



MISSING INACTION. * * *

With 13 million online gamers worldwide, the virtual community is booming. But, as *Phil Robinson* discovers, for some players the line is blurred between their fictional and real lives. *Illustrations Chris Keegan.*



WAVE AFTER RELENTLESS wave of Chinese infantry is pouring through a breach in the Great Wall. In my ear, an officer is screaming: “Hold the flag, dammit, hold the flag!” Over the communication net, another officer from a different regiment shouts: “APC behind you!”, before the wall above my head explodes with a relentless *boof, boof, boof*.

As I lie prone in the long grass, an enemy soldier jumps over my head, med-bag flapping in the small of his back. He looks left and right and sweeps around a building. His commander, in an unmanned vehicle flying over my head, starts to guide him into my hiding spot. I jump up. Another three soldiers are moving in on the flag — the target for all of us. I’m the only one left inside the Great Wall; the rest of my squad is dead. Their alter egos are hovering on the outside waiting for me to change the flag to the European Union’s star-circled blue.

I draw a bead on one People’s Liberation Army soldier, but if I shoot him I have to kill all four of them. This thought shouldn’t cross my mind; my squad leader, Taco, says you just have to kill. Don’t think, just do it. I pull my mic closer to my mouth. “They’re on the flag,” I yell into the headset.

“Negative,” growls Taco. “Hey, hey, are you listening to me? It’s so simple. First you kill the Armoured Personnel Carrier, then you kill the infantry, then you take the flag back. This is so damn simple.”

An Eastern European voice breaks in. The BFCO, or battlefield commander. “Mr Phil... you listen to me. I’m sending artillery. Artillery lands, it kills them, you go in.”

“Roger that.”

“Thank you, Mr Phil.”

Artillery pours in. The same Chinese guy who jumped over me (who is actually a 26-year-old policeman from New Jersey) is blown up in the

air like a rag doll. I crawl backwards as heavy rounds throw up dirt and smoke. As I jump up, another soldier runs from the side of the building to treat his comrade, and I drop. I wait for him to do so, then empty a clip into both of them.

“I’m on the flag!”

“Will you shut up now and come to bed?” shrieks yet another voice. “It’s three o’clock in the morning. You’re 33 years old, you loser.”

I hear my wife, but I don’t hear her. The worlds — real and virtual — are merged, confused. The soldier who jumped over me is swinging limp from some pagoda guttering. Around me, soldiers from West Texas to Italy to Korea with battle orders flooding into their headsets have been sitting patiently, waiting for me to turn the flag. Thirty-two players, all working for one cause — to help each other win. The shrill complaints from the bedroom continue, unheeded: I’m no loser; I got the fucking flag. >



ONLINE GAMING HAS come a long way since the late Seventies, when a few nerdy pioneers at British universities first linked up the private servers that would become a primitive form of the internet, then wandered around crudely constructed dungeons casting spells. Where once it was the preserve of holed-up geeks hunched over keyboards, now players with Xboxes and Playstations are linking up globally (more than half of Australian Xbox 360 owners now use them to hook up to the internet). You can spend hours sprawled on a fag ash-stained carpet, playing *Pro Tennis* with someone in Tokyo, out of their head on Sakora, lying on a fag ash-stained tatami mat.

Globally linked gaming is now very much in the mainstream. It entered the realms of spectator-based entertainment in September last year, when DirecTV in the US screened Championship Gaming Invitational. One hundred and fifty slightly jittery geeks from all over the world, all with a fixation, like mine, on games such as *Battlefield 2*, gathered to blow the hell out of each other and maybe scoop a share of the prize fund of \$185,000. The event was filmed by 11-time Emmy-winning sports producer Mike Burks using 16 cameras in a 1500-square-metre converted aircraft hanger in San Francisco.

As gaming booms — the industry is thought to make around \$15.5 billion a year, more than the cumulative box-office receipts of Hollywood — the virtual world is soaking up the money. In addition, online gambling and poker are revelling in such profit predictions that tycoons like James Packer are reshaping entire family dynasties to take advantage. In fact, the virtual germination of

the 21st century is not limited to gaming; surreal worlds, led by Second Life (see 'Next Big Things', pg130) exist where onliners build and buy real estate, own yachts, watch gigs, dance in nightclubs, go to virtual brothels or have virtual wanks. Throw in the broadband boom and the increasingly ubiquitous access to computers, and the virtual scenario starts to mirror the real world. At first participants just want to "pwn noobs" [see glossary, right], but as they spend more and more time performing roles for online societies, they start to also seek structure, order and depth of experience.

