

Live Action Role Playing Games as a Design Model for Massively Multiplayer Role Playing Games

Heather Logas, 2004

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how designers of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games can benefit from the study of the design and implementation of Live Action Role Playing Games. The similarities between the social communities and game spaces of MMORPGs and LARPs will be examined. The question of why players enjoy role playing games will be addressed, and support given for the encouragement of role playing in MMORPGs. Specific design considerations of LARPs that add a sense of immersion and community will be applied to MMORPG design.

Introduction

Chris Crawford notes in *The Art of Computer Game Design* (Crawford 1982) that it can be a cumbersome and not especially useful task to directly translate a non-digital game type into a digital format.

“In one way or another, every transplanted game loses something in the translation.....This is because any game that succeeds in one technology does so because it is optimized for that technology; it takes maximum advantage of the strengths and avoids the weaknesses.”

Massively multiplayer online role playing games attract thousands of players who are clearly enjoying the experience enough as is to log back in night after night. While MMORPGs are clearly not lacking in enjoyable or addictive game play, there is still room for exploring new kinds of play in the genre. The similarities between MMORPGs and live action role playing games suggest that looking towards the successes of the latter might inform new ways to think about the former. The purpose of this paper is not to suggest that MMORPGs can only be successful by the use of LARPs as a design model, but rather to encourage developers to think of a different type of game experience to make available in their online games, and suggest some possible ways to implement that

experience. As Greg Costikyan points out:

“If, on the other hand, you explore that weird and mutable this we call ‘the game’ in all its manifestations, you will see that the universe is large, that the range of technique is enormous, that this truly is a medium of great plasticity. You will have a bigger grab-bag of ideas to draw on, a wider range of ideas to steal, a broader set of shoulders on which to stand.”
(Costikyan 1998)

The role playing game (RPG) allows a player to take on the persona of another character and act with a fair amount of freedom as that character in another world, more so than any other type of game. Part of the introduction to the *Dungeons and Dragons 3rd edition Player's Handbook* reads: “When you play the Dungeons and Dragons game, you create a unique fictional character that lives in your imagination and the imagination of your friends.”(Cook, Tweet et al. 2000) The player's character and the character's interactions with the game world (the alternate reality in which these player characters exist) are what make up a role-playing game. RPGs have rules and mechanics that govern how things in the world work, but they are unlike most other games there are no real winning or losing conditions. The game is free-flowing and flexible. Goals created by the players replace the end conditions of most games.¹ The act of role playing is the act of playing out the role of a player's character. When role playing, the player responds to the stimuli of the game world as their character would, and exerts the will of their character on the fictional world and other characters.

What is a LARP?

Traditionally, role playing games are played around a table. A small group of players sit with their character sheets (which define their characters' capabilities in the game world) and their dice (which are used to determine outcomes of events based on the game's set of

¹ As noted in Salen and Zimmerman (2004), there are many definitions of the term “game”. While many of them require that the game have an end point, a winning or losing condition, I prefer Costikyan's (1994) definition of games as requiring goals. “For it to matter, for the game to be meaningful, you need something to strive toward. You need goals.”

rules)², while another player referees the actions taking place, and represents the actions of non-player characters (other characters in the game world which are not controlled by a player except for the referee), also known as NPCs. This referee is sometimes called the Dungeon Master (DM), Game Master (GM), Story Teller (ST) or a number of other things³.

A live action role-playing game differs from this arrangement (called a table-top or pen and paper RPG) in a number of ways. Instead of sitting around a table, players of LARPs are free to roam the play area and converse with other players as their characters. Instead of declaring their characters' actions, LARPer act them out (or initiate a rules challenge to facilitate them.) LARPs are also usually much larger in scope. A table-top game will usually host 2-6 players, plus one GM. A LARP on the other hand may have 30-200 players, with an additional 1-20 GMs to oversee things. Time is also handled differently in the two styles of play. The action in table-top games tends to occur only during the actual game sessions. In between sessions, the game world is in suspended animation until the players sit down together once more. In the course of one session of play, however, players may pass large chunks of in-game time by simply unanimously informing their GM that they would like to skip to the next scene. In this way, players may skip from interesting moment to interesting moment, similar to watching a movie. The gameplay may also pause for several players while the GM is playing with a subset of the group to work out what those characters are doing while the other characters are not in the area. During this time, the inactive players may chat among themselves about real life issues, or simply use the opportunity for other activities like ordering pizza. In LARPs, the game occurs in real-time. In many continuous (from week to week or month to month) games, when players leave for the evening, the world is not suspended. The game continues through players corresponding via email and other means, and submitting character actions to the GM to indicate character activity in-between face to face

² Diceless games exist as well, such as Eric Wujcik's *Amber* which uses a unique bidding system, and Pinnacle Entertainment Group's *Deadlands*, which before its latest revision was played with a regular deck of playing cards. Using dice to resolve challenges is by far the norm, however.

³ The name of the referee is a matter of aesthetics. Game rule sets pick a name for this player based on the theme associated with the game. The role of this player remains pretty much the same from game to game, regardless of name. I will be using the term "GM", as it is the most generic of the names.

sessions. A single LARP session lasts for the same amount of time in the game world as it does in the real world. Very seldom does an opportunity come for jumping ahead in time or (ideally) for pausing the game; LARP characters are continuously present in their game environment. A table-top game is a fairly casual environment. Players play at a table with their drinks and snacks available, their character sheets in front of them and their dice out. Players play in whatever clothes they happen to be wearing. While the act of role playing is often very important to these games, it is often constrained to speaking as the character in certain situations. The goal of a LARP, on the other hand, is to create an alternate sense of place. LARP administrators are constantly surveying sites for a location to play that will accentuate the mood of the game. LARP players dress in costumes to represent the clothing their characters would wear, and role-playing takes on more aspects of character acting, including body language, facial expressions, gesticulations, and fake accents.

