



OTHERWORLD

There are guys online who swear it was heaven. They still sit around like a bunch of old geezers, swapping tales of epic storms, monstrous beasts and grisly battles. Talk to any gamer in their twenties and at some point they'll say: "You're too young to get it. You never saw Otherworld."

Now keep in mind, most of these idiots never experienced the original Otherworld either. Even at the height of its popularity, it never had more than a handful of subscribers. It wasn't until years after the publisher pulled the plug that it became known in geek lore as the greatest game of all time.

I always thought that was bullshit. I don't anymore.

It took a twentysomething tech billionaire named Milo Yolkin to drag the game back from the dead. Today at noon, his company released an early-access version of Otherworld 2.0. Two thousand lucky gamers were chosen to test it, and somehow I'm one of them. The original Otherworld players were all dorks like me,

but as far as I can tell, this new group of players has little in common aside from deep pockets. The app itself is free—you just have to buy the exclusive new headset that goes with the game. Only a couple thousand have been made, and each one costs over two grand.

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I have no clue what the old Otherworld looked like on a PC monitor when it came out over a decade ago. But I gotta admit—when I downloaded the new app and I put on the headset, I wasn't expecting graphics this good. I know everything is CGI, but my eyes are completely convinced that it's real. I've got a plastic brick strapped to my face, there's sweat trickling out of my haptic gloves, and I'd rather die than be seen in the dainty booties I'm wearing. Back in the real world, my body is blind, deaf and helpless. I've been in Otherworld for over seventeen hours now, and there is no way in hell that I'm leaving.

Of course, this world has been trying to kill me from the very first second I set out to explore. I've encountered some truly insane shit so far—an avalanche, lighting strikes, quicksand and some kind of mutated polar bear that I managed to butcher and eat using nothing but a dagger and my two bare hands. Still, nothing compares to what I've just found.

I've come to a stone path that disappears into a cavern carved out of a glacier. I run my hand along one of the icy walls. I feel that it's there, but my fingertips can neither confirm nor deny that the surface is as smooth or as cold as it appears. I shouldn't have cheaped out when I bought the gloves, but the best ones were so expensive that they'd have triggered a credit alert. I'm sure I could have found a way around it if I'd known the fancy gloves would be worth it. But none of the rumors prepared me for Otherworld.

When I look up, I see a sun just like the one I've always known burning in the sky. Its light penetrates the ice around me, and the whole glacier glows like an enchanted gem. I can hear water rushing somewhere deep within the glacier. A sharp crack echoes behind me, and I spin around a little too quickly. My stomach drops and hot vomit rises and scalds the back of my throat. They haven't found a way to truly beat the motion sickness yet. I close my eyes, swallow and wait until the dizziness fades.

Then I take a deep breath and open my eyes again. Stretching out toward the horizon is the empty ice field I just crossed. Somewhere in the distance is the City of Imra, where I began my journey. Apparently that's where all Otherworld adventures begin. You design your avatar and walk through a door and suddenly you're outside Imra's gates. In the few minutes I was there, I watched a parade of avatars pass through them.

They're all still back there, I guess. They say the original Otherworld could get pretty smutty, but I don't think it had anything quite like Imra. Apparently the city's a CGI Sodom that makes *Grand Theft Auto* look like *Dora the Explorer*. I was tempted to do a little sightseeing in town, but that seemed to be what the designers expected us to do. So I set off in the opposite direction. Away from the city. Down a mountainside. Into the wilderness. Across the ice fields. The way I figure it, when you're given a chance to explore the most incredible survival sandbox ever created, you shouldn't let yourself get slowed down by a few anatomically correct non-player characters.

Now I'm standing here in front of the ice cave, with the wind whistling all around me. It's a pity I can't feel anything but the steady chill of central air. If I breathe in too deeply, I can smell the

Febreze my mom's cleaning lady uses. But my eyes are burning from snow glare, and my toes are numb. Before I enter the glacier, I turn one last time and scan the frozen white landscape behind me. There are no signs of movement, but I know I'm not on my own. Someone's followed me here. She's always kicked ass at camouflage, and I haven't caught sight of her. But I don't need my eyes to tell me that Kat's in Otherworld too. I feel her presence—and I'm finding it hard to wipe the shit-eating grin off my face.

Back in the real world, Kat hasn't spoken to me in months. I've tried pretty much everything, and Otherworld was my last resort. On Friday I left a set of gear in her locker, along with a note to let her know I'd be logging on at noon today. I didn't think she could resist being one of the first to see Milo Yolkin's new wonderland. So I was pretty bummed when I didn't catch sight of her outside Imra. It's starting to look like my investment paid off, though. As far as I'm concerned, a few thousand dollars of my mother's money is a small price to pay for the pleasure of Kat's company.

I step forward into the cave and stop. Lurking in a shadow is a figure I didn't see until now. Someone or something is guarding the entrance. I draw my dagger and prepare to strike. Everything around me may be fake, but the sound of my heart pounding is real. As my eyes adjust, I see a thin man dressed in what looks like a modern-day suit. He's about a foot taller than I am, and there's a scarf wrapped Bedouin-style around his head. The thin strip of face left uncovered is ebony black. In one hand the man holds a gnarled staff. An amulet hangs around his neck, a clear

stone in its center. When the man doesn't move, I have a go at stealing his staff, but his grip remains firm. It's only when I try to take the amulet that I realize I'm attempting to mug a statue. I rap my knuckles against its hollow chest. It seems to be sculpted from clay.

