the escapist

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Remember playing on the playground with other kids on a warm (not hot) sunny day? Everyone is running around, playing games or climbing on the jungle gym having a great time. There are no cares, no worries, just sun, innocent children's games and the delightful exhaustion that comes only from running until you're out of breath and falling into the grass laughing.

And then the piercing scream. Not just piercing to the happy and melodious hubbub of a playground, but also to the innocent nature of the day. Katie's hands became damp with the sweat of play and she fell from the monkeybars. Now Katie's friends surround her; one decides to run to get her Mom.

Everyone else stops dead in their tracks, watching the scene: Katie lies on the ground, clutching her arm; Katie's mom runs over, a terrified look on her face; other parents collect their children, worried; other children hold their own arms close and make mental notes to either stay away from the monkeybars, or perhaps to prove their mettle another time by daring to climb.

The next few days, the playground is less crowded. The monkeybars become a point of contention – some parents move to get rid of the monkeybars altogether; some parents tell "back in my day" stories; some parents teach their children about the little-bit-of-dirt-in-the-palms trick. Some children are afraid of the playground; some children have no problem whatever going back; some children begin putting a little dirt on their hands before climbing again.

The point of this? And how does it relate to games and "Get Off My Cloud," this week's theme? A child breaking an arm during innocent play is a very raw example of "realness" invading. True, this is an accident, and many things in games are not, but ultimately, the reactions are the same – some people get angry and seek decisive action, some people become fearful, some people exploit the opportunity, some people take it in stride and use it as a learning experience.

In gaming, we face invasions of "realness" from things like race, sexuality, economic dissonance in fantasy worlds, worlds that to many, are free from the everyday struggle, discomfort or frustration of such things. This interruption leads to many reactions – anger, desire to stop games, fear of games, amusement and even the realization of opportunity to tackle some of these problems in an environment that's perhaps a little safer. Odd that many are able to show their real, deep worries and fears moreso in a fantasy world than a real one. Perhaps we can build from that.

Cheers,

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "Cold Equations" from The Escapist Forum: I think the biggest problem is people not realizing how much work it actually is to make most games. If you want to make money as an indie you're pretty much going to have to choose a very small, no resources needed type of game.

- greggman

In response to "The Short, Happy Life of Infocom" from The Escapist Forum: I love hearing the labors of love

that go into producing the games that spark my imagination.

- Tom

In Response to "Raph Koster on Fire" from the Escapist Forum: I have been waiting a long time to hear what Raph had to say on the "frankenstein's monster" that *SWG* has become. I always felt that considering the stance he takes in many of the blogs/texts I have read of his that he is constantly striving to create the unusual, the testing, the intriguing.

SWG should have been the Star Wars playground that all us 30+ gamers wanted it to be. I look at my friends list of ex *SWG* players; lawyers, government workers, company directors, software designers. We were all grown-ups playing at being kids again, and gladly paying our subs to do so. We were the players who, as Raph describes, had the rug pulled out from under us.

Raph, if you're reading this, thanks for speaking up on your feelings about *SWG* and how it's been handled.

- F_A_F

In Response to "Raph Koster on Fire" from the Escapist Forum: I've played both games, *UO* and *SWG*, and now I know why they went down the drain after he left. I **loved** both those games and truly miss them.

Ralph, if you read these replies, thank you for telling how games have been handled. I hope that future developers/designers read it as well and **learn** to not jack with something so drastically if it's not broke.

- Relluc

In Response to "E3 is Dead" from The Escapist News Room: As someone that has been to E3, my nose and ears are rejoicing.

- binkplayboy

In response to "Dear Hype: E3 No Longer Wants You" from The Escapist lounge: I like coffee houses versus night clubs anyway. That is, if the ESA is downsizing E3. E3 has become a big, bloated show where the music is too loud, it's stuffy, and the hot women won't talk to me. Gimme a cafe latte, a scone, and an artsy college chick any day of the week.

- Spirit-of

In response to Episode One of Escape Radio, The Escapist Podcast: Welcome back, guys. It's about damn time.

- Demiurge

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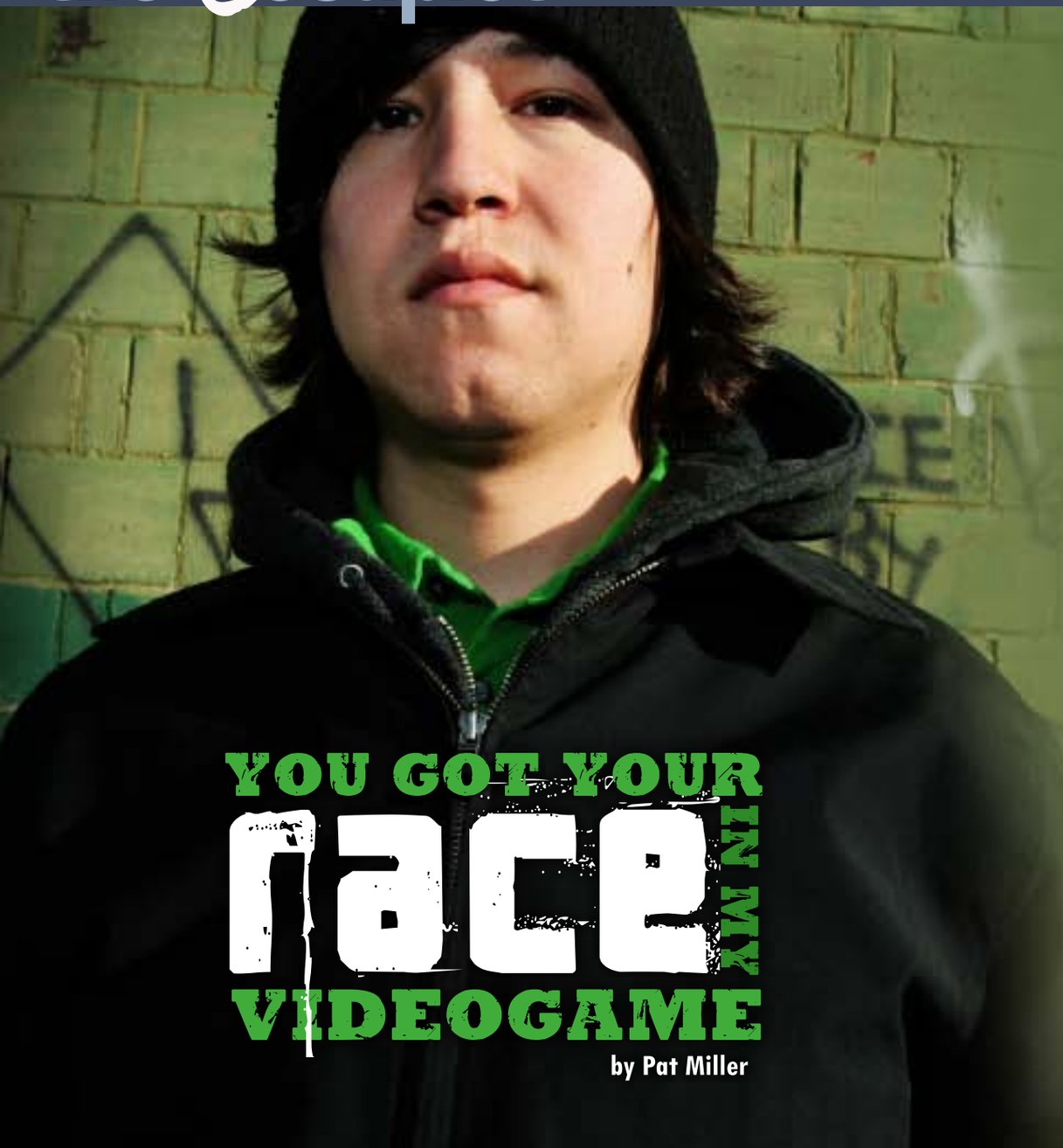

YOU GOT YOUR RACE IN MY VIDEOGAME

by Pat Miller

This story begins at a low-key birthday party of a good friend of mine. Rather than opt for a decadent college bacchanal, she simply decided to invite a few friends to dinner at her family's house, somewhere in the manicured sprawl that is Orange County, California. While her (white) mom and (Asian) dad put the finishing touches on their (Korean) barbecue, my friend and I relaxed in the backyard, alternating between eyeing the rain clouds that come with SoCal winters and chatting with the other guests: her (white) boyfriend and her two other good (white) friends.

