

# the Escapist

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by Joe Blancato

For me, it started way back in 1999. It was February; I was 15. A friend of mine had me over to take a look at a new game he just got: *Ultima Online*. He showed me an ugly little isometric view of a town called Britain, though I couldn't figure out why - no fog or guys in furry hats. The area he referred to as the bank was overrun with people, real people, which was sorta cool. Then, he went down a ladder and started killing rats. Not demons, not hill giants, not people. Rats. And then he told me he was paying \$10 a month for the privilege.

What?

Somehow, and I'm still not sure how it happened, he got me to pick up a copy at Best Buy the next day. The following weekend, I managed to log over 24 hours in game. Watching him play **his** character was passive and boring. But when I logged in for myself, I realized what so many first-time MMOG players do: This is big, this is special.

I found my way over to that bank my friend showed me, and what was

originally a mass of badly dressed characters became a group of individuals, individuals selling stuff and talking about killing things bigger than rats. A guy dressed like a wizard summoned a demon right next to me, then named it "a" and told it to follow him. Then a woman wearing nothing but a robe stole the sword I had in my backpack. The whole place teemed with possibility, and I was hooked.

Now, eight years later, MMOGs are bigger than they ever were. No matter what genre you like best, there's probably an MMOG out there representing it. If not, someone's probably shopping a design document as we speak. What, for me, began with a crowded scene outside a gray stone bank has exploded into gaming's great white hope, both financially and philosophically.

Which is why we're setting aside this week to talk to you about them. In issue 103, "Massively Multiplayer," Darius Kazemi makes his *The Escapist* debut to tell a modern-day detective story about tracking down gold farmers in a popular game. Allen Varney checks in from the Orient with a look at Korean MMOGs. Shawn "Kwip" Williams reminisces about *Asheron's*

*Call* and its wide open world. Michael Zenke speaks to a few radiomen at the forefront of the MMOG podcast movement. And Dana Massey explains what Blizzard did right with *World of Warcraft*, but worries none of the other players in the field learned the correct lesson.

Enjoy!

Yours,



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**In response to "Blood and Trumpets in the Rastan Saga" from The Escapist Forum:**

It is interesting to note that there is an article about Howard fantasy and Lovecraft fantasy in the same issue; Howard and Lovecraft were correspondents and, apparently, friends.

- Bongo Bill

**In Response to "Richard Garriott: The Escapist Interview" from The**

**Escapist Forum:** I very much respect the hard work Richard has done over the years, but I have a very hard time reconciling what he's saying here with his new chosen medium.

MMOs are a poor vehicle for telling a story. While all MMOs HAVE a story, the players are usually so busy squabbling over mechanics or questing for loot that they couldn't care less about WHY they're doing it. I agree wholeheartedly with Richard's stance on bringing accountability to gaming actions; that, to me, would be far more dynamic than deformable terrain. Anyone can destroy a building, but it would take real effort to rescue the destitute of an entire city. This kind of action almost requires a persistent world, but I don't believe that the MMO players of today have been trained to think of their games in this manner.

- Scopique

**In Response to "Richard Garriott: The Escapist Interview" from The Escapist Forum:** When I think of seeing both sides of an issue, I think of Dark Messiah. I always sneer when the hero pauses to listen to the baddie's monologue at the climax of most stories,



but with *Dark Messiah* I found myself doing it out of choice. I stood there, weapon raised but genuinely wanting to hear the opposing view.

The plot may have been bunk in general but it did a fantastic job of making you ask difficult question about your morals and justifying the so-called bad guy's actions.

- **Tom Edwards**

**In response to "Richard Garriott: The Escapist Interview" from The Escapist Forum:** When Quite simply, sincerely, I cried.

There, right there, is a person who understands. Unique, unparalleled and unequalled. Whether *Tabula Rasa* succeeds or fail as a game, Richard is forever my hero.

- **Ramification**

**In response to "Gaming's Fringe Cults" from The Escapist Forum:** As for "the industry has moved on," it has and it hasn't. It's not that much different. For instance, Cain once said about *Fallout*'s combat: "It also showed how popular and fun turn-based combat

could be, when everyone else was going with real-time or pause-based combat." That's no different now, everyone else is going with real-time or pause-based, only this time so is *Fallout*.

So if anything has changed it's that the unique situation behind *Fallout* can't be reproduced. Not because the people aren't there, but because the companies have closed ranks, and even a proclaimed independent like Bethesda joins those ranks. Only Blizzard remains, I guess, with their hearty sod off to the, as CVG put it, "big new feature" kind of showmanship." ... I'm sure Bethesda's *Fallout 3* has the potential to outsell the *Fallout 3* BIS was working on, but BIS didn't need to sell a million copies just to break even.

The base investment cost of the license and ludicrous expenses like their PR department (including a community manager who doesn't really do anything, from what I can tell) or hiring Liam Neeson are choices Bethesda made, and only because of those choices do they have to compete in three markets to so much as break even. That's not inherent of today's gaming market, but I'll admit it's predominant, and it will have to

collapse in on itself someday. These high-risk high-profit ventures are a way to instable base for an industry. Heck, you don't see any other industry doing it.

- **Brother None**

**In response to "Cthulhu: Why So Difficult?" from The Escapist Forum:** I think there needs to be some flexibility, both on the part of developers and fans. It's entirely possible for a design to retain certain fundamental elements of Lovecraft while discarding ones that don't translate well. Allen did a great job of isolating the latter category.

If it's the kiss of death to market your game as Lovecraft-inspired (and I'm not necessarily sure it is), then don't wear it on your sleeve. Joe Gamer doesn't need to see tentacles or go insane or be gimped in a fight to be chilled by the realization that we're very, very small in a cold, indifferent Universe. Allen's right, that realization isn't sustainable, but it doesn't need to be. While that's the point where many of Lovecraft's works climax, we needn't stop there. After all, the realization isn't the hard part -- the hard part is living in the world with that terrible knowledge.

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True passion for Lovecraft and his themes shouldn't be about adhering to the letter of the Mythos, but rather the spirit. Dump the stuff that doesn't work in games and drive home the core horror of the human condition. It'll make the tall guy proud.

- Erik Robson

## In response to "Cthulhu: Why So Difficult?" from The Escapist Forum:

Just because no game has successfully awakened the Old Ones yet doesn't mean it's not going to happen.

With respect to the issue of the cerebral path that the protagonist takes, hunting down clues and piecing together information, this describes the pure adventure game (Myst-style, not Zelda) perfectly.

