

P.S.

**O**NE OF THE MOST famous pieces of pop music ever recorded opens with the words, "Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?". The lyric came to mind recently as I was finding out about the phenomenon of online gaming, which seems to be taking the world by storm.

Computer games have been around for many years, of course, since the pioneering days of Pac-man and Space Invaders. What is new about online games is that they continually evolve. Whereas in conventional computer games the gamer completes the game after a few weeks or months (or gives up in frustration), online games are different. Players go on adventures in real time—rushing home from work or school to find out what has happened while they've been away—and the software writers continually develop the virtual world of the game, adding locations, characters and plot lines over months and even years to keep the consumer hooked. The advantage for the software companies is significant; instead of a one-off charge of £30, say, they take the £30 and then insist on a £12 subscription every month for continued playing of the game. Nice work if you can get it!

Although popular in Asia for some time (South Korea leads the way, with around four million online game subscribers out of a population of sixty million!), the phenomenon is only just taking off in the West. But it is doing so at some speed. The most recent success, 'World of Warcraft', sold out within weeks of launch and hit its full-year sales target of over a million in less than three months. So captivating is the game (apparently) that you can even hire people on eBay and pay them to play for you while you are asleep! Currency converters are available to convert real money to Warcraft money so that you can buy status and power within the game. This is a game for lawyers and investment bankers as well as spotty fourteen-year-old males.

What is fascinating about this is not just society's habits potentially taking a new turn before one's eyes, but the ability of humans to create for themselves fantasy worlds—worlds which are completely unreal—and to find them more fascinating than the real world that they actually inhabit.

Computer games are not the only way human beings create for themselves a virtual reality. Many forms of escapism—story telling, written fiction,

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film, soap—invent characters and places, creating imaginary stages upon which imaginary events involving imaginary people might unfold. This piece is not an attack on the arts, on human creativity, or on escapism per se; these things may well all be fine in moderation. I do, however, want to reflect on what this ability to create imaginary worlds tells us about ourselves and about the human condition.

The very fact that we might seek or 'need' to create or enjoy an imaginary world tells us something about the emptiness of the real lives humans lead. Human life is sufficiently weightless and vain (in the sense of the vanity of Ecclesiastes) that people find it necessary to invent another world which has more to offer.

Yet vainer far is the vanity of actually creating those other worlds in the full knowledge that they neither do nor will exist. To rush home from work to discover what has happened in one's other life as an elf, a warlock or a space invader—scarcely able to contain one's excitement as the latest updates are downloaded—is a bizarre situation to find people in.

Is life really so boring that we need to escape it? Is it so free of challenge, so straightforward, that it holds no real appeal for people, but that they should seek to live in some other universe as some other creature? The Preacher was right, of course. God has given men this sore travail to be exercised therewith (Eccl. 1:13), and in one way or another they try to pretend it wasn't so given. Life can be so empty that one may as well pretend to be troll or troglodyte living in Middle Earth. Life makes just as much sense that way!

But for us, God has provided some better thing. Our Lord has called us to greater adventures than these, and exalted us to participate in the ultimate challenge, the battle against sin and the striving for God's will to be done in daily life prior to the establishment of His Kingdom. With such an agenda life can never be boring, and there is much less of a need to escape it. Why should we want to escape the greatest and most exciting destiny to which we could ever be called, to be a son or daughter of God and to live a life which answers to that calling? The real adventure takes place right here, in the real world.

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