

**Toying with the Game:
Transgression and Subversion in *Everquest***

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I. Introduction

The general consensus among players of the Massively Multiplayer Online RPG (MMORPG) *Everquest* is that the elements of escapism, the fantasy element, stress relief, and online society constitute the main appeal of the game¹. In other words, the game allows them to do what they would not ordinarily be able to do; it permits any player from anywhere in the world to transgress the limits of the corporeal and assert almost complete control of the definition of their online persona, or “avatar”. Interesting, then, to note that within this game world there have arisen behaviors and practices that defy even the boundaries set in place by *Everquest* itself. These behaviors range from simple verbal harassment of players, to malicious actions that result in the detriment of players’ game experiences, and even to outright criminal actions that could feasibly be punished by law in real-life. Although these practices are prohibited by *Everquest*’s Terms of Service² and Rules of Conduct³¹, thanks to the sufficiently vague nature of terms like “harassment” and “abusive”, players are usually able to find ways to transgress the laws of the virtual land. One problem with explicitly defining prohibited behavior is that, because the range of possible actions and interactions in *Everquest* is fairly complex, it is difficult to predict what the offenses will even be. For instance, it is not a simple matter of killing someone’s player or stealing their equipment; unlike the real world, any “damage” done to a player’s character or property is easily reversed by the in-game “guides”. Rather, the nature of the more common and harder-to-catch online transgressions is one of offending players or wasting their time, something which is not as easily repaired. So transgression within an

¹ Set forth and enforced by *Everquest*’s parent companies, Verant and Sony Online Entertainment (SOE).

artificial universe such as *Everquest* is one subtly and uniquely different than the pranks and crimes of the real world; indeed, it is a form of interaction defined by its online mediation, one with no immediate analogue to everyday interactions in the real world. The behavior is distinct from the notion of “hacking”, which entails exploitation of technology in order to achieve what is not ordinarily possible in the game; the species of transgressive behavior discussed in this study refers to that which any player could do, without directly manipulating the game medium. The concept of transgression will be a central idea, describing a category of behaviors that are essentially defined by the act of breaking rules.

Given the growing importance of virtual societies within multiplayer online spaces, the recognition, categorization, and dissection of new models of behavior—as well as a thorough assessment of their impact and utility—is worth studying. This case study will first introduce the fundamentals of *Everquest*, and then discuss the different examples of forms of in-game transgression, and the typical motivations behind each form. An analysis of the reactions of the player community and of SOE will follow; the facts of this dialectic between the harassers and the harassed will perhaps reveal the underlying significance of transgressive behavior, how it can be used to guide the development of MMORPGs and online communities in the future, and how it can inform acts of transgression in the real world.

***Everquest* and the MMORPG**

The MMORPG genre, whose birth is commonly designated by the release of *Meridian 59* in 1996⁴, has had, since its relatively recent emergence, an enormous impact on the video game industry, the prevailing notions of game design, and the lives of players worldwide. *Everquest*, released in 1998⁵, is currently the most popular MMORPG in America, with over 430,000 subscribers⁶; it was the first MMORPG to feature fully three-dimensionally rendered characters and environments⁷. In this immersive online fantasy environment, countless forms of human interaction have been prominently simulated and recreated by the developers and player community alike. In *Everquest*'s virtual world of Norrath, there is market economy of trade and barter, social communities, and even a code of social mores and etiquette (the "Play Nice" rules⁸). With a world that mirrors the real world in such ways, online interactions have inevitably bled into the lives of the real people behind the avatars: as with many online communities, players often get acquainted and become friends in a more or less real sense; towards an extreme end, real-life marriages have been arranged⁹ and broken¹⁰ as a result of online activity. Although transgressions have prominently occurred in almost every MMORPG released to date, *Everquest* is an appropriate focus for analysis for two reasons. First, as it is the most popular MMORPG in America, it offers an incontestably broad sampling of behavior among its players, while still retaining a basis in North American cultural mores that would perhaps be lost in an analysis of, for example, *Lineage* (a far more populous MMORPG, but with a primarily Korean patronage¹¹). Second, by the opinions of many in the player community¹², SOE has been notoriously lax about making non-game balance-related changes to the game; this laissez-faire social policy has the result of allowing many cycles and trends of in-game transgression to run their course, mutating and

developing to a moderately large scale, until SOE is forced to change them for reasons of stability. In many cases, the player community's reactions to undesirable behavior play a bigger role in how that behavior develops than the reaction of SOE, resulting in the emergence of informal "codes of conduct". As online game developers Jessica Mulligan and Bridgette Patrovsky write on the topic of codes of conduct:

The primary purpose of a code of conduct is to inform the player populations as to what kinds of behavior are considered permissible and to establish a social norm... [the code of conduct] is an important component of a rich and diverse play experience, possessing a homegrown feeling of authenticity that may be lacking in the first, explicit code.¹³

II. Why People Transgress^{II}

Scamming for Fun and Profit

Motivations for performing offenses online seem fairly straightforward, at first: a player might simply be bored, or wish to cheat the system in order to get an advantage in the game. This view of transgressive behavior only takes into account why a player in any given game—say, *Scrabble* or *Risk*—might cheat. This ignores the immense significance of virtual community within *Everquest*; while *Scrabble* is merely played, it can be argued that *Everquest* is not only played, but lived.

Thus the considerations to be taken into account concern not only why one would cheat at a game, but why someone would do anything wrong, in real life or otherwise.

The first explanation, then, is personal gain; indeed, ever since the conception of

^{II} On the whole, player mischief has not been confined to any specific time or date in *Everquest*'s eight years of operation. Rather, its occurrence is typically random, appearing at the whims of players in isolation—or at best, appearing in cycles as SOE's TOP enforcements became more or less pronounced. It is therefore difficult to give a representative date for a whole category of misdeeds, and so the dates given for specific events should be taken at face value, and not representative of all occurrences of a certain type of transgression.

Everquest, there has existed the notion using the game as a vehicle for real-life profit, as evidenced bluntly by the founding of the “Everquest Superstore”¹⁴ in the same year as its titular game. Entrepreneurs have recognized the significance that people place on having powerful characters, and used this desire to fuel online sales of in-game items and “powerleveling” of characters for the seemingly steep fees of up to \$165.50 for a single level gained, or \$1000 for a pre-fabricated character¹⁵. SOE has banned in-game equipment and characters on online auction sites such as eBay¹⁶, for fear that it destabilizes gameplay and breeds unfair competition. Because it is a private transaction performed entirely outside of gameplay between two private parties, it can never be truly monitored, and so private websites such as Everquest Superstore still exist and thrive today.

The act of “twinking”¹⁷, or equipping a low-level character with high-level equipment, is a punishable offense¹⁸ and a common motive for Internet equipment purchases. However, this exchange of goods-for-money happens outside of the game; its status as an in-game transgression is debatable. However, there is a practice parasitic to the industry of equipment and character farming, known as scamming. Scamming involves manipulating or coercing a player in-game by purely social means, in order to obtain that player’s items or account information. The ramifications of this in-game behavior are immediate: if a scammer obtains a player’s account information, then s/he will possess all of a player’s equipment and character, and will be free to do with them as s/he pleases.

For the sake of illustrating what exactly is gained and lost by scamming, the following is an account of the methodology, motivations, and life events of an actual

scammer, obtained via online interview (App. A). The scammer, known here as C., was a sixteen year old high-school student who actively played *Everquest*. In 1999, he and a friend were harassing people online simply out of boredom; he asked one player repeatedly (begging, described later) to give him a certain item, and to his surprise, the player complied. This gave him the idea of finding ways to obtain the characters and equipment of other players; his boredom with high school, distaste for menial part-time jobs, and the prospect of making fast money by using his skill convinced him to start scamming. By 2000, C. was working with an accomplice (a younger friend of his); he bought a good account on Everquest Market and began developing a systematic method of scamming:

The easiest way is to offer people "trades" for their accounts being sold. If they are being sold, they are usually open to haggling or at least making some easy money. Let's say a person is selling a level 65 cleric. The account has a name attached to it, which has an in game reputation. My friend would offer an account worth more, dollar wise, to the person trading the account. Usually the deal was too good to pass up. The catch was, this was an offer via e-mail and didn't have much backing considering the information was made up. My friend would ask to "test" the account and make sure it was as stated. The key part of this deal is getting THEIR password FIRST. If they won't do this, it is a lot harder to make the deal happen, but it can still work. Here is how you do it:

He would usually be chatting with the person on AIM, or through a Hotmail account. If on AIM, the convo is in real time and time is important. I would have my computer waiting at the login screen waiting for the information. The second the person would give up the password (and strangely, when the deal is TOO good, they almost always do), I would log into the account, change the password, name, zip code (all required to reset the password), and give him the ok. Meanwhile, [my partner] was delaying them on AIM, claiming his computer was logging in and loading the character. Shortly after, he blocks them or signs off and the deal is done. The account was still ours. (App. A)

Shortly afterwards, C. would strip the stolen character of its equipment and "launder" it by swapping it between several of his characters, then sell it for other high-level items to make it even more untraceable. He would then go to the equipment auction site Playerauctions.com and sell his equipment the normal way, making upwards of \$650 per piece of equipment; any equipment that would not fetch a worthwhile price, he distributed to new players online, for fun.