But to create the slow realization of the apocalypse ... You have to gradually realize that you, personally, are responsible for the end of the world. I think that means that it has to be an MMO (for persistence, can't just restart into a new, undestroyed game world) where the final endgame for one very

powerful character is to bring down the game server, to make it unplayable.

Now, to prevent the \*server\* from simply resetting once the game is over. You can't, really, so you have to make the initial state of the game as boring as possible. Given Game 3.0, I think that this could be doable. A thin baseline of meta-rules would allow players to gradually build up a complex, rich, well-developed world, something really worth keeping and missing; and eventually to unmake it forever. That is the apocalypse.

And, yes, I do expect a lot of players to react to the realization that their lovingly crafted world is doomed with something akin, if not to insanity, then at least to raw unreason and panic. Compare Corrupted Blood: people react to catastrophe as they would in real life. The Cthulhu game waiting to be made is a nomic with a tragic flaw.

Just like real life.

- Pavitra





## To catch a farmer

by Darius Kazemi

The page refreshes and I see a list of names: Jimfun, Jimgun, Jimrun, Jimkun. All elves, all level 1, each belonging to different accounts but all charged to the same credit card. Every one of them has traded with the same high-level character. I'm willing to bet dollars to dimes that these guys are gold farmers. But I send their names over to customer service anyway, to have a look. You can never be too sure.

But I know they're farmers. It's my job to know. See, while you and your friends are playing in our world, grinding levels, looking for groups and ganking newbies, our servers sit and collect data about what level you are, who you're grouped with, and who you just wasted in player-vs.-player combat. All of that data, and much more, is piped into a database.

I'm the keeper of that database. It grows by gigabytes per day, containing vast amounts of information about a given MMOG, all encoded numerically to save space. Some days I feel like Cypher in *The Matrix*, staring at a bunch of symbols on a screen: "All I see now is dwarf, elf, troll."

An MMOG is an amazingly complex entity. You might believe a gold farmer could easily hide among the millions of other characters on a server, like a needle in a haystack. But farmers behave fundamentally differently than a normal player. The farmer isn't trying to have fun. In fact, if you look at the act of farming, it's probably the most boring thing you can imagine. But it's efficient, and efficiency is what the farmers are optimizing for. That efficient boredom sticks out like a sore thumb. We can see this stuff happen. So it's like finding a needle in a haystack where the needle is colored bright orange and we happen to know the density of each cubic centimeter of the haystack.

Rooting out farmers is about finding patterns. Fortunately, the human mind is actually incredibly good at pattern recognition. One of my favorite tricks is to take an incredible amount of data, say every trade that's ever occurred between players in a game, and then just render the whole thing to the screen as nodes and edges in a graph. It's an incomprehensible mess of spaghetti. And yet anyone, after just a split second of

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looking at the screen, will begin to spot anomalies, patterns in the noise. Zoom in on these fleeting anomalies, and, quite often, you'll find there's illegitimate activity going on there.

But of course, the real job of rooting out farmers is far less psychological and far more rooted in hard data. For example, one morning I was scanning my dashboard of macro visualizations of the world. Immediately, the graphs revealed a potential hot spot. The Cave of P'tath quest was being completed far too often in relation to similarly designed quests. I whipped up an SQL query and found out the quest's completion rate was being skewed by a single group. Most people that complete the quest move on to bigger and better things, but these guys banged through it 172 times in the last four days. Their names: Abcde, Fghij, Klmnop, and Qrstuv.

I drilled into the characters' recent histories. They had an awful lot of gold on hand, especially for characters of their level: They were more than **five** standard deviations away from the mean for gold. But where'd the gold come from? I looked at their gold acquisition records and found most of the gold came

from The Cave of P'tath. They were grabbing Loki's Amulet, an overpriced reward item, and selling it to NPC vendors for a great profit. It turns out there was a typo in a spreadsheet. QA was not pleased.

So, I knew where the gold came from, but where was it going? That's the tricky part. First, I had to put the characters on a watch list and send it over to customer service, who can monitor the players' behavior a little more closely. On my end, I keep an eye on their trade records. They have to move the gold at some point, and the only way to do that in most MMOGs is by player-to-player trading. (You lose too much gold buying and selling items using NPC vendors to launder things that way.) Abcde and friends are pretty high-level, and they don't want to risk having those characters banned, since those characters took hours to level up. In most cases they'll move their gold to a low-level alternate character (alt) on a completely different account.

I got lucky this time. They made a common mistake: In a 24-hour period, they all traded gold to the same alt, and while the alt belonged to a different

account than our four farmers, that account shared the same credit card with Qrstuv. When we see that kind of behavior, it's banning time, and this case was no different.

Granted, maybe we're only catching the really dumb farmers. It's like that saying about crime: the best criminals are the ones you never hear about. There are almost certainly farmers who are so good at what they do I don't notice



**They had an awful lot of gold on hand, especially for characters of their level. But where'd the gold come from?**

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them. But if they're that stealthy, they're probably not disrupting anyone else's game, and they're probably not unbalancing the economy. And if they're not doing either of those things, I'm personally fine with their continued existence. I really don't believe there is anything intrinsically wrong with selling virtual items second-hand on eBay or wherever, despite the fact it cuts into a potential source of revenue for the game developer. As long as it's still a "potential" source, and the developer isn't making a concerted effort to actually get involved in the market (see Sony's Station Exchange for an example of a pretty good effort), I don't think the developer has the moral high ground to strike down any secondary markets.

Then there's the question of the game designers' intent. Having worked with designers, I know they hate farmers more than a lot of players do, because the farmers are finding and exploiting design weaknesses in products they've worked on for years. Some people would say, "Hey, tough luck. If your design is weak, it's your own fault." Others would take the stance that people who agree to

play a game are entering in an implicit contract to not only play by the rules, but to play reasonably within the designer's intent. I tend to side with the "tough luck" crowd, but I would add that if you're going to exploit a weak design, you'd better do it in a way that doesn't undermine the enjoyment of other players.

In the end, it comes down to a cost-benefit analysis: Is banning a suspected farmer worth the \$15 per month subscription fee you lose that the farmer is paying, and on the chance that it's not a farmer, is it worth the bad word of mouth to insinuate you don't trust the people who play your game? It's a delicate balance that involves the marketing and customer service departments of a company every bit as much as it involves the designers.

