extended
explorations
Having played around with Aardwolf for awhile now, I must say that I have mixed feelings. I really wanted to spend my MMO time with Star Trek Online, but I'm saving for an iPad, and didn't want to spend $50.

Aardwolf was a bit overwhelming for me. This was not because of the game’s scope and scale, but simply because it was text-based. I still remember my first Gameboy, and spending countless hours playing Tetris. Even then, games incorporated a graphical interface, a control scheme that uses arrow keys to move the cursor, icons to represent items, and visually realistic worlds that convince us suspend our own realities and immerse us in the game.

Aardwolf is a throwback to a previous era, and for many people this is great. There are still people that prefer a command line interface on a computer to modern graphical user interfaces (GUI). I am not one of these people.

Aardwolf made me do something that games don’t normally do: it made me think about how to play. After a relatively short period of time, control schemes for modern games have become familiar, almost second nature. This effectively eliminates the controller that separates the gamer from the game, and we become a part of what we see on screen.

This essential component of enjoyment never existed for me in Aardwolf. Having to constantly think not about “what spell should I cast?” but rather “how do I cast a spell?” made the game very frustrating.

I realize that Aardwolf is a throwback to the beginning of virtual worlds, and the games have come a long way since Richard Bartle’s original MUD. Though I have never played World of Warcraft, Everquest, or Star Trek Online, it is clear from what I do know that they embrace modern game design principles. Though they are certainly more complicated than the average single player game and offer a higher level of customization, they use familiar graphic interfaces that allow players to become a part of the virtual world in a way that Aardwolf and similar text-based MUDs can’t.
“Living in a virtual world”

A friend of mine has been trying to get me into World of Warcraft for almost two years now. Despite all of her persuasive efforts, I never saw the appeal. The game required too much memorization (something I hate), and the virtual relationships built with other players seemed like little more than an evolved chat room.

Recently, I asked her to play for a while so I could observe the game. Then, she graciously let me take the controls for about an hour. Compared to the game Aardwolf, WoW is more ‘real’ and open-ended, which make the gaming experience more enjoyable and relaxing. In WoW, there are a vast amount of options and both visual and aural stimuli.

Even though WoW is easier and more enjoyable, I still had no idea what I was doing. I aimlessly jogged around my little forest kingdom looking for people to talk to for a good chunk of the time. It reminded me of Zelda (Nintendo 64 version, one of the best!) when I played as Link searching around for quests… except in WoW I was this terrifying goblin woman who was running into trees.

The biggest difference between Zelda and WoW is that Zelda’s characters were driven by artificial premeditated intelligence, whereas you’re actually interacting with other people in WoW. It was really awkward communicating with the other players in WoW, because I couldn’t get past the fact that they were real people. I have gathered that awkward people like me are probably not the greatest candidates for role playing games like this… and I’m okay with that.

After watching for a while, and hearing other people during the game, it was really interesting to me that there were dorky sounding guys with bulked up avatars, and men playing as female characters. That immediately struck me as one of the strange appeals that must lure some of the players in to this virtual world. No matter what you look like in real life, you are in charge of your physical construct in WoW in order to give yourself the optimal playing advantage and social experience. I find that people are very accepting in this type of virtual world, as far as ‘accepting’ goes when there is no face-to-face contact or serious interaction.

Overall, I don’t think I’ll ever be the gaming type, nor will I pick up on the frenzy any time soon. I’m somewhat awkward in social situations that push norms and create new boundaries because I place a lot of value on communication. Although I am completely accepting of new technologies, I like face-to-face interaction.

I have faith in our media, I’m just weird when it comes to chat-room type environments. Games like WoW and Aardwolf are very much for people who are able to engage themselves deeply in their own imaginations and who are able to explore new means of communication. I see the appeal, but don’t think it’s a type of reality I could ever identify with.
Aardwolf reminded me heavily of my high school days playing *Dungeons and Dragons*. While neither are inherently lame, I have a hard time imagining things while playing, so they become quite lame.

Often both games boil down to “Vague story for five minutes. Tedium boring combat for an hour. Vague story for five more minutes. Tedium boring combat for an hour.” I respect *Aardwolf* for what it does but have no desire to return unless I’m showing it to some seriously drunk friends.

Needing another game to play, I moved back to *Aion: The Tower of Eternity*. (I feel that subtitle is worthy of being typed in capital letters as if it is being announced by someone really manly and awesome) A friend is testing out a private Aion server (this means it’s everything in the game, minus official servers and mods, plus unofficial mods, minus paying for it monthly, minus a bunch of people, including gold spammers) so I visited his server. Though I wasn’t playing with any more than three people at a time, I have to admit, the time I did spend in there with them was as much fun—or more fun—than when the world was filled to the brim with people.

Now, let’s get some things straight.

First, the game was incomplete. In fact, most of it did not work. My brother got a blue screen whenever he attempted the necessary ascension quest, the Abyss didn’t work, and other game mechanics (such as enchantments and stigmas) did not work at all.

Second, everyone playing was an administrator. What does this mean? It means whatever the players want, we get. Any monster. Any item. Any title. Any person. Any place. This is why I enjoyed it so much.

Now, the incompleteness of the game kinda sucked, because characters did not have advanced skills and could not function at optimal capacity. The Abyss is arguably the most fun area, and it was broken.

However, the administrator privileges made the game absolutely amazing. As soon as I could, I promoted myself to fiftieth level, gave myself a million bajillion zillion gold, added all the best gear for my class, included all the enhancements I wanted, and threw in healing potions guaranteed to bring you back to full health. My brother and friends all did the same. And then the fun began.

We spawned huge monsters and small monsters, visited enemy capitals, and traveled wherever we wanted. It was everything I ever wanted to do in an MMO all wrapped into an hour.

That was awesome. We were all in Ventrillo, which is a free Voice Over IP client, laughing and having a great time. Getting to hang out and mess around with friends and family in an MMO (note this great sound byte

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**Evan Barnett**

“Welcome to the world”

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that makes it sound like my parents actually do cool things.) and doing whatever we wanted felt so much more interesting than being confined by a restrictive game.

This server was running off my friend’s computer rather than a dedicated box. I cannot wait until the server eventually goes up for real. There will be fewer people, increased rates for experience and loot, and a closer community.

I hate playing MMOs normally, because I’m fairly shy online, and it takes too long. For this reason, I’ve never integrated well in MMOs, which makes them rather boring for me. Exploring a community server, rather than the official server, is much more fun.

The friends I made on other games will stop by to visit now and then. With the boosted rates, it won’t take forever to level up and be awesome. And, because of the size, there will be fewer people farming monsters.

In the end, I really enjoy persistent worlds as long as they’re fairly small.
ANDREW TRUELOVE

“So after my less than ideal experience with *Maple Story*, when I was told to experiment with another virtual world, I decided to go with something a little less 2D. Now, seeing as I own a PlayStation 3, I decided to try out the *Home* application included on the console. I had messed around with friends on it before, but I decided to try going a little more in depth with what the program had to offer.

Now to those who aren’t familiar with *Home* (and in all honesty, that’s probably a good thing), it’s like *Second Life* on a console with more advertisements for video games. I would not have bothered with it if it was not free and already on my system. My experience with it until this point had primarily consisted of having my avatar run up to random groups of people and performing the running man dance. I can also have him do the cabbage patch or the robot, but the running man is always dependable. Tonight, I decided to see if I could actually carry out a conversation with other people online.

I started out by sending my avatar to the main plaza area. When I made my avatar a few months ago, I designed him to be morbidly obese and gave him a greasy hairdo, tons of freckles, a sleazy mustache and a unibrow. Most people try to make themselves look better online. I just think it’s fun to make my avatar look funny. It also makes me stand out. However, it seems that funny-looking people are ignored in cyberspace as much as they are in real life. No one wanted to talk to me, and whenever I approached anyone else, I would not really get a response. So after performing the running man in front of different groups of people, I left to rethink my strategy.

I decided to make my avatar less pudgy and more in line with *Playstation Home* standards. I chose a premade avatar. He did not have greasy hair, a creeper mustache, nor a unibrow. Where’s the fun in that? When I returned to the plaz, I thought I would have more people who would want to talk with me.

Instead, I was greeted by a guy with shades and a large beard who asked if he could perform an R-rated act on my character. I declined, because:

a. *PlayStation Home* is meant to be a family program, thus rendering said R-rated acts logically unfeasible, and

b. he was a freaking creepy guy with a beard and my avatar does not go for that kind of thing.

He went on his way, and I went back to my old standby: the running man. After dancing for a few minutes, a few other people joined in and soon we had a sort of dance party going on. This was good, and I managed to have a minor conversation that consisted primarily of “Running man rules!”
However it wasn’t long before everyone left and I was alone again. I tried talking to a few other people, and had a few more short conversations, but there wasn’t anything substantial. What could I do to get people to maintain a conversation with me?

I went back to the character creation space and decided to try one last thing. I made my character female.

And that did it.

By doing this I discovered the key to *PlayStation Home*. Apparently, the majority of players are teenage boys so desperate for action that they flock to anything that even slightly resembles a girl. Apparently this includes avatars.

People walked up to my avatar to introduce themselves and I could reply with any crap from the suggested word pool (such as “e.g. we should wait in the store to wait in the store in the store”) and I would get interested responses. However, as is the law with *PlayStation Home*, the sketchy players reappeared. If I thought the R-rated acts suggested to my male character were messed up, well—I got off the program pretty quickly. I’m just hoping Chris Hanson comes and busts some of these guys.

To sum it up: if you want to have a decent conversation online, *PlayStation Home* is not your best bet. If you want to interact with sketchy individuals, go right on ahead. Think of *PlayStation Home* as being like *Society* from the movie *Gamer*, but less people die and more apparently bisexual men with shades and large beards ask for digital R-rated material.

As for me, I might actually miss *Maple Story*.

On second thought, no,

I do not miss *Maple Story*.

I do, however, miss the sense of innocence I used to believe still existed in this world.
Well? I spent some time exploring more of the Aardwolf MUD. I’ll have to say, not being able to “see” exactly what I’m doing is kind of frustrating. I’m already slightly video game impaired, so it’s just a little frustrating.

What also throws me off a little bit about this text-based stuff is that it’s this weird combination of things. It’s a fantasy novel of sorts (which, I mean, I really like. Fantasy novels, I mean) combined with a video game. This is a really cool concept, but the combination of the two causes a disconnect for me. If I wanted to sit and read paragraphs of description, I would sit down and pick up a book.

It would be better if the descriptions were shorter and they would just get to the point. I found myself thinking during training, “Okay read, read, read, are there dummies in this room? No? Okay, then where are the exits so I can find more dummies? Read... read... dammit where are the exits?” Perhaps if I had a little more patience, I would understand that it was like a story that I could make up as I go along. And that would be cool. It would be like a fantasy story in which I was the author.

I tried thinking like that, and it really worked whenever I was going through training because there was a point. There was a goal I was trying to get to. But I was bored just walking around, not really doing a task or anything. I liked having a goal or something to focus on. I feel like if there was some over arching theme. Or goal. Like. You must defeat the master or boss or whatever. Except, you know, then it wouldn’t really be an interactive game. It would just be a video game. Because once one player defeats the boss, then he’s dead for everyone else, isn’t he? So I suppose the point here is that there’s not supposed to be an end. Thist bothers me in general about interactive games, not just text-based ones. I like there to be a goal. I like there to be a goal in real life too, I suppose.

Another thing that was weird for me was that because it was text-based there were no pictures. Obviously. But I was kind of bummed because, I mean. I’m a CENTAUR. A freaking centaur. They’re awesome. I’d want to like pick what color my coat was and my mane and tail and my hair and facial features. But I could never see how awesome I’d look. It was just like “You kicked a dummy!” or “Your kick chopped through a dummy!”

So there definitely was an additional weird disconnect between my body and the game. I mean, even if there was a picture, I don’t know if my body would have had necessarily a strong attachment or feeling towards the body on the game when it moved, but at least I could have seen how the body moved. And, yes, there’s this whole desire of imagination which makes it possible for every one to imagine their individual character exactly as they want to. But in video games there’s already a disconnect between player and game. The computer serves as both a connector and disconnector. On one hand, it’s connecting you to the virtual world but on the other hand, you’re still not physically and actually in the game because the computer is just a mediator.
Also, there are really disturbing pictures of female centaurs when you Google them. Glad to know female sexuality permeates fantasy creatures too.

As for the actual game itself, I would need a few weeks to totally get down. As I was going through the game, I made a list of things to remember—commands and stuff—so that when I got to the training section, I could remember all of the commands that the “teacher” had taught me. And in some ways it was really helpful, but even based on my own notes I took, I still couldn't figure stuff out. Like I could only kick the dummies. Why couldn't I use my axe? My skills showed that I had only 1% skill in kicking but 95% in axing. I wanted to use my ax, but I couldn't figure out how. So for my training section of my skills and spells, I spent about fifteen minutes wandering around trying to find dummies to kick. I don't really like repetitition so that got boring really quickly.

All in all, I would have liked the game better if there were at least some kind of pictures. Even if there were just pictures of your customized person or centaur or elf. Visualization is so important in video games because it helps us better connect with with the game. We're already distanced from the world through the mediation of the computer, so why distance ourselves even further?

Recently, I’ve started to explore other video games. After discussing how I didn't like Call of Duty or those other stupid shooting games and how I wished there were more games that girls could actually get into, my boyfriend took my computer and about ten minutes later I had Pokemon Fire Red version on my computer.

No joke. It’s the freaking coolest thing ever.

Now, instead of watching TV shows as breaks between homework assignments (currently working through The United States of Tara), I break it up sometimes by playing some good old fashion Pokemon. It’s as if it’s on the Gameboy, but I can play it on my computer.

I have a badass Charmeleon and Mankey and Kadabra, among others. I don't know if it's the pictures, the satisfaction of accomplishing goals whenever I defeat other trainers or the fact that it brings me back to childhood when I had to borrow my neighbors’ Gameboy because my parents wouldn't let us have one, but I definitely like playing Pokemon. I promised Alex I'd try out Maple Story after I got tired of Pokemon, so that’s next on my list of gaming adventures.

