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The F-Words of MMORPGs: Fairness

By Simon Ludgate

[*In this, the first part of a three-part series, MMO economy expert Simon Ludgate examines the concept of fairness -- how the economy of a game, and the way items function, can keep the player base convinced that the game is fair, and thus, satisfying to play -- and how some games have either maintained or destroyed this delicate and abstract concept through their designs.*]

Late last year, I wrote an article about Virtual Economic Theory. It was fairly broad, covering a number of basics and a few specific case studies. This series of articles go beyond the basics and examine major current issues in MMORPG economies, with the help of some of the people who brought those systems into existence. If you haven't read the original article, give it a skim over; I'll try not to duplicate much of that material in the pages that follow.

Joining me are a few of the legends in MMORPG history (listed are the games which we discussed):

- Brian Knox, Senior Producer, En Masse Entertainment. *TERA*.
- Cardell Kerr, Creative Director, Turbine. *Asheron's Call*, *Asheron's Call 2*, *Dungeons and Dragons Online*, *Lord of the Rings Online*.
- Jack Emmert, CEO, Cryptic Studios. *City of Heroes*, *City of Villains*, *Champions Online*, *Star Trek Online*.
- Lance Stites, Executive VP, NCsoft. *Aion*.
- Richard Garriott, Co-Founder, Portalarium. *Ultima Online*, *Tabula Rasa*.
- Scott Hartsman, Executive Producer, Trion Worlds. *EverQuest*, *EverQuest II*, *Rift*.

There are three major F-words in today's MMORPGs: Fairness, Faucets, and Free-to-Play. As it happens, these three systems are very tightly intertwined.

In order to better understand the dynamics of MMORPG economies, consider the far simpler example of single-player games. In a single-player game, everything about the game is within the domain of the developer's control. The developer makes all the rules: whether or not monsters respawn, whether or not they drop coin, how much inventory space you have, what things drop and when and where. All of these details are determined by the developer. Indeed, all of these details are carefully crafted to produce a planned game experience.

"When you're creating a solo player game, whether you're talking about advancement in your character's attributes or advancements in their wealth and what they can buy with that wealth -- the next armour or equipment -- those are quite controllable, quite containable," explains Richard Garriott, when describing his work on the *Ultima* single player RPGs.

"We can very tightly constrain the ways that players have to earn money so by the time that they reach a certain point in the story we can know with pretty good authority what we call the relative scale of money they have in their pocket is. You can increase the scale of wealth and the scale of where they are in the story and you keep them in quite close lock-step."

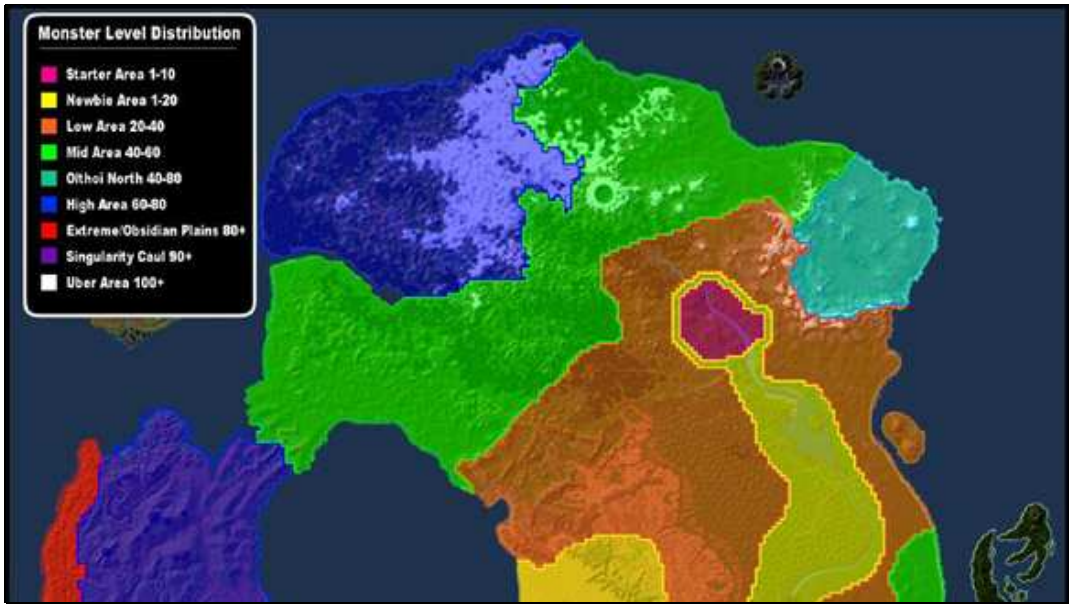
Scaling is an important element in maintaining the sense of challenge in a game. In an RPG, the challenge of an encounter is directly proportional to the difference between your level and the level of your foes. If you are level 10 and your foes are level 10, the challenge might be normal; if you are level 12, the challenge might be easy and if you are 8 the challenge might be hard.

