By Patrick Munsey, KokomoPerspective.com

The virtual world of online gaming seems like the perfect place to hide. There is plenty of anonymity, and it's almost impossible for someone to trace activity back to its source, right? Wrong.

Two weeks ago, Howard County Sheriff's Department deputy Matt Roberson tracked down a wanted fugitive through one of the most popular games on the Internet — World of Warcraft. And he got his man.

"You hear stories about you can't get someone through the Internet," said Roberson. "Guess what? You can. I just did. Here you are, playing World of Warcraft, and you never know who you're playing with."

In this case, online gamers were playing alongside Alfred Hightower, a man wanted on charges of dealing in a schedule III controlled substance and dealing in a schedule IV controlled substance, and two charges of dealing in marijuana. A warrant was issued for his arrest in 2007.

The sheriff's department enlisted the aid of the U.S. Marshals this summer to track down a number of fugitives as part of Operation: Falcon, and Hightower was among those targeted. Unfortunately, authorities were unable to locate him. Roberson soon found out why. The suspect had skipped the country.

"I received information from a childhood friend, who tells me the guy is in Canada," said Roberson. "I held onto the information in the back of my head. I spoke to the marshals and asked if we could confirm the guy's location, would they help us get him? They indicated that they would."

With the help of sheriff's major Steve Rogers, Roberson began gathering information on Hightower through a number of sources. That is how they discovered that their suspect was a World of Warcraft fan.

"We received information that this guy was a regular player of an online game, which was referred to as 'some warlock and witches' game," said Roberson. "None of that information was sound enough to pursue on its own, but putting everything we had together gave me enough evidence to send a subpoena to Blizzard Entertainment. I knew exactly what he was playing — World of Warcraft. I used to play it. It's one of the largest online games in the world."

Indeed, World of Warcraft is among the most popular online pastimes today, boasting more than 14 million players in dozens of countries — including Canada. But this is the Internet, and Blizzard is in California. Roberson's subpoena was nothing more than a politely worded request, considering the limits of his law enforcement jurisdiction and the ambiguity of the online world.

"They don't have to respond to us, and I was under the assumption that they wouldn't," said

Roberson. “It had been three or four months since I had sent the subpoena. I just put it in the back of my mind and went on to do other things. Then I finally got a response from them. They sent me a package of information. They were very cooperative. It was nice that they were that willing to provide information.”

Blizzard did more than cooperate. It gave Roberson everything he needed to track down Hightower, including his IP address, his account information and history, his billing address, and even his online screen name and preferred server. From there it was a simple matter to zero in on the suspect’s location.

“I did a search off the IP address to locate him,” said Roberson. “I got a longitude and latitude. Then I went to Google Earth. It works wonders. It uses longitude and latitude. Boom! I had an address. I was not able to go streetside at the location, but I had him.”

Roberson and Rogers contacted the U.S. Marshals, who immediately notified the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Canadian Border Services Agency. According to Rogers, Canadian authorities located Hightower in Ottawa, Ontario, and arranged to have him deported. The marshals picked up the suspect in Minneapolis, and Howard County has until Jan. 5 to bring him back here to face charges.

“Roberson did some great work on this deal,” said sheriff Marty Talbert. “This is the first time in my seven years as sheriff that a fugitive was located in Canada. Rogers and Roberson did an outstanding job coordinating this.”

Talbert explained that this online manhunt isn’t the first time his department has ventured onto the Internet to track down a suspect. Earlier this year, sheriff’s deputies used a phone number look-up Web site to find a man in North Carolina who was wanted on charges in Howard County. In that case, authorities found their suspect through an online classified ad on Craig’s List.

“Suspects cannot be allowed to escape facing criminal charges by simply moving and relocating,” said Talbert.