Now, all of us had been known to enjoy the occasional videogame every now and then, so the conversation quickly turned to the latest release - *Shadow of the Colossus.* One of the other partygoers asked the birthday girl if she had ever played *Shadow's* well-known predecessor, *Ico.* She stared blankly. "What's it about?"

"Well, you see, you're a boy, with, uh, horns, and there's this girl, and ... "

How would *you* describe *Ico*? I sure as hell don't know how to describe it. But blame it on the social awkwardness of being surrounded by upper-middle-class white people, or on having to be the fifth wheel - for whatever reason, I found myself jokingly interjecting:

"Actually, it's an allegory of race relations in the United States - the white woman is using the brown man to keep the black man down."

Blank stares all around. I tried again.

"With a stick."

Homeboy turned to me with that you-got-your-chocolate-in-my-peanut-butter look.

"So! How about that *Phoenix Wright*? Did I mention you get to yell 'Objection'?"

With each new generation of consoles, videogames have grown up a little bit more, gradually coming into their own as a medium of expression. While videogames tackling serious themes and subject matter is nothing new - see *Missile Command* and its depressing outlook on World War III, for example - videogames are rapidly becoming more and more accurate facsimiles of the real

world. And with these increasingly realistic game worlds, we will be bringing in, consciously or unconsciously, more and more of our very real-world problems. Race is on the tip of our tongues these days, whether we're watching *Chappelle's Show* or *Crash*. But pick up that PS2 controller and no one dares drops the R-word. What's going on?

We are, by and large, concerned with the propagation of racial stereotypes in any form of mass media; we want to be depicted as **people**, not shallow, refined characterizations, and yet most of us barely notice that most black videogame characters are boxers or basketball players. Asians show up as ninjas and kung fu masters and, sadly, you probably won't find a whole lot of Chicano-Latino individuals outside of *Border Patrol*.

This is a larger issue than simply that of window dressing. While *Street Fighter II*'s Balrog will have the same standing Fierce Punch regardless of whether he's white, black, brown or yellow, the images we take in through different channels of mass media all affect the way we understand race. If all boxers are black and all Asians know kung fu in our fighting games, we will come to strongly associate boxing with blackness and kung fu with yellow. Our news teaches us that black people loot and white people find, our movies teach us that Asian people in the United States simply can't speak English and, by and large, our games are teaching us that heroes are invariably white. As videogames continue to grow as a medium, it becomes less and less absurd that they might be dictating, as well as reflecting, our racial common sense.

Perhaps we can take a look at a similar and potentially parallel ongoing discussion. Sex and sexuality in games is a hot topic, whether it's on Bonnie Ruberg's "Heroine Sheik" blog or that oh-so-overblown Hot Coffee business in *GTA: San Andreas*. Now, I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that gamers, by and large, like sex: We will masturbate to *Rez*, we'll rate our *Second Life* hookers, we'll even give public sex a shot in *World of WarCraft*. For all the hubbub about sex and nudity in games, it's very rarely the gamers themselves you'll find rallying against pixelated boobies in our videogames.

But wait until a group of self-identified queer gamers is advertising their guild as "LGBT-friendly" (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender), and all we hear is "Why can't an orc just be an orc?" It's been my experience that for all the criticism gamers are willing to dish out at the people who make games and occasionally the people who write about them, they are singularly unwilling to criticize **themselves.** Sex is fine with gamers as a **feature**; once it becomes an **issue**, and a potentially divisive one at that, games are escapism, not reality, and we just don't want to bring our real baggage into our fantasy worlds.

Whether we like it or not, race, like sexuality, is intricately woven throughout our videogames, and we are astonishingly capable of ignoring it even when it's staring us in the face. We have no problem assigning essentialist, natural meaning to racial categories when we're rolling our *D&D* characters; trolls are strong, elves are agile, "humans" can do pretty much everything. But could we ever, in good conscience, write "black" on our character sheet because we need the strength bonus?

Could we ever, in good conscience, write "black" on our character sheet because we need the strength bonus?

the escapist lounge

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at the official blog for the magazine!

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Regardless of whether a film intends to thematically engage race or not, we will scrutinize it; but by and large we refuse to do the same for games. Frankly, we can't afford to wait for the videogame equivalent of Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* to begin discussing race and videogames; we have scarcely begun to dissect the videogame equivalents of *Friday* and *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood.* Barring Sony's recent excursion into poor taste, people are generally unwilling to discuss the topic much further than simply shouting down the few who do take notice of some of the more ridiculous racialized imagery, themes and rhetoric that moves through videogames and videogamers.

Sadly, our reluctance to use our critical lenses isn't restricted to the medium, either: We are, by and large, just as blind toward issues of race and racism within our own communities, as well. Certainly, the anonymous nature of the internet makes it easier to bring racist dialogue into any discursive space - from a public chat room to a lightsaber duel - and I'm sure I'm not the only one who's seen racial slurs tossed around in an otherwise friendly game of *Counter-Strike*. Make no mistake, there is far, far more to look at here than just a bunch of punk kids spamming their racial-invective-of-the-day chat macros.

An example of gamer humor gone racial comes from *Counter-Strike*: About a year or so ago, a video clip of a young, presumably black man named "C-Note" playing *CS* on a public server, complete with voice chat, made the internet rounds and enjoyed a brief stint of popularity. The clip is a series of mashed-up highlights of some of C-Note's choice dialogue, which consists of bizarre one-liners ("Oh, nigga, is that a bazooka right there? Nigga, that's my bazooka" in reference to the AK-47), random braggadocio ("Nigga I c-walk down the *street*") and occasional threats to sic his older brother ("He's 6'7", 250") on other people on the server.

The joke in C-Note's video is not easily accessible to anyone who doesn't play *Counter-Strike*; recognizing his flamboyant beginner-ness requires a certain amount of knowledge of the game, of course. But neither is it his newbie yelling that makes him entertaining to those that *do* get the game. Sure, it's loud and obnoxious, but

that's not the joke. It isn't until you become used to the kinds of voices and diction that you find on *Counter-Strike*'s teamspeak channels that you start to see why some people found the C-Note video so funny. C-Note is a joke about being clearly, unavoidably black in an online space where everyone is assumed to be white and male until proven otherwise. While there's nothing **bad** about fish-out-of-water humor, per se, laughing at Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker in *Rush Hour* is substantially different from mocking some hapless kid for committing the social faux pas of being black in white-space.

Race is no less innocuous when it enters our virtual worlds voluntarily, either. Lisa Nakamura, author of *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, studies the *LambdaMOO*, a text-only MUD (multi-user dungeon), in her essay "Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet." *LambdaMOO*, like most online communities, provides no explicit space for players to indicate race, so it's up to the player to describe himself however he wishes. However, Nakamura observes, "Players who elect to describe themselves in racial terms, as Asian, African American, Latino, or other members of oppressed and marginalized minorities, are often seen as engaging in a form of hostile performance, since they introduce what many consider a real life 'divisive issue' into the phantasmatic world of cybernetic textual interaction. The borders and frontiers of cyberspace which had previously seemed so amorphous take on a keen sharpness when the enunciation of racial otherness is put into play as performance. While everyone is 'passing,' some forms of racial passing are condoned and practiced since they do not threaten the integrity of a national sense of self which is defined as white."