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HENCE BF2COMBAT Tour of Duty, an online society built around *Battlefield 2*, the massive war simulation game that's one of American gaming developer Electronic Arts's (EA) flagship titles. Players come here to fight strictly regimented, well-policed 16-week tours in an atmosphere of insanely competitive, barely contained football hooligan-like rivalry (despite the website's reference to "a mature environment without smacktards and cheaters"). Each army has an air force, an armoured regiment and four line companies. Virtual training schools teach everything from anti-tank to medic skills. A movie team records great battles for posterity and a police-like organisation enforces the rules of engagement and settles disputes. Between battle days, subscribers in the same armies will play the game together, talk trash, work on strategy and even do divisional training (some of which is handled by retired — or sometimes even still-

serving — military personnel, guys who don't appreciate any screwing around).

The future of home youth entertainment is called Networked MDK, as in murder, death, kill — a term plucked from the script of Sylvester Stallone's 1993 action movie *Demolition Man*, and used to refer to all gun-toting combat gaming. Once upon a time, blokes seeking escape retreated to a train set in the garden shed; now, we stumble back from the pub and 'become' fictional *Fighter Ace 300* pilots, simultaneously reconstructing World War II battles in a single bout. The attention to detail in the cyber world mirrors that of our train set-nurturing predecessors — it takes 40 minutes to fly from one side of a map to another.

Michael Lewis of Combat Studios started the BF2Combat tournament after tiring of

CHINESE GOLD DIGGERS

There's gold in them there Chinese warehouses. Well, gold coins. Virtual gold coins. Bear with us. Scores of real Chinese workers are sitting in factories, probably as you read this, playing online games to harvest virtual gold coins and other actually non-existent goods. They then sell them to online gamers around the real world for real money to spend in real China. You see, some gamers are too busy to waste their time progressing through the lower levels of games, so these roles, as in other industries, have been outsourced to cheap labour in Asia. The gamers buy the virtual gold coins and then use them to virtually buy armour and guns and other stuff that helps them climb higher levels or create more powerful characters in their chosen games. One of the more barking mad manifestations of Globalisation.

disorganised online play. “Anyone who has ever played on a public server knows there are some people out there who want to ruin your experience,” he says. “Team-killing and complete disregard of objectives are often norms in such places. We wanted to make an inclusive community, predicated on the ideal of mutual respect, where people could get much more out of their investment in their game.

“Unfortunately, most online gaming denigrates into a contest of tweak skill [handset dexterity over strategic nous] and play time, which is both detrimental for casual users who want to enjoy themselves and unfulfilling for serious gamers. We created a meritocratic ranking system in our community where players were promoted based on the things which really matter, like leadership potential, as opposed to those which are of distant importance — like the ability to ‘pwn noobs’”

A sense of achievement and responsibility are also becoming more sought-after in gaming. “I remember an article talking about how, in

raids and become more powerful. Inside the game there is an intricate system of social ranking; you can't lie about how good you are. You're playing with real people. Here, someone who spends their day in a cubicle hitting the tab button and complaining about the broken air-conditioning can be a bona fide king, head of a 100-strong clan who parades around as a nine-foot priest on a horse and brings people back from the dead. Whatever floats your virtual boat.

Admission to this parallel universe doesn't come cheap. *World of Warcraft* is a subscription game, with eight million players paying \$18.50 a month. And what you don't lose in money, you will lose in time; as the games become more complex and increasingly mirror reality, they have to adopt the rigours of the real world that some players are trying to escape.

In fact, virtual worlds can be just as rewarding or frustrating, productive or futile, true or erroneous, just or unjust as the real world. If game play was all reward, after all, it would become meaningless. And so, just as in

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online games, if you kill a dragon no one cares,” says Lewis. “If you get to be level 60 in *World of Warcraft*, and assist the orcs in taking a human stronghold, so what? Chances are that place will be in enemy hands tomorrow, and a couple of thousand people have already trounced the same enemy you so valiantly slew. We're able to do something similar, but turning a traditional title into an epic experience. Instead of just playing for 20 minutes and having your progress erased, the *Tour of Duty* framework is persistent and one battle affects the next.”

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NOWHERE IS GAMING'S bleeding into the real world more apparent than in the misunderstood and much maligned world of ‘MMORPGs’ (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games). High-level user accounts — those in which player-characters have an abundance of hard-earned cash, possessions, skills and powers — infamously change hands on eBay for hundreds of dollars. Between them, games such as *EQ* (*EverQuest*) and *WoW* (*World of Warcraft*) have somewhere in the region of 13 million registered users — that's more than the population of Belgium — and generate around \$6.2 billion a year. No wonder a sweatshop approach to tapping this mine has crept in, with factories of online gamers in China reaping gold coins and other virtual currency to be sold for worldly money (see ‘Chinese Gold Diggers’, *below left*).

