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Mobs move into 'Sims Online' power vacuum

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Tony Soprano can keep Jersey (who wants it, anyways?) A new family is movin' in on unclaimed turf - online.

An underground group known as the Sims Shadow Government has taken over the fantasy world that is ``The Sims Online," meting out mob justice.

It's a violent twist for ``The Sims," the dollhouse-inspired computer game that has long been portrayed as the antithesis to guns-'n-gore bestsellers like ``Grand Theft Auto." The emergence of a seedy underbelly in the online game may reveal more about the dark fantasies of middle-aged suburbanites than anyone suspected.

Turns out, everyone wants to be Tony Soprano or Don Vito Corleone.

To hear the ersatz mob boss, Piers Mathieson, tell it, it all began innocently enough, with the desire to impose order on the chaos that is ``The Sims Online."

The game's designer, Will Wright, deliberately created a blank stage on which players could act out their fantasies.

To Mathieson, the lack of a government to lay down laws in virtual online communities like Alphaville -- let alone cops to enforce the rules -- resulted in anarchy. ``Grievers" arose -- players who delight in creating misery for other players -- stealing money, trashing houses or even appropriating another's online identity.

Mathieson, 34, who lives in Las Vegas and promotes bands, said players turned into racketeers.

``They show up at your house and they request protection money. `You have to pay me 100,000 simolians if you don't want your house torn down.' It's technically harassment."

The most popular person in the Sims universe -- Mia Wallace, a composite character played by Mathieson and his wife, Jennifer -- stepped into the power vacuum and organized the Sims Shadow Government.

``We weren't playing the games as hoodlums, we were playing the game as protectors of the city," said Mathieson.

At least at first. Somewhere along the line, though, the Sims Shadow Government turned from benevolent overseer to a virtual version of La Cosa Nostra.

Maybe it was the emergence of a rival family, the Playtime gang. Or maybe it was the Mia impostor, who tarnished the real Mia's reputation by inviting other players to work for her as a prostitute. Perhaps the final straw was when someone hijacked Mathieson's America Online account -- and stole all of his in-game cash and property.

Whatever the pretext. Mia morphed from prom queen to mob boss. A handful of the SSG's 160

members would meet outside the game -- in Yahoo discussion groups or by phone -- to talk about offenses against the ``family" and plot revenge.

The in-game hits are not as gory as a bloody horse head in the bed of a movie producer who offended Don Corleone -- the fictional Godfather created by Mario Puzo.

Nor does it match the savagery of a HBO's prime-time mobster Tony Soprano, who beats fellow ``made man" Ralphie Cifaretto to death for killing their jointly-owned racehorse, Pie-o-My, for the insurance money, then stuffs Ralphie's head in a bowling ball bag for safekeeping.

But for online game players who invest months developing a character, it can be nonetheless devastating. Like the time 28 gang members stormed a rival's property and delivered a ``red link" -- the game's way of designating another player as an ``enemy."

Particularly egregious affronts to the Shadow Government could -- at least until game maker Maxis disabled this feature -- be dealt with by ripping out an opponent's heart. Of course, nobody dies in the ``Sims Online." It's just to prove a point.

This drama via modem is consuming for its participants, who've formed real-life friendships with their in-game allies.

Kacie Velie, a 21-year-old assistant manager of a residential facility for the mentally retarded in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., is by night one of the SSG's capos. She said the drama became so intense she sometimes receives calls at work about developments.

``I am amazed personally as to how this whole game has become so real . . . I spend more time with my computer than I do with my friends," said Velie, who like about 60 percent of the players, is a woman.

Wright -- the grand puppet master who birthed the bestselling Sims franchise -- is both fascinated and frustrated by the emergence of the mob.

In an interview at a recent trade show, Wright said he logs on nightly to monitor the mob's exploits. But he said Maxis is powerless to stop it -- since all the group's communications happen outside of the game.

Game experts say organized gangs are the hallmark of successful online multiplayer games, like ``Lineage" or ``Ultima Online." Sometimes, it's a sign that the game lacks enough interesting elements to engage the players -- so they create their own drama. More often, it means players are so attached that they invest the time to exploit its rules.

Consider the Mathiesons hooked. They decided to delete the Mia character, saying the demands of reigning as overlord of Alphaville became too taxing. But they're not about to quit the game.

``She just retired, for the simple fact she needs to go in for a face-lift," said Mathieson. ``She came back as Hermia, with a bouffant hairdo. A much different Sim."

Maybe Mia's gone. But she's not forgotten.

``Our friends know who the overlord is."

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