the escapist

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

"What's going on with the suits, Virgil?"

"Nothing. That's his suit, I'm trying to fix it."

"He can take a new suit, Virgil. Why are you wasting time with the old one?"

I fix a cold gaze on Virgil who stares angrily back. He knows I know.

"You've modified Johnny's suit, haven't you Virgil? To be safer, but not mine. Why is that?"

"You're crazy. Get out of my way."

"I'm right and you know it. What are you up to?"

"Men! Kill her!" Virgil yells at the mechanized troops to fire on me. He has been caught and I am a thorn in his side. I calmly pull out my two sigs.

"I'd call them off if I were you, Virg."

"They'll kill you if you shoot me, you crazy…"

"Yeah, well, maybe. But at least I'll have the satisfaction of knowing I took you out first."

Diva is probably the most challenging character I've ever roleplayed. She was my barely human, sociopathic assassin character in our Friday Night Gaming Group's *Cyberpunk 2020* campaign. She was conniving, ruthless and didn't trust anyone.

I, on the other hand, have a hard time killing a spider.

So, you see, there's something of a disconnect between Diva and myself. I don't like to pick fights; I don't like to be **involved** in fights. Diva spoke her mind and generally got her way, whether by using her considerable feminine charm or her prowess with her most prized possession – her Sig Sauer.

But it was glorious fun. To unwind at the end of a long week by getting into a character so wholly different from myself was therapy – don't mind the fact that the character I played could've used a good dose of therapy, herself. Plunging into the dark, near future on Friday nights, while sometimes stressful, was cathartic. We got together, ate too many salt and ground pepper potato chips, drank too much diet soda, and shed the worries of the week prior. We found a way to just make it all go away for a while. And who hasn't ever wanted that?

That's why we've decided to devote this week's issue to the roleplayers. John Tynes is back, discussing his experiences with in-person roleplaying games versus computer roleplaying games. Nova Barlow shares some of the lessons she learned while running events in *Ultima Online*. Newcomer to *The Escapist*, Will Hindmarch, ventures for the first time into computer RPGs, and lives to tell the tale. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: Just stumbled upon your mag today … and just read through your entire collection of issues in one sitting. This is the games journalism I've been waiting for.

Now let's just hope the games industry catches up with you.
- Paul

To the Editor: [Re: "Making the Sacrifice" by Khurram Ahmed]
I am currently playing (and greatly enjoying!) *Shadow of the Colossus*. In it, a boy has come to the temple of a powerful being, to have it bring back the soul of his dead companion. He sees a light come from on high, hears a mighty voice, and obeys it without question. He hunts down the colossi one by one, confident that his spiritual sword will give him the necessary strength and skill to accomplish the task before him. He does not need to say it, for the truth of the matter is evident in his every action; he has faith. By extension, via the controller in my hand that links us together, so do I.
- David

From the Blog: [Re: "An Exit" by Patrick Dugan]
"According to Game Designer Raph Koster's understanding, "*Paidia* just means 'very big rulesets.'" The

implication of this is any *paidic* title is going to have very high content demands and production costs. This assumption ignores the very Zen-like notion that complex results can result from simple rules, and the best *paidic* play is fostered by the confluence of a few robust mechanics. In *Façade*'s case, these mechanics are the two characters and the drama management AI."

Yes, I do believe that *paidia* means very big rulesets - specifically, what I call "imported rulesets," - rules from outside the defined model of the game.

That doesn't mean that the rulesets imply high content demands; quite the opposite, actually. Physics is a commonly imported ruleset in numerous sports, but the rules of physics (in terms of ordinary life) are fairly straightforward in application and don't imply a lot of content load.

Overall, I am a huge fan of emergence coming from simple rules. We shouldn't think, however, that what Michael and Andrew did with *Façade* is at all simple; the rules underlying it were enough to build a Ph.D. dissertation from.
- Raph

From the Blog: [Re: "Metal Gear Pacifist" by Pat Miller] You see this is why it confuses me when Kojima-san himself would agree with Ebert in saying games are not art. Surely if a game has a story, a meaning, or a certain style visual or otherwise, it can be made as art. As far as I know art has always been interactive, though not to this extent.

He says: "'I don't think they're art either, videogames,' he said, referring to Roger Ebert's recent commentary on the same subject. 'The thing is, art is something that radiates the artist, the person who creates that piece of art. If 100 people walk by and a single person is captivated by whatever that piece radiates, it's art. But videogames aren't trying to capture one person. A videogame should make sure that all 100 people that play that game should enjoy the service provided by that videogame. It's something of a service. It's not art.'"

A game can be a service and art at the same time cant it? Like you said in the article, the majority of people would buy *MGS* for the entertaining game mechanic and not the interesting meaning/feeling within the game. And even if all 100 people who play the game understand that message or the feeling the artist wants to put across, surely its still art. It's like he wants to berate his own work and say it is purely an enjoyable game mechanic and nothing else. And even then, creating an enjoyable game mechanic that works is something of an art as well.

I just don't get it.
- Munir

In Celebration
of the
Inner Rogue

by Mark Wallace

I'm a big fan of my troll Rogue in *World of Warcraft*. He's good at ambushing his enemies, and he hits hard. I find myself rooting for him as he's trotting off to take on the next quest or fidgeting around in the Warsong lumber camp, waiting for a battleground to begin.

But every time he puts the killing blow on a nasty gnome Mage or detestable yeti, I always think, "Way to go, Wallace," rather than, "Way to go, Rogue." Every time I reach that small moment of excitement, when I'm no longer considering but only reacting, it's always, "Yay, me," and never, "Yay, him." And every time I think that, it raises the question: Just who is it I see before me on my screen? Is it him, or is it me? What real difference could it possibly make?

It could make a big difference, it turns out. We call places like *World of Warcraft*

and *EVE Online* massively multiplayer "roleplaying" games, but the term doesn't really describe what's actually going on there. Few players inhabit their avatars in the same way an actor inhabits a role. In fact, there are many more potential ways to enter an online world than most people realize. In one sense, the player merely pilots an avatar through the online environment, and only rarely becomes him.

Total immersion, in which the physical world is truly forgotten and one actually believes oneself to be someone else, is exceedingly rare (and probably an indication of serious mental problems). Even run of the mill roleplaying is almost unheard of; if it wasn't, the chat channel in *WoW*'s Barrens zone wouldn't be filled with exclamations of "OMGWTFPWND!!" and endless paeans to Chuck Norris. On the other hand, the relationship between player and avatar is clearly deeper than

that between a chess player and his king. Yet is it as deep as what happens with athletes who are at the top of their game, who seem to become someone different as they take the field?

To explore some answers to these questions, I turned to the godfather of virtual worlds, Richard Bartle. In 1979, Bartle became the first multiplayer world designer when he created a text-based "multi-user dungeon" known simply as *MUD1*. Still running today, *MUD1* was the first online world in which large numbers of people could interact with each other, just as they do in *World of Warcraft* today.

And as Bartle points out in his book, *Designing Virtual Worlds*, the player-to-player and player-to-avatar relationships that arise in such places have not been changed at all by the advent of cool-looking graphics. You are what you are in online worlds, whether they have high poly-counts or just a Telnet connection.

So, what are you? The answer, according to Bartle, changes over time, and has less to do with a player leaving the "real" world behind, and more to do with the gradual merging of the person at the

keyboard with the "person" on the screen.

The first time you entered a virtual world, you were probably struck by the avatar on the screen before you. This is the player as pilot, and the avatar as something entirely distinct, little more than a tool or vehicle with which to explore the new space you find yourself in, like a remote-controlled robot rover sending pictures back from the surface of a distant planet.

But as your familiarity with your new environment develops, you soon begin to understand the digital person before you as a character in his or her own right, according to Bartle. Now, the avatar is no longer a puppet, but is a distinct personality, probably a mix of your own character traits and a few you think might be interesting to have or to explore. The character is still someone recognizably separate from yourself, but it's "someone" nonetheless (as a characters in a piece of fiction is "someone"), it's no longer "something."

Most people might assume this is as deep as things go without straying into the territory of mental illness. But there's

more, a deeper level of immersion. "The more immersed you are, the closer your game character is to being **you**," Bartle told me in a recent interview. "By selecting an avatar, you're choosing how others will see you superficially. By playing a character using that avatar, you're experimenting with aspects of your personality. By emphasizing and de-emphasizing facets of the character's personality and your own personality, eventually the two lock together and you have a **persona**."
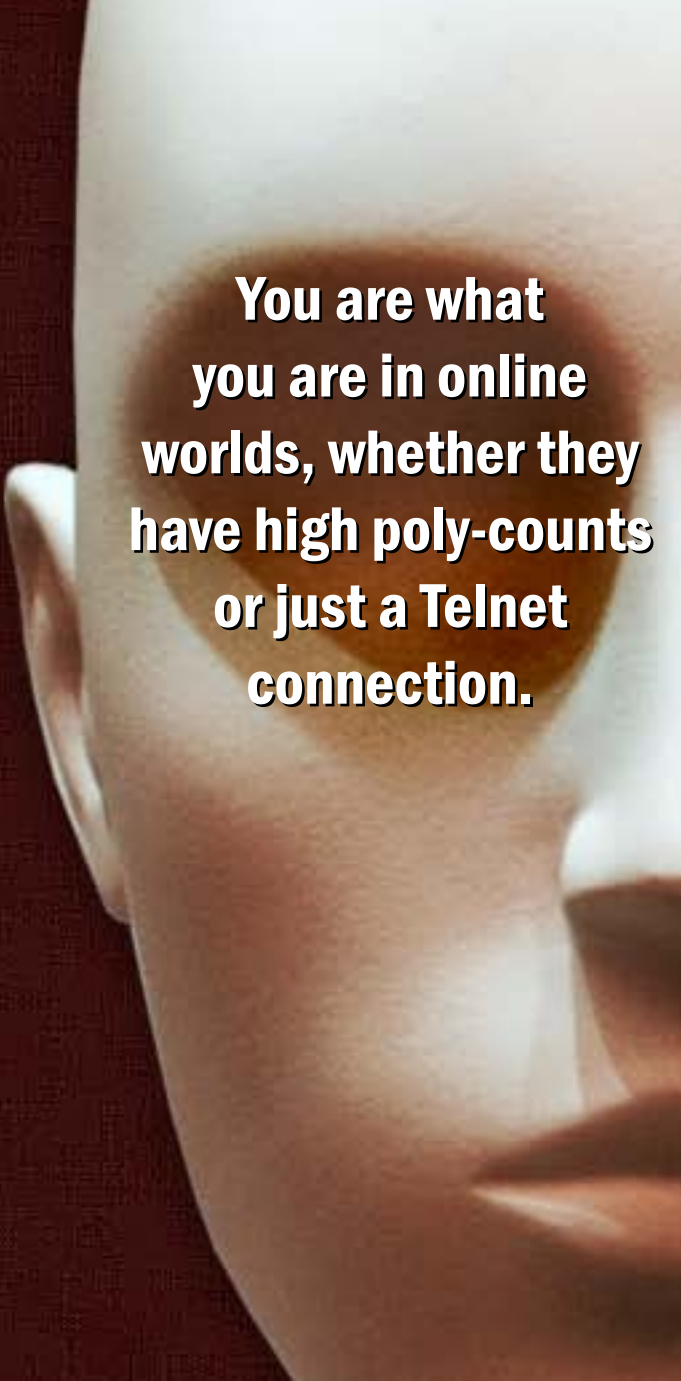
At the persona level of immersion, according to Bartle, the virtual world is just another place you might visit, like Sydney or Rome. Your avatar is simply the clothing you wear when you go there. There is no more vehicle, no more separate character. It's just you, in the world.

