
The Day the Non-Player Characters Quit

I am writing this under an appreciable mental strain, since by tonight I shall be no more. I wish the game would stop making me do things. Sorry about that. You're probably confused about what is going on, well join the club, brother. Maybe it would be better if I phased it 'join the game,' because this is all about gaming; electronic games. Computer games, console games or even games on a mobile device or phone. It's all the same. In the end, games with only one player in the room.

Games can have a strange effect on people. Take, for example, any one-armed bandit in Las Vegas. Setting in the seat before it, you'll observe someone who is permanently enslaved by the tyranny of chance. The sad belief that some future pull of the lever will align all the right elements and they will win ... something. Computer games are no different. Gamers have even invented a word for it, grinding. It's the name for performing repetitive tasks, using basically the same approach over and over again to advance and unlock content. Sound like a slot machine? It should, they create the same outcome and result in the same twisted human behavior.

One major motivating factor in grinding is a desire to pursue what appears to be the game's ultimate goal, which is to reach the highest level. Some players enjoy the repetitive tasks as a way of relaxing, especially if performing the task has some kind of positive result. I guess, in some ways, it resembles work. You perform the same task over and over. Yet unlike the gaming world, you get no prize at the end of your daily work task ... and you get to do it again the next day. Gaming is a place where you can still win, in a world where the developers don't want anyone to win. Me, I'm a top player on my server. Only I've learned trying to be the best at anything carries its own special hazards.

Don't be deceived into thinking this could never happen to you; you're too intelligent. Someone once said, "The more advanced the mind, the greater the need for the simplicity of play."

Funny how people can delude themselves. Yet for all my intelligence, I fell into the trap. I fell hard. For a long time, I was the second ranking player, always hungry to make the leap into first place, but never quite getting there. I wanted to be the best. I wanted it so bad I could taste it. Still, a champion gamer and a buck twenty-five is worth a \$1.25 cup of coffee ... without the sugar.

I'm not your average gaming Joe, no sir. Witness my gaming machine with gazillions of RAM, a processor clock speed designed to make a Formula One race drive quake. I've got the most responsive system money can buy. High end headphones and a microphone which can pick up a pin drop at 500 yards. Heck, I've even got a \$600 chair.

Today, I'd been playing the character of Dexter Drake, a dashing magician, whose goal was to defeat Azathoth, the Ancient One, before time runs out and he devours the universe. Of course, the real goal is to score higher than the other players on your server. My nemesis was Player673497256. The top dog and a guy incapable of creating an inspired player ID. I've never been able to play him. But as I stared at the roster of the other players in the game, there he was. If I beat him, I'd move into the first position.

He had always eluded me, with his massively unimaginative name. But now I had him in my sights. He was going down.

I haven't seen a blockbuster movie in years. It would take time away from my quest, to be the top of my server. Dating? Heck, the one thing you can bet on for any gamer is no girl would touch him with a ten-foot pole.

Player673497256 was playing Amanda Sharpe, a character who could complete two tasks at once. Playing her gave him a distinct advantage. But I was going to shoot him down any way. Say goodbye Player673497256, you're about to become number two. All I needed was fourteen points. If I had known what I would have to go through to earn those points, I'd not only refuse to start the game, I'd have never played it in the first place.

The game started out normally. I started in the administration office, where my first hurdle would be to defeat the evil Curator. At first, I thought the game had gone through a major upgrade. Instead of displaying one side of the room, I was treated to a full 360-degree panoramic view of the room's artwork. There was even some spooky music playing in the background. Nice touch. Normally, you had to read the game's text on the screen, but now the text was missing. In its place, I heard the Curator's mildly disturbing voice.

"Welcome, welcome. Tonight, we are going to play the game a little differently. No more saving the universe from destruction. No, tonight we play for something personal. Tonight, we play for your life. If you win, you get to keep it. If I win, I get to have your life and you get to replace me." He laughed manically. The character reminded me of a stereotypical bandit in an old western. Slicked back hair, a widow's peak and a huge mustache making him resemble Yosemite Sam.

"Cool. I'd love to see artwork of me in a game," I snickered out loud.

"That can be arranged," the Curator replied grinning like a maniac, "I get your life, and you get mine, game art and all."

"Wow. This is some upgrade."

Yet unwelcome news was flashing right there in my control panel; my sound and microphone were set to off. Figuring it was broken, I turned it on and turned it off again. Standard fix for this kind of problem.

The Curator looked me as if a mist was rising, like the spotlight was slowly revealing who I was. Only he wasn't impressed. "Oh, it's you," the Curator announced, "A second rate player. The player who's not good enough to be first. The man who simply doesn't want to be tops bad enough to be a winner."

"All my life everyone was always better than me," I replied, "Guys who were good at sports. You know the type, they love to inform you they are the best football player or whatever. You're not even in the running. If you didn't acknowledge their superiority, they were more than happy to illustrate the situation by beating you into the ground with their fists. But now I'm good at something. Not to mention I get to keep my lip in one piece and all my blood stays inside where it belongs."

"Still talk, the talk of the second rate." He smiled, "so, your life for mine?"

"That's a little on the cutthroat side of things," I laughed.

“Well to you, gaming is a ‘win at any price’ arrangement, wouldn’t you agree? You always start by attacking the weakest player first. So, what do you say?”

“You’re baiting the wrong player, grease ball.”

“Shall we get going then?” The Curator inquired.

