

A Virtual Life (part 1)

By Harclubs Bartag

Every civilization needs to reflect on what is or is not important. In times gone by, it was knowledge, love, or honour. Things have changed.

At the dawn of Western society, great thinkers and writers such as Plato, Aristophanes, and Euripides bent their minds to the many problems that beset their fledgling civilization. Their toil played no small part in making the West what it is today. Time marches on, however, and Western civilization has evolved and changed. Sadly, Plato and his toga-wearing contemporaries are no longer all that relevant to your average iPod toting consumer. Symposia re-casts the work of these three Hellenic writers in a way that works in today's fast paced world.

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The room is dark and feels strangely crowded despite there being only two men occupying the space. They sit side by side in front of two computer monitors that are the room's only source of illumination. Even though the light is dim, it is possible to make out several other computers lined up on tables against three of the four walls. At the rooms centre is a table piled high with empty pizza boxes and beer bottles. An almost complete silence accompanies the gloom, broken only by the occasional tap-tap-tap of fingers on keyboards and a faint chattering noise, on the very cusp of hearing, emanating from the headphones that both men wear.

The images on the screens are spectacularly colourful. A fluid and dynamic scene of a fantasy army: warriors in heavy armour carrying swords and shields, leather clad archers armed with longbows, cowled monks armed with staves, and wizards dressed in flowing robes and carrying wands and orbs that crackle with arcane power. The scene is the same on both screens but the perspectives differ slightly.

'Are we all here?' asks the smaller of the two men into the microphone attached to his headphones. He taps the spacebar on his keyboard and one of the heavily armoured warriors on his screen jumps up. It wears the label "Horc" above its head. The intensity of noise coming from the headphones increases to an almost audible level.

'We're just waiting on Twoswords' group,' says the broad-shouldered man beside him, pressing the "w" key on his keyboard which propels forward an archer wearing the label "Pamen". 'They were held up at the Ogre camp.'

'Twoswords, how long are you going to be?' Horc asks into his microphone.

'Just coming around the corner now boss,' comes the reply in the headphones of both men. 'We got jumped by a gank squad at the ruins. It was amusing watching them run when they realised who we were.'

Horc smiles to himself. All the characters on screen are wearing a cloak that bears the distinctive insignia of the famed Enemies of Shadow. 'I hope you killed them all,' he says.

'That's why we took so long,' Twoswords replies. 'One of the bloody Stalkers went into stealth and it took us ages to find her.'

'Since she's almost here, I'll move my people into position,' says Pamen. 'Okay, groups four, five and six follow me. We need to move to the rear of the keep without the enemy seeing us. That means no ganking randoms.'

Horc watches half the army on his screen file away after Pamen. 'For those of you who may have been afk when we went through this before, I'll run through the plan again,' he says into his microphone. 'We need to get into this keep in order to take out General Tzamos, who drops the Acid Armour. No guild has been able to defeat the General thus far on any server, so getting this done will expand our epeens to monstrous proportions. Unfortunately, the evil guild Chaos Incorporated is complicating our already difficult task. I've heard around the traps that they don't like us very much, and they find the thought of monstrous epeens on EoS members deeply offensive.'

Several members of the guild laugh at this statement, and the chat-box on Horc's screen. He pauses a moment to let the frivolity wind down. 'Stealthbomb has been inside,' he continues when the laughing has faded away and the "rofl's" have finally stopped scrolling through his chat-box. 'He reckons that there are about 50 or 60 Chaos Inc waiting to take us out before we get to the general's door. We are fortunate, however, that the defence of the General has been organised by Chaosman, Chaos Inc's less than illustrious leader. Chaosman's plans usually come fully equipped with a fatal flaw, and this one is no exception. Stealthbomb reckons the silly buggers have set up camp at an open intersection in the keep without posting guards at the rear door, which leaves them open to attack from two sides. We are going to split into two companies.'

