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# Voyager to a Strange Planet



Darren Hauck for The New York Times

ALTER EGO - Richard L. Stenlund is the force behind Thedeacon, shown on monitor, a powerful character in the game Anarchy Online.

By SETH SCHIESEL

IN the year 29477, at the distant end of a strife-torn galaxy, one of the most famous residents of the planet Rubi-Ka is a genetically engineered mutant called Thedeacon.

He is an ugly mutant, prideful and lewd. The spectacle of his wealth is surpassed by the vulgarity of his tongue. He sexually accosts strangers - be they female, male or neuter - and is renowned for his undying fetish for feet.

Thedeacon is also a kind mutant, a leader and beacon. Among Rubi-Ka's weaker citizens, he is revered for his generosity of mind, for sharing the information others need to prosper. Among the planet's elite, he is respected for his generosity of spirit, for comforting the lovesick and the lonely.

Thedeacon does not physically exist, of course. In the year 2003, at the blue-collar end of Madison, Wis., he is a struggling, frustrated 27-year-old computer repairman called Richard L. Stenlund.

Rubi-Ka does not physically exist, either. It is a construct within an Internet-based game called Anarchy Online. Every day, thousands visit Rubi-Ka as they log into their \$12.95-a-month Anarchy Online accounts. Meanwhile,

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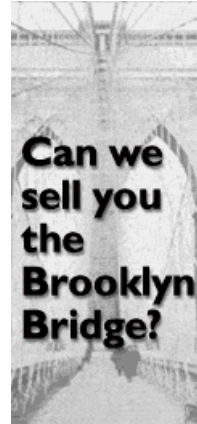
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thousands of others depart for the vast worlds of similar games like EverQuest, Asheron's Call 2 and Dark Age of Camelot.

Most are merely playing a game, reaching for intermittent diversion. But for some players, these virtual worlds known as massively multiplayer games - filled with real friendships, real love affairs, real jealousies, real hatreds, real esteem - are almost as important as that world of bills in the mail, office politics, personal pain and unfulfilled dreams.

Rick Stenlund is one of those players.

Thedeacon is a celebrity. Mr. Stenlund, meanwhile, feels trapped - trapped in a town too far from big cities where big things happen, trapped in a hand-to-mouth existence, trapped in a mean little culture of cheap thrills and fast-food television.

That is why he has spent an average of seven hours a day in the last month on Rubi-Ka. That is why he has spent more than 2,400 hours on the planet in the last two years. That is why Rick Stenlund has become Thedeacon.

"It's a total release of the id," he said one Thursday last month as he sat in a Japanese restaurant in Madison with his wife, Sarah A. Werner-Stenlund, explaining his attraction to Anarchy Online. "I think people are generally false. Even sitting here with you, we are putting on a front. But in A. O. you can really let your true character out. If I want to be a pervert, I am able to do that in A. O. and be a pervert right off the bat."

Ms. Werner-Stenlund, who seems alternately befuddled and amused by her husband's other life, put in, "You are a pervert."

The Stenlunds run a computer repair and assembly business, Affordable PC Services, from the second bedroom of their \$655-a-month apartment not far from a boulevard lined with used car dealers and small restaurants, adult bookstores and gas stations.

They don't get out much. That is partly a result of the couple's dim finances, but also a result of Mr. Stenlund's dim view of humanity. "The more you deal with people, the more you hate people," he said. "It just feels that everybody is so asleep in this world."

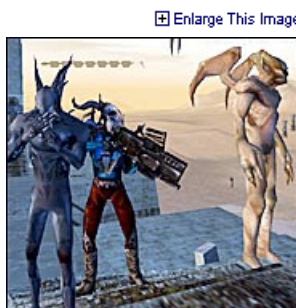


As the mutant Thedeacon (holding staff), Mr. Stenlund led a group of Meta-Physicists on a virtual protest march on Sunday.



Andy Manis for The New York Times

CELEBRITY - Richard L. Stenlund and his wife, Sarah A. Werner-Stenlund, at home.