I suppose the clay man is a sign that I'm on the right track. Open world or not, the developers wouldn't have placed a statue here for no reason. There's bound to be something interesting at the end of the path. And when I find it, I have a hunch that the statue will spring to life and show me what it can do with its staff. But why worry about that right now, when I can listen to the crunch of rocks beneath my bootie-clad feet? Or watch chunks of ice bobbing in the Slurpee-blue stream that's flowing beside the path? The scenery alone is worth every single penny of the six grand I charged to my mom's credit card.

I plunge deeper into the glacier, occasionally sneaking a peek over my shoulder, hoping to catch Kat slinking up behind me. I'm thinking about the two of us alone together in an icy blue cavern with a giant clay man guarding the door. It's been over a year since she and I have been by ourselves. I'm enjoying the thought so much that when I turn a corner and see *him*, I almost mistake him for a rock.

He sits on a throne chiseled out of granite. His body is made of a gray material that looks like stone, and there's an impressive set of horns sprouting out of his head. He's human in shape, though he seems to be built on a much larger scale. Whoever he is, he feels no need for clothes. Heat radiates from him, and the melting ice walls form a sphere around his body. The moat of meltwater

at his feet is clear, but I can't gauge its depth. On the opposite side of his chamber is a tall metal door that doesn't really fit with the decorating scheme. I'm itching to find out what's behind it, but it's pretty obvious that I'll need to make it past the big dude first.

I make my way closer, and his head rises. I can't tell if he sees me, because he doesn't have a face, but I get the sense that he's not very happy. From what I've read online, the lands of Otherworld are ruled by demigods known as Elementals. This might be one of them. Some Elementals are helpful; many are hostile. I'm guessing the creature in front of me isn't interested in making friends.

"I wasn't expecting visitors." His voice booms in my headset and I have to turn the volume down.

Otherworld's new publisher has spent months bragging about its next-generation AI, but there's something that makes me think this guy's not part of the game. And if he's not an Elemental or an NPC, then I'm not the only explorer around. Whoever this is, he's built a formidable avatar.

"I guess not," I say into my mike. "Looks like you forgot to get dressed. You know, a stud like you would be pretty popular back in Imra. I've heard the place is a nonstop orgy. What are you doing out here when the action's back there?"

"I could ask the same of you," he says.

"Yeah, well, I'm allergic to fun. And mangos. Long-haired cats, too."

"How amusing," he says, giving my avatar the once-over. "You could have been anyone. And this is what you chose? What are you—a peasant?" He sounds so . . . *disappointed*. "Lack of imagination is a terrible affliction."

I glance down at my dull brown robe, sewn from the best

cyberburlap available. Whenever I'm given the option, I choose something similar.

"I can think of worse," I tell him. "Nothing wrong with keeping things simple. You know what they say: the flashier the avatar, the smaller the . . ." I stop the instant he stands up. His crotch is nothing but a smooth bump. He's like one of the action figures I used to torture when I was a kid. "You know, you're missing a little something down below." I gesture to his absent parts. "They had some amazing options during setup. Might be worth a reset."

"I appreciate your concern, but I have everything I need," he responds, moving toward me. "The ice fields are no place for guests. I'm afraid you must leave and return to the City of Imra."

"Make me." It just pops out. Which happens more often than I'd like. My tongue produces words faster than my brain can approve them.

"*Make you?*" he responds incredulously. "Perhaps you're not aware that Otherworld is intended for players eighteen and older? Did you lie when you registered?"

I didn't, but what the hell does he care?

"Spare me the lecture and get ready to rumble," I say. "I've been battling the environment for seventeen hours straight, and it's time for bed. I need a little PVP action to put me to sleep."

The avatar approaches, and soon he's towering over me. Once again, I'm blown away by the details. I can actually see veins throbbing in his chest, and though I'm an eighteen-year-old heterosexual, even I recognize that the dude's nipples are works of art. "You assume Otherworld is like the games you know. I assure you it's not. You've entered my sanctuary, and you are not welcome." The guy's beginning to glow from within like an ember. As his

head lights up, features finally appear on his face, and I almost bolt. He does not look friendly.

Instead of running, I draw my dagger. “Then you’d better kick me out.”

Before I can make a move, three flaming arrows zip past my shoulder. They miss the monstrous avatar and sink into the frozen arched ceiling above him. A second later, an explosion rocks the entire cavern. I steady myself and watch as ice rains down from above, burying the beast. I turn to find a sleek figure behind me. She’s dressed in a body-hugging suit of reflective material. It’s hard to see her even though she’s standing out in the open, but I’d know the face anywhere.

“You provoked that guy on purpose, Simon,” Kat says. The voice is all hers, and it sets me on fire. “Did you think you had any chance of winning a fight with that dinky little dagger?”

“Absolutely not. I figured you’d show up and save me,” I tell her. “I wanted to see what you’re wearing. *Very nice.*”

“Let’s go, dumbass,” she orders. She’s never been able to accept a compliment. “He’ll be out of there soon.”

I glance back. The mysterious door behind the avatar is blocked now, so there’s no real reason to stay. Kat is already retreating down the path, and I race to catch up, following her toward the entrance of the cavern. It’s only when we’re outside on the ice field that I realize something’s different.

“The clay man’s gone,” I say as it registers.

“What clay man?” she asks.

“Never mind.” It’s not important, and there’s much more that is. “Listen—” Just as I say it, the ground beneath our feet begins to rumble, and in moments the whole world is shaking around us.

“Not now, Simon,” she says.

“Kat.” I grab her hand and pull her toward me. There’s no place to run. A geyser of lava erupts from beneath the ice and showers down on us. My crappy haptic gloves and booties are suddenly so hot that I yank them off and throw them across my bedroom. I keep the headset on, hoping for one last vision of Kat. All I see are sparks.