For now, I’m gonna go level up my Mankey.
I’ve been playing *Aardwolf* on my own for a week or two now and I have to say that I’m really enjoying myself. Being somewhat of a gamer myself, I’ve always recognized online games as something I might possibly want to get into sooner or later but I have never been comfortable with any game that would demand a long-term commitment from me to play.

Games such as *World of Warcraft* look exciting from the outside, allotting players a virtual Valhalla to explore, battle and make friends. However, I also know the darker side. Mind numbing repetition, mounting costs of online subscriptions and life consuming addictions all make me slightly apprehensive when approaching games like these. Nevertheless, I have enjoyed *Aardwolf*’s free, text based alternative to WOW.

My character’s name is Stetson. I’m a human mind flayer and I’ve just reached level twenty four while roaming through quests and slaying monsters. At the beginning the text based interface seemed sluggish to someone who had spent the vast majority of their childhood playing console games with graphics, but—if one persists in learning the appropriate commands—these actions become intuitive and streamlined. The game has even made me better at typing because I have to spell everything I type correctly and fast if I want the desired result from the game. Yet, much of *Aardwolf* still confuses me and I have only yet to scratch the surface of everything I am allowed to do within the world.

For me, the biggest draw of *Aardwolf* is the mindboggling amount of variety that it presents the player. During one quest, I came upon a monster, killed it and looted its body for items. I didn’t pay much attention to what I received at the time, but later I discovered that I had gained a shotgun as a weapon that I could use. I equipped it immediately and subsequently began to blow away every monster I could find while still in a suit of armor. This is when the game really took off for me. I found new places to explore such as one map that’s just a giant void in space with me floating from planet to planet or an amusement park with rides.

The enemies are incredibly diverse. For example, I found a purple dinosaur named Barney the Loser Dinosaur. Naturally, I had to fight him. Upon entering combat I dealt enormous damage to him while his feeble punches missed me entirely. Yet, his health never declined no matter how what attack I used. I couldn’t hurt him and he couldn’t hurt me. I was trapped in a never-ending battle with Barney the dinosaur. Eventually, I had to flee or I would have been stuck there forever.

All of this is only a fraction of my experiences in *Aardwolf* and even then my experiences with the world have been incredibly limited. In short, this is by far one of the best games that I have ever played and I can’t wait to explore it some more to find out what else this game has to offer. If you didn’t make it past the training portion of the game, I implore you to give the game a second chance and take the time to explore. I can almost guarantee that you will find something you like.
emergence
IS THE VIRTUAL TOO UNREALISTIC?

CRYING OVER UNSPOILED MILK

LENNON PUBLIC LECTURE
8TH APRIL, 2010

PROF. RICHARD A. BARTLE
UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX, UK

INTRODUCTION

• THIS EVENING, I'M GOING TO TALK ABOUT VIRTUAL WORLDS
  - SPECIFICALLY, GAME WORLDS, OR MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES
    • MMORPGS FOR SHORT
    • MMOS FOR EVEN SHORTER...
• BECAUSE WE HAVE A MIXED AUDIENCE, I'LL START BY BRIEFLY OUTLINING THEIR HISTORY
  - NON-PLAYERS: "SO THAT'S WHAT AN MMO IS..."
  - PLAYERS: "SO THAT'S WHERE THEY CAME FROM..."
THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE

- THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE, TURBINE, 2007:

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

- WORLD OF WARCRAFT, BLIZZARD, 2004:
EVERQUEST

- EVERQUEST, SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT, 1999

DIKUMUD

- DIKUMUD, COPENHAGEN UNIVERSITY, 1990

A barrel has been left here.
An angry-looking statue of Hoturi is standing here.
A statue of Priapus is standing here.
A statue of Odin is standing behind the altar.
A Sign for Newbies is here.
You are a guest here until you save yourself.

If you need
to get to your guild, use the guild medallion in your inventory. If you lose
it, pray to the statue of Odin for another.

105m/202c/38hlook

temple of Udgaard

You are inside the small and humble village temple in Udgaard. A simple
stone altar, with strange stone carvings, is placed against the north wall. A
small humble donation room is to the east. The temple exit is south to the
Village Square.

[x2] A barrel has been left here.
An angry-looking statue of Hoturi is standing here.
An angry-looking statue of Priapus is standing here.
A statue of Odin is standing behind the altar.
A Sign for Newbies is here.

105m/202c/38h...
ABERMUD

• ABERMUD, ALAN COX, 1987

Your wimpy value is set to 15. See 'help change' to see what that means.

The Temple of Paradise
You stand in the Temple of Paradise, a huge sandstone structure whose walls are decorated with ancient carvings and runes, some so old that even the priests no longer know their meanings.
A single set of steps lead south, descending the huge mound upon which the temple is built and ending in the forests below. A roaring fire burns here. Its flames make the temple sparkle and glitter. At your feet a huge sacrificial pit allows you to give valuables to the gods in the hope of being rewarded. A furled umbrella lies here.

Obvious exits are:
North : Welcome Center
South : Forest Track
Down : Forest Track

Last login: Wed Sep 7 17:43:26 2005

MUD

• MUD, ROY TRUBSHAW & RICHARD BARTLE, 1978

Narrow road between lands.
You are stood on a narrow road between The Land and whence you came. To the north and south are the small foothills of a pair of majestic mountains, with a large wall running round. To the west the road continues, where in the distance you can see a thatched cottage opposite an ancient cemetery. The way out is to the east, where a shroud of mist covers the secret pass by which you entered The Land. It is raining.

* Narrow road.
You are on a narrow east-west road with a forest to the north and Gorse scrub to the south. It is raining. A splendid necklace lies on the ground.

• MUD DIDN'T COME FROM ANYTHING
• THIS IS WHY I GET TO GIVE THIS TALK AND YOU DON'T!
WHY PEOPLE PLAY

- **People today** play MMOS for the **same reason people of yore** played text MUDS
  - They get to be and become themselves
- It’s a quest for **self-understanding** and **identity**
- They visit a place that’s **like the mundane world but different in strange and exciting ways**
  - They undertake a **hero’s journey**
- Unfortunately, it would take me 2 hours to explain the full theory...

LOOKING FORWARD

- What would a player of a 1980s text MUD think of **today’s MMOS**?
- Well they’d **still** recognise LOTRO and WOW as basically MUDS
- They’d find the quality of the graphics **utterly breathtaking**
- They would be **impressed by the size** of today’s virtual worlds
- However, they’d regard almost everything else as a joke
EXAMPLES 1

- Here are just **some** of the things that a time-travelling Mud Player would **ridicule** in **LOTRO**
  - **LOTRO**, because **Wow** players are far more liberal in their use of **death threats**
- So: if I kill some **Orc** and it was carrying a **sword**, why was it hitting me with a **stick**?
- Why does everyone wear the **same** clothes when it **rains** as they do when it's **sunny**?
- These troublesome **animals** you want me to kill don't **actually** seem all that threatening...
- The **only** way to be a **scholar** is if I'm also a farmer and a metalworker? **Uh**?

EXAMPLES 2

- **How come I merely suffer morale damage** when I fall off **Weathertop**? Did I somehow "flee in fear" before I hit the ground?
- I can walk **through** people?
- Didn't I see you **depart** with the Fellowship not **ten minutes ago**, **Legolas**? Why are you **here**?
- **You can dye** metal armour? But you can't **paint** it? But you **can** paint the walls of your house? But **not** walls in general?
- In the middle of a fight, **time** stopped and these **mid-air buttons** appeared. **What the blazes**?!?
- So... **arraggorrrnn** is an allowed **name**?
EXAMPLES 3

- Flowers appear to be every bit as open at night as they are in daylight.
- When I salute, it says I do it smartly – but I wanted to salute sarcastically.
- What’s with this “make it look like I’m wearing these clothes when I’m actually wearing these clothes” system? Either you’re wearing plate mail and carrying a shield or you’re not!
- How come those bad guys I can see right there aren’t running to stop me killing their buddies? Are they both deaf and blind?

EXAMPLES 4

- These half-timbered houses in Bree have windows in supporting beams.
**WOW**

- OH, AND JUST SO WOW PLAYERS DON’T FEEL TOO SMUG...

- DOES THAT PORTCULLIS WORK LIKE A ROLLER BLIND OR WHAT?

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**REALISTIC**

- WHAT THE MUD-PLAYERS OF YEASTERYEAR WOULD BE COMPLAINING ABOUT IS THAT TODAY’S MMOs ARE NOT REALISTIC

- HOLD ON! ISN’T A VIRTUAL WORLD SET IN AN IMAGINARY MILIEU POPULATED BY FANTASY CREATURES “NOT REALISTIC” BY DEFINITION?

- NO! REALISM ISN’T REALISTICNESS!
  - LOTRO WITH ELVES LACKS REALISM
  - LOTRO WITHOUT ELVES LACKS REALISTICNESS
**UNREALISTIC**

- Because people **complain** more than they **praise**, the usual form is **“unrealistic”**
  - It means **“not consistent with how I believe things should be”**
- As to how people **do** believe things should be, there are **two components**:
  - The **fiction**: there are elves and magic and death is not a permanent condition and ...
  - The **non-fiction**: you can’t walk through walls, and things fall when you drop them and the sky on a summer’s day is blue and ...

**DEFERMENT**

- The way these two components **work** is that the **fiction** takes **precedence**
  - Anything the fiction has something to say about, the fiction **controls**
  - Anything the fiction **doesn’t** have anything to say about, it **defers** to the **non-fiction**
- Actually, modern MMOs are pretty **good** at being **faithful** to their **fiction**
- It’s what their fiction **defers** to that is the problem...
THE OLDE WAY

- **TEXT MUDS DEFERRED TO REALITY**
  - Ones in which bags could contain bags containing bags **disparaged** ones that didn't even **have** bags
  - Ones in which biscuits turned to **mush** when wet would **disdain** ones wherein you could swim across a river and your **crackers** would remain **edible**
  - Ones in which **icicles** gradually melted above freezing point would **mock** ones in which they could safely be carried across a **desert**
    - In your **coat pocket**

WHY REALITY

- They deferred to reality for two reasons: **PERSUASIVENESS** and **EMERGENCE**
- **HMM, I HAVE SOME FREE SPACE** on this slide, so how about a picture of a **space station**?
PERSUASIVENESS

- **PERSUASIVENESS** MEANS THE DEGREE TO WHICH THE VIRTUAL WORLD'S CONCEIT THAT IT'S REAL IS CONVINCING
- YOUR BRAIN IS **HARD-WIRED** TO MAKE SENSE OF THE REAL WORLD ALMOST INSTANTLY
  - IF SOMETHING DOESN'T **FIT**, YOU **NOTICE**
- IF IT'S PART OF THE **FICTION**, YOU HAVE TO **WILL** YOURSELF TO BELIEVE IT
- YOU WANT TO **MINIMISE** THESE OCCASIONS WHERE MISMATCHES ARE **NOTICED**, BECAUSE THEY ARE **OBSTACLES** TO **IMMERSION**

IMMERSION

- **IMMERSION** IS THE SENSE THAT **YOU ARE THERE**, IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD
  - A **VERY HIGHLY** DESIRED STATE
  - **ACCORDING TO THE THEORY** I DIDN'T EXPLAIN TO YOU, THE **VERY AIM** OF PLAYING MMOS
- **THEREFORE**, IF THE FICTION **DOESN'T** HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY ABOUT SOMETHING, AN MMO SHOULD **DEFER TO REALITY** SO AS TO **PROMOTE IMMERSION**
  - IF **MOST** THINGS WORK AS THEY SHOULD, THE **REST** IS **MORE EASILY BELIEVABLE**
**Baton & Bow**

- Who's really in charge of an orchestra, the conductor or the first violin?
  - Is it the baton or the bow?

**Emergence**

- Emergence is the process by which interactions between sub-systems create new systems of their own
  - Can be planned-for or unplanned-for
  - Can be features or exploits
- Very desirable because it generates content
  - Content is otherwise expensive to create
- Emergent content also tends to be more meaningful for individual players
**NO ANSWER**

- **NONE** of these are show-stoppers
  - They're just **special cases**
- So why do MMOs simulate reality so lazily?
- They **don't mess with the fiction** ("lore") unless they really have to
- The **lore** defers to reality
- So why would they risk **undermining** the lore by deferring to something else?!

**WEIGHTLESSNESS**

- **Astronauts:** You see them on TV, floating around in space, doing things to satellites with exotic tools
- They're **weightless**, right?
  - Otherwise they'd fall!
  - Everyone knows they're weightless!
- Except they're **not**
  - The **ISS** is 350KM above the earth's surface
  - If you climbed a 350KM-high **tower**, you would weigh 95% of what you do on earth
  - Those astronauts are **falling!**
**Naïve Physics**

- **People expect weightlessness in space**
- If they played an MMO in which they climbed to the top of a **350km tower** and weren't weightless, they would **complain**
  - It would interrupt their sense of **immersion**
- Not just a problem for MMOs
  - **Explosions** in space in movies
  - Working class Victorian education in books
- It's much worse in MMOs, though

**In MMOs**

- The value of "realistic" to immersion is that you don't have to **think** about it
- Therefore, if being realistic **makes you think** about it, it **undoes** its own **purpose**
- This means MMOs want to defer not to what is **true**, but what players **expect** to be true
- If in their previous MMO they could teleport from anywhere to their home, they **expect** that in their current MMO
“REALITY”

- Players do **not** come to an MMO with expectations that it will work like the *real* world.
- They come with expectations that it will work like MMOS.
- MMOS such as *World of Warcraft* and *LotRO* defer not to reality but to an **MMO paradigm** - a paradigm in which walk-through people, dry rain, floating steel armour and shopkeepers who *buy your junk* is the norm.

Whence the paradigm?

