

I Do... Virtually



TYING THE KNOT... TO IMPROVE GAME PLAY

Asiasoft Online, which publishes games such as MapleStory and AuditionSEA, said getting married in these games is purely for fun.

"It's just a platform where players can train together," said marketing director Ng Kok Khwang. Amanda Tan looks at how online marriages are made.

MapleStory

The game: Players kill monsters, collect in-game weapons and attempt to clear 200 levels.

How to tie the knot: Players choose from three wedding packages that come with a ring for the proposal. Players have to pay more if they wish to customise their wedding attire by, for example, adding veils, gowns and tuxedos. These can be bought using @cash. The going rate for a wedding gown starts from 4,500@cash.

A couple can invite up to 50 guests to witness their solemnisation. Rather than hongbao, guests come bearing online gifts of potions and in-game money that can improve the couple's game play.

Divorces are also part of the game, but they must go through a 'cooling' period of four days and pay 500,000 mesos (MapleStory's game currency).

Perks of being married: Wedding packages come with exclusive add-ons such as 'luck', 'intelligence', 'dexterity' and 'strength'. These give players more power and enhance their abilities.

AuditionSEA

The game: Players dance their way through various modes with different songs and rhythms to be the best dancer.

How to tie the knot: Players have to choose one of five dance modes to enter as a couple. Together, they have to achieve five sets of perfect moves before the male is invited to propose. Couples who are unable to achieve perfect moves in unison, but still want to get married, can buy a love potion that costs 600@cash.

The couple can buy a wedding party ticket for 2,900@cash to celebrate with their friends and receive double 'experience' points and double dens, the in-game money.

Those getting married will get a free gown and a suit for their big day.

Perks of being married: Both parties will get to display a gold ring beside their avatars. This ring can be further embellished each time they complete more dance modes. Dancing together, the players can also accumulate couple points, which help them move up levels in the game.

World of Warcraft

The game: Players form groups and strategise how to defeat their opponents.

How to tie the knot: No marriage function available, so individuals pair up unofficially. Some couples may engage fellow gamers to act as pastors to solemnise their union, and online friends are invited to the ceremony in the game play.

Perks of being married: It is easier for players to overcome challenges as a pair, especially if they possess different skills and powers.

said Jeff Tan, of the game's distributor Asiasoft Online. "For example, if I'm a warrior and my partner is a healer, then I fight the monsters while she heals my injuries. It is easier for players to overcome challenges and complete quests."

Other gamers choose to tie the knot to add an extra dimension to the game, so that it is not all about killing monsters or defeating enemies in the main quests.

Some couples even try to mimic real life by having children—usually other gamers whom they know online.

Eric Low, 16, has an online daughter on MapleStory who is three years older than him and his wife. "We met while playing and she decided to partner us and so we called her our 'daughter'."

His daughter, Esther Teo, 19, follows her 'parents' around for the 'added security'. The waitress added: "It's just like when we were younger, we played families as kids. This is just taking it online."

Eric, his wife Sharon and Esther have all met up in real life for meals and are all close friends now.

Amanda, a Secondary 3 student in a top girls' school, got attached to a youth she met online. "I usually meet these strangers in a group because it's safer and I only go if there are other girls around. But I rely a lot on my instinct to judge if I can trust a person or not," she said.

But she recently broke up with the 17-year-old boy and he quit the game, leaving her 'widowed'. She now plans to 'marry' a friend she has known for about a year in AuditionSEA.

In most virtual marriages, though, partners do not take their online affiliations into the real world.

Cecilia Aw, 15, said she will never meet an online partner. "We're just playing different characters in the game and I've got no real interest in who he is in real life."

Though Amanda's parents consent to her meeting her online friends, some parents cannot help but worry.

Housewife Chong Kim Teck, 41, who has two children aged 10 and 12, said: "I am against it and will stop them. I always show them reports of people getting cheated so they know what the consequences are. It's really dangerous to go out with someone they don't know."

Youth counsellors such as Dr Carol Balhetchet, director of youth services at the Singapore Children's Society, do not think parents should be alarmed, saying teenagers are doing it out of curiosity.

However, she pointed out that getting hitched online might symbolise a need for companionship. If that were the case, then the problem has to be addressed.

"If they spend their time finding company online, they will miss out on learning social and communication skills in real life. This is something they cannot miss out on at that age," she said.

Other counsellors said being able to wed and get divorced so easily online with little consequences may give teenagers the mistaken impression that things are just as simple in real life.

The young are not the only ones experimenting with online marriages.