While a table-top game may have different main goals for its player group (everything from destroying as many monsters in a single evening to having rich in-depth character interactions), the difference in format between table-top and live action games has a huge impact on the respective playing styles. In a table-top game, a very small number of people interface with the game world directly through the GM. The GM throws obstacles in their way, gives the players monsters for their characters to fight, and puzzles for them to solve. Often there is one main story written by the GM that the players must work through, and the story progresses as a direct result of the players and GM working together.

Costikyan identifies two types of LARPs: the “line” LARP and the “freeform” LARP. “Line” LARPs play out more like table top RPGs (Costikyan 1998). In one LARP described in Lancaster's *Warlocks and Warpdrive: Contemporary Fantasy Entertainments with Interactive and Virtual Environments* (Lancaster 1999), a GM escorted ten costumed players through a wooded path in a local state park, and described what they saw as they approached different sites along the way. Other people played NPCs that the players encountered on their quest through the woods. The small number

of players, direct communication with the GM, and the story structure of this game are very similar to a table top role playing game. As LARPs grew in popularity, however, and larger and larger numbers of players turned out to play, it became necessary for a break in style. Enter the “freeform” LARP, the style with which this paper is concerned. At a table top game, there is one GM for at most 7 or 8 players. In a LARP, there is one GM for possibly every 20 players (on the low side). As players could less reliably count on GM oversight, it became necessary to rely on each other more in order to have a satisfying experience. Player-driven plots and in-game politics replace the strong GM narrated storyline and player character to player character interaction replace player to GM interaction as the main interface players have to the game world. The direct result of this is that the role-playing “scene” (a role playing encounter between players) and character development become the emphasis of the game over GM-run storylines and encounters with GM-controlled characters.

Why do people play RPGs?

Players play games for a number of reasons and RPGs are no exception. In his book, *Game Design: Theory and Practice*, Richard Rouse III identifies the following reasons players play games: players want a challenge, players want to socialize, players want a dynamic solitaire experience, players want bragging rights, players want an emotional experience, and players want to fantasize. These reasons can all be applied to role playing games.

Players want a Challenge

The free-form nature of the role playing game offers players an opportunity to set their own goals and therefore challenges within the game. Some players may try to assemble a coup to overthrow a political figure, while others may want to find a lost family member or simply see how many characters of the opposite sex they can charm in the course of an evening. The challenges are unique to every player and character, and are in constant flux. The person whose attempts at a coup end in failure may adopt the new goal to simply stay alive and re-group. Because the challenges are so individualized, each player can choose the challenge level and types of challenges they are comfortable with and

enjoy.

Players want to Socialize

Role playing games, andLARPs in particular, are very social games. Players come together to share in this particular shared reality. SomeLARPs are networked games, and are comprised of multiple games spread out geographically and sharing the same storyline. Periodically, a large game is held in a centralized location, and the entire network of games is invited. The events are the occasion for a great deal of socializing both in the game and afterwards, when the players will enjoy each others' company far into the night, sharing stories about the game and discussing the rules or how the story is progressing in their corner of the world. The role playing game gives players a common ground to meet people over, after which friendships can form for non-game reasons.

Players want a Dynamic Solitaire Experience

While role playing games are very social, they also provide dynamic solitaire experiences to their players. Players spend a great deal of time deliberating over how to best balance their character's statistics (the numbers that determine how good a character is at doing particular things in the game world), working out background stories for their characters, and deciding what their character's next plans in the game should be. Players inLARPs may also spend a great deal of time shopping for or creating costuming and props for the game. Players may also have an opportunity to turn in written accounts to their GMs of what their characters have been up to in between game sessions. This gives the player an opportunity to explore some of their character's interior motivations and personality.

Players want Bragging Rights

Just as role playing provides a variety of challenges based on player's preferences, so to does it provide a variety of things for players to brag about after completing those challenges. A good amount of after-game socialization centers on boasting about characters' most recent accomplishments. An additional good deal of after-game socialization is hinting about goals that players have accomplished, but inform other players about for story reasons, comprising a unique kind of bragging. Because the

activities of game characters are up to the imaginations of their players, truly clever actions of particular characters may be bragged about for years following by that character's player. While multiple players may be able to achieve a particular high score in a video game, each role player's accomplishments will be unique to them alone.

Players want an Emotional Experience

Role playing offers a range of emotional experiences not easily found in other game types. As Rouse points out, most video games are limited to the emotions of the adrenaline rush and aggressiveness towards computerized opponents (Rouse 2001). Role playing, on the other hand, offers a wide range of emotions, from anger to grief to excitement to elation over accomplishing a goal. Role playing is often sited as a safe way for players to explore emotions and actions they would not be able to explore in real life (i.e. (Turkle 1995)

Players want to Fantasize

Role playing allows players to take on a completely new persona. It may be a character that shares some aspects of the player's personality, or it may be a character that exhibits traits that the player would find repulsive in themselves. The player then takes this creation of theirs and inserts it into an alternate reality, where their actions have a direct result on the game world. For a few hours at a time, the player essentially has the opportunity to be someone else, somewhere else, offering a fantasy that is rich beyond comparison from other game types.

Yet, while the role playing game appeals to players through all of Rouse's categories, there is still another reason that role playing has so many devotees world wide.

Immersion, Engrossment, Flow,

Role playing has a strong tendency to evoke in its players its optimal experience which is total immersion, engrossment, or "flow".

Janet Murray (Murray 1997) defines immersion as: "the sensation of being surrounded by

a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus.” Role playing scholar Gary Alan Fine (Fine 1983) refers to immersion in role playing games as “engrossment”.

“A key concept is the *engrossment* of players in the game. For the game to work as an aesthetic experience players must be willing to “bracket” their “natural” selves and enact a fantasy self. They must lose themselves to the game...The acceptance of the fantasy world as a (temporarily) real world gives meaning to the game, and the creation of a fantasy scenario and culture must take into account those things that players find engrossing.”

