

# 1 The Death of Urizenus

It was a quiet night at the *Alphaville Herald*. The newspaper had been put to bed and a man known as Urizenus, its publisher, was as usual the last one in the office. He busied himself closing up shop, tending to fireplaces and cleaning up the messes that had accumulated over the course of the day. It took a few minutes to get Uri's cats, Cheddar Cheese Cheetah and a tabby named Black, back into their cages. Then he turned out the lights, locked up for the night, and headed home.

Alphaville never saw him again.

A few nights later, in mid-December 2003, Urizenus was snuffed out, his life terminated by a powerful unseen foe. His cats remained in their cages at the *Herald* offices, never to see their master again. His killers robbed him of his money, emptied his bank account, made off with much of his equipment and supplies. The *Herald's* legal editor managed to have ownership of the newspaper's offices transferred to her, but in effect that game was over; the brave little newspaper that had only just begun to make waves had been put to bed for the last time.

And make waves the *Herald* had. It had been launched only six weeks before, but in that short span of time the newspaper had become a force to be reckoned with. Once the first edition hit Alphaville's streets, things got busy fast. Almost before he could venture out in search of stories, the news started coming to Uri (as his friends called him). Alphaville residents showed up at his office door unannounced, with stories, scoops, and complaints about local politicians, hoodlums, and scam artists. Uri listened, investigated, and wrote up what he found. Though he had never expected his little publication to become so influential, the *Herald* fast became the voice of the people, and gained a loyal following as a result. Of course, it had made more than a few enemies since that first edition had appeared.



**Figure 1.1**  
Urizenus chills in his Alphaville Pad

The voice of the people was a muckraking yellow tabloid, as far as some were concerned. Around Alphaville, you either loved it or you hated it—but you could not escape its roving eye.

But now Urizenus was dead. Whoever it was that had hoped to smooth the ripples the *Herald* had caused had prevailed. At least for the moment.

Other publications picked up the story. The widely read online magazine *Salon.com* raised the question of censorship through murder. A few weeks later, Uri's death made the front page of the *New York Times*, which used the case to explore issues of free expression and of responsibility and governance in small towns like Alphaville. CNN, the BBC, and newspapers from London to Moscow to Madrid all sent reporters to Alphaville to cover the story.

But the police were never quoted. There was no mention of a trial. No bereaved relatives surfaced to deplore the killing. There was not even a murder weapon that could easily be brought to hand.

Because, in fact, there was no body. The “newspaper” that had given rise to a small international sensation had never actually appeared in print. Coverage of Urizenus's murder did indeed appear in major news outlets around the (real) world, but most of that coverage focused less on the details of his death and more on the uncertain boundaries that separate

the real from the imagined, and on the grey area that divides the concrete world around us from the virtual world that exists only thanks to modern technology—a world whose very existence is a question of some debate.

In fact, Alphaville is not a physical place at all but rather a kind of collective digital fantasy, a place that exists somewhere between the data stored on a computer network server in Silicon Valley and the thousands of people who log on to that server each day. Urizenus was not a person, at least not in the conventional sense, but only a digital representation of a person, an entity known as an avatar, in an online world with tens of thousands of participants who hailed from all over the real, offline globe. Uri's cats were virtual cats, mere pixels on a screen, controlled by software subroutines running somewhere in California. And Uri's money, though convertible into hard cash, was not denominated in U.S. dollars but in a currency called simoleans that could be spent only within the confines of the online game world known as *The Sims Online*.

The *Alphaville Herald*, however, was a very real publication. While it never took the form of ink on paper, it existed as a Weblog outside *The Sims Online* (or TSO, as it is commonly known),<sup>1</sup> and ran stories five to ten times each week, covering events that took place in Alphaville—or, depending on how you preferred to see it, events that took place on the computer network server known as Alphaville, one of the dozen or so servers that collectively make up the world of TSO. And it pulled no punches, a fact that presumably caused much chagrin in the corporate offices of those who owned TSO's servers—and ruled them with god-like powers.

