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Role-Playing toward a Virtual Musical Democracy in *The Lord of the Rings Online*

William Cheng / Harvard University

*B*oasting the finest ale in Northern Middle-earth, Bree-Town's Prancing Pony Inn serves these days as a nightly haven for all local townsfolk seeking to lift their spirits from the gravities of war. Sturdy kegs stacked from floor to ceiling hold infinite promises of liquid mirth. Sprawled in front of a crackling fireplace are red velvet rugs that have soaked up centuries of memories from the boots of weather-worn travelers. The smaller flames of candelabras cast a humble glow upon chairs bumped askew by tipsy Dwarves, while across long wooden tables, Humans exchange tales of dragon-slaying and apple-picking with equal zeal. On a stage in the far corner, musicians perform merry strains to the tapping feet of Elves and the wild dancing of Hobbits. The cheers of patrons grow from murmurs to roars as dusk swings to daybreak. Even in the darkest of times, it seems, there is some joy to be found in the minstrel's song.

Fieldwork in Musical Middle-earth

The vignette above depicts a lively evening in the simulated universe of an online role-playing game called *The Lord of the Rings Online* (LOTRO). Developed by the American game company Turbine Incorporated and set in J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy realm of Middle-earth, LOTRO launched on 24 April 2007 across North America, Europe, Australia, and Japan.[1] Players, totaling over 600,000 worldwide,[2] interact with the gameworld's graphical interface using avatars that can be customized in terms of name, gender, race, class, and appearance.[3] The game enables players to communicate with one another via instant text messages, private voice-chat, and pre-rendered avataric animations called *emotes*. LOTRO's social landscape is molded daily by the collective actions of players as well as by Turbine's periodic updates to the game's technical content (see Figure 1). Like many Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing

Games (MMORPGs), LOTRO constitutes a dynamic public domain in which players can embark on lengthy adventures, advance the skills and reputations of their avatars, strike up intense rivalries, and nurture lasting friendships (see Kelly 2004:24–45; Castronova 2005:1–22; Taylor 2006:49–52; Nardi 2010:52–93). Communal events that regularly take place in the gameworld include concerts, costume contests, birthday parties, weddings, barter fairs, horse races, and seasonal festivals.

In an attempt to honor the rich musical lore of Tolkien's Middle-earth, Turbine implemented in LOTRO one of the most elaborate player-music systems in any MMORPG to date.[4] This system allows a player to perform both live and pre-recorded tunes that can be heard by other nearby players in the gameworld. A player's musical performance is visually simulated by avataric motions and strings of colorful notes that float out of a character's equipped instrument (see Figure 2). Examples of such instruments—each of which sports a different synthesized timbre and a range of three chromatic octaves along the Western twelve-tone scale—include the bagpipes, clarinet, flute, horn, cowbell, drums, harp, lute, and theorbo.

Most players view music-making in LOTRO primarily as a hobby that offers temporary respite from adventuring and other quest-driven ludic endeavors. As one player explains: "After a day of fighting goblins or farming ores for money, it's nice to head to the Prancing Pony Inn for some music-playing" (interview, Aellwen, 4 November 2008).[5] Another player remarks that "music is one of the only activities that really helps 'break up' the game,

Figure 1. The activities of players in LOTRO take place primarily in the region of Eriador (circled here on a map of Middle-earth). Image reproduced from Turbine's manual for *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar.*

Figure 2. [Left] A collaborative musical performance inside the Bree Auction Hall (13 November 2008) and [Right] my own avatar playing the lute on the streets of Bree-town (23 January 2009). Bodies of avatars sway gently from side to side as they simulate musical performances. The hands and fingers of avatars also make pre-programmed performative gestures that are in no way synchronized with (or affected by) the instrumental music being played. Screen captures by author.
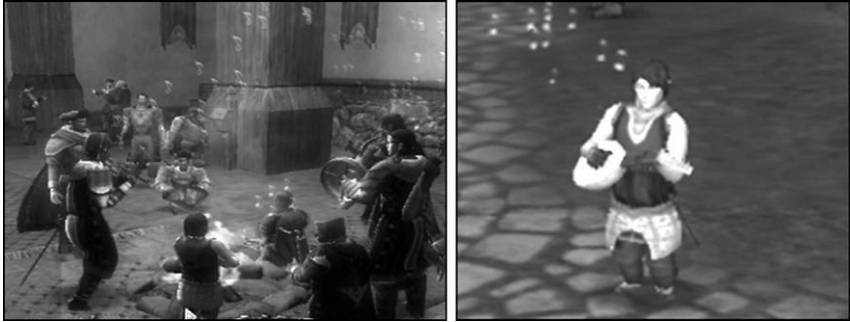
which is almost absolutely based on physical combat" (interview, Alexander, 19 December 2008). Given the automated performative gestures of LOTRO's avatars and the MIDI-quality *beeps* and *boops* of player-made tunes, readers might be inclined to envision a musical performance in this gameworld as little more than a mechanical assemblage of moving pixels and tinny waveforms. Yet this is, according to my experience, far from the case. The social significance of music in LOTRO quickly becomes evident when one sees a player performing eulogistic bagpipe melodies at an in-game memorial service for a real-life cancer victim, or alternatively, when one witnesses six bagpipers blasting an auction hall with six different musical pieces in an attempt to drive all other players from the room. These are but two examples of actual events from the field—among many which will be recounted here—that can attest to the affective as well as coercive power of musical performances within LOTRO's communities.[6]

I conducted an ethnography of LOTRO's musical cultures between September 2008 and May 2009 on a North American English-speaking server called Brandywine. With my avatar—a Hobbit Minstrel named Willishire—I attended concerts, engaged in instant-text interviews with the gameworld's inhabitants, sharpened my own musical skills, and performed recreationally alongside various players. I encountered an extraordinary range of player-made music, including Beethoven sonatas, opera arias, *Star Wars* medleys, Japanese pop songs, Christmas tunes, and all sorts of original compositions and improvisations. Most of my time was spent in a small village called Bree-

Town, where the Auction Hall and the Prancing Pony Inn rank among the most popular venues in the game for formal concerts as well as more spontaneous acts of music-making (see Figure 3). Outside the gameworld, I gathered the views that players, journalists, and game developers shared in blogs, online discussion boards, magazines, and video commentaries on gameplay footage. Using email and instant messaging, I initiated conversations with a number of players who were actively participating in debates about music on LOTRO's official forums. Many interviewees, during our exchanges, described their epic and quotidian gameplay experiences alike with considerable flair. Quite often it was through the avid storytelling and poetic embellishments of players that I was thoroughly able to grasp the social valence of musical actions in LOTRO's simulated environments.

Scholars across disciplines have lately come to note that virtual fields—with all the conveniences and pseudonymous liberties promised therein—are exceedingly capable of scrambling an ethnographer's moral compass (see Turkle 1995:321–24; Kendall 2002:233–46; Lysloff 2003:24–28; Boellstorff 2008:79–86). During my fieldwork in LOTRO, I sought to be as transparent as possible about my research aims without unduly disrupting the adventuring and role-playing activities of other players. My avatar in LOTRO was unremarkable in dress—outfitted with a standard Hobbit-sized tunic, a pair of green gloves, and a short kilt—and was therefore wholly indiscernible as a fieldworker based on appearances alone. The extent to which I found it necessary or desirable for Willishire to be visible as a researcher varied according to different social circumstances. When attending large public performances in the gameworld, I saw no need (and no practical way) to come out continuously as a fieldworker to every player in the vicinity. But when conducting

Figure 3. [Left] Bree-Land circled on a map of Eriador and [Right] the Prancing Pony Inn and the Auction Hall circled on a map of Bree-Town (a central village in Bree-Land). Images reproduced from Turbine's LOTRO game manual.

one-on-one interviews with musicians, I always provided my real name and details about the nature of my project while in turn permitting players to reveal as little or as much about their own real-life identities as they wished. All complying interviewees were informed that their responses were being logged and that the opinions they were sharing would eventually be cited in scholarly forums. Among those who opted to disclose their real-world occupations were two philosophy students, two computer technicians, a graphic designer, a full-time professional gamer, a book editor, and a retired horse trainer. These players hailed from diverse musical backgrounds and possessed expertise in topics ranging from Middle-earth lore to performance theory. Between the summer of 2009 and early 2010, I invited several of my longer-term correspondents to read earlier drafts of this article and have since benefited tremendously from their insightful feedback.