The attitude a developer takes in regard to farmers should be consistent and should be integrated tightly with the game's design. When we set out to design an MMOG, we should be as concerned with our policies and attitude toward farmers and other exploiters as we are with the art style of our game

world, or the pacing of combat. If developers set down some guidelines about farming early on as a core part of the experience, the designers can take that into account during the development process. At that point, the developers will hopefully have a consistent and sensible set of policies about farming the community understands, and then maybe we can go about catching the right farmers for the right reasons. [COMMENTS](#)

*Darius Kazemi runs Orbus Gameworks, a gameplay metrics middleware company. He also has a blog about the game industry, called Tiny Subversions.*

**Is it worth the bad word of mouth to insinuate you don't trust the people who play your game?**







## THE KOREAN INVASION

Asian MMOGs find the West is hard to win

by Allen Varney

Since the North American debut of NCsoft's *Lineage II* in 2004, South Korean game publishers have launched, or are now launching, well over a dozen Korean massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) translated into English for a Western audience. In Asia, some of these games are colossal hits. What response have they gotten in North America? With a few exceptions, not much:

- *Lineage II* did all right in North America – well, barely OK – but disappointed those hoping to repeat its Korean success (1 million players), let alone match the first *Lineage* game's spectacular 30 million.

- Nexon's *MapleStory* is a solid hit here, having reached 3 million registered users since its 2005 launch. Target superstores sell *MapleStory* game cards; game security expert Steven B. Davis, whose PlayNoEvil blog extensively covers Korean MMOGs and other Asian games, calls the Target deal, in capital letters, "REALLY IMPORTANT." In February 2007, according to *Business Week*, "North American players spent \$1.6 million on 600,000 virtual products within *MapleStory*." The game shows another, darker sign of success: pervasive, uncontrolled hacking.

Still, it's doubtful the American *MapleStory* will ever reach the Asian total: 50 million players. That Asian figure includes 30 million in South Korea alone, a nation of 49 million people.

- The social networking site Cyworld, having engulfed about 20 million Korean users, launched here in July 2006. Has it engulfed 40 percent of America's population? Uh, not yet, though it's pushing toward half a million members and is about to launch a mobile Cyworld.

- Acclaim, resurrected from bankruptcy in 2004 (in name only) as Acclaim Games, is localizing several Korean MMOGs, including *9Dragons* and *2Moons*. *BOTS* recently reached 1 million American accounts.

- Servers across Asia and Latin America host crowded *GunBound* combat games, but *GunBound Revolution* has only a modest American following. The operator, game portal ijji, runs six Korean MMOG imports. Ever hear of *Soldier Front*? *KwonHo: Fist of Heroes*? *Drift City*? *Pocket Masters*, a pool-playing MMOG? Didn't think so. The ijji forums have about 12,000 active members.

• *Albatross 18*, anyone? *War Rock*? *Voyage Century*? *Shot-Online*? *Myth War*? *Tales of Pirates*? *Global MU*? *Fishing Champ*? Come on, some of these games have hundreds of thousands of Asian users. **Someone** here must be playing.

By Western standards, some Korean MMOGs have performed respectably here. But they fall **so** far short of the Asian originals, we may ask why.

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Partly, of course, because Asian companies count players differently. There, many players pay by the hour at net cafes – though that’s changing fast in Korea, where 90 percent of homes now have super-fast broadband. One cafe player might be counted multiple times. Yet no matter how you boil down 50 million accounts, you’re still talking lots of bodies.

The shortfall is not just players, but money. How far short? A GameStudy.org report by Jun Sok Huhh lists 2006 global revenues, or rather, **lack** of revenues for many major Korean companies in Japan, Europe and North America. Last year,

Webzen, once a mighty player, bled \$3.4 million in America.

Why do mega-hit Korean games draw a response here politely described as “lukewarm”?


For starters, the Western market for online games is much smaller than Asia’s. The North American MMOG market is variously estimated at \$750 million to \$1 billion annually; less than a third of Asia’s \$3 billion. In fact, Korea earned \$698 million in 2006 simply from licensing its games to other Asian countries. In Korea as here, *World of Warcraft* is a giant success with around a million players –

but in Korea, “a million” relegates *WoW* to a niche market, dwarfed by *KartRider* and other casual games.

Korean publishers also struggled, early on, to introduce their business model into a hostile American environment. Virtual asset purchase (that is, in-game item selling) makes up at least half of Korean MMOG revenue. People pay for them on their phone bills. These games rack up millions, \$0.25 at a time. Micropayments are still new here, and many payment systems either aren’t set up for it or seem perversely user-hostile. Target’s *MapleStory* game cards foreshadow a breakthrough (a REALLY

IMPORTANT breakthrough!) that may transform the entire MMOG industry.

In a November 2006 Gamasutra interview that plugged Pearl Research’s “Games Market in Korea” report, Allison Luong talked about the importance of micropayments: “A critical success factor in growing the online games market is having a reliable and inexpensive system to bill, make payments and collect micropayments. In Korea, the development of a mobile billing system, capable of processing small payments of less than \$5 has been instrumental in helping publishers monetize gameplay.”



**// no matter how you boil down 50 MILLION ACCOUNTS, you’re still talking LOTS OF BODIES. //**

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**// TR designer Richard Garriott said, "We started with a very international crew trying to make a collaborative game design between the US and Asia. We wanted to make one game that was going to SOLVE ALL THE DESIGN AND ARTISTIC ISSUES for both territories." After two years of wasted work, THE EXPERIMENT FAILED. //**

Even Korea isn't leading the micropayment trend. In Japan, you can buy a pack of gum with your cellphone. (This is completely different from your Nintendo Wii controller "beaming money.")

More than market size and logistics, Korean MMOGs in America face cultural obstacles. Every gamer knows, and most roll their eyes at, the default Korean look: big-eyed, underfed waifs in a low-end 2-D isometric view. The imports are also rife with dismaying "Engrish." Among many examples, a recent IGG press release announcing *Godswar Online* asserts, "Every scene in game presents a characteristic physiognomy."

Far more important, though, is the difference in play styles. Korean games emphasize endless grinding, easy rewards and heavy player-vs.-player competition. The status ladder, the hierarchy, is all-important. In an interview on the Korean game blog Pig-Min, Manifesto Games CEO Greg Costikyan notes, "In the US, most players prefer to avoid player-versus-player combat, at least most of the time, so games are built primarily on character advancement and quests. In Korea, grouping together and fighting battles

against other groups seems to be the main point of most [MMOGs]. So what's a minority taste here is the majority interest in Korea, and vice versa."

NCsoft's much-delayed *Tabula Rasa* MMOG tried to bridge the American and Korean markets. In a March 2007 *Next Generation* interview with Colin Campbell, TR designer Richard Garriott said, "We started with a very international crew trying to make a collaborative game design between the US and Asia. We wanted to make one game that was going to solve all the design and artistic issues for both territories." After two years of wasted work, the experiment failed.

