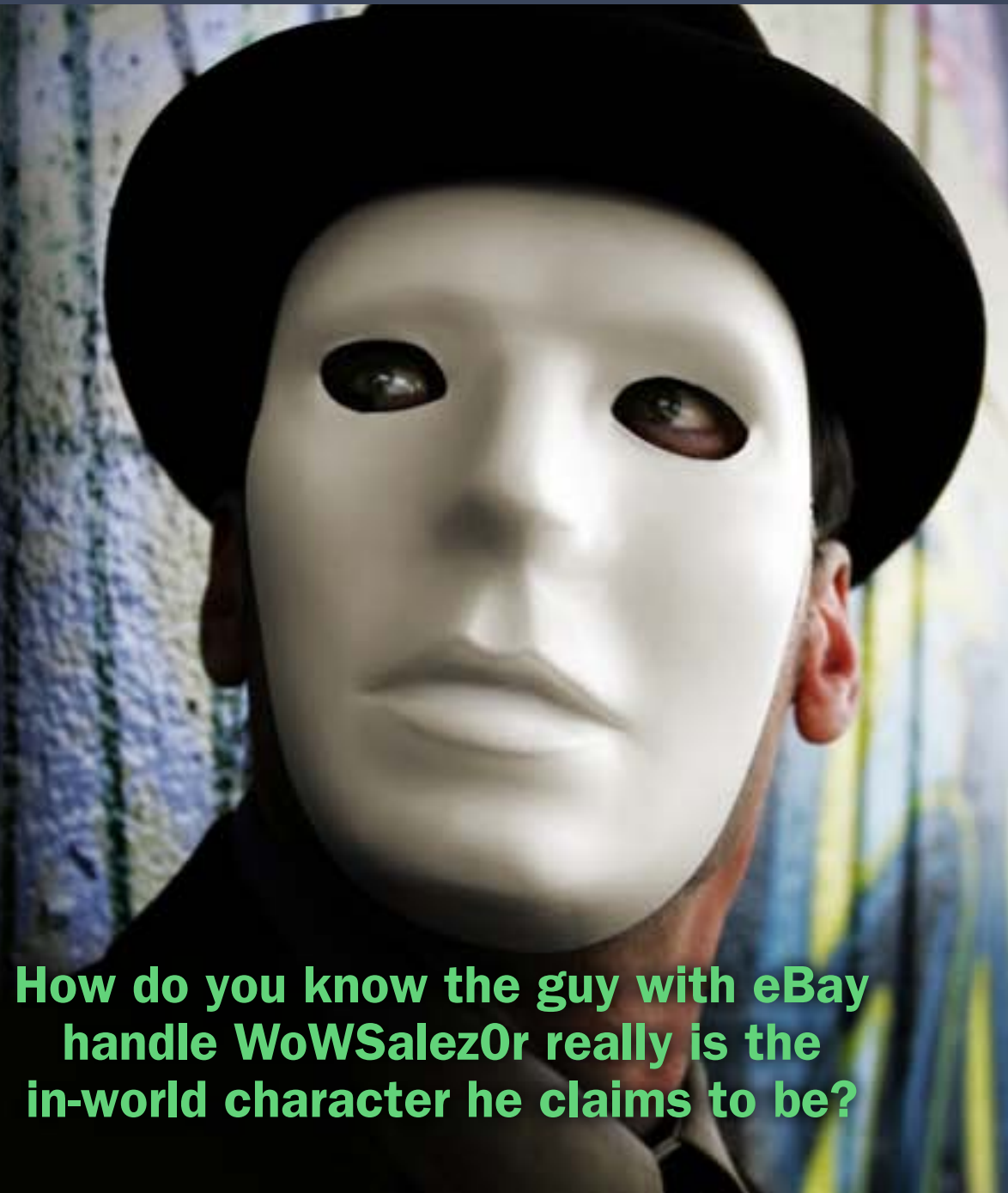
players real money, or to stalk other players online (and sometimes offline as well). And for those honest virtual businessmen out there, anonymity can sometimes make it difficult to build the kind of solid reputation of trust that any smart customer looks for.

Finding solutions to the problems of online anonymity will be important, especially as more and more people find ways to do things in online worlds that have a deep and real impact on their own and others' offline lives. But retaining the advantages of an anonymous medium is important, as well. The question, then, is how to split the difference. How can I convince you I am who I say I am in a digital context, while at the same time protecting myself from prying eyes, and giving others the chance to maintain the cloak of anonymity some find so crucial to their online lives? Who am I, anyway?

No matter what kind of online existence you have, these issues should already be important to you. Even if all you do online is pay your bills, you want to know you're not giving your credit card number to a phishing site, and you

probably want to know the government isn't harvesting data about what kind of purchases you're making. If those purchases include buying *World of Warcraft* gold on eBay, though, you've got another problem. How do you know the guy with eBay handle *WoWSalez0r* really is the in-world character he claims to be? And, if you've got a more complex virtual business venture in mind, like one of the investment banks that spring up every so often in *Second Life* or *EVE Online* - ventures that can mean real money for both their executives and investors - how can you convince potential customers you can be trusted with their money? In the real world, you may be a person of high standing and accomplishment, but in the context of cyberspace, you're just another toon.

As the things that happen in virtual worlds become more and more integrated with our offline lives, having a real identity in such places will become more and more important. The good news is some of the tools being discussed in the distributed conversation that landed at Harvard in early February may do a great deal to address these kinds of issues. Taken together, they



How do you know the guy with eBay handle *WoWSalez0r* really is the in-world character he claims to be?

How can you know for sure?

could lead to a much broader range of available choices as to who we want to be in online worlds.

Perhaps surprisingly, two of the most interesting solutions are being developed by companies most of us think of as nameless, faceless behemoths of the technology industry: Microsoft and IBM. The "Identity Metasystem," a project developed by an avuncular technologist named Kim Cameron at Microsoft, aims to bring a kind of "identity protocol" to the internet, not unlike the Internet Protocol (the IP in TCP/IP) that allows the various types of networks that make up the internet to talk to each other.

Under the Identity Metasystem, it won't matter whether you're paying a bill, signing on to a virtual world or buying gold on eBay: Any identity management application written to use the Metasystem's open standards will be able to interact with them all. Your various identities (i.e., your username and password in various contexts, plus whatever other information you want to include) will be stored in a kind of secure online wallet. Microsoft's InfoCard

application, which should be available this year, uses the same metaphor to represent each identity as a graphical ID card. When you sign onto eBay, you simply choose your eBay identity card, and the InfoCard system - or whatever other application you prefer - first verifies the site is what it says it is (i.e., you're not being phished), and then sends over the information. There's no need for you to store your password in a company database, as you can simply point and click to sign on.

While the Identity Metasystem is a long way from becoming the internet standard for identity transactions, it is gaining traction among various development communities, and marks a big step for Microsoft toward a contribution to the metaverse that need not be tied to Microsoft products at all.