Of course, Bartle says, many players will protest their avatar carries more weight than just a suit of clothes. If that's the case, "you have more immersion to go yet," Bartle argues. If you still inhabit a character in a virtual world - in other words, if you're roleplaying - you yourself are not really in the world as fully as you could be. "You haven't yet

combined character and player into persona," Bartle says. When you and the character are finally unified, "then it **is** you in there - no metaphor about it."

Perhaps that explains why I compliment myself each time my Rogue puts a nice garotte around some vile Stormwind Warrior's neck: Because it isn't my Rogue in there at all, it's me. And that answers the question of what difference it makes. Bartle puts it nicely: "The point of playing a virtual world is to celebrate and understand who you are."

And here you were thinking the point was to level as fast as possible so you could get your hands on all that awesome loot. Not at all, my friend. This is "a personal journey of self-discovery" we're on, according to Bartle, much like the "hero's journey" Joseph Campbell described in his 1949 book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. There, Campbell outlines an archetypal "monomyth" in which the hero is sent away from the world he knows to accomplish a task in a world of unknown dangers and challenges. He must pass a series of trials by drawing on aspects of himself he hardly knew he had, or which he's creating on the spot. Finally, he

You are what you are in online worlds, whether they have high poly-counts or just a Telnet connection.

accomplishes the goal of his long quest, and returns home with new knowledge of himself, a person changed by the roles he took on during his adventure.

To me, this is an apt and enlightening description of what happens to a person in a virtual world. It doesn't necessarily happen on a conscious level, of course. But if you're open to it and you're lucky, you may notice the manner in which you make your way through *World of Warcraft* is bleeding over into how you make your way in the physical world.

I've seen it in myself, at any rate. I am a person who is not very quick to action. I deliberate, I weigh my choices, I decide what the right course of action is - and then I still can't make up my mind. But in Azeroth and *EVE*, among other virtual places, I've found that mode of adventuring doesn't work very well. There's a right moment to strike, and if I miss it I find myself at a real disadvantage. So, I've had to tailor my persona in *World of Warcraft*, to look for the moment and strike without hesitation. Maybe I get it wrong

sometimes and I die as a result, but the results overall have been good.

What's been interesting is to watch that persona creep into the person I am offline. I've hardly undergone a deep psychological change as a result of paying Blizzard my hard-earned $15 a month. But I do find I've been arguing with myself less over the right course of action, and simply taking the plunge more often. What's curious is that it brings on the same sensation I described at the beginning of this piece, something

akin to a little cheer, and then the thought: Who was that?

In both cases, whether online or off, the answer is the same: It was me.

[COMMENTS]

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

And here you were thinking the point was to level as **fast** as possible so you could get your **hands** on all that awesome **loot**.

THE CONTRARIAN: Masks in the Woods

by John Tynes

They'd gamed together before, this group. I'd never met them until that night. They were veteran tabletop roleplayers, passionate about their characters and their methods. So when Gantry threw Douglas against the wall and then fastened his hands around Douglas's throat, choking him, I decided to trust that they knew what they were doing.

They did. It was fine. But it took your breath away to watch all the same. Later, when Gantry announced he was now going to murder Douglas, chasing his desperate, half-mad victim outside into the consensually imagined rain, putting the gun to the back of his head, even he was just as riveted as the rest of us when Douglas, still in the throes of a hallucinatory flashback to his damaged childhood, sobbed out his sister's name and pleaded for her to stop hurting him, his tormentors now interchangeable. Even that stone killer, cold-blooded Gantry, the bully, lowered the gun and led Douglas back inside the lonely farmhouse, satisfying himself with simply handcuffing the weeping man to the

couch instead of blowing his brains out. Which made it all the harder to listen to Douglas plead with him not to handcuff him there, not to leave Pfeiff, the blond woman with no tongue, in charge of guarding him. She'll kill me, he cried.

When Gantry left, she did. She slipped the knife into Douglas's heart and that was that. Douglas was dead, murdered by the woman who in real life was his girlfriend. But tonight, she was Pfeiff and Pfeiff never said a word, and Gantry never realized, but she was the scariest and craziest one of them all.

Pfeiff usually was. Even when Pfeiff was a man.

In the space of two years, in one anonymous hotel room after another, I gathered four people together to play a game. I did it 37 times. The game was *In Media Res*, and it was a tabletop roleplaying adventure loosely related to Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu*. From convention to convention, weekend after weekend, I ran this scenario repeatedly. It only takes about 90 minutes. Each

player receives a jumpsuit with a last name, an identification number and a patch reading "Liberty Center for the Criminally Insane."

They begin the game standing around a table on which lies sprawled the bloody corpse of a prison guard. One of them says a strange, mystical phrase while holding the flesh of the guard's face over his own, a moist mask. A Rorschach blot is painted on the wall in the guard's blood. None of the players have any idea who they are or what is going on. Suddenly the player who read the line coughs and spits something onto the table: A human tongue, taken from the dead prison guard along with his face, supernaturally allowing Pfeiff, a mute, to speak an occult rite. Knowing all this and no more, the players glance at each other nervously. Then, I would say, "What do you do?"

The very first time I ran *In Media Res* and asked that question, the player playing Morgan shot the player playing Douglas in the head seven seconds later. The game was off to a promising start, and one of my most memorable journeys through roleplaying began.

My goal with *In Media Res* was to make a cinematic thriller, one that would heavily tax the players' appetites for roleplaying. With no more than a brief sketch of their personalities, I dropped the players into the deep end of the pool, and they had to figure out who they were, what was going on, where their memories had gone and how to best flee from the farmhouse where they were hiding out after a prison break. The Rorschach blot on the wall meant something different to each character, and in the right circumstances it could trigger a flashback sequence. I would lead the player into the hotel bathroom, close the door and then guide them through a very intense memory of the first time they ever killed someone - the day they became who they are. It was after this flashback, when Douglas remembered his sister binding and torturing him when their parents were out of town, that Gantry chased him into the rain intending to finish him off.

Of all the players who ever went through *In Media Res*, that group was something special. They jumped into their characters with everything they had, cut loose with their emotions, got very physical with each other and improvised

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their parts to the fullest. Even when they did things that frightened me, like when Gantry started choking Douglas, I could tell they were in control. They weren't just roleplaying. They were **acting**, and it was something to see.

When Gantry was about to shoot Douglas and Douglas let out that plaintive wail to his long-gone sister, the moment was electric. My whole body seemed to vibrate with the emotion, chills rippling across my skin. I'd never been in the presence of that kind of power - except in real life.

After seeing dozens of Gantries and Douglases and Pfeiffs and Morgans struggling to understand themselves and each other, lashing out in violence or in guilt, running that scenario at game

A human being emoting three feet from you is a very different experience than a human being emoting in text messages...

conventions I can't even name anymore, it's really hard for me to take online-game "roleplaying" seriously. In my experience, very few games have really progressed past the point of "Blue Elf is about to die!" or "Warrior needs food badly!" When *Brothers in Arms* included a voiceover by your character where he freaks out and starts screaming and sobbing about how his best friend died at the hands of those stinking Nazis, I felt only mild embarrassment for the actor who had to perform that stuff, as if someone at a cocktail party broke down and revealed his infidelity to complete strangers. It wasn't moving, it was just awkward, and that's about as good as it gets in this field.

Yet, people try. If the game-makers can't do it, maybe the game-players can. The truth about *In Media Res* is my hands were tied. As gamemaster, I gave all the power to the players. There were no NPCs, not until the very end, so there wasn't much for the gamemaster to do in that scenario, except describe the location and answer questions. That game was only as good as the players, and they certainly weren't all good. But when they were good, the game was great.

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Is that possible in online gaming? Can good players make a great game? It certainly isn't easy. A human being emoting three feet from you is a very different experience than a human being emoting in text messages interspersed with notices like, "You hit the Large Sand Crab for 5 points!" or "Cleric 5 LFG!!!!"

There are a lot of guilds out there for online games, and many of them advertise a roleplaying focus - or RP, as it's known. They're often very passionate on the subject, at least in message boards where they write stories about their characters or pass the time at work roleplaying conversations. They have their controversies, too, such as the degree of IC vs. OOC gameplay. IC means "In Character" and OOC means "Out Of Character," and RP guilds frequently have guidelines for how and when you use each form of text messaging. One guild might demand all chat on the guild channel be IC, while another uses guild chat for OOC and local or group chat for IC.