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as “flow--the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter...” He further describes how certain activities can give design affordances towards creating an experience conducive to flow.

“What makes these activities conducive to Flow is that they were *designed* to make optimal experience easier to achieve....For example, in each sport participants dress up in eye-catching uniforms and enter special enclaves that set them apart temporarily from ordinary mortals. For the duration of the event, players and spectators cease to act in terms of common sense and concentrate instead on the peculiar reality of the game.” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990)

While Csikszentmihalyi was specifically referring to sports, this description could not fit Live Action Role Playing more perfectly. Players have a direct interface with the game world through each other. Costuming and props add to the feel of truly being in another world, while the act of role playing itself transforms everyday existence into an alternate reality. This direct interfacing with the game world, combined with a large number of players and encouragement of all players to contribute to the world's atmosphere, give LARPs a high level of immersion, and lead players into a flow experience. For moments at a time, players *become* their characters, and the mall they play in, the classroom, the state park, *becomes* their game world. They experience the emotions that their characters would experience and say what their characters would say, sometimes without prior thought. Role playing also relates to Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of self because, even as role-playing seems to be a mostly social experience, in fact most of it takes place in the

individual's mind. That is where the transformation to another reality takes place. Role playing offers a unique chance in a player's life where they can completely become someone, or something, else. The game plays you.

“These phenomena do show that much of the pleasure of playing lies in the fact that the game plays you; that your reactions are often more reflexive than voluntary; that the game takes you out of yourself.” (Sutton-Smith 1997)

In *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle gives this example from a live action role playing game:

“So there we were in this room in the chemistry department and I guess we moved over into a corner, and we were sitting on the floor, like, cross-legged in front of each other, like...like, I guess we were probably holding hands. I think we were, And we like...we really did it. We acted out the whole scene....It was, it really was a nearly tearful experience.” (Turkle 1995)

RPGs can provide outlets for many different players' playing styles, and not everyone plays RPGs to experience flow. Players may enjoy the aspect of RPGs that involves their character's mastery over other creatures in the game world. Or they may simply enjoy the company of their friends. Nonetheless, the potential for extreme immersion that is so powerful in role playing in general and LARPs in particular is what makes them so fascinating to so many players. They allow the players a chance to free themselves from real-life society and become, for a little while, someone else. The flow experience that can occur through a well-run LARP is the type of experience we would like to be able to replicate in an MMORPG.

What is an MMORPG?

Online role playing broke onto the digital scene in 1980 with the first MUD (multi-user dungeon) (Bartle 2000). The action in these MUDs was text-based. When looking at the screen, a player would see a text based description of what was happening around them. Players were required to use their imaginations to fill in the details of the world around them, much like if they were playing a table-top role-playing game and hearing the GM

describe things to them.

In 1997, the first commercially successful graphical MUD was born: *Ultima Online* (Kim 1998). Players flocked to this game in which they could see graphical representations of their characters, and the world they lived in, on the computer screen. With *EverQuest's* release in 2000 (*EverQuest* web-site, 2002) a phenomenon became a genre: that of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game.

A MMORPG shares a good number of characteristics with a LARP. The move from the action taking place as text to it taking place graphically in the digital realm can be compared to the move from it taking place in the imagination to it taking place in physical space in the face to face RPG realm. Actions are acted out in MMORPGs through dialogue and animated emotes (animated expressions of emotion), just as they are in LARPs. Players have the opportunity to choose their characters' appearances and clothing styles, even as LARPers costume themselves as their characters. There are considerably more characters than there are facilitators of the game (GMs). Time in an MMORPG is continuous, and the world continues to function through characters logging on and off. In an MMORPG, player characters move through virtual space and see visual representations of what their characters would actually be seeing, which is similar to the use physical space in an LARP.

The major difference between LARPs and MMORPGs is role playing and its potential impact on the game world. In your average MMORPG session, role playing is either extremely shallow or non-existent. Logging on to *EverQuest* or *Ultima Online* with the intent of pursuing a deep role-playing experience will quickly lead to frustration. “And why can't players be taught to say, 'The foul knaves didst strike me from behind' rather than, “Those pussy wimps fucking killed me when I wasn't looking!” (an actual quote from today's game).” (Lizard 1998) While there are exceptions to this rule, the vast majority of players are not interested in developing any sense of character⁴. Instead, they

⁴ Several games have role playing specific servers. However, these servers host the same game with no special design considerations made to foster role playing and social politics.

use their characters as an avatar of their real world personae in the game world. Topics of conversation include things such as how much they enjoy (or hate) the game, what they like or hate about it, how much longer they have until they will reach the next level, and whether or not another player will help them with something. If players get to know each other after a while of playing together, conversations might also include things such as their real-world living situation or families, what their gender is, and whether or not they are single. It is difficult to try to preserve any sense of alternate identity in an alternate reality when the feared Dark Elf Marauder is telling you how great their other character is, or asking you out on a date in “real life”.

While the emphasis in a LARP is on character to character interaction and social manipulation, the emphasis in an MMORPG is on killing and looting. The goal is about killing monsters, gaining treasure, and gaining power in the world so that you can kill more monsters. Every action you take in the game feeds back to this goal of killing monsters. In *Ultima Online*, for example, you have the option of becoming a trade class character instead of the typical adventurer/killer types. However, it is common practice to create two characters. A player will have his “real” adventurer character who goes out and kills things, and will also have his trade character whose purpose is to make things so that they can make money for the adventurer character to be able to buy better armor, better weapons, and better spells, so that they can go out and kill more things. In addition, *Ultima Online* allows you to build houses. Most of the time, these houses are used to set up NPC bot “vendors” who can sell things to players when the player who owns the house is not home, thus leading back into the goal of making money to buy weapons to kill monsters.⁵

Status in these games is directly related to how many monsters you've killed. As your character kills creatures, they gain “experience.” Once enough experience is gained, a character gains a new “level,” which may give them new powers or abilities, or increase the effectiveness of powers or abilities they already have. Going up levels also makes

