

## — Chapter 2 —

# MMORPG Culture

*“The life which is unexamined is not worth living.”*—Plato

*“The world is full of people whose notion of a satisfactory future is, in fact, a return to the idealised past.”*

—Robertson Davies

Entering a MMORPG is like entering a separate universe with its own physical and sociological rules. It’s a recognizable universe. You can’t walk through walls, for example. And you don’t fall upward when you slip. But it’s also a wholly different universe. If a rock lands on your head, you feel no pain. And if you cast a spell on yourself, you can fly, or breathe underwater, or shoot lightning bolts from your fingertips. So MMORPGs are simultaneously identical to the real world and completely different from it.

The biggest difference, however, is in the culture, not the physics, of MMORPG realms. And the disparity between the two planes of existence really comes down to certain life-enriching features that MMORPGs possess and that the real world just can’t compete with. These unique features define MMORPG society and make the MMORPG universe a fascinating and compelling place to live in.

First among them is certainly the idea of daily progress — something that is taken for granted in every MMORPG but can be conspicuously absent in real life. Then there’s the whole concept of the quest, the idea that experience and profit can best be gained by actively seeking out danger. Then, to support the people who are trying to make

their way through quests and through the rest of the game world, there are guilds, organizations that work for the betterment of their members. Both quests and guilds are intertwined with the private economies that spring up in all MMORPGs and lead to a good deal of the villainous behavior that taints MMORPG life. And, last, is the practice of player killing that offers everyone the chance to murder other people with impunity. Interlaced through all of these ideas, though, is the concept of guaranteed protection from catastrophe — a feature that most people would like to add to the real world and which has a major effect on MMORPG culture in every game.

## A Quick Primer

The first thing anyone does when they enter a MMORPG is cobble together an in-game persona, called an avatar, toon, or character — a little man, woman, alien, or mythical creature that is directed through the game world to explore, trade, negotiate, collect, and do battle. The process of devising this character is like creating a second self. And the use of a unique character created by the player, rather than a one-size-fits-all generic sprite provided by the game's developers, distinguishes MMORPGs from ordinary video games.

The character creation process begins with choosing a character's race — its species, physiognomy, history, heritage, philosophy, and disposition. The types of available races vary from game to game. But they usually include large thoughtless bruisers, clever sylphid waifs, stout determined pugilists, greedy business types, and contemplative spiritual adepts.

Once you've decided on your character's background, you then tweak its appearance. For human characters, this means selecting skin color, haircut, height, weight, and tattooing. For other species, it can mean choosing spaniel ears, a nose long enough to stir soup with, uber-babe lips, ultra-dude reflective sunglasses, a paunchy belly, a furry back, scales, fins, tentacles, you name it. The selection of both male and female characters is allowed and the choice of gender never limits the skills of the character in any way.

Once you've settled on an appearance, you next figure out your profession or class—the way you want your character to handle the

challenges of life. Almost all games include some kind of mage who casts spells or uses “mental energy,” a melee character who fights hand to hand, and a ranger character who shoots arrows, flings darts, or throws deadly axes. But beyond these common themes the professional possibilities are as wide as they are in the real world. You may be able to become a biotechnician, for example, or a banker, animal trainer, metaphysician, dancer, healer, engineer, thief, miner, bounty hunter, or arbitrageur, depending on the game.

After you’ve chosen your profession, the selection process then focuses on skills. These are the talents and abilities that allow you to perform specialized actions. They’re the abilities that you practice and improve over the long life of your character, the combination of traits that make you successful in the virtual world and distinguish you from everyone else.

Most folks would probably choose every skill available from ocean fishing to armor tinkering, dragon taming, gourmet cooking, acrobatics, dowsing, shape-shifting, meditation, x-ray vision, birdsong imitation, hypnosis, weaving, asteroid mining, lyre plucking, piracy, confidence scheming, rabbit breeding, nursing, and all the rest. But you’re only given so many skill credits to distribute between your various abilities. So, you start out reasonably proficient at only a few skills and embarrassingly deficient in all the others. Then, as you use your skills, you gain points that can be employed to improve existing skills and gain new ones.

Finally, you have to invent a name for your character. Some players are so impatient to get started that they leave typos in their names. They have handles like Lime Germlin, Sowrd of Death, and The Balck Shadow.

But most players take the time to dwell on the spelling and meaning of their monikers because, in a strange way, a character’s name seeps into the player over time. In fact, it seems to be a common view among MMORPG players that if you call yourself something like Frightened Paranoid and spend thousands of hours living under that alias, you can brand your psyche with a subliminal message that stains your waking consciousness. In their eyes, it’s better to call your character Selfless Hero or Oceans of Bliss.