Once again, Horc pauses as the guild get fractious. 'Groups one, two and three, made up mostly of healers and heavy melee will be the first company and will come with me through the front door,' he continues when the noise finally dies down. 'We will hit Chaos Inc from the front and draw their melee away from the squishies. Once we have their attention, Pamen will lead the ranged and light melee fighters of company two in an assault on their back lines. If we do this well, we can take out their healers before they know what's hit them, then clean up the other squishies and melee at our leisure.'

'Ok, we're here and in position,' Pamen's voice comes through the headphones.

'Sending out the ready alert,' Horc says, watching his screen where six red buttons have appeared along the left hand side, five of which turn green almost immediately. 'What's holding you up now, Twoswords?'

'Just waiting for a debuff to expire,' comes the reply, followed a few seconds later by the last button turning green.

'OK, let's move out,' says Horc. 'Remember, company one needs to concentrate on staying alive until company two hits the back lines. It'll be 60 seconds after our initial contact, which I will announce, so no risky behaviour unless it's absolutely necessary. Do you hear me, Kamikazebblue?'

'Yes boss,' a high-pitched voice answers.

Horc leads a stream of avatars through the monstrous doors of the virtual keep into the maw of a hideous army of ghouls and goblins. Screaming and cursing in their repulsive tongue, the evil legions of Chaos Incorporated charge the intruders. 'Contact,' he says into the microphone, and falls silent as he concentrates on applying his virtual weapon to the unreal horrors on his screen.

Twisting and turning, Horc the armoured avatar wields his virtual weapon, causing havoc to all enemies around him. Despite his mighty efforts, two sword-wielding ghouls are able to dodge past and attack a cowled monk standing several meters behind and to his left. Cursing, he disengages from the goblin trying to run him through with a spear and spins on his heels, skewering one of the ghouls with his long sword. Bringing his sword back and across, he severs the head of the goblin that has followed him while simultaneously kicking the other ghoul with his armoured virtual foot. The monk brings down his stave and a blinding flash of fire reduces both ghouls to twitching virtual corpses that quickly fade. Horc notices the body of the goblin crawling forward in a spirited attempt to regain its head, which has the label "Chaosman" floating above it. Running forward, he finishes it off with his sword and because the dead goblin is the avatar of the guild leader, he bows to the corpse before it fades away. He is of the opinion that it always pays to be polite. 'Bloody regen,' he mutters into his microphone. 'You okay there Healsforyou?'

'Yeah, thanks boss,' says a voice through his headphones.

Turning to face the hideous charge once more, Horc can see volleys of arrows and burning fireballs in the distance, a sure sign that Pamen's group has engaged from the rear. The evil charge falters as many of the ghouls turn to face the new threat. Pressing the advantage and bolstered by the healing energies of the monks, Horc and his virtual army fall upon their dithering enemies and carnage ensues. By the time the two companies meet again, every member of Chaos Incorporated has met virtual death and all signs of battle have faded away. There are no corpses littering the ground, no burning buildings belching acrid smoke into the air. There has been no death. There has been no destruction.

'Well done, people,' Horc says into the microphone, 'that battle was massive and awesome, possibly even epic. My counter says we took out 67 Chaos without one casualty. Outstanding! This has been a victory that they'll be talking about on the forums for months to come.'

'I'm posting a little taunt as we speak,' says the voice of Twoswords. 'Let's do the General right away. I've got to pick up the kids from school in a couple of hours.'

'Ok,' Horc says. 'I'll re-arrange the groups and when all the debuffs wear off we'll "do" him. Just don't tell Twoswords' husband.' There is a general twitter in the headphones.

'The bastard is dead below the waste so he wouldn't give a shit,' replies Twoswords, adding an edge of embarrassment to the twittering.

Horc taps furiously at his keyboard for a few minutes, and then looks up at the screen. Satisfied that all is prepared, he sends out the ready signal and this time all six buttons turn green simultaneously. Screaming a terrible battle cry, the massed legions of Enemy of Shadow charge in to do battle with the formidable General. The fight is long and arduous and the General's murderous ways keep the monks busy, tending the wounded and resurrecting the fallen.