⁵ *Star Wars Galaxies* has a couple nice exceptions to this, as there are viable character professions such as the tailor, architect, and image designer whose activities do not directly impact combat. Most of the player

your character be able to take more damage from creatures and cast more spells before having to rest. The “level” is the key to a character's power in the game world, and these levels directly rest on how much killing your character does. Games such as *Asheron's Call* actually allow you to gain levels without killing anything, but levels are gained nowhere as quickly as when you are actively seeking out creatures to kill. While there are social positions of sorts in *Asheron's Call* and the guilds in other games, levels remain a very visible reminder of each character's relative power level, and people tend not to follow other players whose characters are too low in level.⁶ Following is an excerpt from the *Dark Ages of Camelot* online FAQ:

What can you do to gain levels other than fighting monsters?

We realize that players don't always want to kill monsters to advance in levels - Dark Age of Camelot is designed to allow the player to attain from 30-50% of the experience required to level from quests. Some monster hunting will always be required, but through judicious use of quests, players can greatly enhance their playing experience by going on quests.

In order to facilitate gaining experience through quests, Camelot (implements) an "auto quest" generator, where a player can go up to an NPC and ask it if it has any "tasks" for them to do. The NPC can then randomly create either a "carry task", where the player takes an object to another NPC, or a "kill task" where the player has to go and kill a certain number and type of monsters as dictated by the NPC. (2001)

In other words, to avoid killing monsters to gain levels, you can opt to do a quest. Of course, there is a chance that the quest you will be given will be to kill monsters.⁷

economy and professions, however, are still extremely combat-centric.

⁶ A special note should be made here about *Ultima Online*. *Ultima Online* does not use a levels system for character advancement. Instead, characters have skills which go up in response to them being used in gameplay. However, due to the nature of how much (or little) you can do at various skill levels, *Ultima Online* still repeatedly devolves into repetitive activity.

⁷ Of course, the “Carry Tasks” aren’t much fun either, as they basically consist of the player running their character from location to location to bring an item from one NPC to another.

Because of the emphasis on killing monsters and looting, as opposed to interaction between characters, these games become more of action adventure games than role playing games. “We'll see how many more days this life of killing bunnies and selling meat keeps me amused.” (Lizard 1998)

The MMORPG is designed with single-player computer role playing games as a model,⁸ which in turn was inspired by table top role playing games. In a table top game, a small group of player characters, often called a party, usually work together to achieve some mutual goal. The focus of MMORPGs also is on the power level of the individual character and on a small group of player characters acting together to achieve a goal. The main basic social structure supported by an MMORPG is that of the party or group. This party usually needs to consist of a rounded group of player character types who can then go out and slay monsters together. A larger group of players may form (called different things in different games, but “guild” is a common term) but these groups are mostly for the purpose of having people to chat with and forming parties to hunt creatures with.⁹

The trouble is, though, that while a table top role playing game can provide a rich playing experience, it does not stand up as a model when applied to a huge online game. The primary difficulty is that, in a table top game, the GM provides drama and a very responsive interface to the game world. In an MMORPG, there is no GM (at least not that acts in the traditional sense). The interface to the world is through a computer, which is a much less responsive interface than a human being. In addition, it is hard for a computer to provide any sense of drama or story that can affect an entire game worth of people for very long. “It took us hours to design, weeks to build...In fact, the puzzle was solved in about 8 hours by a person who had figured out the critical clue in 15 minutes.” (Morningstar and Farmer 1990) Also, in on-going table top games, players meet with the same group at the same time for week after week, whereas the party system in MMORPGs has to support players being able to log on and off at random times.

⁸ This seems odd, given the long history and many evolutions of the MUD.

⁹ Certain games (far in the minority), such as *Star Wars Galaxies* and *Shadowbane* also allow player guilds

When the primary social affordance of the MMORPG is the party system, and the main verbs (what players are allowed to do in games) offered players are to kill things and chat¹⁰, it does not offer a very dynamic playing experience. Using a table top model with the GM element removed cannot make for a very deep experience for very long. Instead, the great mass of people playing these games could itself be utilized to improve the gameplay. This is the strength of the Live Action Role Playing game.

Positive design attributes of LARPs and how they can be applied to MMORPGs

Players cannot be expected to role play in MMORPGs because there is very little reason for them to do so. While there are players who enjoy role playing for its own sake, players who have never role played before (the majority of the MMORPG audience) have no frame of reference for what is potentially a very enjoyable experience and have no reason to experiment with it unless it gains them something tangible in the game. Role playing in an MMORPG has no real impact on the game world. By contrast, role playing in a LARP impacts everything in the game world. Alliances can be drawn, political coups occur, bitter enemies made. LARPs emphasize social intrigue and drama, and role playing is the vehicle which makes this possible. Below, I will compare the attributes of LARPs that help support role playing to the way MMORPGs are currently designed and I will then suggest design elements that can be incorporated into MMORPGs in order to help them foster role playing.

Alternate ways to gain power

The most important thing MMORPGs can learn from LARPs in regards to experience and leveling is that experience points themselves should be less important to the player's enjoyment of the game than the character's own ability to achieve their in-game goals. In LARPs, characters with relatively few experience points can still become prominent members of the in-game society. Some players are able to work their characters up through careful back-room dealing, or just through their charisma and making the right friends. Not all players want to have to kill monsters to get ahead in the world, and the

to build or control towns.

¹⁰ Exploring, making items, and buying and selling make up most of the other available verbs.

game should facilitate these players being able to mold their character into whatever they see them as, whether it be a fierce fighter, a powerful sorcerer, a cunning politician, or a skilled craftsman.