Once your character is completed, it’s then time to enter the

MMORPG world to encounter the game's three types of animate beings: PCs, NPCs, and Creatures.

Player Characters (PCs) are the avatars of the other players, the people with whom you can chat, trade, and buddy up. These are the characters who will either selflessly help you out of a jam if you're lucky, or cheat you in a business deal and then kill you if you're not.

Non-Player Characters (NPCs) are the computer-generated figures who facilitate game play. They act as shopkeepers, teachers, guides, or quest initiators. Usually, you click on them to start a conversation or purchase their goods, choosing products or responses from the menus they present.

And Creatures, the third type of virtual world denizen, are the source of both danger and wealth in the MMORPG realms. They can kill you — in which case you may reincarnate somewhere else in the world, lose points, or have to return to your body to collect the dropped items on your cadaver. Or you can kill them — and their dead bodies will provide you with the loot you need to prosper in the game world: weapons, tools, money, clothing, musical instruments, machine parts, gems, potions, and other booty. (In many games you can also tame creatures and ride them or train them to hunt for you.)

Every little success you have in dealing with the three types of inhabitants results in the accumulation of experience points (XP). These are what cause your character to grow and improve over time. And they're why many players stay in the game world for months or years.

If you make restorative medicines, for example, you receive experience points. If you complete a quest handed to you by an NPC, you also gain points. And if you remove a dangerous creature from the landscape, you gain still more points.

Every time you cast a spell, build a forge, heal a friend, or tame a monster, you gain XP. And the more difficult the task, the more points you receive for accomplishing it. The total number of accumulated points then determines your level in the game. (With 1,000 points you may be a Level 2. With 1,000,000 points you'd be a Level 22.) So, when other players scan your approaching avatar, they can see by glancing at your level whether they're dealing with a newbie who might *need* help or a grizzled veteran who might *provide* help.

These same experience points are also what you use to upgrade

your skills. Acquire 1000 XP for croaking a difficult monster, for example, and you can add those points to your archery skill to make yourself a more accurate shot. Over time, you're able to grow yourself into someone more formidable than the pipsqueak you start out as.

But the number of points required to upgrade skills increases as your character grows, and that means you have to put in more effort each time to improve your abilities. Many people see this creeping XP inflation as a perfect addiction system. XP begins to look like a drug after a while. You need more of it each time to get the same effect. So, you have to go after bigger and more difficult challenges every day. And this sense of growing challenge and competence is the common experience of all MMORPG players whether they're forming a guild, defending themselves from other players, selling items in the game economy, or joining a quest.

## Failsafe

The ability to take big risks without ever having to suffer big punishments is, by far, the most striking feature of MMORPG cultures everywhere. It influences all of the other aspects of MMORPG life: quests, guilds, the economy, player killing, everything. And it's really what distinguishes the MMORPG universe from both the physical universe and from video games.

In a MMORPG you can commit any action you like without losing most of the points you've already piled up. The challenges that have to be met to acquire more points become more difficult over time. But the chances of a serious setback that takes away most of your hard-won XP are nil.

Essentially, what this means is that you can move forward every day in a MMORPG, and *never fall back* because the skills, talents, strengths, and expertise that you acquire on your travels can never be taken away from you. Even if you cheat or kill other people, you'll still prosper. Even if you devote yourself to your friends and throw yourself into spider-infested caves to save them, you'll still flourish. You can be as impulsive, destructive, or self-sacrificing as you like and you won't find yourself set back to zero, relegated to prison, or permanently dead. So, you're free to act in any way you choose.

In an ordinary video game your character passes through the world unchanged. You scroll across the landscape and travel to different levels in the game world, but, when you've vanquished the last boss, your character is still the same frenetic little hopper it was on the day you started.

In a MMORPG, by contrast, you change as you progress through life. This is possible because MMORPGs are persistent state universes. Like the real world, they continue to exist whether players are in them or not. Characters who log out of a world simply enter a state of suspended animation and reappear in the same place again when they log back in. No one freezes "his game" into a save state when they depart, the way they do with a traditional video game. So MMORPG characters can live and grow indefinitely. They become stronger, smarter, and more adept over time. And after they've piled up some experience, they're able to do things that they couldn't do when they started.

What really distinguishes MMORPG society from that of the real world, however, is not just that MMORPG characters grow. After all, people grow and improve themselves in the real world. What distinguishes MMORPG life is that once someone has improved, there's no way they can deteriorate. And it's this lack of any chance for downward mobility that sets the tone for all of MMORPG culture.

