

Chapter 10

Questing for Knowledge – virtual worlds as dynamic processes of social interaction

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1 Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the nature of social interaction and game-play in the massively multi-player online game Everquest. Based on my studies of this particular type of virtual world, I will address the question of how the experience of participating in virtual worlds changes over the course of time and the implications of this on how we conceive of virtual worlds from a design perspective. In parallel I will also address some methodological implications of performing ethnographic studies in an environment where new levels of interacting with the world and its participants continuously reveal themselves like new levels in a platform game.

For social interaction to exist within a virtual environment there have to be social actors in it. This book as well as its predecessor [1] covers a wide range of cases of social interaction from separate individuals all the way up to large groups of people. In this volume, yet another dimension is added as this and Nick Yee's chapter in this volume look at a fully three-dimensional graphical environment that attracts and supports participants on a massive scale averaging several thousands of participants in the same virtual world.

In a previous essay (in [1]) I argued for the importance of an *inside view* in order to grasp the unique properties of the social environments of virtual worlds. In this chapter my focus is on the vantage point of a participant embedded in the world. I will describe the game from four different points in the process of progressing through the game as a player and through the empirical study as a researcher. These discreet reference points will then be connected in an attempt to reveal a richer picture of the process like qualities of virtual worlds in terms understanding the object of study as well as the process of studying it.

While it is generally a bad idea to recount a study in chronological terms, I will do exactly that here with the explicit purpose of showing how the understanding of an object of study can change when looked at over an extended period of time. In this way I wish to uncover the research process rather than hiding it beneath the surface of the text.

Until recently, there were no systems of this scale and complexity in existence but that changed with the arrival of the game Everquest in 1999. Built on a real-time three-dimensional graphics system similar to e.g. Active Worlds but with a closed graphics library, Everquest took the role-playing genre of computer games to a new level of technological sophistication. The response from the gaming community was overwhelming, and a flood of similar games has followed establishing a new genre of computer games, the massively multiplayer online game MMOG. (This kind of game is sometimes referred to as MMORPGs, or role playing game, but since the role-playing element is often very weak and some games lack it completely, the RP part of the acronym is becoming ever less appropriate).

Everquest continues to be one of the most successful games in the genre with over 2.5 million copies of the game sold and currently having over 400,000 paying subscribers of which around 100,000 play simultaneously at peak times [2]. Operating via a client/server architecture, the world of Everquest is a fairly elaborately rendered three-dimensional space in which players battle a variety of characters and creatures. The world of Everquest is inhabited by participants who wander a vast terrain covering a number of continents. Much like old-style tabletop role-playing games, players create a character to play by selecting a "race" such as human, halfling or troll, a class such as warrior, shaman or wizard and setting a few other parameters defining their character. On special servers players can engage in combat against other players or in more formalized role-playing, but the overwhelming majority play against the monsters in the world without bothering with the role-playing aspects of the game.

2 The Beginner Level: Everquest as a Single-player Game

To say that the Everquest world is vast feels like a bit of an understatement. The amount of places to visit and monsters to battle is almost endless. Most of this is, however, out of reach for a beginner. When a player first enters the world, it is in the designated hometown. Before the player has put a few experience levels under her or his belt and acquired some basic equipment, it is impossible to venture very far beyond the city gates without falling prey to the creatures that roam the game world.

The very first obstacle that the player has to overcome is, however, the user interface. Before being able to interact with the environment, non-player characters, or other participants, the technical aspects of interaction have to be

mastered. A crucial part of this interaction is the communication with other players. All text-based communication is carried out in different chat channels. As long as the player has not selected a channel for the text input, the keys on the keyboard work as shortcuts to different commands. This means that if you target a non-player character and start typing to say something to it without indicating the appropriate channel, the keystrokes will be interpreted as commands. This will in turn prove deadly if the intended message includes the character 'A' since that key by default is set to trigger the command "auto-attack", and the non-player characters in the game are powerful enough to quickly eradicate a beginner player. (Measures are continuously taken to make the system more forgiving to the beginners, including a recent move of the default key for auto-attack from typing the 'A' key to typing the significantly less used 'Q' key.)

One of the promises of three-dimensional graphics was the possibility of making interaction interfaces more intuitive and easy to use for beginners. What we see in the user interface of Everquest should not necessarily be interpreted as an indication that these promises were incorrect. Instead it speaks of the powerful impact of history in technology development. Despite the ocean-wide difference in complexity and experience of play between the early text-based MUDs and today's MMOGs, many designers as well as players have come to today's MMOGs via the MUDs bringing their history of previous influences and experiences with them and Everquest displays a number of technological and cultural traces to these earlier systems.