In LARPs, there are many different ways to gain power in the game world. Becoming an expert fighter is only one possible way, and is not even the most assured way. LARPs do have systems of either levels or experience points, but a good number of these points are gained from simply showing up. In the rules for Mind's Eye Theater LARPs, it suggests giving an experience point for each game a player attends (Carl, Henig et al. 1999). Players do not get additional points for killing anything, but may occasionally gain extra points for completion of plotlines.

At first glance, it seems difficult to award “attendance points” for MMORPG players, since they can log on multiple times a day or anytime during the day or night. A slightly different approach would need to be taken. Instead of granting points for each log in, every week of gameplay would have a set amount of points associated with it. If a player logged in with a certain character at any point during the week, that character would be awarded their monthly points. The player could then spend their points on different skills or abilities, or save points for the following month in order to buy more advanced or special abilities. This would have several advantages over the common leveling system. First, a player would have the freedom to pursue any activities they desired during their on-line time, instead of having to spend all of their time engaged in repetitive activity. Secondly, it would help in the time commitment aspect of MMORPGs. It would help to better support casual players as well as more serious players because all characters would be receiving the same number of points, regardless of how many hours they played. Casual players would be able to log in for smaller segments of time and enjoy their gaming experience while not becoming frustrated that other players were rapidly outpacing them level-wise. At the same time, players who invested a good deal of time would still be able to enjoy the fruits of their labor, because they would be able to actively pursue goals and spend more time in social manipulation, which would potentially ultimately lead to more in game political power. Thirdly, this system would

eliminate the level rifts that in many current MMORPGs can occur between friends.¹¹ Characters that start at similar power levels will still be at similar power levels months later and can still socialize and adventure together, regardless of whether one player spent a good deal more time playing than their friend.

Changing the focus of the games will also help the problem that is found in most MMORPGs with characters at extremely low and high levels of power being bored. Currently, a beginning character in an MMORPG is stuck desperately trying to kill small animals like rabbits or rats (or other non-combat related but no more enjoyable repetitive activities) in order to get to higher levels when they are able to start gaining access to some of the more desirable powers. This is not very enjoyable, but the players see it through based on the promise that they will be able to eventually have more interesting things to do. The problem is worse when characters are extremely high level. At this point, they have already seen and done everything that can be seen and done. Their characters are far above the scope of power of everyone else, and there is no further to go. There is not much left to hold the player's interest. Games like *EverQuest* address this problem by releasing expansion packs that add new higher levels and new powers to go with them. But if the player was enjoying doing other things than simply leveling, they would be able to get involved in the game much earlier in their character's life-cycle, and would still have plenty of things to do even when their characters were of very high level (plan coups of their rivals, plant nasty rumors, or even just throw big contests or events). Finally, using the above experience system, characters would reach this very high level of power at much slower pace, because they cannot simply log in hour upon hour of play time in order to advance.

Player Agency in a Persistent World

In a Live Action Role Playing Game, the game world is a persistent one. That is, actions that are taken have effects that last beyond the gaming session. For example, if a painting is stolen from somewhere, that painting remains missing until it is recovered. In addition, players have agency over the game world. According to Murray (1997), agency is "...the

¹¹ *Star Wars Galaxies* being a notable exception to this.

satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices.” In order to really feel like part of the world, a player needs to be able to make dramatically important decisions. Player character's actions need to have consequences that make some kind of difference to the game world. Players need to have the power to make long-lasting and dramatic changes to the game environment. Using our previous example, a player has the option of stealing the painting in the first place, and the fact that the painting doesn't reappear on its own means that the character's effort of stealing it counts for something.

In an MMORPG, the game world is not persistent. Monsters always “re-spawn” (regenerate in a given location) no matter how many times they are killed (and killed NPCs always re-spawn with the same name) and rare artifacts always re-appear in the same spots no matter how many of the same exact kind have already been looted. Adventuring parties in *EverQuest* have been known to camp outside of certain dungeons in long lines with other parties in order to wait for their turns to access the dungeon, clean out the monsters, and collect the rare treasure inside. Even in *Ultima Online* and *Star Wars Galaxies*, which allow players to build their own buildings, those buildings will disappear into nothing if the players do not upkeep them.¹²

One suggestion to assist the feeling of persistence in MMORPGs is to not respawn certain important monsters or NPCs. *Star Wars Galaxies* does help alleviate the “camping” issue somewhat by having creatures respawn in a general area rather than in specific spots. But certain creatures that are the keys to specific quests shouldn't respawn after the quest has been completed. Quests instead might be grander affairs, for which players have to work together over a period of time to complete. If a certain player feels that they have missed out on a certain quest, they would have a chance to participate in a future one. This would also create interest and more chances for role playing, as the tales of completed quests are spread far and wide throughout the game world. NPCs that fulfill a certain role in a town can be respawned so that their services are always available

¹² There are other, very reasonable design decisions for this, such as avoiding over-crowding in “urban” areas and siphoning in-game money back out of the characters’ hands. Nonetheless, the disappearance of

to characters, but could be respawned with a change of physical appearance and name, to avoid the ever-reincarnating NPC.

Another way to assist both agency and persistence would be to build in systems that would encourage player run political and economic systems. LARPs succeed with so many players and so few referees because they use the player characters themselves as material for creating interest in the game world. With player run political and economic systems, players suddenly find themselves as agents of power in the game world, and intrigue and political maneuvering suddenly become important pastimes. This focus on politics and intrigue will work to create a large part of the drama that current MMORPGs are lacking, while simultaneously relieving the pressure on GMs to provide plot for players to follow.¹³ MMORPGs do allow the creation of “guilds”, or player-run organizations, but these guilds do not hold any real power or influence in the game world. Instead, they are more like tribal organizations of friends who enjoy playing together. In *Asheron's Call*, there is an allegiance system by which a player can swear allegiance to another player, and if a player has enough players sworn to him or her, they are considered a “monarch”. However, a monarch has no real political power or influence over their vassals or anyone else, because there can potentially be any number of them at any given time and player characters can ignore them with no real consequences.