What IBM contributed to the Harvard meeting, though, is perhaps of more immediate interest to the denizens of virtual worlds. If you've ever met a *World of Warcraft* toon named Vlastic, chances are it was being played by a "Web Theorist" in IBM's Emerging

Technologies group named Andrew Donoho. Donoho is currently implementing what's being called the Papillon system - which doesn't want to know anything about your real-world identity at all.

Papillon will give users the power of "persistent anonymity." Those of us who inhabit virtual worlds already enjoy this power, to a certain extent. In one sense, it's nothing more than the identity of your avatar: Those who know the avatar Walker Spaight count on the fact that the same person (me) is behind him each time he appears in *Second Life*. What's important, here, is merely that it's the same person, not which particular person it is. Walker's identity is persistent, but at the same time it's anonymous in real-world terms.

The problem is, how can you know for sure? Passwords aren't the most secure pieces of information in the world. Of course, not many people are too concerned about who's at the controls of Walker Spaight. But if Walker were up to anything interesting - like selling *Second Life* currency on eBay, for example, or



developing a project for someone in the virtual world - you'd at least want to know Walker was always Walker, and you'd probably want to know Walker was always me.

Papillon will allow users to make connections between their online identities that can verify both those claims. Rather than storing passwords or real-world identity information, Papillon will only store associations between identities in different contexts, encoded in such a way that the information is secure, even if it falls into the wrong hands. It seems a trivial thing on the surface, but the tools it makes possible could change how we think of our identities in online worlds. With Papillon, knowing eBay's WoWSalez0r is really the *World of Warcraft* toon he says he is becomes a trivial matter of simply asking at a Papillon-enabled Web site. If WoWSalez0r has registered there, you have your answer. And if he hasn't, you can make your own decision as to whether or not to do business with him, just as we do today.

And if connecting your online identity to your "real" self is important, you can do

that, too. For many people, such connections already carry much weight. Just look at the number of people who reveal their identity in *The Sims Online* through the realsimonline.com site. Even there, though, a screenshot and a claim that Toon X is Person Y is pretty slim evidence to go on. For many inhabitants of the virtual world, total anonymity is not enough. When tools like Papillon and the Identity Metasystem arrive later this year, we won't have to settle for total anonymity anymore.

As the things we think of as "real" move further into the place we think of as "virtual," it's a good bet that more and more people will demand the kind of strong connections such systems will make possible. These kinds of things allow us to build stronger communities than are presently possible in cyberspace. The metaverse of virtual worlds is held back by a lack of trust, at the moment. But imagine a version of cyberspace in which all your online identities could be connected to each other in a secure, verifiable fashion, in whatever combination you choose. The kind of community found in a *World of Warcraft* guild is only the beginning.

When you can travel from *World of Warcraft* to *Second Life* to *EVE Online* to *ActiveWorlds* to eBay and have your avatar in each of those contexts be **you** (if you so choose), that's when the metaverse will really start cooking. I, for one, look forward to it. But then, who am I? [COMMENTS](#)

Mark Wallace can be found on the web at [Walkering.com](#). His book with Peter Ludlow, *Only A Game: Online Worlds and the Virtual Journalist Who Knew Too Much*, will be published by O'Reilly in 2006.



Alter SEX

by Bonnie Ruberg

Where Is Sex?

Sex is everywhere. It's on our TV sets; it's in our art; it's on our minds. Sometimes, it's even in our bedrooms. This fascination with sex - which goes far beyond its reproductive uses - is part of what makes us human. Wherever we go, sex is bound to follow. So, while the act itself may be a physical one, sex has had no trouble adapting to the challenges of our newest frontiers, non-physical worlds.

Sex does not only need a "where," though, it needs a "who." As individuals, we may have romping on the brain, but since sex is innately an exchange, it's much easier to spot when it involves more than one person. Sex needs a social environment, somewhere two people can meet and go about their business.

The internet, of course, has no shortage of social environments. After all, what is the internet but a (arguably sexual) conjunction of people? From chat rooms to full-blown virtual worlds, there are countless ways and places to interact with other users. Whether these

environments have been constructed to encourage fun, friendships or just simple fooling around, sex has and will pop up. It's a symptom of every community, however small, however tasteful.

Let's Get Specific

If you give a mouse a cookie ... well, we know how that one ends. It seems sex, too, is inevitable, given a few minor variables. In games like *Second Life*, a place of theoretically infinite possibility, sex has become mainstay of in-world culture. True, detailed attention to character design and decent graphics gave *SL's* sex life an initial boost, but pose balls, kinky boots and clickable nipples don't come from thin air. Players are actively working to make their sex better.

Other online games are much less welcoming to in-game sex. Worlds like *Habbo* regulate acceptable content, and make cybering an obstacle course where sex has to evolve to survive. It begins to change its shape, its values, its language. Yet, it remains strangely reminiscent of real life. For example, in

Habbo, physical items (furniture, to be specific) are the incentive for sex, goofy words like “bobba” are used instead of “intercourse,” and on-screen avatars stare awkwardly ahead during the act.

Quid Pro Quo

Just because sex can spring up anywhere doesn't mean videogames make getting it on an easy task. Game mechanics are always improving, but, by a similar token, they'll always fall short. The same thing goes for graphics. Unless pixelation is what gets you hot - and to each his own - virtual nudity usually can't compete with the real thing. Not to mention the fact that most games aren't equipped with naked skins or “have sex with” commands. Sure, you can dance your pseudo-sultry night elf dance, but for the most part, the logistics just aren't there.