A good example of a typical RP guild is the Black Moon Tribe, on *World of Warcraft*'s Emerald Dream RP-PvP server. The Tribe primarily consists of trolls organized in a sort of religious cult dedicated to kicking the Alliance out of Stranglethorn Vale, the ancestral troll homeland. Their most recent game event, the Rite of the Black Moon, saw the guild gather amid ancient troll ruins. There, members had the opportunity to advance in rank, celebrate, pray to the spirits and even duel the leaders to take control of the guild. Rite screenshots are oddly moving, as the tribe kneels before its leader, who proclaims they have now returned to their ancestral home.

Their in-game RP exploits sound fun, as in this example I heard from Sahn'Jin, Dark Elder of the Tribe:

"A few months back, one of the guild officers had an extended absence and was unable to communicate with us. When it came time to have our internal duels for leadership, known as the Rite

of the Black Moon, we decided to let someone else take his officer spot. He returned shortly after and roleplayed that the tribe had betrayed him and was slowly dueling certain members he faulted for the loss of his position. Out-of-character, everything was fine and he understood the decision."

The Tribe speaks in character for all forms of in-game chat, other than the guild channel. "We do this not only to enhance our own playing experiences," Sahn'jin says, "but because when those around you see you RP, it triggers a natural urge to do so as well ... a domino effect."

Fittingly for a medium whose primary mode of expression is text messaging, however, the lengthiest roleplaying efforts seem to be put forth on message boards. In this lengthy thread, for example, Black Moon Tribe members collaborate on a story in which they meet at a tavern, get drunk and have some fun. It's difficult to imagine even this straightforward exercise existing in any useful way in the game, where facial expressions and gestures cannot very effectively be tied in with text messaging - let alone the inability of the game to provide you with a new character entering the scene at a dramatic moment as a plot twist. The control over narrative and expression that RPers clearly crave just doesn't exist in the game, and so they divert their energies to this kind of writing.

Tabletop game designer Robin Laws has a term for this sort of thing: "closet drama." In gaming books, closet drama is the endless backstory nobody but the gamemaster is ever really going to know. A tabletop game might have 18 centuries of heroes, villains and legends, but there's little chance players in the game will ever glimpse more than a fraction of it at the weekly dungeon crawl. It's just reading material for the gamemaster, slathered on thick. That Black Moon Tribe thread was written over the course of 16 days by several different players. Will it come up in their online play at all? Or is it just closet drama, inaccessible to anyone in the game who doesn't also read the forum? RP guilds are often divided this way, their energies neither wholly in the game nor in the forums. At their web site, they play passionate, engaged characters who face life head on. In the game, they assiduously level up and quest for loot.

This split between what RPers want and the reality the game gives them makes me sad. I wish they could have their stories and tell them, too. They do their best. But game companies haven't shown much interest in innovating tools for RP.

But you know what really makes me sad? The Order of Mithril Twilight.

I ran across their website while researching RP guilds in *World of Warcraft*. The melancholy music, the animated scrolls, the devotion to a higher cause - it all adds up to something rather nifty. This group of

holy warriors has extensive histories and gospels explaining the story of their guild and Lady Twilight, in whose memory they quest against the undead. As I read through page after page of what was admittedly closet drama, I got more and more curious about who these people were and what their gameplay was like.

Then, after spending a while prowling through their writings, I clicked the Forum link to see what the discussion was like. And I found this cryptic message:

Board Offline
A note is attached to the wall: "Turn back! Warning to all ye who seek The Order Of Mithril Twilight. Plague has besieged the Order. With my dying breath, I write these words of warning for any who venture this way. Our fallen brethren, The Mithril Twilight Legion, was too strong for those few of us remaining. They have --"

The letter ends with no other information. Perhaps you should seek out the Mithril Twilight Legion for more information.

A link led me to the Mithril Twilight Legion's website. There, I learned the Order of Mithril Twilight had gained a splinter sect, the Mithril Twilight Legion. The Legion was an evil group of fallen members who had become the undead they used to fight. Now, the two guilds fought against each other, each attempting to persuade the other of their supremacy. The Legion's site had more of the strange, mystical texts, positing a sort of inverse set of lore to that of Lady Twilight. But according to the note on the Order's web site, the Legion had won and the Order was gone forever.

I was deep into closet drama at this point. But I was hooked. What happened next? A forum posting on the Legion's web site made it painfully clear:

"And All That Was Mithril Is Dead: Well, Mithril Twilight Legion is no more. We have merged into The Shatter Scar Clan."

And that was that. Both the Order of Mithril Twilight and the Mithril Twilight Legion were defunct. This whole journey I'd just taken through their lore was for nothing. The Order vs. Legion war had ended before it ever really started. This grand and glorious foundation, which seemingly could have launched years of RP, had all gone to ruin.

What happened? For that answer, I interviewed Endsong, founder of the guild and creator of the Order's website, and Kalis, who led the guild in its latter days through the merger with the Shatter Scar Clan. In the process, I got a look at what an RP guild goes through in pursuit of its dream.

Endsong started the guild in mid-2003 after playing various MMOGs from *Ultima*

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Online forward. He researched the *Warcraft* setting from previous games and began to build his concept of a holy order fighting the undead. This led to his experiments in writing fiction, and then to teaching himself Flash, Photoshop and Painter for purposes of making the site he imagined.

As *WoW* went through beta, the Order and some other RP guilds in the *World of Warcraft* Roleplaying Association decided to settle on a player vs. player server. The choice was somewhat arbitrary because the game's developer, Blizzard, hadn't designated any servers as being RP-specific.

Another choice Endsong and the guild made in beta had to do with the theme and characters of the guild:

"Having been in the *WoW* Beta program, I knew how strong the Paladins were against the Forsaken and how vanilla they were against everything else. In the Beta, the Forsaken was the one race that was difficult for the Alliance players to fight, due to their special racial abilities. However, when a Paladin and Holy Priest teamed up against a larger number of Forsaken players, they became a force to

be reckoned with. I foresaw that our RP guild could have special RP roles to play in PvP to counter the advantage of the Horde by being anti-undead (Forsaken) specialists."

This backfired. Well after the Order was established, Blizzard changed the game design to revamp Paladins, making them much less effective against the Forsaken. Conventional wisdom soon coalesced that having more than one Paladin in your party was "inefficient" - that great tyranny of MMOGs - and although the guild did their best, they were stuck with a class whose focus had changed in an unexpected way. As Endsong says, "Blizzard took away our principle advantage and role in PvP and gave us nothing else, so it became frustrating for many of our members … we were an RP-PvP guild without much of the PvP."

Eventually, Blizzard created a server that was both PvP and RP. The guild took a vote and chose to move to that server. But, faced with starting new characters from scratch, Endsong and the guild devised a plan. They would split the guild into good and evil schisms, essentially PvPing against themselves to ensure thematically appropriate

From the outset, though, the new incarnation was doomed.

opposition and better RP. New lore was devised and they made their new characters.

From the outset, though, the new incarnation was doomed. Few players stuck with the original Order, most preferring to switch to the Legion, since playing on the Horde side was still a novelty. Endsong got too busy with life and work to stick with the guild and drifted away. Kalis and other guild leaders finally took control without him. "I'm not disappointed," he says of this period. "I always told them any guild that has to rely on one person to succeed doesn't deserve to succeed." But Endsong's absence left the guild rudderless too long, and members wandered off to do their own thing. By the time Kalis was in charge, the Order of Mithril Twilight was gone. Only the Legion remained, but it too was weakened. When another guild, the Shatter Scar Clan, came knocking, the few remaining members voted to move

over. Indeed, as Kalis wrote, "all that was Mithril is dead."

There is no golden age here. There's just another group of players who tried to tell some stories and couldn't bend the tools to their will. The tools even made things harder in some cases - as in the contentious area of IC vs. OOC chat.

Endsong says the guild started with local chat being in character. But more and more members switched to using voice communication via TeamSpeak. If you thought roleplaying online via text messages was a challenge, try it with a headset. In theory, sure; your voice is a much better medium for expressing emotion. Yet, how many players really feel comfortable trying to summon up dialogue like, "By the Black Sword of Thundril, I shall smite these Alliance scum!" An afternoon on Xbox Live! will make it clear that voice chat in online games mostly means you can use profanity without getting banned.

The guild tried limiting voice communication only to combat, so as to encourage incidental roleplaying in chat. But that didn't work. Guild members soon argued with guild members over

the importance and methods of RP, and ultimately nobody was overjoyed with the situation.

I say there is no golden age here. But there was, or so Endsong believes:

"I think the closest game that had satisfying RPing in it was *Ultima Online* in its early years. There was so much of the game that was a blank slate for the player. Empires were created, wars were initiated and personal drama was common. Unfortunately, *UO* decided to take away its most unique aspect and irrevocably changed it."

You hear this refrain a lot from long-time players who pine for the early days of *Ultima Online*. But these are the cards the game-makers have dealt us: level grinds, TeamSpeak and no tools for storytelling. It's like the old line about a falling tree. If a player feels an emotion in a game but can't express it to anyone else, did he really feel anything at all?

