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Toons and Terrorism

By IProfess, [1] Elvin Druid of Zuljin

A recurrent issues facing those of us who live largely in Azeroth, the virtual World of Warcraft, now a population of ten million realworldwide [2], is what is real, and why? We think that the boundaries between our virtual world and your presumably real one are increasingly difficult to discern. Here we explore that issue in the most serious of all the games found in TRW (The Real World), national security!

In our last piece in this estimable journal, we reviewed a book by another Toon, Sabert of Ever Quest, who passes in TRW as the economist Edward Castronova. Here we quote both Sabert and ourself from that earlier review, thus becoming pleasingly, doubly, self-referential:

"One of his (Sabert's) more interesting concepts, building on earlier research, is to view "synthetic worlds" (ugly term!) as "a locus of migration." His point, with which I am in full agreement, is that increasing numbers of people from TRW are choosing to live increasingly larger portions of their lives in online games because they find those carefully selected and constructed lives more meaningful and more satisfactory than their shadow lives in TRW. In our worlds you are who you appear to be, though that may be an identity, even a gender, quite different than the one which nature so capriciously assigned you. And our worlds most often enforce a generally cooperative and social existence, unlike the dreadfully competitive and increasingly lose-lose calculus of TRW."
At the time of our review of Sabert's still earlier publication, (2006 A.C.E., TRW), this argument that people were migrating to cyberspace for the more pleasing lifestyle must have seemed somewhat strange to the simple citizens of TRW. But, sadly, the once sharp divide between "reality" and Azeroth, let alone all other game worlds, is blurring and not only are Toons like myself slipping back and forth, but so are some very questionable "real" characters coming the other way.

True, we Toons are not entirely blameless, though I think most of us would prefer a good quest in Azeroth to some of the events occurring in the frontier between our worlds. In Mexico City, it is reliably reported—by the standards of journalism in TRW—a male player repeatedly "ganked"—killed in game—a female Toon to prevent her from progressing in Azeroth. He unwisely challenged her husband to intervene, giving his address in Mexico City, TRW. He came to regret this revelation when three men arrived (her guildies?), smashed his computer and broke his wrist and a finger. [3] As the comments appended to the blog cited above indicate, there is widespread disagreement at to who, exactly, is at fault here. Some think he got his proper reward, others think she should have sucked it up and soldiered on.

The rise of cyber harassment has been so rapid with the growth of the Web that even The New York Times has spotted it. [4] It is, according to that source, now called "trolling," in an effort to point with alarm with more linguistic specificity. Unfortunately, these practices have resulted in real deaths. [5]

But for every Toon who crosses into TRW seeking revenge for virtual slights, it appears that there well may now be an even stranger group entering the fray, intelligence agents from TRW looking for evidence of terrorist plots in on-line games.
Sabert had earlier warned of this possibility. Then, more recently, a number of groups in TRW, mostly those who stand to benefit financially from paranoia, became aware of this threat, even before either the U.S. Federal Government or The New York Times discovered it. [6]

The U.S. Federal Government, fully appraised, now began to study the issue. The federal project to fund the study is called "Reynard." In the report to Congress detailing data mining programs by the Office of the Director of Intelligence, it was said:

"Reynard is "seedling effort looking at the emerging social dynamics of virtual worlds and on-line games, and their implications to the IC (Intelligence Community?):

The cultural and behavioral norms of virtual worlds and gaming are generally unstudied. Therefore, Reynard will seek to identify the emerging social, behavioral and cultural norms in virtual worlds and gaming environments. The project would then apply the lessons learned to determine the feasibility of automatically detecting suspicious behavior and actions in the virtual world.

If it shows early promise, this small seedling effort may increase its scope to a full project. Reynard will conduct unclassified research in a public virtual world environment. The research will use publicly available data and will begin with observational studies to establish baseline normative behaviors."

The above report is written with such dry wit and insouciance that it could only have been written by a Blood Elf—the dark side esthetes of Azeroth. One can hardly wait to read the follow up report in which "baseline normative behaviors" are clearly established.
Evidence of the critical importance of this task is further indicated by the fact that the U.S. Army has issued a Request for Proposals, stubbornly refusing to yield the virtual battlespace to terrorist Toons. [7] The army's RFP, clearly also Blood Elf prose, though usually they are more facile in using the possessive case, goes in part:

The contractor shall conduct internet awareness services in support of the Government's (sic) activities to include Indications and Warning, Force Protection, and situational awareness.