"Asia has a whole set of unique differences," says Garriott. "Some of these are subtle but important. But one of the most obvious is what a heroic character looks like. In the United States, a heroic character is often very buff, broad-shouldered, square-chinned and barrel-chested. The dashing hero is a very clear idea to us. In Asia, characters who look like that are always the bad guys, always. The people who are the good guys are young, nerdy, skinny little kids who survive against those big people

because of an inner strength. ... And so when we create heroic characters and try to send them over to Asia, they're saying, 'Why are you making me play these big, dumb brutes who are clearly evil?' That's a big disconnect."

Still, whatever the culture divide, Korean MMOG publishers want to cross it. The domestic Korean MMOG market is maturing – or, from another viewpoint, stagnating.

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In April 2007, the Korean newspaper *Joong Ang Daily* reported domestic MMOGs were dwindling in popularity, "because new games were not innovative, having similar storylines and game play characteristics to those in *Lineage*." The article cites Ministry of Culture statistics showing domestic online game growth projections of only (!) 18 percent this year, from \$175 to \$211 million – evidently a tepid rate by Korean standards.

Publishers are springing to address this alleged crisis. They're doing more licensing in Western countries, such as Vivendi's May 2007 release (albeit as a standalone retail game) of JCE's casual

MMOG *Freestyle Street Basketball*, which has 32 million Asian players.

A few Korean companies have started hiring American marketing firms, as when Nexon allied with MTV Networks. But much of this marketing has been awkward. K2 Networks made a clueless big-money PR push in late 2006, complete with booth babes, at – no, not E3, but the sedate Austin Game Conference, where attendees wouldn't look twice at a booth babe unless she flashed an MMOG development contract.

The overlooked issue is, how about improving the games? How about showing America the really good stuff?

There are a couple of promising prospects. *KartRider* claims 160 million players, including one third of all South Koreans. At its height in 2005, 200,000 Koreans logged in daily. In China, *KartRider* has reached 800,000 concurrent users. Here, the game is currently in beta, with under 20,000 forum members. And *Audition Online* (aka *Dancing Paradise*), the casual dancing MMOG from Korean publisher T3 Entertainment, has 50 million players in China. In June 2007, the Nexon America version hit 100,000 registered users. (See

"Will Bobba for Furni" by Russ Pitts in *The Escapist* issue 101.) Acclaim's *Dance Online*, now in beta, imitates *Audition*.

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In one important sense, Korean MMOGs have already succeeded here, just by proving the validity of the free-to-play model. In a year or two, every new MMOG you play will use virtual asset purchase.

Korea continues to be the scout, the lab rat for American companies. Its struggles with regulation of real-money trading and net addiction foreshadow our own. Korean companies experiment with original ways to foster community, such as Hanbit Soft's age-segregated servers for *Granado Espada* (marketed here as *Sword of the New World*): age 18 and over, 25-plus, 30-plus and a "silver" server for seniors.

Most important, no matter what *Joong Ang Daily* thinks, Korea's MMOGs are often novel and imaginative by American standards. They bring new ideas to our market. It's possible their MMOGs may become the leading edge of a larger Korea-pop invasion that has already swept Asia; China gave this phenomenon

a name, *hallyu* ("Korean wave"). If *hallyu* takes hold here, expect much name-checking in the future for the insanely fast rapper Outsider, singers Rain and BoA, films like *Oldboy* and *The Host*, and a zillion soap operas. The real Korean invasion may be just beginning.

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.*




how about improving the games? How about showing America **THE REALLY GOOD STUFF?**

## WoW's Magic NUMBER

8.5 million people  
can't be wrong, but  
**CAN THEY BE SWAYED?**

by Dana Massey



Boasting an estimated 8.5 million subscribers, it's impossible to ignore the influence of *World of Warcraft* (WoW) on the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) market. It's the first MMOG to flirt with the word "mainstream," it redefined the way studios think about their development process, influenced designs and sent dozens of start-ups on a quest to get their slice of the apparently expanded MMOG pie. There's just one problem: In North America, there is no evidence that there are significantly more MMOG fans than there were in the days before *WoW* swept the world off its feet.

MMOG fans are the few hundred thousand North Americans who have played every MMOG before and after *WoW*. Studios look at *WoW*, which is an MMOG, and assume that because it has those sexy subscriber numbers, there are more people running around willing to fling money at them. That's just not the case. Just like not every whiskey is a scotch, MMOG fans may be *WoW* fans, but *WoW* fans are not necessarily MMOG fans. There is little evidence to suggest the average *WoW* fan knows what MMOG stands for, let alone what the heck a *Tabula Rasa* is.

The expected *WoW* refugee trickle-down has stubbornly refused to materialize. As a conservative estimate, it is safe to assume that in any given month, 5 percent of *WoW*'s player base cancels their accounts. Where do these people go? Some undoubtedly dive back into the MMOG pool and spread out among the infinite titles floating around, but at 5 percent, that means there are roughly 425,000 *WoW* refugees milling about every month. But 425,000 people aren't playing new games each month. *WoW* just doesn't grow the genre.

When developers talk about those 8.5 million subscribers, they're presenting that data in a way North American consumers aren't used to hearing. Traditionally, when gamers read about subscriber numbers, they're getting regionally focused numbers. For example, Turbine licenses *The Lord of the Rings Online* and *Dungeons & Dragons Online* to Codemasters, who handles distribution and subscriptions in Europe. This means most estimates evaluate the two pools (Codemasters and Turbine) separately. *WoW*, however, is all under one banner, and this inflates the numbers. In reality, only roughly 2.25 million players subscribe to *WoW* in

North America. To hit the full 8.5 million, Blizzard counts 3.75 million in China, 1.6 million in Europe and additional few hundred thousand in South Korea, Australia and Asia.

Outside of *WoW*, the numbers are tragically anemic, near an all-time low. The genre used to have echelons, but now there is only *WoW*. Everyone else, by comparison, is non-existent.

*City of Heroes/Villains*, NCsoft's most successful subscription-based game, has 143,127 subscribers in North America and Europe. *Star Wars Galaxies* and *Vanguard* are each at approximately 100,000. And, despite widespread media attention, as of March *Second Life* only had 57,702 paying subscribers across the globe.