Eventually, however, the mighty virtual warriors of EoS triumph, and the hitherto undefeated General bites the dust before exploding in a shower of loot. For their trouble, each of the participants earns the title “The Respected” and a small bag of virtual gold. Horc is the first warrior in all the lands to don the fabled Acid Armour of the General, and his troops let out a cheer when he first puts it on. Lot allocates the rest of the booty, and several members receive powerful weapons and trinkets that they proudly display to their peers. It is agreed by all that Twoswords should receive the potent Sword of Virility for her outstanding contribution to the battle, and because all geeks love a little irony.

The two men get up off their chairs and stretch their legs.

‘Taking five,’ Horc says into his microphone and removes his headphones.

‘Beer break,’ says Pamen and does the same. He runs out of the room and returns with two bottles of beer so cold that moisture, condensed out of the dank atmosphere of the room, runs down their sides.

‘That was fucking awesome!’ says Horc, accepting a bottle. ‘We killed the General, we have the armour. We are gods!’

‘Now that we’ve done it, it doesn’t seem so tough,’ Pamen says. ‘With enough healing, three tanks and a shitload of DPS, he’s a piece of cake.’

‘Yeah, but remember that you have to time it all perfectly. Hit him too hard, too early and you can kiss your healers goodbye. He goes ape shit if he has more than 70% health and you hit him with anything that takes more than 2% of his health in one shot.’

Horc sits back down and takes a satisfied swig of his beer.

‘Are you going to publish a guide on this one?’ Pamen asks.

‘Nah,’ replies Horc thoughtfully. ‘I’d like to get him to farm status first and gear up the guild so we have an advantage over everyone else. Once that happens, I’ll think about it.’

‘What if someone else figures it out?’

‘Yeah, that could be a problem. We need to reduce the chance of that happening,’ Horc says. ‘We’ll set a permanent guard on the keep doors and come down hard on anyone who tries. Our biggest threat is Chaos Inc, and you saw what just happened to them.’

‘Oh yeah, I sure the fuck did,’ Pamen answers enthusiastically. ‘They won’t be tangling with EoS again anytime soon.’

‘Yeah, which is a bit of a shame,’ says Horc and dons his headphones again. ‘OK folks, we’re back. We’ll set a guard here, groups one and four should do nicely. Group one at the front and group four at the rear. There’ll be DKP for every hour done on guard duty so you won’t be missing out. Feel free to farm the area while you’re here. If you see a force big enough to threaten the General, send out a muster alert and hold them off until help arrives. He’s our little puppy now and we’re going to try and keep it that way. Everyone else, port to Central for a little dragon farming.’

Beside Horc, Pamen puts on his headphones and manoeuvres his character to the front of his group. Suddenly, a thunderous knocking rings out. The men look at one another.

‘Was that in game?’ Horc asks.

‘I don’t think so,’ says Pamen, taking off his headphones. Another knock confirms their suspicions. The real world is trying to intrude upon their virtual reality. Pamen looks at Horc, who puts his finger to his lips and makes a shushing noise. Pamen nods his head in

agreement. Both men sit still and quiet, hoping to convince the real world that no one is at home. No such luck, however, and the knocking thunders a third time.

‘Slava, I know you’re in there,’ screams a feminine voice. ‘Open the fucking door or I swear I’ll go home and burn all your Pratchett books.’

Pamen explodes from his seat. ‘I’m coming, sweetness, I’m coming!’ he calls as he races to the front door.

‘You better be or it’ll be the only coming you’ll be doing for the next six months!’ says the voice.

Pamen, aka Slava, opens the door to a petite young woman who, from the looks of her, could not possibly have caused such a loud noise. ‘Hey Dimi,’ he says. ‘How’s it going?’

‘It was going great till I married you,’ she says, pushing past him and making sure to stamp hard on his foot on her way through.

‘Ouch,’ says Pamen, jumping up and down while holding his injured foot. ‘That’s not nice. What the fuck is your problem?’