The mystery of Urizenus's death was never a whodunnit; the culprits were clear from the start: Uri's killers were agents of Electronic Arts Inc., the multibillion-dollar game company that owns and operates *The Sims Online*. More intriguing than who did it was why. What was it that Urizenus said or did or knew about the goings-on in Alphaville—or was on the verge of discovering—that moved EA to terminate his avatar with such extreme prejudice? Was there a report about EA itself that the company was eager to quash? Were there really such explosive stories to be found within the realm of a world like TSO, stories that blurred the boundaries between reality and virtual reality? The *Alphaville Herald* was an online newspaper covering imaginary events in an imaginary world. And yet it had catalyzed EA, the company behind that world—the wizard-of-Oz-like men behind

the curtain, if you will—to step forward for a moment to exercise their power, and to violate the fiction on which the world’s existence largely depends. What could have mattered so much to them if *The Sims Online* is only a game?

The answer lies as much in what kind of game TSO is as it does in what kinds of stories the *Herald* was printing.

Most computer games—including everything from Yahoo! Solitaire to Super Mario Brothers to Grand Theft Auto—provide a set scenario with a finite beginning and end, and a defined group of conditions at the beginning of each game, whether these include a deck of cards and some simulated green felt or a 3-D-rendered layout of mountains, valleys, streets, tunnels, buildings, traps, and treasures (known as a map) that’s reset each time a new game is begun. You play until you win or lose (though you may often pause along the way), and then you start again with a fresh and untouched version of the original scenario.

But the class of games that TSO belongs to—known as “massively multiplayer online games” (aka MMOs, MMOGs, or MMORPGs—the RP stands for “role-playing”)—differs from most traditional games in two key ways: the worlds they offer are “persistent,” and they are inhabited by thousands of other players all gaming in the same virtual environment at the same time.

Persistent worlds are just that: open-ended virtual environments that continue to exist no matter who is logged in at any particular moment. MMOs take place not on a one-off battlefield that resets itself at the opening of each scenario, but in a game world that persists regardless of how often its players come and go, or what they do when they are there. In most other kinds of games, your on-screen representative is merely a placeholder, a highly detailed king in a kind of elaborate online game of chess, a game that pauses or ends when you switch off your computer. In MMOs, switching off your computer neither pauses nor stops the game. Step away from your screen for a day or two and the online you rests on one of the game company’s servers until you’re ready to play again; meanwhile, the game itself doesn’t slow down at all. Other players in the same persistent world will have been garnering their own rewards. A character who might have presented no challenge to you last week may have become a

fierce warrior while you were foolish enough to be off attending to real-life business. The point is that when you log back into the world, that world has continued to develop—it's not a fresh copy in which the elements have all been reset to some initial state.

In MMOs the words "game over" have no meaning, for the game you're playing never ends. And with thousands of other players also coming and going in the world, the experience of an MMO is very different from a game in which one player comes out as winner. Instead it's an ongoing story in which all the players pursue their own competitive and personal goals, but where no one is ever really the ultimate victor. Instead of one-on-one or team-vs.-team, in MMOs the player coexists with literally thousands of other players, in some cases tens of thousands.

Instead of finite games to be won or lost, MMOs offer open-ended environments in which players can tackle "quests," take on "jobs," form lasting relationships with other players, and continue to develop their online characters for as long as they care to. There is no way to win or lose the game itself (unless, like Urizenus, the creators destroy your character), because the game itself never ends; all you can do is play. In a way, your avatar takes on a life of its own. It develops characteristics and a history based on its experience. You can play the same ongoing character in the same ongoing game for months or even years, and millions of people do. For what they find in MMOs is something they find in no other kind of computer game: the chance to inhabit virtual worlds.

Virtual worlds come in as many different shapes and sizes as one can imagine: fantasy realms set everywhere from ancient Egypt to medieval Europe to fictional locales like J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, in which players take on the personae of knights, swordsmen, samurai, wizards, traders, or even damsels in distress; science fiction scenarios filled with stormtroopers, Jedi knights, starship pilots, and interstellar pirates; World War II simulations featuring combat missions both fictional and historical; "adult" worlds in which cybersex is the main part of gameplay; modern urban automobile fantasies, and post-apocalyptic ones; worlds filled with cartoon characters or comic-book superheroes or villains; one unusual MMO in which players take on the roles of players on baseball teams; and those in which your screentime is whatever you make it, including places like The Sims Online, the virtual world of There, and Second Life, in which the

game is less a game than, well, a second life, and the “player” is a resident or citizen with limitless choices as to how he or she wants to spend time, rather than a competitor on some virtual global playing field.