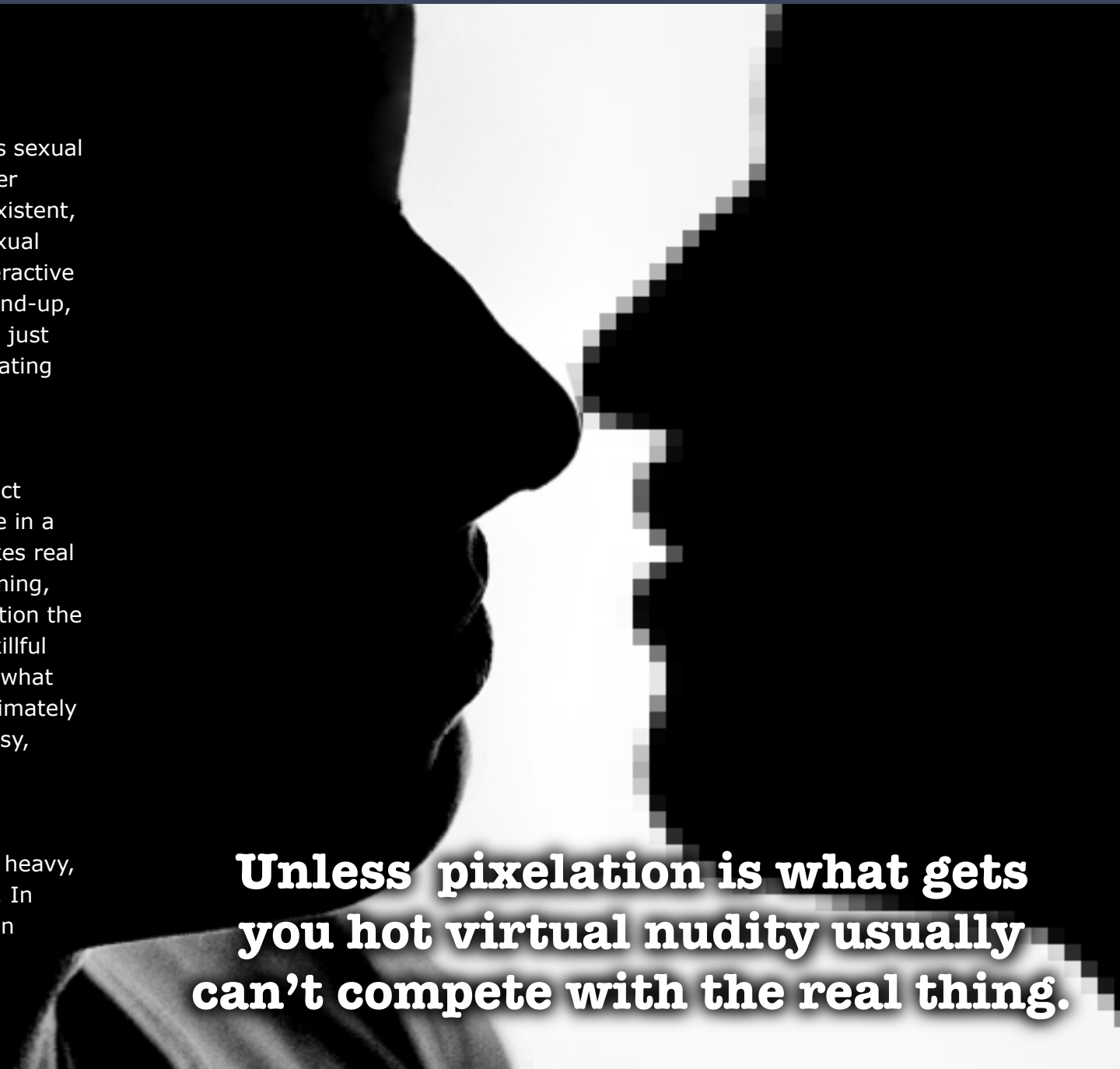
At the same time, it's possible to argue online videogames do have some inherently sexy qualities. Virtual worlds are based on human interaction and

offer relatively easy, anonymous communication, which encourages sexual openness. Plus, all games, whether visually stunning or visually nonexistent, provide fluid intercourse (both sexual and otherwise) through chat. Interactive visualizations may be on the up-and-up, but good old-fashioned sex talk is just as popular, convenient and stimulating as ever.

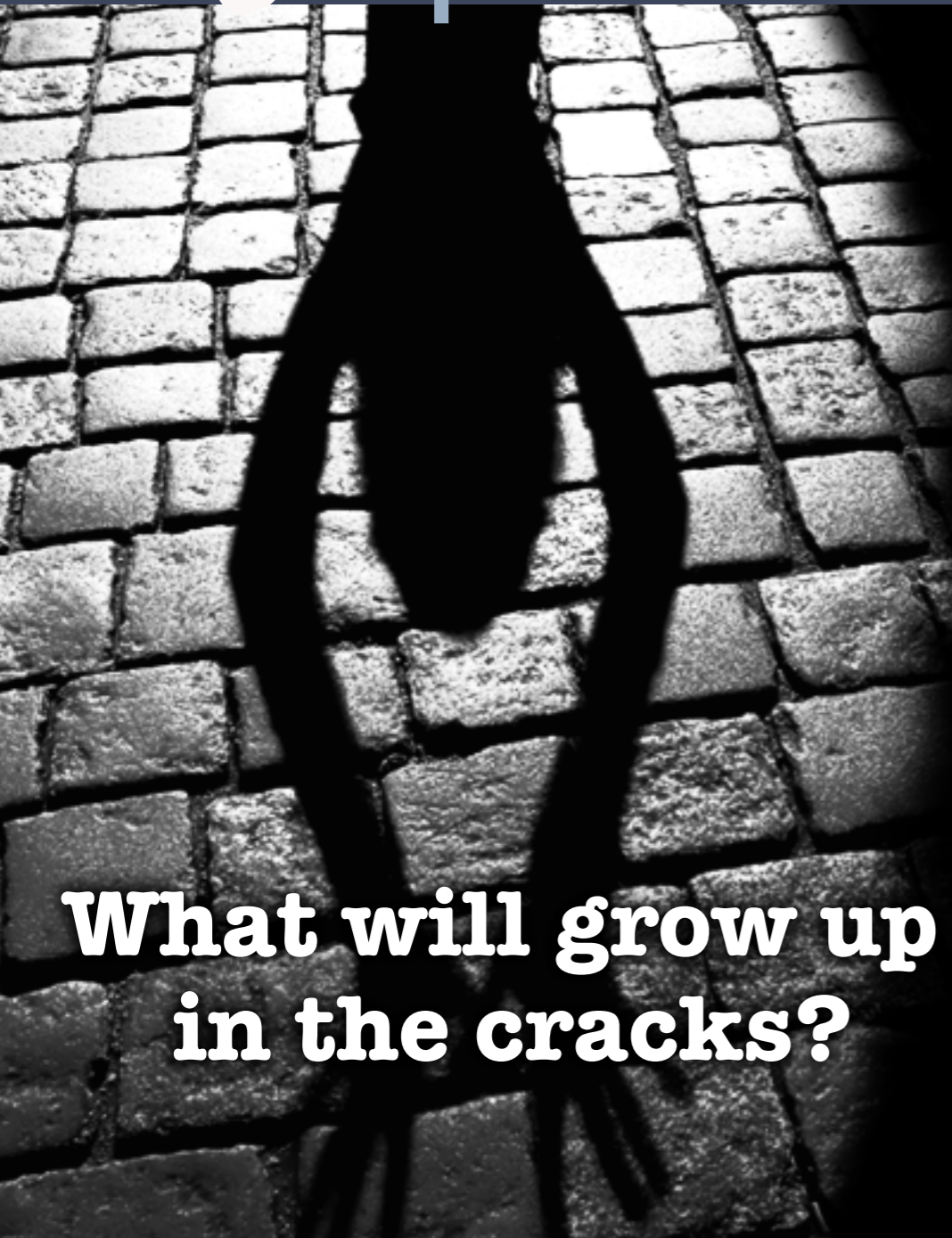
Still, virtual sex is a challenge. Collaborating successfully on an act that's both attractive and effective in a wholly intangible environment takes real skill: the right words, the right timing, the right imagination. Not to mention the difficulties in finding an equally skillful partner. But these challenges are what make virtual sex arousing and ultimately fun. After all, if great sex were easy, would it be great?