In real life, you can be the high-flying CEO of a multinational corporation one day and under indictment for fraud the next. You can be a self-indulgent rock diva cheered by millions in January and dragging yourself out of rehab in February. You can be president of the United States one morning and fleeing the White House under threat of impeachment that afternoon. But in the MMORPG realm, you cannot suffer this kind of catastrophic reversal of fortune. Once you've risen to a certain level, you cannot seriously decline. One bad decision cannot send your life spiraling into the pit as it can in the real world.

You can't even be felled by the ordinary savagery of life. You cannot become enfeebled by old age, hobbled by disease or accident, made obsolete by new technology, disabled, or permanently killed. If you acquire a particular skill, it's yours forever. And the more time you put into the world, the more skills you acquire. So, MMORPG worlds feature the attractive aspects of the real world without the risks of ultimate failure.

This makes virtual lands far more forgiving places than the real world. It instills in players a kind of confident optimism when facing the future that doesn't always exist in real life where bad decisions can be severely punished and bad luck can be merciless. And it is one significant reason that MMORPG players commit themselves to their characters in such a determined way. Often living with their avatars every day for years, players can rest assured that all of their hard work will not be undone by cruel circumstance. They can feel a kind of joy in daily irreversible progress that may be hard to come by in real life. And the sense of growth, improvement, and accomplishment — along with the assurance that they can't permanently lose any of the talents they've already acquired — serves to define MMORPG players and their culture as ultimately self-assured, optimistic, forward-looking, and even joyful.

## Quests: Frodo, Take This Ring to Mordor

Quests — one of the basic components of MMORPG culture — work according to the all-carrot-no-stick principle that infuses every experience in the MMORPG world. They allow players to feel the joy and excitement of exploration without experiencing the hazards inherent in a real journey. Players on a MMORPG quest always feel *impelled* to finish the quest because they get rewarded if they succeed, but rarely feel *compelled* to finish because there is seldom any serious punishment for failure. And this system twists what would be dangerous, terror-filled journeys in the real world into exciting expeditions in the MMORPG realm.

Quests — also called missions or trials — are tasks that usually start with a rumor (a set of explanations, instructions, assignments, or requests) from an NPC called a rumormonger. In fantasy worlds, this is often a character who waits inside a hut in the woods and calls out to adventurers who stroll by. But in some games, mongers take the form of special monsters, Easter Island-style statue heads, or vending machines located in cities or space stations.

The most common form of mission is known as a fetch quest, FedEx quest, or mail run. In it, the player is asked to travel to a distant venue,

convey a letter of introduction to another person, collect an object, or get a certificate stamped with a special seal, and then to return to the sender with proof of the accomplishment. The player then receives XP, money, a title, or a collectable whose value is related to the difficulty of the quest.

Sometimes the mission is multipart and becomes increasingly complex the further into it the player goes. A player may, for example, have to journey to a dungeon and fight the Ant Women (who squirt him with scent and drop a key), then unlock the treasure chest, obtain the relic bones, and return them to the hermit who checks for the ant scent while converting the relics into a powder which is sprinkled around a tree that produces a seed that grows into a vine that yields a poisonous fruit that is fed to a gelatinous wraith who offers a ring that protects the wearer from acid.

For some people, the bizarre complexity of such elaborate quests is part of their allure, while others are drawn to the camaraderie that's forced on players who are on an expedition together and are relying on each other for protection and support.

Not all quests are complex, however. Some of the quests that players spend their game lives completing are so simple and straightforward that they can be finished in an hour.

Slaughter quests, for example, require players to simply eliminate a specified number of creatures ("Kill 7 Bruxing Gnashers and bring me their incisors").

Scavenger hunts require players to gather a series of different objects from around the game world (eggs, pelts, feathers, jewels, musical instruments).

And treasure quests require players to overcome obstacles in order to retrieve valuable booty from remote and difficult locations.

But riddle quests are slightly more involved and complicated.

In a riddle quest, you may be presented with a couplet that makes sense only within the context of the game ("Where krakens twist and serpents gyre, there you'll find the Sacred Pyre"). Or you may be presented with a riddle and several choices:

"The certain knot of peace, the balm of woe, the poor man's wealth, the prisoner's release. What am I? Choices: Money, Science, or Sleep."

(According to Sir Walter Raleigh, the author of the verse, the answer is “sleep.”)

A riddle may also be in graphical form. You may be presented, for example, with a collection of boxes color-coded to indicate their various strengths, and you may have to stack them in the order of the visible light spectrum to ascend to a ledge where a ticking bomb awaits.

Marathons, sometimes called orienteering quests, are an even more complicated form of quest — including intricate maps and complex travel instructions that lead players all over the virtual world in search of treasure and experience.