- *Here’s what happens:*  
  - Players **only** look at the **short term**, so will play MMOS that make **big promises**.
  - Short-term **good** is often long-term **bad**.
    - Eventually they **quit** because the game **sucks**.
  - They don’t **realise** that the features that **attracted them** are the very ones that **caused them to leave**.
    - They **seek** those features in their **next MMO**.
  - MMOS without those features don’t get the **newbies**, so they **wither and die**.
    - Even though they have the **better design**!
DANGER SIGNS

- **The paradigm is consequently getting shallower and shallower**
- **Graphics quality is hiding this, but can only go so far**
- **2002: Asheron’s Call 2 flopped because the designer took out all the boring parts**
  - Sadly, this made the exciting parts boring
- **Many of AC2’s ease-of-use features are now being gradually adopted by WoW...**

ULTIMATELY

- **The more that detail is replaced by abstractions, the less of its potential an MMO is able to deliver**
- **Eventually, they’ll become so superficial that people will wonder why they were ever considered fun and compelling**
- **At that point, there’ll be a realignment**
  - The simple ones will carry on successfully as casual games
  - New MMOs will reboot the paradigm
NEW LOOK

- **What will these new MMOS **look** like?**
- They’ll **have** to go back to their **roots**
- MMOS let you be and **become** who you **really** are
- **What MMOS offer, nothing else offers**
  - Well, unless you’re **rich** or get **shot at**
- **Not everyone wants or needs** what they offer, but if they do they won’t get it from a further watered-down paradigm

AN ANECDOTE I

- My 1985 world, **MUD2**, has a **baton** and a **bow**
  - If you **wave** one, it **teleports** you to the other
- **These float in rivers, which flow**
- One player **dropped** the bow down a **well**, whereupon it was **carried downstream** and **stuck on a grate in a secret room**
- He waved the baton, **picked up** the bow, and realised he was **safe from attack**
AN ANECDOTE 2

- **MUD2** also has a **keg of gunpowder**
  - for shooting a cannon at a treasure room door
- One player put it in a **coracle** along with a **burning brand** and dropped it in the **well**
- The coracle **caught fire** from the brand as it floated down the river to the grate
- **Before** the coracle sank, the fire spread to the gunpowder, which exploded
  - killing the guy with the baton sleeping "safely" nearby

EMERGENCE

- What today's MMO paradigm is missing is **emergence**
  - they've concentrated on **immersion** so much that they've forgotten what it's for
- The **power of MMOs** comes from people conspiring to believe that the **virtual world** is **real**
- If they conspire to believe that it's an **MMO**, they miss half the point
- Emergence also aids immersion
CONCLUSION

- In the past **decade**, virtual worlds have become **decreasingly detailed**
  - They have **breadth**, but not **depth**
- The **aim** is to make them more immersive, but ultimately this is **self-defeating**
  - Eventually they will depart **so far** from their origins that the connection will **snap**
- New virtual worlds **will** appear that once again deliver on their promise
  - A place where you can be **you**

QUESTIONS?

- This is where I pay for having spent too long talking...
**AARON DELWICHE**

“Girls will be boys and boys will be girls”

Bit by bit, the mainstream is waking up to the existence of digital worlds that bring together players from all walks of life. In recent years, *FoxTrot*, *South Park* and *Big Bang Theory* have all poked fun at massively multiplayer games.

Even celebrities are not immune to the lure of the virtual life. William Shatner, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Ozzy Osborne and Mr. T. have all been linked to the game *World of Warcraft*. They are not alone. More than 11.5 million subscribers pay $20 a month for the privilege of entering the fantasy-themed world.

But something funny is happening in these on-line spaces. If you were to wander through the capital cities of Orgrimmar or Stormwind, you would notice an equal number of male and female characters. However, reliable estimates suggest that women make up only 16 percent of the game’s player base. As games researcher Nick Yee explains, men play half of all female characters.

In theory, gender bending should go both ways. Women can easily create male characters. Yet, Yee’s research has found that men are eight times more likely to play characters of the opposite gender. This means "1 out of every 2 female characters is played by a guy, [but] only 1 out of every 100 male characters is played by a woman."

Why are so many men experimenting with gender in virtual worlds? And why aren’t women doing the same thing?

Some male gamers say that they play female characters because they are more likely to receive donations of money and equipment during early stages of the game. A few claim that the speed and size of female characters provide strategic advantages during combat.

Others rationalize the behavior as a form of voyeurism. One gamer says that her male friends say they play female Night Elves because they enjoy looking at their highly sexualized bodies. “They might as well have a nice-looking avatar who can pole dance,” she explains.

These explanations almost make sense, but they fail to acknowledge the intense identification between players and their on-line selves. Game characters are not just objects deployed for strategic advantage or for visual pleasure. We actively become our characters.

Research shows that typical gamers spend 23 hours a week in the game world. Assuming eight hours of sleep each night, this means that one-fifth of their waking life is experienced in their on-line bodies.

Clearly, something else is happening here.

From the earliest stages of childhood, society reprimands young men for
displaying gender-inappropriate behaviors. Girls make crafts or pretend to be princesses. Boys play with thinly disguised “toy soldiers.”

Today, as the result of years of struggle, girls can express a range of behaviors. Barbie can be a doctor, a lawyer, or an architect, and she can ride a Harley Davidson. For boys, the possibilities have not changed since the 1950s. They can be superheroes, soldiers, robots, or race-car drivers, but never mermen or nurses.

When boys attempt to cross the line, they quickly get the message that they have done something wrong. Research shows that parents worry much more about “sissy” behavior in boys than about “tomboy” behavior in girls.

We often think of oppression as something that stems from the barrel of a gun, but it is even more insidious when reinforced by subtle messages from peers and loved ones. From the schoolyard to the workplace, the typical American man hears the same message throughout his lifetime: “Boys don’t cry.” “Stop acting like a girl.” “Be hard, not soft.” “Show no fear.”

So it is mind-blowing that men choose to play women in on-line games at all. Virtual worlds are one of the few social spaces in which men can display female-coded behaviors without fear of social persecution. Perhaps so many males are playing female characters in Azeroth because this is the only place that they can get away with it.

I am not suggesting that World of Warcraft — or any other multiplayer world—is an enlightened utopia. Homophobic and racist slurs fly fast and furious in the general chat channels, and the level of maturity is a few notches below that of a junior-high cafeteria.

It is also important to acknowledge that men who experiment with female characters often rely on clichéd stereotypes. At first, they might play a hyper-sexualized character who jokes about having a bad sense of direction and becoming grumpy during “that time of the month.”

However, over the course of a single year, the average gender-bending male player spends approximately 30 work weeks in a female body. It is possible—though not guaranteed—that he will encounter new insights about gender along the way. For example, he might realize that it’s not flattering to be constantly flirted with when wandering through a public area.

Ultimately, these digital arenas remind us that gender is a social construction. For all of their problems, on-line games allow men to explore these issues with unparalleled freedom. As Richard Bartle, the programmer who created the first virtual world, writes: “For me, the question isn’t ‘why would people play the opposite to their real-life gender’ but ‘why wouldn’t they?’”
Several years ago, players on the Illidan server of World of Warcraft learned that their dear friend Fayejin had died unexpectedly of a stroke. She was described by those who knew her as “one of the nicest people you could ever meet,” and her guildmates were deeply saddened to learn of her death.

In a short posting to the game’s message boards, Fayejin’s friends invited the community to commemorate her by holding an in-game memorial near the Frostfire Hot Springs in a zone called Winterspring. “She loved to fish in the game,” explained the organizers, “she liked the sound of water ... and she loved the snow.”

Unable to attend the real-world funeral for financial and geographic reasons, the organizers hoped to record the memorial service for their friend’s parents. Fayejin had spent hundreds of hours building a life within the game, and it seemed important to document the meaningful relationships that she had formed on-line.

On the appointed day, dozens of players congregated near the water, lining up to pay their respects. Close friends shared memories of the deceased, and mourners filed one-by-one up to the water’s edge.

Without warning, a mob of players from another guild descended upon the funeral and began slaughtering members of the grieving crowd. Paralyzed by a mixture of shock and sorrow, the mourners did not fight back. Soon, the area was littered with corpses of funeral attendees.

A few days later, the guild responsible for the attack posted a short video clip celebrating the massacre. Combining excerpts from angry e-mail messages with game footage and a pulsing soundtrack, the video was rapidly propagated throughout the net.

The attack on the funeral was only possible because Illidan is a “player-vs.-player” (PvP) server. On such servers, players in contested areas are allowed to kill members of other game factions. PvP culture is notoriously cutthroat. Some players say that PvP is crucial to their enjoyment of the game, while others argue that it enables bullies and psychopaths.

This was hardly the first time that player events had been raided on PvP servers. Funerals and weddings for game characters have often been attacked by outsiders. However, in this instance, there was one crucial difference: The funeral had been organized to commemorate the loss of a real human being.

Many gamers viewed the attack as unconscionable. Posting in an affiliated message board, a higher-level dwarf asked members of the raiding guild, “is there no sense of right or wrong within you? These people were honoring a person who is no longer with them, and you attacked them while they were unarmed.”
As discussion escalated in on-line forums, many gamers supported the guild’s right to attack the mourners. “Oh, good grief,” suggested one player. “It’s a PvP server, and you should expect it to happen. Why go on a PvP server? To kill and have fun killing helpless people who just stand around.”

Defending their actions in public forums, the attackers showed no signs of remorse. “I wish I were undead so I could have cannibalized her corpse,” wrote one attacker. Another argued that virtual funerals are a ridiculous concept. “I don’t log in to watch people celebrating things that happened outside the game,” he wrote. “When you sign in, you sign an invisible consent contract to be part of that game’s rule set.”

In a follow-up message, the same assailant wrote, “Yes I went out of my way to kill stupid people doing something stupid in a video game. I loved doing it, and seeing you cry here ... We decided to make a bunch of nerds rage out ... cry more dude.”

To gamers and non-gamers alike, the entire incident might seem like a frivolous topic. However, conversations about these happenings are important. Ethical understandings that emerge from these debates may affect the ways that virtual worlds develop in the future. The stubborn refusal to contemplate the humanity of players on the other side of the network is callous and disturbing.

These games are creating global social networks that pull people together across national borders. Even on PvP servers, we have an opportunity to augment our compassion, rather than become dehumanized killers.

Ultimately, the biggest losers may be the members of the guild who initiated the attacks. As Michael W. pointed out in a recent post to Terra Nova, “I mourn the day they lose someone they love, or someone in their guild steps out in front of a bus, or whatever. Their actions now mean their pain will likely be compounded in the future when they realize both what loss is and how they must have made the others feel at the time.”
projects
AARON PASSER

“Our turn: Generation Y ruling the corporate landscape.”

Whether you like it or not games of all kinds are transforming and progressing the corporate landscape. Video games today have the ability to teach and reinforce specialized skills that allow players to practice without the stress of real life failure. Today many surgeons practice laparoscopic surgery by first playing simple games like Super Monkey Ball that require the same fine motor skills that complex surgeries do. Other games are designed to help promote mental agility and wellness. In business it is becoming more productive to focus on communication and collaboration rather than autocratic direction. Likewise, the most popular games of today are those that require teamwork and cooperation. Specifically, games that incorporate both social and competitive interactions such as Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) can be used in the corporate setting to promote collaboration and teamwork skills in coworkers.

Games like World of Warcraft (WoW) encourage and require players to collaborate with each other in order to conquer quests that without such cooperation would be impossible. In my personal adventures in WoW, I set out to discover how in-game challenges and interpersonal relations can be directly translated to foster better communication and problem solving skills in today’s corporate world. No longer should games be viewed as a waste of body and mind; rather we should continue to utilize social games and interfaces to promote and teach skills that are pivotal to success in the ever changing business environment.

Most organizations today do not allow for games in the workplace. Employees must scan the environment for superiors, waiting for the right moment to get in a quick game of minesweeper or solitaire. If caught, employees are told to stop wasting time and get back to work (minesweeper got me kicked off the computer for a day at my summer internship). Despite this overwhelming attitude towards games in the workplace more and more “companies are setting up break rooms with video games to create a fun office atmosphere and—believe it or not—increase productivity.”

As a business major here at Trinity one thing I have learned is that interpersonal relationships have the ability to make or break business deals and team goals. Video games are a great way for peers to interact with each other in a fun and informal way. As Generation Y continues to invade the workforce many companies are designing game rooms instead of coffee lounges for their employees to enjoy. Keeping morale high in the office is key to success, and a game room is a great way for employers to provide a fun place to interact with co-workers.

MMOGs can provide another great learning environment for co-workers that is not only fun, but also can help teach important leadership skills necessary for continued success in the corporate world. Instances, raids, and guilds in WoW have the ability to strengthen relationships and teamwork between coworkers that can be used for real life business
situations. Games are designed to be stimulating, challenging, and fun, and that is exactly the type of atmosphere that employers want to provide. In raids (large-scale group quests) it is necessary that all players fulfill their specific role: whether it is to tank (take damage) or to heal. If group members lag behind or don’t do what they are supposed to, the whole raid is put in jeopardy. This is also true in the business world. In many cases coworkers must work together to accomplish goals, and just like in *WoW* if even one group member falls back on their responsibilities it puts the whole group at risk of failure. Quests in *WoW* are composed of challenging tasks that are satisfying to accomplish and are linked to a clear mission. Games like these can be used for co-workers to learn how to work together to complete difficult goals.

When participating in instances (small scale raids) I was able to identify several leadership skills that are reinforced through the game. The first is learning how to pick team members. While participating in an instance it is necessary to have players who can take damage, inflict damage, and heal other players. *WoW* now makes this very easy with the “Dungeon queue” which searches for other players who are trying to accomplish the same instance. Based upon your preferred position in the instance the game will pair you up with other players who have chosen other tasks. For example if an instance composed of five players has no one who can take a lot of damage the group will fail. It is necessary in the game and in real life to choose team members with unique skill sets that are necessary to get the job done. It may be possible to complete the instance with out a “tank” player, but it will definitely be a lot more difficult. While this does make it easy to team up with other people, it doesn't account for players who won't actually put full effort into the instance. Being in a guild is one way to get around this problem because constant player interaction helps build trust, which is a key ingredient to success, even in the gaming world.

Planning is also a determining factor for success in both worlds. Group members must understand their roles and stick to the plan if success is to be had. A famous viral video known to most simply as “Leeroy Jenkins” is a good example of this point. In the video a group of *WoW* players are getting ready to do a raid. A few of the players are assigning tasks to other players and are planning the attack based on past failures. Leeroy Jenkins, one of the players, decides it’s time to run to battle and leave behind the others. This causes total panic among the group and in a short time causes the death of all players' involved and ultimate failure. Leeroy didn't stick to the plan and ruined everything for all players involved. In business planning is of utmost importance. Time is money, and if you don't have a plan you are probably wasting your time.