Different Strokes

Much of my investigation here will hinge on a debate among LOTRO players pertaining to the game's two modes of musical production—known as *freestyle* and *ABC*—and their respective merits. A player performing freestyle strikes a series of individual keys on the computer keyboard to produce corresponding musical sounds in the game. A menu in LOTRO gives players the ability to map any number or letter (e.g., 7 or P) to a specific pitch (e.g., middle C) within the three-octave range of an equipped instrument. One of the primary challenges for a freestyler is devising and getting accustomed to a keymap that facilitates the performability of various kinds of music (see Figure 4). Many players share their own customized keymaps on LOTRO's online forums to assist others with the execution of complex freestyle pieces (see Figure 5).

Whereas freestyling approximates a live performance on a keyboard instrument (or a similarly configured metallophone), the game's other mode of music-making—ABC—allows players to activate an entire pre-composed sound file with a single text command. Players can create their own ABC files with Windows Notepad or other plain-text applications. ABC notation uses ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) characters and symbols to designate sequences of musical pitches and rhythms. General parameters are additionally specified with the letters Q (tempo), M (meter), L (default duration of a note), and K (key).[7] Once an ABC file has been assigned a name and saved to a player's "My Documents\The Lord of the Rings Online\Music" folder, it can be activated in LOTRO's gameworld with the text command "/play <filename>." The music that is coded in the file will then play from start to finish without any further input from the player. Figure 6 contains

Figure 4. A LOTRO freestyle customization menu in which a player can assign computer keystrokes to individual musical pitches. Screen capture by author.
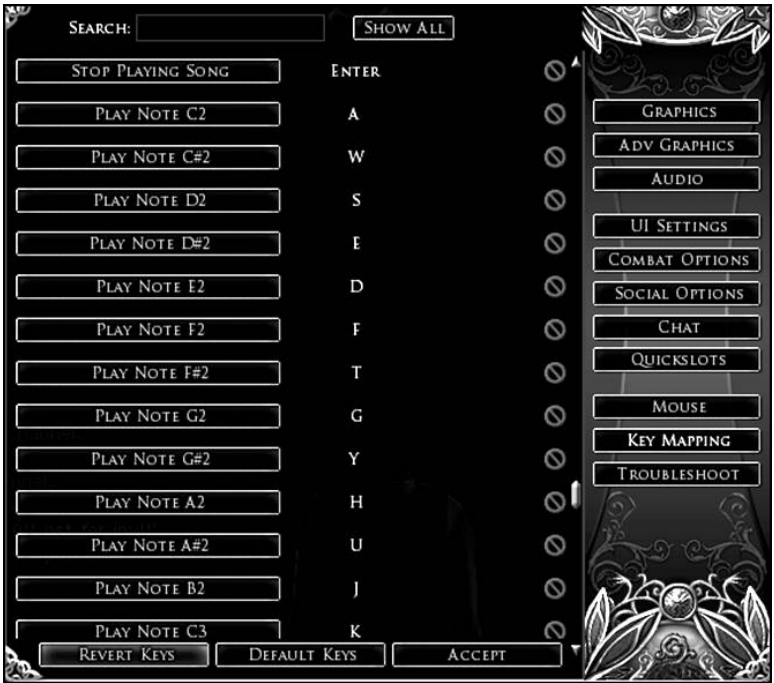
Figure 5. A keymap devised by a player named Psomm and shared on LOTRO's official forums.
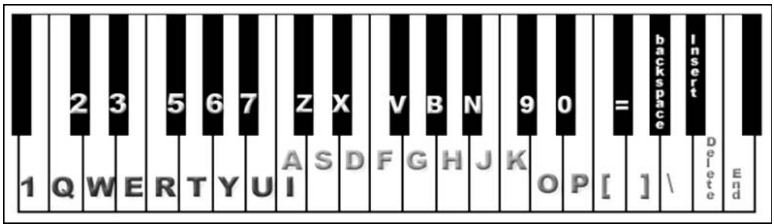
an illustration of the ABC notation that I drafted for my own arrangement of the English folk song "Greensleeves."

Several LOTRO players insist that mastering ABC notation requires remarkable time and patience. The payoff is that this system permits players to execute intricate polyphonic pieces that are not as easily realized via freestyling. For some performers, the appeal of freestyle is dampened by lag and other techni-

Figure 6. [Above] Lines of ABC notation with [Below] corresponding Western staff notation of "Greensleeves." Shown below each Western staff are the keystrokes that players can alternatively use to perform this tune in freestyle (according to the keymap configuration presented in Figure 5).

cal factors contingent on the speed of a player's Internet connection and the stability of LOTRO's servers. All sorts of glitches within the game can result in unpredictable delays between the freestyler's input and the sonic output. As such, a player's competence with acoustic keyboard instruments does not guarantee an equivalent level of aptitude when freestyling with a computer keyboard. One player explains: "I tried playing live [freestyle] music myself when I was new to the game, before I even found out you could use ABC files, but coming from a piano and organ background, I found the number-key system for playing music live far too clunky and laggy. I only really started 'playing' music once I figured out how to use ABC" (interview, Christian, 31 October 2008). Given that the intensity of lag tends to be proportional to the amount of player activity in a particular area, attempts at cooperative freestyling often lead to problems with synchronization. As a result, most players who aim to coordinate large ensemble performances favor the ABC system, which features a built-in function that automatically aligns the beats across the ABC files of collaborating performers. A member of a LOTRO band called the Hobbiton Philharmonic comments as follows on the toils and rewards of creating ABC ensemble pieces:

> I was one of those people who initially only played live music in the game, and at first scoffed at ABC. But I came to discover that there is immense satisfaction in making a 5+ part song for an in-game band. I've been working for weeks on my 54-minute adaptation of *Carmina Burana*, which will be for an 8- to 10-player group. (LOTRO forums, Vraell, 27 December 2008)

What is notable about this player's proud statement is its suggestion that ABC—despite the pre-recorded nature of its sonic materials—can sometimes actually be more effective than freestyling for bringing together a live community of player-musicians.

Many players share their own ABC creations on websites such as *The Fat Lute* (*http://www.thefatlute.com*) and *LOTRO-ABC* (*http://www.lotro-abc.com*). As of September 2011, *The Fat Lute* contained over 7,500 ABC files uploaded by hundreds of different contributors. Any player can download these files free of charge as well as preview the music in MIDI format. The stylistic diversity of these ABC compositions can be seen in Table 1, which lists twenty of the site's most frequently downloaded files.

Such friendly practices of peer-to-peer filesharing, however, have encountered opposition from various LOTRO players who look down on ABC and describe it as nothing more than the empty recycling of digital code. For while freestyling appears to require a live and skillful demonstration of hand-eye coordination and musical expression—akin to playing an acoustic keyboard instrument—the execution of an ABC file is sometimes accused of lacking performative engagement because it seemingly requires no manual input from the player-musician beyond an initial text command. On 22 July 2008, a player named Chazcon posted the following comment on a LOTRO forum thread titled "ABC—Way to Ruin a Wonderful Music System":

> There is no skill in playing ABC music. Any chimp can download "Crazy Train" [by Ozzy Osbourne] and inconsiderately slam it on the ears of passersby by clicking a button. That is not playing music. There is no creativity involved, there are none of the dynamics that happen when a band plays live, nor the satisfaction of a job well done based on long practice at a craft.

Other LOTRO players have gone so far as to suggest that only individuals with real-life musical talent should have the right to play music in the game. Those who protest against this exclusionist attitude tend to cite the carte-blanche premises of online role-play as a way of justifying their technologically amplified virtuosity. As an interviewee named Harparella (3 November 2008) defiantly asks: "I can't swing a sword in real life; why should in-game minstrels be required to be real musicians?"