The RPers keep trying. Shatter Scar is assembled from the wreckage of a half-dozen or more guilds, their members not willing to give up. The Black Moon Tribe holds their rites and their troll dance
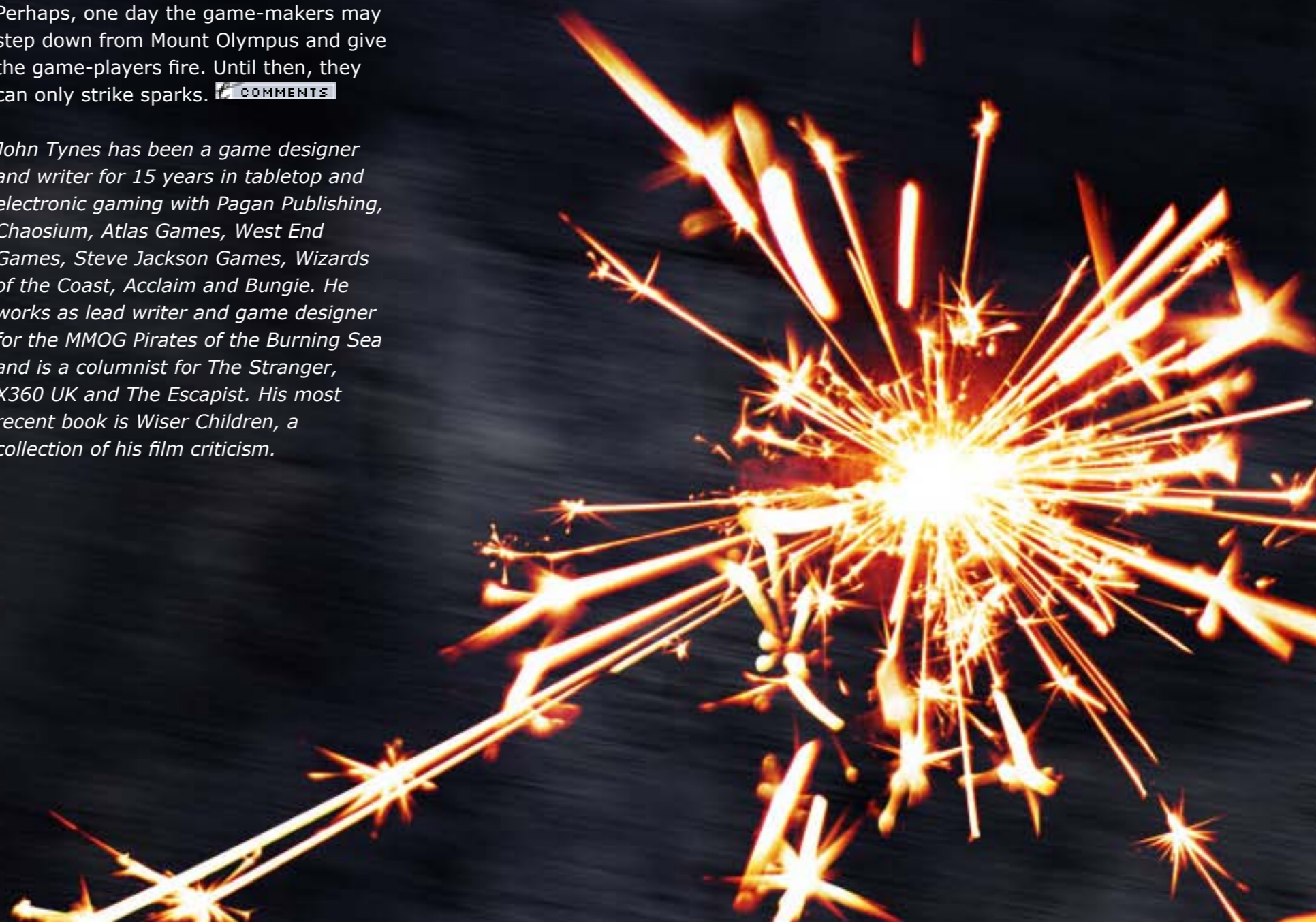
parties. Even Endsong isn't done. He has started a multi-year project to build a new guild for *Warhammer Online*. With the game far from beta, he has loads of time to build a new web site, write some more closet drama and recruit a new band of enthusiasts ready for another go.

The saga of Lady Twilight, her Order, and the Legion that destroyed it but then died itself, will never really be told. It's just another story that doesn't have an ending, a myth whose gods have died leaving only their dreams behind. We can uncover their ancient runes, for a while, and see what they built. We can examine the primitive tools they left, make suppositions about behaviors and conflicts, and extend the specific into the general as we look at the many other tribes out there attempting to roleplay with the digital equivalent of Stone Age technology.

One thing is certain. On October 10th, 2007, the domain MithrilTwilight.com will expire unless Endsong renews it out of nostalgia. The flood will come and extinguish all traces of this lost culture. Highways will go through the land, burying the remains under asphalt.

Perhaps, one day the game-makers may step down from Mount Olympus and give the game-players fire. Until then, they can only strike sparks. COMMENTS

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

I enjoy playing a Girl

by Chris Dahlen

About half of the women you see in *World of Warcraft* are actually played by men. Nick Yee's Daedalus Project came up with this number last July, and anecdotally, it seems about right. But, take a step back into the real world and ask yourself: Why is it so common? How would you explain to your grandparents why so many guys - given a free and clear choice of either gender - choose to pretend they're girls?

Some say certain classes and races, and the avatars Blizzard designed, work better as women than as men. Others give the "nice butt" defense, arguing if you're going to stare at a rear end all the way up to level 60, it might as well be a woman's. But I don't buy that; I have to believe any serious gamer would rather roleplay their characters than ogle them. Your avatar is your interface to the game, the vessel other players speak with, tend to and fight alongside, and I can't imagine making one just to leer at it.

I'm also speaking from experience. See, I enjoy playing a girl.

I tell people I have two characters in *World of Warcraft*, a (macho) undead Warlock and a (pretty, but no-nonsense) female human Paladin. I like to say I just happen to play the Paladin more often, or I made her a woman because of the Joan of Arc thing. But the truth is, I play the female character far, **far** more often. The Warlock's pretty much a beard. And while I'm putting my cards on the table, I'll tell you, more often than not, I play female characters in the privacy of single-player RPGs, as well.

I'm not saying I'm especially gifted at thinking or acting like a woman. Here's how I impersonate a girl in *Warcraft*: I chat more legibly, but capitalize less often. I don't say things like, "Oh duude, I was pwned – that suxored." And one time, I spent a whole night of my gaming time looking around for the right shirt to match my hair. But that's about it.

Of course, most roleplaying games avoid any distinctions between the sexes. In combat, skills, spellcraft and every other piece of gameplay, women and men have the same experiences and the

same brains and muscles. We've come a long way from *Ultima II*, where male characters got a +5 Strength bonus while women got +10 Charisma, but we've also lost any sense that gender would impact your life. In the real world, women are shaped by experiences I can't imagine: Even if I felt like throwing on a dress and trying to pass as the other sex, I wouldn't have one clue about how to do it. For all our assurances that men and women have the same talents and potential, treating them exactly the same feels like ducking an issue, rather than leveling a playing field. So, you'd think an MMOG would find some way to tap into this, to set the sexes apart even as much as dwarves and gnomes. But, the differences are largely cosmetic.

As I psychoanalyze myself, I'd have to say my first reason for switching gender isn't to become a woman, but to not be myself. When I roleplay as a guy, I start with the way I see myself and project that into a 60-foot-tall caricature - and it never comes out the way I want. I keep asking myself: Am I the noble hero? A backstabbing thief? An insecure wisecracker? Do I want to be an alpha male, and if not, does that make me a wimp? Some people roleplay to learn about themselves, but personally, I want to take a break from myself – and playing a girl puts me in far more neutral territory.

Also, with so many guys – especially teenage guys – clogging MMOGs, it's refreshing to switch gender. Many people who play as girls report other players, both male and female, become more approachable and friendlier around women - even when you don't factor in the flirting. That suits me; I'm more comfortable in the middle of a group, helping the stragglers or making suggestions to the leader. In real life, I've worked as a project manager; PMs communicate and moderate, and even when they set the course, they do it by consensus. Traditionally, that management style is associated with women.

But there's one other factor. We often talk about guys who imitate girls as if they have a fetish, or they're giving up status to explore this new identity. But the truth is, girls are cooler. In fact, much like nerdy suburbanites who wish

With so many guys - especially teenage guys - clogging MMOGs, it's refreshing to switch gender.

they were urban gangstas, some of us think girls are way cooler – and for reasons I can't put my finger on, it's awesome to watch them kick ass.

The archetypical male heroes, from the big blonde swordsmen to the plucked-from-obscurity, chosen-by-fate losers, have gotten old. But the age of *Buffy* and *Veronica Mars* has just started, and they make much more exciting heroes. Geek guys don't look up to the high school quarterbacks that smacked us in the locker room; we're more impressed by the complicated but confident geek girls, who actually talked to us in the library and always seemed more sure of themselves than the rest of school, no matter who teased them. And now they can slay giants. Who wouldn't want to be one of them?

As a man pretending to be one of these giant killers, what do I owe other players? Although I don't try to hide my identity, I also don't bring it up. And at first, I actually thought it would be a non-issue: Partly thanks to Whitney

Butts' essay, "OMG Girlz Don't Exist on teh Intarweb!!!!1" I didn't even think anyone would expect that game girls are real girls. But it's not always that simple.

Early on in the game, I landed in a group with a couple of other players, and I struck up a conversation with one of the players - a handsome, burly night elf. We had fun killing gnolls, and we added each other to our "Friends" lists. Thing was, the next few times I logged in, I noticed this guy would say hello almost immediately – wherever he was, and whatever he was doing. Then, I got a message through the game's mail system, saying hello and asking why I haven't been around lately. He also included a chunk of change as a "gift," and he signed it with his character's name, but also his real-life name – trying to lower the veil a little on his own character, as it were, and ask for a peek behind mine.

I had to give him the brush-off, but what would be the best way to do it? Come clean and tell him I'm a dude? Or would

that embarrass or bother him? And anyway, why should I have to break character? Do other people admit that in real life they're shy, or short, or don't really have an English accent? I don't tell people where I live, what I drive or what I do to pay the rent, so why would I tell everyone I'm a guy? I didn't put in this much time as a chick to ditch my skirt for every chucklehead with a schoolboy crush.

So I settled for a compromise: I shot him a letter, returning the money he had given me, and making small talk about how little time I've had to play – because I have a kid eating up my time in the real world. And I left it at that. Maybe he thinks I'm a MILF, but hey, if he wants to dream about somebody's mom, that's his fantasy. And who am I to criticize?

`COMMENTS`

Chris Dahlen is a freelance writer for Pitchforkmedia.com, the Boston Phoenix, Signal to Noise, Paste, and The Wire (New Hampshire). His website is Save The Robot.

ROLEPLAYER in Azeroth

by Will Hindmarch

CRPGs aren't RPGs. I'm a snob about this, always have been.