A Garden of Weeds

When it comes to getting hot and heavy, we human beings are resourceful. In turn, virtual sex can be found even



Unless pixelation is what gets you hot virtual nudity usually can't compete with the real thing.



What will grow up in the cracks?

where it's least expected, where it's least likely to survive. It flourishes like weeds – popping up between the cracks of cyber society in both rough and temperate climates, forming a sort of leafy background to the more acceptable blossoms of online interaction. Out of the spotlight, sex becomes sexier in the shadows.

But all of that may be changing this year, with the release of a flood of MMOEGs – massively multiplayer online erotic games – ranging from the cartoon-esque *Naughty America*, to the teledildonics-based *3Feelonline*. These worlds are designed for sex. Their graphics, their game mechanics; all are set up to optimize the sexual experience. They're moving sex from the background to the foreground, out of the shadows and into the light.

These MMOEGs are both reacting to, and taking part in, an upswing of interest in adult videogames. While they're catering to a wide-spread love of sex, they're also testing new territory, and they may be

walking a delicate line. When sex is no longer a challenge or a taboo, will it still pique our interest? Will these games satiate or spoil our sexual hunger?

Sociolotron and *Second Life*, two already-released MMOGs where sex is king, have both proven themselves capable of keeping players interested and aroused. This may be due in part to the feelings of transgression they promote. Here, fetishes thrive. Vanilla sex is merely a starting point for the creation of new dark spots on the map of sexuality.

After Sex

When sex is a given – when, for the first time, it is actually the established, open, accepted basis for society – what will grow up in the cracks? What other element of human interaction will take root in the shadows behind well-lit sex? Perhaps the answer is simply more sex: Communities of fetish, like those found in *Second Life*. Or, maybe we will move away from sex altogether.

In *Sociolotron*, for example, power struggles and gang rule lie beneath the surface of a seemingly sex-centered virtual London. *Second Life* players, too, take time out of their active social lives to involve themselves in local politics. But the largest current that undercuts such worlds – one that runs even deeper, perhaps, than sex – is economy. Like sex, an exchange system is bound to evolve in all but the simplest of societies.

It may be, though, that sex and economics have more in common than we might think. Sex can be used for economic motives or economics for sexual ones. Both are ways to intermediate between people. Both represent the networking of people through a medium of intercourse. Both create a web, connecting players through their past interactions. Both create a common exchange value, and a common language of exchange.

All of which begs the question: Is there such thing as a basic human function? Does sex pop up in all our virtual worlds because it is, at our core, our primary purpose? Or is money – the need to trade, to claim value – what's at our center? Perhaps it's neither sex nor money, but what they both stand in for, namely connecting with other people.

Only time will tell what's in store for the future of MMOEGs. But, whatever comes after sex, one thing's for certain: People won't be doing it alone. [COMMENTS](#)

Bonnie Ruberg is a videogame journalist specializing in gender and sexuality in games and gaming communities. She also runs a blog, Heroine Sheik, dedicated to such issues. Most recently, her work has appeared at Wired.com, The A. V. Club, and Gamasutra.



Sex and economics have more in common than we might think.



Anywhere, Anytime, Any Phone

How A Band of Rebels from Sega.Com Transformed Nokia's N-Gage from a Failing Handset to a Mobile Gaming Software Platform with Revolutionary Potential

by Max Steele

I'm sipping a latte at Starbucks when an instant message arrives on my mobile phone. There's a mobile game tournament starting soon with a \$30 prize, and I'm invited to play. No computer necessary, just my phone. Thirty bucks will just about cover my Triple-Shot Venti No-Foam Latte, and I've got some time to spare, so I decide to play.

When I log into the tournament chat room, dozens of other gamers are already there, wirelessly connecting from around the globe - Thailand, India, England, Australia and countless other places that might not even have Starbucks, if such places exist. All these gamers got the same SMS I did, our message traveling via satellite to virtually every carrier in the world. We stop to chat briefly, handsets engaged momentarily in slow motion mobile chat, and then we play. My mobile gaming *feng shui* is weak, and I lose quickly. Some guy from Poland named "Zergus" takes the prize. I wonder how many lattes you can get in Poland for \$30. I wonder what time it is in Poland and all the other places I'm connected to. Who's playing me at 4 a.m. halfway around the world? I'm fascinated and intrigued by our unlikely communion in much the same way Texas Hold 'Em addicts must be, as they sit in their dorm rooms, offices, and Starbucks around the world. Unlike them, however, I flip my phone closed and am quickly on my way.

This all sounds like science fiction fantasy, but it's happening right now. Cross-carrier communication problems and international access issues have not impeded the path of progress - the wireless global gaming network is up and running real-time tournaments already.

Who's responsible for this revolution? EA? Microsoft? Xbox Live Mobile? Actually, it's Nokia – courtesy of one of the most interesting acquisition and strategic redirection plays I've seen recently. Following on the heels of the much ballyhooed failure of its N-Gage game deck, Nokia has in the past year quietly transformed near debacle into sleeper strategy. Instead of focusing on one dedicated game gadget, it has started moving toward making **all** of its mobile phones into potential wireless gaming devices. It's an audacious plan. And it just may change everything.

Why Nokia? Where did this come from? Where is it headed now?

Those who've been reading *The Escapist* the beginning may remember my prediction in "The War at Hand" that Nokia's new strategy will make it one of the most important companies in handheld gaming. Since then, I've been doing a bit of digging. It turns out our story began in Japan during the Dot Com boom of the 1990s and, ultimately, revolves around a small band of rebels from the former Sega.com.

What Dreams Were Cast

Back in the mid-'90s, Sega.com was the Xerox PARC of the online games industry: A pioneer with innovations never commercially utilized by its corporate parent. Originally known as Segasoft, a research and development division of the preeminent Sega of Japan games company, Sega.com led the vanguard in the multiplayer gaming world between 1997 and 2001. It created one of the first online game/community services (Heat.NET), launched the first massively multiplayer game capable of supporting one million players at a time (10Six), built the first gaming ISP (SegaNet), and supported the first online-enabled console (Sega Dreamcast) and first online console sports title (NFL 2K1). Sega.com entered the mobile gaming space in 2001.

In the end, after six chaotic years and facing overwhelming debt from other failing businesses, Sega of Japan decided to pull the plug on the promising but bankrupt Sega.com venture. And so, in March 2003, Sega.com was on the market for an acquirer.

It found one: Nokia.



Wiener's games division sold handsets in China, Thailand and India in droves...

