THE RISE OF SOCIAL GAMING

Once the chosen pastime of a select few, video games are now a major part of everyday entertainment. Technology advisory firm Gartner Inc recently valued the games industry at $74 billion worldwide (Hinkle, 2011). The Nintendo Wii, Facebook, and the surge of mobile gaming platforms changed the concept of what playing video games and being a gamer means. The Wii gave non-gamers a new way to look at how games are played and who can play them, changing up the control scheme to something much more intuitive and engaging for the average person. Facebook and mobile gaming turned games into quick, convenient, and, most importantly, social affairs. These technologies shifted the view of games from the stereotypical domain of children and computer nerds to being a pillar of modern social interaction. This shift in public perception of games and social play creates new challenges and responsibilities on the part of the games designer. One of the genres most heavily affected by this social shift is the one that forms its foundation on social play: the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game.

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games, often shortened to MMORPGs or simply MMOs, are a rapidly growing sector of the games industry, and one of the most unique genres of gaming. These games feature massive virtual worlds to explore, typically challenging players with difficult quests and intimidating monsters to defeat. Such encounters are frequently impossible to complete alone, forcing players to work together to overcome the obstacles and reap their rewards. The existing focus on teamwork and socialization in MMOs amplifies the new focus on gaming as a social activity. The importance of player interaction and community put MMO designers into a

difficult and often unfamiliar position of social architect for their games. As a social architect, these designers are now responsible for managing the social systems in their games, working to grow and shape the online community that surrounds their games in a constructive manner. In order to tap into the lucrative MMO market, designers find themselves needing to embrace their new position to develop a successful online world.

The creation of a successful MMO is a daunting task. Producing a large scale game world to handle millions of players on dozens of servers across the world takes impressive amounts of time, money, and technical skill. The network coding needed to support so many players all interacting with a server at the same time is a rough undertaking for even the most experienced programmers. Producing thousands of different assets to populate the game world requires hiring a small army of artists, and even when the world is populated, purchasing the servers and associated infrastructure adds further costs. Gaming analyst Michael Pachter estimated total costs for the upcoming Star Wars: The Old Republic at $80 million (Curtis, 2011, para. 2), with costs expected only to rise in the future.

Even if a game possesses the talent and financial backing, it still faces many other difficulties along the way. Niche and experimental titles that stray from the established formula are too risky for the costs involved, so the game must be able to simultaneously differentiate itself and maintain familiar qualities. While not overly saturated compared to other game genres, there exist several well established brands that seem impossible to overcome in market share. World of Warcraft, the current leader in MMOs, recently claimed 11.1 million active subscribers (Cifaldi, 2011, para. 1). Even if the game does

well on initial sales, the subscription based pricing model common to the genre requires players to keep playing and paying in order to sustain a profit. The need for customer loyalty is a defining feature of this industry compared to other titles, and necessitates constant post-release support through regular content updates and expansion packs in order to retain subscriptions and keep the game alive.

Constant development may seem like a downside, but it also offers designers a way to learn from mistakes and improve the game on a regular basis. Players will commonly leave the game when they are bored or a change is made they dislike, but rejoin and begin paying again with a new update that grabs their attention. Keeping the players happy and engaged is the key to making an MMO a success, and games of its type are expected to change and grow over time to suit the needs of the players supporting it. Designers work with a demographic in mind, but the people playing might not end up being the ones the designers had in mind. The nature of the genre allows the developers to observe their players and understand how they interact, molding the game around its triumphs while learning from their failures.

At the core of the challenges for an MMO designer is understanding the players themselves. The business model and the multiplayer component of the genre force the designer to take on the role of a social engineer. The social aspect of MMOs is its defining feature. Players are expected to work as a team, supporting each other to overcome difficult monsters or other game content that cannot be handled alone. Players will create 'guilds,' forming a group that regularly plays and communicates with each other, often sharing in-game or out-of-game interests that define their group. Each server

that hosts a virtual world has its own subset of players, and these players and guilds will develop reputations on their particular game servers and within the greater community based on their skills or behavior.

This report examines the difficulties of the MMO designer in his role of social engineer of the game and its greater community. While every game and situation will require its own solution, the examples and observations presented will identify common problem areas that designers are likely to face and provide a guideline for resolving such issues in the future.