The ongoing nature of these persistent virtual worlds gives the social interactions among their residents far more meaning than can be found in more straightforward competitive games. If a sniper blows you away in the action game Counter-Strike, you get to face her on a freshly leveled playing field at the beginning of the next round of play—if you choose to play against her any more at all. But any encounter in a virtual world is with someone you may well encounter again, whether you like it or not. If a valiant knight helps you kill a dragon, a shadowy rogue scams you out of a valuable sword, a space pirate besmirches your reputation, or a neighbor commits “rape” (as happened in an early text-based world<sup>2</sup>), that event becomes part of your ongoing experience of the virtual world and carries far more weight than if it were simply a one-off occurrence during a particular round of the game. The fact is that what goes on in MMOs goes far beyond what we think of as “play,” and the number of users is positively enormous.

The most popular recent entrant to the field, World of Warcraft, boasted almost four million players around the world by the time it had been in release for a year. The Korean MMO Lineage enjoys a similar number. In China, some 22.8 million people reportedly played at least one MMO in 2004.<sup>3</sup>

With a total population of at least ten million regular users around the world and as many as forty million more occasional visitors, the internal workings of persistent virtual worlds are in many ways as rich and complex as our real world, and are real enough themselves to have some surprising effects on the offline lives of the people who inhabit them. For example:

- Far more than merely entertaining diversions, many virtual worlds have become full-time jobs not just for their developers but for some of their inhabitants as well, jobs that earn some people more than \$200,000 a year—in cold hard cash, not virtual currency.
- Economist Edward Castronova of Indiana University, who specializes in the economies of virtual worlds, measures the per capita gross national product of Norrath, the imaginary setting for the MMO EverQuest, as more than that of a few real-life countries.<sup>4</sup>

- Virtual worlds like *Second Life* and *There are now* playing host to all manner of real-world business ventures, from public relations agencies to fashion chains like American Apparel, tie-ins involving the likes of MTV's *Laguna Beach*, and hit musical groups like Gorillaz (in *Habbo Hotel*).
- In China and Korea, real-world courts have handed down rulings on conflicts that arose between characters in virtual worlds, including thefts of virtual items. It is only a matter of time before such a legal stance is adopted in the United States—though game companies might prefer it otherwise.
- Almost half of MMO gamers live in Korea, where virtual worlds are far more popular than they are in the United States or Europe.
- The universe of MMOs includes dozens of graphical worlds, and hundreds of smaller text-based worlds with just as loyal a following.
- More than one gamer interviewed for this book is now married to someone they first met in a virtual world.

Meanwhile, the shadow economy that exists within online worlds and on their fringes outside the games has grown to surprising proportions. Because of the persistent nature of online worlds, the virtual items that are used in MMOs—things like swords and shields, virtual real estate, and even software that can be used within the virtual worlds to enhance (or hack) the user interface—have taken on real value to many users. The ability to trade such items back and forth within a virtual world has led to a thriving out-of-world market that now accounts for nearly \$1 billion a year in transaction value, according to the leading online broker of such goods.<sup>5</sup> A growing service economy exists as well, in which expert “power users” take on the task of improving character skills and combat abilities for players who don’t care to spend their time as weak, low-level characters.

There are aspects of these worlds that many find unsavory, of course. The virtual currency of many such worlds can be converted into real money, which has at times inspired unscrupulous residents to mount scams that have cost users significant sums. The relative anonymity that online life provides has allowed a variety of sexual communities to flourish in online worlds, composed of people who might have had a harder time connecting otherwise. Online “Mafias” vie for dominance in virtual worlds such as *Second Life* and *The Sims Online*, with their rivalries sometimes leading to costly online attacks on the world’s underlying computer servers themselves. Many users complain of shadowy insider players who allegedly