Why indeed?

Arguments about what constitutes a legitimate musical performance in LOTRO and who deserves recognition as a musician shore up the notion that

Table 1. Commonly downloaded ABC files on *The Fat Lute* (sorted in order of popularity). List compiled by author.

	Title	Original artist	Player-arranger	Number of parts
1	"Concerning Hobbits"	Howard Shore	Cranberry	3 (all lutes)
2	"The Bard's Song"	Blind Guardian	Musgo	3 (flute, harp, lute)
3	"Through the Fire and Flames"	Dragonforce	ThorHal	5 (drums, theorbo, lute, flute, horn)
4	"Highway to Hell"	AC/DC	Tapiron	1 (lute)
5	"Into the West"	Howard Shore	Cranberry	1 (lute)
6	"Bohemian Rhapsody"	Queen	Snosh	1 (lute)
7	"Welcome to the Jungle"	Guns N' Roses	Ratissia	1 (lute)
8	"May It Be"	Enya	Ocie-1	1 (harp)
9	"All the Small Things"	Blink 182	Prosco	1 (lute)
10	"Don't Stop Believin'"	Journey	Arie	1 (harp)
11	"Dancing Queen"	ABBA	Ogfast	1 (lute)
12	"Moonlight" Sonata (Adagio sostenuto)	Ludwig van Beethoven	Jazriel	1 (lute)
13	"(Don't Fear) The Reaper"	Blue Öyster Cult	Warden	5 (clarinet, cowbell, drums, lute, theorbo)
14	"Für Elise"	Beethoven	Jazriel	1 (lute)
15	"Wanted Dead or Alive"	Jon Bon Jovi	Warden	1 (lute)
16	"Blackbird"	The Beatles	Figgy	2 (harp, lute)
17	"Crazy Train"	Ozzy Osbourne	Snosh	3 (drums, theorbo, lute)
18	"Dream On"	Aerosmith	Bungee	4 (drums, clarinet, theorbo, lute)
19	"Boulevard of Broken Dreams"	Green Day	Tirithannon	2 (theorbo, lute)
20	"Smooth Criminal"	Michael Jackson	Trignis	1 (lute)

musicality—whether in a conservatory (Kingsbury 1988:59–84), academia (Bigenho 2008:29–32), or an online gameworld—carries symbolic capital and implications of social distinction (see also Blacking 1973:4–11; Brett 2006:11; Cheng 2011:62–66). But what exactly happens to this symbolic capital when every player in LOTRO can *role-play* as a virtual virtuoso? With so many ABC files available for download on websites, thousands of masked Paganinis roam the free-for-all musical networks of Middle-earth. The prestige of musicality is thus simultaneously everywhere and—as a ubiquitous asset—nowhere. That player-made ABC files are not formally copyrighted has further led players to express concerns about intellectual theft, artistic integrity, and the ethics of online filesharing.[8] On the LOTRO forums, one player remarked: "Hell, I've run into people who use OTHER people's ABC files that they've downloaded, and when someone compliments them, instead of giving credit where it's due, they take the praise upon themselves" (MahaTahu, 27 December 2008). It is clear that LOTRO players regard musicality as a marker of privilege—a privilege that, by its very nature, is sustained by the exclusion of those who are not deemed able or worthy to possess it. What is perhaps less apparent, however, is why some players should feel so strongly that the boundaries between musicians and non-musicians in an online gameworld need to be policed in the first place.

This article examines the ways in which inhabitants of LOTRO simulate musical behaviors and negotiate ideologies of virtual musical performance in light of the perceived freedoms that accompany practices of online role-play. Abiding by familiar conceptions of cyberspace as a site of disinhibition where identity pluralism prevails and anything goes, many players of LOTRO—especially those who prefer to use ABC—appeal to the egalitarian principles of role-play to defend their sense of performative entitlement. As one player colorfully puts it: "Players who want to play music in the gameworld ought to be able to regardless of whether they can in reality. I don't know many folks who can take an enemy out of commission entirely for thirty seconds with a flash of light, or by telling a riddle. Yet we do these things in-game, and I don't view the music system any differently" (interview, Dalman, 23 December 2008). But whereas some players perform music as a means of propagating such democratic ideals and fostering a peaceful community of immersive role-play, others choose instead to deploy music as a tool of harassment and territorialization. Those who sonically provoke others or deliberately play *over* one another's performances transform LOTRO's soundscapes into veritable arenas that expose the creative yet potentially offensive consequences of music-making. At the heart of this study is the twin assertion that the emergent musical practices in LOTRO can broadly illuminate 1) the impact of technology on cultural definitions of music and musical agency and 2) the social dynamics and motivations that inform uses and abuses of sound in formations of musical communities.

Music's Labors Lost

> My oldest sister plays flute and piccolo.
> My other sister plays clarinet, flute, guitar, keyboard . . . and any other instrument she can get her hands on.
> I tried flute. I tried trombone.
> I wanted to try sax, e-guitar and drums but got vetoed.
> I have a joke. I tell people what my sisters play . . . then I say I play the radio.
>
> —Milctoaste, response to Chazcon's initial thread post in "ABC—Way to Ruin
>   a Wonderful Music System." *The Lord of the Rings Online: Community Forums*
>   (26 August 2008)

Shortly after LOTRO's launch, an audio director at Turbine announced: "We wanted [the music system] to be accessible to people. You don't want to be afraid of the music system if you're a non-musician. We really encourage people to equip an instrument and play around with it" (Scott 2007). Players of LOTRO have since come to champion as well as contest this philosophy of musical utilitarianism. The ABC system in particular has bred controversy for enabling players who are not musically adept in real life to role-play as avatars that are capable of amazing virtuosic feats in the gameworld.[9] One player suggests that "ABC in LOTRO was added to give every player the ability to experience the fun and enjoyment of music. I appreciate that I can easily teach even the most intimidated pupil how to play a song with their favorite character, and thus appreciate the sense of utter wonderment they experience when they do so" (interview, Tirithannon, 12 November 2008). Another player states: "I think those individuals who put down others for using the ABC music system are a tad elitist, as they would rather maintain a system in which the few excel, but the many are left behind" (interview, Tristriam, 31 October 2008). Players who uphold LOTRO as a musical democracy insist on their rights as role-players to re-imagine and extend their human abilities with the assistance of the game's technologies.[10] The medium of videogames, after all, has historically allowed players to carry out "choreographies of technological wizardry" (Mactavish 2002:46), to enact "cyberathletic performances" (Dovey and Kennedy 2006:116), and to experience "a joyously exaggerated sense of control, or amplification of input" (Poole 2000:160). What opponents of LOTRO's ABC system are condemning, of course, is none other than its amplification of musical input and the attendant minimization of so-called *real* skill and labor.

Music scholars in recent years have followed the examples of anthropologists and media theorists in attempting to deconstruct the real-virtual dichotomy and to establish online environments as vital social settings that

are not essentially peripheral or subservient to the physical world.[11] In a collaborative essay featuring three ethnomusicological studies that respectively foreground the Internet, email, and digital recordings as new tools of field research, Timothy Cooley, Katharine Meizel, and Nasir Syed voice their shared desire to "[challenge] the polemic binary between 'virtual' and 'real' in . . . fieldwork [and] to understand technologies of communication as human constructions that are *as real as* any other human cultural production" (2008:92; emphasis added). In an ethnography of an online music-modding scene, René Lysloff similarly declares that "[c]ommunities on the Internet are not 'virtual,' they are real—*as real as* the offline communities we belong to as embodied humans" (2003:56; emphasis added). And regarding the modes of schizophonic virtuosity that have been enabled by recent music simulation games such as *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*, Kiri Miller points out that players often describe their performative experiences with these games "to feel *as 'real' as* the other musical experiences in their lives" (2009:408; emphasis added). In all three of these statements, the rhetorical construction "as real as" is employed with the admirable aim of de-trivializing virtual communities and the musical practices therein. One disadvantage of this comparative formulation, however, is that it runs the risk of implicitly reinscribing the ontological precedence of the real, a vague construct that, in any event, increasingly signifies nowadays only in contradistinction to the equally blurry concept of the virtual. Without retreading the nuanced arguments that many writers have already contributed to this topic (see, for example, Poster 1995:85–86; Hillis 1999:164–99; Miller and Slater 2000:7; Bell 2008:2–4; Boellstorff 2010a:126; Boellstorff 2010b:228; Lehdonvirta 2010), I wish simply to emphasize here that the real and the virtual—though frequently wreathed in scare quotes and disclaimers—ultimately constitute a meaningful dichotomy to users of online technologies and thus cannot be too hastily conflated. Players of games such as LOTRO knowingly enter what they perceive to be alternate spatial realities precisely so that they can simulate actions which they might not otherwise be able or willing to perform in physical settings.