To me, *Knights of the Old Republic* was a complex adventure game with too many chances to make character advancement choices I'd regret later, not an RPG. The story was fun, but the longest, most difficult route through any satisfying narrative is a CRPG. I thought it was the illusion of freedom on the road through a fixed story that bothered me — I would rather have watched *KOTOR* than play it — but *Morrowind* proved me wrong. For all its freedom, I was bored.

In comparison, one game that feels like an RPG to me, but isn't, is the fantastic *Thief: The Dark Project* . Its castles and cityscapes are like miniature solo dungeon crawls . Its grim, creepy world is as immersive as an RPG adventure should be. Its gameplay makes me think and feel like someone else, like I'm playing a role, not just steering a themed avatar around a map.

Like a lot of roleplayers, I started with *Dungeons & Dragons*. My first exposure to the game was the night before I started middle school, at a friend's sleepover birthday party. His dad ran the game for four of us: his son, a quiet kid who lived down the street from us, a loud-mouthed smart-aleck with a Luke Skywalker haircut who harassed me at school (I'll call him Miles) and me.

D&D wasn't the beginning of my geekhood by any stretch, and Miles passed the time at school by using my geekiness to make fun of me. (Also, I was a spaz, so he found me to be easy work.) He was a funny guy, really, but cruel. If I'd known he was going to be at the party, I probably would've stayed home, 'cause who wants to be the butt of a sleepover? But I didn't know, so that night, I ended up sitting on my friend's floor with the old "red box" books , rolling up my first Fighter.

Miles played a Fighter, too. I was swords, he was maces. I was plate armor, he was chainmail. By the end of that night's adventure, though, we were battling giant scorpions back-to-back and working together to lure out and vanquish a minotaur.

In all honesty, we were barely playing *D&D*. It was what the modern RPG player might call "rules light": ability checks, attack rolls and damage were the only game mechanics we used. It was a game of problem solving and play-acting, not THAC0 . I didn't even learn about leveling up until the next session, when I took my first turn as dungeon master (DM). Sure, now I get off on game rules and genre emulation, too, but they're not the undertow that pulled me into this sea. It's the real-time

interface of imaginations I love, the interaction between DM and PCs, between the Storyteller and the players. That's what makes an RPG what it is.

The undeniable flaw in my definition, of course, is I'm outnumbered. Millions of people played *KOTOR* and called it an RPG. Am I just being contrary to flaunt my snobbery? Not on purpose. CRPGs just don't deliver what I play RPGs to get — instantly gratifying escapism in a room with friends. But if the rest of the

planet agrees that any game in which a PC advances over time is an RPG, is that what an RPG is?

In theory, MMORPGs capture the true spirit of table-top RPGs by granting players the freedom to roam a fantasy world and interact with a vast cast of ever-changing characters. This is, in many ways, what *D&D* promised back in the day (and what it challenged the DM to deliver). *World of Warcraft* delivers this with a clean focus. Floon Beetle,

Lead Production Artist on *Lord of the Rings Online* supposes interaction between players puts the RP in MMORPG. It's hard to disagree. Yet these games don't really capture the crackling improvisational power of a great table-top RPG session. So, what do they do? I had to find out, which meant I had to play an MMORPG longer than it took me to get sick of killing rats in *EverQuest*.

Like a lot of people, my first MMORPG (for keeps) was *World of Warcraft*.

Millions of people played *KOTOR* and called it an RPG. Am I just being contrary to flaunt my snobbery?

World of Warcraft doesn't deliver what I play RPGs to get, but it delivers what I often get when I play RPGs.

Exploring it over the past few weeks has had me questioning my definitions. The game is instant fun. It instantly delivers the simple joy of killing monsters and taking their stuff. It expertly grants the ancient thrill of exploring a fantastic land and meeting its people. And it does all this without tasking a DM with number-wrangling and paper-herding. Nice.

My gut reaction: It's still not an RPG. The immediate interaction between the Storyteller and the player is missing. My secret confession: I don't care, I'm having fun. My sudden epiphany: It's an RPG.

I found it in the interaction of the players in my guild. Like many RPG players, they were gathered together because they each wanted to play the g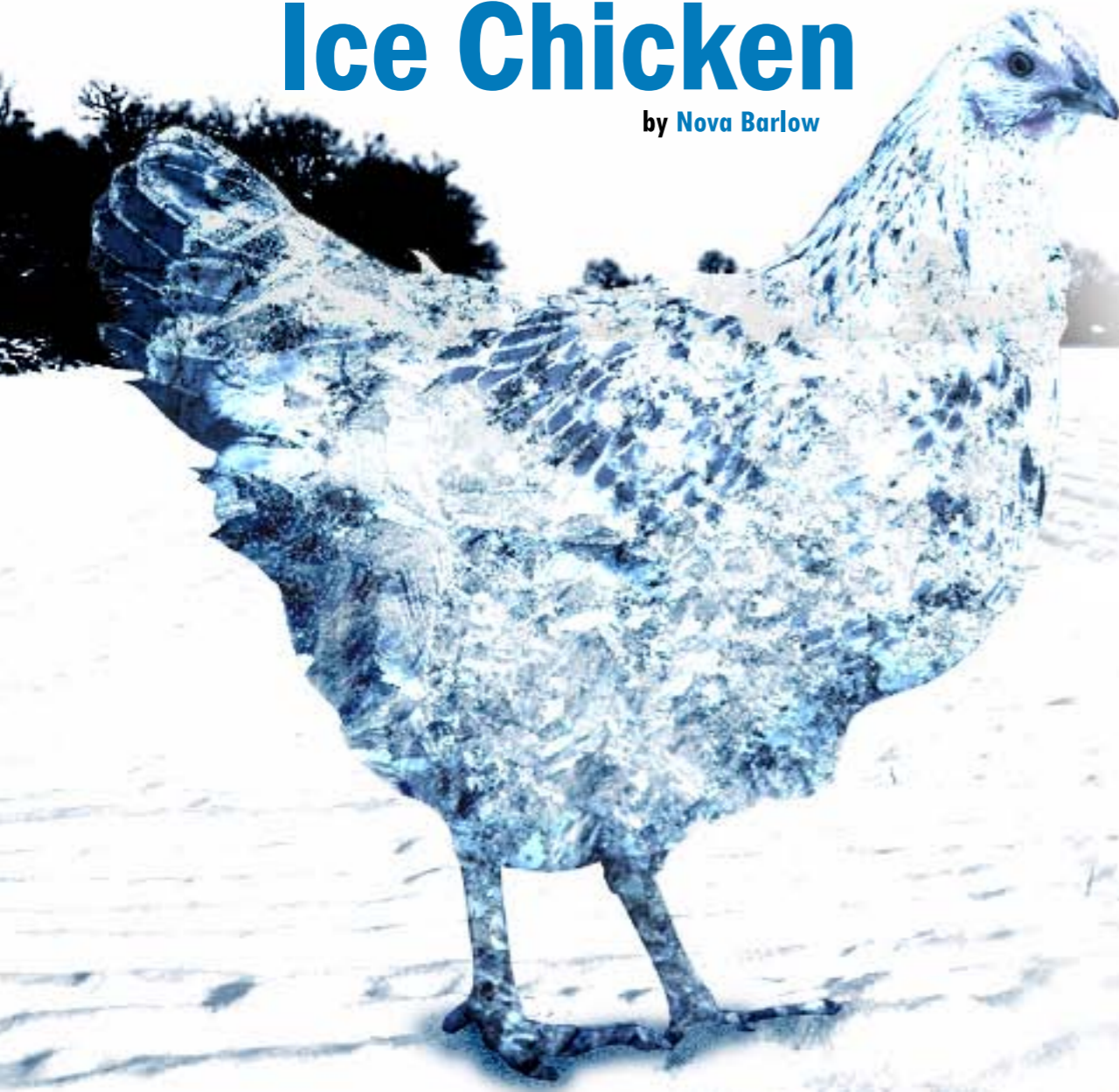ame, to advance their characters and imagine dramatic adventures, but conversations often turned away from the game and to '80s movies or stories from work. Players wandered off when they felt like it to do their own thing. They got together to chat as much as to play.

So, here's the thing: *World of Warcraft* doesn't deliver what I play RPGs to get, but it delivers what I often get when I play RPGs. It doesn't scratch the same itch as a table-top RPG, but it's close. Now, after I get home from my table-top games, I stay up too late and play online. If you want to group up and chat about *Aliens* or *The Temple of Doom*, I'm about to start a new human Paladin alt. I'll call him Myels. **COMMENTS**

Will Hindmarch is new at this. He is also the developer for Vampire: The Requiem at White Wolf Game Studio.

Remember the
Ice Chicken

by Nova Barlow

The year: 1999. The game: *Ultima Online*. The place: Moonglow Lycaeum. The event: A lecture, designed to provide some information related to a quest which, by that point had been running for a few months. I was a Seer, the *UO* equivalent of a supernatural bard, given the spotlight by Origin to draw players into game lore, and generally encourage people to roleplay.

That night, I stepped out of the Seer's mysterious green robe and into my favorite role - the Lycaeum's most famous professor, ready to spin a tale to a crowded room. The event was designed to spread information, yes, but then we would "surprise" the players with an attack by monsters "from the great and dangerous northern lands." The usual creatures were on that night's playbill: frost trolls, wyrms, poisonous ice serpents. Everybody would be happy – the hardcore, information-hungry roleplayers would be satisfied by the story I was telling, and the people who just loved to show up and crush enemy hordes would have a turn, as well. It was a textbook case of a good event.

Then, things changed. Behind the scenes, we were watching the players

fighting, then someone said, "What if … ?" someone else said, "Sure!" and suddenly, right there in the middle of all the other deadly creatures …

… an ice blue chicken with superhuman strength appeared.

The players were stunned. In fact, the action paused momentarily, but once the shock passed, the action picked up right where it left off. Some even laughed - even after they fell to the chicken. After fighting in scattered fashion and barely holding its own at some points in the battle, the group realized they needed to work together fast or get pwned by a fleet of chickens and its icy leader. They rose to the challenge admirably.

