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It's Love at First Kill

By STEPHANIE ROSENBLOOM

THIS is a love story. It began on a hot summer night in Santa Barbara, Calif., when Tamara Langman helped kill the yellow-eyed demon known as Prince Malchezaar. She was logged into World of Warcraft, the multiplayer fantasy game, and her avatar — Arixi Fizzlebolt, a busty gnome with three blond pigtales — had also managed to pique the interest of John Bentley, a k a Weulfgar McDoal.

A note to the uninitiated: World of Warcraft is a vast online game where monsters are meant to be vanquished, but it is also a social networking experience. When players aren't battling monsters, their avatars are exploring fantastical landscapes (lush jungles, snowy forests, misty beaches), where they can meet and gab via the game's instant message feature, or through voice communication software.

And so Ms. Langman and Mr. Bentley found a quiet spot for their avatars to sit. Hours evaporated as they discussed everything from their families to their futures. Sometime before dawn, Ms. Langman realized that while she was in the fictional world of Azeroth, she was also on a date.

For the next two months, Ms. Langman, 27, and Mr. Bentley, 24, rendezvoused in Azeroth, until one day they decided to meet in Santa Barbara instead. When Mr. Bentley stepped onto the tarmac at the Santa Barbara airport on a bright October afternoon in 2008, Ms. Langman ran to him. Mr. Bentley scooped her up into his arms and spun her around.

He had planned to stay for a couple of weeks before returning to Atlanta. But two weeks became two years, and Mr. Bentley and Ms. Langman are still together.

Who knew a World of Warcraft subscription could deliver more romance than Match.com?

Ms. Langman and Mr. Bentley are hardly the only couple to have forged an avatar love connection. Gaming forums are rife with anecdotes from players who are dating and marrying. Some couples have even had their avatars marry. (You can watch videos of the ceremonies on YouTube.)

And while it may sound like something out of a science fiction novel, more people are likely to meet this way as the genre (known as massively multiplayer online role-playing games, or MMORPGs) continues to grow. With more than 12 million subscribers, World of Warcraft is one of the most popular games of its kind in the world (others include EverQuest, Aion, Guild Wars). That's a sizable dating pool. Match.com, by way of comparison, has fewer than 2 million subscribers.

"It's giving people something that they're missing in the real world," said Ramona Pringle, an interactive media producer and a professor of new media at the Ryerson School of Image Arts in Toronto. "It is a really primal experience. It's about survival. It's about needing someone."

Ms. Pringle, 29, first observed gamer love connections while working as an interactive producer for the PBS "Frontline" project called "Digital Nation." At BlizzCon 2009, a gaming convention in California, she was stunned by the number of die-hard gamers holding hands and pushing baby carriages.

She thought about her friends: successful, striking and yet struggling to find love. She herself — willowy with wide green eyes — had just had a breakup with a boyfriend. "What's going on that these people we

consider the fringe, these gamers, are finding love?” she said, nursing a beer at a bar in Austin, Tex., last month during the South by Southwest Interactive conference. She wanted to see what gaming might teach her about love.

So instead of turning to religion or therapy to mend her heart, Ms. Pringle said, she turned to World of Warcraft.

More than 40 percent of online gamers are women, and adult women are among the industry’s fastest growing demographics, representing 33 percent of the game-playing population — a larger portion than boys 17 and younger, who make up 20 percent, according to the Entertainment Software Association, an industry group.

To help her navigate World of Warcraft, Ms. Pringle enlisted Brent George, the animation director for James Cameron’s *Avatar: The Game*, to be her guide. They began playing last summer — she from Toronto, he from Montreal — as many as six hours a night.

As Ms. Pringle tumbled down the rabbit hole, she found herself directing her avatar — Tristanova, a graceful blue-skinned night elf priest — to run excitedly up to Mr. George’s avatar, Caethis, a heroic-looking warrior. “It’s remarkable to me that you can have a crush on someone’s avatar,” Ms. Pringle said.