Debates among LOTRO players about the ABC system's utilitarian potential have ample precedents in historical discourses surrounding technology's democratizing effects on the performance, production, and distribution of music. Simon Frith suggests that synthesizers, drum machines, and tape recorders "made possible new forms of cultural democracy and **new opportunities** of individual and collective expression . . . Each new development in recording technology enables new voices to be heard and to be heard in new ways" (1986:278).[12] David Sanjek (2003:363), René Lysloff (2003:44), and Paul Théberge (1997:131), moreover, all tentatively use the term "utopian" to describe Do-It-Yourself musical practices and cultures of online filesharing.

Timothy Taylor pursues a similar line of thought in remarking on electronic technology's "democratization of musicking" (2001:161), but he is careful to stipulate that the fulfillment of these egalitarian values depends on an individual's ability to access the requisite technology to begin with. As many scholars have pointed out, visions of cyberspace as a site of democracy tend to be born primarily out of the idealistic fantasies of individuals who have the luxury of inhabiting these realms and propagating such optimistic theories (see Turkle 1995:244–45; Taylor 2001:155; M. Smith 2007:167). Not everyone, in other words, can afford to be a Hobbit virtuoso. But while some LOTRO players might indeed recognize that one's very entry into virtual Middle-earth already signals a social advantage, the admission (and articulation) of this reality can interfere with the seductive ideologies of liberalist universalism offered by the ABC system in particular and by videogame technologies more generally. A promotional slogan such as *Now anyone can be a Guitar Hero!* would probably lose much of its catchy ring if it were appended with the qualification . . . *provided one possesses sufficient financial means to purchase the product and resides in a country in which the product can be acquired.* Especially since the advent of radio, reports about technology's capacity to democratize music have successfully appealed to specific publics in part by understating the practical limits and cultural boundaries of democracy. In this regard, musical democracies, well before LOTRO and the era of videogames, have always, in a sense, been virtual, manifesting primarily as products of privileged imaginations.

By giving gamers the ability to role-play musicality, LOTRO's ABC system extends the sorts of equalizing prospects that have traditionally inspired characterizations of online environments as postmodern playgrounds (see Hillis 1999:xxix-xxx; Filiciak 2003:93–99; Payne 2008:62–64). The Internet's purported capacity to elide or to mask social hierarchies has been considered a cause for both celebration and distress. Postmodernism, according to more cynical perspectives, does not simply level the proverbial playing field but steamrolls unceremoniously over it, leaving in its wake a flattened wasteland that sustains only the padded rhetorics of value-free relativism. It is this disquieting vision that perhaps motivates some individuals to criticize ABC performances or to argue that Guitar Heroes would be better off spending their time and money learning how to play real guitars (see Miller 2009:401). Such criticisms resonate with broader stereotypical media depictions of videogames as addictive diversions that breed lazy social citizens, brainwash children, and instill violent tendencies in players (see Castronova 2005:64–65, 277–88; Jenkins 2006:187–225; Boellstorff 2008:176–8; Cogburn and Silcox 2009:50–72). Sensationalist reports these days about how Second Life and other online phenomena are overtaking people's real (or First) lives betray anxieties similar

to those concerning how musical role-playing in videogames might one day completely supplant the good old-fashioned values of acoustic musicality.

One argument commonly set forth by detractors of LOTRO's ABC system is that the execution of a pre-composed sound file does not represent a legitimate mode of musical performance. "ABC," as Chazcon pronounced in his contentious online thread, "is not *playing* music." Most forum respondents who took issue with this statement ended up expressing either outright indignation (*Yes, it is!*) or a musick-and-let-musick philosophy of laissez-faire (*So what if it isn't?*). There is clearly something about the simulation of a musical performance that, in the minds of these players, sets it apart from simulations of sword swinging and other ludic actions. It seems that the heated nature of debates about authentic musicality stems at least partly from conceptions of music as a privileged form of creative expression. The perceived elitism and frustration of LOTRO players who denounce ABC might be engendered by a sense that the game's music system does not really serve as a satisfying medium through which players can achieve recognition for real-life, hard-earned musical talents. LOTRO's developers appear to have come very close to creating a system capable of translating certain musical skills, but as a result of some technical shortcomings—lag, lack of input sensitivity, and so on—the performative aspirations of freestylers do not always compute. One could argue that the freestyle system still "leaves room for those who ARE truly gifted to express themselves via original live performances" (interview, Tristriam, 31 October 2008), but in most cases, even players who perform freestyle with apparent finesse can have a hard time attracting large and appreciative audiences. As noted by one player: "I think this is where many people find the problem with ABC music: they themselves are great musicians, and only play live. Then they go to Bree or wherever, and see someone with 'canned' music with a huge crowd and lots of applause, while they sit in the corner with one or two people watching their performance. I really think it's a jealousy thing" (interview, Ross, 31 October 2008). In the end, the ability to download ABC files from the Internet, to pass them off as one's own in the gameworld, and subsequently to steal the thunder of nearby freestylers severely confounds possibilities in LOTRO for an organized or stable system of musical meritocracy.

Recording-based modes of musical performance, of course, have rarely failed to incite debates between individuals eager to assert the creativity of such practices and those who would claim otherwise. Researchers of musical sampling in genres such as hip-hop have submitted some of the most extensive arguments regarding the expressive potential of pre-recorded materials. Mark Katz describes sampling as "an art of *transformation*" rather than mere "technological quotation" (2010:174; emphasis in original), while Kai Fikentscher similarly characterizes the deejay as a "composer [who] manipulates sounds in

creative ways so as to render his or her performance *unique* to a time and place" (2003:294; emphasis in original). By stressing the putatively non-reproducible and unscripted elements of sampling—for example, technical glitches, a deejay's spontaneous bodily gestures, the audience's reactions, and the mutable acoustics of a particular space—scholars have been able to portray the soundscapes and experiences of these performances as eminently (read: humanly) variable (see Porcello 1991:75; Schloss 2004:46). Just as inventions of the pianola, the phonograph, and the radio all initially sparked controversies about issues of musical authoriality, canned sounds, amateur ideologies, and the dangers of mass consumption (see Théberge 1997:29; Morton 2000:48–73; Sterne 2003:291; Douglas 2004:20–25, 328–46; Katz 2010:56–79; Goodman 2011), so sampling, LOTRO's ABC system, and other technologies today are continuing to call attention to the slippery criteria on which writers have historically relied to distinguish active performers from allegedly passive consumer-listeners.