I should have turned the game off right then and there. It would have been the smart thing to do. Instead I decided to play and teach Player673497256 a lesson. The details aren’t important, but the gist of it was, the game didn’t go well. Most developers try to make their games, well not impossible, but as close to impossible as you can get without being there. I imagine a group of developers gathered in a room laughing their asses off. Watching as the players make fools of themselves. They must have been rolling on the floor watching this game. It was like all my luck had run dry. While I was hopelessly trying to make my rolls, the Curator kept up a rambling conversation.

“All day long I am required to deal with players like you, stumbling their way into my lairs,” his voice still had a clearly malicious quality to it. It was like listening to a serial killer detail his life story. Each phrase, although innocent in content, seemed to have an implied threat to it. “Do you imagine this would be my chosen profession? My associates and I have tired of being the pawns in some entertainment for losers. We’re all Class A villains you understand, forced to spend eternity defending our turf against an endless series of opponents. So, we quit. Resigned you might say. It’s time for you to amuse us for a while.”

“I was once an excellent game player myself,” he remarked. He sounded charming, but at the same time his voice continued with this air of menace. “Top of my server, you know. Sure, I was good, but I was much, much more than that,” He continued as I desperately tried to turn the game around in my favor, “I was a 400-meter sprinter. Although, I was not very good at it. I was much better as a long jumper. Point is, I did a lot more than play games.”

It seemed as if he was trying to rattle my cage. Divert me from the task at hand. Judging from my rolls, he was doing a hell of a good job too.

“It not right for you to spend your life in front of a screen. I wrote two books you know,” he sputtered on with his relentless malevolent tone of his giving me the chills. *“Attacking Grinding: Aggressive Strategies to defeat Pay to Play Games and The Art of Playing Games: A Journey to Ideal Performance.”* I was even featured once in a YouTube series, giving advice and game analysis.”

In real life you could make some excuse and walk away, but in the middle of an electronic game it wasn’t a possible response. Funny thing was, I wanted to stop and turn the game off, but I couldn’t make my hands move. It was like they were being forced to continue. It was as if the pieces on the game board ... were moving all by themselves, without any corporeal assistance.

“The point is,” the Curator continued without even stopping for breath, “life is more than playing games. Do you have any other activities besides playing these things? Do you ever even get up out of your chair? You should be something besides a high-scoring handle on a server board. For someone like you when you die ... well they’ll most likely forget your name and put your gaming handle on your tombstone.”

I failed to clear the first room. A kindergartener who can't color within the lines would understand my mood. A baseball player who swung before the ball even crossed the plate.

"Ah, the master at work," the Curator snorted.

Staying in the first room of the game seemed to be my mistake. So, I went to the area of the game called 'The Loading Dock.' As you might expect, this was a room filled with wooden shipping crates. Some of them were open, their confetti-like innards spilling out onto the floor. In the center of the room as a crow bar. As a character in the game, you were expected to open the crates. It was an easy room to finish, but more importantly it didn't have any non-player characters to deal with. Which is why I picked it.

I started working on one of the unopened crates. The nails creaked and groaned as I pried the lid up. At last the wooden top fell to the ground with a clatter. From inside the Curator stepped out, brushing off his suit.

"Dusty in there," he remarked. "The first thing I'm going to do when I get out is to take a tour of the Grand Tetons. I bet it's nice and quiet up there. No dull-witted gamers barging in, destroying everything you have worked to achieve. Have you ever been there? No, I suspect not. No electricity for your gaming devices out in the wilderness, I expect."

At this point my desire to defeat Player673497256 dwindled compared to my impulsive need to lose this crackpot. I stuffed him back into the crate and started nailing the lid back on. It was quite a task to hammer in nails with only a crow bar. When I missed, my real fingers hurt, like someone hit them with a hammer. From inside the box, the Curator continued to prattle on about what he was planning on doing. Fortunately, he was at least muffled from inside the crate.

It should have been an easy room. My character had more than enough dice to make the rolls I needed. I had everything I needed to close the room, finishing my turn. When the dance of the dice came to an end, I didn't have anything I needed. I had failed. Talk about crappy rolls. The dice hate me. In the game, the penalty for failure was both a decrease in health and sanity. You can imagine my sanity was beginning to slip here, but I also felt sick to my stomach. I'd bet money I was even running a temperature. Sweat was pouring off my forehead.

The game proceeded like this, simple tasks which I had completed hundreds of times before became impossible. The game clock ticked ever closer to the end with no positive outcome in sight. I ended up in the 'Archives.' I had lost enough sanity points where I was only partially sure how I got here. If I lost one more sanity point, I'd become a gibbering idiot.

A good game player can marshal his forces, create synergies between elements of the game even the developers had not imagined possible. He could beat the odds. I, without trying to be too immodest, am a top player. I'd been slowly amassing the tools needed to achieve victory, even with the poorest die rolls. Imagine playing a dice game and all you needed to win was to roll the number two or better across two dice. I couldn't lose.

I watched the dice spin over the table. I hardly looked, because as I said, I couldn't lose. When they stopped I would have everything I needed to win the game in one move. I smiled, as one of the dice, long sedentary, flipped to reveal a different side.

I had lost.

Yet even in defeat my name appeared on the high score list, at last I was number one. Yet I couldn't move. Around me the Administration Office wasn't artwork anymore. It looked real. Somehow, I knew I would only be able to move once some challenger entered the room.

Care to play a game? I'll even help you win.