Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing games and Near Miss: Are players *motivated* by Near Miss in MMORPGs outside of raiding?

# Introduction

Near miss is a term that can be used to describe the situation where a gambler is in a losing situation, but interprets it as being close to winning. In gaming we can apply this term to describe the gamers false interpretation of being close to finishing or achieving something, when in reality this may not be the case (Karlsen, Faltin 2010). Faltin Karlsen’s paper: *"Entrapment and Near Miss: A Comparative analysis of Psycho-Structural elements in Gambling games and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing games"* (2010) explains how this term can be applied to Massively multiplayer Online Role-Playing games (MMORPGs) in the raiding scene, where the players might want to keep going for another attempt at a boss-fight after almost managing to defeat it.

Based on Karlsen’s paper, I will examine how the extra motivation gained from near miss in a raiding environment in MMORPGs, may exist to an even higher degree than what Karlsen concluded in his paper. Based on his findings, as well as those of others, I will attempt to show that near miss experiences may act as a motivational force for MMORPG players in several aspects of the game, not just in raiding. The hypothesis is that players in MMORPGs can experience near miss in almost all aspects of the game, and that this experience, to many players, is motivating and drives them to become more hardcore, try harder and play even more to achieve what they want. I will also look for differences when it comes to the motivational value, to *see if it may vary based on the type of activity.*

# Method

This paper is using a theoretical research approach, based on the IMRoD structure. The literature and research used as basis for my argumentation and conclusions has been found by searching the ACM-database (http://dl.acm.org/) as well as Google Scholar (scholar.google.com). I have also looked up and used references that Karlsen used in his paper.   
  
While this paper does look at the MMORPG genre as a whole, I will be targeting the game World of Warcraft (WoW) as the main source of information. This both because it is by far the largest MMORPG to date in terms of player base (mmodata.net), and the fact that it is the game I personally have most experience with.

Having this in mind, I have included "World of Warcraft" in the search strings in most cases. Paired with World of Warcraft, I have used words such as "addiction", "addictiveness", "invested", "near miss", "hardcore", "motivation" and "accomplishment". I have also used these words paired with "MMORPG" and "MMO", though mostly I have focused on the results involving WoW.

The amount of research done on WoW and MMORPGs in general is overwhelming, however there are still areas less explored than others. The theory that MMORPGs, and especially WoW, is addictive to the players, is a widely discussed subject. The cause of the discussed addictiveness is a whole branch of that subject, and there are several theories as to the cause. The paper by Karlsen analyzes the differences between gambling and MMORPG gaming, using WoW players as his focus group trough a comparative analysis. Questioning his 12 hardcore WoW playing informants, he studies how the near miss feeling may be a motivational or driving force that push players to keep going even longer. Even though there is a lot of research on addictiveness in MMORPGs in general, this specific theory seems less explored in computer gaming context. There is quite a lot of research done on the near miss effects in gambling games, but research on its effect in MMORPGs is lacking.

Using research on addictive behavior and statistical data on the subject, paired with Karlsen’s paper as a basis, I will argue that the near miss feeling can be a motivating force for many MMORPG players to a high degree, also outside of raiding.

# Results

Karlsen seems to believe that near miss does motivate players to keep going for a longer time. He says: *"It seems that being near to defeating a boss or clearing an instance collectively increases the dedication to play. This might increase considerably the time spent on an already quite time-consuming activity."* (Karlsen, Faltin 2010). He mentions on several occasions that near miss occurs in many parts of games, and refers to King et al. who in 2009 released a paper where they argued that near miss is a common experience in computer games. Quoting from the paper by King et al: *"For example, in a platform jumping game, a player may execute three perfect jumping maneuvers in a row and then misjudge the final obstacle and lose the game."*(King et al. 2009).

I believe it's correct to assume Karlsen takes the position where he believes that near miss happens, and that it motivates and drives players in several aspects of the game. He does, however, only conclude this to be the case in the raiding environment.

The paper, *"Why MMORPG players do what they do: Relating motivations to action categories"* (Suznjevic, M. and Matijasevic, M. 2010), compares various player behavior patterns in World of Warcraft to motivational components. They concluded that players were highly motivated by an *Achievement* component they describe as the desire to gain power, progress rapidly, accumulate in-game symbols of wealth and status, the desire to challenge and compete with others and having the interest in analyzing the underlying rules and system in order to optimize character performance (Suznjevic, M. and Matijasevic, M. 2010).

This *Achievement* component can be linked to accomplishing something in the sense that once you *achieve* your goal, you must also have accomplished it. The word most rapidly repeated in Karlsen’s discussion on near miss, is accomplishment. It's clear that his informants were stretching to accomplish their goals, which in their case was killing the bosses they were progressing on. If they seemed close to accomplish, they would become extra motivated, and often keep going outside their schedule in order to achieve what they wanted.