If you are too low -- if the challenge is too hard -- the usual player response is to backtrack and "level up" by completing easier challenges. This "grinding" is something many older players of JRPGs from the '80s and '90s will be intimately familiar with. However, if you are too high and the challenge is too easy (and you haven't been grinding all that much), the game just feels poorly designed. Shouldn't the developer have expected me to be level 15 by this point in the game?

One of the major changes in single-player RPG design has been the somewhat controversial implementation of dynamic content scaling. The *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* was famously criticized by a portion of "hardcore" gamers for scaling every encounter throughout the entire game to the player's current level. Every dungeon you visited, even if you had previously encountered low-level monsters there, would have monsters at the player's current level.

You could never encounter a challenge that was too easy or too hard. That barrier to exploration, the sense that, at some point, you'll be strong enough to go somewhere, does not exist in *Oblivion*.

Bethesda's follow-up RPG hit, *Fallout 3*, used the same scaling to set the initial level of encounters, but "locked" the level of monsters once players visited an area, alleviating some of the annoyances with complete level scaling in *Oblivion*.



But MMORPGs don't scale. They can't, really, because players of all different levels might wander into the same area at the same time. You wouldn't want a game that would spawn a level 50 monster right next to a level 5 player just because a high level player was riding past. Thus MMORPGs scale their content in the same way that classical JRPGs did: monsters of various difficulty levels are intentionally painted over the landscape. Here's one of my favorite examples of this: a map of Dereth, the game world from *Asheron's Call*, showing the relative levels of monsters.

What does this have to do with fairness? The point is that the distinct graphical layout of monsters in *Asheron's Call* meant that players could directly associate areas with accomplishment. When I first set foot in the Obsidian Plains -- when I finally joined the elite ranks of Tusker-slayers who roamed the black heart of the Direlands -- that was an accomplishment. And any time there's a sense of accomplishment compared with others, there's also a sense of fairness.

Fairness is a very important concept in developing MMORPGs. That's because fairness doesn't exist in their single-player predecessors. "Cheating" and other forms of rule-changing in single-player games is not only acceptable, it's encouraged. Many games have difficulty settings or cheat codes that allow players to tailor the experience to suit their desires. Does it really matter that you beat the game on easy instead of hard? Only to you.

Fairness comes into play with multiplayer games. Cheating suddenly becomes frowned upon when in competition with other players. But only if some players don't agree with the cheating. When everyone agrees to a specific "cheat", it's not really cheating anymore, is it? It's changing the rules. Changing the rules is very common in multiplayer; creating mods, which are basically changes to game rules, are incredibly popular and gave birth to entire genres and franchises. But these rule changes intrinsically depend on the agreement of all participants. Everyone has to download the mod and choose to use it.

The problem is that there is no structure for change in MMORPGs. There are no cheat codes, no mods, no way to have a subset of people play by a different set of rules. There is one and only one set of rules and if anyone even slightly smudges the clear lines of those rules, all hell breaks loose about fairness.

This sense of fairness affects everything from PvP class balance to PvE raid progression. And, of course, it affects the in-game economy.

Nowhere is this economic fairness more clear in MMORPGs than in the rate of progression. MMORPGs tend to be based on a very simple formula: time = progression. Most modern MMORPGs are not particularly challenging. They're just time-consuming.