While developers learned a lot from *WoW*, they missed one very important lesson: It's a videogame and was marketed as such, whereas MMOGs are thought of as being their own unique snowflake and are promoted differently. Industry insiders talk about how *WoW*'s success is good for the genre as a whole, but none of them have stopped and truly taken advantage of it. For years, MMOGs have existed in their own little segregated world. Sure,

*WoW* appeals to MMOG fans, but it transcends the genre in a way other companies have failed to grasp.

MMOG companies continue to channel their message through a select group of publications that focus on the MMOG genre exclusively. While each game gets the occasional day in the sun on a larger outlet like GameSpot, they rarely stay in the limelight for long. Blizzard doesn't ignore MMOG sites, but they hardly covet them, because they have the distinct advantage of being the elephant in the room. Smaller sites have to cover *WoW* if they're covering the genre. It's too big to ignore.

When game companies focus their message on MMOG players, they fight with each other over a small, stagnant group.

This phenomenon explains how in MMORPG.com's annual Reader's Choice Awards, *EVE Online* was able to sweep *WoW*. *EVE* has 180,000 subscribers worldwide, just over 2 percent of *WoW*'s subscriber base. The average *WoW* player just doesn't care about what the typical MMOG fan does.



// While developers learned a lot from *WoW*, they **MISSED ONE VERY IMPORTANT LESSON** //

Since MMOG fans and *WoW* fans travel in different circles, it is up to MMOG studios to figure out not only how to appeal to *WoW* fans, but where they came from in the first place.

The biggest advantage Blizzard had coming in was a built-in fan base no one – with the possible exception of BioWare – can rival. Then, they marketed themselves beyond the established MMOG circles; they even ran TV ads. And if their initial success wasn't enough, they were immortalized in a *South Park* episode poking fun at the game's addictive qualities.

MMOG companies need to get creative if they hope to duplicate *WoW*'s mainstream success. Most recently, Turbine seems to have learned that lesson. Since its launch in late April, *The Lord of the Rings Online* has dominated NPD sales numbers, and in a recent interview, Executive Producer Jeffrey Steefel was quoted as saying their game was the second most popular MMOG ever, but it remains too early to guess how many subscribers they might actually have.

Turbine leveraged their mainstream license and attracted attention outside the traditional routes. Their studio name doesn't carry the weight of Blizzard's, but many more people know the works of J.R.R. Tolkien than know *Warcraft*. Turbine still evangelized on fansites and gaming portals, but they also had placement in major newspapers and other mainstream outlets. If Steefel's quote is accurate, the strategy paid off. But they still have a long way to go. Despite its epic license, improved

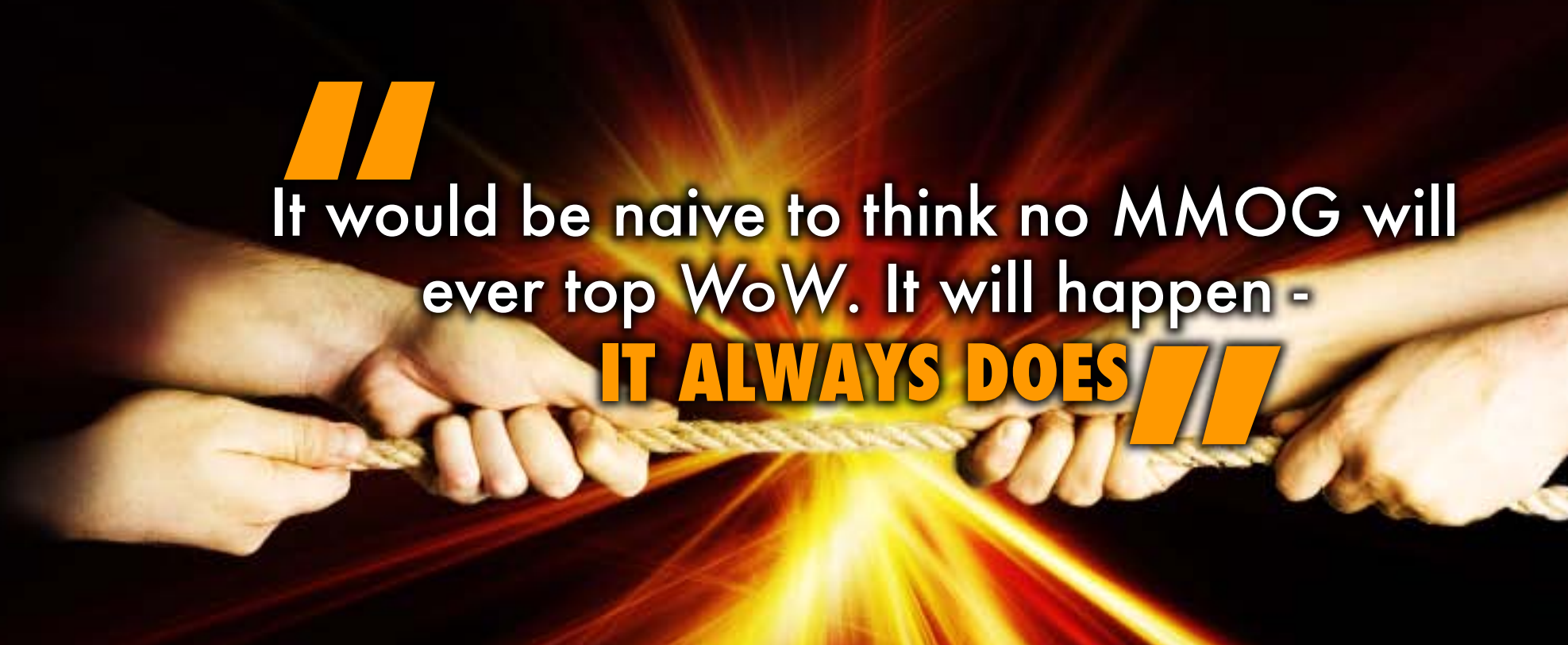
marketing and generally top notch reviews, no one expects *The Lord of the Rings Online* to compete with *WoW* anytime soon.

It would be naive to think no MMOG will ever top *WoW*. It will happen - it always does - but it definitely won't happen until game companies wake up and stop fighting over the same hardcore group that's played every MMOG since *EverQuest*. *WoW* appealed to a wider audience, and to achieve that level of

success, studios must reach beyond hardcore MMOG fans, through *WoW* fans and out to people who still look confused when they hear the word MMOG.

