
A Wish List for Massively Multiplayer Games

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

Introduction

- Massively multiplayer games are the titans of online gaming.
 - Everquest
 - ◆ 400,000+ players.
 - Ultima Online
 - ◆ Still going strong on 270,000.
 - Asheron's Call
 - ◆ A "failure" that brings in \$800,000 a month.
- The second wave of games is starting to break.
 - At last...
 - How big is it going to be?

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New Kids on the Block

- The Big Three are being challenged by:
 - Genre shifts
 - ◆ Anarchy Online – buggy but unbowed
 - ◆ SeduCity – did they use motion capture?
 - Licensed properties
 - ◆ Star Wars, Lord of the Rings (supposedly), others in secret.
 - Public domain “licensed” properties
 - ◆ Dark Age of Camelot
 - Follow-ups
 - ◆ Asheron’s Call 2, Ultima Online 2, EverQuest whatever...
 - The Rest.
 - ◆ Some good, some bad, but all with ugly finances

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The Challenge

- How are the new games going to affect the status quo?
 - Spiffier graphics.
 - ◆ Goes without saying.
 - Better service.
 - ◆ We can hope...
 - Better gameplay?
 - ◆ This is the crucial issue.
- Design questions:
 - What new ideas are these games bringing with them?
 - What old ideas are they leaving behind?
 - What shouldn’t they have done that they have done?
 - What should they have done that they haven’t done?

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What we have Now

- Today's online games are not without their problems.
- To succeed, games of this kind must:
 - Attract newbies.
 - Retain them.
 - Not break the bank doing either of the above.
- A lot of this is to do with operations:
 - Reliability.
 - Customer service.
- Big design issues are:
 - Repetitiveness.
 - Immersion.
 - The end-game issue.

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Coming Real Soon

- Two flavours:
 - Games for gamers.
 - Games for non-gamers.
- MUDs (graphical or otherwise) have the widest appeal of any online games:
 - Women!
 - People over 30!
 - Parents! Grandparents!
 - People who don't *like* games!
- But most new games target existing gamers.
- This tends to colour what the new games are doing:
 - Pro-core, anti-casual.
 - NB: Many designers think their games aren't core when they are.

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Out with the Old...

- Retention by expansion.
 - Keep game fresh by adding new modules/storylines.
 - Works for oldbies, but tough on newbies.
 - Costs \$\$\$.
- The game is separate from the real world.
 - People don't have real world lives.
 - Real-world actions must not affect the game
 - ◆ Buying/selling accounts, personae, property, items...
 - ◆ Cheats, hacks, walk-throughs.
 - The World Wide Web is out-of-game.
 - ◆ Can't do even limited things offline (eg. via mobile phone)
 - ◆ Can't link directly to players' web sites or other creations

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...In with the New

- New genres
 - Swing to Science Fiction.
 - Licensed products.
 - ◆ Long-term only. Can't do one-movie wonders.
 - Public domain "licences".
 - ◆ Eg. DAOC. First one to claim it gets it.
- Player-generated content.
 - Within certain controlled parameters.
 - ◆ Although see Neverwinter Nights.
 - Possible copyright issues.
 - Players are not game designers, artists or writers.
 - ◆ But they think they are.

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What Players Want

(That they won't be getting).

- Variety.
 - Meaningful quests, and lots of them.
 - Vast opportunities for role-play.
- Atmosphere.
- Wit.
- To matter.
 - A tangible impact on the game.
 - A meaningful existence.
- Note: most players *don't know* what they want.
 - Or refuse to accept the consequences of their desires.
 - Good of the game versus good of the individual.

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What Players Don't Want

(That they will be getting).

- Storylines.
 - Players want to change the world, not watch the inevitable unfold.
- Politics.
 - Works as an endgame, but:
 - ◆ People hate politics.
 - ◆ People hate politicians.
- Artificial group conflict.
 - No side can ever *really* win or *really* lose.
- Patronised.
 - "People will simply adore those pretty baskets you make..."
 - "Cooks are just as capable of heroism as half-elf paladins".

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All Things to All Players

- The problem is that players have conflicting needs.
- Addressing one player type's needs affects the other types' needs.
- Old hat quick summary of player types:
 - Achievers – play the game as a game, to “win”.
 - Explorers – seek to understand the game world.
 - Socialisers – the game provides a context for socialising.
 - Killers – control freaks; feel the need to dominate other players.
- It's possible, but not easy, to get a stable balance between these.
 - Costs very little to maintain.
- Otherwise, balance has to be forced.
 - Newbie hose.
 - Continual updates.

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Conflicting Needs

- Achievers need an end-game
 - but politics is for killers.
- Socialisers need meaning
 - but they don't accept persona death
 - and they don't accept a free market economy.
- Explorers want depth
 - but depth costs money.
- Killers want to dominate other players
 - (except for other killers)
 - but no-one wants to be dominated.
- Socialisers and explorers want story
 - but achievers and killers don't.

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My Ideal Game

- These issues are not insoluble, though.
- Too many designers start from the wrong set of axioms.
 - Salad days...
 - So what are the backtrack points?
- Here's how some of the major problems can be resolved...
 - Described *very* briefly or it would take forever.
 - From point of view of design.
 - ◆ Operations and customer service are also very important.
- Note that many of these are anathema to people raised on EverQuest
 - But your players won't be coming from EverQuest...

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My Wish List

- Persona death (PD).
 - Only if you take the risk.
 - Periodic risk is necessary at highest levels.
- Player versus player (PvP).
- Multiple player hierarchies.
- Intelligent quests.
 - Artificially intelligent, to be precise.
- Workable economics.
 - It doesn't have to be all faucet/drain.
- Persona advancement.
 - No character classes/races.
 - No skill caps.

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Conclusion

- Massively multiplayer games do have problems.
 - But there are accessible solutions.
- Unfortunately, the designers of the second wave of games often:
 - Don't understand the problems.
 - Follow the wrong precedents.
 - Think they're infallible.
- So much applies to any game designer, of course, but they also:
 - Design for themselves, rather than for their players.
 - Don't think through the full consequences of their ideas.
 - Place too much emphasis on the opinions of gamers.
- Never forget people: these are *worlds*, not games.
 - They work *differently!*

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