WHY THEY PLAY

Social dynamics in games are often obvious. The MMO requires teamwork to do anything of significance. Farmville is reliant on interacting with other other player's farms to proceed. However, these components are intentionally designed to foster a social element and player interaction. Game systems themselves can possess unintended social consequences. Understanding that all designs can contain a social element is an extremely important concept for designing a socially driven game environment. Christopher A. Paul analyzes one of the most prominent examples of the unintended effects of design in his article "Welfare Epics? The Rhetoric of Rewards in World of Warcraft" (2010).

The term "welfare epics" came from Blizzard Entertainment's own Jeff Kaplan,

Lead Content Designer of World of Warcraft (WoW). Kaplan, better known as Tigole, used the phrase during Blizzard's 2007 conference to describe the new player-versus-player (PvP) rewards that were implemented in a recent update to the game. Player-versus-player content include game activities where players directly compete against each other instead of computer controlled opponents. Describing the new reward system as "welfare" set off a storm of controversy within the community, sparking debate on the nature and value of rewards in WoW. Paul observes the power of the word "welfare" and the implications associated with it to explain this sudden burst of outrage. It revealed a sharp divide in the behaviors and desires of WoW's player base and left WoW's designers with a difficult question of how to satisfy their diverse playerbase. While the use of "welfare" was originally limited to describing the player-versus-player rewards, in the following years the term encompassed all manner of in game rewards that are seen as relatively easy to obtain compared to the traditional rewards from difficult monsters that required teamwork.

Originally, players obtained high end equipment only through 'Raids', where a group of up to 40 players would work together to defeat powerful computer controlled enemies. When defeated, the group would be rewarded with several pieces of high end equipment to be distributed among the players. 'Epic' equipment commonly features unique and impressive looking armor and weapon models, making them highly desirable for both creating a stronger character and as a visible symbol of the player's skill and strength. Epics are the second highest level of equipment quality and rarity, and were originally extremely rare outside of Raids. This status contributes to what Paul identifies

as "Avatar Capital" (p. 164). Acquiring, maintaining, and preserving the value of a player's own avatar capital drastically effects how they view the game and respond to the choices made by the design team.

The addition of Epic equipment as a PvP reward drastically changed the prominence of Epic items, which now could be gained gradually in groups of 5 players of less instead of the 20 or 40 person raids. Players questioned the value of PvP rewards in the past, but it was not until "welfare epics" that the debates began to escalate. Many people, particularly those who live in capitalist societies like the United State, view welfare as mostly benefiting the undeserving, lazy, or unskilled. These feelings carry over to a belief that welfare can also imply that someone is inferior or not good enough to receive higher end equipment, and that using these items is shameful even if the game allows them to be obtained in such a way. The heated feelings behind the term 'welfare' ignited a long subdued debate among the playerbase on who is deserving of such items and how they should be obtained.

Paul's analysis of the culture surrounding the rewards in Warcraft gave new insights into why people play and how the structure of rewards can change in the course of an MMO's lifespan. In part, his review exposes the core "conflict of interest" between four parties: the two types of players, the designers, and the directors and/or investors supporting the project. According to Martin and Schinzinger (2010), a conflict of interest occurs when a professional is in a role that requires exercising good judgment on behalf of an employer or client and the professional has some additional interest that could affect their judgment in serving the client or employer (p.137). When faced design

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choices, developers try to best serve the needs of the various types of players, along with

company investors. Jeff Kaplan's use of "welfare epics" also show that designers

themselves have interests, their own ideas on how they believe the game should be run

and played. Their own preferences of what makes for good gameplay can color their

perception of the state of the game and the will of the players. However, designers must

not give into to every player demand, as they still possess the expertise and knowledge to

know what goes in to making a balanced and enjoyable game experience that the

common player lacks.

The welfare epics debate is an excellent source for beginning to understand the

types of decisions that designers face when dealing with how to further develop and

expand upon the game. MMOs have a more diverse group of players then probably any

other genre, and understanding the needs and expectations of those players is the key to

creating a successful and long lasting game. The value players place in the rewards they

receive also gives new insight into the reasons that people play, and the importance of

rewards in modern gaming.