In addition, while difficult to construct well, it is possible to create over-arching plot-lines that can affect a large number of players and add an additional bit of drama to the player-characters' lives. The plots should be very long-running in scope (a several months to a year long plot would not be too long) and start out very subtle, which will allow for a great deal of speculation on the part of the players as to what will be happening next. Players should be able to participate on some level regardless of the type of character they are playing. And very importantly, the plot needs to be distributed to the players through a “trickle-up” method rather than a “trickle-down” method. The “trickle-up” theory is simple: the hooks into the plot (the mechanisms that get a player

buildings does keep players from permanently altering the in-game landscape.

¹³ For example, players in a long-running LARP I once played in were heard complaining to their GM that

interested) need to be distributed among the lowest power level characters rather than the highest-power level characters. Lower power level characters will most likely not know exactly what it is they are hearing or seeing, and even if they do have an idea, they will still need help from others to address the issue in anyway. Eventually, someone will ask someone of higher power for help, or the high-level characters will hear of it one way or another and be able to participate at that point. This is important, because if the plot hooks are distributed among the higher level characters first, they might not need much help to figure out what to do with them, and the lower-level characters may never get to participate.

Support Materials set scene

Laws of the Night, which is the rule book for White's Wolf's Mind's Eye Theater *Vampire: the Masquerade* live action game opens with a story set in the game world. The next chapter explains what a Live Action game is, and how they are played. The book couches everything in terms of story and narrative and even the descriptions of the mechanics of play are worded in such a way that they directly relate to story and reinforce the reality of the game world (Carl, Henig et al. 1999).

The instruction manual for *EverQuest* only briefly touches on the *EverQuest* world being an alternate reality, and emphasizes how to create a character, fight a combat, gain and spend money, and use the software (Sony 2004).

The first thing a player sees when they are about to enter a new game, be it a LARP or an MMORPG are the support materials. If the rule book or manual is designed to support and reflect the alternate reality of the game, it will set the stage for the player from the very beginning as to what they can expect from the experience of the game. A well written manual, with art indicative of the feeling of the game, can be an immersive experience in and of itself, and can build excitement for the game the player is about to partake it. The manual is also a good place to encourage role-playing by suggesting tips for how to interact or simply by giving a fictional story that has examples of player

he was trying to create too much plot which was interfering in their own player-created plotlines.

interactions.¹⁴

Volunteer run NPCs

Players of LARPs are usually people who have a history playing role-playing games. Or else they are friends with someone who has had a history playing role-playing games who has brought them along to the game. As such, when a player shows up at a LARP, they have a rough idea of what to expect, and how to act. If they are unsure of themselves, they take cues from other players and follow their examples of role playing. The rare players who come to LARPs without any real idea how a LARP is played are taken aside by a GM who talks them through the LARP experience, and informs them of what to expect. This goes a long way towards making sure everyone is playing the same game and towards encouraging people to put effort into role playing.

MMORPGs have a much more diverse audience than LARPs. As an MMORPG is a huge commercial product, it is bound to collect a great number of people who have never had experience playing role playing games, and who don't really have a grasp of what it means to role play.¹⁵ Players still take cues from other players, but as those other players are not role playing either, there is no suggestion that it is an acceptable thing to do. Someone who attempts to role play in an MMORPG is more likely to feel out of place than someone who doesn't. And when players first enter the world, there is no GM to suggest to them a playing style different from what they would expect from playing a multi-player action/adventure game or a single player computer role playing game. Since MMORPGs currently do not emphasize role playing, this is not too much of an issue. But in a game that will foster role playing, a different approach is needed.

One thing that could help encouraging role-playing is having volunteer-run NPCs. These NPCs would not be characters with any huge power level or political power in the game. In fact, they shouldn't be allowed to hold political power unless it was warranted for a specific storyline. Their primary purpose would simply be to go around the game world

¹⁴ The manual for *Star Wars Galaxies* is a good example of support materials helping to set the scene.

¹⁵ Or any idea of why they should bother.

and re-enforce role playing by role playing themselves in order to encourage like behavior in others. When there are players who actively role play, then it makes role playing an acceptable activity rather than an abnormal one. These NPCs would not be demarcated as NPCs, and players would not be able to separate them out from other player characters. These NPCs would also be extremely useful from time to time for distribution of quest rumors or other story information, or even to stir up trouble in a region that has been stagnant for too long.

These volunteer-run NPCs could in addition be used to help new players get adapt to the new world they have just stepped into. In *Star Wars Galaxies*, as characters are generated in the world they've just joined, a series of “bots” (automated character controlled by computer) NPCs greets them gives them a tutorial in the style of the Star Wars world. This job could also be done by volunteer NPCs, who would additionally be able to answer any questions the new players may have and help get them oriented in their new world.¹⁶ If they do it in a consistent role playing style, it will immediately give the new player a feeling that role playing is acceptable and encouraged. It helps set the tone for future interactions.

Just having a volunteer system could be used to help encourage role playing. If there was a small group of paid GMs who chose the volunteers, the volunteers were themselves chosen for their role playing ability, the volunteers were granted a free account, and the existence of this system was very public, then it would offer an extra incentive to players to make a greater attempt at role playing. Volunteers could additionally recommend players for additional experience points for role playing (although this system would have to be regulated to discourage cheating), which would further increase the incentive to role play. As players would not be able to tell the difference from volunteer NPCs and other player characters, they would not necessarily know if they were “on-stage” and so might be more likely to perform more often.

¹⁶ A system that utilizes both volunteers and bots would probably have the best chance of succeeding, since in many games you may have many new player characters being generated at any one time.

Fewer, better scripted bots

LARP game worlds are constructed entirely of player characters and a few NPCs who are run by other players.