From here, she goes on to describe an online world where the most common occurrences of race are white men playing either as Asian men named "Mr. Sulu," "Musashi" and "Bruce Lee" or Asian women named "AsianDoll," "Miss_Saigon" and "Geisha_Guest," the latter of whom was described as a "petite Japanese girl in her twenties. She has devoted her entire life to the perfecting the tea ceremony and mastering the art of lovemaking" and has "spent her entire

life in the pursuit of erotic experiences," and, if you read the rest of the character description, apparently isn't wearing panties. Race, here, is unacceptable if **you** bring in real-world Latino or African-American baggage, but racial roleplaying of classic Asian stereotypes - Asian men as sexless engineers and fantastical warriors and Asian women as sexual objects - is clearly not unusual. Here, we are not only implicitly condoning these stereotypical characters as acceptable roleplaying material, we are also announcing that Asians are somehow less marginalized than blacks or Latinos by regarding the stereotypes at hand as somehow innocuous and less threatening than if we were performing as black or Latino in *LambdaMOO*. Even though this space is virtual and fictional by nature, the way we handle race in our virtual spaces can have very local and very real implications.

All of a sudden, the internet is looking less like a colorblind haven and more like second grade, where everyone thought the two Asian kids in the class knew kung fu, could speak Chinese and were related. And maybe, just maybe, we could compare this to *GTA: San Andreas* again, and see what it would be like to roleplay the stereotypical black thug in *LambdaMOO.* How is it different when a white male racially performs as black? Or when an Asian male roleplays as white?

I'm writing this to you, videogame community, because I love you. I have played through the same stories as you. I have cursed *King of Fighters* boss characters like you. I have had controllers thrown at me, probably ***by*** you. I have borrowed games from you and not returned them because you lost my copy of *Nights Into Dreams*. I have owned you, and I have been owned by you. I see the same incredible potential for telling new stories with new technology that you do. I want a game to be truly Mature when it's labeled Mature, because I know just as well as you do that boobies and dead bodies aren't enough to hold on to my interest these days.

But sadly, amid our chatter of $600 PlayStation 3s, we're glossing over some of the important stuff, the ugly stuff, the revealing stuff, and, yes, some of the genuinely *Mature* stuff that we have in the games that are already out. We are *so* unwilling to take our beloved medium seriously, we just shrug and brush it off when we have to check our real-life identities at the login screen. Many of us just don't think about why this could be relevant to you and the people you play with.

Race and videogames may not quite be two great tastes that taste great together, but they're both here, and when they're staring us in the face it would be nothing but childish and irresponsible to ignore them.

Even in *Ico.* COMMENTS

Pat Miller has been doing this for way too long. Stop by his blog, Token Minorities, for more on race and videogames.

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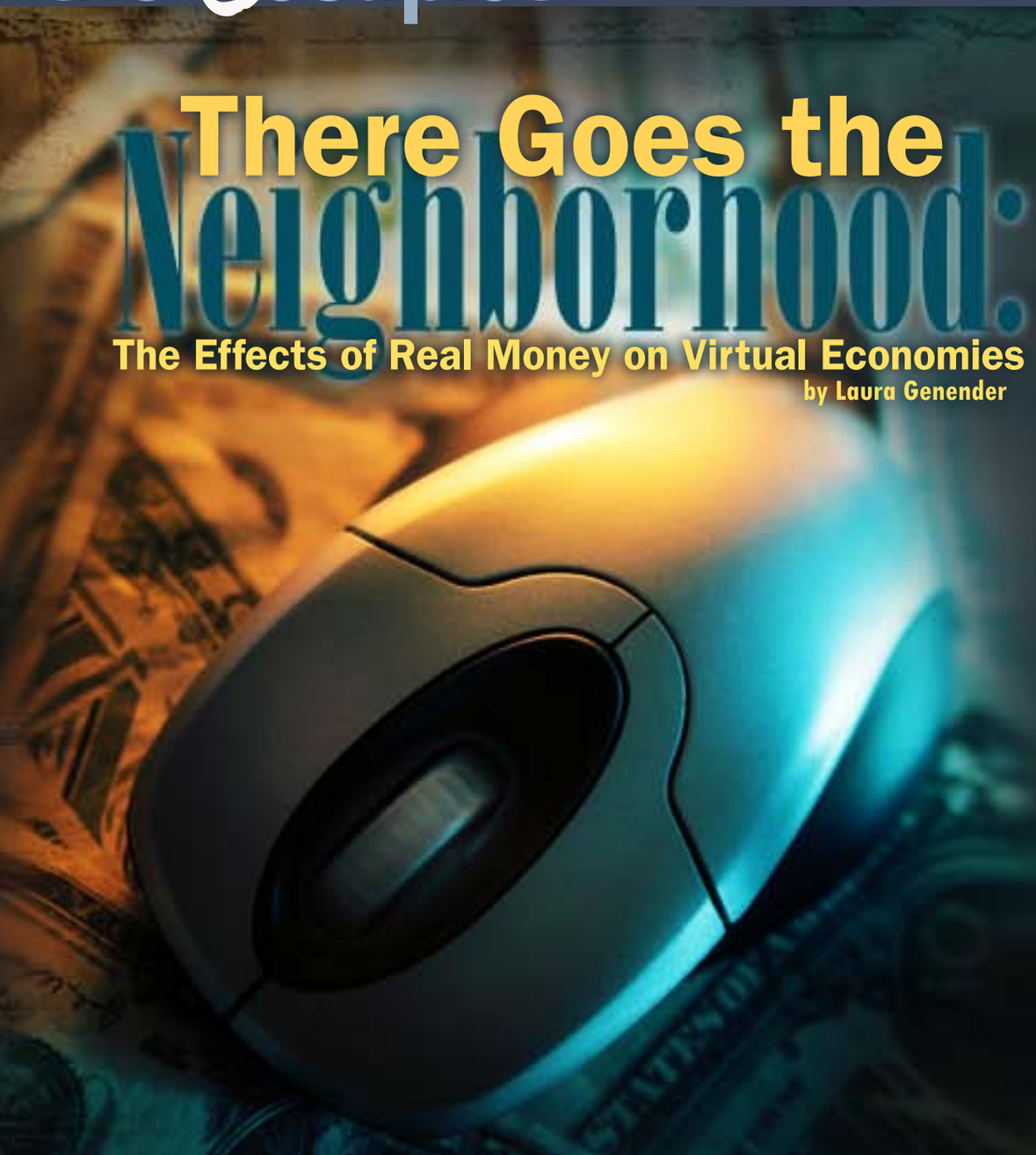


There Goes the Neighborhood:

The Effects of Real Money on Virtual Economies

by Laura Genender

I remember the first time I loaded up *Lineage*, my first massively multiplayer online game. It was one of the turning points in my gaming career, and to this date I can still see the shadowed, two-dimensional character-creation screen, empty and waiting for my input. I can hear the music, foreboding and repetitive. I can see the font, bright and blocky.

Here I was given the chance to transform and to shine. This program, this **game** was allowing me to spread my wings. It was teaching me more about myself and what kind of person I wanted to be than school or parents or any other force that was supposed to be guiding me through my teenage years. In *Lineage*, I could be the type of person I wanted to be, without fear. I could be confident and cocky, I could be a leader.

Or so I thought.

I remember coming across a CNN.com article entitled "Where Does Fantasy End?" published in June of 2001. This article spotlighted Paek Jung Yul, a "shy, skinny 16-year-old" who, when in the game world, transformed into the ruthless leader of a feared and renowned bloodpledge, the *Lineage* equivalent of guilds. I envied and admired Paek Jung Yul and his ability to become such a different person when he stepped online. I wanted to be like him someday.