Getting "N-Gaged" to Nokia

Nokia, the biggest phone maker in the world, was only a month away from launching its N-Gage game deck when it acquired the people and technology of Sega.com in August 2003. Now known as the Nokia Network Games Solution Group, part of the larger Nokia games unit, the former Sega.com team designed and implemented the N-Gage Arena during 2003 and early 2004, and by spring 2004, its full community features were in place and the first community-oriented titles were being released.

If the team from Sega.com had more time to work on the community features before the N-Gage launched, N-Gage Arena might have matched the success of X-Box Live. They are similar platforms: Both are full-featured on-device online services with alerts, tournaments, game rankings, chat, message boards and play-matching – all the features that transform a hardware platform into a community. Interestingly, both are descended from the original Sega.com concept, architecture, features and policies. (Both the head of X-Box and its director of marketing came from the Sega family of companies.) But

instead, N-Gage was now in danger and sinking fast.

In January 2005, Nokia handed the reins of its games unit to Gerard Wiener, the former COO of Sega.com. No stranger to tough battles, the Harvard-educated lawyer turned operations wizard had been the frontline commander during the two-year restructuring of Sega.com and head of Nokia Network Games Solution Group since the acquisition.

As Wiener jumped in to stabilize the Nokia games business, he reportedly stepped on some toes. He started by shifting focus away from North America and Europe. Instead, Wiener's games division sold handsets in China, Thailand, and India in droves – over a million in 12 months, which significantly beat the prior year's total sales and exceeded all internal and external targets, insiders confirm. Publicly, Nokia is stating 2.4 million N-Gage handsets are in the field.

At the same time he pushed for increasing worldwide device sales, Wiener and the former Sega.com team were busy changing Nokia's games unit's entire business model. At E3 2005, Wiener announced a new strategy for

Nokia's game unit: N-Gage would move from a hardware device to a software platform operating on the family of Series 60 (Symbian) smartphones. At the same time, SNAP Mobile, a new, lighter-weight version of the proven Sega.com technology, would function as a software platform for connected gaming on mass market Java phones. Because both platforms offer connectivity for mobile gaming by plugging into the N-Gage Arena, the result is a connected mobile gaming community spanning a vast number of handsets worldwide.

The shift to a software-based strategy addresses needs in the mobile gaming space in a way never before brought to the market. Nokia plans to sell 25 million smartphones in the next 12 months, which means they will have a huge installed base of game-capable smartphones. Countless millions more can be connected via the Java-based SNAP Mobile. If every Nokia phone has a community launcher application that connects users to games, music, other entertainment and to each other, we are looking at a massively important development. In other words, Nokia's

games strategy suddenly has real backbone and potential.

To Be, or Not To Be

The real test for Nokia is whether it can follow through on its strategy. Even as I researched this article, rumors circulated that Wiener is moving to a position outside of games. Why this would occur is unclear. Wiener himself would not comment, but other sources indicated he is slated for a new strategic position **not** directly involved in the games business. That in itself is a cause for concern. Nokia can ill afford to lose the momentum he started.

There are some promising signs, such as rumors of talks with major third-party publishers and potential partnerships with Sun to promote the Java-based SNAP Mobile, but without some continuity at the helm, it's easy to be worried about Nokia's ability to stay on target. A recent embarrassing announcement by a high-ranking Nokia executive rekindled rumors of the demise of Nokia gaming and perhaps highlighted Nokia's own confusion on gaming without Wiener to guide them.

Clearly, Nokia came a long way in the past year. Let's hope those labors were not in vain. As they say, the jury is still out. [COMMENTS](#)

Max Steele is an enigma wrapped inside a riddle. When not actively being mysterious, he passes his time manipulating time and space to fit his plans for world domination.



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THE CONTRIAN: Growing Out of the Stone Age

by John Tynes



In my last column, I wrote about roleplaying at the tabletop and online, and how the latter experience falls short of the former. I don't think that's a gap technology can readily close - the two experiences are fundamentally different - but in writing that column, I kept wondering: What could technology do to improve the experience of roleplaying online?

I soon realized that was the wrong question to ask. Technology's impact on roleplaying is limited for the foreseeable future. Making your voice sound funny on Xbox Live doesn't make you a better roleplayer; neither do RP servers on MMOGs, which aggregate more roleplayers together but have no effective ways of enforcing RP through game mechanics. *Shadowbane* has its RP server where factional hatreds are actually obeyed rather than relegated to closet drama, and most online games are happy to encourage roleplayers as long as it doesn't cost anything. But the conventional wisdom is that good RP experiences require good in-game GMs,

nannyish supervision, or both, to ensure that Everyone Has The Right Sort Of Fun.

The hell with that. I started playing *Dungeons & Dragons* around 1983, and we learned quickly in those days: Good gaming needs a good group, period. The rest is optional.

Back when TSR, the original publisher of *D&D*, cranked out the first adventures in the *Dragonlance* series, I really bought into it. I obsessively studied the modules, recruited players, photocopied back-story and gave everyone packets of information about their characters, the world and the awe-inspiring story of epic grandeur we were about to undertake.

The first session lasted about 45 minutes, at which point the group I'd gathered was so bored, we watched TV instead.

The problem wasn't *Dragonlance*, despite its death grip on fantasy clichés and exuberant ambition. The problem was with the group I'd assembled to play: We

sucked. They weren't into it and I did a poor job of getting them into it. We really were better off watching television.

Since then, I've had a lot of gaming groups, good and bad, and what I've always found is the group makes the game, not the other way around. The biggest impediment to tabletop gaming being a bigger hobby is the need to find a half-dozen people who are smart, creative, engaged and punctual. Good luck with that.

That's the real problem with RP online. It's not the lack of tools for roleplaying - it's the lack of tools for finding and maintaining good groups. Groups are self-selecting by definition, whether they are guilds or ad hoc clusters of players doing the same mission. If players want a better experience in online games, they need better tools for groups.

What they need are community-building tools. They aren't getting them.

The case in point is *World of Warcraft*, whose own official community site lays

out the depressing summary of its offerings: "The official site containing news, trailers, gameplay videos, wallpapers, screen shots and the official forums." There's only one word for this kind of community support and that word is "yawn."

Sure, it's fine. And admittedly, when you want a bold, original vision in online gaming, the place to go is not Blizzard. So, let's give them a hand. Let's talk about what they could do to better support online gaming communities.

Blogs: I'm talking about in-game, in-character blogs. You log in and while you're waiting in the server queue, you can access your blog, guild blogs, friends' blogs, etc. The interface is inside the game client, not on an external web page. You don't have to be in the game, but you need to be in the client. There, you can blog as Thundarr the night elf to your heart's content.

Bolting an HTML window onto the game client is easy. But you want to give players a reason to use your in-game

blog tool instead of something on the web. So, let's snazz it up a little with some features you won't get from LiveJournal.