Behind the scenes, things were understandably merry, and I was impressed by how things turned out. It had been a long evening, and it was getting late by the time the attack finally ended, but people hung around to talk about how events unfolded, even those that had just been called in as backup from the ranks of instant messenger. That night, the players had new information to process and faced an unexpected challenge, and still went

right along with the turn of events, speculating about the "unusual tactics" of a now very unpredictable enemy force. Everyone had a great time, and a "good event" became memorable in an instant.

By this point in time, I had been running large-scale events for a while, so I was clearly not a newbie. However, it was at that precise moment in the event, when the chicken appeared, when something became clear to me: Don't take everything so seriously.

Over the years, I would learn this lesson time and time again. I needed that knowledge. In fact, many people call me a "hardcore roleplayer" because I won't break character in a room full of non-roleplayers to get my point across. But in that one instant, it sunk in – it's OK to laugh, and in fact, it's encouraged. Now, I always try to take a moment whenever I'm running an event to remind anyone helping: If we're not having fun, people are going to notice. Go have fun out there (just not at someone else's expense). Remember the ice chicken! Immersion is good, but at the end of the day, if it isn't fun for someone else, what's the point? Running online events

is definitely not about the person writing the event; it's about the audience and what they bring to the virtual stage. It's about interaction and roleplaying. Otherwise, there's really no point. If I want total control over something, I'll write a novel. The rest of the time, I'll run events.

The next thing I learned was the plan can always change. In fact, if there isn't room in the original plan for change, rewriting the plan before it ever sees another person is not only well-advised, but necessary. Yes, having a plan is part of the legendary, albeit not entirely tangible Event Runner's Code, in which everything you needed to know about running an event, from A-Z, and handling the inevitable press (good and bad) afterwards is covered.

Any "how to" only gets you so far on the virtual stage. If it's a good how to, it may cover the basics of what happens when the stage light falls on your fellow actor's head, suddenly taking them out of the action. Most often, you're just on your own with a reminder that calling an ambulance might be helpful. But it's up to you to learn to improvise, doubly so if there's no working phones to be had.

...something became clear to me: Don't take everything so seriously.

the Escapist

...everything the story touches develops meaning.

Most events don't quite go off as planned; some do, but those are exceptions rather than rules. Or, you may find, on occasion, the plan should be tossed out the window and a new one made - on the spot if necessary (and it often is). It's fine. Even when the ending is screwed up because of some game patch, and therefore has to be retooled, it really is possible to rearrange the steps from A to B. It honestly helps if you've read a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book at least once in your life.

The final lesson from the "ice chicken incident" was: Never underestimate your audience. Although it was illustrated in a very minor way then, I now realize it is the most important lesson of all.

An indecipherable code meant to last an entire day will most likely be solved in 10 minutes. Someone will always want to ally with "the villain" of the tale. The person you can always count on to share "vital secrets" with others will one day decide that *this* secret should remain so, and all the cooperation with other players you were banking on flies right out of the door. It doesn't matter if you have five alternate endings for an event (no joke) when something unexpected

happens ten minutes into the event that makes all of those endings fairly implausible and "more trouble than they're worth" to push into making happen. I learned to improvise constantly.

When people are so far immersed in a story, everything the story touches develops meaning. First, it was the feathers from an ice chicken. ("Grab the feathers! We should study them!") Years later, when I was running an event for another game, it was a bag of sugar in a space station, thought to contain deadly substances or vital clues to a mission. ("But why would he fixate on a bag unless it's **important**?") In fact, it was just something improvised by the person behind the scenes playing a government delegate being rescued. Sometimes it's a vital clue; sometimes it's just a bag of sugar. Who knows what it will be tomorrow? I can't wait to find out.

COMMENTS

Nova Barlow is the Research Manager for The Escapist and Playerbase Solutions. She is also a regular contributor to WarCry.

the Escapist

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Quest For Glory

by **John Walker**

There are conventions in media we become perfectly used to, despite their having no place in reality. If we watch a movie, and someone is given CPR in the street, on the beach or dangling on a rope from a hot air balloon, we know they'll come back to life. Nevermind that CPR merely sustains things until proper medical equipment arrives – we know, and accept, that with a couple of compressions and a few puffs in the mouth, they'll be up and about and back to shooting zombies in a couple of minutes.

All romantic comedies will end in life-lasting true love, and all soap operas will have a 100% relationship failure rate. All cops will announce, "There's no time for back up!" when they arrive at the scene of a crime, before being asked to hand in their gun and badge to the furious captain (what with the governor being in town) on a weekly basis. All aliens are bipedal, and of all the languages spoken on Earth, choose English. Shopping bags always contain a long stick of French bread. And if you bump into someone of the opposite sex carrying a large stack of files, you will fall in love while picking them up. These are truths.

Conventions require time. Videogames have finally reached an age where such imaginary stalwarts are becoming firmly established, most especially within roleplaying games.

The distinguishing feature of such behaviors is we don't stop to question them until they're starkly pointed out. We accept them, unconsciously suspending our disbelief, only noticing when some smart-ass comes along and says, "Why is it when men disguise themselves as women, they suddenly gain super-strength?" So tell me, why is it in every RPG I've ever played, complete strangers are perfectly happy to walk up to me and entrust their very most intimate and important needs to my charge?

Arriving in a new town for the very first time, dressed in a confused mishmash of brown leggings, a priestly robe, chain mail jerkin, leather gloves, three magic rings, a large amulet necklace and a pointed wizard's hat, any number of distraught mothers will approach me and beg that I find their missing children/husbands/swords. Perhaps, I might be walking around naked but for the scrap of cloth protecting my decency and a fine pair of kobold-hide boots, but this won't prevent the local baker from requesting that I take a magic cake to his colleague in a neighbouring town, or the grumpy old codger from barking at me that I should clear his basement of vampiric rats.

What are they thinking? Do they ask just anyone who walks past, and I'm the only one daft enough to stop and listen? And when, exactly, was the last time someone accosted you in the street and asked you to complete a quest for them?

I decided to put this to the test.

The plan: To take to the streets, dressed as a wizard, with a quest for the good peoples of Bath, England. Would they really help out a stranger with a strange beard? Would they even stop to listen? Is there any truth to this convention we've otherwise entirely accepted?
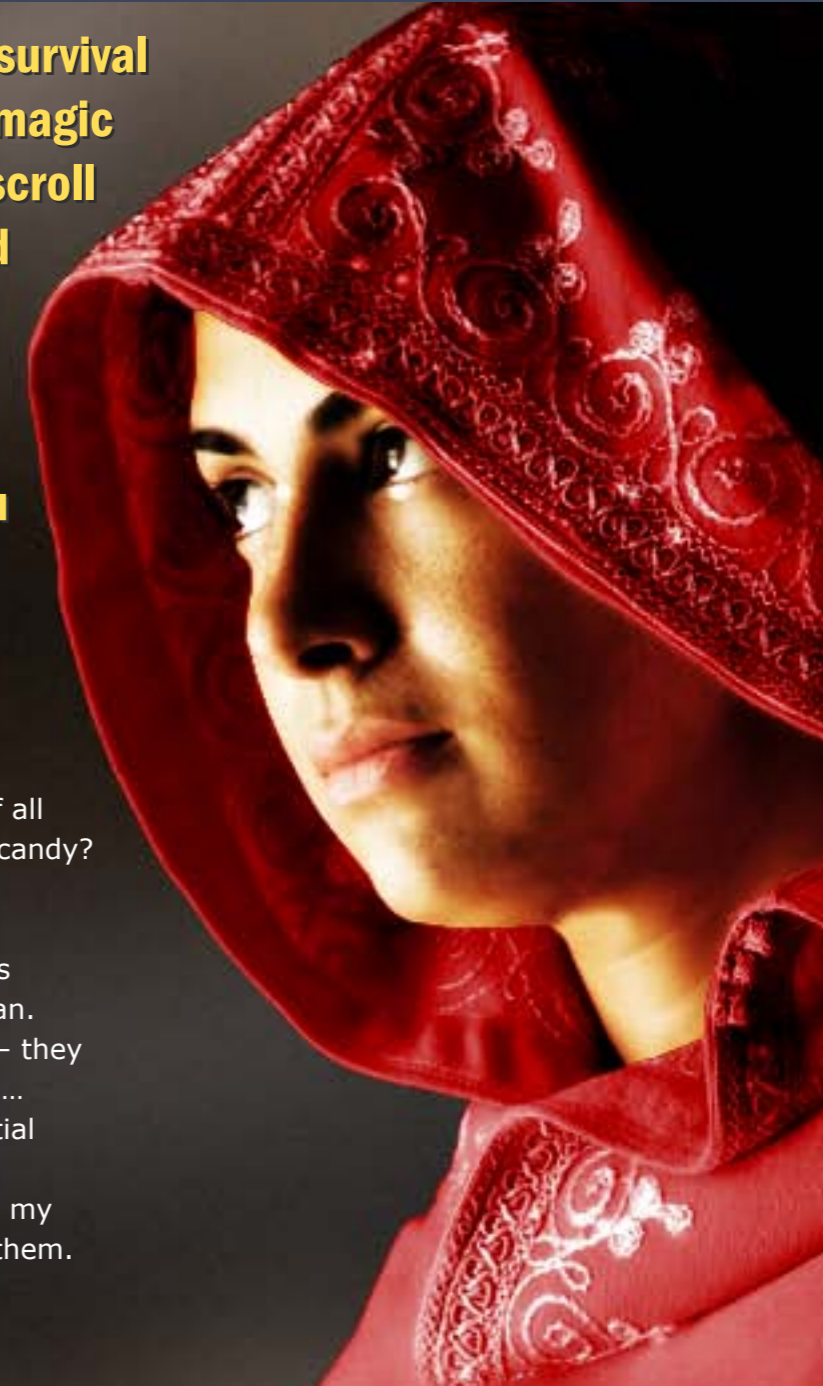
First of all, I should immediately get this out of the way: No one, at any point, approached **me** to ask for a quest. Short of suspending a yellow exclamation mark above my head, I'm not sure what more I could have done to attract the attention of any passing adventurers braving the cold thoroughfare through the centre of the town. If anything, people did their very best to avoid me, refusing eye contact, moving far away from my pleading face. It was already concerning.