[COMMENTS](#)

*Dana "Lepidus" Massey is the Senior Editor for WarCry.com and former Co-Lead Game Designer for Wish.*



**//**  
It would be naive to think no MMOG will  
ever top *WoW*. It will happen -  
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## “Putting the” **Massive** in “Massively Multiplayer Online”

by Shawn Williams

Everyone knew how worlds were designed: They were basically a series of “zones,” sometimes interlocked, sometimes completely detached, accessible only by very special means, sometimes migrating connections from room to room to simulate settings like a sailing ship. You came up with a number of zones, mapped them out, populated them with some monsters and divided them among the servers according to their load. Players would quickly learn the necessary routes – which zones connected, where there were shortcuts, the quickest paths through zones.

And then, *Asheron’s Call* launched in late 1999 and introduced a radical concept: no zones in a three-dimensional world – just one, big continuous continent. Seamless.

**It Keeps Going and Going and Going**  
*Asheron’s Call* took place on the world of Dereth, a roughly square continent about 24 miles on each side. Created by Turbine and released in November 1999, *AC* broke with the well-established norms of its competitors, *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest*, in a number of ways. It was set in an original fantasy world that lacked “stereotypical” creatures and

playable races, skills weren’t bound to specific classes, and it featured a new technology: dynamic load balancing, which made for wide open spaces. Contrary to popular belief, this wasn’t a reaction to market forces; Turbine designed *AC* that way from the very beginning.

“People always seemed to think that *EQ*, *AC* and *UO* were all trying to differentiate from each other, when in fact most of the major decisions had been made long before we even knew of each other,” says Jason Booth, Turbine’s original Lead Technical Artist and one of the earliest members of the team. “We were all just doing our own thing and sort of bumped into each other at E3 one year.”

Their “own thing” included a scalable server-side architecture. It worked by dividing the game world between available servers (in this case, individual computers networked together locally), based on population density in certain areas and the server’s available processor capacity. Depending on how players spread out in the world, the servers would shift processing between themselves, sharing the load. What’s interesting is how different play styles

affected the technology, and how the technology reacted to solve the problem.

"On [player-vs.-player] servers, people spread out a lot more, causing more of the world to be loaded and increasing memory usage," Jason explains.

"Whereas on [non-PvP] servers, people cluster more, causing network and processing load to be the limiting factor."

The players experienced those imposed limits by way of "portal storms," an in-game term for "too many players in one spot." When a number of players gathered in any one location, the game instituted a portal storm, which randomly teleported people out of high-traffic areas.

### **Crossing The Great Divide**

The seamless world was incredibly immersive. When you're crossing a mountain range for mile after snow-covered mile, a five-second load screen can still kill the illusion, especially when something incongruous to the real world happens, like the weather changing from partly sunny to mostly terrible in an instant, or the position of the sun in the sky not matching from area to area.

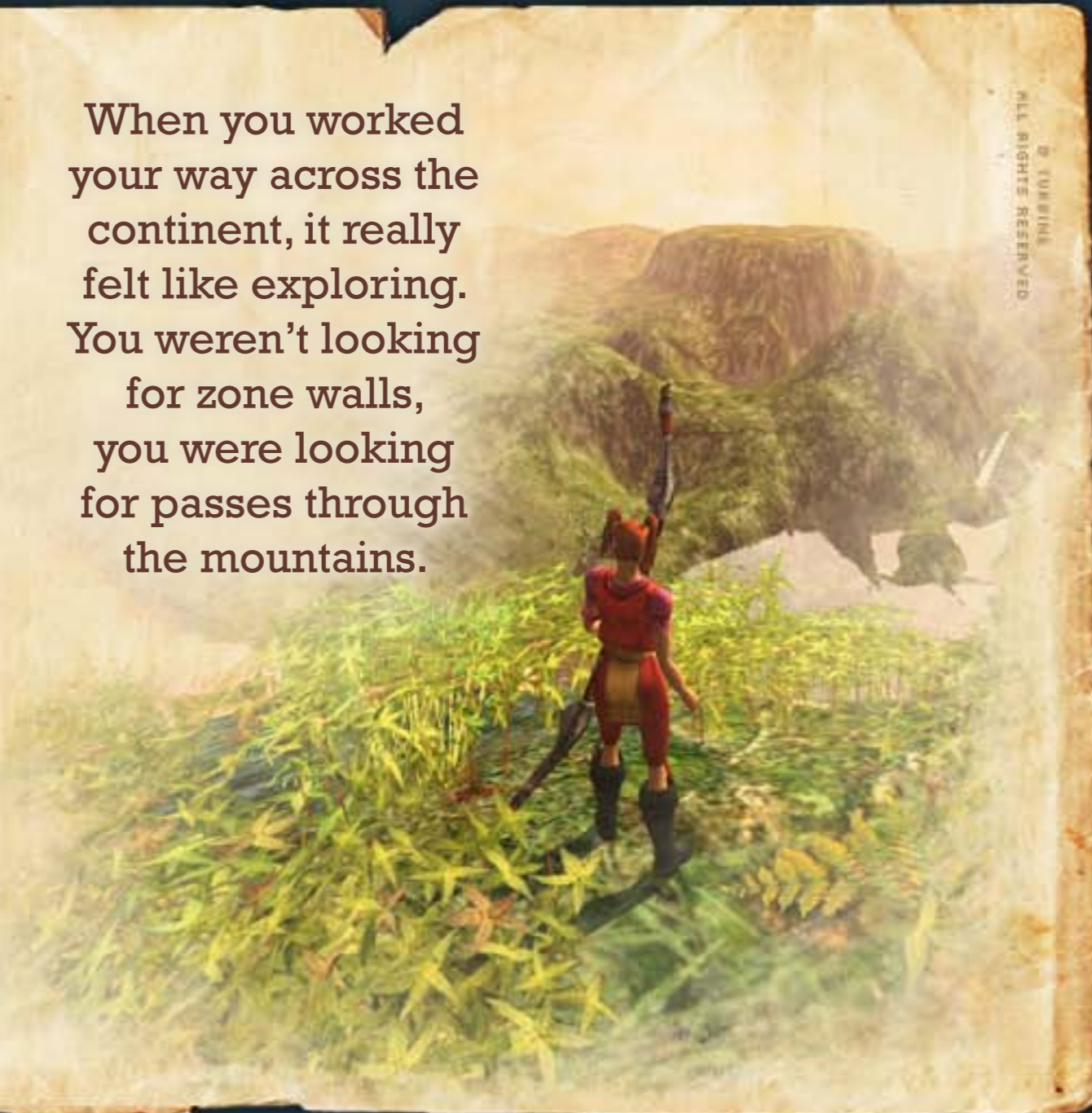
In *Asheron's Call*, when you worked your way across the continent, it really felt like exploring. You weren't looking for zone walls, you were looking for passes through the mountains, and those passes sported all the dangers of their real-world counterparts.

