The party goes on in massive online worlds

You don’t have to be so socially distant when playing *Final Fantasy XIV* online.

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My friends and I were taking a pit stop after an aimless drive when we heard a stranger loudly invite anyone within earshot to her friends’ party. Our plans had ended at “go for a drive;” before that, we were loitering between some collapsed columns in a crystalline wasteland.

We debated whether to attend from inside our car. The party seemed a little raunchy—its promoter, Nina, a minuscule woman with pink blush marks painted on either side of her button nose, advertised “drinks and good company” but also “ERP,” which stands for “erotic role-play.” That’s not generally our thing. We’re more stand-outside types than the types to cast a flashy glamour spell and chat up the nearest cat girl. But, hey, it’s *Final Fantasy XIV* online, and where my body sat in New York, the epicenter of America’s Covid-19 outbreak, there certainly weren’t any parties.

On Fridays, Saturdays, and basically any given weeknight, my Brooklyn neighborhood is alive with throbbing house music, over-earnest open mics, DJ sets, roiling apartment bashes, and

cars blasting reggaeton. In this new-normal world, events as we know them no longer exist, unless you count texting your 20 closest acquaintances a *DRINKS ON ZOOM!!!!* invite, give or take a couple of cloying emojis. With all of this newfound time to overthink the mundane, I recognize now that social outings are dedicated units of time for self-expression, coloring-book pages onto which we and our friends draw outlines that we pour ourselves into. Social distancing has separated us from our social contexts; without them, all the color drains out.

It quickly became apparent that those of us whose social lives revolve around online videogames had a fail-safe for staying entertained indoors. Floating on my back in a virtual fountain lined with turquoise Byzantine-style tiles, I let a new gratitude wash over me for massively multiplayer online role-playing games, or MMORPGs. For weeks, I have been compulsively playing *Final Fantasy XIV* and *World of Warcraft Classic,* online games in which my meticulously customized characters battle monsters and complete quests in huge, biologically diverse, digital worlds. On my *Final Fantasy XIV* server, 13,000 strangers, plus a couple of my real-life neighborhood friends, roam the ancient forests, the thronged cities and the cramped, rocky caves.

One of them was Cid, who lives a 20-minute walk from me in Brooklyn. On a catwalk in someone's virtual basement, we had just put on an impromptu two-person fashion show. (She posed slouchy and with a pout in her reindeer onesie.) Once we we tired of that, she found me in that fountain and entered in the "/waterfloat" command nearby me. The sun shone down.

It's easy to wax poetic about how videogames let you do things that you can't in real life anymore. You can host house parties in *Animal Crossing*. You can play basketball with your friends in *NBA 2K20*. Whatever. The easy sell for MMORPGs in the time of pandemic is simply that you can exist together, even /hug. Maybe that's not entirely distinct from Zoom happy

hours or Skype trivia at a time when there are plenty of digital channels for connecting. To feel like myself again, I needed to vector my personality off a new experience, and do it alongside people who know me.

Enlarge / Now is as good a time as any to bust out your OG armor sets in WoW Classic.

A group of us were slogging through a checklist of mundane quests in *World of Warcraft Classic* when our undead friend Baen Chunch—named for Martha Stewart's pony, Ben Chunch—suddenly started toward the mountains. As she sprinted, she rotated herself toward the tallest ridge we could see, a jagged, tannish peak looming over a massive desert. Over the Discord app's voice chat, we egged her on and, one by one, enthusiastically followed suit.

Because the game replicates the experience of *World of Warcraft* as it was in 2001, climbing isn't a straight shot up. Most craggy geometries only offer a small window for forward movement, and to find it, players rhythmically alternate between the space bar, which makes them jump, and the W key, which is "forward." While the rest of us climbed in this frenzied zigzag, Trollthan the troll happened upon a rare smooth trail and gunned it. Meanwhile, Baen Chunch and the

rest of us were missing jumps and falling downward.

One by one, we all eventually made it to the summit. It was beautiful to look out together onto the dusty desert, but not consequential, like a for-the-sake-of-it hike. It was just a thing we had all decided to do.

Transferring my social energies into MMORPGs has been surprisingly seamless. In *World of Warcraft*, I can /burp and /cackle. My partner, if he's feeling tolerant, might /chuckle. In *Final Fantasy XIV*, I can magick my high-level armor into the sort of outfit I'd purchase at Urban Outfitters. Then I might beg Cid to meet me in the city and assess whether my orange leggings are too loud. It's an embarrassing thing to admit, but the social validation of others is something I desperately miss; expressing myself in a void is not so satisfying. A question I keep having, locked inside and isolated, is who I am without the connections that normally define me, and to what extent this sense of self I'm accessing in MMORPG is a viable substitute.

In-game, Cid looks much like herself: androgynous, with short hair and an all-black outfit that could have come from a trendier Army surplus store. Cid's been on *Final Fantasy XIV* a lot recently since the cafe she works at closed, and along with my partner and our friend Responsible, who is sheltering in place 20 minutes from either of us, we drove over to Nina's party.

We pulled up to a mansion in the Lavender Beds, a quiet residential area separate from the monster-filled landscapes that *Final Fantasy XIV* is known for. We walked through the garden and the tall double doors, where we noticed the receptionist, played by another person, standing in the opulent, burgundy foyer. It was oddly quiet. After welcoming us in, he told us that the party was in the basement and to head downstairs for some fun.

When Cid and I manage to get together in Brooklyn, we meet at a tiki bar that serves too-strong cocktails in ridiculous inflatable flamingos. Responsible and I like to go to dive bars with cheap well drinks, and when we get sick of the crowds, we'll sit in my small yard and drink cold vodka. Downstairs in this digital mansion, through the room packed with dancing cat boys and shirtless beastmen, we zeroed in on the four open stools at the bar. The music was pounding. Embarrassed that I showed up in battle gear, I quickly changed into a tank top and leather pants.

When we found our seats, we attempted to flag down the bartender, another cat boy. He was taking his sweet time serving the other partygoers, likely regulars. Impatient, I begged my partner to get his attention. When he finally turned to us, he offered us his signature fruit slush cocktails, which he sold for an exorbitant 5,000 gil each. We immediately inhaled them. For the duration of the party, we didn't dance with or talk to anyone, except for the one human woman whose pants I complimented. (She obligingly /smiled.)

We were bored and it was getting late, so we wove our way back toward the stairs. It was a mediocre outing. Not really our scene, plus the service was lousy and the drinks were expensive. Exiting the mansion, again with no plan, I turned to my friends and asked: "Wanna break into some houses?"

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