As well as revolutionising global relations, commerce and politics, the internet has brought together millions of people who want to call themselves ‘Thrawn’ and banish goblins. Their HQ is *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), a fantasy game set in the Warcraft universe where players assume characters from priests to warriors, creating their own original persona, or avatar. Think Planet of the Gandalfs. Computer dating from hell. A world where you can meet only close variations of yourself.

Players then take this cartoon alter ego on missions and battles. By teaming up with other players in ‘clans’ or ‘guilds’, you can go on bigger

the real world money and time are essential, games emulate reality by demanding toil to improve players' status and standard of in-game living. Some MMORPGs even go so far as to rely on behavioural conditioning to keep players in the game, using techniques similar to those used on lab rats. For example: a player might spend a couple of hours clicking the mouse to get some copper coins. Such tasks, aimed at building experience, are called ‘time sinks’. As you gain more experience, you have to put in more time to make the same progress as when you started. This breeds obsessive behaviours, and keeps players hooked.

As one BF2C officer told me: “Man, you don't want to let this game suck you in. I'm in charge of hundreds of people — you don't want that. Keep it fun: drop in and out of it. You don't need this kind of responsibility. First you get addicted. Then you get this feeling of burning out, when it's not fun anymore. That's when you need to demote yourself and just play the game. The real world has always got to be more important.”

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WHEN YOU RETURN home triumphant from a 16-week tour of virtual duty, despite a display of medals (virtual, of course) in the online forum, there'll be no tearful wife proud that you've just ‘jihaded’ an armour column with a Black Hawk helicopter rigged with C4 explosives. None of your effort will amount to what matters in the real world — money to survive.

Or will it? According to Nick Yee, who runs The Daedalus Project (www.nickyee.com/daedalus) — an investigation into the psychology of MMORPG worlds — “Game-play is approaching an uncanny level of complexity. In *Eve Online* [a multiplayer online game about inter-galactic colonisation, developed by CCP Games], players form corporations for a variety of brokerage, retail and consulting businesses. They hire other players as employees on wages. They have organisational hierarchies with executive branches. Some even have live customer support,” he says.

This mass-scale organisation isn't only a feature of the more sophisticated games. “Even in the hack-and-slash games,” says Yee, “we're seeing many players take part in highly-structured ‘raids’, where groups of 30 to 50 players need to work together for five to 10 hours.” Hence, progressing inside these virtual worlds means selling your social life to the game. Extended periods of use are required to satiate the needs of the player — there comes a point when, to get any kind of return, the player is doing nothing else but playing.

This is why a popular online nickname for *WoW* is “World of Warcrack”. You're not so much a gamer as a user. Contributing further to the problem of addiction, some games progress, even when players are absent. Jim, as we'll call him, is a member of a clan in *Eve Online*. “It doesn't stop when you leave,” he says. “Just like in the real world, you can wake up in the morning and find that... everything you own has been destroyed. You get a bit panicky when you go to bed, sometimes. You're lying there thinking... some bastard is setting fire to my new shed. I mean, it's just like the real world. I've got two fucking existences to be neurotic about. I'm not sure I need it.”

It is a game. It is fun. There are normal people playing, but research shows that serious players neglect real life relationships; 40 per cent of *WoW* users told one survey they preferred online relationships and friends. Perhaps that's because in the real world you can't hit your best friend with a 40-foot sword and take all his money without doing some serious prison time. Perhaps it's because departing from the game involves withdrawing from a social group as well as your in-game avatar, which is as painful to some people as losing a limb. The character they play is often a popular and successful expression of themselves. There is a magnetic, cult-like draw to the guild or clan. People know you by name, and they greet you warmly when you log on. Your computer is transformed in to an intensely social experience.

Welcome to the virtual world — one where, just like in the real world, you have to get along to go along. Even if you are a master of evil and disaster and terror of the known universe. **GQ**

TOUR OF DUTY GLOSSARY.

Aimbot

[noun] A computer program that assists bad players by aiming their gun for them.

Jihad

[verb] To crash an explosive-laden vehicle into the enemy.

Teabagging

[verb] Repeatedly dropping one's groin into a dead foe's face using the control key.

Lawn dart

[verb] To fly a Black Hawk helicopter into a tank.

LMAO

[noun] Abbreviation of ‘laughing my arse off’.

Noob

[noun] A new player.

Nub

[adj] Non useful body (a particularly bad noob).

Nubcake

[noun] A noob that's been pwned.

Pwn

[verb] A typographical error relating to ‘own’. To beat another player or team mercilessly in a God-like fashion.

Rambo

[verb] Running around on your own, ignoring the squad. Noob behaviour.

Shockpaddle

[verb] Using a defibrillator to kill the enemy. The ultimate insult.

Spawn

[verb] To come back to life.

Spawn Camp

[verb] To wait around the area in which characters spawn and kill them before they get a chance to move.