Blog Waypoints: Embedding waypoints in your blog means other players can follow your footsteps. If you found some really cool corner of the gameworld, you can share a waypoint for other players to go there, too. If you're organizing a dance party, you can point everybody to the right location.

Blog Cameras: Pick a waypoint and let viewers of the blog look through a camera to see that location. Drop one on a famous loot drop spawn and visitors can check the current status of the queue to fight the bad guy, or just check out the amazing view you found. Mountain climbers can drop a cam at the top of the summit; the rest of us can enjoy it.

Blog Screenshots: Besides dumping screenshots to your hard drive, they can also be added to your in-game photo album. Then, you can easily select one



**What they
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They aren't
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If your blog is all about cybering with trolls, you can keep that stuff to yourself.

and add it to a blog entry without uploading files. Adding coordinates as metadata to all screenshots allows any screenshot to offer a waypoint or a live feed from the point where it was taken.

With features like these, players will launch the client just to keep up with the blogs. As long as you keep the blog server separate from the game server, players can do this without taking up valuable slots in the live game. But if they're already in and playing, they can be checking out their friends' blogs or updating their own while suffering through endless travel times.

Imagine you meet another player in game. She's 30th level, a druid, and she has some sweet gear. "Where'd you get that?" you might ask. She responds by opening her blog to you, and there you find the entry where she records the sweet loot drop she got. There's a waypoint there you can grab, and you can check out the live camera for that site to see if it's crawling with Horde scumbags. As long as you're reading her blog, you can see she's working through a big quest you're doing, too, so you ask

her for some advice and offer to tag along while you both work on it. For that matter, you can add a comment to her blog entry and post a thumbs-up/thumbs-down review of her blog in general, which affects her standing in the blog stats and can lead to more traffic to her write-ups.

Competing for better blog stats becomes a metagame. Links from blog to blog introduce you to players you would never otherwise meet. Players with popular blogs become celebrities, attracting useful group mates, twinklers and friends aplenty. If you're looking for group mates, you can scan someone's blog and see if they sound like crap or not. You can flag an entry as public, for friends only or for guildmates only. If your blog is all about cybering with trolls, you can keep that stuff to yourself.

So, blogs are one thing online games could do to help players find each other and make more meaningful connections. What else is there?

Privacy: You know what would be a great thing to do with local/global chat?

Turn it the heck off. Unless you want to hear 16 gajillion players screeching, "THIEF 3 LFG!!!!!" you shouldn't have to participate in that particular "feature" of persistent worlds. I know diehards scream about issues like instancing and whether it's really a shared world if I can ignore your annoying ass. Let me just make that call for you: Yeah, it is. It's still a shared world if my friends and me, who have opted to hang out on my island of sanity, can pretend you and the 2,000 other motards who pollute this server with your constant stream of shouts and come-ons simply don't exist. We still have our guild, we can meet people when we need to, and when something big is going down I'll need all the help I can get. But the rest of the time? Leave me alone. I realize there's a mythical fantasy in which we're all heroes striving for glory, but the reality of MMOGs is most of you are shills for the Home Shopping Network and what I really want is a mute button.

If you want to talk to me, you can /tell or /whisper me. Otherwise, let me tune you out in favor of my buddy list, group mates and guildmates, in the hopes that

you won't stomp all over my fun. And if you are looking for a group, the game darn well better provide you with a good feature for making that happen rather than relying on constant spamming of chat channels.

Meeting Places: There's usually a tavern in town, but if anyone's there, it's probably AFKers or people making drunk emotes. What if no local chat was the default for everywhere except in taverns, so they became the places you went to find other players to game with?

Other forms of departure lounges would be useful. A group leader who is ready to go out on a mission could play a looping emote that caused them to raise a glowing beacon and advertise their desired mission underneath their floaty name on mouseover. So, if you're looking for people to do a specific quest with, you'll spot them easily and can gather 'round, then head out.

Good Gaming Bonus: Some tabletop roleplaying games let players vote at the end of each game session for who was the best roleplayer that night. If

someone at the table had a particularly inspired conversation with an NPC, give that gal some XP! While players can technically hand over bennies whenever desired, there's nothing to suggest that they do so. Twinking is something players do to the disadvantaged. Instead, how about twinkling for the gifted, to reward those players who made your latest dungeon crawl more entertaining or successful? It's easy enough. At the end of a mission, all group members would receive a UI where they can pick the MVP for that mission. Let each member of the group decide what he or she values - tactics, humor, RP or whatever. Whoever gets the most votes is awarded a little XP bonus, and the leader breaks ties. Stats keep track of how many bonuses you've earned, so players can see who the talented ones are.

Guild Plots: Making missions for MMOGs shouldn't be **that** hard. Open up the content creation tools, just a little, and enable players to create missions for their guild. Given how intensely unsophisticated most MMOG missions are, this should be trivial. Let them pick

Let me tune you out in favor of my buddylist, group mates, and guildmates.



an existing spawn in a known location, write up some profanity-filtered text, assign XP/loot rewards based on the existing spawn, and let them daisy-chain the results together to make a story. Pick a source and destination NPC for FedEx quests and supply their dialogue. Request X of some crafting material and reward those who deliver.

RP fans already do a lot more with a lot less. They create alts just to play NPCs in their own storylines. If they actually had in-game missions, even just delivery/hunt missions, they could forge endless storylines out of those base materials. Let them offer those missions to their guildmates, restricting them by guild rank or in exchange for guild donations. Tax them a bit to support the content so it becomes a money sink. In no time you'll have players constructing 60-mission storylines that feed directly into guild events and RP, with special rewards for completing major guild storylines.

Soon, you have guilds competing not just on the basis of reasonable players

but on excellent content. A writer who can spin a compelling storyline out of a stock mission generator becomes literally worth his or her weight in gold, turning out new chapters in the guild's saga in exchange for sweet loot.

When storytelling becomes a form of crafting, game developers can officially go on vacation. The players will take it from here. In the meantime, find the right friends to game with and don't let them down. Until somebody invents holographic peer-to-peer Doritos, a good group makes everything more fun.

[COMMENTS](#)

John Tynes has been a game designer and writer for 15 years in tabletop and electronic gaming with Pagan Publishing, Chaosium, Atlas Games, West End Games, Steve Jackson Games, Wizards of the Coast, Acclaim and Bungie. He works as lead writer and game designer for the MMOG Pirates of the Burning Sea and is a columnist for The Stranger, X360 UK and The Escapist. His most recent book is Wiser Children, a collection of his film criticism.



GROUPS 'N' GAMERS

by Hitchhiker

So many online communities have fragmented and rotted from the inside out that the empty houses and town halls of these binary townships litter your every turn, both inside and outside of our favorite game worlds. The zombified corpses of their usurped leaders wander the desert, their shambling accompanied only by the repeated mutterings that protest their innocence in these failings.