The subject of liveness frequently comes up in discussions about the authenticity and merit of musical performances mediated by technologies of recording. The social capital of live performances largely stems, as Philip Auslander observes, from their connotations of "spontaneity, community, presence, and feedback between performers and audiences" (2008:63; see also Miller 2009:41; Katz 2010:5). LOTRO players often use the terms "canned" and "live" to describe respectively the game's ABC and freestyle modes of performance. The implied opposition between the two, however, is more complicated than it might first appear. For while it is true that the ludic input of players is not required to sustain an ABC file once it has begun, these performers can nevertheless complement their music with other kinds of distinctly live actions. Unlike freestylers—whose fingers are necessarily preoccupied with the task of producing music with the computer keyboard—the hands-free functionality of ABC allows its performers to banter with audience members via text chat, dramatize emotions, and even provide running commentaries on the music being played. Three dedicated ABC musicians describe their musical role-playing strategies as follows:

> If role-playing, I will incorporate the music-playing into the role-playing. I will emote text describing my character's attitude or the degree of apparent effort he is putting into the music. I've found that playing music can be a great hook for drawing other role-players into conversations. (Interview, Christian, 16 December 2008)

> If someone compliments my song, I respond. If I happen to be using a wind instrument, well, obviously one cannot talk while playing a wind instrument, so I usually do a nod emote. (Interview, Aellwen, 5 December 2008)

> There is one ABC song my kinsmen play: "Riverdance." It was really well put together, I believe, and has been a hit every time we play it. Now, if you are familiar

with the song, it has slow parts and speeds up, and gets faster and faster by the end. We, almost without fail, play this up every time:

> A: "You know, this is kind of an easy pace for us."
> B: "You think we should go faster, huh?"
> A: "Yeah."
> B: "Okay . . . When do you want to pick it up?"
> A: "Hmmm . . . How about . . . "
> All: "NOW!" (Interview, Reclusiveone, 6 December 2008).

In online gameworlds, the conveyance of human presence relies on prosthetic vocabularies—that is, on sequences of pre-programmed avataric animations and sounds that players must learn to perform in order to render their surrogate bodies legible as live and living entities. Whereas freestylers in LOTRO depend exclusively on the production of music to telegraph liveness, ABC performers can carry out extra-musical actions that grant this mode of performance its *own* dimensions of liveness. These supplementary role-playing gestures verify the engaged presence of the ABC musician and affirm that even though the production of the music itself is not live, the production of the *musical performance* in its totality is demonstrably live. That music cannot always be regarded as the sole—or even central—component of a musical performance unsettles any definitive ontological boundaries one might attempt to draw between the respective liveness of ABC and freestyle.

At this point, the reader might already be getting the sense (rightfully so) that the democratization of musical craft in LOTRO evidently has not paved way for a virtual utopia—indeed, quite the contrary. Flames of controversy have been fanned by the equalizing power of ABC and its subversion of critical rubrics by which exhibitions of musical competence and learnedness have conventionally been measured. Players who favor freestyle seem particularly eager to import real-world musical hierarchies into the gameworld so as to lay claim to the privileges typically associated with formal musical training and live performance. But possibilities for a peaceful musical democracy in LOTRO are also undermined, in a more palpable way, by music's ability to function as a tool of disruption, harassment, and territorialization. Disputes abound concerning what kinds of music qualify as good, pleasing, and stylistically appropriate to the gameworld. The fact that player-made music in LOTRO is automatically broadcast in a sizable radius around a performer means that any musician can trespass (whether intentionally or unintentionally) on the aural ranges of listeners without first obtaining consent. Players who deliberately interrupt or perform over the music of others do so to attract attention, to provoke nearby audience members, and to test and transgress the limits of what music can do in a virtual world. Through acts of disorderly playfulness, these LOTRO musicians expose a host of social and ethical issues surrounding the

weaponization of sound and the antagonistic potential of musical expression writ large.

Democracy's Discontents

> The harpists, and the lutanists, the flautists and pipers, the organs and the countless choirs of the Ainur began to fashion the theme of Ilúvatar into great music; and a sound arose of mighty melodies changing and interchanging, mingling and dissolving amid the thunder of harmonies greater than the roar of the great seas . . . But as the great theme progressed it came into the heart of Melko to interweave matters of his own vain imagining that were not fitting to that great theme of Ilúvatar . . . Then did [Ilúvatar] smile sadly and raise his left hand, and immediately, though none clearly knew how, a new theme began among the clash . . . But the discord and noise that Melko had aroused started into uproar against it, and there was a war of sounds, and a clangour arose in which little could be distinguished.
>
> —J. R. R. Tolkien, "The Music of the Ainur" (1983:50–51)

One need look no further than to Tolkien's own creation myth for Middle-earth to see an example of the sonic and symbolic discord that can arise when musical performances collide. In Tolkien's tale, the God Ilúvatar instructs his choir of holy beings, the Ainur, to bring the universe into existence through the production of beautiful harmonies. This Ur-Music, according to Ilúvatar, will serve as a blueprint for all subsequent events and social relations in the cosmos. But one of the Ainur, the mischievous and overconfident Melko, refuses to play along, opting instead to fabricate his own competing strains. Ilúvatar eventually triumphs in this noisy battle, while Melko, it is worth noting, goes on to become the primal source of all evil in Middle-earth, later recruiting minions such as Balrogs, dragons, werewolves, and most remarkably Sauron, the principal antagonist in *The Lord of the Rings*.

What can LOTRO's communities teach us about the social consequences of—and motives for—agonistic musical behavior? How does the virtual nature of the gameworld impact the kinds of musical practices that players are inclined to perform and to tolerate? And what is it about musical conflict in particular that, in the eyes of players, sets it apart from other forms of ludic contention? By way of broaching these inquiries, let us turn to a complaint that a player once voiced on a LOTRO forum thread titled "Don't Play Bad Music!":

> My god, some folks in here must be deaf or lack any intonation. I passed by the [horse] stable area in Bree last night & OMG . . . they must have been just banging keys. Course, I made a comment thinking I said it to Kin [private chat] and it was

on Say [public chat]. Something about god-awful noise. But if you heard it on my end, you'd be crying too! (27 August 2008)

Another player posted an indignant response the very next day:

Funny, I looked at this post and thought, this really can't be about me, can it? Hark it is, that was me and my friend playing there, thanks for the vote of confidence by the way . . . I personally know some people in your kin, just wanted them to be aware you were representing their kin in such a positive way . . . Guess it really doesn't matter though since I can't get my partner to play anymore. Have a good day and be sure to check your chat [Kin vs. Say] before bad-talking people. (28 August 2008)

The scenario recounted in this exchange sounded like it was, to say the least, embarrassing and upsetting for both individuals. The second player, after being shamed in the gameworld as an inept musician, retaliated by likewise publicly rebuking the first player on the forums for having broadcast the initial insult to everyone else in the Bree-Town area. The fundamental issue raised by this brief encounter concerns who has the right to perform what (and where) in LOTRO's gameworld, and in turn, who has the right to object (and to whom).

Official rules for player behavior in LOTRO are outlined in its Code of Conduct, which the developers at Turbine drafted as a subsection to the game's End-User License Agreement. One rule states: "While playing the Game or participating in related services, you may not exhibit or partake in behavior that is disruptive to the Game's normal playability [or] causes grief or alarm to other players" (Turbine 2007:106). These vague terms of common decency, however, are complicated by LOTRO's role-playing premises, such that the Code of Conduct makes a provision that reads: "Although the Game is a role-playing game, you may not claim 'role-playing' in defense of any violation of the Code of Conduct" (ibid.:107). Indeed, if it were not for this stipulation, players could try to justify virtually any offensive act by citing the hypothetically ill-mannered dispositions of their avatars. Yet it is ultimately within the legal purview of Turbine's game administrators to discipline injurious behaviors as they see fit. According to the User Agreement, any "player who violates the Code of Conduct may be warned by Turbine staff, but some particularly serious violations or repeated violations can result in other sanctions, such as a lockout or permanent ban, without warning" (ibid.). The most extreme penalty involves the termination of a player's account, a sort of virtual capital punishment insofar as it entails the irreversible deletion of a player's avatar from Turbine's central server.