This has always been one of the strengths of the gaming industry: No matter who you are, when you step into the loading screen of your game, you are instantly transformed into the fearsome warrior, or infamous mage, or sly thief. Today, though, something else separates the men from the boys in the gaming world. Those shy, skinny 16-year-olds can still conquer the beefy football players and 30-something executives ... but only if they have the real-world cash to back their characters.

With the rise of online currency sales, the real-world "survival of the richest" is seeping into the online world. How can the kid who saves up his lunch money to buy game time cards stand a chance against his richer classmate who can purchase powerleveling and gear? Who attracts more followers, the shady rich man or the honest pauper?

In *Lineage*'s sequel, *Lineage II*, the world is led by buyers and sellers. In a competitive atmosphere where resources are limited, honest players stand no chance against buyers who can put down a billion adena (*L2*'s currency) at the auction house, or against the currency farmers who dominate all raid encounters. Bloodpledge leaders attract players with promises of "A-grade" gear. Prices are driven higher and higher by competing buyers.

MMOGs are, in essence, simple worlds contained in their own pocket universes. When one starts a new game, it is starting a life in a new world. Trading "real-world" currency for virtual currency is not the same as converting dollars to euros; it is an intrusion into another universe's privacy. Professional sellers are not sinking their funds back into the economy, as the designers planned. They don't buy new, flashy armor for their characters – they farm money to pass on to other players. There is a careful balance of progression in videogames, between character development and wealth and storyline and location. The secondary market topples that.

Already, we have seen developers trying to find solutions to this. The popular MMOG *World of Warcraft* employs a system of "soulbinding" items. Once an item is soulbound, it can not be sold or traded to another player, only to NPC stores (which pay very little). Items are either bound on pickup or bound when equipped; many of the better items are bound on pickup.

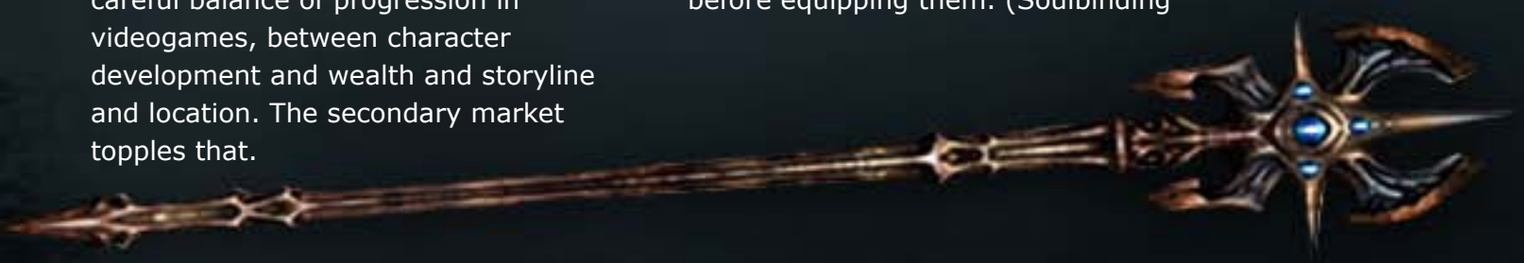
While this helps curb the secondary market, currency trade in *WoW* is still a big moneymaker for companies like IGE, which makes hundreds of millions of dollars on currency trading every year. And, unfortunately, "bind on equip" items often punish players more than the buyers – no seller is going to equip his new powerful weapon when he could sell it for cold, hard cash.

Guild Wars has a similar customization system, but offers players more freedom. Players can choose whether they wish to soulbind their weapons before equipping them. (Soulbinding gives the player a 20 percent boost in weapon efficiency.) Armor, on the other hand, is soulbound from purchase, though players can trade various enhancement runes.

City of Heroes and *City of Villains* have made the economy very low priority, placing emphasis on guild prestige, which is no-trade and can only be earned by supergroup (guild) members in "Supergroup Mode" (dressed in preset colors while playing with members of their supergroup). Currency is extremely easy to earn, and there is only one thing to buy with it: Enhancements for skills. Once these Enhancements have been used, there is no way to remove them and trade them to other people; in effect, *City of Heroes*/*Villains* does not have an economy.

Some MMOGs have tried to adapt to the secondary market with varying degrees of success. SOE's Station Exchange, available in *EverQuest II*, is seen by many players as a failure. Sony tacked an official and sanctioned secondary market onto a game not prepared for it. While a secondary market would no doubt exist in the game with or without the publisher's approval, many players view the Exchange to be Sony's surrender.

Puzzle Pirates' doubloon servers have an additional currency (doubloons), as well as the game's standard pieces of eight. Players can earn pieces of eight and trade them for doubloons, or purchase doubloons via the official game site. In the comparatively noncompetitive



No seller is going to equip his new powerful weapon when he could sell it for cold, hard cash.

Many of the new methods being used to combat the secondary market result in more casual and less complex gameplay.

environment of *Puzzle Pirates*, this has much less negative impact than the Sony Exchange in *EverQuest II*.

And then, there are games like *Second Life*, which have embraced and prepared for the secondary market. *Second Life*'s secondary market does not squelch opportunity, it creates it; just as *Lineage* initially allowed me the chance to shine and show my potential, *Second Life* allows creative minds to flourish. And yet, *Second Life*'s secondary market is largely different from other games: You don't buy virtual property or virtual items or time; you buy ideas and concepts and art.

And yet, these partial solutions are imperfect, and, while they may work for some, they require key parts of the MMOG experience to be removed from games. Economies are a huge part of many MMOGs, with rare equipment and spells earning players bragging rights as well as powerful advantages over others. Many of the new methods being used to combat the secondary market result in more casual and less complex gameplay.

So does this leave players who are seeking worlds free of outside influence out of luck? While honest players can still find ways to earn large amounts of in-game money and compete with those who buy their virtual currency, the secondary market **always** affects **everyone**. Money is constantly changing hands in these virtual worlds, and it is impossible to completely avoid tainted money without avoiding trading altogether. The economy is warped, with prices on upper-level gear hugely inflated. No one wants to be "second best," and as such, the demand for mid-level gear is often extremely low. In *Lineage II*, very few people run around in middle-of-the-road, "C-grade" gear; they have the best armor and weapons that their character can wear. In *City of Villains*, having the best Enhancements possible is a given.

In games not built with expectations of secondary market interference, this creates huge problems for most players. Videogames have yet to go the way of "everybody's it" tag; there is competition, there are limited and contested resources, and only a select few can be at the top of the top. Buyers drive prices up with ridiculous amounts of virtual money, forcing non-buyers out of the market. For example, there is limited guild housing in *Lineage II*, and as soon as a house goes to auction, one guild or another will immediately put the maximum bid of 1 billion adena down on the house. And no, they didn't earn that killing bugbears.

This is not to say that honest players can't afford the best, but being rich – whether by luck or smart trading or real-world credit cards – immediately puts you under suspicion as a buyer. Everyone's a liar and a buyer. Everyone's a suspect.

Would that we could solve this with a simple division of servers – "you buyers go over there, and those of us against the secondary market will stay here." But victory in an MMOG is not

necessarily earning the best; rather, it's **having** the best. What happens at IGE.com stays at IGE.com – no one's going to know how you got that fancy new sword. Honest non-buyers have become as much of a myth as gamer girls used to be.

So, is it hopeless? Can Paek Jung Yuls still rise to leadership without the aid of Visa or Mastercard? This is not an impossible task, but something has to change. Ignoring the secondary market is not the solution, because it is not going away. Nor should we be forced to sacrifice complex economies or gameplay to negate the need for currency competition. Instead, we need to find ways to legitimately beat the secondary market, to use a game's systems, as intended, better than they can.