I should explain the scenario. I, the brave wizard, had transferred through a portal into this dimension, but could not leave the spot on which I stood. It was imperative to the survival of the universe that the magic spell I held (a rolled up scroll of paper, engagingly tied with a purple ribbon) be given to the girl in the red cloak and hood, waiting outside what you humans call "the shoe shop," 300 yards down the road. Upon completion of this vital task, a bag of gold coins would be given as a reward. In my dimension, chocolate coins are of the very highest worth. Would anyone go out of their way

It was imperative to the survival of the universe that the magic spell I held (a rolled up scroll of paper, engagingly tied with a purple ribbon) be given to the girl in the red cloak and hood, waiting outside what you humans call "the shoe shop," 300 yards down the road.

for me, in order to be the savior of all mankind, for the prize of a bag of candy?

Things started off well. Almost immediately, a pair of teenage girls stopped to help a stranded magician. Laughing – mostly with confusion – they found it in their hearts to help out … once they glanced upon the potential reward. Taking the scroll, they immediately set off on their quest, my calls of good luck barely reaching them. By the time they had met my

companion, known as Chrissy, she was engaged in conversation with a friend who had happened to pass by. With surprise, she met the outthrust hands of the two girls, ready for the expected coins. Not quite the courageous attitude I might have hoped for, but the few coins were a paltry sum, just for the look of confusion on Chrissy-Red-Riding-Hood's friend's face when she nonchalantly turned to two strangers and exchanged gilded chocolate for a magic spell.

And then, things went a bit downhill.

Perhaps some blame for any disappointment should be laid at the feet of the innumerous others who attempt to garner money from innocent passers by. Whether the sideways-dancing collectors for charities, trained in trapping the innocent in conversation, or those wishing to sell anything from the Big Issue to car insurance, we have become quite adept at the entirely non-engaging

"No, thank you" accompanied by a sharply quickened pace. Rarely was I able to get through, "Would you be so kind as to help me with a quest?" before my targets were disappearing toward the horizon.

In this time of rejection, I did learn a few useful things, however.

1) Older people are much less likely to see the funny side of something, even when the safety of the universe is in the balance.

2) Couples are far better at avoiding the magically hindered than individuals.

3) Men with grey beards **really** don't like to be called, "fellow wizard." (Although, their wives are likely to find it funny.)

And then, hope was restored in the form of a man in his 40s. His reaction was certainly the most peculiar of the day. He resigned himself to helping me as if he **had** to. Could this man have been a true

adventurer? Someone who is aware of the demands of being a hero? Perhaps his acquiescent attitude was due to the low level of the quest, and the relatively poor reward for a man of such experience. But something about the simplicity of the task, and the accompanying XP, must have been enough.

Except that my companion reported never meeting him, let alone receiving the spell. I suspect that at the end of his day's adventuring he'll find the scroll at the bottom of his satchel, roll his eyes, and simply delete the quest from his list. He has dragons to be slaying.

Not long after, but long enough to receive a very convincing "f--- off" from one particularly surly gentleman, a couple eventually stopped once they realized this was an attempt to give coins, rather than take. Australian tourists, they were far more in the role of the visiting adventurer, and happily accepted the task with good humor.

Unfortunately, despite setting off with cheer in their hearts, they were unable to complete the quest. Spotted standing in the middle of an area of benches, looking around in confusion, yet somehow failing to spot the girl in the bright red hood, they unfurled the scroll, perhaps in desperation, only to discover, "This spell is destroyed by reading it." Their failure realized, they once again went about their exploration of this new zone.

Finally, after another extended period of angry glares, smart refusals and looks of utter horror, the universe was once more brought back from the brink by another pair of girls, this time in their 20s. Enthusiastic, they gladly accepted their task, did not question the story they were told and warmly accepted my heartfelt wishes of luck on their journey. Not only that, but upon arriving at their goal they explained why they were there, handed over the spell and modestly took their reward from the grateful hooded lady. They are champions. Your universe is safe in their hands.

What was learned? Against expectation, and while certainly in the minority,

people **are** willing to help a wizard in distress. Perhaps this RPG convention is not quite the farce once supposed by this cynical player. Or, maybe some people just feel sorry for the berk dressed in a silly costume on a freezing cold winter's day.

And if one thing should be taken from this experience, above anything else, should the fate of the universe ever be in your hands, only bother to seek the aid of girls under the age of 30. **COMMENTS**

John Walker is an occasional wizard, and frequent journalist, who when not throwing mysterious ingredients into a giant, smoking cauldron, writes about videogames for various magazines and websites.

Diseased

by Joe Blancato

I've never been much for roleplaying. Well, let me rephrase that: I've never been much for playing the roles assigned to me. When I was a kid playing cops and robbers, I was the dirty cop who'd shoot his backup and make off with the loot. School was worse; assignments became mere suggestions, springboards for better ideas to make projects entertaining, rather than informative. Trace my gaming career back far enough, and you'll find I've always performed a bit outside any conventional game's scope. If I wasn't trying repeatedly to injure opponents in *Madden*, I was careening around a virtual racetrack in reverse, trying to knock my friends out of the race.

When games went massive, my world exploded. Suddenly, rather than having to completely abandon a game's objective in order to have a good time, I could create my own fun however I liked. The "RP" in MMORPG (long-since abandoned by cynics and twice-bitten game designers) gave me carte blanche to blaze my own trail, tell a story of my own. If I tried hard enough, I could even leave a ripple in the world.

Unfortunately, it didn't quite work out. You see, I've always had trouble with in-game lore: It all reads like derivative fantasy schlock. There's a chosen one or two, maybe some slaves, a virtuous hero with a tendency to speak in passive voice, and some evil force ultimately up to thousands of players to defeat, despite the fact everything re-spawns five minutes after you kill it. I wasn't interested in being a part of that schlock. So any sort of conventional roleplaying just wouldn't do.

My misadventures began in *Ultima Online* where I quickly became a career murderer. I wasn't a griefer; I was just a victim of circumstance, time and time again. *UO*'s combat system was a bit wonky: If you attacked and killed an "innocent," you would be labeled a murderer, barring you from entering towns and leaving you freely attackable by other players. It makes sense in theory, but a lot of jerks hid behind that flag of innocence. Let's just say, for instance, you had a bad habit of attacking and killing jerks before they attacked you. Then, let's say you managed to do this around 500 times.

Well, I went through enough jerks to ensure I'd never see the inside of a city again.

My house was located just north of Britain, one of the game's larger cities, right near the Chaos shrine, one of the only static sites to allow murderers to resurrect. This was prime real estate for people in my situation, and other murderers gravitated to the area. However, with so many murderers in one area, bounty hunters were always circling the area like great white sharks around an Australian coral reef. These guys, "innocents" only because they were far more selective in how they killed other players, quickly became a problem for our small community of murderers, just trying to, well, exist in peace.

The way things were, it was unbearable. Troupes of bounty hunters would roll through the area, taking out solitary murderers just trying to mine or smith or hone their skills. I would have to sneak around my own house if I wanted to get anything done. I would watch as neighbors were senselessly cut down in a nearby alleyway. A community of hunters

had become the hunted – and that just was not acceptable.

I rounded up a few of my immediate neighbors, and inside my small tower, we hammered out a loose pact to turn the area into a safe zone, a network of homes protected by the community, a neighborhood watch. The community would protect the people who lived in the valley near the Chaos shrine, innocent or murderer. The rules were simple: Anyone who attacked a neighbor was fair game, but looting anything other than weapons or spell casting materials was prohibited.

We were ruthless, but with flare, like Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday in the last 45 minutes of *Tombstone*. We'd roll through the area on horseback, mowing down unsuspecting groups of bounty hunters not used to a fair fight. But, in some creepy sort of medieval arms race, the bounty hunters didn't run away; they came back with greater numbers. Some nights, we'd have 30 people camped outside a house, trying desperately to kill two of us.

Our little neighborhood quickly developed a reputation. We were "those

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PKs who killed my dragon," "those assholes who looted my sword," "a cool group of guys who hung out with me after we fought for an hour." As my love/hate relationship with *UO* had me quitting and re-subscribing on a bi-monthly basis, I found, each time I came back, that my enemies had missed me as much as my friends.

With each patch to the game, *UO*'s PvP-centric population gradually died out, and I eventually joined the exodus — permanently. But every once in a great while, I'll get an IM from an old friend - or enemy - hit by a bout of nostalgia and wanting to take a stroll down memory lane, to remember the neighborhood watch and the effect it had on hundreds of players for a few short months.

I can't help but wonder what role I was playing, there. I wasn't a race's last son. I wasn't a vampire space elf. I was a community leader. I assumed a role unknown to me in real life. It might have broken the roleplaying mold, but only because it was bigger, better.

I didn't stop at *UO*, though. That's only when my missions stopped being serious. Say what you will about *UO*, but it **forced** people to interact, something modern MMOGs have gone to great lengths to avoid. That's why they're games rather than worlds, and that's why Raoulduke and Doctorgonzo made an appearance in *World of Warcraft*.

A friend and I wanted to make undead Rogues, and we liked being zany almost as much as we liked plagiarism. And lo, Duke and Gonzo, tributes to characters from Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, were born.

We raced to level 30 and prowled around contested areas, spamming film dialogue across multiple conversation channels, to the delight (and occasional dismay) of spectators across the territory. Our victims, since they couldn't actually read the text we'd spew at them, never knew it, but the indecipherable gibberish coming out of out mouths as they lay dying at our feet was usually, "Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn

animals?" or, "Never turn your back on a Rogue, especially when he's waving a razor-sharp hunting knife in your eye."

On slow nights, we'd travel around at high speeds, shouting soliloquy across the world in loud parody of Thompson's writing style, telling a fractured story as we killed monsters for experience or snuck around looking for our next human quarry. Even death didn't stop us. If anything, the surrealistic notion of resurrection fit into our schtick.

