

As danah boyd's contribution (Chapter 8, this volume) illustrates, software modifications are not the only way to change the context of a game engine. The context of the game is shaped by the diverse intentions of the players, not merely by the stated rules. On June 28, 2000, Blizzard Entertainment released *Diablo II*, a follow-up to their enormously popular 1997 game, *Diablo*. By July 17, *Diablo II* had sold more than one million copies, making it the fastest selling video game in PC history.¹ Within six months *Diablo II* had sold more than two million copies and had been named Game of the Year by a host of gaming magazines and websites, marking it as one of the most successful PC games of all time. *Diablo II*'s popularity was partly driven by Blizzard's free online gaming network, battle.net, which allowed anyone who purchased the game to play in an interactive multiuser environment. Battle.net, in turn, was divided into "realms," reflecting a "real-world" geography of servers and bandwidth. There were two U.S. realms (U.S. East and U.S. West), and separate realms for Europe and Asia. Blizzard assumed that the players would self-assign to their regional servers in order to take advantage of higher bandwidth.

Like many online multiplayer games, *Diablo II* created its own economic system. Players traded valuable items, exchanged gold and loot, and even innovated a system of currency built around a game item called the Stone of Jordan. The "realms" kept each system closed and independent, meaning that players could not trade between realms or play with or against players on other servers. Over time, this created a player imbalance that greatly favored U.S. West. U.S. West, which became known as the premier *Diablo II* realm, home to the best and "richest" players.

As the game grew in international popularity, players from all over the world converged on the U.S. West server, leading to frequent overloading and lag in game play. The problem became particularly acute when *Diablo II* was released in Korea. Within a few weeks of its release, *Diablo II* sold 300,000 copies, making it far and away Blizzard's most profitable overseas launch. This rapid uptake produced a massive influx of game players into U.S. West, causing further problems with game lag. Whereas in earlier instances, the causes of lag were invisible and consequently were attributed to the community at large, the new round of slowdowns had a visible scapegoat. The Korean version of *Diablo II* included linguistic customization that facilitated game play among Koreans, but which marked Korean players within the game space. As problems with lag worsened, a portion of the player base began to blame the Korean players. Language barriers in the shared game world added to tensions. Players in the

United States began to think of the fictional game world as a nation-space, with an accompanying sense of entitlement to the U.S. West server domain.

This entitlement rapidly took on an ugly aspect. U.S. Players in the United States began a campaign against Korean players, both inside the game space and outside on websites and forums. They used tropes of national borders and boundaries, and framed Korean players as “illegal immigrants” and “invaders.” Players began joining games with Korean players with the sole intention of disrupting game play and literally chasing them off of the servers. Some players adopted racist or anti-Korean names. At one point a bug was discovered that allowed players to send a string of characters to the screen that would crash the Korean version of the game (a simple line of 255 periods). It became common to see players enter a game and send the string to the screen to clear the game of Korean players.

Perhaps most alarming was the creation of KPK, Inc., or Korean Player Killers, Incorporated, a self-described “*Diablo II* Community Effort.”² The site blamed Koreans for server instability, excessively long wait times to join games, international video piracy, creating a sense of “excessive paranoia,” and filling chat rooms with “nonsense and numbers.” Korean players, they argued, sought to disrupt their enjoyment of the game: “It is also all too common for a normal, peaceful, public chatroom to be instantly filled with meaningless dribble by Koreans who desire only to piss off the Western realm users,” wrote one user.

Blizzard worked to end the problem by correcting the player-killer bug, the visible differentiation Korean players, and—most importantly, in the end—the capacity problems responsible for lag on U.S. West. The anti-Korean player “movement” lost its grounding in the system architecture.

Although it is hard to take the *Diablo* pogrom completely seriously as a performance of national and racial identity, it is interesting to consider where the differences from more familiar forms of violent nationalism lay. In the *Diablo* case, xenophobia and racism were mapped onto an unusual representation of space and territory, but one that is in some respects no more “imaginary” than the experience of the nation itself. The strangeness of the circumstances in U.S. West bring out the formal character of national adhesion—the requirement of an identity principle that can define the in-group (“people of like backgrounds tend to stick together, and in these games the situation is no different”), despite the manifest difficulty in this case of knowing who one’s compatriots were. The overblown performance of national identity in *Diablo* is testimony to the portability of the race–nation discourse and to the ease with

which it is activated. It should come as no surprise that it can be asserted in virtual spaces, or that investments in virtual lives should give rise to strong senses of injury. At the same time, the exaggeration is suggestive of the ways in which the pogrom itself came to resemble a game within the game—with rules, a narrative, forms of action, and venues for community commentary and reinforcement. Such games within the game develop because players ultimately determine the meaning of the game and contextualize the game space, no matter how strictly the game is scripted. If this overflow of meaning is responsible for the growth of new roles and forms of cultural engagement in online environments—of playful interventions—it should come as no surprise that it also produces playful hatreds.

notes

- 1 Sales figures are quoted from PC Data, the industry standard for monitoring and tracking PC games sales figures (<http://www.bluesnews.com/cgi-bin/articles.pl?show=44>).
- 2 All references to the KPK are from <http://www.kpk.250x.com>, accessed June 2, 2004.