The utter distillation of ease of play in *World of Warcraft* gave birth to the term Faceroll, sheer numbers in *EVE Online* gave birth to the Blob, and all of them have given birth to a huge multi-million dollar industry of gold farming and power leveling.

The math is simple. Time = progression. Time = money. So, logically, money = progression, right? Yes. Absolutely. Anyone who tries to rationalize otherwise is just plain wrong. So why the outcry about gold farming?

On a fundamental level, it points to a major flaw in the game design. If you're willing to pay someone to skip through a game for you, that's a good sign that you're not enjoying the game, and if you're not enjoying the game, then the game is bad. To a game's developer, buying gold or leveling is akin to telling them their game is *so* bad, you'll actually *pay money* to avoid having to play it.

"In almost all RPGs these days, that grind mechanic has been repeated in every facet of your virtual life to the point of, for at least me, distress," says Richard Garriott. "Slice the game any place you want and you'll find that exact same game mechanic used over and over again. What you're really doing is having people spend time. You're making them waste time in order to level up."

So why do games keep going back to the grind? "If you look at *Ultima*s in general -- not just *Online* but *Ultima*s in general -- *Ultima*s have very customized storylines. A customized storyline is very expensive to build and takes a lot of time and effort. To do 10 more, and 10 more, and 10 more, is something you can create algorithmically, and it works very well. So as much as those hard core 'role-playing' gamers in us might complain, the level grind works astonishingly well."

So the grind is inescapable in game design, and players will pay to skip past it, but where's the unfair bit? Is it really "unfair" that some people spend months getting to level 50 and others spend money? Is it unfair only because the game doesn't officially sell you the levels and some shady third party is doing it? Or is there some inherent sense of fairness in actually doing the grinding yourself?

When Turbine brought *Dungeons & Dragons Online* and *Lord of the Rings Online* over from a traditional subscription model to a hybrid free-to-play model, the developers had to face this sense of fairness straight on. Cardell Kerr, creative director at Turbine, describes the process:

"When we did our migration, there were definitely moments of concern, on all sides. No one wants to break their baby. Each of these games is based around certain designs that were meant to go in a certain way. But one of the things that we ultimately gravitated towards was time. That was it. Pretty much everything was always about time.

"With that in mind, it's kind of us trying to give players two different sides of how they can progress in the game: either they can spend the time and go off and fight and participate in the natural game mechanics themselves, or they can spend the money in order to not spend the time doing those particular things.

"With that in mind, and applying that to what we see in each of the games, it didn't have as large an effect as you might have thought. I guess the reason for that is, under the hood, it has really always been about the amount of time that the player has available to them to participate. The difference that we really saw has been that people who didn't have the ability to participate at that level of intensity have suddenly become more competitive. Suddenly, they can make the most of what time they had to spend, as opposed to spending time gathering resources or finding weapons or gear."

Cardell has a unique insight that most designers don't have. Most designers only have a sense of how their players might react, only a few vocal forum posters to give them insight into the way their entire population feels. To most designers, selling content-skipping seems like an inevitably bad idea. But Turbine actually *did it*, braced for the storm, and found it never came. It turns out that most players don't actually find it unfair.

Ever since the Turbine games went free-to-play, instead of seeing the storm of blogs hailing the coming of the F2P apocalypse, I've seen just the opposite: article after article about how F2P isn't so bad after all.

So what happened? Where did the doom and gloom go?

I think the actual sense of unfairness emanates from a much more fundamental issue: the gameplay associated with progression in most MMORPGs isn't fun. It's tedious, it's repetitive, and it's time-consuming. The "leveling" part of most MMORPGs can best be described as an extremely long tutorial you're obliged to complete before you're allowed to start playing the real game. As long as no one can skip it, it's fair because everyone suffers equally, but if there were a way to pay and skip the level grind, it would feel unfair primarily because of how unpleasant the leveling experience really is.

The big concern is that, if these games did start directly selling max level characters, they would also unfairly elongate the leveling process to encourage more people to pay their way to the top. Players have developed a strong sense of unjust game development due to free-to-play game designers who produce barbaric "games" in the hopes that players will pay to avoid having to play them. If Blizzard were to roll out a paid service for instant max level characters without shortening their leveling experience to less than a few hours, players would be waving their pitchforks in the air and faces would roll.