MMORPGs have computer-controlled “bot” NPCs. These NPCs are usually characters such as shop-keepers, leaders of a faction that characters can belong to, healers, etc. The vocabulary of these bots is extremely limited. They usually have just a handful of key terms that they respond to when a player says them in their presence, or they respond to a menu of choices. Instead of re-enforcing immersion, this emphasizes the fact that a player is just playing a game on the computer.

NPC bots are necessary in a game that has important roles to be filled for the benefit of the players, but which players themselves would not want to fill. While scripting bots to respond just like another human player would is probably a hopeless task, more work could go into them to make them feel a bit more life-like. For example, they could respond to such things as “hello”, “goodbye” “Thank you”, and other common things that players might say to them. They could also have hobbies, for example, or a personal history, that they would talk about if prompted.

While this sounds like a great deal of work to re-script all these bots with more character depth, what should be remembered is that if the political and economic systems were put into the hands of the players and there were NPCs being played by humans there would be a need for far fewer bots. Fewer bots that were able to have greater depths of conversation could help give more of a feel of being in an alternate world.

Support for non-regulars

LARPs support players who do not play regularly by offering an immersive environment where they can get lost for an evening just enjoying role-playing. In addition, large LARP events at gaming conventions that attract a fair number of non-regulars will usually have smaller activities available that they can participate in, whether it is playing cards in character, or holding an auction of rare items.

There is currently a cry for MMORPGs to support players who cannot play for multiple hours every day. Currently, player characters must spend hours in repetitive tasks to see their characters improve to a point where the game becomes more interesting to play. Players who don't have the time to invest may try for awhile but generally give up in frustration.

Changing the emphasis of the game to being more social will give non-regulars more interesting things to do than spending all their precious time doing the same task over and over again. In addition, smaller activities could be added to the game that would allow a non-regular to log on, have a short enjoyable experience, and log off again. *Star Wars Galaxies* implemented gambling wheels in some in-game cantinas. A gambling house could be introduced into a game where characters could play different small games for an hour or two. They would not feel compelled to go out and fight monsters for levels if they did not feel like it, for not only would there be optional activities, but the game would reward them for participating in them. In the gambling example, characters could win money in the games and would still get experience points to use to improve their characters just for taking any time to log in and play. If the games or other smaller activities are enjoyable in and of themselves, players will enjoy logging on for a brief period to play, especially if they can watch their character improve at the same time.

Unknown power levels

When playing a LARP, character's power levels are known only by their reputations or what political positions they hold. How many points they have invested in the character or how long they have been playing the game are generally only known to the player of that character. This adds to a sense of game reality and provides for interesting role-playing opportunities.

In an MMORPG, players all can visibly see the level (whether general or exact) of other characters. Players of higher or lower levels may not socialize with players whose levels

are far from theirs.

MMORPGs should not make the power levels of characters visible to other players. In addition to encouraging players to role-play with each other, not knowing power levels just by looking also affords some interesting possibilities. For example, a high-level character may want to move among lower-level characters to hide from his enemies. Or a low-level character may assume the attitude of being more powerful than they really are, in order to pave their way into political power, or in order to bluff other characters into leaving their operations alone.

Limited character deaths

In most LARPs, if a character dies, they are dead. The player who is playing them cannot bring their character back from the dead to play again. They must at this point create a new character in order to continue playing. This does a number of positive things. If a player is attached to his or her character, they are less likely to take foolishly risky actions that the character would not themselves take. They take better care of the character, just as if the character's life were their own. It also provides a good deal of tension and drama when a character is in harm's way. It makes players more cautious about starting fights with other characters. Character death encourages a player to consider trying to play a different kind of character next, and explore a different aspect of themselves or a new way to play. And it is a final problem solver if an individual or group of individuals is holding power for a very long time and stagnating the action of the rest of the game. If a group of player characters come up with a brilliant plan to stage a coup and kill a much more powerful character than themselves, they do not have to worry about that character coming back just as powerful and taking vengeance on them.

The discussions on MMORPG character death and how to handle it often run fairly hot. In current MMORPGs, a character can die an unlimited number of times. The penalties for death range from losing a portion of the character's accumulated experience, to potentially losing all the equipment the character was carrying, to losing time trying to find the character's corpse with the avatar of the new incarnation. While dying is usually

annoying in MMORPGs, it is hardly the end of the character.

With the current model of MMORPG action being centered on combat, allowing characters unlimited lives does make sense. After all, if they are going to be out fighting constantly, they are likely to also be dying quite a number of times. However, if the action is shifted to player to player interactions, it makes more sense to give harsher penalties for character death. This also has the side benefit of encouraging people to congregate in common areas and interact with each other, rather than wandering off alone and fighting where they may lose their character. For MMORPGs, however, terminating a character after their first death may not be a satisfactory solution. While a GM in a LARP will generally not throw a monster at a character that the character cannot handle, a character in an MMORPG may accidentally wander into the wrong part of an area and get cornered by something much too dangerous for their capabilities. Or a computer glitch could cause a character's death by slowing the character down when something is chasing it. Also,LARPs take place in very small contained environs, whereas MMORPGs give a huge world to explore, and discouraging players from exploring may mean that they never find the clue hidden in the wilderness which would lead them to the next over-arching storyline. Therefore, it seems prudent to increase the consequences for character death, while allowing characters to die more than once.

NERO, the New England Role Playing Organization (which is now world-wide) is a live-action organization with their own set of rules. They allow characters to die multiple times, but every subsequent time they die lowers their chance of “resurrecting” (or bringing their character back to life) in the future. Death continues to become riskier and riskier until the character's 12th death. After their 12th death, they can no longer come back (NERO 1990 - 2000). A system like this might be used to great effect in an MMORPG, but without a finite number of deaths, and with the percentage chance of resurrecting decreasing at a very slow level. The death and possible resurrection sequence could be played out as dramatically as possible. Alternatively, taking a character out of commission for what would be a long time in the game (a day or week perhaps) before they could come back into play would be a different way to handle

character death. A player could play a different character in the meantime.

