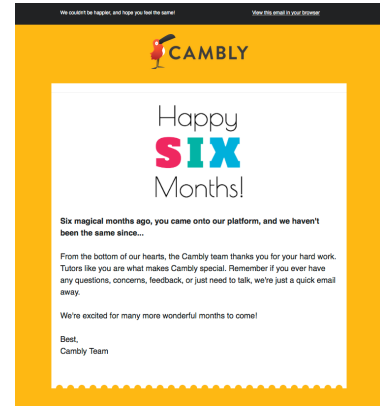


# Cambly's Gollum Technology

On Friday, June 17th, 2016, at 3:02 PM (PST) I received an email congratulating me on my first “six magical months” and an invitation for “many more wonderful months to come”. In light of the fact that I had just received the pecuniary fruit of my best weekly performance on Cambly on the Monday before I was, needless to say, delighted.

On the same day, just before it was time for me to retire, I received another email from a certain Dorothy Li whose subject heading was “Student Feedback”. After being told that Cambly had received dozens of complaints in my regard about rudely refusing to entertain their desire to engage in asymmetric video chats, I was told that “the purpose of Cambly is to create a safe, friendly environment for students to learn English” and that despite my “being a knowledgeable and kind tutor” I was not “a good fit for Cambly’s platform”. After a brief email exchange in which I sought to defend my position I was told that my account had been deactivated.



An asymmetric video-chat is one in which the student is allowed to view the tutor, but the tutor is not allowed to view the student. Technologically speaking, students are provided with the ability to turn off their video camera, but the tutor lacks the same facility. The tutor is thus left with the choice of encouraging the student to find another tutor or playing along as if the subject of a psychology experiment in which he or she is observed from behind a two-way mirror by his own student.



In 1948, shortly after the close of World War II, John R. R. Tolkien completed his three volume trilogy entitled *Lord of the Rings*. It was a 10-year endeavor that first went into print between the years 1954 and 1955. Although originally targeted for children, the book was gradually transformed into a work of adult fantasy, and its enormous literary popularity eventually led to a series of six films including *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002), *The Return of the King* (2003), and the *Hobbit* (2012, 2013, and 2014). These film projects took eight years to produce and received 17 out of the 30 Academy Awards for which they were nominated. Indeed, *The Return of the King* received 11 Academy Awards alone and tied the motion pictures *Ben Hur* and

*Titanic* for the most Academy Awards ever awarded to a single film. According to Box Office Mojo, an online data base, more than two thirds of the series' nearly six billion US dollars in revenue were earned overseas — an international audience of vast proportion.

The entire trilogy is focused on the destruction of a ring that, originally forged as a magic ring of invisibility, soon develops into a contested prize between good and evil. The ring corrupts its bearer and when placed on



his finger makes him or her invisible to others. On the ring are written the words

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,  
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.

or in translation

*One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,  
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.*

This inscription, however, can only be seen when the ring is thrown into fire, and the ring's destruction can only take place in the volcanic inferno at Mount Doom where the ring was crafted. When asked about the intent of the ring as the central motif of his work John Tolkien wrote in 1958 as follows:

I should say that it was a mythical way of representing the truth that potency (or perhaps potentiality) if it is to be exercised, and produce results, has to be externalized and so as it were passes, to a greater or lesser degree, out of one's direct control.



Today we live in a world of secret government organizations that wield immense political and financial power, and that exercise this power outside of the law. That an online company whose stated purpose is to “create a safe, friendly environment for students to learn English” would encourage the mentality embodied in this ring leads one to wonder who is behind the company's creation.

In the final correspondence written by Dorothy Li I was told that students complained that my unwillingness to entertain such a mentality was rude and that I was “racist” or “culturally insensitive”.

Although I was never permitted to see the correspondence, despite my having requested to see it without knowledge of its authors, I can reasonably conclude that some of it was written by Saudi women or women pretending to be Saudis and seeking to eliminate my controversial influence on the internet.