What is interesting to observe is that throughout the debate and within Paul's

article itself, the words 'work', 'labor', 'time', 'effort', and 'difficulty' are all frequently used

but 'fun' is noticeably absent. The acquisition of rewards and status items are seen as the

ultimate goal of play. When the rewards are devalued, players express their anger and

dissatisfaction with the game now that the benefits are too easy to obtain. This connection

between player satisfaction and the value of rewards is the crucial point of difference

between MMO and normal game design. The core gameplay does not drive the players of

an MMO on its own, but is instead driven by the secondary systems to keep players invested in their character, and by extension, the game itself. Developing, cultivating, and maintaining avatar capital for each player is just as much the work of the developer as it is the player. The acquisition and value of avatar capital is an essential component in MMO design, and one that designers must be aware of for success.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND CULTURAL DIVIDES

The designer needs to consider who the players themselves are in addition to the newfound understanding of why people play and enjoy MMOs. With the increased importance of international releases, a designer needs to be able to visualize the wide range of people and cultures that will participate in his or her game. Being sensitive and knowledgeable of outside cultures helps to cut down on development costs by preventing negative press and extended development time. Cultural misunderstandings and stereotyping can alienate sections of the playerbase and decrease sales and subscriptions. Issues also arise from foreign censorship laws, requiring significant changes to the game in order to be released in overseas markets.

China is one of the most important markets in online gaming. As of 2009, China stood as the largest online gaming market, contributing one third of total revenue for the online gaming industry (Yan, 2010). The amount of potential dollars in the Chinese market is important for an MMO's overall financial success, but it is not as easy as a

simple localization. China and other Eastern countries require time management features in MMOs to help combat their growing epidemics of online gaming addiction. Censorship laws and cultural differences from Western views can stop a major release at the gate, requiring extensive changes to avoid controversy or to even be allowed to sell the game in the new country in the first place. While potentially lucrative, handling a Chinese release of a new MMO requires particular understanding and consideration of the rules and beliefs involved.

World of Warcraft and the Warcraft franchise clashed with China in the past. Before the release of WoW, Warcraft III introduced the Pandaren, a race of anthropomorphic panda bears. Originally, Pandaren were dressed in samurai outfits and wielded Japanese weaponry. Chinese players took issue with Blizzard, angry in seeing their beloved national animal adopt Japan's cultural history. While Blizzard later redesigned the Pandaren to follow a Chinese aesthetic (Harper, 2007, 10:10 AM section), the incident reveals how a seemingly harmless stylistic choice can become offensive. Stereotyping and inappropriate grouping of cultures and races can lead to more issues like the Pandaren, and designers must be aware of the risks when they design a setting or character with an unfamiliar culture in mind. Blizzard could have easily avoided the Pandaren controversy with a little extra research into Chinese and Japanese culture and history.

Chinese censorship laws and regulations also stand in the way of a successful release. Large sections of games may need to be completely redesigned, substantially adding to the cost and production time of the game. Designer and producer clash here,

and must work together to determine of the product will be successful enough to warrant the necessary changes. In a dramatic case, Blizzard delayed World of Warcraft's expansion pack, Wrath of the Lich King, by several years to meet censorship requirements (Yang, 2010). Displaying skulls and skeletons is forbidden in Chinese media, which posed a massive problem for the expansion as it heavily focused on an evil undead army and morbid aesthetic. Almost every asset in the game had to be altered or replaced before it was finally approved for sale in China, two years after the US release. While meeting the standards proved an expensive and difficult process, the potential in the Chinese market and the power behind the Warcraft brand drove developers to take the initial cost and collect the revenue of Chinese sales.

Figure 1: The changes made from US (left) and Chinese (right)
releases range from subtle edits to complete overhauls
(Yang, 2010).

BUGS, GLITCHES, AND EXPLOITS: ADDRESSING EMERGENT BEHAVIOUR

The size and complexity of MMO development, along with the sheer number of people playing at any given time, means that the game might break or evolve in ways the designers never intended. While many are clearly in need of a fix, some bugs can have unique unintended consequences on the players and the game world. Analyzing exploits and the way players use them can help designers with their design decisions. Observing the impact of glitches can help resolve future issues that arise give new ideas to developers for ways to advance the game in the future.

Players abusing glitches for personal benefit is nothing new to MMOs. Most glitches come from abusing client/server interactions falsify data and do things like teleport from place to place. These bugs are quickly resolved as violation of the Terms of Service for tampering with the data stream. But some exploits can be game supported, and are much more controversial. Players finding a loophole in the game code to give themselves an edge cause a less clear-cut ethical considerations.