Another key skill is being able to evaluate performance. In *WoW* this can easily be accomplished by checking various gauges that track a players performance. This can be a bit more challenging to do in the real world, but the idea of monitoring performance of team members is vital to uncovering why the group succeeded or failed. Managers must be willing and able to deal with underperformers in order to ensure that failure does not happen again. Sometimes underperformers simply are
bad players who don’t care and who should probably not be a part of your group anymore. Other times however, underperformance is due to the individual wanting to contribute and help, but not knowing exactly how to do that. While playing WoW one day a player of a higher rank invited me to join his group so that he could help me with quests. We played together for almost eight hours that night and he eventually invited me to his guild. I quickly learned that the guild I had joined was assembled to help lower level players advance more rapidly. Before player Sofedanor came to my aid I found myself mostly wandering aimlessly around the world trying to complete random tasks. However when I joined forces with Sofedanor he gave me tons of hints and tricks on how to improve my game play. With out his game play knowledge I probably would have eventually found my way, but his sincere help made for a smooth transition into an active and contributing guild member.

WoW in general is a great place to practice leadership skills. Anyone has the ability to be a party leader or start his or her own guild. Leadership roles in real life may present more pressing matters, but leadership roles in video games like WoW have enough parallels to real life that they can be used to prepare new workers for management positions in the future. In WoW you can lead, organize with others, solve problems, learn, motivate, and gain a sense of unity among players. Valuable leadership skills like those are important for success in WoW and business. As a member of Generation Y I grew up learning through technology so it seems only fitting that we continue to use every facet of technology, especially video games, to continue our learning. Games like WoW can promote and reinforce communities of practice among coworkers, which build strong relationships through interaction and collaborative work on problem solving.

In today’s rapidly changing business environment the valuable leadership and collaborative skills taught and reinforced in games like WoW are more important than ever. The most popular games of today are “massive problem solving exercises wrapped in the veneer of an exotic adventure.” Games like these are increasingly more complex and require players not only to play individually, but also to actively solve problems through teamwork and cooperation. Video games have evolved to engage rationality and logic skills that can be directly related to real life situations. The teamwork and logic skills demanded by MMOGs are the same skills that are demanded for success in business, and by harnessing everyone’s greatest abilities, raids and business teams are able to work together to solve problems where the individual would fail.
Agras woke-up on this rather gloomy pre-dawn Monday morning as if he had sprung to life. In an instant he was on his feet, fully-dressed and ready to go. Everything seemed normal. Awake and ready to go, Agras looked down at his watch to read new messages in his inbox.

While opening his inbox, Agras made sure to keep a close eye for his friends, he didn’t want them to notice his iOMEGA 3. Just last week Agras bought an iOMEGA 4, but because he’s so short compared to others in his class, he was forced to relinquish the iOMEGA 4, or else. If his family or friends were to notice the iOMEGA 3 instead of the iOMEGA 4, then they might kick him out of the house, his dad was the military-type: unrelenting, unwilling, and unmerciful. Maybe this was good for Agras, to have a strong fatherly figure guiding him on his life’s journey; and besides, it’s not like Agras is starving, homeless, or worse yet, lost.

The iOMEGA 3 flashed with vibrant colors: red, blue, magenta, purple. An annoying folkish song began to pierce the jet-black walls of Agras’ small 20 x 20 parcel of a room. The sound waves filled His ears with such piercing intensity that He was left with no other choice but to lower the volume, somehow and someway it had to happen and it did.

Business was usual, the market went down a few percentage points and his SPAM folder was filled to the zipper with advertisements for penis enlargers and gold. “Delete” He said with a temporary lisp, He continued “huh, that’d be so cool, one day, drink beers. HA HA! Yes, Asia, China, Asian food, Asian women;” He was unmistakably faded from the night’s activities and clearly He had no idea what He was talking about.

Agras put his free hand down and looked around the room. The dark walls were jet black and windows were missing. No sunlight had ever shined down into Agras’ room, never. But this didn’t bother him, after all, sleeping is always better without light; movies, too. Bored, Agras decided to lead himself to the door in the Northeast corner of the room and with little effort the door swung open rapidly and crashed into the other side of the wall. Apparently this was a usual occurrence as Agras noticeably didn’t flinch to the chaotic door. Agras walked down his cobblestone steps outside his room when all of a sudden, He got a craving for a cigarette, but tobacco went extinct in 2036 so cigarettes were no longer produced.

As he took his next to last step off the uneven cobblestone steps, his iOMEGA 3 once again broke the sound barrier and projected the unmistakable sound of new messages in the inbox. Surprised that a message had arrived right after He just got through checking, He reluctantly opened the message, not even realizing that his family and friends might notice the iOMEGA 3.

The message was from a sender by the name of “Kypolai” from the
REALITY HACKERS: EXTENDED: FACES OF AGRAS (SHORT FICTION)

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS. The message was written in CAPS:

DEAR AGRAS,

DUE TO YOUR ACTIONS FROM THE NIGHT OF THE PAST FEW HOURS, YOU WILL BE SENT TO THE NEWLY LIVABLE PLANET, OTULP. YOUR ACTIONS ARE NOT TO BE SEEN AS THREATENING TO OUR RACE, FOR THIS YOUR EXILE WILL BE TEMPORARY AND THE DATE OF YOUR RETURN WILL BE ESTABLISHED AFTER A FULL-REVIEW OF YOUR CASE# 1123581321.

YOUR IMPELLING EXILE SHOULD NOT BE VIEWED AS A PUNISHMENT, OTULP IS FULL OF NEW AND EXCITING ADVENTURES FOR LIFE’S SPONTANEOUS JOURNEY. PLEASE KEEP IN MIND, ANY FURTHER DISSENTING ACTIONS WILL DRAMATICALLY INCREASE THE SEVERITY OF YOUR EXILE. PLAY NICE BY THE RULES AND WE SHOULD BE WELCOMING YOU BACK IN NO TIME AT ALL!

WE GRANT A GRACE PERIOD OF 12 HOURS WHICH CAN BE UTILIZED AT YOUR DISCRETION TO SECURE BELONGINGS OR BID FAREWELL. WE ALWAYS RECOMMEND THE SECURING OF IMPORTANT DOCUMENTATION. AT 1818 HOURS, YOU WILL BE TELEPORTED TO THE SPACE MIGRATION STATION.

THANKS FOR YOUR LOYALTY AND PLEASE CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY WITH ENTHUSIASM.

BEST REGARDS,
KYPOLAI
Grand President, Department of Public Affairs

“What the fuck!” He shouted with rage causing His mother to wake up from her early-morning hangover; she stormed down the hall scolded Him for His gamer thug talk and rudeness. But seriously, He was right for shouting out loud, he was being sent to another planet in exile for his past actions. What actions? What did Agras do? What did He do?

He paused but couldn’t remember anything—who he fought, who he talked with, nothing. The smell of His breath told the story, it was tequila. With the realization of his utter impairment, He passed-out, and laid down in a folded position on His desk.

He shuffled in His dream and eventually fell onto the floor. The sun light woke Him up and He grawged and yawned with unprecedented intensity, tequila still poignantly in his breath.

##### 14:41 #####

Agras jumped up off the ground with enthusiasm. He shook off His
impairment, which by now had subsided after the brief nap. He only had 8 more hours left until he'd be automatically teleported to the Space Migration Station (SMNSN). The Department of Public Affairs has jurisdiction over the SMNSN and up until recently, the Station was only used for alpha Migrators. These alphas were given the task to explore the far off lands and to report back to the Department of Public Affairs. Awareness was slim, as nobody seemed to care that new worlds were being created every day. Alpha tests confirmed that the far off lands would be great depositories for societal dissidents, you know, those who broke the rules.

Looking around, Agras found his transport wrecked into the sidewall of his room, luckily the walls were made of material from 2012—when the ancient astronauts came back to earth and brought new technology! The transporter on the other hand looked nearly totaled, the back left tire was split in half from the sharp edge of a decorative boulder. The grille was cracked and the manufacturer's logo became even less intelligible. Not knowing how his transport got into the side of the wall but seemingly unaffected, Agras jumped aboard and drove off, speeding and peeling away in the grass as usual; teenagers these days.

Agras raced past his neighbors, ones which he never truly knew. The trees on the road to the federally run Local Community Center (LCC) were hanging well into the street, sometimes in the way of pedestrians or traffic. Complaining wouldn't accomplish much, though. Public Affairs didn't do streets, that was something for the planners and designers. But for as long as He could remember, the trees were always hanging in the way of day-to-day traffic, that's just how it was. Looking at His watch He realized that his time to exile was approaching quickly; so Agras abruptly turned 20 degrees to the left in the direction of the LCC; after thinking over the exile message, it occurred to Him that it would be most wise to secure his personal belongings and items, as well as documentation—couldn't even expect the feds to keep backup copies of legal documents anymore.

##### 15:15 #####

“Three hours left, shit.” Agras stood at a stand still for a couple of minutes patiently waiting for his transport to begin moving again. He looked around, a layer of thick pixelated mist floated above the lush grass and rolling mounds. It was deathly still outside, not even a breath of wind. As He came back from a quick mental hiatus outside, He realized the situation was perfect for killing. Agras was jolted forward sharply by his near ruined transport, which ironically was still running like a charm, equally as fast as always. Hunting involved no smell, only sight. Looking over his shoulder He found one, a prime and delicious water buffalo lying down in the brush. The transport screeched to an extreme halt 200 yards away from the buffalo, throwing Agras off the front end of the buggy; but his skills kept him on his feet.

He was unsure whether the buffalo was asleep or not, but Agras seemed to only care about killing. He ran with haste, sometimes so fast forcing Him to lag.
He was obviously annoyed and felt no sympathy for His mother who was still waiting for her exedrin to kick-in as epitomized by his constant bursts of rage, “MEEERHEH! MIERDA! I wonder if everyone has bad connections... GOSH!”

The buffalo was near, and it was definitely not asleep. Agras leaped thirty feet with the help of His super boost, traveling through two large bushes and falling on top but sliding off of the buffalo. No matter how hard He tried, Agras couldn’t get on top of the “stupid dummy” to kill it. The buffalo, half the size of Agras, was startled by the attack but kept her ground; in the past the buffalo would have ran off in fear because of a genetic glitch or something, but once the update came out buffalo no longer ran off when bigger enemies challenged it.

Blood spilled from the buffalo as Agras took his knife and jabbed at the buffalo. She was a tough cookie because until she had died there were no wounds, it was like she was untouched, “[sic] well I guess they are tough animals /shrug” he wrote on his chat journal, linked to His twitter account.

Agras searched through the buffalo carcass and found 4 gold in its back hind. He picked up the gold, as expected, and looked around for more buffalo to kill. “C’mon son, what’s up with that shit... how can you do shit like that Kanye?” was heard in the background.

“Damn foutube.... jeez.”

It continued, “how you gonna go on stage and do that shit to that little white girl? c’mon son...”

He burst out in laughter, obviously no longer paying attention to His urge to kill. “Ha! well, c’mon son... I guess I should go to the bar and at least get a drink or some potion before the journey. Also need to stop by the bank... or maybe I’ll trade platinum for gold with a farmer... I hear gold is like literally the universal currency. SOO righteous! ”

Apparently the likes of “c’mon son” grabbed His attention, forcing Him to remember that he was on a time schedule!

##### 15:51 #####

He had ventured so far into the forest that Agras couldn’t spot his transport. He looked at his iOmega and went to the map function, he appeared close to the bar and His experience suggested that he should just run, he was fast after all.

Agras ran at full speed towards the bar, speeding past conversing shamen, clerics, and soldiers and pretty much anyone else who was signed in and nearby. He even might have passed some friends, but Agras was obviously in a hurry and He imagined the others could notice he was doing something important.
He could see the bar, perched on flimsy looking wooden stilts high into the air. Trees covered the four corners of the bar and an ancient looking wooden plank walkway led up to the entrance. As he got to the top, now walking on the level porch which went around the outside perimeter of the bar, Agras turned and looked north and upwards towards the sky. Up there, He thought, was where he was going.

“I wonder what it’s like. I hope it’s not as bad as it sounds, I mean, being a beta is always fun even if shit does go wrong. But that’s definitely their reasoning behind the decision, it’s gotta be. I bet I’ll be listed on the founder’s blog for the new world at OTULP. That’d be so cool.”

Appearing bewildered, Agras jaggedly looked around and found the entrance to the bar. As he swung the door open it once again crashed into the wall with unprecedented force and silence—“there was definitely something glitchy about these doors,” He thought. Entering the hall, he noticed the regulars sitting in their usual, seemingly permanent positions at tables just waiting to be talked to. They didn't mind though, that’s just what they did, not everyone had cool, fun, and interesting jobs; not everyone was allowed to kill!

“Nobody interesting today... hmm, how does some milk sound? I do need some after the killing and I guess the crash... OH yea! the crash, how did I crash anyway?”

As he approached the bar, Agras automatically put down his weapons so that he could sit on one of the awkwardly designed barstools. The bartender, il dirigente, looked emotion-less as if something had happened. Agras got his attention and He ordered some milk to replenish his magma.

“One milk for the recent inquirer,” said il dirigente.

“You sound like a moron...” He said directly to il’s face. But il just stood there, looking past Agras and at the back wall of the bar. Il's stare and casual shifting movement made it seem like something was wrong, but there most definitely wasn’t. At least there wasn’t a problem that affected il, and it’s not like he knew of OTULP or Agras' punishment, or did he?

Agras finished the milk in an instant and immediately regained his much needed magma. Getting creeped out by il’s lameness, He looked around the room, remarking to Himself that it was just the regulars, “...nooobody cool.” Time was being wasted anyway, so He decided to leave.