Lore quests, by contrast, are tied directly to the underlying plot of the game. They allow players to influence the storyline of the world they inhabit. Players may learn the lore of the world by completing the quest. Each time they finish a mission, for example, they may receive a little more information on the history and current affairs of the land. Or they may receive items that are referred to in the latest installment of lore. Or they may actually have a hand in creating the world’s lore through their actions. (Their success or failure in finding an artifact or defeating a foe may become part of the game’s official history.)

Title quests are similar, but they deal with personal history rather than world history. They are designed to grant a character an official honorific that becomes the prefix or suffix of his name. No one will ever address a character as “First Lieutenant Dandelion, Defender of the Meek, Slaughterer of the Necronomial Menace, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Lord of All He Surveys,” but some people collect such titles — the more ornate the better. And for many players, these kinds of quests are the richest part of the game experience.

Almost all MMORPG players take part in quests at one time or another. And players have different reasons for entering quests and for finding them compelling. A Minnesota administrative assistant in her early 50s, for example, whose youngest child had just gone off to college leaving her with some time on her hands, explained her love of quests by saying that she didn’t want her real life to be “exciting.” Some of her friends had had exciting lives full of vicious divorces, alcohol problems, job layoffs, breast cancer, and bankruptcy. In real life, she said, “exciting” was always “bad.” When something exciting happened

to you, you ended up talking to lawyers, doctors, creditors, and psychiatrists — the four horsemen of the personal apocalypse. So she didn't want excitement in her real life. But she didn't want to fall asleep either. So quests were a good compromise. She could feel invigorated and enthused while pursuing the quests. But she didn't have to go to the hospital afterward.

Another player, living in the mountains of Colorado in real life, said that he regarded missions as a family bonding activity. He explained that his family had three separate accounts on the same game, three computers in their home, and a router so they (father, mother, and eight-year-old son) could all sign on at the same time and play together. It was their "family time," especially in the winter when the snow was too deep to play outside. And they often created their own personal quests when the packaged ones didn't entice them.

In fact, many players build player quests that are similar to the game engine's missions involving traveling to another part of the world and accomplishing a particular feat, but which also include a humorous component as well, with fluorescent pink armor or vases of wilted sunflowers serving as the prizes.

When asked what they liked about all of the different forms of quest, players answered in a multitude of ways. Some said loot was the important factor for them. All of the best trophy items were at the end of the quests, so greed was their motivating factor. Other players said that quests inserted them into the ongoing narrative. It was as if questing players were allowed inside one chapter of the "game book" during the mission. Instead of reading about someone else's adventures, players could experience them firsthand. The quest, in a sense, erased the line between myth and reality. An equal number said the quest gave them a specific purpose in interacting with people and creatures in the game world. It clarified their goals in life. And many people also said that the best part of questing was the sense of mateship that was forced on players by the difficulty of the task. When quests were too hard to handle alone, questers ended up making friends with other players on the road, players they might never have met otherwise. And this was a great plus for them.

Almost everyone mentioned, in one way or another, the fact that quests represented excitement and purpose in their lives without the

risk of actual physical danger. People on a quest could be immersed in and mesmerized by an exciting task in the same way that they were mesmerized by a thriller movie. But they could also participate in what was exciting them. They could feel their hearts pound and their pulses quicken. And they could leap off cliffs, charge into crowds of armed villains, and rush into dangerous caverns to save their friends — all the while knowing that there would be no physical consequences for failing. Their characters might be killed, and that would certainly be inconvenient. But there was no way that the players themselves could suffer in any way as a result of bad luck or bad decisions. And this was intensely attractive to many players.

## **Guilds: The Three Thousand Musketeers**

Another feature that helps define MMORPG society is the concept of the guild or player association, a feature that often provides the scaffolding for a game world's social structure and becomes a major part of a MMORPG player's life. (For some players, in fact, guild life is so much more rewarding than real life that it's embraced in a way that real-world social interactions are never embraced.) And the guild system works in the same way that the quest system works. It allows players to enjoy all the benefits of something — in this case, a social life — without any of the drawbacks.

One player I spoke with in a guild mansion, for example, admitted freely to a sentiment voiced by many other players. He said his guild colleagues were better than his real family. He had friends he could count on and connect with in the game world, but they weren't like relatives. He didn't hang around with his game world friends because he was stuck with them genetically. He associated with them because he cherished their friendship (and could simply walk away from them if they became disagreeable).

This sense of meaningful relationships without the pain of maintenance is a very common sentiment among guild members, and one of the defining aspects of all-carrot-no-stick MMORPG culture.