Developers should not simplify games to combat IGE and eBay, but instead find more complex systems that users can experiment with and discover new rewards. Developers need to be rewarding smart gameplay, be it hunting, farming or crafting.

Over the last two weeks, since the *EverQuest* Progression Servers opened, I have seen first-hand the effect that smart players can have on a complex economy. While the average smith lost money buying expensive ores from NPCs, the smart smith broke down rusty weapons and re-smelted their own materials. While the average trader insisted customers meet them at common locations, the smart one used shared bank slots to freight inventory back and forth.

Instead of removing flexible economies, why not add to them? Why not add more non-trade rewards, such as faction in *EverQuest* or prestige in *City of Heroes*? Currency and equipment is, in most games, easily transferred. Non-transferable character progression demands that players legitimately access gameplay and encourages further immersion into a gameworld.

Yet, all of these suggestions are improbable hopes based on an assumption that the community will take a step and fight back. Korean *Lineage II* players have no qualms about banding together and pushing farmers out of their territories, but the Western world has a problem with reproducing this accomplishment. We are unwilling to work together to uproot the sellers. And we are unwilling to stop buying.

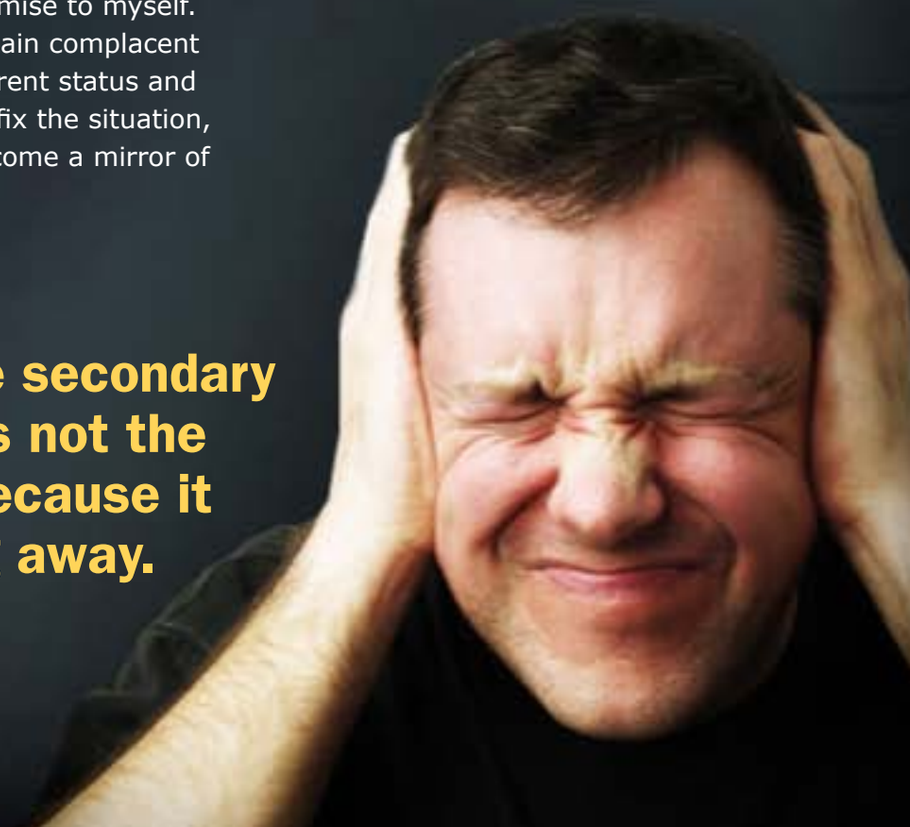
In *Lineage II*, I'm not a guild leader; I'm a follower. I am guilty not of buying, but of accepting. I know that the majority of my clan buys adena, and I hate it, and that's a large part of why I haven't logged in for nearly a month.

I will never buy. I have no fear of making that statement, that promise to myself. My fear is that I will remain complacent and accepting of the current status and not make any efforts to fix the situation, before virtual worlds become a mirror of the real world, and the ability to shine regardless of finances, status or ethnicity is lost.

The greatest evil is the indifference of good people. COMMENTS

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

Ignoring the secondary market is not the solution, because it is not going away.



My Second Job

by Whitney Butts

7:00 a.m.
My alarm clock just went off. I don't particularly enjoy the morning, but I still wander over to my computer and take a sneak peak at what the day will bring. I read my email; I have a message waiting for me. Enter: Drama. One of my employees has resigned. He says he'll help for one week and make sure all of his affairs are in order, but after that, he's gone and there is no changing his mind. I don't understand why. He said he loved helping and loved being a part of the group, but it's time to move on. How does one determine when it's "time to move on"? Does one ever think about how this will affect others that rely on his contributions?

I continue with my morning. I sit down, and I get some work done. General housekeeping-type things come first. Some people need access to the secure areas we work within, applications need addressing and it's important for me to keep up with the guild's banter to know exactly what is going on. I need to compose a message to the core congratulating them on the progress we made last week, but that can come later. Right now, the important matter at hand is finding a replacement for my advisor. I compose a few letters explaining the situation, and I hope for a quick response. This a dangerous situation. To the core of the group, a hole in leadership is a flaw to be exploited. The only thing I can do is attempt to find a suitable replacement.

10:00 a.m.
I have a brief meeting with my closest advisor about what's been going on. We discuss what we should do about it. Then, we lay out plans for the week ahead, which we submit to the other advisors for approval.

12:00 p.m.
It's noon and time for a break. I set my work aside for a few minutes and head to work. My office, I mean, where I'm the employee and follow the corporate rules of my employer. My employees are actually members of my *WoW* guild, and the task of managing their various wants and desires has become almost a second job.

Case in point, I need to stop by the "bank" and make a few deposits. Not a

real bank, but the in-game *WoW* bank. The deposits are loot from previous adventures. A few of my "departments" have requested withdrawals that need to be fulfilled. I make sure everyone has what they need and decide to drop in on some of my "employees," hard at work. It doesn't take long for me to have someone ask me for a raise. I'll consider it; it's only the 11th time this week I've been asked this very same question. I make my way back to my office and continue with my day.

3:00 p.m.
I spend the rest of the day working (both jobs) and taking suggestions from my guild members. Everyone has ideas, but no one wants to help implement them. It's like this every day. People are quick to judge and criticize but when asked to step up, it's extremely unlikely that anyone will.

Someone asks me to change some facet of our corporate policy. The funny thing is, this policy was just changed based on someone else's suggestion. Now this new guy wants it changed back to the way it was.