They worked at it sporadically for two summers, scamming in marathon sessions (often making \$2000 a day) and then laying low for weeks to avoid drawing too much attention to the threat of scamming. In the end, C. and his partner made \$12,000 each, and never got caught. Even if he was, the worst he could have faced is a banning of one of his many accounts, since he didn't actually do anything technically illegal, and as he says soberly, "the IFCC is not going to investigate an online thief in a roleplaying game" (ibid.). Despite the incredible profits he'd made, after graduating high school, C. stopped scamming:

...[SOE's] TOS is lacking but they finally figure out that they HAD to admit to the problem of the scams and not just ban everyone they talked to. Sure, they did not want to have to take the time to police it, but it got to the point where players just weren't happy... After losing over \$5000 (potentially \$5k, it was still [in] items in *Everquest*) because Sony tracked down many of our accounts and banned them all at once (preventing further laundering), I called it quits. I hate to say it but I'd gladly do it again if the rules weren't enforced so much. My guess is we still overdid it and ended up killing the business out of greed. (App. A)

And so it went that, three years after C.'s scamming spree had begun, there had been a sufficient outcry in the community to pressure SOE into actively pursuing scammer accounts. Although their policies did not officially change, their active policing of the community improved (ibid.). Considering the lifespan of the game, that is a long time to wait before a scam cycle can be effectively extinguished, which gives scammers like C. ample time to refine their techniques, or to simply opt out.

Interestingly enough, when it comes to bare gameplay, C. does not condone illicit activities:

I don't usually cheat when I play videogames. I like a challenge, and that challenge is most of the reason why I even bother with videogames. Without that challenge, the game is just a waste of time... I loved [Diablo] until I tried cheating. I made a bunch of free items for myself with a hex editor, and could

not make them any better. Because of this, there was nothing left to do and the game got boring immediately. (App. A)

What this indicates is that C.'s transgressive behavior is purely motivated by tangible monetary benefit; he doesn't consider the game either as a game to be cheated, or a virtual reality to be virtually transgressed, but rather as a real-world means to a real-world end. There are plenty of other examples to this end: amateurish attempts at disguising oneself as an SOE representative¹⁹, or offering shady advice on hacking into the system²⁰, or trying to deliver Trojan horse viruses in the form of game patches²¹ all in order to gain players' account information. These scams, however, are easily recognized and avoided by players with any online experience. What made C.'s scam work so consistently on experienced players is that he offered them exactly what they wanted, what he had to offer was tantalizing and verifiable, and the practice of item trading is already common in *Everquest*. Also, since every documented conversation and transaction is performed anonymously offline, and since the actions of logging in as someone else and using their equipment are all but untraceable, the crime is particularly hard to trace in the server log files. C. was, by all definitions, a professional transgressor.

Grief as Game

C.'s behavior had nothing to do with malice, scorn, or any sort of afflictive feelings he had towards the victims of his scams; in fact, as he mentions, it is exactly the anonymous and consequence-free nature of the medium that allowed him to justify his behavior in the first place: "I found [scamming] more acceptable in game because you

didn't have to admit to your self that the person you were taking advantage of was a real person. Online anonymity is a powerful tool in letting your morals take the backseat.” (App. A) However, scammers by no means constitute the majority of the transgressions that occur online, and moreover, their intended impact is not social but pragmatic. This is quite different from the mode of transgression known as “griefing”.

The short definition of a griefer: “Griefer: (noun) Someone who grieves other players. Causes grief.”²² Found on the same webpage is the definition of a griefer by an obviously affected member of the community:

The griefer is the guy that plays an online game for no other reason than to give others a hard time and laugh at their misfortune (I use the term “guy” here because, in my experience, the ratio of male to female griefers is about 10,000:1). The griefer is the one that will run up to you, out of nowhere and either attack you or, in the case of some games that require certain items to be used for spells, etc... will first steal whatever you have that is needed to defend yourself, THEN attack you. They also rejoice in finding ways to break into your house or your clan's house, usually through the use of bugs in the software, after which they will proceed to rob you blind...²³

The description goes on to enumerate, with great specificity, the types of things that griefers are known to do in MMORPGs. The general idea, though, is that for no other goal than to harass other players, a griefer will make gameplay for other players difficult or annoying. This encompasses a wide range of behavior, from the gameplay-based infractions mentioned above, to verbal harassment, to more creative kinds of grief, mentioned below. With griefing, anything goes, as long as it's irritating.

There are several ways to explain this phenomenon, most of them valid and overlapping. The first and most obvious explanation is that certain people simply take pleasure in the suffering of others and, removed from the ramifications and guilt of causing suffering in real life, these players are free to indulge in their more ethically dubious whims. The anonymity and dissociation that let C. justify his scamming is also

that which fuels the practice of what amounts to online sadism. One self-avowed griefer, Kurt Frerichs, explains his motives simply: "Griefers feed on the negative reactions of the people they kill... There's nothing sweeter than when you kill someone, and they spout insults at you for hours. That's when you know you got him. It sounds really cruel, but it's fun."²⁴ Not even the benevolent, all-powerful *Everquest* guides—the SOE-employed enforcers of policy—are above griefing, as we see in the case of a guide who, in November of 2000, bound 20 characters to a deadly mountain and watched them die repeatedly until other guides intervened²⁵.

Frerichs' motivations are shared by the vocal constituency of griefers active online, as for many of them, griefing supplants actual gameplay, and so subscription fees are being paid solely to cause other players pain. Since the rules and parameters of *Everquest* are designed to preclude "abusive" gameplay, circumventing the limitations of the medium usually requires a degree of creativity or skill. For example, most *Everquest* servers are designated "PvE", or "Player vs. Environment"²⁶, which means that players cannot fight or harm one another. This can be circumvented, however, by having two consenting players type "/d", which is shorthand for "/duel". Griefers sometimes approach low-level players and convince them to type "/d" for various bogus reasons, which will of course start a duel which the more experienced griefer always wins (App. B). Dying in-game forces a player to spend time retrieving their corpse and restoring their character's items, so grief is assured, especially if the hoax occurred within a particularly difficult dungeon that is impossible to get back into. So this type of griefing is predicated on newer players' ignorance of keyboard shortcuts; although education is certainly not

the intent of the griefer, a player who has been tricked will certainly not forget what “/d” stands for.

Other common techniques: luring a mob of enemies into a group of unsuspecting adventurers, forcing the group to fight the aggravated mob unprepared; stealing the dropped treasure of a monster who wasn't killed by them (“ninja looting”); luring players into bank vaults and locking them in with a rogue character, and countless others (App. B). These are obvious enough pranks, simply exploiting different quirks in the game's mechanisms in order to harm other players or prevent them from progressing and traveling freely.

Some acts of griefing, while annoying, play off of the sympathies of players. Begging is one of the odder ways to grief players; it basically amounts to standing around and asking anybody who will listen for equipment, items, or help. Beggars occasionally even look the part, wearing deliberately shabby clothing in order to garner sympathy²⁷. This is, of course, simply to coax

The griefer, then, seems to have little at stake, being motivated purely out of boredom and suffering no consequences. However, there are more volatile forms of griefing that are personally relevant to both the offender and the offended. Although one of the leading motivations for playing *Everquest* is stress relief²⁸, the inevitable disputes that occur among players in the online communities may lead to conflict, and subsequently, a motivation to personally grief a specific player.

Interestingly, a survey reveals that among players of *Everquest*, those who play most are most likely to receive a high rating of Neuroticism when given a standard personality assessment²⁹; Neurotics, by definition, tend to be “quick to anger” and “have

difficulty resisting temptations and coping with stress”³⁰. Given this, and given the lack of potential repercussions, it is not surprising that straightforward verbal harassment, or “telling”, occurs both in public and private. As MMORPG developer Gordon Walton states, “There are all kinds of virtual assaults where people are basically confronted in ways they didn't think were possible. Sexual stuff, racial stuff. You name it, and it's happened”³¹.