Finding shortcuts across mountains or through particularly treacherous areas was an endless quest in itself. It wasn't just the terrain you were fighting against; a large population of foul-tempered nasties awaited you behind every brush, tree and hill. This made the radar on the user interface a welcome, but not always reliable, tool.

The radar showed the position of nearby players and monsters, but relying on the radar was dangerous; some of the nastiest monsters in the game didn't show up on your radar until you had already stumbled into their effective attacking range. By the time you knew they were there, you were dead.

In an area full of high-level, radar-resistant monsters, the radar was practically useless. You had to actively

When you worked your way across the continent, it really felt like exploring. You weren't looking for zone walls, you were looking for passes through the mountains.



watch where you were going and constantly adjust your course to avoid deadly groups of monsters, lest you be drawn into an epic struggle with no hope for survival.

In other MMOGs, one need only run away to the nearest zone border; players pass through, monsters do not. This is called “training”; fleeing aggressive monsters, who then follow behind you, forming what looks like a train. A train of death.

In AC there were no zone borders to train to; you couldn’t count on an easy escape. Monsters would break off pursuit after a certain distance, but with enough monsters – especially the more lethal monsters – the odds were good you would die before your train even left the station. As you fled, you would invariably flee into **more** monsters, coupling even more critters to your train.

One particularly existential solution to this dilemma was the act of jumping off a cliff, which, while perhaps a bit insane, would actually occasionally save your life. Unfortunately, the train of death

would sometimes be so intent in their pursuit, they might jump off the cliff right after you. If they landed on you, you could expect to take damage (more than from the fall anyway). It was a sorry adventurer who, having survived a desperate jump from a great height, believed he was safe only to suffer death from above in the form of a monster bouncing off his skull.

### Sea To Shining Sea

A continuous, seamless world is more than just a hook. It gives players in AC a truly unique experience, with a great sense of a massive world that wasn’t present in games before Dereth was introduced. AC isn’t perfect, and it’s certainly gone through its share of problems, but it still stands out as the first real “massive” game, due in no small part to the ingenious design of its server architecture.

*Asheron’s Call* never came close to dethroning then-leader *EverQuest*, and today, compared to the millions of subscribers boasted by *World of Warcraft*, its subscriber base is pitifully

small. But after nearly 10 years and two expansions, Dereth remains a diverse, fully-explorable world full of adventure on a truly **massive** scale. [COMMENTS](#)

*Shawn “Kwip” Williams is the founder of N3 (NeenerNeener.Net), where he toils away documenting his adventures as the worst MMOG and pen-and-paper RPG player in recorded history.*

A continuous,  
seamless world  
is more than  
just a hook.



# MASSIVE IN THE MMOG COMMUNITY

by Michael Zenke

The massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) podcasting community is incredibly rich. Taken together as a group, MMOG podcasts number in the dozens and feature some of the most dedicated gamers in the world. These players, and the medium of podcasting, have been playing a larger and larger role in the communities they serve. Whether they're bringing people together via forums or offering high-level players unique strategies, the massive podcaster makes the game more fun for everyone.

I had the chance to speak with the hosts of several well-known podcasts about their medium and its potential. The creators of VirginWorlds, World of Warcraft, GuildCast, EQ2 Daily and The Official SOE Podcast were kind enough to share thoughts on their time behind the mic.

The first question most everyone asks is, why bother? "I think it has to do with the commitment the community has, and the passion," says Alan "Brenlo" Crosby, one of the minds behind The Official SOE Podcast. "They have a great deal of passion, these huge investments into these games, and they want to do more. They want to feel more a part of it, they want to contribute."

Participating in and creating subcommunities is the chief reason massive podcasters get behind the mic. GuildCast creator Shawn was upfront about his goals: "When I started GuildCast ... I wanted to create more of a community. Even after I started playing *Guild Wars*, I found myself still playing by myself. It just wasn't cutting it for me. ... I wanted to create something where people would have a common point of reference."

Brent of the VirginWorlds podcast feels the podcasters themselves are ultimately the tie that binds. "I believe that podcasting builds community and trust better than any other medium online right now because of the personality involved. ... Before the podcasting at Ziff [Davis] launched, most people wouldn't have cared one lick if one of those people left the site. Now, though, if Jeff Green were to leave the magazine, people would be like, 'Ahh!' ... It would be very disconcerting to the VirginWorlds listeners and browsers if Brent were not here tomorrow. There's no replacement for that."

But it does go beyond making a name for yourself. When "Starman" started

World of Warcraft, he had a very specific model to build on: "I wanted to do a [The] Screen Savers for [World of Warcraft]. That was essentially it. I wanted it to be fun, I wanted it to be informative, I wanted to bring a bunch of things to the table. I basically wanted it to be the place people would go to, to learn about the game, just like I would watch *The Screen Savers* every day at 7:00 to learn about technology. ... I think, over the last two years, it's really become exactly what I wanted it to be."

A mix of community and information seems to be a winning combination for podcast subscribers, and speaks to the power of coverage by dedicated fans versus that of traditional gaming media. EQ2 Daily's "Cyanbane" pointed out that, "Pre-WoW, I think that there was a disjoint between your bigger sites and players. You had the people who played *EverQuest*, and the playerbase that played [MMOGs], and then you had the people that played every other videogame. Don't get me wrong, if you're [a big site], you're going to cater to the bigger market. And now that *WoW* has hit, you've started to see an upswing in coverage. Even still, it's more looking for the press release kind of stuff. They'll set

up their hub and put up screenshots, and then a review, but then after that you don't get much in the way of content."

The hosts of Warcraft feel this was the result of the way traditional gaming media thinks about MMOGs. Says "Renata," "[MMOGs] are meant to be played in different ways by different people. In an [MMOG], you've got tons of different ways you can take the game. You can get into crafting, you can get into raiding, you can be a more casual player, you can do tons of alts [alternate characters], you can log in just every once in a while. There are so many ways to play the game - we don't struggle with finding content. Bigger sites don't live the game the way that we do."