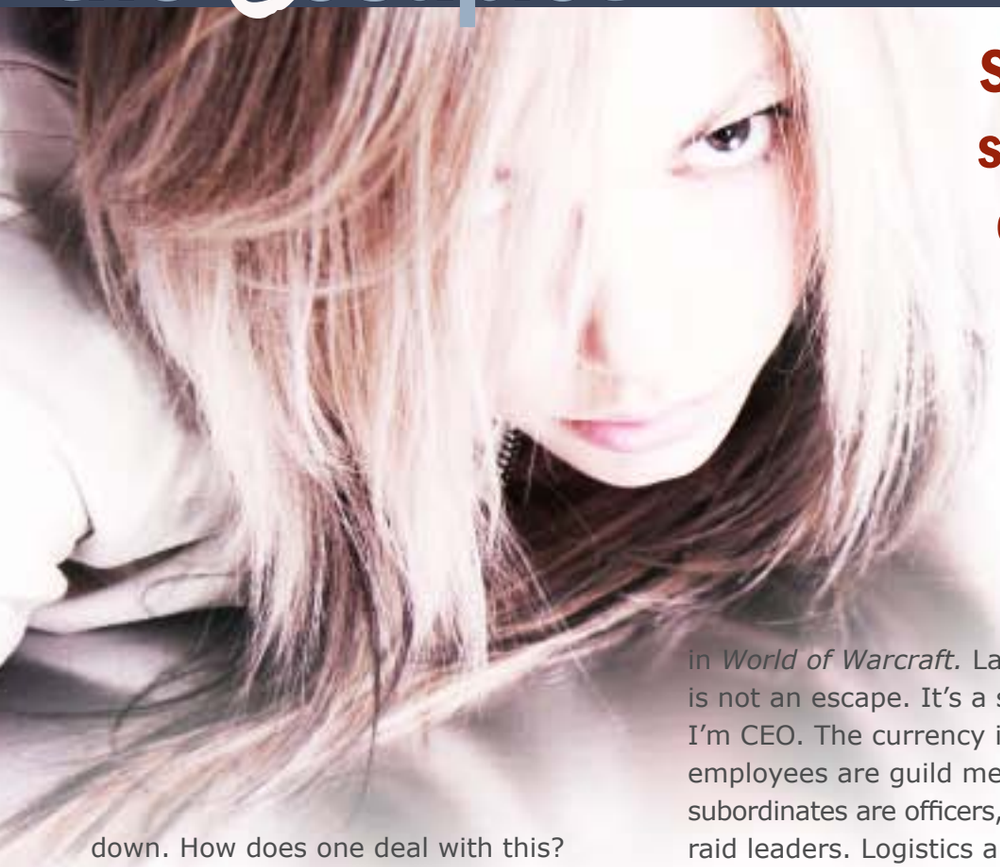
Something I had to learn very quickly is that you can't make everyone happy. There is always going to be someone who feels the need to complain, who feels that we aren't progressing fast enough, who feels that something will always need to be changed. It makes me want to scream. It can't be had both ways. We chose a plan and that is the plan we stick to. I wish the guild would realize that they contribute to these game plans, despite the fact they talk otherwise.

6:00 p.m.
In one hour, a raid is due to start. Trying to organize one of these things can be a living nightmare, but it's something I live for. Participants have to be chosen, currency has to be given out, strategies must be planned and researched and everyone must be at their peak. The night has a 50/50 chance of being successful. Which way we go is dependent on who is involved.

8:00 p.m.
During the raid, I get approached by another guild master. His guild is much smaller than mine and wishes to experience endgame content. He offers to do some joint runs of one of the easier instances. This looks simple enough from an outside point of view; however, it will require a lot of work. We'd need a way to keep track of another guild's DKP (dragon kill points, or points given to people who participate in raids, which they exchange for dropped items). Will they adopt our method of looting, or must we adopt theirs?

12:00 a.m.
It's over. It was a mediocre night, and three or four people really slowed us

I wish the guild would realize that they contribute to these game plans, despite the fact they talk otherwise.



down. How does one deal with this? Punishment? Removal? Will it have an effect? All things to ponder for the next day; but for now, I owe people items and money. Once I get everything situated, I'll think about ways we can improve ourselves before bed.

I escape the stress of the real world by playing games. I escape by being the guild master of a successful raiding guild in *World of Warcraft.* Lately, my escape is not an escape. It's a second job where I'm CEO. The currency is DKP and the employees are guild members. My subordinates are officers, class leaders and raid leaders. Logistics are raid strategies, personnel issues are drama bombs and company politics are guild politics.

I do it because I love to help; I love to see so many people happy when a new goal is achieved; I love that feeling of success, but it's really not that much fun. I sacrifice my escapism so others can enjoy theirs. I do my job as guild master, I make sure as many people as possible are happy and I keep things moving, but it's not fun – it's work.

Someday, a boss kill will result in a smile from me instead of the dread of "oh God, what kind of loot am I going to have to deal with now?"

The stress of the job doesn't come from keeping track of things, it comes from people who fail to realize the work that goes into making sure they can make their Wednesday night raid and get a new item.

Time and time again, it's one excuse after another. "I don't want to help, I want to PvP." Thirty-nine other people are relying on you to help because they helped you get the gear you need to PvP. "I've done that enough already." Sure, but if you help your guild mates do it, we can unlock more content. No one gets it, but when you join a guild, you join a group to play together; not use and abuse your friends and guild mates to get what you want and then leave them high and dry when it's their time to shine.

Someday, it will be fun again. I can only dream that someday it will click, and everyone will realize how much a few leaders sacrifice so the rest of the guild can enjoy the content we all enjoy. Someday, a boss kill will result in a smile from me instead of the dread of "oh God, what kind of loot am I going to have to deal with now?"

For now, I'll do it because I love to see us succeed. I'll do it because I take pride in knowing that I helped build my guild. Although I find myself afraid to log in and face so much work, it's just like when you wake up on Monday morning, staring down a work week in a job you love; but there's still that dread. But I always know one thing: There are good people and good friends there to help make everything go smoothly. If it weren't for them, this job would be nothing more than a pain in the neck.

This is my success, this is my job.

COMMENTS

Whitney Butts is the "woman behind the curtain" at The Escapist. Her existence revolves around the fact that Mathematics is the key to the universe, and that she alone is the square root of all evil.

the Escapist

iMob

by Matthew Hector

On June 1, 2006, *The New York Times* reported on a Chinese phenomenon called "internet hunting." A husband, who believed his wife was having an affair with a college student she met at a *World of Warcraft* player gathering, posted the young man's real name to one of China's most popular message boards, along with a letter decrying the affair. According to the article, hundreds of people took up the cause of finding as much information as they could about the student, known as Bronze Moustache. After one poster, Spring Azalea, stated, "We call on every company, every establishment, every office, school, hospital, shopping mall and public street to reject him . . . until he makes a satisfying and convincing repentance," the situation, and the number of participants, escalated dramatically. Bronze Moustache was chased off of his college campus, and his family was forced to virtually barricade itself inside its home due to the negative sentiment spilling off of the web and into their real lives.

People "from the internet" have been tracking down others for quite a while. Some Westerners may dismiss the scale of the Chinese incident as uniquely Asian, but "anonymous" environments like online games and message boards all have their share of so-called internet hunters. In virtual worlds like *Second Life*, revealing another resident's real-life personally identifiable information is arguably harassment and a potentially ban-able offense. Although prohibited by the terms of service, *Second Life* residents have discovered others' real-life information, and even "outed" residents on the official forums. In April 2005, such an action spawned a 29-page thread as residents debated the merits of a long-standing rule prohibiting people from not publicizing the link between a resident and his real-life identity.