Provide a place for Out of Character conversation

In LARPs, talking out of character (OOC) or as your real-world self is severely discouraged. If a player is not talking in character (IC), or their character would be talking, they are interfering with other players' sense of immersion. A good deal of out of character socializing does happen around LARPs, but it happens before or after the LARP, and not during.

In an MMORPG, talking in character is discouraged by the simple fact that no one else is doing it. In a LARP, a player will feel like the odd person out if they are not at least making an attempt at role playing. In an MMORPG, they will feel like the odd man out for trying. Players who become agitated at other players for not role playing are considered “role playing Nazis” and are viewed by the other players as great annoyances.¹⁷

One thing that could help is providing official locations for conducting out of character conversation. An OOC lounge or lobby could be provided that character's avatars could teleport to from centers in towns.¹⁸ Players could assemble there to talk about their days at work, discuss the game, etc. In addition, the game could provide an out-of-character “tell” system where a player could specifically tell another player something OOC, and no one else would see it. It would preface whatever the player is telling them with “OOC:” and may even appear in a different color to distinguish it. For example: “OOC: Hey meet me in the OOC lounge!” Currently, many MMORPGs have an OOC “channel” which is a string of conversation that anyone who is on the channel can listen to and participate in. It is possible to turn the channel off, but the problem is that when a player's character avatar is actively sitting in one spot conversing on the OOC channel and ignoring people who come up to them to talk to them IC, it can be very off-putting to

¹⁷ In all fairness, trying to force someone to play in a certain way by being rude is not exactly a way to make friends. Players who enjoy role playing need to realize that current MMORPGs are only minimally role playing games, and that other players may have other reasons for playing.

other players. It would be more conducive to role playing if people who wanted to have long OOC conversations simply re-located temporarily, and it would also be more conducive to those people having their OOC conversation.

Conclusion

The first MUDs were also designed from a table-top perspective. For a long while, action in MUDs was limited to killing monsters and retrieving items from their corpses. Slowly, different types of players were attracted to MUDs. And as different types of players came to MUDs, they started desiring different types of game play and interaction. New MUD designers began to incorporate more diverse and interesting ways to encourage role playing and immersion in the game worlds. A whole new style of “social MUDs” even sprang up, which went the opposite direction of the original MUDs by removing all combat and instead focusing on building things and interacting with other players. Today, there are 1,875 MUDs and MUD type games listed in the MUD database MUD Connector (www.mudconnector.com). These games represent a huge array of narrative genres and gameplay styles.

The MMORPG genre is still very young. It is just now starting to blossom into adolescence. And as it does so, developers are starting to recognize the need for more diverse game play experiences. Games released in the last year attempt to differentiate themselves from the *EverQuest* model in various ways, and many games in development boast features to heighten immersion in story or game world. *Asheron's Call II* features a completely player-driven economy.¹⁹ *Star Wars Galaxies* features “chapters” of an on-going story that players can participate in, and provides opportunities for players to play combat free characters. *Atriarch* claims that it will provide players with political systems to interact with and manipulate. *World of Warcraft* will allow players to partake in “life quests” which supposedly will be “career spanning”, and *The Matrix Online* will feature storylines and special events which will involve the player in the world of *The Matrix*

¹⁸ Perhaps players could even have a separate OOC avatar if they wished, in order to further distinguish themselves from their characters.

¹⁹ Although this is at the expense of having towns as common gathering places and having the treasure that monsters carry be completely unrealistic – such as giant wasps that carry around with them bits of armor.

movies. Even Sony is releasing *EverQuest II* which makes claim to allowing non-combat based character advancement. The narrative genres will no longer be restricted to fantasy and science fiction with the release of *City of Heroes* (a super hero themed game) and *Frontier: 1859* (a Wild West game which may be the first game to incorporate permanent character death).²⁰

Another interesting development is in small independent games. MUDs became so prolific partly because they were fairly easy and inexpensive to develop and run. An MMORPG such as *Final Fantasy XI* with its amazing polish costs a great amount of time and money to make, and so it becomes very difficult for small groups without external funding to create one. However, some very interesting games are being created on a smaller scale and with a much smaller budget. *A Tale in the Desert* is a small scale game that has no combat whatsoever, and instead emphasizes player social interaction and economics. *Puzzle Pirates* is an amazingly ingenious game that has no levels or classes or skills for characters. Instead, sword-fighting and crafting, as well as all functions of running a ship are based around players playing different puzzle games. *Puzzle Pirates* also features a player-based political system, where characters can become captains of their ships and promote other characters to different positions in the crew. Modding tools, which creative individuals can use to create new content based on existing games, also offer an interesting venue for creating online role playing games. *Battledale* is a role playing only game that makes use of *NeverWinter Nights'* client-server technology to deliver an online graphical world for players to partake in. The prevalence of such tools may enable a new generation of would-be game developers to bring their own creations to life. Since these smaller games have much less risk involved in their development than large scale MMORPGs, they are able to innovate in directions that the larger games may not dare to.

Is it possible to teach the entire audience of an MMORPG to role play and have them do

²⁰ Completely social games exist now too, such as *There.Com* and *Second Life*. These games are more like virtual worlds than role playing games, however, in that many people will probably opt to play as “themselves” rather than adopt the role of another character.

it? Probably not, and trying to force them to may just result in a very small audience.²¹ It should be emphasized that players cannot be forced to role play if they simply don't want to. However, steps can be taken to help encourage a role playing environment.

MMORPGs still have a good deal further to go before they will create an experience that will foster role playing and the deep levels of player immersion that can accompany it.

There are design models available to the MMORPG developer beyond simply what the other MMORPG companies are making. Live action role playing games are one such model. “A freeform LARP is as close to actual immersion in and interactive story that you’ll get anywhere in the world. And computer game designers with an interest in true interactive story-telling would be insane not to learn about this form” (Costikyan 1998)

²¹ Such as in the very interesting, but under populated *Underlight*.

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