A player who goes by the name Syrienne describes her experiences in this regard:

Ever wonder why real women get frustrated playing on EQ?... In my EQ playing career... almost 4 years now, I have been stalked, abused verbally, and harassed in what is primarily a male-dominated society... the constant flirtation over my character... the *BITCH* when I refuse advances... etc. It gets on my nerves. So we took someone into the guild that was having the SAME problems I have had all along... old story. She was *dating* someone in the game... he took it too seriously... she backed off... he freaks out. We took her and her RL boyfriend into the guild and did so quietly... she said nothing about anything to us... and WHAMMO! The tells started. It seems her old guild is out to ruin her name... just because the guild leader was spurned. Sheeeesh... Sure this is a game... but people DO get hurt... AND there are freaks on here too.³²

This post reveals what seems to be a consolidated, systematic regimen of griefing, motivated by an online romantic rejection. The motivations here are strictly emotional, and in this case, the attacks are not coming from one but an entire guild of players, who very likely do not consider themselves griefers. The issue of gender comes into play as Syrienne suggests that women (or at least players with female avatars) are more predisposed to be victims of harassment than men. This suggests that real-world prejudices and biases motivate these harassments. Boredom and entertainment, then, have little to do with this type of griefing; in this simulated universe, where the identity of the player so often intersects with that of his/her character, revenge, anger, jealousy, and pride have everything to do with it.

In contrast to the solitary nature of scammers, whose secrecy and anonymity is their best weapon, griefers have been known to create communities around their hobby, bragging on message boards and posting screenshots depicting successful harassments. One website, Griefers.net, has become popular enough to become more of a straightforward general-interest community, relegating the actual griefing to a mere motif. In-game, griefers occasionally work together to cause grief, using accomplices to more effectively verbally harass a player or to make it easier to steal an item³³. On a larger scale, griefers can band together to form cartels, affecting the game economy by monopolizing a certain item (such as Eye of Newt) and then selling them at exorbitant prices³⁴; this can have an impact on entire regions of the game, griefing people who are not even actively involved.

It would seem that griefing is inextinguishable. The nature of a griefer, whether bored or malevolent, is to interfere in whatever way possible, and once successful annoyance is confirmed, s/he either moves on to his/her next victim, or simply signs off. Unlike the actual game of *Everquest*, there is no sense of progress to griefing, no continuity, no tangible or salvageable reward for wronging other players, merely satisfaction intrinsic in the task. This means that if someone who plays solely for the thrill of griefing is suspended, banned, or punished, s/he doesn't stand to lose much in the way of equipment or experience. So it goes for the dedicated griefers; except for diligent-yet-perpetually imperfect patrolling of the servers, there is no real way yet to stop them from doing what they do best.

Subversion and Creative Expression

The previously described forms of transgression both have in common a destructive quality; scamming deprives players of everything they virtually own, while griefing by definition raises the ire of those it affects. Although it is a much rarer and underreported phenomenon, there is evidence to suggest that there also exist forms of transgression with constructive ends or results, though the means and intentions behind the transgressive acts may be undesirable. It can be argued, for example, that although C.'s scamming exploits had a profoundly negative impact on those he chose to target, it also yielded an interesting by-product: "...we usually focused on the more expensive items... Most of the smaller stuff was given away to new players, in a Robin Hood like fashion" (App. A). The Robin Hood comparison here indicates well how a transgressive act can both benefit and detract from the player community.

Intentional or unintentional, many of the common bug exploits in the game—such as tricking a player into dropping items into a glitched container and having an accomplice steal the money that is dropped as a result of the bug (App. B)—also have the effect of forcing SOE to fix them. Alex Pham of the Chicago Tribune remarks: "There is even a school of thought that griefers play a vital role, sniffing out technical bugs in the game and lending a sense of flesh-and-blood tension."³⁵ In this way, *Everquest* transgressors serve a function analogous to hackers^{III}. The game's flaws are exposed, and often game-enhancing features are implemented to fix them; as C. remarks, regarding the current state of scamming:

^{III} The term "hacker" here does not refer to one who tries to exploit technological flaws in *Everquest* in order to gain an advantage in the game, but rather to hackers in the more generally understood sense. A good understanding of this subculture can be found in Douglas Thomas's definitive book *Hacker Culture*, as well as, of course, *The Hacker Manifesto*.

...with the new bazaar trading system, [trading] is all automatic, no human interaction.[It] hurts on swinging hot deals. Before, people would just use the /auc channel, and be like, "[I'm] selling this item", and you talk to them, work out a price, lie to them, whatever... Now there is this zone you go to: put your stuff in a bag, set a price for each item, go AFK and people can just buy it from you while you are gone, so [the] price is whatever they set, and easily looked up in a search menu. So if you are trying to rip someone off, they can check in 2 seconds to see [if] it's a bad deal...^{IV} (App. B).

In this case, C. refers to the Bazaar system that was implemented with the December 2001 release of the *Shadows of Luclin* expansion to *Everquest*³⁶. This is a good example of a streamlining of the game that responds to and fixes grievances resulting from scammer pressure.

This brings up an interesting dimension to transgression: since tangible change is proven to result from the actions and complaints of the player community, it seems to indicate that in-game protest of undesirable game elements might work very well. Indeed, on November 7th, 2003, it was announced that there was to be a prominent gathering of members of *Everquest*'s "Warrior" class, in order to protest game balance issues³⁷. One of the organizers of this "Stand Down", a player known as Darkoan, posted this message to a Warrior community message board:

Fellow Warriors,
I know that I'm no formal leader of the Warrior community. I'd love to see someone like Furor or Brutul take this up, but still I can't stand by and watch this anymore without taking action! After years of watching us erode into what we are now. Years of seeing the parses, the breakdowns, the explanations of how sad balance and particularly our class has become. Here's where I personally am at on this:
I'm willing to be banned to make a statement!³⁸

The call-to-arms followed with a lengthy explanation of where all concerned Warriors would meet, what they would wear, and what they would do. Specifically, the aim was to flood the server with canned slogans, such as, "Today we STAND DOWN in

^{IV} Quote edited for clarity.

defiance of the pure melee class imbalance that exists, and has existed, in Norrath. May Rallos strengthen our plea to the Gods!"³⁹ in order to cause disruption, or at least force a large and captive audience to hear their plea. These acts could certainly be construed as a violation of *Everquest's* Rules of Conduct, which state that both "Making excessive and inappropriate use of public channels of communications" and "Intentionally causing excessive zone latency" are prohibited⁴⁰; however, as Darkoan's manifesto so boldly asserted, the cause was worth the threat of being banned.

While there does exist a mechanism for filing grievances in-game (the /petition command), this form of protest transgresses this fairly restrictive command by sheer force of numbers. There is no risk that a single /petition command will crash a server; there is no visibility inherent in one player's isolated complaint. By this transgressive, potentially irritating, and perhaps destructive act, players are given a voice and an opportunity to change the nature of the reality in which they operate.

The typical MMORPG can be expected to cost ten to fifteen million dollars to develop⁴¹. This prohibitive but necessary cost suggests that for the foreseeable future, only large corporations will be able to produce them. It has been a longstanding cultural fear that the homogenization of taste will be brought about by corporations dictating how one can and should think, feel, and act. Given that the corporation alone dictates the fundamental parameters of the MMORPG, and that it possesses omnipotent control over every individual character, committing a transgression in itself becomes an almost identity-affirming act. Technology commentator Philip Bereco writes about the phenomenon of the "appearance of choice":

As David Dickson has said about the about the automobile, they give you tremendous numbers of choices: color, white or black wall tires, digital or sweep-hand clock. But the important decisions, like what kind of propulsion system it's going to have, you don't have any choice about... without the whole

technological infrastructure, which is as much a part of the technology as the artifact of the car, you cannot have an electric car... One's choices only appear to be decentralized.⁴²

In *Everquest*, you can choose your character's class, race, gender, appearance, equipment, all sorts of variables that transgress the limitations of real life. However, the nature of this transgression is fixed, finite; one can count only so many differences between a Cleric and a Warrior before one realizes that neither is able to make an obscene hand gesture.

Thus, any case in which players subvert their medium is an important affirmation of possibility in a spuriously infinite universe. In the case of the Warriors, the threat of stand down worked, at least to draw attention to the Warriors' plight, as Edward Castronova of the Terra Nova gaming weblog recounts:

The protest was announced on November 7 and originally scheduled for Tuesday, November 18. On November 14, Alan VanCouvering, EQ's Community Manager, announced in an interview a major overhaul of melee combat systems (read: warrior issues)... the warrior leaders have now postponed the protest until December 2. Whether it happens will depend on the policy announcement on the 24th.⁴³

So it has been demonstrated that transgression can take the form of in-game social protest, which is generally considered positive; however, due to the very vocal and potentially disruptive nature of these protests, this does not divorce transgression from its stigma as an annoyance to those not involved in the transgression. It can even be conceived that this same form of "standing down" could be employed as a form of terrorism, with multiple players casting effects-heavy spells causing a server to crash. The question then becomes: does there exist a form of in-game transgression that is entertaining and/or useful, both to those breaking the rule and to random onlookers? Given that reports or conversation about these types of practices are almost non-existent on most message boards, the safe response would be that it depends on the player. Some

players not involved in the act of transgression may actually derive pleasure from observing the act, as a form of performance entertainment. Sympathizers with the Warrior protest might cheer on the throngs of howling Warriors; a player tricked into being locked into a vault might find the joke amusing, so long as it was performed by a close friend; and if it is possible to imagine grievers—online sadists—couldn't one also conceive of online masochists?