##### 16:20 #####

By now Agras was halfway to the bank, it was only on the other side of Nihiri-platz which was not very far at all. On the way though he encountered some interesting characters one stood out from the crowd like Tom Cruise at a gay bar; it’s not like he didn’t fit in with the crowd, but this crazy man on the corner of Huvin and Nihiri-Strasse just wanted way too much attention, he kept screaming over-and-over, “Reeloy
Renkins! Oooohh YES that’s me! REEEEELOOOYY REEENKINSSS. The KNOW-IT-ALL extraordinaire! Ask me anything, DO IT! Reeloy Renkins! Oooohh YES that’s me! REEEEELOOOYY REEENKINSSS…."

“What an annoying buffoon… who the hell does he think he is. Reeloy, psh, c’mon son.” At that very instant, He knew what He had to do.

Agras drew-out his knife, and prepared for battle. The obnoxious fool on the corner, screaming as loud as he could was going to pay for being such a tool. As he quickly approached Reeloy, He noticed that it was coming as a surprise to the supposed know-it-all. “This is gonna be too easy!” Agras threw all his mass and force into his knife’s blow. The tip of his knife soared through the air skillfully slicing a tiny insect in half as if that was part of the plan. The knife approached Reeloy. Ten inches. Seven inches. Two inches. Right before the sharp edged tip of the knife was about to pounce the weak-looking body of the halfling, it bowed to a standstill in the air. Reeloy must have had these threats all the time because a forcefield surrounding the buffoon prevented Agras from penetrating his form.

“Do it! C’mon, let’s chat… ask me anything. Only thrrrrreeee buffalo carcass’ or six copper!” said Reeloy.

Agras stood there, hilariously stunned, He paused to think and He checked his balance. “All platinum and no carcass. Shit.”

After a few minutes of awkward standing, Agras left Reeloy in search of the bank. He could see the bank in the distance. It was a hut, made of wood, stone, and straw. Rather unsecure looking, but the bank was actually impenetrable from direct contact, a thief would have to hack it’s mainframe to cause any real ruckus.

As Agras approached the door to the bank, he was met by a farmer who had in his possession ample amounts of gold, platinum, and even copper; not even the bank carried copper, it was sort of left only to the underground, and Febay.

The gold farmer approached Agras and offered to conduct a trade at a lower interest than the bank. It was sketchy, but He knew that there was no other option. Bank tellers could take up too much time, which is something He did not have.

Accepting the offer, Agras traded all his platinum for gold and the farmer, rejoicing, gave him seven copper as a token of gratitude, “thank so much!”

######## 16:51 ########

Kypolai was a brilliant ranger and a loyal member of the Order. His long and droopy face could be seen mirrored on his glass desktop. At the very moment when Agras traded with the farmer, Kypolai received a notification message that He had received another point for “dissenting behavior.”
“Who does he think he is?” said the Russian-born Kypolai, “try to mess with me, I mess back at you!”

### 17:17 ###

Unaware of the developments occurring within the walls of the Public Affairs building, Agras left the farmer and the bank and enthusiastically dance’d his way back to the corner of Huvin and Nihiri-Strasse. He found the farmer’s generosity to be an omen, He was curious as to what Reeloy had to say, if he knew everything, then he’d surely know of Agras’ forced migration and maybe even further details.

“This is gonna be great, he’s annoying but I have to give him a try, maybe he’s part of the new update or something,” He said to Himself.

As Agras approached Reeloy, He heard an unusually familiar sound, “MAIL!!!” He said in a very deep, loud, and obnoxious yet exciting voice.

“/iOmega.”

Agras looked at his watch and opened his inbox. The sender was Kypolai from Public Affairs. When His eyes on the screen read Kypolai, His heart dropped. “What did Agras do now?”

He opened the message and noticed it was in CAPS:

**DEAR AGRAS,**

**DUR TO YOUR ACTIONS OF THE PAST FEW MINUTES, YOUR EXILE SENTENCE HAS INCREASED. YOU WILL BE AUTOMATICALLY TELEPORTED TO OTULP AT 18:18 HOURS, BYPASSING THE SPACE MIGRATION STATION. YOUR HARSHER SENTENCE SHOULD NOT BE TAKEN DISTASTEFULLY, OTULP IS FULL OF FUN AND EXCITING ADVENTURES AND I PROMISE YOU’LL ENJOY IT! SEE YOU SOON!**

**BEST REGARDS,**

**KYPOLAI**
Grand President, Department of Public Affairs

Completely and utterly befuddled, all He wanted to do now as speed to Reeloy to figure out what’s going on—otherwise it would be all over.

Agras put away his *iOmega 3* and continued to approach Reeloy. He could hear the annoying buffoon off in the distance.

He could spot Reeloy. Agras drew his knife once again and went running through the air. The tip of his knife went soaring towards the heart of Reeloy, “whatever, at least it’s fun, even if I can’t kill him.”
Agras' knife stood dead still at the onset of Reeloy's forcefield.
“REEEEEEOOOOY REENKINSSS. The KNOW-IT-ALL extraordinaire! Ask me anything…”

“Shut-up bitch…” said Agras right to Reeloy's face. He looked at his clock and realized that time was running-out. In less than an hour, he would be teleported directly to OTULP and perhaps Kypolai will bet here to greet him. He did say in the message after all that he would “SEE YOU SOON!”

He clicked on Reeloy's chat bubble with the click of a mouse. Reeloy sprang to life and greeted Agras warmly.

“Hello sir,” Reeloy said in a surprisingly normal tone of voice, “how may I be of service?”

Agras was instructed by his player Bruce to give six copper to Reeloy in exchange for information. Bruce typed in his question, “What is OTULP, who is Kypolai, and why and I being exiled?”

“/enter.”

Reeloy took a second to process the information and a smile soon shined brightly on his face. Bruce couldn't help himself but to be excited, he was about to finally figure out what has been happening with his avatar Agras.

As he anxiously awaited Reeloy’s response, His laptop fan began to run loudly and rapidly. “What’s going on?! Huh?!!”

In a robot tone, Reeloy gave Agras his answer, “You gave me six copper but asked me THREE q-u-e-s-t-i-o-n-s! You are t-e-r-m-i-n-a-t-ed!”

At that very instant, Bruce's laptop screen went blue, and at the top of the screen read, “Trojan download successful.”

“NOOOOOOOOOO!” He cried, His mom's footsteps could be heard pounding down the carpet of the hallway leading to his room.

Bruce's laptop had died, and for the time being, so had Agras.
My name is Malcolm Xavier, born on earth in year 2467 of the old calendar.

I earned the Gladiator sigil in Imperial Year 13, the day of my 16th birthday.
I was three years old during the revolution, but remember little of it.

They say my dad was one of the last independent holdouts. — Good for him.

Didn't help mom any though.

For the last sixty five I've been a gladiator, and in that time have won 500 battles and lost 124.
I'm currently on my 126th body.

It should only be my 125th, but I was hit by some drunken pilot on a jetpack tour of Mars.

If I didn't have a backup for the Gladiator's league, that would've been it.

Somehow that death seems more 'real' than all the others.
As it was, it'd been a few months since my last fight, so the backup was out of date.

Now it's a three month gap in my memory.

Since then I've posted a new save to the server almost every night.

I might go months without a fight, but that doesn't mean I'm going to risk anything I don't have to.

I like to think of it as a really good corporate life insurance policy.

Yeah, it may be rough, but being a gladiator has its perks.
Anda didn’t really start to play the game until she got herself a girl-shaped avatar. She was 12, and up until then, she’d played a boy-elf, because her parents had sternly warned her that if you played a girl you were an instant perv-magnet. None of the girls at Ada Lovelace Comprehensive would have been caught dead playing a girl character. In fact, the only girls she’d ever seen in-game were being played by boys. You could tell, cos they were shaped like a boy’s idea of what a girl looked like: hooge buzwabs and long legs all barely contained in tiny, pointless leather bikini-armor. Bintware, she called it.

But when Anda was 12, she met Liza the Organiza, whose avatar was female, but had sensible tits and sensible armor and a bloody great sword that she was clearly very good with. Liza came to school after PE, when Anda was sitting and massaging her abused podge and hating her entire life from stupid sunrise to rotten sunset. Her PE kit was at the bottom of her school-bag and her face was that stupid red color that she hated now it was stinking maths which was hardly better than PE but at least she didn’t have to sweat.

But instead of maths, all the girls were called to assembly, and Liza the Organiza stood on the stage in front of Miss Cruickshanks the principal and Mrs Danzig, the useless counsellor.

“Hullo chickens,” Liza said. She had an Australian accent. “Well, aren’t you lot just precious and bright and expectant with your pink upturned faces like a load of flowers staring up at the sky?

“Warms me fecking heart it does.”

That made her laugh, and she wasn’t the only one. Miss Cruickshanks and Mrs Danzig didn’t look amused, but they tried to hide it.

“I am Liza the Organiza, and I kick arse. Seriously.” She tapped a key on her laptop and the screen behind her lit up. It was a game—not the one that Anda played, but something space-themed, a space-station with a rocketship in the background. “This is my avatar.” Sensible boobs, sensible armor, and a sword the size of the world. “In-game, they call me the Lizanator, Queen of the Spacelanes, El Presidente of the Clan Fahrenheit.” The Fahrenheits had chapters in every game. They were amazing and deadly and cool, and to her knowledge, Anda had never met one in the flesh. They had their own island in her game. Crikey.

On screen, The Lizanator was fighting an army of wookie-men, sword in one hand, laser-blaster in the other, rocket-jumping, spinning, strafing,
making impossible kills and long shots, diving for power-ups and ruthlessly running her enemies to ground.

“The whole Clan Fahrenheit. I won that title through popular election, but they voted me in cos of my prowess in combat. I’m a world-champion in six different games, from first-person shooters to strategy games. I’ve commanded armies and I’ve sent armies to their respawn gates by the thousands. Thousands, chickens: my battle record is 3,522 kills in a single battle. I have taken home cash prizes from competitions totaling more than 400,000 pounds. I game for four to six hours nearly every day, and the rest of the time, I do what I like.

“One of the things I like to do is come to girls’ schools like yours and let you in on a secret: girls kick arse. We’re faster, smarter and better than boys. We play harder. We spend too much time thinking that we’re freaks for gaming and when we do game, we never play as girls because we catch so much shite for it. Time to turn that around. I am the best gamer in the world and I’m a girl. I started playing at 10, and there were no women in games—you couldn’t even buy a game in any of the shops I went to. It’s different now, but it’s still not perfect. We’re going to change that, chickens, you lot and me.

“How many of you game?”

Anda put her hand up. So did about half the girls in the room.

“And how many of you play girls?”

All the hands went down.

“See, that’s a tragedy. Practically makes me weep. Gamespace smells like a boy’s armpit. It’s time we girled it up a little. So here’s my offer to you: if you will play as a girl, you will be given probationary memberships in the Clan Fahrenheit, and if you measure up, in six months, you’ll be full-fledged members.”

In real life, Liza the Organiza was a little podgy, like Anda herself, but she wore it with confidence. She was solid, like a brick wall, her hair bobbed bluntly at her shoulders. She dressed in a black jumper over loose dungarees with giant, goth boots with steel toes that looked like something you’d see in an in-game shop, though Anda was pretty sure they’d come from a real-world goth shop in Camden Town.

She stomped her boots, one-two, thump-thump, like thunder on the stage. “Who’s in, chickens? Who wants to be a girl out-game and in?”

Anda jumped to her feet. A Fahrenheit, with her own island! Her head was so full of it that she didn’t notice that she was the only one standing. The other girls stared at her, a few giggling and whispering.

“That’s all right, love,” Liza called, “I like enthusiasm. Don’t let those staring faces rattle yer: they’re just flowers turning to look at the sky. Pink
scrubbed shining expectant faces. They're looking at you because you had the sense to get to your feet when opportunity came—and that means that someday, girl, you are going to be a leader of women, and men, and you will kick arse. Welcome to the Clan Fahrenheit.”

She began to clap, and the other girls clapped too, and even though Anda’s face was the color of a lollipop-lady’s sign, she felt like she might burst with pride and good feeling and she smiled until her face hurt.

###

> Anda,

her sergeant said to her,

> how would you like to make some money?

> Money, Sarge?

Ever since she’d risen to platoon leader, she’d been getting more missions, but they paid gold—money wasn’t really something you talked about in-game.

The Sarge—sensible boobs, gigantic sword, longbow, gloriously orcish ugly phiz—moved her avatar impatiently.

> Something wrong with my typing, Anda?

> No, Sarge,

she typed.

> You mean gold?

> If I meant gold, I would have said gold. Can you go voice?

Anda looked around. Her door was shut and she could hear her parents in the sitting-room watching something loud on telly. She turned up her music just to be safe and then slipped on her headset. They said it could noise-cancel a Blackhawk helicopter—it had better be able to overcome the little inductive speakers suction-cupped to the underside of her desk. She switched to voice.

“Hey, Lucy,” she said.

“Call me Sarge!” Lucy’s accent was American, like an old TV show, and she lived somewhere in the middle of the country where it was all vowels, Iowa or Ohio. She was Anda’s best friend in-game but she was so hardcore it was boring sometimes.

“Hi Sarge,” she said, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice. She’d never smart off to a superior in-game, but v2v it was harder to remember
to keep to the game norms.

“I have a mission that pays real cash. Whichever paypal you’re using, they’ll deposit money into it. Looks fun, too.”

“That’s a bit weird, Sarge. Is that against Clan rules?” There were a lot of Clan rules about what kind of mission you could accept and they were always changing. There were curb-crawlers in gamespace and the way that the Clan leadership kept all the mummies and daddies from going ape-poo about it was by enforcing a long, boring code of conduct that was meant to ensure that none of the Fahrenheit girlies ended up being virtual prozzies for hairy old men in raincoats on the other side of the world.

“What?” Anda loved how Lucy quacked What? It sounded especially American. She had to force herself from parroting it back. “No, geez. All the executives in the Clan pay the rent doing missions for money. Some of them are even rich from it, I hear! You can make a lot of money gaming, you know.”

“Is it really true?” She’d heard about this but she’d assumed it was just stories, like the kids who gamed so much that they couldn’t tell reality from fantasy. Or the ones who gamed so much that they stopped eating and got all anorexic. She wouldn’t mind getting a little anorexic, to be honest. Bloody podge.

“Yup! And this is our chance to get in on the ground floor. Are you in?”

“It’s not—you know, pervy, is it?”