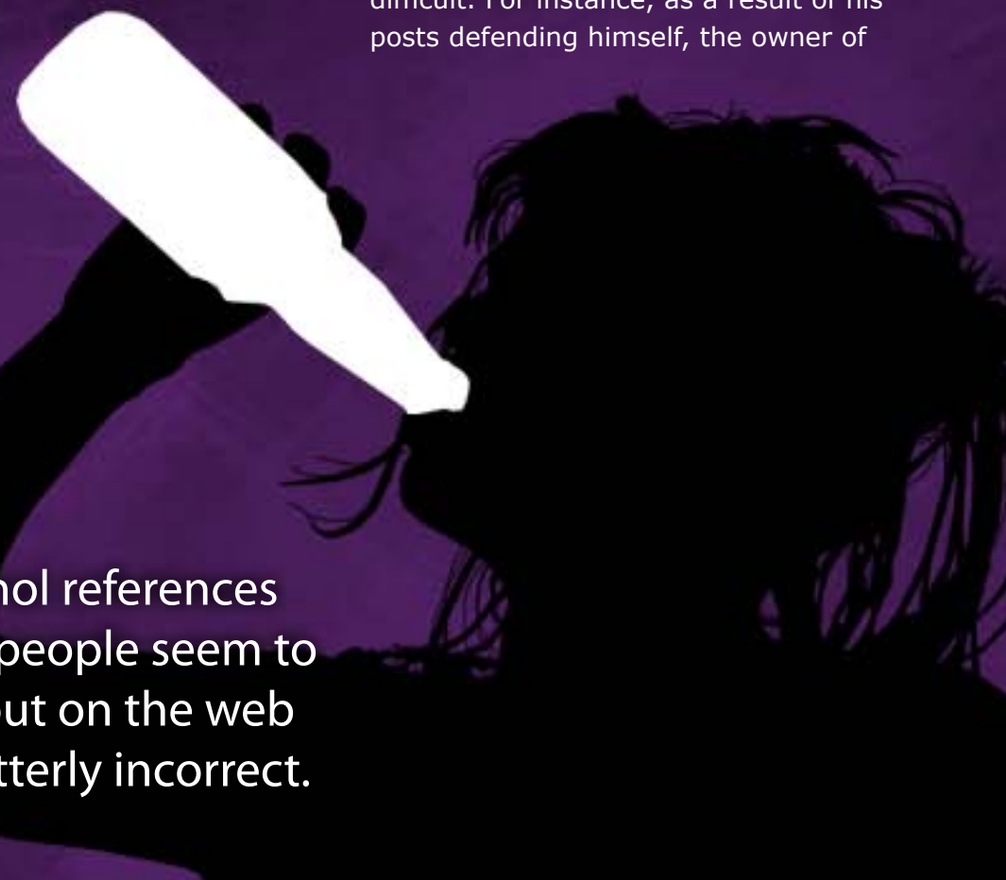
People behave differently online. In meatspace, we have the punch-in-the-nose-factor. We tend to tone down our more abrasive tendencies to avoid being punched in the nose, or receiving some other kind of reprisal. Online, many people don't fear physical reprisal. Given the transparency of changing handles, it is possible for someone to behave poorly online, either trolling a message board, or perhaps ruining the others' gameplay. For most people who spend a large

amount of time online, this is probably not a shocking revelation. Individual jerks are not always persistent, but they're rather fungible.

We are also faced with the reality that those who maintain any kind of consistent online persona, jerk or paragon of politeness, are susceptible to being tracked down. As such, they may have to someday face the "iMob" in one way or another. It also means that there is potential for truly disastrous crossover into real-life. For example, the QA manager of Ritual Entertainment recently posted on his blog that he was diminishing his online presence to avoid further unsolicited people crossing over into his everyday life. Judge Joan Lefkow lost her family because a killer obtained her address without her knowledge or consent. There is now a federal statute that both broadens the definition of cyber-stalking and also increases the penalties for doing it. It seems clear that we need to examine our own expectations about privacy online, as well as the expectations of others.

Given the plethora of drug and alcohol references one can find on MySpace pages, many people seem to think that personal information they put on the web will remain private. Those people are utterly incorrect. Take, for example, the Stolen Sidekick website that went live earlier this year. Based on an AOL Instant Messenger username and some photos that were stored on T-Mobile's servers, Evan, the owner of the website, began a campaign to recover his friend's stolen cell phone. Links to the site quickly spread across the web. In response, a multitude of people formed their own iMob, tracking down the home address of the thieves, as well as locating other personal information about them. A good deal of this information was obtained via their MySpace pages. Some people actually went to their home and harassed them, causing the site owner to ask people to stay away. What makes this interesting is that, similar to Bronze Moustache's predicament, people banded together to punish someone who had offended the herd.

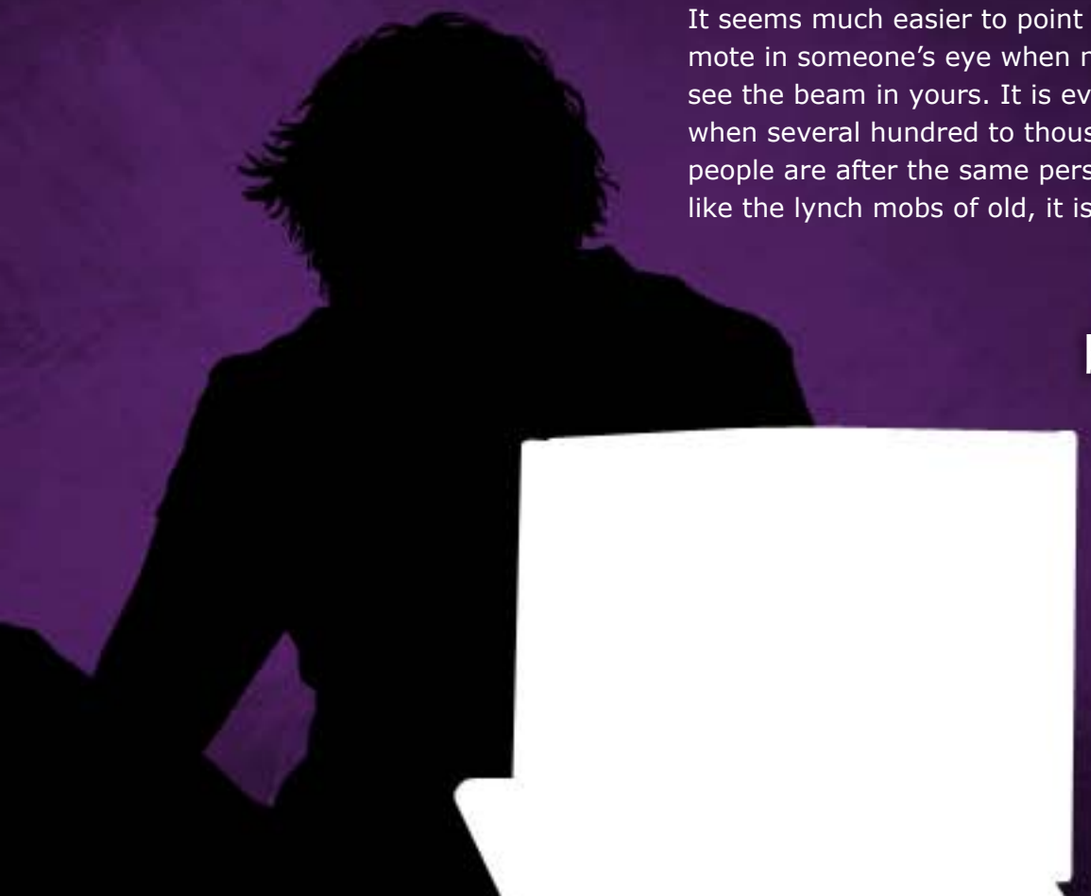
The common element to both of these incidents is that both started online, but quickly spiraled into meatspace. It is not far-fetched to imagine that this could happen within an online game's community. In the past, Western gamers have banded together to identify and harass other players that have exposed themselves in some way. For instance, when a hapless adventurer named Ceciliantas used his apartment in *EverQuest 2* for some "quality roleplay," the torrid logs were quickly posted on the independently-hosted forums for his server. The story quickly spread across the internet, and the player was harassed to the point of making a new character. Although the harassment didn't spill out into the real world, going that extra yard would not have been too difficult. For instance, as a result of his posts defending himself, the owner of



Given the plethora of drugs and alcohol references one can find on MySpace pages, many people seem to think that personal information they put on the web will remain private. Those people are utterly incorrect.

the message forum had his IP address captured. With that IP address, it is not too difficult to locate its physical location. Police departments use this software to track child predators, and it's also available to the general public.

While most people would never dream of intruding on someone else's solitude,



this sentiment seems to fade when they are online. From gamers who engage in griefing to the nefarious individuals who fill our inboxes with spam and phishing scams, some of us abuse our online anonymity. This same anonymity seems to empower these iMobs, who have a very real target with a known identity. Each member of the iMob is just as anonymous as he or she chooses to be. It seems much easier to point out the mote in someone's eye when nobody can see the beam in yours. It is even easier when several hundred to thousand people are after the same person. Much like the lynch mobs of old, it is easier to persecute someone when "all the other kids are doing it."