enjoy special favors from unscrupulous administrators of online worlds. Offline Mafias have their presence too: A ring of Russian credit-card scammers in *Ultima Online* is said to have cost Electronic Arts at least \$4 million in the mid-1990s.<sup>6</sup> Real-life hate crimes and threats of violence sometimes grow out of online relationships, and even real-world killings have been blamed on interactions within virtual worlds.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, the word “game” doesn’t come close to describing much of what takes place in online worlds. Online spaces like *The Sims Online* and *Second Life* are better described as virtual worlds in which many different kinds of social relations can be conducted. Success in these virtual spaces is measured in the same ways people measure success in their offline lives: money, popularity, love, family, community, career—however you want to measure it. Some people work to make their avatars’ lives as similar as possible to their own; others do just the opposite, creating online representatives of the opposite sex, attempting to build virtual versions of the family or social relations they may have found missing in their offline lives, or even playing out cruel and violent fantasies. To some extent they are fairy-tale worlds: Possibilities are unbounded and the laws of physics can be bent, if you know how. Unlike fairy tales, however, there is no guarantee that life in a virtual world will end happily ever after. In fact, virtual spaces have their share of dark forces, as *Urizenus* learned the hard way.

The dark forces lurking in the shadows of *Urizenus*’s story are known collectively as Electronic Arts Inc., one of the biggest computer game publishers in the world, a company with 4,800 employees, and which reported 2004 revenues of \$2.95 billion.<sup>8</sup> With dozens of games on the market and ownership of some of the most desirable franchise rights in gaming (including the rights to create games based on *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* series, *The Godfather*, and many professional sports leagues), EA is the giant among game companies, and *TSO*, it had been hoped, would make it even bigger. Before it hit stores in late 2002 the company predicted four hundred thousand users within the first six months of the game’s release<sup>9</sup> and a total of two million eventually.

*TSO* was popular, but it never took off quite as EA had hoped. The game peaked at around 105,000 users in mid-2003 and had fallen back to fewer than 100,000 by the fall of that year, when the *Alphaville Herald* began publication. (By mid-2005, *TSO* had fewer than 40,000 users, and people



were starting to speculate about whether EA would soon close it down.) But though it hadn't lived up to its expectations, TSO had garnered a population bigger than that of a small city the size of Albany, New York, or Santa Monica, California, and after twenty years in the business, EA had grown into a vast company whose universe of games had attracted millions more customers.

What could have stirred a behemoth like EA to take such action against Urizenus and the *Herald*? The company claimed that the newspaper and its editor had violated the game's Terms of Service agreement, the document that regulates the standards of proper behavior in an online world. But the evidence for this was so flimsy and any actual violation so many times removed from Urizenus himself that there had to be another reason.

Whatever it was, Urizenus was dead. But in a university office in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Uri's typist, the man behind the avatar—a philosophy and linguistics professor named Peter Ludlow—lived on. Ludlow was not pleased that his online persona had suddenly vanished from the face of the virtual world. His blood boiled as he read the email that had come from EA:

Dear Urizenus,

Your "The Sims Online" login account (578372615) has been permanently closed for severe and/or repeated Terms of Service or Rules of Conduct violations. Most recently, on 12-10-2003 at 16:25 GMT a cheating complaint was filed against you. You have continued to list alphavilleherald.com in your profiles after a warning and suspension for this. Your previous account record has also been considered in this action. While we regret it, we feel it is necessary for the good of the game and its community.

Part of what infuriated Ludlow was that the "cheating complaint" had been filed against him at a point when Urizenus was already under a temporary suspension, and so couldn't possibly have committed any "crimes"—he hadn't even been in the game! He had already deleted all the references to alphavilleherald.com that he could find in his profile, and in any case the site was not a "commercial" one, as EA had claimed in previous emails (linking from user profiles to commercial sites was forbidden under TSO's Terms of Service). The *Herald's* only relationship to any commercial sites was through links to other users' Web pages, some of which offered commercial services or information about how to cheat the game. And besides the several hundred dollars worth of virtual assets that

were lost with Uri's demise, Ludlow was outraged that the omnipotent entity that was EA (omnipotent as far as TSO was concerned, at least) would move against a newspaper like the *Herald* "for the good of the game and its community." It was almost as if EA were playing the role of an overzealous government agency, shuttering a neighborhood newspaper after less than two months of publication.