III. Backlash and Reactions to Transgression

Although it is not always negative or reviled by the player community, rule-defying is still often highly associated with griefing and hacking. This attitude makes sense when considering a player who subscribes to the game in order to play the game as it is presented. In single-player games or non-electronic games, transgressing is less practiced because the player interacts either with a computer who has no motive to transgress, or with friends, who ordinarily don't want to cause their friends grief. This changes when one plays with disinterested strangers. The expectation among most “goody-two-shoes”⁴⁴ players is that all players abide by the same set of rules; in fact, the RPG genre defines itself on letting players believe that they inhabit a closed system, internally consistent and free of outside restriction or influence. The transgressor, then, is a conduit between the real and game worlds, causing one to influence the other and stripping away the transparency⁴⁵ of the game medium.

The Impact of Transgression on the Player

As interesting as the transgressor's role in the gaming universe is, the net impact of in-game transgressions has certainly been detrimental to the game universe. As even C. admits, "Losing everything your character owns is grounds for quitting." (App. B) Another player by the handle of HaemishM commented on the effects of griefing in particular:

What makes the problem [of griefing] even more critical for MMOG's is the damage one serial griever can do to the game's single most important facet, the community... The true joy, the deepest interaction the game provides us isn't between the player and the engine, it is between the player and other players... Multiplayer games live and die by the strength of their community. Every single act of grief against one individual in that community diminishes the whole. For every person who quits a game, whether permanently or just for the night, because some asshole ks'ed them, is one less person who could drive that community to new heights.⁴⁶

For those players who continue to play despite the threat of griefing, the game experience for them is often impacted. To some extent, a culture of fear has arisen; in one case, a message board post calling for a meeting in a PvP server was met with the reply: "Not a good idea to use an open forum to call for a meeting in a PvP area. Either the ones calling the meeting could be pk griefers or a group of them could show up and ruin things."⁴⁷ Play is affected by an outside concern—that is, the choice of what server one chooses to arrange one's meeting on—and the reality that players are paying for becomes an unmistakably virtual one, for all practical purposes.

Perhaps more important than the issue of how extramedial actions affect the game experience is the question of how game events affect the real lives of players. As mentioned above, people have married and divorced as a result of events that happened in-game; for periods in history, it has also been argued that game-related events have cost people their lives. While there are several cases that have thrown this absurd notion into

cultural prominence, the most well-known case is of a clinically obsessed *Everquest* player, 21-year old Shawn Woolley. The following is a composite account of the Woolley case, gathered from various sources⁴⁸.

Woolley had a history of addiction to *Everquest*, as well as a history of schizoid personality disorder and depression; after having tried to rehabilitate himself off of the game, he regressed to his former addiction, quitting his job and distancing himself from close friends and family. In his Hudson home, at 6 AM on Thanksgiving morning in 2001, Woolley fatally shot himself while at his computer, playing *Everquest*.^V The Milwaukee Sentinel Journal speculated (strongly, and perhaps unfoundedly) that an in-game loss of treasure or status could have been the impetus for Woolley's suicide⁴⁹. The truth of this assertion is dubious, considering that he secretly purchased the gun he used to shoot himself a full week before his death⁵⁰, but it may be, at least, plausible:

Elizabeth Woolley remembers when her son was betrayed by an EverQuest associate he had been adventuring with for six months. Shawn's online brother-in-arms stole all the money from his character and refused to give it back

"He was so upset, he was in tears," she said. "He was so depressed, and I was trying to say, 'Shawn, it's only a game.' I said he couldn't trust those people."

If Elizabeth Woolley, despite her outsider's knowledge of the game^{VI}, is accurately conveying what had happened, then it would seem that Shawn had once been a

^V The Woolley case briefly gained national attention, for two reasons. First, its reinforcement of a commonly-held belief that video games are unhealthy gave it sensational appeal. The Milwaukee Sentinel Journal, drawing a strong association between video games and drug addiction, entitled one section of its article "Hooked on Evercrack"; though this is a common term used in jest by *Everquest* players, the MSJ article went on to quote a psychiatrist who "compared playing online games to drinking alcohol". The second reason Woolley's death gained prominence was because of the efforts of his mother, Elizabeth Woolley, who became a vociferous game addiction awareness activist, petitioning SOE to add labels warning against potential addiction on their products.

^{VI} Regarding the scrawled notes around Shawn at the time of his death, the MSJ writes: "...Woolley is not sure if they are names of online friends, places he explored in the game or treasures his character may have captured in quests."

victim of grieving, and a severely affected one, at that. This fact makes the Woolley case immediately relevant to the idea of transgression: in-game events provoked an immediate and tangibly felt reaction in Woolley's real life. This is not to suggest, of course, that Woolley's intense reaction is by any means typical of victims of grieving, but rather that the degree to which one is involved in a game is the factor that will likely determine the impact that grieving has on the player's real life.

By serving as a reminder of the inevitable intrusion of the real world into the fantasy world, it is possible that the transgressor plays the role of the reality check, which in Woolley's case, might have been useful if he was perhaps exposed to it earlier. There is no doubt that C.'s actions affected somebody, and the potential extent to which his actions are felt are made concrete by a case like Woolley's. For most players, grieving will merely remain an issue of the quality of virtual life; however, any source of more or less intense and volatile emotional reactions with dire real-life consequences, should not be ignored.^{VII}

The Impact of Transgression on the Industry

The result of players leaving, for whatever reason, means one important thing for SOE: the loss of subscription revenue. Impact on the virtual community aside, with prices of the actual retail *Everquest* game dipping below \$10⁵¹, the massive cost of maintaining,

^{VII} The Woolley case is just one of a spate of accounts of *Everquest*'s allegedly adverse effects on its players. Another case involves a man who murdered his son as a result of the son's interference with the man's *Everquest* gameplay (<http://www.avault.com/news/displaynews.asp?story=132001-15200>), while yet another

updating, and patrolling a persistent online world is justified only by how many paying players return to the game every month.

Simply preventing online transgressions is the most cost-effective method of dealing with undesired activity. Aside from simply doing the best job they can while the game is in development, the extensive four-phase beta testing period for the original game⁵² and its successive expansions is the developers' only real way of sniffing out exploitable errors. The beta tests are fairly routine, conducted with a small and manageable pool of trustworthy applicants who provide constant user feedback; though it helps in catching more macroscopic gameplay issues (balance, stability, major glitches), it only catches a small percentage of the bugs that are likely to be exploited. Other preventative measures have to do with how the game's parameters itself are set.

Everquest was the first MMORPG to offer PvE gameplay; in fact, the majority of the servers are PvE, and time has proven that the majority of players prefer it that way⁵³. This was the biggest step in preventing the kind of transgressive and excessive player-killing (PK-ing) that rendered the previously dominant MMORPG, 1997's *Ultima Online*, practically uninhabitable⁵⁴. Verbal harassment from a single player can be silenced with the /squelch command, and SOE issues scam alerts to members of its community⁵⁵ to warn players of the more common types of in-game fraud.

The most effective preventative measure that SOE has is its Terms of Service and Rules of Conduct⁵⁶. The value of this pseudo-legal set of rules, which is accompanied by descriptions of its own codified and soberly-worded punishments, lies mainly in its deterrent power. As C. stated, when asked whether the threat of Terms of Service and account banning influenced his scamming activities: "Yes! That is exactly why I quit."

(App. A) As mentioned before, players who are at all interested in playing *Everquest* as it was intended to be played have much to lose if their account is cancelled; therefore, only those who are exclusively dedicated to griefing or scamming will be likely to risk violating the Terms of Service.

The problem with these rules comes when they must be enforced. According to a 2002 article, “Sony's customer service manager, Alan Crosby, estimated that each of his 60 customer-support staff members spends an average of one hour out of an eight-hour shift dealing with grief-related activity.”⁵⁷ The cost of the work required to handle just griefers, then, far outstrips the subscription rates that the griefers are paying; part of the maintenance costs, then, must go specifically towards enforcing the law of the land.

So now money is being spent to handle griefing. Also, since SOE's justification for requesting that eBay forbid equipment auctions was predicated on prohibiting the unlawful sale of intellectual property⁵⁸, the issue of real-life ownership is also involved in the game world. By SOE's actions, it would seem that they own the characters and equipment, not the players. It would seem, then, that there exist fair grounds to bring the law into affairs of the game. While actual legal threats have very effectively prevented and dealt with hacking directly into *Everquest* servers⁵⁹, this same has not happened in terms of violating the rules of a game, for several possible reasons. Like C. said, although damage to legally-defined property and undesirable expenses are involved with in-game transgression, the IFCC's priorities are probably far, far away from the game world. From an outsider's perspective, it does make sense to leave companies to patrol their own creations: after all, they made the game, so why don't they simply make undesirable behavior within it impossible? The argument falls apart, of course, when one considers

that what enables most in-game transgression are necessary elements of the game, such as item trading and chat; as Mulligan and Patrovsky write:

The problem is that in many cases, undesirable behavior is very similar in outward form to permissible or even desirable behavior. Distinguishing between the two often requires a human value judgement. For example, a computer subroutine would have a hard time distinguishing between someone who was “stalking” another player, and someone who was merely following a player because he was lost and too shy to ask for help directly.