She wheels around to look at him, arms akimbo and feet planted firmly on the ground. ‘What’s my problem? What’s my problem? It’s been two days since anyone has seen either of you two dildos, that’s what’s my problem.’ She turns and continues her advance towards the dark room. ‘You could at least come home to sleep.’

‘Why?’ asks Pamen. He knows he is heading towards disaster but is unable to stop his mouth from talking. Two days without sleep on a diet of Pizza and beer can dull even the sharpest mind. ‘Sleep is for the weak,’ he mumbles.

The petite woman pushes into the dark room and confronts a cowering Horc. ‘For God’s sake, Alaric, you’re in your thirties. Stop playing computer games and go find someone to fuck,’ she says, looking at him and then at his computer screen. ‘You certainly can’t fuck a cartoon,’ she continues pointing at his computer, but the image of Horc’s avatar draws her eye and drains the urgency from her words. ‘Wow, is that the General’s Acid Armour you’re wearing?’ she asks, pushing past Alaric, aka Horc, for a closer look. ‘Oh my god, it is! Did you guys do the General? Fucking legends!’

Alaric (virtually Horc), beams proudly, and Slava (virtually Pamen), puts his arm around his wife’s shoulders.

‘A couple of days AWOL is a small price to pay for becoming a legend, don’t you think?’ Slava says.

Alaric dons his headphones and sits back down at his computer. ‘That’s it for Pamen and I today, people, we gotta run. You know, work and stuff,’ he says, but all the while his fingers are busy typing away at the keyboard. Dimi looks over his shoulder at the screen.

‘Damn right Pamen has wife agro,’ she says, ‘and there is isn’t a fucking de-taunt out there that can save his arse.’

‘That’s the general consensus,’ Horc says. ‘Pamen left his mic on when he ran to the door, they heard the whole thing. Twoswords wants to know when you’re going to log on again. She’s been saving a drop for you.’

‘Tell her to send it to Matahari, she’s an alt I’ve been working on,’ Dimi says. ‘Better still, give me the mic.’ She reaches over and picks up Pamen’s headphones.

‘Hey Swords, how’s it going?’ she says, and sits down in the chair. ‘What you got for me?’

Slava looks at Alaric, but he is staring intently at his screen and typing furiously. Feeling left out and alone, he turns on one of the other computers and sits down.

‘I thought so!’ exclaims Alaric after a few minutes, jolting Slava out of a rather enjoyable bout of self-pity. ‘Matahari has been running with us for ages. She only logged off a few hours ago, just before we decided to hit the General.’

Dimi looks up from her conversation with Twoswords and smiles at the two men. ‘Why do you think young Slava still has his testicles? At least I know where he’s been and what he’s been doing.’

Slava decides against logging into his wife’s game account- out of common courtesy and not because she has changed the password- and instead browses the official forums. ‘I see you’ve been active on the forums, my love,’ he says. ‘Your trolling ways have earned the guild a reprimand from the moderators.’

Dimi shrugs and turns back to her screen. ‘Hey Swords,’ she says into the microphone, ‘open up a private chat channel. I have eavesdroppers here.’

After a few minutes browsing the forums, Slava looks up with a “hang on a minute” look on his face. ‘Hang on a minute,’ he says. Imagination has never been his strong suit. ‘If you knew where I was and you were watching the whole time, why did you come here and break my nuts?’

Dimi looks around at her husband and shrugs. ‘I got lonely,’ she says. ‘You should, at the very least, inform your wife when you’re planning on leaving reality for the better part of a week.’

‘Fair enough,’ Slava replies, ‘but it wasn’t planned, it just happened.’

‘Yeah right, and the bouncy email you set with the message “Gone to Hell, be back Friday” was a complete coincidence.’

‘Okay, so there was a little preplanning involved,’ Slava says, blushing at the ease with which his little fib was exposed. ‘I thought you were going to stay at your mother’s place for the week. Why’d you come back?’