We never broke out of character, at least in public, and people began to take notice. Nightly, I'd fend off tells from people quoting the movie, or Thompson's other works. I'd usually cryptically respond with a one-liner bitching about Nixon or Reagan. One guy we killed actually created a Horde character on another account, just to tell me what a joy it was to be killed by Raoul Duke and Doctor Gonzo.

As my attention span would have it, Duke quickly began to out-level me, and

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like a fat Samoan attorney at the end of a drug bender, it was time for me to move on. I broke the news to Duke gently, who went on to level 60 while I took an extended break, not planning to return to our previous romping grounds (and I never did, at least on that character.)

For a brief time, we had been larger than life, borrowing the legacy of a dead mad scientist to connect to others in a familiar, albeit immersion-breaking way.

But still, this wasn't roleplaying. If anything, it was low-level griefing; we were intentionally casting aside *WoW*'s back-story, disregarding how others felt about our actions, in the pursuit of a good time. Shouldn't roleplaying be dark and mysterious? Shouldn't we have fought against the Alliance, rather than making them part of our joke?

A few months ago, Blizzard announced they had created a new roleplaying server with a PvP ruleset. I was

intrigued; the roleplaying aspect would scare off most of the morons who are drawn to PvP for all the wrong reasons, but it was still possible for conflict to manifest physically. I still wasn't much of a roleplayer, but I could suffer a few "thees" and "thous" if it meant I didn't have to deal with guys typing in shorthand and making dick jokes. I still wasn't sure I'd make it back into the game, though. My love affair with *WoW* had ended as soon as I hit level 30, when it started to take hours, rather

than minutes, to accomplish much of anything.

But then, the goons came swooping in and stole my heart.

Some of the Something Awful goons who played *WoW* were interested in checking out one of the PvP-RP servers, but they really weren't interested in the game's lore. Instead, they suggested we form two crime families, Famiglias Mariano and Luigiano, one on the Horde side and

one on the Alliance. The plan was simple: The two families would collude in order to gain control over both factions' auction house. For instance, stuff deep in Alliance territory would be hard for a normal Horde character to get, but a member of the Mariano crime family could ask for assistance from a group of Luigianos to escort him to wherever he needed to be safely. From there, the Mariano could return home and sell the normally hard to get item for a high price.

In addition to running a racket on the auction house, other groups within the families would be available as hit men. If you had a problem with a player, be they on your side of the in-game lore war or not, all you had to do was put in a call to The Right People, and within a day, your vengeance would be enacted - for a price. There was also talk of a protection racket forming, and I had dreams of rolling up a gnome Warlock named Consigliere and running around alliance territory with a hulking minion in tow, warning low level players about how much it would suck if someone would continually train them over and over, then telling them how lucky they are a

guy like me was there to stop that from happening - and all I charged was one gold per hour.

So, when the time came to create new characters, I jumped right in. I decided I'd put Consigliere on the backburner in favor of movie homage, so I created Roman Moronie, a night elf Hunter, inspired by the antagonist in the movie *Johnny Dangerously*. I ran around with a pet, firing bowshots at random monsters while calling them "miserable cork-suckers" and "fargin iceholes." When I got tired of speaking in broken English, I created Danny Vermin, a human Hunter inspired again from the movie, and called the gun I picked up an .88 magnum, telling anyone who listened, "This thing shoots through schools." I told people I was looking for Johnny, who worked with another gang on the Horde side of the world.

Most people didn't get it. Granted, *Johnny Dangerously* isn't the most popular movie in the world, but anyone who grew up watching Comedy Central has seen it roughly 600 times. Especially after dropping helpful quotes from the

movie, the ponderous emotes directed my way could only have been willful ignorance. Other people were so wrapped up in their own version of roleplaying, they didn't have room for mine, so they just pretended they didn't understand.

But who really does? Most according-to-Hoyle roleplayers I've met don't really seem to get along well with anyone outside their incredibly exclusive circles, incapable of bending their structured mythos. Every individual's story and premise is just too different to really jive with anyone else. Sure, your night elf Druid is actually a demon from the planet Zardo, but good luck getting along with the guy whose human Paladin is an avatar of light sent by a Judeo-Christian God to convert heathens like you. That's when the old adage, "Ignore them and they'll go away," comes into play, and the wagons circle closer around you.
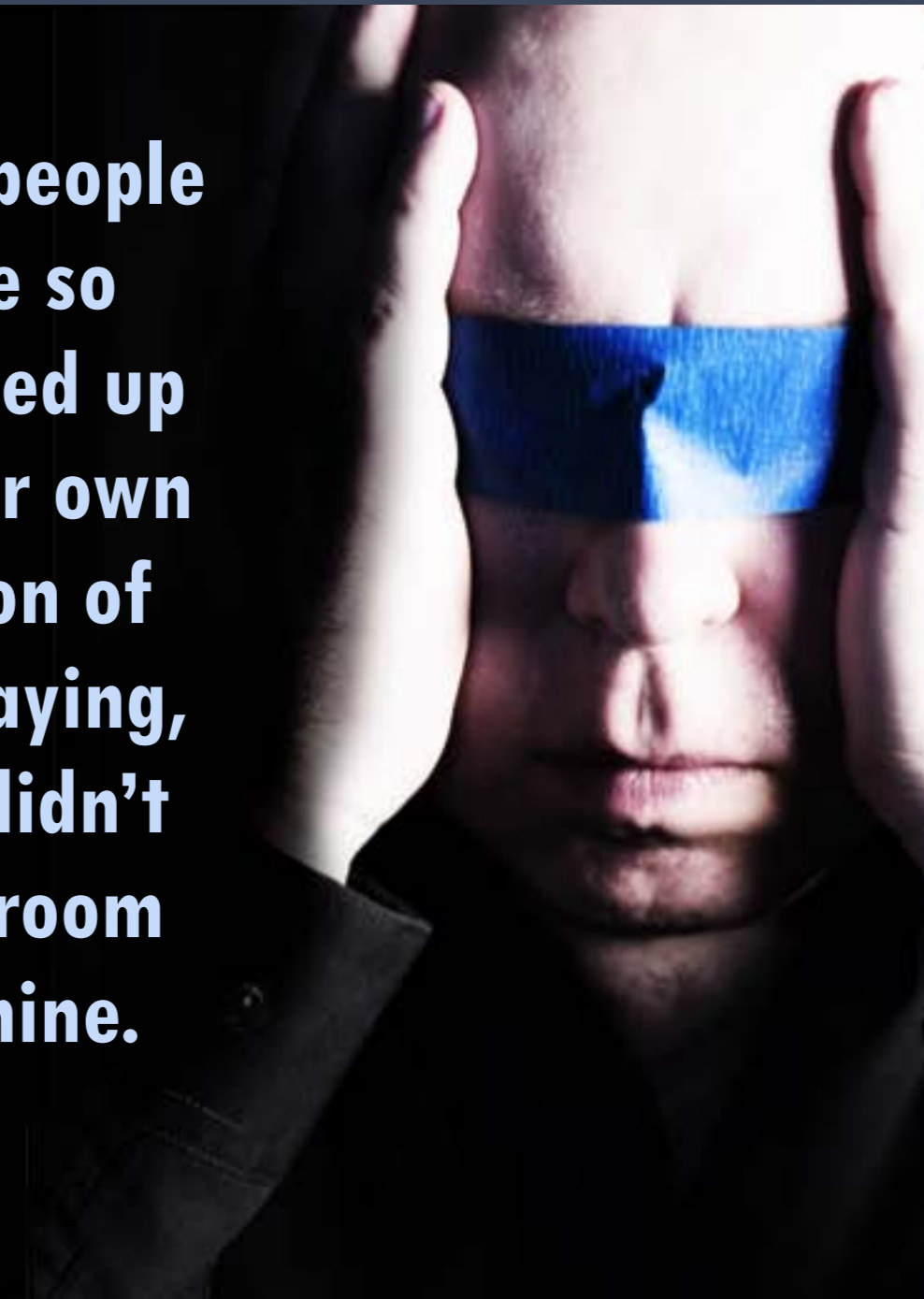
That's what I don't get. It may be easier to pretend your personal story exists in a bubble, but is that really the point of online roleplaying? Is a story within the game's lore the only legitimate form of roleplaying? It just seems like bad acting if you can't find a way to merge your character with your fellow man, even if he's typing with a fake Brooklyn accent. Intermingling with other people, forcing yourself to become a part of the world, is what makes MMOGs more than the sum of some 5 million parts. What's the point of videogame communities if there isn't any communication between them?

In the end, isn't community what it's all about? You can't tell your story, no matter what it is, without others to listen. What's wrong with having a slightly off-kilt story to share? But what do I know? I've never been much of a roleplayer. COMMENTS

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

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MEET THE TEAM

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

"You're sitting alone in a tavern when an elf with gray eyes and a look of deep concern on his face walks up to you. What do you do?"

Will Hindmarh,
"A Roleplayer in Azaroth"
I take the bait, 'cause I came to play.

Chris Dahlen,
"I Enjoy Playing a Girl"
I would say, "I'm sorry, hon - the rabbit died."

Mark Wallace,
"In Celebration of the Inner Rogue"
I buy him a drink (obviously), whip out

my reporter's notebook and take down his tale of woe. If only these things really happened in places like *World of Warcraft*, how much richer our virtual existences would be?

Nova Barlow,
"Remember the Ice Chicken,"
Research Manager
After checking my bag to see if I have something to take notes with, I would quietly hope he brought money for his

own ale, because elves talk at great length and scholars such as myself tend to have only just enough money to cover personal ale needs.

John Walker,
"Quest for Glory"
Write this off as about as wrong as a first date can go, and see if he wants to go Gnome Bowling, maybe show off in front of the Sorcerer babes.

John Tynes,
"The Contrarian: Masks in the Woods"
Get him drunk and take his wallet.

Joe Blancato,
"Diseased Cur,"
Contributing Editor
If the guy looks rich, I give a nod to the other Rogue in the party; we have our rube.

JR Sutich,
Contributing Editor
Log out.

Julianne Greer,
Executive Editor
Put down my empty pint glass and hope he looks less concerned without the help of the bottom of the empty glass. Hmm, he doesn't. Oh well, there goes my evening. "Can I help you?"