WARRIOR - Accompanied by three minions, Thedeacon, with gun, prepares to attack a monster, left, in the game Anarchy Online.

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In that other world, however, there is always something happening.

If a game is a rigidly defined artificial activity that is meant to be completed, or won, then products like Anarchy Online are in many ways not really games at all. Rather, they are full-fledged virtual sandboxes. Instead of castles, players build lives.

In Anarchy Online, players create an avatar and then navigate a vast world rendered in colorful three-dimensional graphics. That avatar belongs to one of four mutant species and one of 12 professions. Each profession is strong in different areas. Doctors, for instance, are best at healing. Nano-Technicians, meanwhile, inflict damage by unleashing destructive nanotechnology programs.

Once their avatar, or character, is created, some players flirt. Some team up to defeat fantastic creatures. Others explore deep wilderness. Many undertake quests for wealth and material possessions. What one player considers rewarding another may find insipid. In general, however, most players spend most of their time on a psychologically reinforcing treadmill of sporadic rewards, trying to make their character more capable, progressing in power to Level 200.

Battling other players can generate the social reward of fame and is an integral part of Anarchy Online's back story: Rubi-Ka is a planet at war, with the pangalactic Omni-Tek Corporation battling a scrappy confederation of rebel clans for control of the planet. Almost all players belong to one side of the conflict or the other.

But even for players who care only about finding the next powerful weapon or piece of armor, an essential reward for those efforts is the esteem and respect (or envy and fear) of other users.

"These hard-core players are the leaders, they are the ones that other players look up to, they are what other players want to be," Thomas Johnsen, the official Anarchy Online community manager for Funcom, the Oslo-based company that runs the game, said in a telephone interview. "That makes the hard-core players very important, not so much as role models but as measuring sticks for other players."

In that sense, these games are really only about the relationships among the people who play them. In some way they are like The Sims - the "Seinfeld" of video games - where the goal is simply to manage a character's everyday suburban existence. In The Sims, however, human relationships are simulated by software. In a massively multiplayer game, where thousands of people can simultaneously occupy a common (if vast) virtual environment, those relationships are real. That may be one reason that The Sims itself has spawned a massively multiplayer offshoot, The Sims Online.

"I think for almost anyone who goes very far into a game like this, the original reason for playing goes away, and it becomes a way to replace parts of your life that you don't have in real life," said Oskar Asbrink, 28, a music producer in Stockholm who is known in Anarchy Online as

Wolfe, president of Storm, the most powerful player organization in the game. "For many people, it is a way to establish yourself in a community and become prominent for people who might not be able to do that in real life. In the game, anyone can be the boss, the leader, become popular."

Thedeacon is certainly well known. "Some would say he is famous," Mr. Johnsen said. "Others would say infamous."

Perhaps most important, he is ubiquitous, and not just because he often plays more than 40 hours a week. The message boards at [forums.anarchyonline.com](http://forums.anarchyonline.com) are a major element of the game community, and Thedeacon has posted more than 3,000 messages since February 2002. At least as important, he is at once self-consciously outrageous and ultimately harmless, a sort of transgalactic RuPaul. Both in the game and on the message boards, Thedeacon often adopts a patois of inner-city slang and hacker dialect. He demands sexual favors from mutants of all species and requests that, in particular, mutant females of the nanomage persuasion provide him their feet.

Most players find his antics amusing. Thedeacon is a member of Storm, and as Mr. Asbrink put it, "We can kind of do anything in the game, and as long as Thedeacon comes along to liven things up, it is more fun for almost everyone. He has that natural entertainer's personality."

Like many natural extroverts, Mr. Stenlund actually seems a bit shy offstage. Though articulate and clearly intelligent, he skipped college because he believed that school stifled creativity. Even as a child, Mr. Stenlund was not very outgoing, according to his mother, Marge Jarrells.

