



• Greetings from Michel Delving!

nosy hobbits. The Shire is a place with its own brand of danger.

**BRUCE:** This, on the other hand, is a pretty dumb game mechanic.

**TOM:** Unlike Bruce, I have developed the skill of avoiding patrol paths by extensive playing of *Metal Gear Solid* games.

**BRUCE:** I got so carried away by Gandalf wanting to have a personal conversation with me that I forgot to mention probably the most important thing about my time in *The Lord of the Rings Online*: I'm a minstrel. Yeah, I know. Turbine has done an interesting job of integrating the decidedly non-violent minstrel skill set into a fantasy-adventure combat game, in that it appears that they never really tried. Because I am such a master of roleplaying, I could probably act out for you right now the scene at Turbine where everybody just decided to avoid the design problem inherent in having a bard character fight skeletons with music. I don't have space here for the whole play, but part of it involves some guy saying, "Dude, you just rock out and it fights the goblins!" while pretending to be Jimmy Page and wearing wizard pants. And then everyone else at Turbine is like, "Yeah, we can't think of anything good, either. And please change, because while we don't have an official dress code, the pants from the 1975 Led Zeppelin tour are kind of over the line."

**TOM:** Once we've gotten to know the Shire, we start doing some of the story quests, which consist of furtive visits to a back room in The Prancing Pony where Strider hangs out and entertains an endless succession of player characters, doling out bits of the story in the process. This is a lot of what makes *The Lord of the Rings Online* so appealing to me: There's a familiar narrative thread and we get to ride its coattails, appearing around the periphery of famous events as if we were in the Middle-earth version of *Forrest Gump*. For instance, we have to visit Fredegar "Fatty" Bolger, who was manning Frodo's house to throw off the Nazgul. Sauron's crebain, which are these really mean crows, attack him. We reenact a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, with Bolger in the role of Tippi Hedren. After a couple of tries, we manage to protect him from the evil birds, one of which flies off into the Old Forest.

**BRUCE:** Because Tom ruined it for me, I'm going to ruin it for you: When you run through the Old

Forest, trees can attack you. Yeah, I know—that's the kind of thing that games are great at doing unexpectedly, right? So you can thank Tom for telling me while I'm entering the forest, "Hey, watch out for the trees, because they might attack you."

**TOM:** It was unfortunate that I had to ruin this for Bruce, because it's a great moment when that tree rustles and shakes and then rips its roots out of the ground and starts coming at you. But the problem with trees attacking Bruce is that they will also be attacking me. Being a relatively low-level minstrel and burglar, we're not quite ready to take on trees. We did, however, fight a swarm of bees earlier. I punched every bee in the face.

**BRUCE:** I am consistently pleasantly surprised by how well *LOTRO* re-creates MMO versions of locales that, due to my degree in Tolkien history and folklore, I feel familiar with already. The Old Forest is a particularly good example. It's kind of creepy, because the art direction is just good enough to play on the expectation that I have that it's going to be creepy in the first place. This is how established IP so easily trumps original IP: I've had 30 years to imagine what the Old Forest looks like.

**TOM:** Now we meet up with Tom Bombadil, who gives us +8 Hope along with a sunbeam from the heavens. Tom B is awesome, even if he is a bit fruity. He sends us after a few lilies that grow under the drooping limbs of Old Man Willow, who constantly drains our power. You can understand why a Hobbit might want to lie down here and just sleep forever.

**BRUCE:** The movies that Tom thinks are where *The Lord of the Rings* came from ended up not including Tom Bombadil. Tom thinks this is because that whole thing never actually happened. I think this part of the movies were on Rose Mary Woods' 18 1/2 minutes of blank tape. A crazy Internet conspiracy theory, though, says that it was because it was too hard to film and stay consistent with the rest of the presentation. So it shouldn't surprise you that I'm about to debunk yet another improbable Internet myth by revealing that it's totally possible to have Tom Bombadil in a realistic *The Lord of the Rings* game, and *Turbine* has figured out how to do it. Here is its secret: Everything is kind of too bright, and you get that scary Peter Jackson Ring Effect all the time, and Tom Bombadil is just some guy you can't make out too well, but he gives you extra Hope. Hope is an actual character stat that I didn't think made any sense until I realized I could tell Tom that "I've got a New Hope!" every time my Hope went up.

**TOM:** One of the things I really like in *The Lord of the Rings Online* is that, unlike me and Bruce and *World of Warcraft*, it doesn't constantly veer outside itself to refer to things like *Star Wars*, the Nixon administration, and the music Bruce listened to in college. It's earnest and self-contained and not at all cartoony. As a result, there are fewer fans of *Ren & Stimpy* running around in here, acting like jackasses.

**BRUCE:** One of the benefits of portraying the Shire so consistently is that it gives you a real sense of travel. When you cross into the Barrow-downs, you get the sense that things aren't quite right. Of

course, you can also thank J.R.R. Tolkien for writing a bunch of books about this that already set everything up in my mind before I get there.

**TOM:** We die a couple of times in the Barrow-downs. I blame Bruce, because it's always the healer's fault. But it's also because there are only two of us. One of the problems with this game, and many MMOs, is that it expects you to group. We've been able to piggyback onto other people doing things like saving Fatty from the birds or getting a goblin skull from the spider cave at Scary's quarry in Scary. But without committing to a full six-Man/Hobbit/Dwarf/Elf Fellowship, there's no way we're ready for the Great Barrows, which is the final chapter of Book I and a really kick-ass instance that later opens up into a really kick-ass bigger instance. The sad fact of the matter is that we're stalled, and now I face the prospect of listening to Bruce try to play his lute.

**BRUCE:** One reason I wanted to be a minstrel is that *LOTRO* has this completely amazing deal where you can play actual instruments with your keyboard, rather than just triggering premade music tracks. Even more amazingly, Turbine realized how annoying this could potentially be, and made sure to include a separate sound slider just for player-made music. Whoever thought of it should get the Oscar for Best Game Idea right there, although it would actually be a big fight with the "jumpers run slower" guy. My goal was to get a lute and dig out the old sheet music I have for "Stairway to Heaven" and play it on my keyboard. Then Tom told me that he heard someone playing "Stairway to Heaven" at The Prancing Pony Inn, and I immediately lost all interest.

**TOM:** The guy playing "Stairway" then transitioned into doing the "Imperial March" from *Empire Strikes Back*. That's the thing about MMOs: If the game doesn't mess it up, the people themselves will.

**BRUCE:** *LOTRO* has a lot of cool ideas that are just slightly different from the way all other MMOs did the exact same thing, so in that way it's like every good MMO ever released, except the first one. I love the deeds and feats, even though I have no idea what they are. It's all so familiar, yet done very well. And it all stops at about level 20, because I guess they ran out of time. That's a shame, because it's a disservice to all the characters who gave their lives in the service of the real *The Lord of the Rings*.

**TOM:** I haven't quite explained this to Bruce yet, but it seems to pick up around level 30 or so, particularly if you can hook up with a good group. I've had some luck powering past the long, empty stretches with my main character. And Turbine has announced new content that should be live by the time you read this.

**BRUCE:** I guess that's because in the real *Lord of the Rings*, things were slow between levels 20 and 30. So it's not Turbine's fault, because that's just how it has to be. While I can guarantee you I'm never going to get close to level 30, *LOTRO* is already one of my favorite games, because it reminded me I have an old Led Zeppelin songbook. The best games are all about your memories. •

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FINAL SCORE  
TOM AND BRUCE 1 MILLION, SAURON 0