In addition, different people have different opinions about what is desirable and what is not desirable, and that may change with a given context.⁶⁰

It would seem, then, that the best that SOE can do is defend themselves from the legal repercussions of player grief by using the End-User License Agreement⁶¹ (EULA) to preemptively limit the amount of liability that SOE has for any game-related misfortunes. As a prerequisite agreement to playing the game, this effectively makes the player community personally shoulder any grievances that, in a real life context, they would have the authorities handle. This laissez-faire, do-it-yourself mentality may ultimately be preferable for most players, as the threat of legal action for potentially unwitting or ambiguously defined misdeeds committed within a game setting is even more disillusioning and hypermediating than the transgressive behavior it would seek to prevent. The fight against rule-breaking seems to be a no-win situation for SOE; either way, it would seem that the consistent, immersive, freeform gameplay that they are intending to achieve is somehow threatened, undermined.

IV. Transgression as Meta-Game

If SOE can't beat that vocal minority of players who insist on fault-finding, on using the tools of the master to destroy the master's house, on pulling fellow players out

of the comfortable illusion of the fantasy world, then perhaps it is time that they join them. The inextricability of the bad with the good in new technological media is not a new idea; as Harvard University's Emmanuel Mesthane writes:

New technology creates new opportunities for men and societies and it also generates new problems for them. It has both positive and negative effects and it usually has the two of them at the same time and in virtue of each other.⁶²

Transgressing the boundaries of online gaming has never been historically or categorically bad; the strength of many online games, in fact, derives from the initiative that the player community takes to create content for the games, whether in the guise of message board discussions or actual in-game items. As Will Wright says, in the MMORPG *The Sims Online*, 90 percent of the content is player-created⁶³. As Mulligan and Patrovsky write on the topic of player-created content:

“[Content creating capabilities] allow the players to have a ‘game within the game’. Be prepared to see players playing the game in ways you never expected or intended. They will create their own content with whatever is available... the rules were by the players themselves within the context of the game’s capabilities, and they were managed by the players... be prepared to see players playing *their* game.”⁶⁴

Those statements apply broadly to the idea of transgression as its own, self-contained meta-game; however, they differ in one subtle respect. A game, by definition, implies an adherence to rules. When a player transgresses these rules, he is not playing within the boundaries of the game, but rather, playing with the game, using the game itself as a component in the larger game of transgression. To a transgressor, *Everquest* is the real “game within a game”.

How, then, should developers adapt their games in order to cater to the new recreational form of transgression, without jeopardizing their loyal fanbases? One solution might be one analogous to the creation of PvE servers: create a server in which, short of manipulating the code of the game with extramedial technological hacks, any sort of transgression—social, moral, political, or otherwise—is not only permitted, but

encouraged. This might encourage players to be flamboyantly creative, freed from the obligation to role-play in a generic fantasy universe; on *Ultima Online*, for example, there were cases of players staging shows of *The Wizard of Oz*, complete with dialogue and staging, using spells as special effects⁶⁵. There are several reasons, however, why cordoning off a transgression would be infeasible: unfair advantage to players who are allowed to camp monsters, new players playing there unwittingly, a vague definition of what is still prohibited, and so on. The chief among these concerns is that, if rule-breaking is permitted, then rule-breaking is no longer rule-breaking. Any attempt to actively implement the semiotics of in-game transgression would have to be done without the knowledge of the players involved.

So the question of whether it would even be possible to create a system that caters to the transgressor is still debatable. There seems to exist an ideological conflict between those who transgress and those who do not: the latter derives pleasure from doing well within the parameters of the game, while the former enjoys merely working around those parameters. One wants to keep fantasy wholly separated from reality, while the other rejoices in their intersection. *Everquest* has already spent 8 years positioning itself as the premier fantasy game in America, and as an established success owned by one of the largest companies in the world, it already possesses the costly mechanisms for monitoring and dealing with transgressive behavior that adversely affects players, i.e. griefing and scamming. In a few short weeks, *Everquest II* will be released, and will very likely be a success based on the strength of the franchise; as an upgrade to *Everquest* in almost every respect, eventually, it will likely become the new home of the majority of the original *Everquest* communities. And so it ends that *Everquest*, a fully self-involved

member of the fantasy genre, never truly reconciled itself to transgressive behavior, but rather engaged in a rough dialectic with it: some griefers were caught and banned, while some infuriated dozens of players without ever being caught. Some players made easy money by scamming faceless characters in the game, while some were driven to tears by betrayal.

In the future, MMORPGs might distinguish themselves by being more conscious of the player-game interaction, even providing incentives to play with the medium. Such a game would be fundamentally different than *Everquest*, and might even alleviate some of *Everquest's* negative criticisms; in a long polemic posted on the Slashdot online forums, David Sanftenberg says of the game's lasting appeal:

...the game stops being fun. By that time though, you're so "addicted" to the game, you don't realize it. The game becomes a source of frustration and anger instead of a source of entertainment and fun. It becomes a chore. It becomes a job. You plod away at the keyboard, obsessed and consumed with getting that new item, or finishing that last quest... It's a game that goes on forever, and one that you can never win.

Everquest is a game full of people who want to "win" and "be the best" at any cost. This includes grieving you and your guild, making your gameplay miserable. Why not simply quit then, you ask? If the game isn't fun and sucks this badly, why would anyone play it? Well, because they are addicted. They are addicted to the mobs, to the loot, and to the social atmosphere with other people in their guilds. They have invested so much time in these characters (often hundreds of days of play time, sometimes more time than they spend at their jobs), that they can't will themselves to give it up...

Often people you thought were your friends in the game were simply using you to advance, or improve their characters. Online relationships between people in EQ are fickle, and are only good as long as everyone's getting a good dose of the drug (loot, advancement in the game, and good social relations with their guild).⁶⁶

Sanftenberg raises many issues in his post: materialistic item obsession, superficial online relationships, repetitive tasks. Centering a game around concepts of transgression—or at least accounting for them—would not solve these problems, but rather repurpose them. As mentioned earlier, rule-transgression is not a cumulative task, which makes contingency on items unnecessary. Again, mentioned earlier, the superficiality of online relationships makes the act of harassing other players much less consequential, and so players may indulge their anti-social whims with less restriction.

One example that utilizes this aspect is the moderately popular small-scale online game *SiSSYFiGHT 2000*, in which the exchange of insults between players actually forms the basis of the game⁶⁷. And since the act of transgression typically involves directly working with or against other people, with no “environmental” task like monster-killing to serve as a distraction, there is a good degree of task variability.

The reconcilability of the rule to its transgression is a possibly unanswerable social question, but it is undeniable that, both in their lives and in their games, people like to break rules. The testing of boundaries is an affirmation of free will, of doing what suits one best, heedless of the consequences. Those who find loopholes just to exploit them, harass people just because they’re there, and do things simply because they can be done are playing a game that can exist nowhere else but in the space between what one is told to do and what one is able to do.

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VI. Appendices

Appendix A – Email Interview with C., *Everquest* scammer, 3/14/2004 (Bold type indicates questions asked by the author.)

From: "C." <XXXXXX@XXXXXXXXXX>
To: "Tony Tulathimutte" <tonytula@stanford.edu>
Subject: Re: Email interview
Date: Thu, 11 Mar 2004 20:54:41 -0800

The below is all lies, you FBI/IFCC agent.

> **Hey, C. If you could answer these as thoroughly as you could, that**

- > would be excellent. Also, if there's anything else you think I should know
- > about the topic, the history of EQ, or cheating related topics in this game
- > or other MMORPGs, fire away.
- >
- > In what ways exactly do you cheat / hack / use the game for purposes other
- > than it was created for?

If I leave something out or assume you know something, just let me know- there is no hacking to it unfortunately. Beyond simple password guessing and whatnot, it is more a matter of personal manipulation rather than being a hacker. Everquest is a game full of real people, who respond to the same manipulation as anyone would in real life. The only difference is, there are simply no consequences. Here is basically how it works. Sony has various rules and regulations to keep this "scam" from happening, but what it does it make it that much harder to stop.

I'm not sure exactly how much you know about EQ, so I will start from scratch. When you buy Everquest, you get a CD key that is account specific. What that means is any character you create is on that account, which you access with your user name and password.

As you might know, Everquest is a game which takes an unbelievable amount of time. Leveling a character to "max" level can take years of a persons life, playing 12+ hours a day. Many players on EQ have well over 200 days ONLINE play time, which is really hard for most people who do not play online games to even imagine. A significant portion of the players are not your average, casual video gamers, but hardcore powergaming EQ fanatics. They eat/sleep/everything EQ. What that means, is if you are not playing 12+ hours a day, you cannot compete in that online world.