Guilds are organizations created by the players themselves to assist other players inside the game. Sometimes called allegiance groups, tribes,

factions, societies, or clans, the purposes of guilds run the gamut of human attitude and endeavor. Some are peaceful mutual aid societies. Others are profit-making corporations. Some are quasireligious groups with their own law and lore. Others are violent virtual biker gangs. And there are even guilds that act as “mafia dating services” arranging violent trysts for characters who want to gang up in order to make an assault on another clan or kill some despised opponent.

A common model for an allegiance group is the medieval craftsmen’s guild. Organizations with names like the League of Benevolence, All for One, and The Society of the Common Weal organize themselves in a way that allows high-level master players to work with journeymen, and journeymen to assist new apprentices in learning the ropes.

Another popular guild type is the cartel—a group open only to mercantile characters who spend their time buying components, arranging deals, and manufacturing and selling finished goods. These organizations, with names like Mine Not Yours, All for Me, Avarice Before Honor, and Everything Must Go, set the low prices that their members pay for raw materials and the high prices outsiders pay for the finished goods. They may help their members create automated bots to sell their products. Or they may even build shops or entire towns for guild participants to hawk their wares in.

When asked about the notion that guilds facilitate all the best aspects of social and economic life without any of the liabilities, one guild member, a Chicago software engineer in real life, added a comment on the politics of the virtual world that many other players agreed with. He said that guilds were a kind of “communism” done right. This, surprisingly, turns out to be quite a common view among guild members.

One character alone, he explained, could spend a year collecting all of the components needed to assemble a complex device. But a guild could ask its members to fan out in small groups and collect all of the necessary components in one day. Complex items beyond the reach of any individual player could then be quickly constructed by the guild and loaned to everyone. The guild could also accept donations from members and then distribute those contributions to others according to their needs. Everyone benefited as a result. There were always some slackers and parasites, he said. But, over all, the system worked. Guild

life made game life less burdensome in the same way that a supportive family made real life less burdensome.

Another ardent guild proponent, a Missouri landscaper in real life, confessed that his membership in the guild made him feel needed. His apprentices needed advice and assistance from him every day, and he delighted in giving it.

When asked if he couldn't find the same sense of fulfillment in real life, he said guild life was nothing like real life. People weren't afraid to help each other in the guild. He could be nice to people in the game world and not worry about being taken advantage of or getting sued.

Another player, a marketer in Baltimore, joined his guild as a point of honor. He said that so many guild people had helped him when he'd first entered the game that he felt as if he had to return the favor. He said he was "completing the circle" by joining the guild and being generous to its members.

For some players guild life is obviously the adhesive that sticks their eyes to the screen for months at a time, so it's a fundamental component of MMORPG culture. People who are natural organizers love running a virtual organization. And those who are naturally gregarious love the social interplay and persiflage. In fact, these things thrill them enough that many players happily abandon "inferior" real-world social interaction to get what they crave in the game.

A business consultant in California said that he preferred the people in his guild to the people in his real life and that he wouldn't want to go through the day without meeting up with his MMORPG companions. They offered him something that he couldn't get in real life—the chance to mingle with friends when he craved friendship, and the chance to ignore them completely when he wanted solitude. He could be sociable when he was in the mood and curmudgeonly at will. He could have all the benefits of an active social life without the burdensome entanglements and obligations. And that was a big reason why he preferred MMORPG life to real life.

## **Game Economies: Greed as a Creed**

This idea of living a life without negative consequences leads to two kinds of player behavior in MMORPGs: heroic altruism on the one

hand and sneaky villainy on the other. Some players feel free to become philanthropic for the first time in their lives without the gnawing worry of getting hurt themselves as they help other people. But others suddenly feel free to hurt other people because they know they won't be punished for it. And, sadly, the number of these latter types is quite large in most MMORPG worlds. Vile players see MMORPGs as the place where they can take advantage of others without paying the price for bad behavior, so the dark side of MMORPG culture is shaped by these players.

Villainous players concentrate their efforts in two areas — war and commerce. And for many of them, the two are interchangeable. For some strange reason, game economies act as magnets for people whose instincts run toward the greedy, vicious, deceitful, and self-aggrandizing. And mean and duplicitous behavior are part of every MMORPG's culture because people can lie, swindle, bilk, defraud, bamboozle, and steal from each other in the game world without any of the penalties such behavior would garner in the real world.

Many characters, in fact, spend their game lives engaged in economic pursuits that they regard as battles. A deal, to these players, is not just an exchange of goods for money. It's a military skirmish with winners and losers. And trouncing other players in financial matters is something they delight in.

These mercantile-warrior players display certain obvious behaviors.