By late 2003, when Urizenus was terminated, the Internet and the World Wide Web were so old hat that they no longer seemed like revolutionary venues for the free exchange of information. But the Internet had gone through a new evolution, to Web 2.0—the social networking web of blogging, MySpace, Flickr, and Wikipedia. Uri didn't know it when he entered TSO, but he was about to witness the birth of the next iteration—what Mark Wallace liked to refer to as Web 3pointD—the emergence of graphical 3-D social spaces where people would not just socialize and conduct business, but do so in a place where spatial presence was palpable, and whose expressive capabilities were correspondingly enhanced. If the world had left Web 1.0 behind and was deep in Web 2.0, this was the beginning of the third online revolution.

A newspaper covering life in an online game might not seem like a very significant part of that revolution, but given the kinds of things that went on in TSO and other persistent virtual environments—and given the ever-increasing "connectedness" of everyone's "real" lives—the *Herald* could not be so easily dismissed as merely another Web site about just another game. EA certainly seemed to take it seriously enough.

The real-world journalists who picked up the story took it seriously too. International coverage explored questions of free speech in online worlds, and Amy Harmon, writing in the *New York Times*, drew an important parallel: Speech enjoys certain legal protections in privately owned spaces or media open to public use, such as phone lines and shopping malls; if virtual worlds were to be ruled the same kind of space, they would presumably enjoy the same protections.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately for Urizenus and Ludlow, that day had not yet come.

Urizenus's termination left Ludlow taken aback, but around the time of Uri's death, an unusual event occurred in an MMO called EverQuest that stirred Ludlow's passion to keep fighting what he saw as the good fight. Rather than battling each other, almost two hundred EverQuest players banded together to slay one of the supposedly unbeatable monsters that

populated Norrath, the game's imaginary world. It had taken the small army two forays into the lair of the Kerafyrm, a fearsome beast also known as The Sleeper—but not because The Sleeper had gotten the better of them on the first try.

Sony Online Entertainment, the company behind the game, was watching the first attempt on The Sleeper's "life" and realized that the unusual band of allies were prevailing. But SOE had intended The Sleeper to be unslayable. So when the monster had been beaten down to about a quarter of its strength, agents of SOE reset the game. Deus ex machina—the god in the machine—had come forward to save its "unkillable" beast. In effect, Sony saw it was losing the game and simply took its bat and ball and went home. As Andrew Phelps, author of Corante.com's *Got Game?* Weblog and a professor of game programming at the Rochester Institute of Technology, wrote in a blog post at the time, "Wrong move. Seriously wrong move. . . . a level of trust [was] destroyed." Just a few days later, however, undeterred gamers attacked the Kerafyrm again. This time, perhaps because SOE was asleep at the switch, the gamers prevailed, vanquishing their unslayable foe.

#### *I Saw God and I Killed It*

There are two very distinct crowds that play games, the "casual gamer" and the "hard core gamer"—or at least that's what the gaming industry says. . . . But I saw the true diehards last week, and I saw just how little the gaming industry understands some of them.

[EverQuest player] Ghenwivar writes, "On Monday, November 17th, in the most amazing and exciting battle ever, [EverQuest guilds] Ascending Dawn, Wudan and Magus Imperialis Magicus defeated Kerafyrm, also known as The Sleeper, for the first time ever on an EverQuest server. The fight lasted approximately three hours and about 170–180 players from [EverQuest server] Rallos Zek's top three guilds were involved. Hats off to everyone who made this possible and put aside their differences in order to accomplish the impossible. Congratulations RZ!!!!"

My hat goes off to you. They killed what Sony Online Entertainment intended to be unkillable. But rather than actually make it untargetable, Sony just gave it ten billion hit points. For those non-EQers out there, a reference scale: a snake has about 10 hit points. A dragon has about 100,000. A god has 1–2 million. [The Sleeper] really does have about ten billion or more.<sup>11</sup> It took close to 200 players almost four hours to beat the thing down into the ground.

Why, you might ask, would anyone waste four hours of their life doing this? Because a game said it couldn't be done. . . . This is like the Quake freaks that fire their rocket

launchers at their own feet to propel themselves up so they can jump straight to the exit and skip 90% of the level and finish in 2 seconds. Someone probably told them they couldn't finish in less than a minute.

Games are about challenges, about hurdles or puzzles or fights overcome. To some players, the biggest hurdle or challenge is how to do what you (the designer) said couldn't happen. If you are making a game, accept this. Now. Why do I say this?...