CASE STUDY: ENSIDIA

A high-profile example comes from the Warcraft guild Ensidia. Ensidia is a top level raiding guild, and competes against other similar guilds for the bragging rights of being the first group of players in the world to defeat the newest and hardest bosses. One of the hardest encounters in a recent Warcraft expansion, The Lich King, became a very

high profile encounter for top level raiding. Ensidia claimed the first victory over the Lich King fight, but found themselves in controversy. During the fight, Ensidia used a glitch that caused platforms that fell during the fight to reassemble themselves when a certain item was used near them, drastically reducing the difficulty of the encounter. Blizzard took action after discovering Ensidia's use of the glitch, suspending the accounts of all players involved and revoking the credit for their accomplishment (Waxpaper, 2010).

The Lich King incident presents an unusual problem of responsibility between the designer and player. It is easy to rationalize blame against both parties. The programmers let the Lich King platform bug slip by, and proper playtesting would reveal the trick as it involved a rather common game item used by many players to maximize damage. Ensidia had enough game knowledge to know that the rebuilding platforms were not an intended part of the encounter, but used them anyway to greatly simplify the fight. Other guilds stated that they knew about the exploit, but decided to not make use of it. While on questionable grounds, Ensidia's use of the glitch did not involve any outside tools or hacking and relied entirely on the holes in the game itself, and it can be said that they were merely using all the tools available to give themselves an advantage. This situation posed an important question for the designers: does Ensidia deserve the recognition for their achievement, or do the unwritten rules of player honor and respecting the designer's vision overrule their victory? To better answer this question, and future issues, designers can step outside their genre and look elsewhere for inspiration in how to resolve this and other conflicts.

LOOKING TO FIGHTING GAMES

Glitches and maintaining a community are familiar territory to another game genre, Fighting Games. The Fighter scene is heavily community driven, and its players are always looking for the newest trick to give them an edge in tournaments. While game-stopping bugs are quickly banned, some glitches end up being embraced by the tournament scene of a game, being seen as a benefit that provides a more engaging experience for the players involved. One example is Kara Throwing in Street Fighter III, which used an oversight in the game engine's input handler to extend the range of a character's throw attack("Kara Throwing", 2007). The technique required fast hands to pull off, only really benefited certain characters, and didn't break or completely unbalance the game, so the community accepted it as a normal part of play. The development team even programmed Kara Throws as a supported feature of Street Fighter IV, due to the popularity of the technique in the previous game.

MMOs differ from Fighters in that the bugs can be addressed, and are expected to be addressed and corrected by the development team. The Fighting game community and tournament organizers managed to resolve issues with bugs and glitches without patches or updates. MMO designers can better improve their judgments concerning questionable bugs by observing the choices made by the Fighting community on their own exploits. Game designer and avid Fighting game fan David Sirlin outlines his often quoted views on bugs and competitive play in a section of his article "Playing to Win" (2000). In his article, Sirlin states that the exploit requires action when it would fundamentally

undermine the game's base concepts. (Boundaries of Playing to Win section, para. 3). He cites Akuma, a secret character from Street Fighter II, as too game breaking to allow in tournaments. Akuma is nearly unbeatable by the regular character roster, and his attacks are unlike anything else in the game. Picking Akuma, even if intentionally programmed in by the designers, is likened to playing an entirely separate game and not Street Fighter II.

Akuma and Kara Throwing show two different responses based on the intensity of the exploit. Kara Throws are a mostly equal technique, available to both players, and do not fundamentally change the game. Players enjoyed this unintended consequence, and the designers adopted it as part of official design. Removing the bug but converting it into a controllable feature keeps the players happy while returning game control and balance to the designers. The game-changers, like Akuma, require a stronger and harsher response. Characters like Akuma are clear deviations from intended play and design, even if intentionally programmed in. The glitch Ensidia used is closer to Akuma than to Karas: it undermined the fundamental purpose of being the hardest challenge in the game. By revoking Ensidia's victory, the encounter could again be approached on fair terms for the rest of the players and allowing a new 'official' best for beating the fight in a legitimate fashion. The response preserved the nature of the contest of skill between top players and demonstrated that the more intense bugs will not be tolerated if abused in such a way.

CLOSING REMARKS

MMOs stage a unique setting for people around the world to interact and share experiences with one another. Game designers find new challenges and problems every day, trying to find the best solution for all involved. Balancing the social aspect of an MMO is an essential part of the job, as turning a profit depends upon maintaining and expanding a loyal community of players. But as games develop further into mediums of social interaction, designers must grow into their new role as social architects of these online worlds. By understanding the new-found responsibilities of their title, game designers can create even better worlds for players of all types to interact and grow together.

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