Don't Feed the Trolls:
A Cautionary Tale

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In Eddo Stern's *Best. Flame War. Ever.* we are presented with an online argument over seemingly insignificant game-playing topics that grows quickly out of proportion and out of the realm of online experience. Two collaged animated masks – each an amalgam of heraldry, knighthood, pixilated warriors, fantasy species, castles, shields and symbols – animate a flame war that actually took place online over the role-playing game Everquest, an MMPORPG.

Did I just make you feel like a total "newb"?

Online games, discussion boards and communities have developed their own language since these online worlds were first populated in research and academia, and then, later (post-cold war, after the military had no need for such a specialized network, and the internet was commercialized) by the home-computer-using public at large. Short forms and acronyms were first seen on the "usenet" discussion boards and "internet relay chat" spaces, and many of these have made their way into our popular everyday chat/SMS-inspired speak – IMO, LOL, BRB.

The term "flame war" developed as heated discussions arose over typically nerdy topics, such as which operating system was better than the others (Linux, of course). In fact, the phrase originated as a reference to the comic book the Fantastic Four, as one of the characters could turn himself into a Human Torch. Chat participants would use the HTML-styled, bracketed annotation to insult other participants online.

<flame on> You're pretty stupid for not knowing what MMPORPG means. Go look it up on Wiki. </flame off>

When the internet opened to the commercial world, and more people joined these groups, more language and jargon was developed to describe the goings-on in these communities. A "troll" is one who writes nasty flames just to make others angry and to be annoying. "Meat-puppets" and "sock-puppets" are those who are deceptive about their identities or their true allegiances on a discussion board.

How all very "D&D."

It's said, by several theorists, that people can be more uninhibited online, they can change their personality, role-play and morph into who they perceive themselves to be. A cartoon in the *New Yorker* many years ago was made famous for depicting this experience so succinctly.

A dog sitting at the computer says to another, "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

Supposedly, the anonymity of the internet gives people of all walks of life the freedom to be someone different, to lose their identities and, at times, to be unafraid of being not only assertive but aggressive.

Also, because online communication lacks many of our human cues –

the power of voice and intonation, facial cues, non-verbal communication – posts are often misinterpreted. Humour and sarcasm are taken literally and become offensive; jokes are thought to be personal attacks. Anyone who's ever had an email misinterpreted by someone else knows how easy it is to see your best intentions thwarted by the plainness of textual online communications.

This is why nerds invented emoticons. Really, I'm joking. See? I'm smiling. I'm laughing with you, not at you.

;-)

These missed cues are farcical in worlds like online dating, where the worst that might happen is you have dinner with someone you never want to see again in a quest for love. *How could I ever have thought this boor was at all interesting?* But the flame war is meant to be violent, not loving. Stern's flaming protagonists, like any online daters, dare to move their experiences into the real world. Hostile, personal and non-constructive insults grow quickly out of control, and before long, the elder of the two players (the"Newb") has challenged the other to a grudge match in the real world, suggesting venues in states that have no such prohibitory laws.

The more experienced player is younger – and displays a superiority that perhaps any emotional teenager might. But his bravado stays online. It is the older character – who claims to have actually served in battle, fought in wars – who quickly takes the bait and crosses the line.

We'll settle this outside, after school. Another participant on the discussion board steps in to break it up. But why does the flame spread out of control in the first place? What leads to such an inappropriate, disturbing display?

I can only imagine that most people who populate online discussions – even casually – have been in a flame war. I've been in my fair share, dating back to the days of BBS culture. When things get personal, the gloves come off. And it might be more men than women who flame, say statistics, but that isn't a conclusive binary.

Your momma.

Why the impulse to make it pesonal? It's non-constructive and illogical. If words are primary in a text-based community, then why isn't logic? Ad hominem attacks are the last resort of the losing team.

Yeah, well, you smell.

Such attacks convey a false sense of superiority. Stern's flame war shows this schoolyard logic at its finest. The masks are so similar, as online, the only shared characteristic is the text and graphics of the screen. But Stern has given voice to these characters – the "King of Bards" (our elder storyteller warrior) and "Squire Rex" (the younger royal). He has made assumptions about their backgrounds, nationalities, intonations in this act, and made the grudge-match conclusion seem even more absurd as a result. In the end, the flame becomes an ember, then ash.

Next time. You're so dead.