Time=Money. Some people have money, yet no time. Most people assume that Everquest is full of 13 year old D&D players, when in fact a wide variety of people play the game, including families, parents, etc. I've run into all types in game, and its always a suprise. Here is where Everquest's own economy crosses over into real life. Some people enjoy the game, yet simply cannot dedicate the time (or choose not to). Therefore, if Everquest takes time that people can not afford to spend, then they could, if they really want to play the game with a decent character, to buy the items.

Sony quickly picked up on this problem. The main problem was that because it was an online world, there was simply no way to police it. If you bought an item on Ebay and sent money, if the other party did not come through with your electronic item, then you were out of luck. Sony did not want to have to police this, so they banned it. If you reported getting ripped off, your account was banned. It became similar to calling the cops for a bad drug deal.

Without a way to sell items on Ebay, someone quickly filled the void and created a site called www.playerauctions.com. This site mimics ebay, but the only difference is the only auctions held on the site were for Everquest. Currently, it now supports other games like Dark Age of Camelot, Shadowbane, and Anarchy Online. With this new site, people were able to buy and sell items, which was pseudo policed by Playerauctions, yet it was still mostly based on trust and risk. With a bad deal on Playerauctions, at least one could have documentation of payment (via paypal) and report it to the IFCC (<http://www1.ifccfbi.gov/index.asp>). So once again, EQ's items were being bought and sold for REAL money, which is once again a concept nearly impossible for non-online gamers to imagine. Some people have shitty lives. Sometimes Everquest is an easy escape. If you are going to spend \$50 on drugs, why not spend it on Everquest. Others consider it more of a "hobby," and then of course there are those who call Everquest a life style.

If Everquest was your life style, it is easy to see how one might be interested in buying an online, electronic item which would aid your game play. If you use EQ as your escape, and it slowly takes over your free time, then buying a new weapon or piece of armor is equivalent to buying a new part for your car or something else which might ease the consuming mind.

I started playing Everquest in highschool, because highschool was completely worthless and boring. Everquest was cheap, contained nearly infinite entertainment, and easily sucks one in with the offering of progress. I played the game to death until I finally got bored of it, and figured I'd give a shot to selling my character online. I spent a large portion of my online time buying/selling items, and becoming a form of in game shop for people to buy and sell items. I was more interested in the business aspect of it, and it felt like I was actually making progress and gaining in-game wealth. When I sold my account, I was not really too sure of what the profit might be, but I posted it on Playerauctions.com anyhow because I figured it was either money wasted on something I'd never play again, or free money. To my delight, someone bought my character for \$650. Being a highschool student who had never had a job, this made my day. It was pretty unbelievable that someone would spend such a huge amount of money on the game, but it was at that point when I figured out that there must be a good way to make money from the game. I checked how long I had played that character, and to my dismay it worked about to have yielded slightly over \$1 an hour. My character at the time had 25 days played, which works out to 600 hours of online time. I guess playing characters and selling them wouldnt work.

I browsed player auctions for a while, and saw someone selling a lower end account, but with rather nice equipment on the character. I invested \$250 in the account and checked out the equipment. I took each item, and sold it seperately on Playerauctions. From the \$250, I made about \$550 total. It wasn't bad, but it was still time consuming and bothersome.

There must have been an easier way to do this. Get the items for free. How could I do that? I talked one of my more "shady" friends into playing EQ prior to selling my character and told him of the money I had made. He was interested and started chatting with people in game. I had sold the items from that one character, but still had the account. He offered it for trade for a much lower level account. The person took the trade without thinking twice, as it was one of those "too good to be true" deals. Now, although I consider myself fairly shady (made money in high school from pirating CDs, etc), I felt really bad about lying to people and trading them stripped accounts or whatnot. On the other hand, I was fairly poor and really wanted some easy money. I talked to my friend and he said he would handle taking accounts, and I would handle laundering and selling the equipment. We decided we would split it 50/50 and got to work.

His method was fairly simple. The easiest way is to offer people "trades" for their accounts being sold. If they are being sold, they are usually open to haggling or at least making some easy money. Let's say a person is selling a level 65 cleric. The account has a name attached to it, which has an in-game reputation. My friend would offer an account worth more, dollar wise, to the person trading the account. Usually the deal was too good to pass up. The catch was, this was an offer via e-mail and didn't have much backing considering the information was made up. My friend would ask to "test" the account and make sure it was as stated. The key part of this deal is getting THEIR password FIRST. If they won't do this, it is a lot harder to make the deal happen, but it can still work. Here is how you do it:

He would usually be chatting with the person on AIM, or through a hotmail account. If on AIM, the convo is in real time and time is important. I would have my computer waiting at the login screen waiting for the information. The second the person would give up the password (and strangely, when the deal is TOO good, they almost always do), I would log into the account, change the password, name, zip code (all required to reset the password), and give him the ok. Meanwhile he was delaying them on AIM claiming his computer was logging in and loading the character. Shortly after, he blocks them or signs off and the deal is done. The account was still ours.

As I mentioned before, if they simply MUST view an account first, after a while we had enough accounts to risk as "proof." We would show them the account, and while they were logged in I would change the password. My friend would then change the password on their account, and once again the account was secured.

Now, the main risk is that they will contact Sony/Varent and let them know that they had been scammed. So once again, time is important. I would then go online, strip the character of equipment, and bring it to sell it for VERY cheap in game. Because of it, it was bought quickly and turned into in-game currency. With that money, I would buy up other items and continue to sell them. Online laundering is basically what it came down to, because we wanted to make sure that Sony could not work their way through the log files. Also, items were switched between characters and accounts as much as possible, to further hassle anyone who cared to check. Also, spreading the items out over various accounts we owned was a way of not putting all our eggs in one basket. Once in a while,

the GM (everquest police/online help) would contact an account in game and ban the account. At that point, all the items on that account are lost, and its time to move items more thoroughly to make sure the GM was unable to trace the other accounts.

You can see how it will quickly grow when you are taking control of more "reputable" names online. If you acquire an account with a well known character, you can log into that character, ask to borrow items, ask to check a guild mates character, check the guild bank, etc. Also, offering a well known character for trade is very appealing, and people would take the bait on it almost instantly.

So what do you do with tons of the best items you can get in Everquest? Head over to playerauctions.com and start selling. When someone would purchase an item, they got it. There was no scam there, because once you are dealing with the IFCC and PayPal, and not to mention REAL money, it is not something to take a risk in scamming. People would buy high end items from us, and always get what they bought. Because it was a trust issue, return customers would buy things again and again, because my auction name was to be trusted. Items ranged in price, but we usually focused on the more expensive items because we reached a point where there wasn't time for the smaller stuff. Most of the smaller stuff was given away to new players, in a Robin Hood like fashion. Once we had higher end items selling daily, cash was flowing in. One person purchased a SINGLE piece of armor (Donal's Breastplate, rare highly sought after piece) for \$650. Other pieces ranged from \$35-\$400, mostly averaging about \$150 each.

Here is why it was "legit." I was selling things on Paypal, and delivering. They had no complaint. I had absolutely NO link to Everquest or in game account theft, because there really isn't any way to see who was just chatting with you. If we were using a stolen account to get another account, all we were doing was using the login of someone else. My friend went through hotmail accounts to chat with people, with were also anonymous. The people wouldn't even bother reporting the scam because they would just be banned in game. Everquest is not "real" by most people's standards, so a place like the IFCC is not going to investigate an online thief in a roleplaying game. We were set. There was no chance of getting caught, the money was REALLY easy, and we kept gaining more and more accounts.

This went on for a 2 summers, where we made about \$12,000 total each. We would usually work every other week to not overwhelm people with trading scams and make people too paranoid. If we attacked too many people, word would get out that trading accounts was a BAD idea. Although I say 2 summers, it was very intermitant. We might work a week, then take a month off, etc. Making \$2000 in a day or two wasn't all that hard. If one piece of gear is worth up to \$700 or so, and an account can hold plenty of stuff, if we were lucky and an account with lots of sellable items fell into our hands, the money was fast. It was fun to make money from a game. It seemed so weird to check the paypal account and see tons of money sitting there.

The basic process was: steal account => use stolen account to lure in more accounts => launder items => use large amounts of in game cash to buy highly wanted items => post on playerauctions for sale => deliver. Because we had so much in game money, we were

able to watch auctions and figure out exactly which items were the best to buy to maximize profits. Also, selling bulk cash was an option when it simply got to be too much work. Lets say you have 100k platinum (Everquest currency) in game. At that point, 100k was worth about \$250 USD. If you can buy an item for 100k that sells for \$400 on playerauctions, it is an obvious move. By watching demand and picking items that will sell, the money is easy. You can even do this now by buying

Everquest money on playerauctions, and buying in game items that sell for more than the money you bought it with. I'm not sure why people do this, but I assume it is to avoid the hassle of looking to buy that item in game.