One example of this behavior is the outing of Prokofy Neva, a resident of *Second Life*. Prokofy was a vocal and often controversial poster on the *Second Life* forums. Nolan Nash, another resident, began posting Prokofy's real-life information to the forums. While many *Second Life* residents expressed their outrage that someone would violate another's privacy in that manner, many intimated that Prokofy deserved it. While the information was easily discoverable, Prokofy's expectation was that nobody would delve that deep. Although there were no reported repercussions in meatspace, this "outing" compromised the purported sanctity of Prokofy's online persona. Ultimately, Prokofy was banned from the *Second Life* forums

When people are victimized by online stalkers, the damage to the person behind the keyboard can be severe.

His banning was the result of the *Second Life* equivalent of an iMob on the forums – people who, possibly with the endorsement of one of Linden Lab's employees, pursued the controversial poster, attempting to enrage him to the point of violating the in-game terms of service or forum guidelines. Instead of changing avatars to return to the forums, or simply to hide from those who dislike him, Prokofy has remained in-world, managing his businesses.

When people are victimized by online stalkers, the damage to the person behind the keyboard can be severe. Although it seems easy to minimize the plight of people who "deserve it," being hounded by others and chased away from a community is no less hurtful because the victim is unpopular. As long as the herd mentality is alive and well, drawing the attention of the iMob is a risk any outspoken online persona takes.

COMMENTS

Matthew 'CmdrSlack' Hector is a licensed attorney in the State of Illinois. He is currently writing for Real Name Gamers (www.rngamers.com)

"Actual game experience may change during online play."

If you're playing videogames on Microsoft's Xbox Live online gaming service, you should be quite familiar with the caveat that comes with every game rating. I signed on for a multiplayer game of *Halo 2* recently. While waiting in the lobby, someone said, "I hope that fucker isn't playing again." I don't think he was talking about me, since I only scored one kill in the previous game. But that's the language I've come to expect in *Halo 2*. After all, it's a mature-rated single-player game, and it's even more mature - or shall we say, immature - in multiplayer mode.

Profanity, racism and sexism are just a few of the things you and your kids can run into as a matter of routine in online bouts of *Halo 2* or *Ghost Recon 3: Advanced Warfighter*. As Microsoft hopes to break Xbox Live's six-million-subscriber mark by June 2007, the biggest obstacle they face may be the bad behavior of other online players who can ruin the experience for the rest of us.

Josh Smith, a blogger, decided to conduct his own survey last December. He played for 33.9 hours on Xbox Live with the original Xbox. He recorded 641 instances of profanity during that time. The most common curse was "fuck." The word accounted for 43 percent of the instances and occurred about eight times an hour. That was followed by "shit," at 19 percent of the time, and something he dubbed "racial" at nine percent. The study confirmed what many people observe when they sign on to the online service for the first time.

"The days the skies turn black on Live have to be when the kids are on it," said Josh Sattler, a 29-year-old student at the Full Sail videogame school in Winter Park, Fla. "The most foul-mouthed and out of control group of individuals on Live has to be unsupervised children."

That doesn't stop Sattler from spending hours at a time playing *Ghost Recon*. But it does diminish his joy for the game. Of course, with the ability to disguise voices on Xbox Live, there is no guarantee that it's kids doing the dirty talk. Should he

accept dealing with profanity as a cost of entry into the virtual life? Would it take a crackdown worthy of the Chinese government to clear the air for everyone?

Bad behavior on the internet is part of modern life. The angst of the modern videogame age isn't so much about a game that doesn't work. It's about suffering a dropped internet connection or hearing 12-year-olds using profanity-laced "trash talk." Gloating is a tradition in competition. But due to the anonymity the internet provides, the online environment can devolve into a *Lord of the Flies*-type environment. The etiquette that prevails with in-person conversations no longer applies because there are no more consequences for bad behavior. Kids can experiment with the freedom of saying anything they'd like out of earshot of their parents.

As if the barrage of profanity isn't enough, it's even more jarring when you find someone cheating. In *Halo 2*, common examples include "standby cheats" that interfere with a network connection to disrupt game play, using hacked maps or game files, and manipulating matchmaking to boost a player's rank on the leaderboards.

But Microsoft contends that it can keep law and order in its online world. From the very start of the service in 2002, the company was able to use its authentication procedures to eject about two percent of the Xbox Live players who used "modded" Xboxes. Microsoft also stated that the use of a common identity, or "gamertag," meant that users weren't truly anonymous.

And with the launch of the Xbox 360 in November, the company was able to take more steps toward policing behavior. It created four "gamer zones," or subsets of the online world governed under different rules. Under the "family" zone, there is no tolerance for cursing. The top dogs can't spend their time whipping the "recreational" zone players; instead, they fight it out among their peers in the "professional" zone. And the "underground" zone is where the rules are more lax.

Taking a cue from eBay, the service now has a feedback system where gamers can rate their rivals. Each player carries a reputation with him. By clicking on someone's gamertag, it's easy to file a complaint about someone. If the complaints pile up, Microsoft can remove the gamer from the service, said Aaron Greenberg, marketing manager for Xbox Live. Just by looking at the number of stars listed next to someone's gamertag, another player can see what kind of reputation that player has.

Greenberg says Microsoft has banned tens of thousands of players for bad behavior. Most of the complaints stem from *Halo 2* games, but that's because

Would it take a crackdown worthy of the Chinese government to clear the air for everyone?

it's the most popular game played on Live. The offenses include multiple transgressions on etiquette violations for foul language in the family zone, racism and cheating. The company will also force players with "inappropriate gamertags" to change their names or face ejection.

"For racism, we have a zero tolerance policy," he said. "It's like having someone over to your house. It's our house, and if someone is offending the guests, we will ask them to leave."

Of course, with new ways to monitor your friends such as inspecting gamertag descriptions, there are new ways to misbehave. One gamer said he was playing *Rumble Roses XX* on his Xbox 360. One of his friends looked at his gamertag, snapped a screen shot that showed what he was playing and emailed it to the player's girlfriend. Greenberg notes that most players don't realize that they can hide from prying "friends" by appearing offline.

Greenberg says that most of the problems are diminishing with the Xbox 360's version of Xbox Live. The bigger problems are with the service for the original Xbox.

Still, with two million Xbox 360 users and growing, the service is hard to monitor. With the addition of Xbox Live Silver (free for online communication), the percentage of online-enabled Xbox 360 consoles is at 60 percent. Dealing with that influx of people isn't an easy task, and it takes a NASA-like control to keep it all going.

Microsoft's time has to be preoccupied with the complexities of keeping the service up and running 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year in 24 countries. Sometimes, that isn't a given.

Majita Biljeskovic, a 22-year-old electrical engineering student at Northern Illinois University, wrote in an e-mail that he loves Xbox Live except for "DISCONNECTIONS!" Last fall, he spent six hours a day trying to become the best FIFA soccer game player in the U.S. But his internet connection dropped him five times in 100 games. He says he lost a month's worth of achievement points, causing him to drop in the rankings.

"Three months of giving up lifting weights, going out with friends at night at college and fitness goes down the drain with five disconnections," he said.

Players get penalized for disconnections, mainly because it's a strategy that losers pull whenever they're about to lose a match. Greenberg says that many disconnections are the fault of third-party internet service providers or broadband suppliers. Microsoft has no control over them, but it strives to hit an uptime target of 99.9 percent of the time for its part of the service.

"We regularly meet and exceed that," he said.

Microsoft continues to modify Xbox Live to provide a better overall experience. One upgrade in spring made it easier to download more than one thing at the same time. Another upgrade will come in the fall. But just as with the real world, life in the virtual world is far from perfect. COMMENTS

Dean Takahashi is author of The Xbox 360 Uncloaked.

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