‘Gary dropped the terrible ones in for some free babysitting,’ she says, referring to the twin tots of terror that are her nephews. ‘And from the look in dad’s eyes I could tell it was going to be me that did most of it, so I thought I’d come home and spend some quality time with my man. That was two days ago.’

Alaric looks up from his keyboard in alarm. ‘Two days ago? How long have we been at this?’ he asks, scrabbling for his mobile phone. ‘Holy shit, it’s fucking Wednesday, I’ve got a meeting with Melniak in a couple of hours!’ he exclaims and jumps out of his chair. Unfortunately, he is still wearing his headphones, which hook into his spectacles and send them flying across the room. Grumbling and squinting myopically, Horc gets on hands and knees and scrabbles in the gloom for his glasses. The cry of triumph when he finds them is truncated by his head colliding with the central table as he gets up off his knees. ‘I’m going to go for a run to clear my head before heading out,’ he says as he dashes out of the room. ‘Lock up when you go,’ he calls from the other side of the door.

Alaric races into his bedroom, changes into his running gear and sets off into the morning gloom. Running has been an escape from reality for as long as he can remember. In fact, between running, television, and leading a virtual army, he rarely spends any time at all in the ultimate reality. It’s just a place where his body hangs out while his mind wanders from

world to world looking for something to do. He is well aware that lady luck has dealt him a fortunate hand. A natural communicator, his particular genius is that he can make himself understood even when using computers. This freakish skill has allowed him to build a career as a consultant to organisations eager to harness the marketing power of the new communication technologies- despite the fact that no one has actually found any marketing power in the new communication technologies. Nonetheless, the faceless bureaucrats that these organisations secrete insist on throwing vast sums of money in his direction in a vain attempt to conquer marketing's latest, and totally imaginary, frontier. All of which has made him a very rich man and allowed him the luxury of picking when, where, and with whom he wants to work.

Smiling at his good fortune and plotting his next move against the dastardly Chaos Incorporated, Alaric's body moves him along a well-worn path at a gentle pace. Down the road he ambles, through the park, across the big intersection, and right into the path of a silent, speeding, and fully electric Toyota. After a short, painful moment, his mind takes to wandering on its own, leaving the crumpled body behind.

Slava's mobile phone rings. Upset at yet another disturbance during his allotted gaming time he picks it up with the intention of turning it off, but a glance at the screen shows that it is Alaric's mother, his aunty, calling. Aware that she is a sensitive woman and that failing to heed her call could start a bitter family feud that may cut even deeper into his gaming time, he reluctantly answers.

'Hello Thea, what's up?' he asks. His mouth drops open as she tells him the news. 'I'll be right there,' he says and rushes out the door, grabbing his wife on the way through.

Within a few minutes, he is helping his ashen faced aunty into the car. Together, they drive to the hospital where they are ushered into a private room in which a very battered and unconscious Alaric lies.

With his aunt sitting crumpled in a chair beside him, his wife long gone to be alone with her grief, Slava sits by Alaric's side as the minutes and hours pass. Eventually, Alaric's eyelids flutter open.

'Ma?' he says. 'Are you here? Where is Slava?'

Thea stirs in her chair, but she seems confused and unfocused.

'Your mother is here, mate,' Slava says. 'We've been waiting here together, waiting for you to open your eyes.'

'I'm glad you're here with mum, Pamen,' Alaric whispers, his words faint but clear. 'It would be terrible if she was alone at her son's death bed. Take care of the guild, cousin. EoS must not die with me. Promise me, Pamen, promise me.'

'I promise,' Slava chokes, tears rolling down his cheeks.

'Good, that makes me happy,' Alaric nods and reaches out to his mother. 'Please Ma, don't cry. It was a good life,' he says. 'I have one last wish, Ma, you must grant it to me. In my wardrobe is a locked box. Open it. I want to wear those clothes to the grave, and drape the flag in there over my casket. Please do this for me, as my last wish,' he says faintly. With a satisfied look on his face, as if he has finally accomplished all that there is to accomplish in the span of a human life, Alaric draws a final breath.