The purpose of the services will be to identify and assess stated and implied threat, antipathy, unrest, and other contextual data relating to selected internet domains. The contractor will prioritize foreign language domains that relate to specific areas of concern.

The contractor will analyze various web pages, chat rooms, blogs and other internet domains to aggregate and assess data of interest to the Government. It will also identify new Internet domains that directly relate to the Government's (sic) specific local requirements.

I doff my helm to the Toons who pulled this one off— to be paid for living in Azeroth and periodically reentering TRW only to report to gullible bureaucrats is a dream job, indeed. And subsequently, other renegade Toons can comment on those suppositions at various security-addled agencies and publications! It is the equivalent of a Full Employment for Toons Program.

However, intelligence-wise, this is not an ideal approach. The intent of Reynard and the army is to monitor Cyberspace from TRW. But I can do much better than that! I hereby volunteer my services as a clandestine agent. Living even periodically in TRW has gotten quite expensive
lately, and I could use some additional income, preferably in Euros, thank you, or better yet, gold delivered in Azeroth.

I even have strong qualifications for this role as luck would have it. My very name, "Iprofess," was originally chosen in Azeroth to indicate that I was somewhat cranky and opinionated. As it turned out, however, the term "I Profess" is also a ritual statement taken from the Koran, and in many sites on the web, the boundary between our worlds, this is of course truncated as IProfess. [8]

And sure enough, once I established my credentials in Azeroth my fame began to spread, a strong indication that there is something to this "implied threat, antipathy, unrest, and other contextual data" and soon there was a musical group named after me in SoCal (apparently a geographical region in TRW roughly equivalent to the monster-ridden deserts of Silithus [9] in Azeroth, though more crowded). [10]

I am, in short, already "inside," if, as I understand it is illegal to do, one were to profile apparent Muslims to scrutinize their normative behaviors. And if these were not sufficient credentials—and in the shadowy world of cyber terrorism there is probably some danger that they are, in fact, too good, and will disqualify me from enlisting—I once played in a group of three in Azeroth which included a teenager from Saudi Arabia. The third member of our party was an intrepid huntress named Bodicea, who repeatedly saved us by sending her pet pig, "Mizpiggy," at our mutual enemies.

I was quite curious about playing with a Saudi and we exchanged a great deal of information while roving. I asked him religious authorities in Saudi Arabia felt about those playing in Azeroth. This seemed to cause him some concern, as though I perhaps were already an undercover Toon for some religious agency. Then Bodicea asked if it bothered him
to be repeatedly saved by what was, after all, a vicious assemblage of bacon that squealed joyfully as it went careening into battle?

The Saudi youth regrettably responded to this latter query by abruptly leaving the game. This might have been evidence of grievous trans-baseline normative behavior, or perhaps it was just that his mom or the Imam was calling him. I withhold judgment until the Reynard study bears fruit. But I stand ready to go back undercover whenever needed.

[1] Iprofess purports to be a 'toon, by which he means a character in an on-line role-playing game, the World Of Warcraft. We have published several pieces by him, which can be found here: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/indexes/?index=author&p=I

Here we reprint our own cautionary note from his last publication: Because we are uncomfortable with publishing an anonymous manuscript, we now require that any responses resulting directly from the publication of this review be sent to Mr. IProfess via our own office. Mr. IProfess, for his part, has agreed that not only any responses from readers, but also his responses to readers will go through our office.


[3] Klink, Funtechtalk, "World Of Warcraft Player Claims A Bounty On His Head In And Out Of Video Game" on line:


http://www.washingtontechnology.com/online/1_1/33024-1.html
See the RFP, if only in order to reassure yourself that I have not been spending too much time in the Silithusian sun at:
https://www.fbo.gov/index?s=opportunity&mode=form&id=4d5a47be731171c3750a402d218cda1e&tab=core&_cview=0&ck=1&au=&ck=


[9] For a screen shot of Silithus showing its resemblance to SoCal see http://www.wowwiki.com/Silithus

[10] See the band leader's pages on line:
    http://profile.myspace.com/musiciprofess