A 52-year-old businessman, who gave his name as only Tan, is married with a 12-year-old daughter in real life, but has also been married twice online.

"My wife doesn't know, but I don't think she'd mind even if she does. This is all just for fun and I'm just doing it to get more exclusive stuff for my character," he said.



Amanda Tan
The Straits Times/ ANN

Amanda Lee is just 15, but she is already twice divorced and is now in the midst of another nasty split with her third husband. Oh, and she also has a daughter who is older than her.

Such a bizarre family structure could only exist in the world of online marriages, where all you need are in-game money and a willing partner—and a match is easily made, and just as easily broken.

Such virtual unions are becoming increasingly popular in the gaming community, especially among young gamers.

Details of an online marriage also cropped up in court last month during a coroner's inquiry into the death of undergraduate David Hartanto Widjaja: The 21-year-old Indonesian was 'married' to an 18-year-old girl on Destiny Online, a monster-killing game he was hooked on.

She was initially married to another gamer but 'dumped' him when he quit the game and married Widjaja instead. They never met but chatted online often.

There are at least four massively multi-

player online role-playing games with in-game marriage functions that are popular with Singaporeans.

On MapleStory, at least 9,000 Singaporean gamers have taken time off from quests killing monsters to get married. And on dancing game AuditionSEA, more than 3,000 players have tied the knot.

Virtual marriages can cost from as little as S\$25-40 (US\$17-28), depending on how elaborate one wants the ceremony to be.

In MapleStory, for example, players use prepaid cards, available at convenience stalls and cyber cafes, to purchase wedding tickets for three types of packages—cosy, sweetie and premium. Couples looking for a divorce must wait four days and pay 500,000 mesos, the non-cash linked game currency.

Most gamers choose to wed for very practical reasons. Among the perks of being married in these games are increased powers, skills and better-looking avatars.

MapleStory couples get added abilities such as intelligence, dexterity and strength.

For World of Warcraft gamers, characters usually choose their spouses based on whether they complement each other,

More youth marrying and divorcing online in the name of the game

Baboons steal underwear

Bosses at Knowsley Safari Park are warning motorists to beware of the baboons, after the animals learned how to open rooftop luggage and began stealing items such as underwear after helping themselves to the contents.

The monkeys - who are known for tearing off the odd windscreen wiper or wing mirror - have been causing havoc at

the park after learning how to crack open the rooftop luggage boxes of visitors passing through their jungle enclosure.

Dozens have been targeting cars carrying the boxes before pouncing and leaving the unsuspecting families to watch helplessly as the monkeys tear open their cases and scamper off with their clothes and underwear.

Now bosses at the Merseyside park have issued a warning to visitors not to travel through the infamous monkey jungle with luggage on the roof.

With the holiday season in full swing, visitors with cargo boxes on the roof are being urged to watch the 140 baboons at play from the safety of the car-friendly route, around the outside of the baboon enclosure.

Safari Park General Manager, David Ross, said, "When the first luggage box was broken into we didn't really take an awful lot of notice - we just thought it was a one-off incident with a faulty box or lock.

"However, when the problem kept happening, it quickly became clear that the baboons had acquired an unfortunate new skill.

"Their technique involves the largest baboons jumping up and down on the box, flexing it until the lock bursts open, when the rest of the baboons pile in to see what they can find.

"Obviously, we're well used to them helping themselves to the odd wing mirror or wiper blade, but this has taken things to a whole new level.



"Let's face it, nobody wants to see a baboon running up a tree with their underwear.

"For this reason, we now issue a warning to all visitors with luggage boxes as a matter of course.

"Unfortunately though, we still get drivers who don't think it will happen to

them and they decide to take a chance. Although a few get through intact, others pay the price for ignoring our advice.

"That's why we recently staged a demonstration to show the reality of the risks drivers face. The baboons were into the luggage box on our car within minutes and absolute mayhem ensued.

"We will now be able to show photographs of this incident to visitors with cargo boxes who may be thinking of

playing 'Russian roulette' in the monkey jungle."

There are currently more than 140 baboons at Knowsley Safari Park and visitor surveys consistently show them to be the attraction's most popular exhibit.

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One of the North West's leading visitor attractions has developed its own ASBO scheme because of worsening problems with local 'vandals'



Special screening of Sanath Gunathilake's maiden film 'Ekamath Eka Rateka' with French subtitles was held recently at the National Film Corporation. The Guest of the honor of the event was Michel Lummaux, France Ambassador in Sri Lanka.

From left: Sanath Gunathilake, Prof. Osmund Boparachchi and Michel Lummaux France Ambassador in Sri Lanka.