"He was pretty close to home most of the time," Ms. Jarrells, a pianist in Madison, said in a telephone interview. "Growing up, it was kind of hard for him to find his niches, and that is typical for people of high intelligence. They are not as sociable as other people. They are just off to themselves in their little projects."

In this latest of Mr. Stenlund's little projects, Thedeacon has also made a name for himself as an excellent warrior. Fantastically wealthy, at Level 200, with the best, rarest equipment, Thedeacon often helps represent the rebel clans in their battles against the forces of Omni-Tek.

In recent months, however, Thedeacon has also become a Dr. Phil-like self-help guru and mentor. His guide on "Making LOTS of money as a new player" has become scripture for new citizens of Rubi-Ka and has been viewed on the Web forums more than 35,000 times. When Thedeacon walks through a city, less powerful players flock to him as if they had seen a celebrity on the sidewalk, which they actually have. They ask him to stop so they can take a screenshot with him, just as a teenager might claw to have a picture of herself taken with Justin Timberlake. Mindful of his status, Thedeacon almost always obliges.

"I had seen him on the forums quite a bit and thought he was pretty funny, but when I actually started talking to him in-game I was surprised

at how helpful and patient he was," Eric A. Munchrath, an 18-year-old student near Houston who plays a character called Stuntliator, said in a telephone interview. "Even though he's Level 200 and must get swarmed with messages, he always takes time to help out."

Lately, Thedeacon has spent a lot of time trying to help out his fellow Meta-Physicists, who make up one of the game's 12 professions. For more than a year, Meta-Physicist players have lobbied Funcom to enhance their profession, widely considered the weakest in the game.

Frightened by the prospect that Meta-Physicists would continue to be left behind, Thedeacon spent two weeks organizing a protest march, held last weekend. Called Black Sunday, it was a success, at least for morale, as about 100 other Meta-Physicists followed Thedeacon on a five-hour hike from the city of Hope to the planetary headquarters of the Interstellar Confederation of Corporations. Funcom acknowledged the protest by turning the sky over the marchers an ominous black (though the company did not provide any concrete information about the future of the profession).

The Meta-Physicist message board clogged with paeans to Thedeacon:

"Deac that was so fun! DEFINETLY the most memorable day in all of AO."

"Thank you so much for organizing this march Deacon; it is indeed an important day of history on Rubi-Ka for us."

"Thanks Deacon, for arranging a awesome event. I have NEVER seen anything like it."

Mr. Johnsen estimated that the average Anarchy Online player spends 10 to 15 hours in the game each week. Funcom does not release subscriber figures, but the game, released in the summer of 2001, appears to have tens of thousands of players.

Perhaps only 3 percent of them are hard-core players like Thedeacon. But then for him, the game has been a particular sort of refuge.

Two years ago the Stenlunds' Web-based computer company was in a shambles. Within months, their business filed for bankruptcy protection.

"No money," Ms. Werner-Stenlund recalled. "Nowhere to go. Nothing to do. We were being threatened to be sued left and right, and I think we were both on the verge of swallowing a bottle of pills."

With the walls closing in, the Stenlunds fled to the mall one day in July 2001, just looking to treat themselves to some small gifts. Ms. Werner-Stenlund bought some shirts. Mr. Stenlund bought Anarchy Online.

"I can honestly say that A. O. helped save my life," Mr. Stenlund said, sitting on a bench outside the store where his journey began.

Now, however, the couple's most important goal is to relocate to an exotic destination in this galaxy: Las Vegas.

"This has been a rough week financially, but at the end of the month we have to move or we're out on the street," he said on Sunday by phone with a halfhearted chuckle.

In his Las Vegas future, he sees a job and perhaps a return to school to improve his employment prospects, even if that means less time for Anarchy Online. "I mean, I can't be poor like this any more," he said. "We're not living happy lives right now."

But for Thedeacon, at least, things have never been better. "It was incredible how the community really pulled together," he said, ebullient over Sunday's protest. "The turnout was great, and the Funcom folks showed up, and the sky turning black, and I'm just thrilled about it all."



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