These fears are also based on a large number of Asian free-to-play games with extremely harsh "free" environments and a heavy emphasis on forcing players to buy power and progression from item stores. "Free-to-play", perhaps, but definitely "pay-to-win".

But it's important to note that the crucial difference between these systems and what I was previously describing is the difference between paying for an advantage that cannot be obtained without buying it from the item store and paying for progression that can be obtained by taking the time to do it yourself. Pay-to-win is not the same as pay-to-progress.

En Masse Entertainment is uniquely positioned to comment on the notions of fairness in Eastern and Western MMORPGs. It is currently in the process of bringing a Korean MMORPG, *TERA*, to Western markets; not merely translating the game, but also "Westernizing" it to make it more appealing to Western audiences.

"As the game stands right now, there are very few items that cannot be traded or sold -- which is different than what players are used to in the West," explains Brian Knox, senior producer at En Masse. "The biggest economy change for the West is that we are evaluating which items in the game will be tradable and which items will bind when you pick them up. This has a huge impact on players' morale and sense of accomplishment: did you really earn this weapon, or did you just spend money and buy your way up?"

When Blizzard introduced "tiers" of raiding content in *World of Warcraft*, especially in the *Burning Crusade* expansion, it dramatically changed the meaning of "gear" in MMORPGs. Weapons and armor used to be more than tokens compiled into a gear score; they used to embody the tales and accomplishments that went into obtaining them.

Everyone I know that played pre-*WoW* MMOs -- games like *Ultima Online, Asheron's Call, EverQuest*, and *Dark Age of Camelot* -- could spin a grand yarn of adventure about at least one piece of equipment they had. Many of those pieces of equipment weren't even the "best" of their type, but the rarity and surprise of getting anything special added a great deal of magic to that style of game.

With its refinement to raiding tiers, *WoW* introduced the concept of gear progression. Progression through raid content was heavily dependent on acquiring the previous tier's gear. You had to get everyone in Tier 1 gear to do Tier 2 raids, and then get everyone into Tier 2 gear to do Tier 3 raids, and so on and so forth. Gearing up became as trivial as leveling up. And, just like XP, all of this gear had to be obtained first-hand. It was all bind-on-pickup.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the same "Chinese gold farmers" who were selling leveling services quickly began to offer raiding services: they would take your character through a raid and get you all the raid gear. Once gearing up became mere progression, it became a time sink… or, optionally, a money sink.

What's ironic is that the whole reason the gear was bind-on-pickup was to ensure a sense of fairness to enforce those accomplishments. You had this epic gear because *you* raided, not because you bought it from someone else who raided. That sense of accomplishment was part of the rules and circumventing that accomplishment by paying someone to get you the gear was cheating.

The player outcry against "raid farming," however, was dwarfed by outcry against Blizzard's own actions.

In *Wrath of the Lich King*, Blizzard had the goal of making raiding more accessible to more players. One of the big difficulties, however, was in the nature of gear progression. If you needed Tier 2 gear to go on Tier 3 raids, but no one was doing Tier 2 raids anymore because they were all doing Tier 3, how could you get caught up? Blizzard added the ability to gather tokens from much easier 5-man dungeons -- trivially difficult challenges that merely required a whole lot of time spent farming tokens -- and added merchants that sold gear equivalent to the previous Tier of the current raid zone.

When Tier 4 raids were introduced, Tier 3 gear showed up on merchants, and within days players who had never set foot in a raid instance were as well geared as those who had toiled for months facing the game's toughest challenges.

Players were justifiably upset: why raid at all if you can just wait for the next set of raids and buy your way through the previous tier of content? What did that accomplishment mean when Blizzard would hand it out to everyone a month or two later?

Blizzard faced a fairness dilemma: the new system wasn't fair to the raiders who worked hard on raiding, but the old system wasn't fair to the casual players who didn't or couldn't spend the time and effort raiding.

The problem was that the raid gear progression in *WoW* used to be skill-based, rather than time-based, progression. Having a full set of raid gear didn't just mean you had invested the time in raiding, it meant that you were good enough a player to overcome those raid bosses.