The paper, "*The Psychology of the Near Miss"*, by R. L. Reid (1986) tells how most people misunderstand the way randomness works, and often misjudge a near miss experience as "luck". The paper also explains how 50 people from various backgrounds were acquainted to discuss the effect of the near miss experience in gambling games. The general consensus was that experiencing near miss was encouraging if it had any effect at all. Also quoting from the paper: *"The most frequent suggestions was that it would be "frustrating" or "irritating"... A few suggested that a near miss would be both encouraging and frustrating. There were some mention of "trying harder" after a near miss, although the discussants had been asked to think of situations in which this phase could have no meaning beyond "trying again." (R. L. Reid. 1986).*

# Discussion

If the extra motivation, gained when experiencing near miss in raids, also can be found when doing other activities in MMORPGs, we may be able to assume the hypothesis is correct.

Let's take a look at some near miss experiences a player might experience in MMORPGs. When for example playing Player versus Player (PvP), one might be close to reaching a rating, but then losing. At any point when trying to do a certain number of Damage Per Second (DPS), and being close to accomplish it, or when almost beating a friend at the DPS meters, and then failing. Reaching an amount of in-game currency trough investing and selling on an Auction House (AH), but suddenly not being able to sell. Almost managing to reach a zone trough illegal exploration, but failing the last jump to reach it. Finding the fourth out of five items with a random drop chance, and then going on grinding for hours without any "luck". Going for a World First kill of a boss, or aiming to be the first person on your server to reach a new level cap, but missing it by a minute.  
  
All these scenarios, and many similar to them, can be interpreted as near miss experiences. If we can assume that a large number of players will get extra motivation to try again, or keep on going, when experiencing these or equal scenarios, the hypothesis might indeed be correct.

While the paper by R. L. Reid is as much as 26 years old, from a time far ahead of any MMORPG, I believe the theories he has, that near miss experiences are encouraging, still apply today. This theory is for gambling games, and not directly aimed at computer games, especially not MMORPGs. However there are a few aspects of MMORPGs that resemble gambling games, especially the random number generator (RNG) found in pretty much all MMORPGs. The RNG takes care of making certain parts of the game more dynamic by being random. E.g. the chance of blocking an attack or finding a specific type of item trough looting, are both random thanks to the RNG (wowwiki.com/RNG). In fact almost all actions performed in an MMORPG are in one way or another affected by the RNG. This means that in a huge part of the activities you take part of when playing MMORPGs, there is a chance you are subjected to randomness. When a large portion of the gaming is affected by randomness, it might be easier to see the resemblance with gambling.

A very interesting point to take note of, is that in the quote from R. L. Reids paper, it is mentioned how some of the people attending the discussion on near miss mentioned "*trying harder*" as a reaction to the experience. In their particular case that could only be translated with "*try again"*, as there really is no such thing as *trying harder* in a game of pure chance. However, in an MMORPG you often have the ability to perform better if you try harder in the sense of practicing more or giving it your full attention. At the same time, the paper by Suznjevic, M. and Matijasevic M. proves trough quantitative research, that achievement, or accomplishment if you prefare, is the most common motivation for a MMORPG gamer. We can also read this in Karlsen’s paper, where several of his 12 informants in a qualitative research were clear on the fact that they were striving to accomplish their goals in raiding. When combining this, we find that players experience near miss at a regular basis when playing, and that it's often not completely random, but rather affected by the player’s skill. This means that if the player tries harder, or practice more, he can beat the odds, not trough luck, but with skill. When achievement and accomplishment is the largest motivator for many players, it seems clear that the near miss experience will be able to motivate a large number of players to keep going, trying again or just trying harder.

# Conclusion

There is no doubt in my mind that near miss motivates players also outside the raiding scene in MMORPGs. The players encounter near miss experiences more often than one might realize, and it can probably be said that you experience it once or more in most of your gaming sessions. When achieving and accomplishing is one of the main objectives of the majority of the players, most of the encounters with near miss will probably be motivating, even though they can be frustrating at the same time.

It is difficult to measure the effect of near miss experiences trough statistical research, as you cannot simply ask a person if he is motivated by near miss. Developing a technique to empirically measure the motivational impact of near miss on players would be a very interesting task for the future, though challenging. This paper suffers from this exact challenging fact. While I believe my hypothesis is correct, and that I have proven this with the use of previous work, none of the previous research I have based the paper on explores the effects of the near miss in MMORPGs specifically outside of raiding. You cannot really conclude the hypothesis 100% until a more directly oriented empirical research has been conducted.

My research has also been strictly global, with no attention paid to age, gender, country or geographical regions. It is possible that the effects of near miss would be greatly affected by these parameters, however it has not been my focus to target a specific group of people, rather get an idea of the general effect.

An interesting theory that I have come to during the writing of this paper, is that the playing of MMORPGs can be looked upon as a near miss experience as a whole. You never really complete a MMORPG, as new content is released at a regular basis. You can complete the content, but you cannot complete the game. This might be a near miss experience for some, and it also might be what motivates them to keep playing.

References  
  
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