“Gag me. No. Jeez, Anda! Are you nuts? No—they want us to go kill some guys.”

“Oh, we’re good at that!”

#

The mission took them far from Fahrenheit Island, to a cottage on the far side of the largest continent on the gameworld, which was called Dandelionwine. The travel was tedious, and twice they were ambushed on the trail, something that had hardly happened to Anda since she joined the Fahrenheits: attacking a Fahrenheit was bad for your health, because even if you won the battle, they’d bring a war to you.

But now they were far from the Fahrenheits’ power-base, and two different packs of brigands waylaid them on the road. Lucy spotted the first group before they got into sword-range and killed four of the six with her bow before they closed for hand-to-hand. Anda’s sword—gigantic and fast—was out then, and her fingers danced over the keyboard as she fought off the player who was attacking her, her body jerking from side to side as she hammered on the multibutton controller beside her. She won—of course! She was a Fahrenheit! Lucy had already slaughtered her attacker. They desultorily searched the bodies and came up with some
gold and a couple scrolls, but nothing to write home about. Even the gold didn’t seem like much, given the cash waiting at the end of the mission.

The second group of brigands was even less daunting, though there were 20 of them. They were total noobs, and fought like statues. They’d clearly clubbed together to protect themselves from harder players, but they were no match for Anda and Lucy. One of them even begged for his life before she ran him through,

> please sorry u cn have my gold sorry!!!11!

Anda laughed and sent him to the respawn gate.

> You’re a nasty person, Anda,

Lucy typed.

> I’m a Fahrenheit!!!!!!!!!!!!

she typed back.

#

The brigands on the road were punters, but the cottage that was their target was guarded by an altogether more sophisticated sort. They were spotted by sentries long before they got within sight of the cottage, and they saw the warning spell travel up from the sentries’ hilltop like a puff of smoke, speeding away toward the cottage. Anda raced up the hill while Lucy covered her with her bow, but that didn’t stop the sentries from subjecting Anda to a hail of flaming spears from their fortified position.

Anda set up her standard dodge-and-weave pattern, assuming that the sentries were non-player characters—who wanted to pay to sit around in gamespace watching a boring road all day?—and to her surprise, the spears followed her. She took one in the chest and only some fast work with her shield and all her healing scrolls saved her. As it was, her constitution was knocked down by half and she had to retreat back down the hillside.

“Get down,” Lucy said in her headset. “I’m gonna use the BFG.”

Every game had one—the Big Friendly Gun, the generic term for the baddest-arse weapon in the world. Lucy had rented this one from the Clan armory for a small fortune in gold and Anda had laughed and called her paranoid, but now Anda helped Lucy set it up and thanked the gamegods for her foresight. It was a huge, demented flaming crossbow that fired five-meter bolts that exploded on impact. It was a beast to arm and a beast to aim, but they had a nice, dug-in position of their own at the bottom of the hill and it was there that they got the BFG set up, deployed, armed and ranged.

“Fire!” Lucy called, and the game did this amazing and cool animation that it rewarded you with whenever you loosed a bolt from the BFG,
making the gamelight dim towards the sizzling bolt as though it were sucking the illumination out of the world as it arced up the hillside, trailing a comet-tail of sparks. The game played them a groan of dismay from their enemies, and then the bolt hit home with a crash that made her point-of-view vibrate like an earthquake. The roar in her headphones was deafening, and behind it she could hear Lucy on the voice-chat, cheering it on.

“Nuke ‘em till they glow and shoot ‘em in the dark! Yee-haw!” Lucy called, and Anda laughed and pounded her fist on the desk. Gobbets of former enemy sailed over the treeline dramatically, dripping hyper-red blood and ichor.

In her bedroom, Anda caressed the controller-pad and her avatar punched the air and did a little rugby victory dance that the All-Blacks had released as a limited edition promo after they won the World Cup.

Now they had to move fast, for their enemies at the cottage would be alerted to their presence and waiting for them. They spread out into a wide flanking manoeuvre around the cottage’s sides, staying just outside of bow-range, using scrying scrolls to magnify the cottage and make the foliage around them fade to translucency.

There were four guards around the cottage, two with nocked arrows and two with whirling slings. One had a scroll out and was surrounded by the concentration marks that indicated spellcasting.

“GO GO GO!” Lucy called.

Anda went! She had two scrolls left in her inventory, and one was a shield spell. They cost a fortune and burned out fast, but whatever that guard was cooking up, it had to be bad news. She cast the spell as she charged for the cottage, and lucky thing, because there was a fifth guard up a tree who dumped a pot of boiling oil on her that would have cooked her down to her bones in ten seconds if not for the spell.

She power-climbed the tree and nearly lost her grip when whatever the nasty spell was bounced off her shield. She reached the fifth man as he was trying to draw his dirk and dagger and lopped his bloody head off in one motion, then backflipped off the high branch, trusting to her shield to stay intact for her impact on the cottage roof.

The strategy worked—now she had the drop (literally!) on the remaining guards, having successfully taken the high ground. In her headphones, the sound of Lucy making mayhem, the grunts as she pounded her keyboard mingling with the in-game shrieks as her arrows found homes in the chests of two more of the guards.

Shrieking a berzerker wail, Anda jumped down off of the roof and landed on one of the two remaining guards, plunging her sword into his chest and pinning him in the dirt. Her sword stuck in the ground, and she hammered on her keys, trying to free it, while the remaining guard ran
for her on-screen. Anda pounded her keyboard, but it was useless: the sword was good and stuck. Poo. She’d blown a small fortune on spells and rations for this project with the expectation of getting some real cash out of it, and now it was all lost.

She moved her hands to the part of the keypad that controlled motion and began to run, waiting for the guard’s sword to find her avatar’s back and knock her into the dirt.

“Got ‘im!” It was Lucy, in her headphones. She wheeled her avatar about so quickly it was nauseating and saw that Lucy was on her erstwhile attacker, grunting as she engaged him close-in. Something was wrong, though: despite Lucy’s avatar’s awesome stats and despite Lucy’s own skill at the keyboard, she was being taken to the cleaners. The guard was kicking her ass. Anda went back to her stuck sword and recommenced whanging on it, watching helplessly as Lucy lost her left arm, then took a cut on her belly, then another to her knee.

“Shit!” Lucy said in her headphones as her avatar began to keel over. Anda yanked her sword free—finally—and charged at the guard, screaming a ululating war cry. He managed to get his avatar swung around and his sword up before she reached him, but it didn’t matter: she got in a lucky swing that took off one leg, then danced back before he could counterstrike. Now she closed carefully, nicking at his sword-hand until he dropped his weapon, then moving in for a fast kill.

“Lucy?”

“Call me Sarge!”

“Sorry, Sarge. Where’d you respawn?”

“I’m all the way over at Body Electric—it’ll take me hours to get there. Do you think you can complete the mission on your own?”

“Uh, sure.” Thinking, Crikey, if that’s what the guards outside were like, how’m I gonna get past the inside guards?

“You’re the best, girl. OK, enter the cottage and kill everyone there.”

“Uh, sure.”

She wished she had another scrying scroll in inventory so she could get a look inside the cottage before she beat its door in, but she was fresh out of scrolls and just about everything else.

She kicked the door in and her fingers danced. She’d killed four of her adversaries before she even noticed that they weren’t fighting back.

In fact, they were generic avatars, maybe even non-player characters. They moved like total noobs, milling around in the little cottage. Around them were heaps of shirts, thousands and thousands of them. A couple
of the noobs were sitting in the back, incredibly, still crafting more shirts, ignoring the swordswoman who’d just butchered four of their companions.

She took a careful look at all the avatars in the room. None of them were armed. Tentatively, she walked up to one of the players and cut his head off. The player next to him moved clumsily to one side and she followed him.

“Are you a player or a bot?” she typed.

The avatar did nothing. She killed it.

“Lucy, they’re not fighting back.”

“Good, kill them all.”

“Really?”

“Yeah—that’s the orders. Kill them all and then I’ll make a phone call and some guys will come by and verify it and then you haul ass back to the island. I’m coming out there to meet you, but it’s a long haul from the respawn gate. Keep an eye on my stuff, OK?”

“Sure,” Anda said, and killed two more. That left ten. *One two one two and through and through,* she thought, lopping their heads off. *Her vorpal blade wentsnicker-snack.* One left. He stood off in the back.

> no porfa necesito mi plata

Italian? No, Spanish. She’d had a term of it in Third Form, though she couldn’t understand what this twit was saying. She could always paste the text into a translation bot on one of the chat channels, but who cared? She cut his head off.

“They’re all dead,” she said into her headset.

“Good job!” Lucy said. “OK, I’m gonna make a call. Sit tight.”

Bo-ring. The cottage was filled with corpses and shirts. She picked some of them up. They were totally generic: the shirts you crafted when you were down at Level 0 and trying to get enough skillz to actually make something of yourself. Each one would fetch just a few coppers. Add it all together and you barely had two thousand gold.

Just to pass the time, she pasted the Spanish into the chatbot

> no [colloquial] please, I need my [colloquial] [money|silver]

Pathetic. A few thousand golds—he could make that much by playing a couple of the beginner missions. More fun. More rewarding. Crafting
shirts!

She left the cottage and patrolled around it. Twenty minutes later, two more avatars showed up. More generics.

> are you players or bots?

She typed, though she had an idea they were players. Bots moved better.

> any trouble?

Well all right then.

> no trouble

> good

One player entered the cottage and came back out again. The other player spoke.

> you can go now

“Lucy?”

“What’s up?”

“Two blokes just showed up and told me to piss off. They’re noobs, though. Should I kill them?”

“No! Jeez, Anda, those are the contacts. They’re just making sure the job was done. Get my stuff and meet me at Marionettes Tavern, OK?”

Anda went over to Lucy’s corpse and looted it, then set out down the road, dragging the BFG behind her. She stopped at the bend in the road and snuck a peek back at the cottage. It was in flames, the two noobs standing amid them, burning slowly along with the cottage and a few thousand golds’ worth of badly crafted shirts.

#

That was the first of Anda and Lucy’s missions, but it wasn’t the last. That month, she fought her way through six more, and the paypal she used filled with real, honest-to-goodness cash, Pounds Sterling that she could withdraw from the cashpoint situated exactly 501 meters away from the schoolgate, next to the candy shop that was likewise 501 meters away.

“Anda, I don’t think it’s healthy for you to spend so much time with your game,” her da said, prodding her bulging podge with a finger. “It’s not healthy.”

“Daaaaa!” she said, pushing his finger aside. “I go to PE every stinking day.
It’s good enough for the Ministry of Education.”

“I don’t like it,” he said. He was no movie star himself, with a little pot belly that he wore his belted trousers high upon, a wobbly extra chin and two bat wings of flab hanging off his upper arms. She pinched his chin and wiggled it.

“I get loads more exercise than you, Mr Kettle.”

“But I pay the bills around here, little Miss Pot.”

“You’re not seriously complaining about the cost of the game?” she said, infusing her voice with as much incredulity and disgust as she could muster. “Ten quid a week and I get unlimited calls, texts and messages! Plus play of course, and the in-game encyclopedia and spellchecker and translator bots!” (this was all from rote—every member of the Fahrenheits memorized this or something very like it for dealing with recalcitrant, ignorant parental units) “Fine then. If the game is too dear for you, Da, let’s set it aside and I’ll just start using a normal phone, is that what you want?”

Her Da held up his hands. “I surrender, Miss Pot. But do try to get a little more exercise, please? Fresh air? Sport? Games?”

“Getting my head trodden on in the hockey pitch, more like,” she said, darkly.

“Zackly!” he said, prodding her podge anew. “That’s the stuff! Getting my head trodden on was what made me the man I are today!”

Her Da could bluster all he liked about paying the bills, but she had pocket-money for the first time in her life: not book-tokens and fruit-tokens and milk-tokens that could be exchanged for “healthy” snacks and literature. She had real money, cash money that she could spend outside of the 500 meter sugar-free zone that surrounded her school.

She wasn’t just kicking arse in the game, now—she was the richest kid she knew, and suddenly she was everybody’s best pal, with handfuls of Curly Wurlies and Dairy Milks and Mars Bars that she could selectively distribute to her schoolmates.

#

“Go get a BFG,” Lucy said. “We’re going on a mission.”

Lucy’s voice in her ear was a constant companion in her life now. When she wasn’t on Fahrenheit Island, she and Lucy were running missions into the wee hours of the night. The Fahrenheit armors, non-player-characters, had learned to recognise her and they had the Clan’s BFGs oiled and ready for her when she showed up.
Today’s mission was close to home, which was good: the road-trips were getting tedious. Sometimes, non-player-characters or Game Masters would try to get them involved in an official in-game mission, impressed by their stats and weapons, and it sometimes broke her heart to pass them up, but cash always beat gold and experience beat experience points: *Money talks and bullshit walks*, as Lucy liked to say.

They caught the first round of sniper/lookouts before they had a chance to attack or send off a message. Anda used the scrying spell to spot them. Lucy had kept both BFGs armed and she loosed rounds at the hilltops flanking the roadway as soon as Anda gave her the signal, long before they got into bow range.

As they picked their way through the ruined chunks of the dead player-character snipers, Anda still on the lookout, she broke the silence over their voicelink.

“Hey, Lucy?”

“Anda, if you’re not going to call me Sarge, at least don’t call me ‘Hey, Lucy!’ My dad loved that old TV show and he makes that joke every visitation day.”

“Sorry, Sarge. Sarge?”

“Yes, Anda?”

“I just can’t understand why anyone would pay us cash for these missions.”

“You complaining?”

“No, but—”

“Anyone asking you to cyber some old pervert?”

“No!”

“OK then. I don’t know either. But the money’s good. I don’t care. Hell, probably it’s two rich gamers who pay their butlers to craft for them all day. One’s fucking with the other one and paying us.”

“You really think that?”

Lucy sighed a put-upon, sophisticated, American sigh. “Look at it this way. Most of the world is living on like a dollar a day. I spend five dollars every day on a frappuccino. Some days, I get two! Dad sends mom three thousand a month in child-support—that’s a hundred bucks a day. So if a day’s money here is a hundred dollars, then to a African or whatever my frappuccino is worth like five hundred dollars. And I buy two or three every day.
“And we’re not rich! There’s craploads of rich people who wouldn’t think twice about spending five hundred bucks on a coffee—how much do you think a hotdog and a Coke go for on the space station? A thousand bucks!