That is about it. It worked well, it was easy, and there was no way of getting caught or having any consequences. The WORST thing that could happen is that Sony would find an account with items which had been stolen, and ban the account. Yes, we lost money on bannings, but it was free money, which was basically risk free.

> Why do you do it? (e.g. for real-world monetary gain, for game advantage, for fun, etc.)

It was strictly for monetary gain. Its not fun to rip people off, but when they are fake people that you can easily ignore as real people, its fairly easy to get sucked in to. I was glad my friend had to deal with most of the complaints and crying when the account got stolen, so it removed me that much more from what I was really doing. At the time though, a highschooler with no job really cant afford anything. I love music and have always been into guitar gear, and this made buying those \$2000 guitars and amps possible. Its fun to be rich in highschool. Being able to spend \$500 on a whim because you felt like it was nice. Yes, it was a crappy thing to do, but that honestly didn't stop me. The only reason we quit is Sony eventually broke their own rule and started investigating the scams very thoroughly. After losing over \$5000 (potentially \$5k, it was still items in everquest) because Sony tracked down many of our accounts and banned them all at once (preventing further laundering) I called it quits. I hate to say it but I'd gladly do it again if the rules wern't enforced so much. My guess is we still over did it and ended up killing the business out of greed. Thats life.

> If only for monetary gain, would you engage in cheating practices if there was no monetary gain? If you cheat for game advantage, what effect would you say that acts of cheating have on the online gaming experience? Does it make it more or less enjoyable?

I don't usually cheat when I play videogames. I like a challenge, and that challenge is most of the reason why I even bother with videogames. Without that challenge, the game is just a waste of time. Have you ever played Diablo? I loved that game until I tried cheating. I made a bunch of free items for my self with a hex editor, and could not make them any better. Because of this, there was nothing left to do and the game got boring immediately. Never played it again. Because of that, I avoid cheating when

I feel the game is entertaining enough.

**> Can you give me examples of creative or expressive cheats, or do you think
> it's mostly a mundane, uncreative process?**

Creative cheats might be considered "exploits." They are not directly cheating, but abusing something in game. In everquest, it was found out that you could attack a monster from a certain point, and not get attacked back. What that does is give you the reward without the risk, which is appealing to players. Unfortunately, that risk is what makes the game exciting, thus making it a mundane, repetitive process with no risk to keep the attention of the player. Some people prize the status of their character so much that they are willing to sacrifice their own time to be looked upon in a good light by other online players. These are the people who actually sit there and repeat the same thing for hours trying to better their character. My Everquest "business" was rather mundane as well, but at least it had the excitement of getting caught and banned. Time was of the essence so it forced us to work quickly, and kept things fun. Buying that new toy you wanted was also pretty cool since I sadly enjoy buying things far too much. I did treat it like a business though, so even it was boring at points, it still had that reward at the end of the day.

**> How hard is it to cheat/hack? Please comment on the difficulty of different
> kinds of cheating/hacking.**

Hacking Everquest is nearly impossible. Many many people have tried it, and the only success stories I've heard were a couple of people in China (Taiwanese, called "TW's" in game. They didn't speak english, had their own guilds, and basically avoided contact with other gamers) managing to get into the Everquest servers and duplicate some items. It worked for a while but they were caught and banned eventually. The other thing is hacking Sony has a lot more risk than stealing an item from someone in game. Sony can sue you for a physical attack, where as when the action is in game, there is no law preventing that.

**> Do you see Terms of Service restrictions or the threat of account banning
> as effective deterrents to cheating/hacking?**

Yes! That is exactly why I quit. Sure, their TOS is lacking but they finally figure out that they HAD to admit to the problem of the scams and not just ban everyone they talked to. Sure, they did not want to have to take the time to police it, but it got to the point where players just weren't happy. Once in while we would give the accounts back to the owner once their items had been taken. They would log into the game and tell their guild they had been "hacked," and try to get their stuff back from the guild. It was common to hear this from people, but in reality it was nearly impossible. Short of guessing someones password (which, strangely, was the same as their user name a good amount of the time) they were NOT getting hacked. They just could not admit that they had tried to trade their account, because they would get banned. After a while it was clear that people

claiming they were "hacked" just got scammed while trying to trade their account, but it didn't stop them from saying so because the other option was getting banned.

> Would you agree with the notion that cheating is a form of "content creation", akin to modding or making utilities for games?

Well, "role-playing" a thief was a good excuse for these actions, considering it is a role playing game and someone has to be the bad guy. **Flat out cheating via hacks/loaders/front ends/trainers/etc seem a little boring to me**, unless the game is so weak to begin with that you might as well cheat to have any fun with it. Like I said above, I feel cheating makes the overall gaming experience rather mundane and pointless.

> What's your moral take on the practice of cheating? Is it something about the nature of the online game experience that makes it more or less acceptable?

Also semi previously answered, but "role-playing a thief" or playing the bad guy seems fun sometimes. I have always enjoyed business, and have worked on little businesses my entire life. Everquest was an easy way to start my own business without any collateral. The downside is someone already beat me to the legit buying and selling of items. You can see Yantis's site here: www.mysupersales.com. I found it more acceptable in game because you didn't have to admit to your self that the person you were taking advantage of was a real person. Online anonymity is a powerful tool in letting your morals take the backseat.

> Anything else I should know?

Well, with typing up 20 pages off the top of my head with no layout, its very easy I overlooked a point or didnt clarify something. If you want any more info, feel free to ask me anything else you would like to know.

Also, I'd be interested in reading your paper when you are done with it, so you should send it over when you are finished up. Anyhow, I hope that was helpful. Track me down on AIM for anything else.

Good luck.

-C.

Appendix B – Later Interview with C., *Everquest* scammer, 3/14-15/2004
(Conducted on AOL Instant Messenger—lightly edited for readability, handles changed)

Tony: are there any other scams and scam techniques you're aware of?

Tony: and also, are there any ways that people misuse the game just to mess with people for fun?

Tony: oh yeah, and when was the time frame of when you started playing and did your scamming?

C.: other scams are mostly just exploits such as item duplication and being unable to be hit by mobs

Tony: so, not many other non-hack exploits like yours?

C.: well, mine wasn't really an exploit, considering exploits usually involve abusing in game things

C.: mine was more exploiting people

C.: i guess you can run across a zone line, die, and reboot comp at same time or something

C.: end up with a duplicate set of gear

C.: but stuff like that is fixed within hours

C.: usually minutes

C.: it's closely monitored

C.: people misuse training a lot

Tony: do you know of any other kind of ways to mess with people?

Tony: for profit or otherwise?

C.: eh, what else does one have to gain if you don't want their account or items

C.: well, you can get aggro from a mob

Tony: well

C.: run it across some other party

Tony: oh yeah, I heard that

C.: zone/feign death/ etc

C.: then other group gets attacked

C.: that is the most standard one

C.: you can also use various spells to be an asshole

C.: EQ uses "play nice" rules though

C.: for example

C.: there are camps in game

C.: which is like a spot your group of 6 claims as theirs

C.: what that means, if your group is better, and you can just steal it

C.: it doesn't matter

C.: they will call a GM and whoever was there first keeps camp

C.: or /duel starts a battle between to PC's

C.: so if you go up to a level 1 and tell him to type /d

C.: it will default to /duel and you can rape him

C.: only rogues can pick locks (open/close)

C.: so you can open a bank door, lead someone in

C.: lock it

C.: doomed

Tony: oh man

C.: GM will come and ban your ass though

Tony: and they can't retrieve their corpse huh?

C.: you can charm a mob that someone else is fighting

C.: well, they won't die. they are just stuck

C.: so they WILL call a GM

C.: and you WILL get in trouble
C.: when a mob is charmed
C.: it acts as if it were a pet of the caster of charm
C.: which is considered a PC you cannot attack
C.: so if you are reallly close to killing a guy
C.: and someone charms it
C.: you cant hit it and finish it
C.: that is a big deal because some more powerful guys can take 5+ minutes to kill

Tony: what kind of trouble do you get into?

C.: depends

C.: warnings, time ban, perma ban

C.: you can also "steal" pulls from campus

C.: which is the most common one

C.: lets say a party has called claim to a large area

Tony: what's that?

C.: if you are sneaky and grab one they dont see, then its yours

Tony: ok

C.: which goes back to the camp dispute

Tony: grap one what?

C.: grab a monster from their claimed area

C.: monster = xp and loot

C.: more = better

Tony: aha

C.: and EQ is so busy that its very limited some times

C.: so its a battle for who gets the most

Tony: is the GM surveillance tight?

C.: not until you call for one

C.: at which point it is

C.: GMs can be invisible

Tony: how quickly do they usually respond?