Although the Code of Conduct refrains from officially legislating or recommending the types of music that should be played in the gameworld, many players choose to perform only musical pieces that they believe accord stylistically with the setting of Middle-earth. Players have frequently reported instances in

which their sense of ludic engagement has been disrupted by encounters with what they considered to be inappropriate music. One player explains: "I prefer that other role-players play at least vaguely period-correct music while role-playing, in the same way that I prefer them to speak in-character and to avoid 'internet speak' or other references which break the immersion. I don't like to play easily recognized popular or classical tunes at all, because playing more obscure pieces preserves the idea that the pieces were written for Tolkien's world, not ours" (interview, Christian, 16 November 2008). Another player insists that "music like heavy metal and rap really don't have a place in Middle-earth. All the songs I play actually in some ways fit within the realm of fantasy, like Irish folk songs and Celtic music such as Enya" (Aellwen, 4 November 2008).[13] But attempts of players to honor musical lore-authenticity in LOTRO are complicated by the fact that there is no unequivocal or primary real-world culture (or historical era) from which Tolkien derived his fantasy land of Middle-earth. Historians and literary critics have posited, for starters, a mix of Norse, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Welsh, Irish, and Germanic mythologies as sources of Tolkien's inspiration (Chance 2004:4–14; Flieger 2005:55–84; Caldecott 2008:211–24; see also Donnelly 2006). And while many players' imaginations of Middle-earth's soundscape have likely been influenced by Howard Shore's soundtracks for the recent *The Lord of the Rings* blockbuster trilogy, the musical lore of the gameworld remains highly contested. Conflicts in LOTRO can arise between players who possess contrasting perspectives on the kinds of actions, linguistic conventions, and musical practices that contribute to a compelling gameplay experience. Players who are not at all invested in immersive role-play can also end up butting heads with those who regard the maintenance of immersion as a collective responsibility.[14]

Seeing as how very little consensus exists within LOTRO's communities concerning the styles of music that are conducive to effective role-play, some players try to circumvent tricky questions of authenticity altogether by advocating for performances of music that suit particular social instances of gameplay rather than the presumed lore of the virtual world as a whole. One player notes that music should be "situational in LOTRO, much like it is in real life. Most people, for example, wouldn't choose to play 'In Da Club' [by 50 Cent] at a funeral" (interview, Tristram, 31 October 2008). When I asked this player about the kinds of music he would personally consider appropriate for a funeral, he responded: "Incidentally, this past Wednesday, we had a memorial event [in LOTRO] for the founder of our kinship, Vincent, who passed away in real life a year ago from cancer. At the event, a number of kin-mates and I played 'Into the West' via the ABC system, along with a few other musical numbers, as a tribute to a fallen leader. My closing piece was a solo rendition of 'Danny Boy' on the bagpipe" (ibid.)[15] The mourners appeared to have

expressed here a sense of duty not to any single musical aesthetic per se, but instead to the staging of a sensitive performance befitting a solemn ceremony. They imported into the gameworld their own encultured notions of what they believed to be respectful commemorative music without dwelling extensively on its degree of authenticity within the greater context of Middle-earth.

Given the sheer amount of musical activity in LOTRO, it might come as a surprise that none of the thirty-four rules in the game's Code of Conduct makes any reference to music at all. Such omission might stem from perceptions of in-game musical performances as primarily recreational acts that resist explicit governance. To this day, I have not heard of a single instance of a player being formally disciplined for music-related violations. While many other forms of misconduct—such as chat-spamming, stealing the loot of fellow players, or hacking the game code to gain an unfair technical advantage—are usually met with swift rebuke, music's apparent kinship with play and playfulness seems to safeguard infractions of this nature against serious admonition. To consign music in virtual spaces to the status of social marginalia, however, is to underestimate its ability to function as a powerful conduit for human expression. Perhaps, then, LOTRO's musical performances require critical attention precisely because they are so readily conceived as diversionary activities—activities within a game that, in itself, is all too easily conceivable as a diversionary medium.

Musical confrontations in LOTRO become especially fraught when players attempt to disturb others on purpose and with antagonistic intent. In online gaming communities, the term *griefing* is used to describe any behavior that a player deliberately commits with the aim of annoying or offending others.[16] Griefers derive pleasure from violating implicit codes of social conduct and hindering the ludic experiences of surrounding players. In LOTRO, performers who employ sound in a disruptive manner are exhibiting an emergent practice of what one might call *musical* griefing. One player explains: "As a listener, I am often annoyed when one musician walks up too close to another musician and starts playing a different song. It's inconsiderate not only to the first musician but also to anyone in the audience who now can only hear the competing and clashing songs" (interview, Christian, 31 October 2008). Another player describes a particularly unpleasant instance of such musical rivalry:

> A guild leader was leading a few of his members in a band performance of Pachelbel's *Canon* on three different instruments. However, it wasn't that great, and I could tell they had struggled to put it together. I gave them constructive criticism at which they took personal offense. Shortly after that I started playing a song, since they seemed to be done playing theirs (common courtesy in the game dictates that if there are multiple people nearby that you give each person time to play a song or take turns

playing songs for an accumulated audience). While in the middle of my rendition of Pachelbel's *Canon*, the leader as well as another member [of the group] started playing the two most auditorially abusive instruments in the game, the cowbell and drums, in order to drown out my music and drive me away. (Interview, Sykomyke, 13 December 2008).

What began here as an impromptu battle-of-the-bands ended as a turf war in which music was harnessed as a tool of spatial dominion. Thus while Melko, the Ainur's rogue chorister, might have been the first musical griefer in Tolkien's virtual universe, he was certainly not the last. That said, I wish to conclude this article with two tales from the field. In the first case, a lone griefer is effectively banished from an outdoor concert via the collaborative efforts of the performers and audience members. In the second, by contrast, six musical griefers appear to emerge victorious when their orchestrated performance of cacophony manages to drive an entire roomful of players out of a communal area.

Holiday Noise at the Prancing Pony

On the evening of 19 December 2008, a kinship called the Lions of Judah (LoJ) staged a Christmas concert in front of Bree-Town's Prancing Pony Inn on LOTRO's Brandywine server. Clad in gold and maroon uniforms with red boots and plumed hats, eight members of LoJ assembled inside the inn around 9:30 PM (EST) to review their program and to finalize their plans. Having seen announcements for this event on LOTRO's forums, I arrived early to interview the performers. The leader of the kinship, a Dwarf Minstrel named Gadowar, informed me that LoJ, though not primarily a music clan, enjoyed putting on performances whenever its members could find time to do so. All of the music they were about to play at this concert, according to Gadowar, would be ABC ensemble pieces arranged by one of the kinship's own members.

At 10:00 PM, the LoJ performers headed out of the inn to face a rowdy audience of about fifty players. Although dusk had descended, dozens of players illuminated the area by building campfires and shooting streams of fireworks into the air. Using emotes, players made their avatars applaud, cheer, laugh, dance, smoke pipes, and breathe fire (see Figure 7). The server's public chat window buzzed continuously with jokes and festive wishes. During the first half of the concert, the LoJ performers played ABC renditions of holiday songs such as "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," "Carol of the Bells," "Carol of the Birds," "Let It Snow," and "Angels We Have Heard on High." Later on, they turned to non-holiday tunes such as Kansas's "Dust in the Wind," Harry Chapin's "Cat's in the Cradle," and the Blue Öyster Cult's "Don't Fear the Reaper." The LoJ musicians handed out prizes to players who were quickest to identify correctly

the songs being performed, while the overall spirits of audience members were further lifted by the distribution of free in-game beer by a Dwarf named Vanthli.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly until about halfway through the concert, when a Hobbit named Dugly suddenly began to play freestyle music on a clarinet against the ABC tunes of the LoJ performers (see Figure 8). The simultaneous performances of two disparate musical pieces created jarring sounds that agitated the concert performers and audience members alike. The following excerpt from the chat window shows examples of the remarks and emotes that players used to express their disapproval of Dugly's behavior:

> Gadowar shouts, "No prizes, no music until spamming is done."
> Marlomur says, "Dugly is stupid."
> Fothicheis sighs at Dugly.

Figure 7. [Left] The Lions of Judah kinship performing in front of the Prancing Pony Inn as [Right] audience members light up the evening sky with fireworks and colorful spells (19 December 2008). Screen captures by author.

Figure 8. Dugly (circled) griefing with a clarinet during the LoJ Christmas concert (19 December 2008). Screen capture by author.

> <u>Elrohiraran</u> scolds Dugly.
> <u>Gadowar</u> shouts, "EVERYONE /ignore DUGLY."
> <u>Hiyo</u> gestures rudely towards Dugly.
> <u>Marthared</u> says, "you can just put Dugly on "ignore" and it turns him off."