“So that’s what I think is going on. There’s someone out there, some Saudi or Japanese guy or Russian mafia kid who’s so rich that this is just chump change for him, and he’s paying us to mess around with some other rich person. To them, we’re like the Africans making a dollar a day to craft—I mean, sew—t-shirts. What’s a couple hundred bucks to them? A cup of coffee.”

Anda thought about it. It made a kind of sense. She’d been on hols in Bratislava where they got a posh hotel room for ten quid—less than she was spending every day on sweeties and fizzy drinks.

“Three o’clock,” she said, and aimed the BFG again. More snipers patted in bits around the forest floor.

“Nice one, Anda.”

“Thanks, Sarge.”

#

They smashed half a dozen more sniper outposts and fought their way through a couple packs of suspiciously bad-ass brigands before coming upon the cottage.

“Bloody hell,” Anda breathed. The cottage was ringed with guards, forty or fifty of them, with bows and spells and spears, in entrenched positions.

“This is nuts,” Lucy agreed. “I’m calling them. This is nuts.”

There was a muting click as Lucy rang off and Anda used up a scrying scroll to examine the inventories of the guards around the corner. The more she looked, the more scared she got. They were loaded down with spells, a couple of them were guarding BFGs and what looked like an even bigger BFG, maybe the fabled BFG10K, something that was removed from the game economy not long after gameday one, as too disruptive to the balance of power. Supposedly, one or two existed, but that was just a rumor. Wasn’t it?

“OK,” Lucy said. “OK, this is how this goes. We’ve got to do this. I just called in three squads of Fahrenheit veterans and their noob prentices for backup.” Anda summed that up in her head to a hundred player characters and maybe three hundred nonplayer characters: familiars, servants, demons;

“That’s a lot of shares to split the pay into,” Anda said.

“Oh ye of little tits,” Lucy said. “I’ve negotiated a bonus for us if we make it—a million gold and three missions’ worth of cash. The Fahrenheits are
taking payment in gold—they’ll be here in an hour.”

This wasn’t a mission anymore, Anda realized. It was war. Gamewar. Hundreds of players converging on this shard, squaring off against the ranked mercenaries guarding the huge cottage over the hill.

#

Lucy wasn’t the ranking Fahrenheit on the scene, but she was the designated general. One of the gamers up from Fahrenheit Island brought a team flag for her to carry, a long spear with the magical standard snapping proudly from it as the troops formed up behind her.

“On my signal,” Lucy said. The voice chat was like a wind-tunnel from all the unmuted breathing voices, hundreds of girls in hundreds of bedrooms like Anda’s, all over the world, some sitting down before breakfast, some just coming home from school, some roused from sleep by their ringing game-sponsored mobiles. “GO GO GO!”

They went, roaring, and Anda roared too, heedless of her parents downstairs in front of the blaring telly, heedless of her throat-lining, a Fahrenheit in berzerker rage, sword swinging. She made straight for the BFG10K—a siege engine that could level a town wall, and it would be hers, captured by her for the Fahrenheits if she could do it. She spelled the merc who was cranking it into insensibility, rolled and rolled again to dodge arrows and spells, healed herself when an arrow found her leg and sent her tumbling, springing to her feet before another arrow could strike home, watching her hit points and experience points move in opposite directions.

HERS! She vaulted the BFG10K and snicker-snacked her sword through two mercs’ heads. Two more appeared—they had the thing primed and aimed at the main body of Fahrenheit fighters, and they could turn the battle’s tide just by firing it—and she killed them, slamming her keypad, howling, barely conscious of the answering howls in her headset.

Now she had the BFG10K, though more mercs were closing on her. She disarmed it quickly and spelled at the nearest bunch of mercs, then had to take evasive action against the hail of incoming arrows and spells. It was all she could do to cast healing spells fast enough to avoid losing consciousness.

“LUCY!” she called into her headset. “LUCY, OVER BY THE BFG10K!”

Lucy snapped out orders and the opposition before Anda began to thin as Fahrenheits fell on them from behind. The flood was stemmed, and now the Fahrenheits’ greater numbers and discipline showed. In short order, every merc was butchered or run off.

Anda waited by the BFG10K while Lucy paid off the Fahrenheits and saw them on their way. “Now we take the cottage,” Lucy said.
“Right,” Anda said. She set her character off for the doorway. Lucy brushed past her.

“I’ll be glad when we’re done with this—that was bugfuck nutso.” She opened the door and her character disappeared in a fireball that erupted from directly overhead. A door-curse, a serious one, one that cooked her in her armor in seconds.

“SHIT!” Lucy said in her headset.

Anda giggled. “Teach you to go rushing into things,” she said. She used up a couple scrying scrolls making sure that there was nothing else in the cottage save for millions of shirts and thousands of unarmed noob avatars that she’d have to mow down like grass to finish out the mission.

She descended upon them like a reaper, swinging her sword heedlessly, taking five or six out with each swing. When she’d been a noob in the game, she’d had to endure endless fighting practice, “grappling” with piles of leaves and other nonlethal targets, just to get enough experience points to have a chance of hitting anything. This was every bit as dull.

Her wrists were getting tired, and her chest heaved and her hated podge wobbled as she worked the keypad.

> Wait, please, don’t—I’d like to speak with you

It was a noob avatar, just like the others, but not just like it after all, for it moved with purpose, backing away from her sword. And it spoke English.

> nothing personal

she typed

> just a job

> There are many here to kill—take me last at least. I need to talk to you.

> talk, then

she typed. Meeting players who moved well and spoke English was hardly unusual in gamespace, but here in the cleanup phase, it felt out of place. It felt wrong.

> My name is Raymond, and I live in Tijuana. I am a labour organizer in the factories here. What is your name?

> i don’t give out my name in-game

> What can I call you?
> kali

It was a name she liked to use in-game: Kali, Destroyer of Worlds, like the Hindu goddess.

> Are you in India?

> london

> You are Indian?

> naw im a whitey

She was halfway through the room, mowing down the noobs in twos and threes. She was hungry and bored and this Raymond was weirding her out.

> Do you know who these people are that you’re killing?

She didn’t answer, but she had an idea. She killed four more and shook out her wrists.

> They’re working for less than a dollar a day. The shirts they make are traded for gold and the gold is sold on eBay. Once their avatars have leveled up, they too are sold off on eBay. They’re mostly young girls supporting their families. They’re the lucky ones: the unlucky ones work as prostitutes.

Her wrists really ached. She slaughtered half a dozen more.

> The bosses used to use bots, but the game has countermeasures against them. Hiring children to click the mouse is cheaper than hiring programmers to circumvent the rules. I’ve been trying to unionize them because they’ve got a very high rate of injury. They have to play for 18-hour shifts with only one short toilet break. Some of them can’t hold it in and they soil themselves where they sit.

> look

she typed, exasperated.

> it’s none of my lookout, is it. the world’s like that. lots of people with no money. im just a kid, theres nothing i can do about it.

> When you kill them, they don’t get paid.
When you kill them, they lose their day’s wages. Do you know who is paying you to do these killings?

She thought of Saudis, rich Japanese, Russian mobsters.

> not a clue

> I’ve been trying to find that out myself, Kali.

They were all dead now. Raymond stood alone amongst the piled corpses.

> Go ahead

he typed

> I will see you again, I’m sure.

She cut his head off. She was hungry. She was alone there in the enormous woodland cottage, and she still had to haul the BFG10K back to Fahrenheit Island.

“Lucy?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m almost back there, hang on. I respawned in the ass end of nowhere.”

“Lucy, do you know who’s in the cottage? Those noobs that we kill?”


“Girls. Little girls in Mexico. Getting paid a dollar a day to craft shirts. Except they don’t get their dollar when we kill them. They don’t get anything.”

“Oh, for chrissakes, is that what one of them told you? Do you believe everything someone tells you in-game? Christ. English girls are so naive.”

“You don’t think it’s true?”

“Naw, I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t, OK? I’m almost there, keep your panties on.”

“I’ve got to go, Lucy,” she said. Her wrists hurt, and her podge overlapped the waistband of her trousers, making her feel a bit like she was drowning.
“What, now? Shit, just hang on.”

“My mom’s calling me to supper. You’re almost here, right?”

“Yeah, but—”

She reached down and shut off her PC.

#

Anda’s Da and Mum were watching the telly again with a bowl of crisps between them. She walked past them like she was dreaming and stepped out the door onto the terrace. It was nighttime, 11 o’clock, and the chavs in front of the council flats across the square were kicking a football around and swilling lager and making rude noises. They were skinny and rawboned, wearing shorts and string vests with strong, muscular limbs flashing in the streetlights.

“Anda?”

“Yes, Mum?”

“Are you all right?” Her mum’s fat fingers caressed the back of her neck.

“Yes, Mum. Just needed some air is all.”

“You’re very clammy,” her mum said. She licked a finger and scrubbed it across Anda’s neck. “Gosh, you’re dirty—how did you get to be such a mucky puppy?”

“Owwww!” she said. Her mum was scrubbing so hard it felt like she’d take her skin off.

“No whingeing,” her mum said sternly. “Behind your ears, too! You are filthy.”

“Mum, owwww!”

Her mum dragged her up to the bathroom and went at her with a flannel and a bar of soap and hot water until she felt boiled and raw.

“What is this mess?” her mum said.

“Lilian, leave off,” her dad said, quietly. “Come out into the hall for a moment, please.”

The conversation was too quiet to hear and Anda didn’t want to, anyway: she was concentrating too hard on not crying—her ears hurt.

Her mum enfolded her shoulders in her soft hands again. “Oh, darling, I’m sorry. It’s a skin condition, your father tells me, Acanthosis Nigricans—he saw it in a TV special. We’ll see the doctor about it
tomorrow after school. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she said, twisting to see if she could see the “dirt” on the back of her neck in the mirror. It was hard because it was an awkward placement—but also because she didn’t like to look at her face and her soft extra chin, and she kept catching sight of it.

She went back to her room to google Acanthosis Nigricans.

> A condition involving darkened, thickened skin. Found in the folds of skin at the base of the back of the neck, under the arms, inside the elbow and at the waistline. Often precedes a diagnosis of type-2 diabetes, especially in children. If found in children, immediate steps must be taken to prevent diabetes, including exercise and nutrition as a means of lowering insulin levels and increasing insulin-sensitivity.

Obesity-related diabetes. They had lectures on this every term in health class—the fastest-growing ailment among British teens, accompanied by photos of orca-fat sacks of lard sat up in bed surrounded by an ocean of rubbery, flowing podge. Anda prodded her belly and watched it jiggle.

It jigged. Her thighs jigged. Her chins wobbled. Her arms sagged.

She grabbed a handful of her belly and squeezed it, pinched it hard as she could, until she had to let go or cry out. She’d left livid red fingerprints in the rolls of fat and she was crying now, from the pain and the shame and oh, God, she was a fat girl with diabetes—

#

“Jesus, Anda, where the hell have you been?”

“Sorry, Sarge,” she said. “My PC’s been broken—” Well, out of service, anyway. Under lock-and-key in her dad’s study. Almost a month now of medications and no telly and no gaming and double PE periods at school with the other whales. She was miserable all day, every day now, with nothing to look forward to except the trips after school to the newsagents at the 501-meter mark and the fistsful of sweets and bottles of fizzy drink she ate in the park while she watched the chavs play footy.

“Well, you should have found a way to let me know. I was getting worried about you, girl.”

“Sorry, Sarge,” she said again. The PC Baang was filled with stinky spotty boys—literally stinky, it smelt like goats, like a train-station toilet—being loud and obnoxious. The dinky headphones provided were greasy as a slice of pizza, and the mouthpiece was sticky with excited boy-saliva from
games gone past.

But it didn't matter. Anda was back in the game, and just in time, too: her money was running short.

“Well, I’ve got a backlog of missions here. I tried going out with a couple other of the girls—” A pang of regret shot through Anda at the thought that her position might have been usurped while she was locked off the game “—but you’re too good to replace, OK? I’ve got four missions we can do today if you’re game.”

“Four missions! How on earth will we do four missions? That’ll take days!”

“We'll take the BFG10K.” Anda could hear the savage grin in her voice.

The BFG10K simplified things quite a lot. Find the cottage, aim the BFG10K, fire it, whim-wham, no more cottage. They started with five bolts for it—one BFG10K bolt was made up of 20 regular BFG bolts, each costing a small fortune in gold—and used them all up on the first three targets. After returning it to the armory and grabbing a couple of BFGs (amazing how puny the BFG seemed after just a couple hours’ campaigning with a really big gun!) they set out for number four.

“I met a guy after the last campaign,” Anda said. “One of the noobs in the cottage. He said he was a union organizer.”

“Oh, you met Raymond, huh?”

“You knew about him?”

“I met him too. He’s been turning up everywhere. What a creep.”

“So you knew about the noobs in the cottages?”

“Um. Well, yeah, I figured it out mostly on my own and then Raymond told me a little more.”

“And you’re fine with depriving little kids of their wages?”

“Anda,” Lucy said, her voice brittle. “You like gaming, right, it’s important to you?”

“Yeah, ’course it is.”

“How important? Is it something you do for fun, just a hobby you waste a little time on? Are you just into it casually, or are you committed to it?”

“I’m committed to it, Lucy, you know that.” God, without the game, what was there? PE class? Stupid Acanthosis Nigricans and, someday, insulin jabs every morning? “I love the game, Lucy. It’s where my friends
“I know that. That’s why you’re my right-hand woman, why I want you at my side when I go on a mission. We’re bad-ass, you and me, as bad-ass as they come, and we got that way through discipline and hard work and really caring about the game, right?”

“Yes, right, but—”

“You’ve met Liza the Organiza, right?”

“Yes, she came by my school.”

“Mine too. She asked me to look out for you because of what she saw in you that day.”

“Liza the Organiza goes to Ohio?”

“Idaho. Yes—all across the US. They put her on the tube and everything. She’s amazing, and she cares about the game, too—that’s what makes us all Fahrenheits: we’re committed to each other, to teamwork, and to fair play.”