Their competitive bragging, for example, often takes the shape of a higher level character stealing a lower level's kill and then bending down to loot the creature's corpse while boasting that he has just found the rarest treasure in the game on this particular body.

This happens so often in some games that many of the declarations of "Woot! Phat loot! You missed it!" are surely fabricated. And it suggests that the urge to flaunt superiority is so strong in some folks that they'll even lie to do it. Because they want to lord it over the suckers and losers around them, they'll pretend that the creature corpses they just stole from other players are loaded with expensive goods — even if the corpses actually contain nothing but fish pies and old socks.

This same type of behavior — designed to both impress and antagonize other characters — also occurs at merchant shops where a player choosing new armor from among a collection of loot just deposited by

other players will announce, “Whoa! Who just dropped off this level 300 breastplate that I’m scooping up! Whoa man! You only see this stuff once in a lifetime!”

The purpose behind such pronouncements seems to be to let other players know that they’re missing out on something big or that they’re far less adept than the character celebrating his own clever shrewdness.

A behavior in the same vein occurs when a business character tries to bully, cajole, browbeat, or trick another character into consummating a deal.

A player interviewed in one game, for example, had four bags of diamond powder to sell and was told by trustworthy friends that they could be exchanged for 14 notes each. He offered his goods for sale in the town square where people stood around calling out what they had to sell, and, after only a minute, another character sent a “/tell” (private message) claiming that diamond powders were only worth one note each. The deceiving player said this in a tone that suggested he was a knowledgeable friend whispering to a naïve younger player. He then offered to buy all the player’s diamond powders for one note each.

Another character then approached and said he’d pay nine notes for each one. But, when the trade was completed, it turned out that he had placed only seven notes on the trading block for each powder. He then immediately turned around and publicly announced that he was selling for 14 notes each the very diamond powders he had just bought — in capital letters no less — in order to emphasize his business triumph and prove that he had bested someone in a deal and screwed them out of their profit.

This kind of very common behavior represents the bleaker side of MMORPG culture. And it turns some players into cynics, souring them on the whole notion of generosity in the MMORPG world. A fascinating conversation overheard in a hinterlands dungeon, for example, perfectly illustrated the opposing views of proper game behavior that players come up with after dealing with other MMORPG inhabitants.

One player cried out that he needed a healing kit for his wounds. Someone offered him several kits for free, but a third player jumped in to prevent the exchange, screaming that no one should just give things away because people weren’t worth it.

The player offering the kits said he had more than enough and he

knew what it was like to be in need. But the cynical player blasted him and tried to block the act of altruism by dragging monsters into the vicinity to kill everyone in the dungeon.

It was a snapshot of both MMORPG and real-world society. On the one hand was a character defending the notion that people are generally evil and anxious to take advantage of compassionate suckers and do-gooders. On the other hand was a character representing the view that anyone's life can be overtaken by catastrophe and that helping people when they're down is the natural response of anyone who has been down himself.

Sadly, many MMORPG players eventually come to take a dim view of their fellow players because they're abused so often. In interviews, a huge number of players admitted that they had been shortchanged, cheated, or taken advantage of by other players. In fact, more than half of them said this was a regular occurrence in their game lives. It was not something most people would have guessed when they first entered the game world, but, as it turned out, the most villainous aspects of real life were amplified by the all-carrot-no-stick culture of MMORPGs.

To see for myself how money was regarded in MMORPG society, I conducted a series of fiscal experiments in the game world. And the results confirmed the experiences of the other players around me.

First, I took a full set of my best armor off one of my mules along with some Crystal Swords. I then proceeded to a newbie town, resolved that the first person who acted honestly toward me would receive all the equipment and millions of coins for free. All he had to do was pass a simple test.

I gave each person a Crystal Sword. Then I announced, "Oh, wait. If you give me that sword back, I'll give you another one that's even better."

Crystal Swords are twice the size of ordinary swords and look so impressive that newbies find them irresistible. I knew that. But I wanted to see who would give the sword back. No one did.

The first person said nothing, kept the sword, and waited for me to leave. I explained again, and he handed me an old wooden club that had been cluttering up one of his packs. "Here. Take this," he said.

This same scenario repeated itself three more times with three other people. Even though these folks knew that I was obviously a good-

natured and generous person, they were all still ready to cheat me out of the sword, even when they were promised a better one in return.

Another time I decided to give all my money away — also with disastrous results.

It takes lower level players many weeks of play to save up one note's worth of money, so I went around dropping notes on newbies and lowbies to see what would happen.