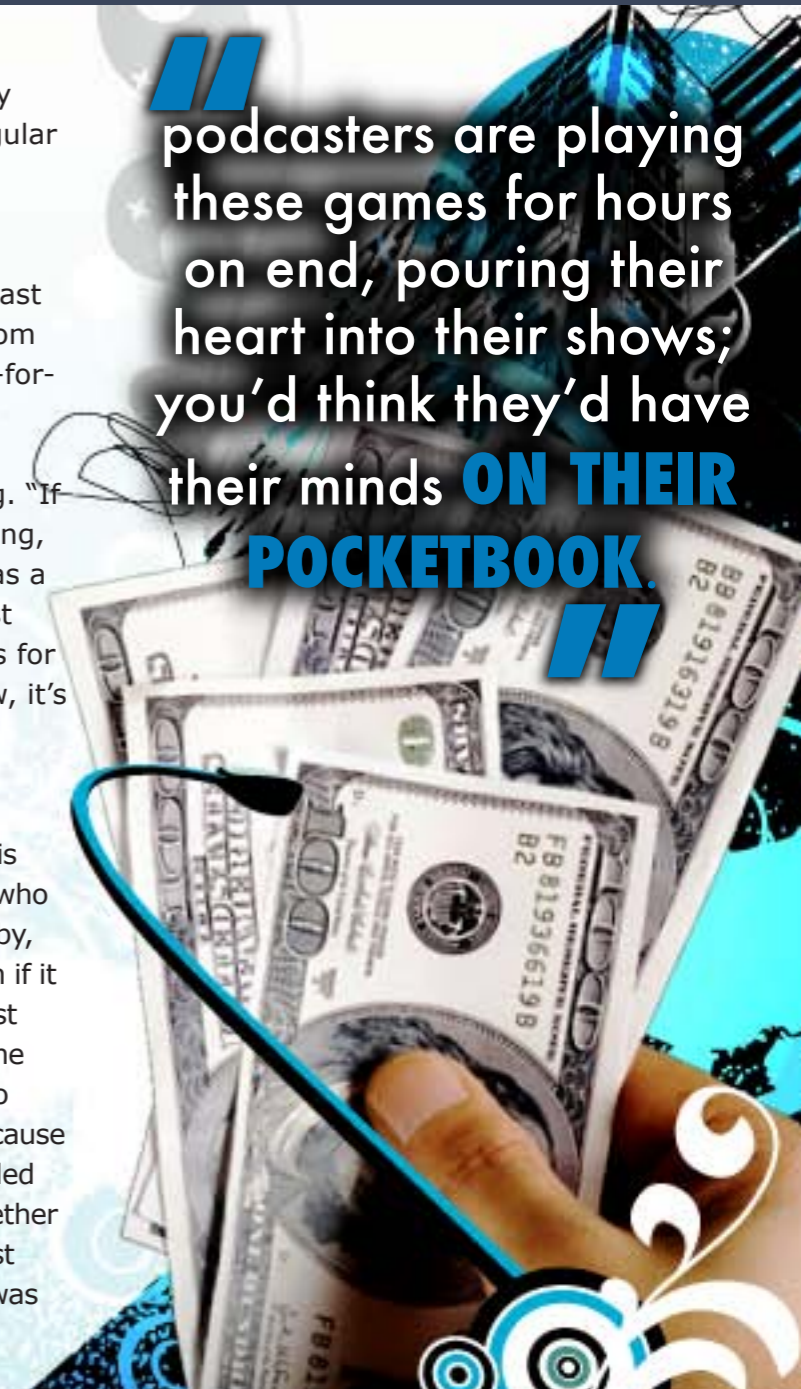
So, podcasters are playing these games for hours on end, pouring their heart into their shows; you'd think they'd have their minds on their pocketbook. Instead, passion for the subject matter seems to be the primary motivation for the most successful podcasters. If anything, getting money involved would make it less fun. As soon as money comes into the picture, so do schedules and forced production windows. "We work to a schedule that suits our need

not to burn out," says Starman. Cyanbane agrees: "We wanted every show to have lots of content; no regular schedule allows us the freedom to address news as it's released."

It's this interest in keeping the podcast content fresh that prevents hosts from committing to the idea of a podcast-for-pay. Shawn would need to expand beyond his current setup to feel challenged by podcasting for a living. "If I had the opportunity to do podcasting, let's just say podcasting in general as a career, I would not only do GuildCast more often. ... I have so many ideas for other podcasts in my head right now, it's not even funny."

While there may not be money in independent podcasting, the medium is becoming very popular with interests who have already made a sale. SOE's Crosby, when asked if he'd be podcasting even if it wasn't a part of his job description, just laughed. "Actually, when we created the community department, there were no plans for a podcast. It came about because two of my community managers decided they wanted to try it. So they put together the first one, which we [called] podcast beta, and it grew from there. So this was

podcasters are playing these games for hours on end, pouring their heart into their shows; you'd think they'd have their minds **ON THEIR POCKETBOOK.**



never something that was mandated, we just did it because we love what we do, we love the communities." Beyond SOE's walls, companies like EA Mythic are turning to expensive podcasts to excite gamers about their upcoming products.

With that trend in mind, it was interesting to hear what the hosts had to say about the future. Brent and the VirginWorlds site are already paving the way, banding together with several other shows to form the VirginWorlds Collective. "There are people who guided me along the path to figure out what this whole podcast thing was. ... Now that VirginWorlds is pushing 70 shows, there are several new waves of podcasters coming up behind me, pointing at me as an example. People ask me all the time, 'How do I get started?' and I got the idea to start this co-op or collective of podcasts. The podcasters would own everything; I'm not trying to sell ads, I'm just trying to build a community. That's what VirginWorlds is about." As established shows reach back to aid up and coming hosts, it's easy to see the hosts' dedication to the community isn't one-way.

While everyone is hopeful for future, Cyanbane was especially prosaic. "I think

you're going to see the start of user-generated channels, like a consortium of [MMOG]-related video feeds. I don't think it will be like your standard TV, but I think that people will really want to sit down and watch that. I think there will be a lot more user-generated content. I don't want to say it will change the world, but over the next 10-15 years I think we're going to see a ridiculous shift to micro-advertisements from Google and the like, attaching itself to user-generated content. I think we're looking

at people sitting down at their computers instead of their TVs."

Whatever form the medium takes, the outgrowth of MMOG communities will continue in new directions in the coming years. Be it videos or podcasting, media-savvy community leaders will ensure the player base never lacks for something interesting to talk about in a pick-up group. As the genre widens, and titles other than *World of Warcraft* begin to attract attention, these communities will

be on the forefront, helping players better enjoy their games. [COMMENTS](#)

*Michael "Zonk" Zenke is Editor of Slashdot Games, a subsite of the technology community Slashdot.org . He comments regularly on massive games at the sites MMOG Nation and 1up.com. He lives in Madison, WI with his wife Katharine.*



**///** Whatever form the medium takes, the **OUTGROWTH OF MMOG COMMUNITIES** will continue in new directions in the coming years. **///**

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