C.: so you never really know

C.: depends on time and how many are currently online, but i find disputes get fixed within 15 minutes

C.: where as if you are just fucked cause some bug, i've had to wait like 2 hours before

C.: most of the other exploits had been fixed

C.: you used to be able to drop items on the ground very easily

C.: and someone could just snatch it up and run

C.: all that has been fixed though

C.: for example

C.: there was this big pot of fire thing near a trade zone

C.: lets say a player stands in the middle, and claims he is selling an item for a GREAT price

C.: someone offers to buy it, and he tells the player with cash to come to him

C.: the player with cash takes cash from invintory, then clicks the player standing

on the pot

C.: there was a bug in the pot and you couldnt target the player int he pot. the money drops to the ground and the guy on the pot has a friend waiting for the money drop

C.: pickup and gone

C.: also monsters are on a spawn timer

C.: so once they are killed, they might not be back for 15 minutes or so

C.: if a high level character goes into a camp and rapes everything in sight, everyone at that spot is out of luck for 15 minutes which gets really annoying too

C.: if you are a teleporting class, you get paid to port people around because travel is slow in the game. Lets say someone pays you to teleport them to a standard area. Then the druid teleports them to the most dangerous and impossible to leave zone ever and leaves em. thats pretty awful too

C.: you can drag corpses that people cant get back to

C.: lets say you are deep in a dungeon

C.: you are the only one left, and you need to drag your friends corpse back up, because by the time he gets back it will be crawling with monsters again

C.: he gives you concent to drag the corpse, and you drag it into a pit of lava or something where he wont ever find it

C.: that used to be more of a prob, but more bards can locate corpses, and necromancers and shadowknights can summon corpses to zone enterances

C.: but you uses to get in big trouble for that one

C.: cause its ultra fucked. losing everything your character owns is grounds for quitting

C.: lol

Tony: do you know how the GMs judge the penalties?

C.: it depends. some are super lax, create good items for players, have fun, and make it interesting

C.: some are tight asses who just ignore claims and ban people over little bitchy shit

C.: also no swearing/racist stuff in pub chat

C.: strict naming policy as well

C.: to keep "role playing" feel

Tony: yeah, I heard that

C.: so you dont have guys named Adolf Hitter and Azn 2133t

Tony: thats good I suppose

C.: yeah.

C.: there is a PK server, but that would be too much stress for me

C.: last thing you want is some guy who is way stronger than you (and there is ALWAYS one) kicking your ass while you are trying to earn some xp and taking your prized items

C.: in diablo or whatever, the stakes arent as high. there isnt the same level of time spend, or rarity involved

Tony: any more annoying things?

C.: spamming instant click spells

C.: lets say you can right click an item for instant spell effect

C.: it makes crazy particle effects, lags people down, and spams the chat channel

C.: i mean, its really up to whatever you can think up

Tony: yeah

Tony: I'm basically breaking down the motivations for transgressing on EQ

Tony: stress relief, the fun of exploiting game flaws, game advantage, grieving

Tony: or in your case, huge lucrative benefits

Tony: okay, so what's the time frame of when you started everquest, when you started scamming, and when you stopped?

C.: i played EQ for like 2 years

C.: then quit

C.: then scammed

C.: played for fun because i had the best gear ever just sitting around in the mean time

C.: quit, repeat

C.: lets see

C.: started in highscool freshman year i guess

C.: i was class of 2001 so thats like 1998 or so when i started

C.: it was late into it

C.: i think

C.: id ont even know

C.: so say 2000 -2001 is proolly scam

C.: and summer after high school

C.: and then i came back for summer after freshman year in college

(Later conversation, 3/14/2004)

C.: i logged on EQ a while ago trying to see if any cool scams were runnign but its so boring these days

C.: with the new bazaar trading system, its all automatic

Tony: would you say they're mostly dead now?

C.: no human interaction

C.: hurts on swinging hot deals

Tony: what's the bazaar system?

C.: before, people would just use the /auc channel;

C.: and be like "selling this item"

C.: and you talk to them

C.: work out a price

C.: lie to them

C.: whatever

C.: get a good deal

C.: now there is this zone you go to

C.: put your stuff in a bag

C.: set a price for each item

C.: go AFK and peopel can just buy it from you while you are gone

C.: so price is whatever they set

C.: and easily looked up in a search menu
C.: so if you are trying to rip someone off
C.: they can check in 2 seconds to see its a bad deal

Tony: aha

C.: when people buy accounts on ebay, they dont always know what their gear is worth

(Later interview, 2/15/04)

Tony (7:20:16 PM): from the interview I got the impression that you started scamming because you were disenchanted with low-paying jobs, high school being shitty, and the allure of buying stuff you wouldn't buy otherwise

C. (7:20:36 PM): yeah that pretty much works

Tony (7:20:40 PM): okay

Tony (7:21:28 PM): how did you explain all the money you got to your parents?

C. (7:21:47 PM): i told them i was selling items i earned from an online game

C. (7:21:54 PM): which was tenchinal enough to keep them satisfied

C. (7:22:25 PM): they dont know much about computers

C. (7:22:37 PM): so when you say somerthing like "oh i sell items from this game on ebay" thjat was plenty

Tony (7:24:14 PM): aha

C. (7:25:18 PM): they had an idea what i was spending, but i still bought stuff online and didnt tell em prices upfront

Tony (7:25:41 PM): anything I should know about your accomplice?

Tony (7:25:49 PM): oh, and how old were you when you started?

C. (7:26:30 PM): uhm 21 now

C. (7:26:37 PM): so lets see. 5 years ago?

Tony (7:26:59 PM): and your friend was same age?

C. (7:27:08 PM): no, 1 year younger

C. (7:27:19 PM): he honestly was fairly weird and immature

C. (7:27:29 PM): which was why he was perfect to get items for me to sell

Tony (7:27:47 PM): whose idea was it in the first place?

C. (7:28:00 PM): well i had done it with someone before that actually

Tony (7:28:37 PM): was it your idea initially

Tony (7:28:44 PM): or did you learn from someone else?

C. (7:29:21 PM): well,. i think it started it as a joke

C. (7:29:30 PM): my friend and i logged on and ask for some guys item

C. (7:29:36 PM): we were just harassing them

C. (7:29:40 PM): and then they gave it to us

C. (7:29:44 PM): which was weird, but we went with ti

Tony (7:42:37 PM): okay, cool

Tony (7:42:45 PM): I'll email you a rough draft when I finish it

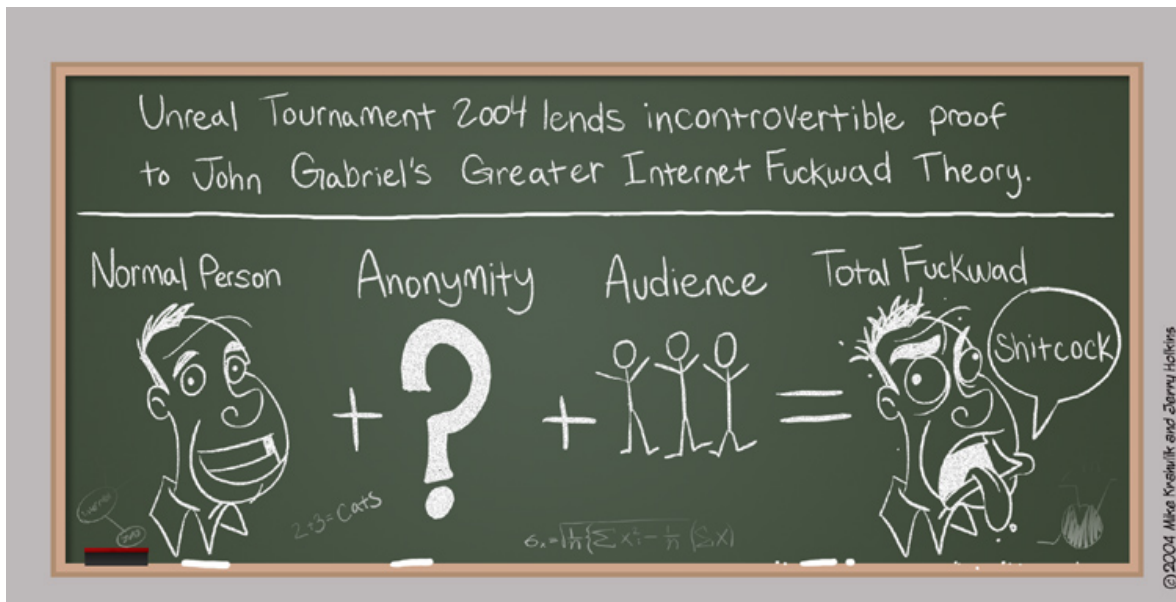
Tony (7:42:49 PM): probably someitme tomorrow

Tony (7:43:13 PM): you can fact check or edit to make yourself seem cooler, smarter, etc

C. (7:43:43 PM): hahah alright

C. (7:43:45 PM): fair enough
C. (7:43:47 PM): let me know
Tony (7:43:49 PM): sure

Appendix C – A Presciently Relevant Penny Arcade Strip



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