Of 20 players who received my largesse, 11 never even said thank you. They simply ran away with the money. Another five typed "thx" or "ty" and scampered off. And one was made so furious by the unexpected munificence that he tracked me down, shot lightning bolts at my face, and threw the money back at me, storming off in protest.

Only three people stopped to say thank you. Two of them offered items in return. And one said he'd been killed so many times in the desert that he was now broke, bloodied, and armorless. He had been picking up apples in the fields to sell for equipment. For him the note translated into 200 fewer hours of tedious apple-picking, and he thanked me profusely. That made up for the other 19 responses. But the fact that so many people had simply run off with the money was a little disconcerting. It was like living one of Mother Theresa's exhortations: You may find that people take advantage of you when you're generous. Be generous anyway.

Even more frightening than the culture of belligerent greed, however, is the culture of player killing that's based on the same commit-any-action-without-consequences idea as all the other uniquely MMORPG cultural efflorescences. In this case, however, it translates into murder without imprisonment.

## Killer Be Killed

Games that allow players to kill each other (called PvP — player versus player — or PK — player-killer — games) have led to the development of a separate subculture in the MMORPG universe — a violent, creepy, ornery, impatient, petulant subculture, and one with a very different set of rules from the usual PvE (Player versus Environment) MMORPG game. It's a subculture that draws certain players into the virtual world

and keeps them there because it guarantees them the chance to commit acts of the most extreme violence without repercussions. In fact, the dominant aspect of this culture is to see the slaughtering of other human beings as both a lifestyle choice and a sport in the manner of Roman gladiatorial contests.

When you first enter PK worlds, they seem to be the hap-happiest places around. There's a lot of high-fiving, rejoicing, and dancing. On closer inspection, though, you discern that what passes for merriment is really either vicious mockery and the vilification of enemies or celebration after the killing of other human beings. The atmosphere is festive all right, but only when the enemies' internal organs are being roasted like marshmallows on sticks over campfires.

The PK culture revolves around clan wars, gang rivalries, vengeance quests, blood feuds, and bounty hunting. Some PK games even weave into their game engine features that add to the murderous and bloodthirsty texture of the game.

Shrunken head quests, for example, in which the goal is to kill a player in another tribe and turn in his head or helmet for a prize, are part of some games. Race wars are part of most PK games, awarding bonus points for killing someone of an enemy race. Property destruction may be part of the game as well, guaranteeing that some characters will make enemies by laying siege to towns, smashing castle walls, and razing villages. In fact, territorial disputes may be built into the fiber of the game by allowing characters to claim real estate gained through the conquest of other players.

All of these factors fundamentally change how PKers see virtual life and how it should be lived. In fact, PK worlds — unlike most MMORPG worlds — would fit anyone's definition of fascist societies. In them, all other players are differentiated as either allies or enemies. A state of emergency and martial law always exists. The military (the loot getters), the business community (the loot processors), and the government (the loot administrators) are very closely allied. The press (in the form of forums and chats) is controlled by Guild Monitors and features chanting and sloganeering rather than reasoned dialogue. "Fear and anger" are renamed "vigilance and justice" and are promoted as virtues. Opinions outside the guild's party line are denounced as cowardice or treason. And the animosity that soaks the landscape prevents players

from traveling beyond their little home regions, so they never experience a different interpretation of game life.

In most PK games, players band together into clans for mutual protection, vengeance, control of territory, and the persecution of enemies. With names like Shallow Grave, The Undertakers, The Overtakers, and Apocalyptic Nightmare, PK guilds take on the characteristics of both bellicose nation-states and warring Cosa Nostra families. They pay bounties for the slaughter of marked enemies, hold grisly ceremonies to honor their “made men,” organize their new members into hit squads, and wage war on other tribes for the control of resources and land.

Some players keep records of every duel they participate in, and these individual records sometimes grow into revenge databases — living documents tracing the history of contention between the clans.

Particularly destructive players may even take out contracts on other players. These are posted on kill-this-bastard bulletin boards around the Internet. In fact, entire guilds may pay mercenaries to kill their enemies or they may assign their younger members to bounty quests in which the goal is to gank the enemy (a PK term — a contraction of “gang up on and kill” — that suggests surprising the opponent with many more attackers than he can defend against). Successful gankers get uber-booty and titles conveyed by the guild leadership.

All of this means that player-killers — called red dots in many games because they show up on radar as red dots whereas other players show up as green or blue dots — are a different breed. And games with 100% of their land set aside for player killing have a different ethos than other MMORPG games. They have a different feel to them, a different smell (the smell of napalm in the morning, perhaps). And the emotional environment is quite striking to anyone used to a normal MMORPG game.