Lets back up to November 16, when the same three guilds on Rallos Zek made their first attempt on the Sleeper... A supposedly [player-vs.-player] server banded together 200 people. The chat channels across the server were ablaze, as no less than 5,000 of us listened in, with "OMG they're attempting the Sleeper! Good luck d00dz!" Everyone clustered near their screens, sharing the thrill of the fight, the nobility of the attempt and the courage of those brave 200. Play slowed to a crawl on every server as whispers turned to shouts, as naysayers predicted, "It can't be done" or "It will drop a rusty level 1 sword" and most of us just held our breath, silently urging them forward. Rumors abounded: "If they win, the whole EQ world stops and you get the text from the end of Wizardry 1," or "If they win, the president of Sony will log on and congratulate them." With thousands watching and waiting, the Sleeper's health inched ever downward.

They beat it down to 27 percent and then, almost three hours into the fight, when victory looked possible, it disappeared, without dying, violating every rule in the world of Norrath on how a monster is supposed to behave. It seems that one of the Game Masters at Sony reset the zone because "they thought the encounter might be bugged" (or, more accurately, "We realized these guilds were going to win, and the Sleeper isn't supposed to be able to die"). Wrong move. Seriously wrong move...

Sony eventually relented, gave the characters involved some of their experience back, and got them safely out from under the dragon's feet. (They did know that they would try again, and had probably already made up their minds to allow it). [But] the damage was done, a level of trust destroyed. Poofing the sleeper said, "We do not really understand why you are doing this, so stop it."

We thought you understood us better. The fact you let it happen the next night means very little. The point is that on that first magical evening when warriors rode off to battle the supreme, you meddled. They thought of something you didn't, something legal by the rules of the game you set forward, and you meddled. In the parlance of the world you created: "shame & ridicule."

Oh, and god drops no loot.<sup>12</sup>

In its way, the Kerafyrn episode raised many of the same questions Ludlow was dealing with, questions having to do with just how "real" our online lives really are. To have two hundred players united against a common enemy in EverQuest was a singularly rare event in the admittedly brief history of multiplayer online games. *They thought of something you didn't.* It

could have been counted one of SOE's crowning achievements: The game had been so well wrought that a real community of players had formed, one that was able to set aside its differences, at least for a night, in pursuit of a common goal. As anyone who's ever attended a shareholder's meeting or even a meeting of a co-op board knows, getting two hundred people to focus on accomplishing the same task is no small feat.

But then the company had violated the illusion that had made that cooperation possible. As a game company, of course, Sony was under no obligation to keep out of the way. But as the creators of an online space in which real people interacted with each other every day, what were Sony's responsibilities? With more than four hundred thousand subscribers, a complex system of social dynamics had developed in Norrath that made EQ, like TSO, something more than just a game. In fact, massively multi-player online games have now become among the most complex and sophisticated online social spaces in existence. And as the lives people lead in virtual worlds become more and more connected with their offline lives, such online spaces are shedding significant light on questions of liberty and responsibility, and on how an online existence reverberates in what we think of as a gamer's real life.

Still smarting from his encounter with the powers behind the scenes at Electronic Arts, Ludlow latched onto the Kerafyrm episode as emblematic of a basic conflict within virtual worlds between the freedom of the "residents" and the seemingly arbitrary commercial interests of the companies that had created those worlds—the gods, if you will. For Ludlow, the story of the Kerafyrm showed it was possible to come together and resist this undefeatable force. The defeat of the Kerafyrm was in a way the defeat of Sony, and the triumph of the gamers over their gods. For Ludlow it served as an inspiration that one could stand up to the multibillion-dollar corporations that produced and ran virtual worlds, and maybe even survive.

Ludlow survived, but Urizenus's life in Alphaville ended on December 10, 2003. That New Year's Eve, Uri's typist posted a short note on the *Herald* site celebrating the Kerafyrm's defeat and urging residents of other virtual worlds to follow the EverQuest players' example. "We all have unkillable monsters in our lives, both online and off," Ludlow wrote. "My New Year's wish is that the citizens of Alphaville stop fighting each other, recognize our true enemy, stand together, and fight the unkillable monster—The Sleeper—of our world. How big is your game?"<sup>13</sup>