Anda had heard these words—lifted from the Fahrenheit mission statement—many times, but now they made her swell a little with pride.

“So these people in Mexico or wherever, what are they doing? They’re earning their living by exploiting the game. You and me, we would never trade cash for gold, or buy a character or a weapon on eBay—it’s cheating. You get gold and weapons through hard work and hard play. But those Mexicans spend all day, every day, crafting stuff to turn into gold to sell off on the exchange. That’s where it comes from—that’s where the crappy players get their gold from! That’s how rich noobs can buy their way into the game that we had to play hard to get into.

“So we burn them out. If we keep burning the factories down, they’ll shut them down and those kids’ll find something else to do for a living and the game will be better. If no one does that, our work will just get cheaper and cheaper: the game will get less and less fun, too.

“These people don’t care about the game. To them, it’s just a place to suck a buck out of. They’re not players, they’re leeches, here to suck all the fun out.”

They had come upon the cottage now, the fourth one, having exterminated four different sniper-nests on the way.

“Are you in, Anda? Are you here to play, or are you so worried about these leeches on the other side of the world that you want out?”

“I’m in, Sarge,” Anda said. She armed the BFGs and pointed them at the cottage.
“Boo-yah!” Lucy said. Her character notched an arrow.

> Hello, Kali

“Oh, Christ, he's back,” Lucy said. Raymond's avatar had snuck up behind them.> Look at these

he said, and his character set something down on the ground and backed away. Anda edged up on them.

“Come on, it's probably a booby-trap, we've got work to do,” Lucy said.

They were photo-objects. She picked them up and then examined them. The first showed ranked little girls, fifty or more, in clean and simple t-shirts, skinny as anything, sitting at generic white-box PCs, hands on the keyboards. They were hollow-eyed and grim, and none of them older than she.

The next showed a shantytown, shacks made of corrugated aluminum and trash, muddy trails between them, spraypainted graffiti, rude boys loitering, rubbish and carrier bags blowing.

The next showed the inside of a shanty, three little girls and a little boy sitting together on a battered sofa, their mother serving them something white and indistinct on plastic plates. Their smiles were heartbreaking and brave.

> That’s who you’re about to deprive of a day’s wages

“Oh, hell, no,” Lucy said. “Not again. I killed him last time and I said I’d do it again if he ever tried to show me photos. That’s it, he’s dead.” Her character turned towards him, putting away her bow and drawing a short sword. Raymond's character backed away quickly.

“Lucy, don’t,” Anda said. She interposed her avatar between Lucy’s and Raymond. “Don't do it. He deserves to have a say.” She thought of old American TV shows, the kinds you saw between the Bollywood movies on telly. “It’s a free country, right?”

“God damn it, Anda, what is wrong with you? Did you come here to play the game, or to screw around with this pervert dork?”

> what do you want from me raymond?

> Don’t kill them—let them have their wages. Go play somewhere else

> They’re leeches

Lucy typed,
> they’re wrecking the game economy and they’re providing a gold-for-cash supply that lets rich assholes buy their way in. They don’t care about the game and neither do you

> If they don’t play the game, they don’t eat. I think that means that they care about the game as much as you do. You’re being paid cash to kill them, yes? So you need to play for your money, too. I think that makes you and them the same, a little the same.

> go screw yourself

Lucy typed. Anda edged her character away from Lucy’s. Raymond’s character was so far away now that his texting came out in tiny type, almost too small to read. Lucy drew her bow again and nocked an arrow.

“You BITCH!” Lucy said. She drew her sword.

“I’m sorry, Lucy,” Anda said, stepping back out of range. “But I don’t want you to hurt him. I want to hear him out.”

Lucy’s avatar came on fast, and there was a click as the voicelink dropped. Anda typed onehanded while she drew her own sword.

> dont lucy come on talk2me

Lucy slashed at her twice and she needed both hands to defend herself or she would have been beheaded. Anda blew out through her nose and counterattacked, fingers pounding the keyboard. Lucy had more experience points than she did, but she was a better player, and she knew it. She hacked away at Lucy driving her back and back, back down the road they’d marched together.

Abruptly, Lucy broke and ran, and Anda thought she was going away and decided to let her go, no harm no foul, but then she saw that Lucy wasn’t running away, she was running towards the BFGs, armed and primed.

“Bloody hell,” she breathed, as a BFG swung around to point at her. Her fingers flew. She cast the fireball at Lucy in the same instant that she cast her shield spell. Lucy loosed the bolt at her a moment before the fireball engulfed her, cooking her down to ash, and the bolt collided with the shield and drove Anda back, high into the air, and the shield spell wore off before she hit ground, costing her half her health and inventory, which scattered around her. She tested her voicelink.

“Lucy?”
There was no reply.

> I’m very sorry you and your friend quarreled.

She felt numb and unreal. There were rules for Fahrenheits, lots of rules, and the penalties for breaking them varied, but the penalty for attacking a fellow Fahrenheit was—she couldn’t think the word, she closed her eyes, but there it was in big glowing letters: EXPULSION.

But Lucy had started it, right? It wasn’t her fault.

But who would believe her?

She opened her eyes. Her vision swam through incipient tears. Her heart was thudding in her ears.

> The enemy isn’t your fellow player. It’s not the players guarding the fabrica, it’s not the girls working there. The people who are working to destroy the game are the people who pay you and the people who pay the girls in the fabrica, who are the same people. You’re being paid by rival factory owners, you know that? THEY are the ones who care nothing for the game. My girls care about the game. You care about the game. Your common enemy is the people who want to destroy the game and who destroy the lives of these girls.

“Whassamatter, you fat little cow? Is your game making you cwy?” She jerked as if slapped. The chav who was speaking to her hadn’t been in the Baang when she arrived, and he had mean, close-set eyes and a football jersey and though he wasn’t any older than she, he looked mean, and angry, and his smile was sadistic and crazy.

“Piss off,” she said, mustering her braveness.

“You wobbling tub of guts, don’t you DARE speak to me that way,” he said, shouting right in her ear. The Baang fell silent and everyone looked at her. The Pakistani who ran the Baang was on his phone, no doubt calling the coppers, and that meant that her parents would discover where she’d been and then—

“I’m talking to you, girl,” he said. “You disgusting lump of suet—Christ, it makes me wanta puke to look at you. You ever had a boyfriend? How’d he shag you—did he roll yer in flour and look for the wet spot?”

She reeled back, then stood. She drew her arm back and slapped him, as hard as she could. The boys in the Baang laughed and went whoooooo! He purpled and balled his fists and she backed away from him. The imprint of her fingers stood out on his cheek.
He bridged the distance between them with a quick step and punched her, in the belly, and the air whooshed out of her and she fell into another player, who pushed her away, so she ended up slumped against the wall, crying.

The mean boy was there, right in front of her, and she could smell the chili crisps on his breath. “You disgusting whore—” he began and she kneed him square in the nadgers, hard as she could, and he screamed like a little girl and fell backwards. She picked up her schoolbag and ran for the door, her chest heaving, her face streaked with tears.

#

“Anda, dear, there’s a phone call for you.”

Her eyes stung. She’d been lying in her darkened bedroom for hours now, snuffling and trying not to cry, trying not to look at the empty desk where her PC used to live.

Her da’s voice was soft and caring, but after the silence of her room, it sounded like a rusting hinge.

“Anda?”

She opened her eyes. He was holding a cordless phone, sillhouetted against the open doorway.

“Who is it?”

“Someone from your game, I think,” he said. He handed her the phone.

“Hullo?”

“Hullo chicken.” It had been a year since she’d heard that voice, but she recognised it instantly.

“Liza?”

“Yes.”

Anda’s skin seemed to shrink over her bones. This was it: expelled. Her heart felt like it was beating once per second, time slowed to a crawl.

“Hullo, Liza.”

“Can you tell me what happened today?”

She did, stumbling over the details, back-tracking and stuttering. She couldn’t remember, exactly—did Lucy move on Raymond and Anda asked her to stop and then Lucy attacked her? Had Anda attacked Lucy first? It was all a jumble. She should have saved a screenmovie and taken it with her, but she couldn’t have taken anything with her, she’d run out—
"I see. Well it sounds like you've gotten yourself into quite a pile of poo, haven't you, my girl?"

"I guess so," Anda said. Then, because she knew that she was as good as expelled, she said, "I don't think it's right to kill them, those girls. All right?"

"Ah," Liza said. "Well, funny you should mention that. I happen to agree. Those girls need our help more than any of the girls anywhere in the game. The Fahrenheits' strength is that we are cooperative—it's another way that we're better than the boys. We care. I'm proud that you took a stand when you did—glad I found out about this business."

"You're not going to expel me?"

"No, chicken, I'm not going to expel you. I think you did the right thing—"

That meant that Lucy would be expelled. Fahrenheit had killed Fahrenheit—something had to be done. The rules had to be enforced. Anda swallowed hard.

"If you expel Lucy, I'll quit," she said, quickly, before she lost her nerve.

Liza laughed. "Oh, chicken, you're a brave thing, aren't you? No one's being expelled, fear not. But I wanta talk to this Raymond of yours."

Anda came home from remedial hockey sweaty and exhausted, but not as exhausted as the last time, nor the time before that. She could run the whole length of the pitch twice now without collapsing—when she'd started out, she could barely make it halfway without having to stop and hold her side, kneading her loathsome podge to make it stop aching. Now there was noticeably less podge, and she found that with the ability to run the pitch came the freedom to actually pay attention to the game, to aim her shots, to build up a degree of accuracy that was nearly as satisfying as being really good in-game.

Her dad knocked at the door of her bedroom after she'd showered and changed. "How's my girl?"

"Revising," she said, and hefted her maths book at him.

"Did you have a fun afternoon on the pitch?"

"You mean 'did my head get trod on'?"

"Did it?"

"Yes," she said. "But I did more treading than getting trodden on." The other girls were really fat, and they didn't have a lot of team skills. Anda
had been to war: she knew how to depend on someone and how to be depended upon.

“That’s my girl.” He pretended to inspect the paint-work around the light switch. “Been on the scales this week?”

She had, of course: the school nutritionist saw to that, a morning humiliation undertaken in full sight of all the other fatties.

“Yes, Dad.”

“And—?”

“I’ve lost a stone,” she said. A little more than a stone, actually. She had been able to fit into last year’s jeans the other day.

She hadn’t been the sweets-shop in a month. When she thought about sweets, it made her think of the little girls in the sweatshop. Sweatshop, sweets shop. The sweets shop man sold his wares close to the school because little girls who didn’t know better would be tempted by them. No one forced them, but they were kids and grownups were supposed to look out for kids.

Her da beamed at her. “I’ve lost three pounds myself,” he said, holding his tum. “I’ve been trying to follow your diet, you know.”

“I know, Da,” she said. It embarrassed her to discuss it with him.

The kids in the sweatshops were being exploited by grownups, too. It was why their situation was so impossible: the adults who were supposed to be taking care of them were exploiting them.

“Well, I just wanted to say that I’m proud of you. We both are, your Mum and me. And I wanted to let you know that I’ll be moving your PC back into your room tomorrow. You’ve earned it.”

Anda blushed pink. She hadn’t really expected this. Her fingers twitched over a phantom game-controller.

“Oh, Da,” she said. He held up his hand.

“It’s all right, girl. We’re just proud of you.”

#

She didn’t touch the PC the first day, nor the second. The kids in the game—she didn’t know what to do about them. On the third day, after hockey, she showered and changed and sat down and slipped the headset on.

“Hello, Anda.”
“Hi, Sarge.”

Lucy had known the minute she entered the game, which meant that she was still on Lucy’s buddy-list. Well, that was a hopeful sign.

“You don’t have to call me that. We’re the same rank now, after all.”

Anda pulled down a menu and confirmed it: she’d been promoted to Sergeant during her absence. She smiled.

“Gosh,” she said.

“Yes, well, you earned it,” Lucy said. “I’ve been talking to Raymond a lot about the working conditions in the factory, and, well—” She broke off. “I’m sorry, Anda.”

“Me too, Lucy.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry about,” she said.

They went adventuring, running some of the game’s standard missions together. It was fun, but after the kind of campaigning they’d done before, it was also kind of pale and flat.

“It’s horrible, I know,” Anda said. “But I miss it.”

“Oh thank God,” Lucy said. “I thought I was the only one. It was fun, wasn’t it? Big fights, big stakes.”

“Well, poo,” Anda said. “I don’t wanna be bored for the rest of my life. What’re we gonna do?”

“I was hoping you knew.”

She thought about it. The part she’d loved had been going up against grownups who were not playing the game, but *gaming* it, breaking it for money. They’d been worthy adversaries, and there was no guilt in beating them, either.

“We’ll ask Raymond how we can help,” she said.

#

“I want them to walk out—to go on strike,” he said. “It’s the only way to get results: band together and withdraw your labour.” Raymond’s voice had a thick Mexican accent that took some getting used to, but his English was very good—better, in fact, than Lucy’s.

“Walk out in-game?” Lucy said.

“No,” Raymond said. “That wouldn’t be very effective. I want them to walk out in Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana. I’ll call the press in, we’ll make a
big deal out of it. We can win—I know we can.”

“So what’s the problem?” Anda said.

“The same problem as always. Getting them organized. I thought that the game would make it easier: we’ve been trying to get these girls organized for years: in the sewing shops, and the toy factories, but they lock the doors and keep us out and the girls go home and their parents won’t let us talk to them. But in the game, I thought I’d be able to reach them—”

“But the bosses keep you away?”

“I keep getting killed. I’ve been practicing my swordfighting, but it’s so hard—”

“This will be fun,” Anda said. “Let’s go.”

“Where?” Lucy said.

“To an in-game factory. We’re your new bodyguards.” The bosses hired some pretty mean mercs, Anda knew. She’d been one. They’d be fun to wipe out.

Raymond’s character spun around on the screen, then planted a kiss on Anda’s cheek. Anda made her character give him a playful shove that sent him sprawling.

“Hey, Lucy, go get us a couple BFGs, OK?”

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On February 3, 2008, he became a father. The little girl is called Poesy Emmeline Fibonacci Nautilus Taylor Doctorow, and is a marvel that puts all the works of technology and artifice to shame.