They registered their account and levelled up high enough to create an in-game group. They created a website and

installed that brilliant open-source forum software. They gathered a handful of recruits. From there, success was guaranteed – their place at the head of the table secure, the dream of being a significant force on their chosen server would soon become a reality.

A month later, it's all fallen apart. Hemorrhaging what few members they had to bigger and better groups, they're almost left on their own in the midst of a huge amount of in-fighting on now troll-ravaged message boards.

Why?

Well, upon stepping off of my rescuers ship and into my future in *City of Villains*, I was immediately invited to join at least a dozen groups with the only pre-requisite being a /tell to the inviter. There was no vetting policy, no checking of character profiles, no actual conversation leading up to these invites - just a little pop-up box that asked me to accept or decline.

Is that really the best way for you to engage new members? To do the virtual

equivalent to handing out leaflets in the mall? I'm confident in predicting that a large majority of individuals who signed up from those random invites are no longer in those same groups.

When I join a group, I want to contribute positively to its existence, to grow as an individual within it and to share my experience with similar, like-minded people. If I'm in a stagnant, directionless group that never gets together, doesn't communicate and has members who think *Streethawk* was better than *Airwolf*, I just can't function within it.

Once the only benefit of being in a group is, well, just being in a group, it's time to move on.

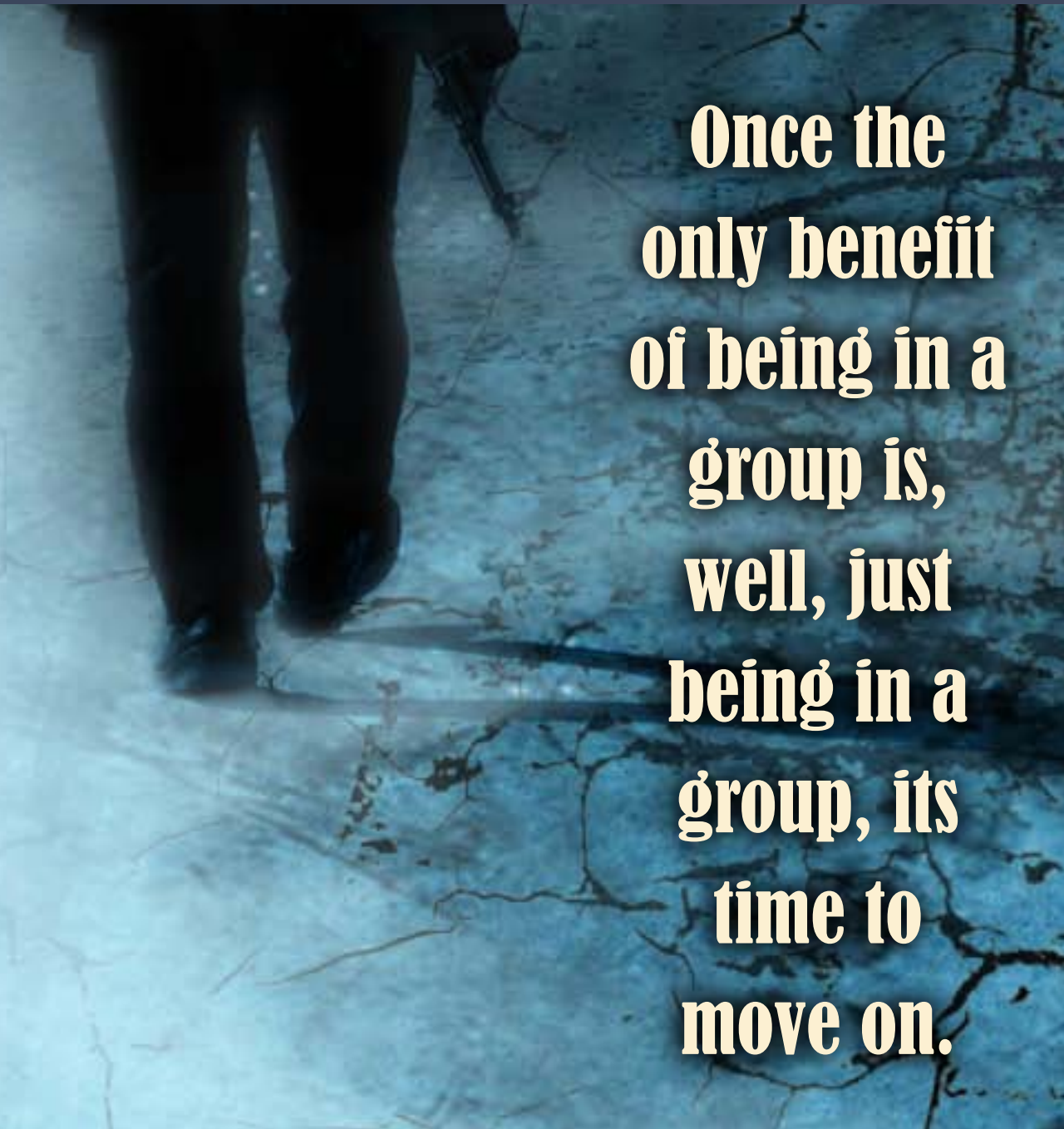
But my requirements and yours may be different. I'm interested in the social experiences offered when gaming alongside others, both when logged into the game world and when chatting about the night's adventures at AlwaysBlack.com. You may just want some assistance taking down Frostfire in *City of Heroes* so you can get your level 14 travel power. That highlights the other problem with randomly inviting strangers to join your aimless but mighty guild: You can't possibly know what any given individual wants from their experience – you haven't even had a conversation with them.

You see, **your** game and **their** game are entirely different, despite the fact they're based in the same piece of software, running on the same server. By far, the best example of this is *Planetside*, which, as luck would have it, was where I've had perhaps my most memorable experience of an in-game group.

I'd been playing SOE's glorious vision of future-war for a fair while, was secure in the role I played in the bigger battle and attempted to play at least a little bit tactically. You could be recruited to pick-up squads, and could request to join them, as well. A well co-ordinated squad was able to turn the tide of battle, while a badly co-ordinated one just got markers on their maps to tell them where to die.

I'd managed to get in to a squad with one chap who was many battle ranks (*PS*'s version of levels) ahead of me, but we still had a brilliant night of play. I'm not convinced I made much of a difference individually, but I followed his orders and killed as many of the enemy as I could. The following night, he invited me into his squad as soon as I logged on. I took the hint, added him to my friends list, and noticed that the other squad members were the same people from the previous night's battle.

After a couple of weeks of play, a little bit of chat and a few visits to his clan's website, I joined the clan. Thursday



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**You need to lead
from the front.**

nights were dedicated to drill practice – here we’d log on, find empty or near-empty continents and go up against poorly defended towers to practice assault drops. It was all terribly banal, but it genuinely enhanced the experience. We were a unit in a world gone nuts. We looked down on the standard grunts, handily distracting laser fire from us while failing to achieve anything. We’d capture videos, post them on the site, chat about successes or losses and push on – every night – with this endless war.