Over the course of several minutes, players also used emotes to slap Dugly an impressive total of fifty-six times, but such chiding actions seemed only to compound the bewildering state of affairs and to encourage Dugly to persist in griefing. Although I tried to initiate conversation with Dugly in a private instant-chat session, I received no response.

Since LOTRO does not support a traditional Player vs. Player mode—that is, gameplay (common in many other MMORPGs) in which players can attack or cause damage to one another's characters—the audience members at the LoJ concert had no way of restraining or chasing away Dugly with avataric actions.[17] Even the reproachful slaps of players remained purely symbolic gestures that could not directly affect Dugly in any ludologically consequential way. To this end, LOTRO's developers—perhaps anticipating the kinds of musical harassment that could proliferate in the gameworld—included in the initial design of the game a technical counter-measure called the *Ignore* function. This utility allows a player to block all incoming music from any other specified player while leaving the rest of the gameworld's sounds—including the music of other un-ignored players—fully audible. At the Christmas concert, Gadowar and other irritated players repeatedly directed audience members to type "/ignore add Dugly" in their command windows so that they could block out the sounds of Dugly's clarinet and enjoy the unadulterated performance of LoJ's music. Once several audience members confirmed that they had "/ignored" Dugly, the LoJ performers proceeded with the remainder of their musical program. Dugly, possibly upon realizing that the griefing music could no longer be heard by most of the surrounding players, vacated the premises a little while thereafter.

To reformulate a familiar philosophical query: If a Hobbit griefs at a Christmas concert—but no one else can hear him—does he make a sound? Although the Ignore function in LOTRO places a filter in the listener's ear rather than a muzzle on the performer's mouth, a musician who is "/ignored" by everyone within earshot becomes effectively mute. The measures taken by the performers and audience members at the LoJ concert thus show that musical censorship in LOTRO is possible through collective action. Yet as one player argues: "The ability for an abused player to shut down both text and sound coming from their abuser is the final step provided by the game, but its utility shouldn't provide justification for the abuser to simply say, 'If they don't like it, they can shut me off.' Giving players the tools to avoid harassment does not excuse those willing to harass in the first place" (interview, Tirithannon, 6 December 2008).

"/Ignoring" a player, in any case, does not render the target invisible; Dugly, even after being placed on the Ignore lists of the LoJ audience members, could still be seen, in the middle of the crowd, *attempting* to grief on the clarinet. Consequently, the Ignore function, despite its name, does not actually allow its users to become instantly and blissfully *ignorant* of a griefer's presence or offensive intentions. One final tale will continue to stress the practical limits of LOTRO's tools of musical censorship and convey just how forceful musical griefing can be when it is executed in an organized and pre-meditated fashion.

Bagpipe Spam in the Auction Hall

On the afternoon of 11 November 2008, I encountered on the streets of Bree-Town a Hobbit named Jimbrosil who informed me that he and a few members of his kinship were planning to "bagpipe spam" the Auction Hall a little after 1:00 AM (EST). When I asked him to explain bagpipe spamming, he responded: "About 6 people go in there, stand in different locations, and play different songs on the bagpipes. It's like listening to 100 dying cats." Sure enough, at 1:40 AM the following morning, Jimbrosil and five other members of his kinship marched into the Auction Hall with bagpipes and matching uniforms. At the time, there were about twelve other players in the hall, a small space with dim lighting and modest decor. These players were retrieving letters from in-game mailboxes, trading items, and casually chatting and role-playing with one another. One can imagine their surprise when the room suddenly became filled with the sounds of six bagpipes simultaneously executing six different ABC files. Jimbrosil and his kinmates had positioned themselves such that every corner of the hall fell within the musical range of at least one performer (see Figure 9). Anyone standing near the center of the room would have been able to hear all six performers.

Although a few players expressed amusement toward the bizarre spectacle, most others were less pleased. These listeners certainly had the option to "/ignore" all six griefers, but to do so, they would have had to run up to each of the griefers to view their respective names and subsequently to place these names, one by one, onto their Ignore lists. Given the burdensome nature of this technical counter-measure, most players appeared to resolve that it would be easier to flee the scene altogether. Within minutes, all but one or two of these listeners had vacated the space. The spammers therefore seemed to win the day, disrupting the activities of the Auction Hall's prior patrons and demonstrating that music can break communities apart just as easily as it can bring them together.

This scenario constitutes a drastic example of music's capacity in LOTRO to function as an instrument of provocation and territorialization. Scholars who

Figure 9. Jimbrosil and five other players (circled) bagpipe-spamming Bree-Town's Auction Hall (12 November 2008). Screen capture by author.
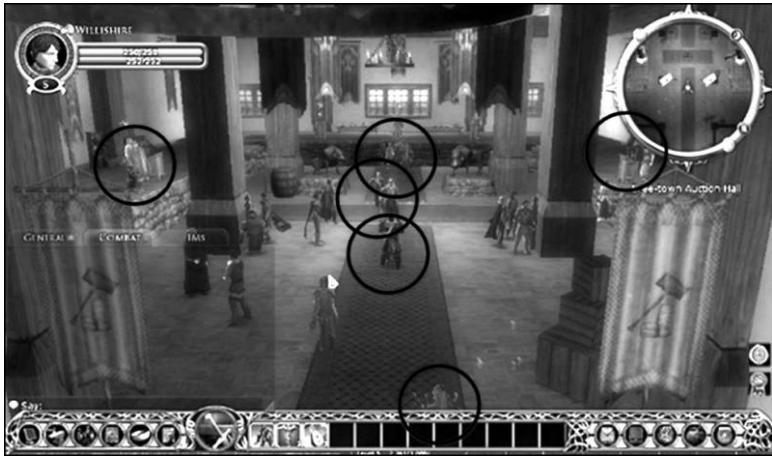
have recently shown heightened interest in the ethics of music's employment as a device of interrogation and psychological warfare have been mindful to emphasize the severe physiological effects that sound can exert upon captive and indisposed listeners (see Cusick 2006, 2008; Pieslak 2009:78–99; Goodman 2010:5–13; Kartomi 2010:453–56; O'Connell 2010). The bagpipe spam in LOTRO, of course, cannot be so facilely equated to the government-sanctioned weaponization of music: one could argue that the former caused little or no lasting damage to its listeners; that these players were free at any point to leave the Auction Hall (an in-game solution) or to turn off their speakers or computers (a hardware solution); and lastly, that the griefers—it would appear—were just trying to have a little fun. Yet despite these mitigating factors, player-made music in LOTRO cannot be wholly conceived as mere frivolity. For one thing, even though the actions of the bagpipe spammers were rendered in a virtual environment, the resulting cacophony nevertheless spilled, through speakers and headphones, from the intangible infrastructures of the Auction Hall into the physical spaces inhabited by players. The palpable effects of this noisy performance serve as a reminder that whatever one might call *virtual* music— music with ostensible origins in a simulated environment (see Duckworth 2005:157–69)—still manifests as material vibrations that can touch, envelop, and disturb the bodies of human listeners.

The bagpipe spam in LOTRO represented an innovative instance of musical behavior lying far beyond the basic applications of the game's music system. Anyone who enters this virtual Middle-earth almost inevitably learns

about the prospect of musical griefing either through experimentation or by watching others. Insofar as virtuosity is an art of persistent transgression—of crossing "the limit of what seems possible, or what the spectator can imagine . . . [and] insistently mobilizing, destabilizing, and reconstituting borders" (Gooley 2004:1)—LOTRO's musical griefers are, one might say, exemplary *ludic* virtuosos. These players are always looking for new ways to push the aesthetic and social boundaries of musical performances and to shock unsuspecting listeners with the resulting sounds. The seemingly effortless execution of music via the ABC system only serves to facilitate possibilities for noise pollution and sonic rivalry. Yet it is also perhaps during these moments of transgression that the musical creativity and playfulness of ABC performers become most discernible. For despite the limited input of its single-click functionality, the ABC system permits players to weave together all sorts of musical and cultural harmonies as they learn to play, to compete, and to co-exist with one another in a constantly changing world—harmonies that resound with social and moral valence precisely because the possibilities for discord are always *only* a click away.