It was also a huge mark of social status: it meant you were a part of a group that was capable of working together to overcome those challenges. Throughout Vanilla *WoW* and, arguably, most of *Burning Crusade*, raid gear was a very impressive status symbol.

Status symbols are valuable specifically because they are difficult to obtain. If you could go online and buy a knighthood for $15, the title "Sir" would no longer be a status symbol.

What Blizzard was doing was thinking that everyone should have the opportunity to have this status symbol and thereby destroyed the very value the status symbol carried. It's basically the Queen going on international TV and announcing "Knighthoods for everybody!"

Still, raid content was very expensive to produce, and arguably some of the most fun content in any MMORPG. It makes perfect sense for Blizzard to want more of their players to be able to enjoy raiding. Blizzard tried to retain the sense of status in a different way: instead of tying it to gear, they tied it to achievements. Blizzard added "normal" and "hard" modes to raid encounters and rewarded players who completed all the hard challenges with rare mounts, titles, and cosmetic achievements.

In theory, this should have worked. In practice, perhaps it did. I was certainly pleased with my Ironbound Proto-Drake. At the same time, I found myself extremely aggravated with "hard" modes after Ulduar, and quit *WoW* after beating the Lich King on normal. The fact was that I enjoyed playing role-playing games for the role-playing aspect, the excitement of adventure, not the convoluted and bizarre challenges contrived for "hard" modes of boss fights. Although the new achievement-based rewards were fair, they weren't ones I was interested in achieving.

What En Masse faces with *TERA* is quite another beast from *WoW*, however. What it faces is the possibility that, rather than simply handing gear out to everyone, making the gear tradable. *WoW* is not a good example of what happens when rare goods can be traded, since everything of value in *WoW* is untradeable. Instead, another Asian MMORPG, *Final Fantasy XI*, can shed some insights on the fairness of trading.

Final Fantasy XI featured "notorious monsters" which rarely appeared in certain locations and had a slim chance of dropping some very rare and valuable gear or crafting material when they were slain.

Notably, gear in *Final Fantasy XI* did not "bind", so not only could it be traded, it could be used and traded many times, potentially used and reused by many players. *FFXI* happened to suffer when the gold farmers exploited hacks to gain a monopoly over these rare goods, something I touch on in the next installment, but here I want to talk about the fairness of the circulation of these rare pieces of gear.

If a player wanted one of these rare items, they basically had two options: they could kill the monster and get it themselves or they could save up enough money to buy it. The interesting thing is that, because there were so many possible valuable items for sale, money in *FFXI* was extremely valuable and meaningful.

Actually earning enough money to buy one of these items was no trivial task; it might actually be more challenging than killing the monster and getting it yourself. So, no matter which route you took to obtain the item, it was an accomplishment. And both routes were inherently fair (disregarding the manipulation by RMT activities).

So when Brian Knox is worried about a player's sense of accomplishment, the worry should come from how these items are introduced to the market, not whether or not they can be bought. If they are flooded into the market to the point of triviality, like they are in *WoW*, then players will likely not feel any sense of accomplishment in buying them and it will further destroy the sense of accomplishment from those players that do earn them.

On the other hand, if they are carefully introduced into the market through player accomplishment rather than NPC vendors, I think the sense of accomplishment will be maintained because the player who sells the item sets the price; and the price will likely reflect the challenge, thereby maintaining its value.

To summarize the notion of fairness in MMORPGs: grinding and other purely time-based progression mechanics trivialize the value of progression and the sense of achievement from progression; in these cases, the notion of fairness is fairly meaningless and no one really minds when people spend money rather than time in progressing. However, when accomplishments are skill-based, such skipping ahead is very much frowned upon. In order to best maintain fairness, avoid stacking skill-based progression, lest you fall into the trap of no-win WoW raiding.

Fairness is best maintained in a "wide and flat" game design: allow players as wide as possible a set of challenges to tackle and keep each of these challenges as self-contained as possible. Allowing players to "trade" challenge accomplishment, through the exchange of rewards in an open market, is perfectly fair and acceptable so long as many challenges as possible are accessible to as many players as possible, ensuring that everyone has the chance to complete the ones they wish to complete and trade for the ones they don't want to do.

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