Some of you hopefully think that sounds cool. Many of you think I’m nuts. For me, though, this was exactly the type of group I wanted to be a part of, and they retained my interest for the same amount of time the game did.

It was so successful because its leaders took the time to identify people who would not only benefit the group as a whole, but who would also benefit from being a member of it. They managed to

drive forward and influence our motivation for being a part of it to the point where there simply wasn’t an alternative. When I re-subscribed to *Planetside* months later, my guild was gone and the game was empty and sterile. The combat was the same, but the social aspect was dead for me.

It’s time the wannabe big-men of the gaming worlds realized that being able to get a guild charter signed off isn’t enough to provide you with longevity or a particularly rewarding experience. You need to lead from the front, dictate a path for those you recruited and recognize that leading starts a long time before you conclude your cold-calling sales pitch through the in-game chat client. [COMMENTS](#)

Hitchhiker is a freelance videogames journalist who spends too much time sat on his own playing multiplayer games. It does give him a sense of belonging, though, so that’s ok. He hangs out at www.alwaysblack.com.



THE Gaming Club

by Chris Maire

Taking a walk around campus, it seems like any other quiet New England boarding school: The ground is icy, and remnants of snowmen from a past storm sit quietly on the quad, little more than piles of snow now. In the cafeteria, the junior class is holding their annual semi-formal Winter Ball, attracting almost every student on campus. The dorms, antiquated 19th century homes, sit quietly on the edge of campus, their residents seeking companionship at the dance. Outside the school buildings, though, on the wintry air, an out-of-place sound carries by:

“Yo, whose name is The Madness? No team-killing, man! There’s an enemy mech **right there!**” This is the second official Mindrot Gaming Club LAN party this semester. Huddled together in a multi-purpose room in the main school building, a dozen gamers followed their instincts and chose a few hours of friendly gaming over the dance. A Super Nintendo is being projected on the wall, and four people are trading off playing *Kirby*. In the center of the room, the rest

of the group is gathered around the official club router, engrossed in a game of *Mechwarrior 4*.

It’s almost a tradition, now, to have LAN parties on the same nights as dances, and none of the people in the room regret coming to this one. Mindrot has been the school’s computer and videogaming club for three years. The original club was shut down for taking advantage of the school’s non-profit nature and making buckets of cash off web design. In the wake of the controversy, six sophomores, including myself, decided to start a new club.

We struggled through picking a name, finding a faculty advisor and eventually scrounging up \$120 for the club’s 24-port router. For the past three years, we fought against dozens of events for LAN party attendance, a misunderstanding that resulted in the loss of over \$100 and our club status, and, of course, numerous bouts of laziness during which none of us felt like organizing a LAN party. But enough of us worked through

adversity and pushed our club into becoming one of the largest and arguably most active on campus.

Halfway through the party, a girl walks through, looking for something to do. Almost immediately, three guys clamor to accompany her for the rest of the evening. The rest of the crowd sits quietly, temporarily uninterested in - and in some cases awkward and incapable of - winning favor with this lovely young lady. She's a new sophomore, and not a gamer at all; of course, everyone is welcome at the LAN party, but I know that all she'll do while she's here is ask if anyone wants to get some coffee, lure some unsuspecting guy out with her siren call and flirt with him meaninglessly on the walk, pulling him out of the fun he was having at the LAN. There is still one girl who's an active member of the club, which no one minds, but this new girl obviously doesn't care for the fun the rest of us are having. A few eyes trail after her as she leaves the room with her small entourage, but the moment is forgotten when the gaming starts up again.

The party progresses and a few more people wander in, having just returned from a race with the ski team. They join in quickly and while away the hours. As 10:30 p.m. and the end of the event approaches, parents call, wondering when their sons will be coming home. People pack up, and soon enough, we declare the party over. People say their goodbyes, and the other co-heads and I sit down to begin planning the next event.

I kick back in my chair, watching the last few people leave the room, lugging all manner of equipment down the stairs, chatting about how they did in the various games we played - another successful event. By this time, the dance is out, and we can hear people leaving to get picked up by their parents. Groups from the dance mingle with some of the gamers as they wait, and for all the apparent separation, I'm reminded our community isn't an isolated one. We decide on the next LAN date, pick up our stuff and leave - back to the dorms for boarders and home for day students. Carrying \$2,000 of computer equipment on my back across campus earns me

some odd looks from people, but they go back to chatting with their friends. It's just another Friday night on campus, and everyone has lives to return to.

[COMMENTS](#)

Chris Maire is a hardcore gamer, recovering World of Warcraft addict and high school senior. He's never written for any publication before, but he hopes this is the start of a trend.

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MEET THE TEAM

Each week we ask a question of our staff and featured writers to learn a little bit about them and gain some insight into where they are coming from. This week's question is:

“Have you ever met an online friend in person? If so, how'd it go?”

**Mark Wallace,
“Anonymity Is Not Enough”**

I've met dozens of people in virtual worlds first and the real world only later. It almost always makes the bonds between people stronger. Personally, I think anonymity is overrated. The more we are “ourselves” online, the more dynamic and creative our online lives will be.

**Hitchhiker,
“Groups 'n' Gamers”**

My first time was great. The second was, unfortunately, the stereotypical loner with a severe lack of social skills. I had to actively extract him from my life

after a night out where he managed to systematically insult every other “real-life” friend who'd come along.

**Bonnie Ruberg,
“After Sex”**

I've never met an online friend in person, but I often ponder the frumpy, 40-somethings that decide - only after getting in my virtual pants - to tell me about their potbellies and their wives, and I think it might be better this way.

**Allen Varney,
“ATTACK OF THE PARASITES”**

I ran an online game to recruit new writers for the *PARANOIA* tabletop

roleplaying game line. One writer, Paul Baldowski, contributed extensively to the rulebook and the support line. When I later visited the United Kingdom, Paul and his family kindly hosted me at their home in Manchester - for almost two weeks! Hope my extended stay didn't sour him on meeting fellow designers in meatspace.

**John Tynes,
“The Contrarian: Growing Out of the Stone Age”**

In college I began chatting regularly with a fellow employee of the computer labs. We'd never met. Once we finally figured out who each other were, we took some shifts together to hang out. Then we'd sit behind the desk at our workstations, still chatting electronically instead of in person.

**Julianne Greer,
Executive Editor**

I have met several friends from online and almost every experience was a good one. I will say that with each one of them I talked with him or her extensively, and had a good idea of who they were. That, and I'm generally very much myself online, except maybe a bit less shy than in person, so people

who've talked to me online have a pretty good idea of who I am.

**Jon Hayter,
Producer**

E3 baby - met a lot of people in person who I've met online, and of course it went well. They were all drunk at the time!