But she did. The two have never been romantically involved, yet when Mr. George told her that he would be her knight in shining armor, “I have to admit, my heart skipped a beat,” she said, “even though we hadn’t met in person.”

Multiplayer games encourage such alliances. The beginner’s guide to World of Warcraft notes that you can go it alone, “but by going it alone, you won’t be able to master some of the game’s tougher challenges, you will likely take longer to reach the endgame, and you won’t have access to the game’s most powerful magical treasures.” Ms. Pringle thinks that is analogous to love.

“We have a society that’s really built upon self-sufficiency and independence and yet it’s not sustainable,” she said. “You need someone with your complementary skills to get through it.”

Take Hannah Romero of Vancouver. When her avatar, Cosomina, met an avatar named Dreadmex (he’s Mexican American), she was unimpressed. His opening line was something to the effect of “Whazzup, homeys?”

But later, when the avatars both showed up early to a group raid, they made small talk. Ms. Romero said that it began as innocent elevator-type chatter but that over time, Cosomina fell for Dreadmex. They became inseparable, spending hours lounging beside by waterfalls and strolling through parks.

Yet why communicate through avatars? Why not pick up the phone? Or Skype?

“When you’re talking on the phone you can say all of those things, but there’s no physicality to it,” said Ms. Romero, a food services director for a gaming company. “And in the game, even though somebody’s 2,000 miles away, they’ve made an effort to sit down and hold your hand. Even though it’s not real, the emotion of it is real.”

Speaking of emotions, the first time she let Dreadmex know she loved him, she did so in the game, and then swiftly logged off. “You can say ‘I love you’ and then run away,” Ms. Romero said. “That moment — ‘Should I tell somebody I love them?’ — it’s a big deal, right? So to be able to say it and then to disappear is pretty great.”

Other gamers have echoed that sentiment, saying that typing their feelings or flirtations is less awkward than saying them aloud. That can lead to more-honest conversations, and fewer misunderstandings. It’s why many players believe that they come to know each other faster and better than, say, people who meet over a few dates.

Eventually, the woman who created Cosomina flew to Los Angeles to meet Pete Romero, the man behind Dreadmex. Like many people who meet on the Internet, she momentarily panicked. “That little voice in my head is like ‘Are you crazy?’ ” she said.

But there was no need to worry. The couple spent the weekend eating, perusing vinyl records, walking on the beach. A year later, on March 27, 2010, they married.

While these stories seem like fairy tales, gamers insist they’re not.

“I love my husband a great deal,” said Ms. Romero, who noted that despite her love story, she’s a mother, a career woman and “obviously not a nut.” “The reality is we’re not magic. We don’t live in a game. We live in a real life. The dishes still need to get done.”

Meeting online eliminates some of the reasons people never pursue each other, be it an awkward first date or a bad hair day.

Still, psychologists and sociologists say there does appear to be a connection between gamers and the avatars they choose. “Most players say the avatar they created instinctually is most like them,” said Ms. Pringle, who created a World of Warcraft personality guide based on gamer interviews, studies of archetypes and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (at avatarsecrets.com). She also has a television pilot in development about the blurry line between virtual and real worlds.

As for Ms. Langman and Mr. Bentley, they live in Mississippi, though at the moment Ms. Langman is in St. Louis. (As a costume designer and draper for theatrical productions, she’s often on the road.) Mr. Bentley counts bills at a casino, a job he landed through a fellow gamer in World of Warcraft. “I don’t see how he could have gotten this job opportunity without World of Warcraft,” Ms. Langman said.

He wouldn’t have gotten Ms. Langman, either. “There’s something magical about falling in love with someone just through writing and then waiting for a reply,” said Ms. Langman, for whom Mr. Bentley once stormed a castle. “It’s evocative of ancient romances where pen-and-ink love letters were delivered on horseback. Just the kind of forgotten world that Warcraft seeks to recreate in digital space.”

It’s the world of Arixi and Weulfgar. And in case you’re wondering if, in between watching DVDs and doing laundry, they still hunt monsters together in Azeroth, they do.

Said Ms. Langman: “We had a raid last night.”