Conclusion: Freedom Rings

In his *Republic*, Plato opens a dialogue about justice and human goodness by invoking the myth of the Ring of Gyges, an ancient artifact that is said to grant its bearer the power to turn invisible. According to Plato, no one equipped with this ring "would be so incorruptible that he would stay on the path of justice or stay away from other people's property, when he could take whatever he wanted from the marketplace with impunity . . . and do all the other things that would make him like a god among humans" (1992:36 [360c]). Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy foregrounds the allegorical principles of Plato's myth by relating an epic tale of how the protagonist Frodo must resist not only the flesh-and-blood demons of Sauron's empire but also the internally corruptive force of the One Ring. Online cultures today are continuing to put Plato's hypothesis to the test. Behind a veil of pseudonymity, players of LOTRO and other online games are accorded enormous freedoms to experiment with behaviors that they might otherwise not be able or willing to enact in real-world settings.

LOTRO's inhabitants have together discovered over the last few years many ways of using music to sound out alternative identities and to forge social ties in a dynamic role-playing universe. To this day, players are driving one another to explore the sorts of things that can be said and done with musical performances. These virtual troubadours, in sum, are relentlessly playing *with* music, and in doing so, they are shedding light on the numerous continuities

as well as disjunctions between virtual and real-world musical experiences. This ethnography offers one starting point for further conversations about the ways in which the means and effects of music-making are rapidly transforming alongside developments in gaming technologies. The creative potential and limitations of LOTRO's ABC system in particular can productively inform ongoing critical debates about the very definition of a musical performance in cultures saturated with practices of recording, sampling, and simulation. For some players, ABC signals the beginning of an anarchic, Adornian nightmare in which players mindlessly regurgitate ready-made music with pretensions to artistic agency. For others, the system embodies the foundation of an exquisite democracy that grants musical wings to all. Negotiating dystopian and utopian conceptions of musical role-play requires a candid—if perhaps uncomfortable and inconvenient—acknowledgment of the stubborn, elitist associations that exist between musicality and privilege. What are our incentives for judging aesthetic worth or policing authentic musicality? Why should we really care who is or gets to be musical? What are the intellectual and academic stakes that underlie cultural formulations of boundaries between music, sound, noise, and other constructed categories of acoustic phenomena? These are the basic yet powerful questions that LOTRO musicians are posing to one another—and now to us—through their playful actions. In the end, as the populations of LOTRO and other online communities continue to grow, it will only become ever more vital to attune ourselves to the varied roles that musicians play in both their real and virtual lives.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Following its initial launch, LOTRO went on to receive releases in China, Korea, Russia, and various other countries. The full title of the base-game is *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar*. Three expansion packs—*Mines of Moria* (2008), *Siege of Mirkwood* (2009), and *Rise of Isengard* (2011)—have since supplied additional content to the gameworld and broadened its geographic scope.

2. See DocHoliday (2011) for this recent estimate. Turbine, like most game development companies, does not publicly disclose official subscription or sales figures.

3. The four playable races in LOTRO are Man (a.k.a. Human), Hobbit, Elf, and Dwarf. Classes that players can select for their avatars include Burglar, Captain, Champion, Guardian, Hunter, Lore-Master, Minstrel, Rune-Keeper, and Warden. A player's adventures in LOTRO take place during the Third Age of Middle-earth and coincide roughly with the events in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Every once in a while, players cross paths with key figures from the novels (e.g., Gandalf, Gimli, and the Balrog of Moria), but for the most part, quests that are undertaken in the game remain tangential to the trilogy's epic narrative.

4. Other online gameworlds and simulation programs with player-music systems include Sony Online Entertainment's MMORPG *Star Wars Galaxies* (released 2003) and Linden Lab's *Second Life* (see Harvey 2009:151–67).

5. Interviewees are quoted here with permission and cited according to their stated preferences.

6. LOTRO contains a soundtrack that features both digitally synthesized music (created principally by Stephen DiGregorio) and recorded orchestral and choral music (composed and conducted by Chance Thomas). Players generally choose to perform their own music in areas with sparse and unobtrusive ambient music (namely towns and indoor areas). LOTRO gives players the ability to adjust in-game audio settings such as the Master Volume, Player Music Volume, Sound Effects Volume, Ambient Sound Volume, and Combat Sound Volume.

7. Freestylers have no means of altering the intensity of individual pitches produced during a performance, but players can add modifiers to an ABC file to specify the desired dynamics of particular sections of music (e.g., +pp+ for pianissimo and +mf+ for mezzo-forte).

8. For musicological case studies on these issues, see Théberge (1997:214–41), Taylor (2001:117–35), Lysloff (2003:47–54), Gillespie (2007:1–20), and Katz (2010:177–210).

9. It is possible in LOTRO to tell whether a player is performing freestyle or ABC by watching the animated notes floating out of the avatar's instrument. The noteheads are solid if a musician is freestyling but discernibly more transparent if the musician is executing an ABC file. Controversies surrounding ABC performances thus do not revolve primarily around issues of potential deception. Whereas practitioners of record splicing (Hecker 2008), lip-synching (Auslander 2008:73–127), and, in some cases, auto-tune (Katz 2010:50–52) might aim to conceal these respective technologies of sound manipulation and reproduction, ABC musicians in LOTRO are not usually attempting to pass as freestylers or otherwise technologically unmediated performers.

10. Dedicated role-players in LOTRO often pen detailed fictional profiles for their avatars, adopt Tolkienesque linguistic mannerisms, and feign ignorance of certain real-world technologies, traditions, and current events. Players in LOTRO can set their avatars' statuses to indicate whether or not they are role-playing so as to inform others about how they wish to be approached in the game.

11. See Boellstorff (2008:16–24) for a concise introduction to the problematic use (and implied spatial demarcations) of terms such as *virtual*, *digital*, *real*, and *actual*.

12. In a study of sampling technologies, Alan Durant proposes three conditions of musical democracy: the "cheapness of the equipment"; "input into definition of the technology"; and "a low or easily attainable skills-threshold for using the technology" (1990:193).

13. LOTRO players concerned with musical lore-authenticity appear to be pursuing a kind of experiential verisimilitude akin to that which is sought out by various *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* players, who, as Kiri Miller reports, listen to rap on the in-game radio "because that's what CJ [the avatar-protagonist] would do" (2007:422).

14. Scholars have examined immersion in digital contexts by referring to theoretical precedents and analogues in Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's ideas of psychological "flow" and "optimal experience" (cf. Perron 2009:137), Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* (cf. M. Smith 2007:163–69), Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" (cf. Hillis 2009:186), and technologies of stereoscopy since the early nineteenth century (cf. Huhtamo 1995:160–74). Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman

assert that pleasures of interactive gameplay stem from a "double consciousness" through which players simultaneously identify with avatars and yet remain fully aware of the avatars' artificiality (2004:453). They propose this as a means of refuting what they call the "immersive fallacy . . . the idea that the pleasure of a media experience lies in its ability to sensually transport the participant into an illusory, simulated reality" (ibid.:450; see also Murray 1997:99 and Wood 2007:116–32.)

15. Composed by Howard Shore, Annie Lennox, and Fran Walsh, the melancholy farewell song "Into the West" (originally recorded by Lennox) plays during the closing credits of Peter Jackson's film *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003). The song was inspired in part by the Auckland filmmaker Cameron Duncan, who passed away from bone cancer in 2003. It received an Oscar for Best Original Song at the 76th Academy Awards in 2004.

16. Regarding online griefing practices, see Ludlow and Wallace (2007:89–107), J. Smith (2007), Boellstorff (2008:187–98, 220–25), Bakioglu (2009), and Dibbell (2009:11–12).

17. Although LOTRO does not have a standard PvP mode, it does offer a Player vs. Monster Player (PvMP) mode in which players—when occupying specific PvMP-sanctioned zones—can temporarily assume the guise of a high-level Monster and engage in combat with non-Monster players. These zones, expectedly, do not tend to be situated in civil areas and villages such as Bree-Town.

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