

Virtual reality players form real-world community

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This Tuesday, April 26, 2011 photo shows Kyra Wilson playing Farmville on her computer at her home in New Haven, Vt. Wilson, a Vermont artist, is one of a small group that has mastered the agriculture planning game, Farmville. She just added a third virtual castle to her farm, which already has a French palace and a winery. She sells virtual wine to pay for the farm's expansion. (AP Photo/Toby Talbot)

(AP) -- In a downtown New York restaurant, a high-ranking Mafia meeting was underway. Three men who robbed, murdered and extorted together were having a top-level sit-down.

"It was very exciting," said one of them, Christopher Chester. "We have fought our way out of some tough situations."

But while their criminal activity - all fictional - took place in the virtual

world, the meeting took place in the [real world](#). Chester, 39, is one of the longest-serving Mafia dons in the [virtual reality game](#) Mafia Wars, in which [players](#) fight their way to guns, power and property with the help of other "family" members.

He is also one of Mafia Wars' top players, earning the prestigious "power player" title enjoyed by a tiny minority of online mobsters. His Mafia sit-down with other online mobsters - in a place where the stairs bore the chalk outline of a body - happened just hours before a party thrown in Lower Manhattan for some of virtual reality's biggest players. They included not just Mafia dons, but also kings and queens of the farm-building game Farmville and the city-planning game Cityville. While tens of millions of people play these games online, the elite players take it to the next level, with their own subcultures and friendships.

Kyra Wilson, a Vermont artist, is an elite player in the agriculture planning game, Farmville. She just added a third virtual castle to her farm, which already has a French palace and a winery. She sells virtual wine to pay for the farm's expansion.

As with Mafia Wars, the real-world community is part of the draw for top Farmville players like Wilson. "They send me cards in the mail for my birthday," said Wilson, who lives on 10 acres in Vermont with her husband and two kids. "When my mother had a mini-stroke, they sent me lots of notes of encouragement for her. One of my favorite players lives in Maryland and has just got married. I'm editing her wedding photos as my wedding gift to her. The community is just amazing."

Does she grow her own crops in real world Vermont?

"No, we let the local dairy farmers have the land for their herds," she said. "The farmers here work really hard, they really do, but I don't think I could ever match that."

In Los Angeles, Robert Yee spends two to three hours every weekday playing the urban design game, Cityville, and between four and eight hours a day on weekends.

"My fiancée says that I sometimes spend more time on Cityville than I do with her," he said.

Yee has earned Farmville' "power player" status and is considered to have one of the best-designed virtual cities. Yee sees his hobby as good training for the time when his many hours of strategy, management and multitasking will help him set up a dental practice in the real world.

"It also helps you decide what kind of world you want to live in," he said. "I know the kind of community I want to create and maybe that is also the same on Farmville."

But while building perfect farms and cities online may provide idyllic visions for the real world, surely playing gangster isn't practice for real life?

"No, we're not involved in real organized crime," said Chester with a laugh. "Look around you - our cigars are made of chocolate. The people we kill online just make great friends in the real world."

Those friendships extend around the world, and they can run deep. When Chester visited Singapore, he went out to dinner with two Mafia Wars players. When a member of his online "family" was laid off at Christmas, other members raised over \$200 so he could buy presents for his children. And when a rival family member discovered his son had cancer, Chester helped organize a Mafia Wars tournament that raised more than \$12,000 in real-world cash.

"And then," said Chester, sipping on whiskey and rye and chomping on a

chocolate cigar, "we got back to killing each other."

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