Having lived and taught in eight countries on three continents including the Middle East I am anything but “racist” or “culturally insensitive”. In fact, two of my mottos developed over the years read as follows:

Nationality and race are burdens for some and source of pride for others. That our own pride not become another's burden. (See [www.imaginejapan.net](http://www.imaginejapan.net).)

What counts is not so much what you believe, but how you convert your belief into thought, speech and action.

Now, Dorothy Li, likely of Hong Kong extraction, may have spent a year in Dubai and believe that she is *less* racist and *more* culturally sensitive than I. According to my Cambly students claiming to be from Dubai, however, the Dubai Emirate is about 80% foreign. In contrast, only 60% of the Saudi work force is foreign, and the Islamic custom among women of covering one's

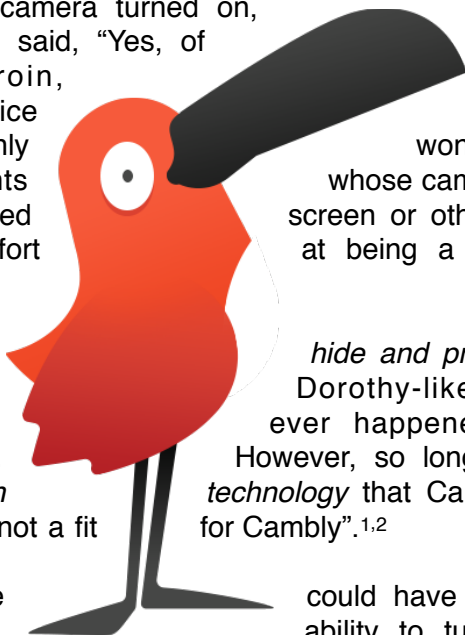
hair and face in public often practiced in the Arabic world is pretty much enforced. I lived and worked in Jeddah, KSA, Saudi Arabia's most cosmopolitan city, for more than three years and spent nearly a year in Jubail, KSA, an industrial town on the Arab/Persian Gulf. I have also visited Riyadh, the Saudi capitol, as well as Abha and Buraidah, other large, but lesser known Saudi cities. Though of European extraction with light skin and bluish gray eyes, I have also lived and worked in Hong Kong (7 years) and Japan (9 years), as well as two other East Asian nations for lesser periods of time. In fact, I have spent 23 of the last 25 years outside of my North American homeland. Indeed, I know a thing or two about what it means to be the victim of racial and cultural prejudice.

As I read Dorothy Li's *account deactivation notice* I was reminded of one of my very early encounters on Cambly. It was perhaps during my third or fourth week when a young male speaker, with his video camera turned on, asked if he could not show me something. Whereupon I said, "Yes, of course", and he turned his camera toward his groin, uncovered his fully erect, naked penis, kissed his device screen, and quit the chat. After this experience I could only wonder what was going on among other Cambly students whose camera was turned off, while I, seated in front of a blackened screen or other image of a pathway to nowhere, was making every effort at being a "knowledgeable and kind tutor".

Setting aside the notion of *Gollum technology* and its probably the best thing that has learners around the world. Dorothy Li is right — I am "just not a fit

*hide and profit* promoted by Cambly's Dorothy-like profiteers, Cambly is ever happened to English language However, so long as Cambly punishes its *technology* that Cambly promotes, I fear that for Cambly".<sup>1,2</sup>

Indeed, this entire misfortune could have been avoided, if only my first request to be given the ability to turn off my video when a student insisted on turning off his had been honored. Just think of the improvement in our ability to communicate were the student's ISP connection weak or the internet traffic very heavy! Alas, how many times did a conversation go foul for lack of a good connection! But no, in the world of Cambly it is not just about making profit, it is how the profit is made that counts — with the Gollum mentality of *Gollum technology*!



Roddy A. Stegemann  
Seattle, Washington  
June 22, 2016

<sup>1</sup> Gollum <<https://youtu.be/DLvIFRNbqOs>>

<sup>2</sup> The Hunt for Gollum <<https://youtu.be/9H09xnhICQU>>