In a non-PK MMORPG (or in a game that allows player killing in only a few areas of its landscape) the aura is mostly one of perseverance, striving toward a goal, perpetual improvement, and camaraderie. In a fully PK world, however, the emotional tone is one of constant petulance, back-stabbing, wariness, taunting, ambushes, paranoia, vulgarity, order-giving, order-following, endocrine spurts, mood swings, wild anger, willfulness, and declarations of hatred. PKers may describe their lives as filled with glorious battles, heroic escapades, the thrill of the hunt, and united defense against villainous attacks. But a few months

in any purely PK game would disabuse new players of that romantic view of PK life.

How did this culture start? Player killing began as a way to mix the dynamics of FPS (first-person shooter) games like Quake and Doom into the MMORPG world. But when player killing entered the MMORPG realm, it transformed from a *mano a mano* exercise in strategy and stealth into large-scale warfare.

In most FPS games, every player is at the same level, and victory is mostly the result of clever planning, tactics, and surprise. In a PK MMORPG, however, each of the characters is at a different level of development, so powerful players and large groups are always favored. Players who get into the game just after its commercial release, especially players who are good at persuading other characters to join their alliance, become the big shots. And, after a few months, there is no way to catch up to them or defeat them without help from many other players. That pretty much eliminates the role of the lone gunslinger, trader, or explorer traveling from town to town in a fully PK game. And that makes the game less fun for the player who comes into it to be a wildcat, desperado, masterless samurai, or lone wolf.

This system also makes life as a younger character a different experience from life in a non-PK game. If you're a level five, for example, in a land full of level 50s (all of whom can squash you like a bug) you spend a lot of time kowtowing. The phrases "Yes, sir" and "No, sir" become part of your permanent vocabulary, and you utter them to characters you'd just as soon clutch by the throat and throttle into the dirt.

To an outsider entering this kind of world for a look around, the place looks like a realm of pettiness, childish vengeance cycles, ludicrous swaggering, silly first-grade shoving matches, and spiritual bankruptcy. And it is. But all of the intrigue and subterfuge, viciousness, political maneuvering, swooping blitzkriegs, bloody private duels, posturing, and bravado are what PKers live for.

Ask any group of regular PK players and they'll always mention the thrill of hunting other human beings. They'll talk about pounding hearts, flushed faces, screams of frustration, torrents of rage, and gushing fountains of adrenaline. They'll point out the satisfaction of revenge, the wild-eyed hysteria of free-for-all battles, the brinksmanship before a war, and the constant violent banter in the middle of a street

fight. PK life is more spleen than brain, more knee-jerk reaction than thoughtful stratagem, more testosterone than neurotransmitter. But PKers find it more real, more visceral, more evocative of true ugly human nature than mere creature-based MMORPGs.

In fact, the most common comment by PKers about their lives is that PK life is “just like real life.” According to this view, killing people and taking the loot from their corpses is obviously how anyone — a person, an organization, a country — becomes more powerful. And power is the only goal really worth striving for. The more people you kill, the more loot you acquire. The more people you kill, the greater your fearsome reputation becomes. The more people you kill, the more you can force your will on the living. Killing people and taking what they have is “natural.” Helping people without a selfish motive, acting for the common good, indulging in artistic or spiritual pursuits, forgiving others, being generous, demonstrating altruism, and the whole notion of a civilized society being one in which the strong protect the weak makes no sense at all in this view. The role of the strong is obviously to crush the weak in the PK view. That’s what logic dictates. Anything else would be contrary to human nature. And PK worlds make this logic manifest.

The player killing life is clearly not everyone’s cup of tea (actually, PKers would say “cup of blood”). And PKers will probably never represent a majority of MMORPG gamers because most players don’t want to go PK. In fact, some games ban the practice entirely. But, in the games where player killing is the dominant cultural factor, it’s why many players enter the virtual world in the first place. If they couldn’t battle and ambush other humans, what would be the point of playing?

And player killing, wherever it flourishes, is entirely representative of the essential element that defines all MMORPG cultures — the ability of players to experience the joys and triumphs of life without the physical risks and punishing failures. Players can grow without ever having to worry about old age, drunken drivers, or deadly pathogens taking away their accomplishments. They can associate with their friends whenever they like but can ignore them the rest of the time — without suffering any social stigma. They can go off on exciting quests without even considering travelers’ diarrhea or terrorist attacks. They can screw their fellow players out of fortunes without interference from the police

or the government. And they can kill at will without a thought about jail time.

In the all-carrot-no-stick world of MMORPG culture, every day offers another chance to do what you love without paying for the privilege. And that may be why people are drawn to MMORPGs in such huge numbers. Who wouldn't be attracted to such a place?