The command interface is so reminiscent of the DIKU (Datalogisk Institut, Københavns Universitet) MUD system that people coming from a MUD of that variety testify to feeling right at home in Everquest. The Everquest team at one point had to release a sworn statement that they had not used any actual code from DIKU MUD which resulted in the following response: "The DIKU group is proud that 'the DIKU feeling' has found its way into a game as enjoyable and award winning as Everquest." [3] Everquest also borrows from other sources. Many of the sites and monster bear a striking resemblance to those in fantasy fiction in general and Tolkien in particular. The game system is heavily influenced by Dungeons and Dragons. [4] There are also technical solutions and modes of navigation originating from predecessors within the field of three-dimensional graphical environments.

The notion of a beginner becomes more complex when the history of the players – and the ways it coincides with the history of the game – is taken into account. A Tolkien reading MUD veteran with previous experience of virtual worlds is a very different kind of beginner than the person without this background.

After a few fatal encounters with merchants and other non-player characters in the hometown, the player will avoid at least the more devastating interaction mistakes. There will, however, still be a barrier between the beginner and the other players in the game. One very palpable factor that keeps beginners separate from other players is the geography. While the beginners cannot stray very far from the guarded cities, the more experienced players have to find other hunting grounds in order to find strong enough monsters to gain experience points from slaying them.

Besides the geographically imposed obstacles to playing the game together with the more experienced players, there is the lack of strategic knowledge. The abilities of different characters are designed in a way to make it beneficial for players to form groups and hunt together. The safety and efficiency of the group is dependent on the participants performing their tasks correctly and being able to efficiently communicate with the other group members. These skills take time to learn and a beginner lacks both the knowledge and the ability to communicate that is required. To accommodate for this, the developers have made it possible for all classes to easily defeat monsters on their own the first ten or so experience levels. A player who decides to start a second character will on the other hand have the required knowledge set and ties to the social networks between players [5] to be able to traverse the isolation of the beginner player.

After having played Everquest a week or so and gained around ten experience levels, I could claim to have gained first-hand experience of the object of study and my notes were full of impressions from the intense experience. But what had I really seen? My perception of the game was that it was a fairly repetitive hack and slash game mainly played solo in a fairly confined space. I knew there was much more of the world to explore out there and that the game was full of other players, but I had no way of knowing if the experience of being in the game world and playing the game would change significantly or if it was going to be more of essentially the same thing. The only way to experience this for myself was to continue playing.

3 The Intermediate Level: Everquest as a World of Personal Communities

Just like a player bursting out in a triumphant “ding” signaling that a new experience level has been reached, I remember feeling a sense of elation when I stepped into the world of interconnected personal networks that signifies participation in the world of Everquest at an intermediate level. In my case it was not so much a question of being rewarded after a long hard struggle, as having contacts outside the game that helped me get “connected” on the inside. In [5] Taylor and I give a detailed description of the structure and importance of social networks in the game and the process of socialization. There we describe how social networks share structural properties with the mafia as we understand its organization from popular fiction. Everything from initiations, pledges of trust and allegiance, vows of silence and favor systems exist both in the mafia and the social networks of Everquest. They both also seem to have their origin in a need for protection in an environment of insufficient control of law and order. Here I will concentrate on describing the way the experience of the game and the world changes as a result of moving from the outside to the inside.

While the beginner stage is passed fairly quickly, the second stage will take months, sometimes years, and ranges approximately from level twenty to sixty. For the majority of the players most of the time is spent in groups at this stage of the

development of the character. The gaming session typically begins with the player spending some time looking for a group to join, or starting a group and gathering the other five players needed. These players will then pick a place to set up camp and start killing the monsters there. When a monster is killed a new one will emerge at the same spot after a set time so the group will not run out of things to kill no matter how long they stay. Normally a session lasts a couple of hours.

Although the players can move around more freely in the world at this stage, they do so to a very limited degree. Since the monsters you kill have to be on par with your own experience level to yield good experience earnings, there are only a few zones to choose from at any given experience level. The activity of camping around the same monsters for hours on end – sometimes referred to as experience grinding – might seem repetitive and even a bit boring. But with a fairly routine task to perform to keep the development of the character in motion, the players have plenty of time to socialize with the other group members and other friends in the game. Some people have social ties to other players already when they come to the game in the form of family members or friends. Others start from scratch in making friends through playing and hanging out together and before long, almost all players have created a social network of friends and acquaintances within the game.

From essentially being a single-player game on the first few levels, the gaming experience transforms into a rich social experience for the intermediate player. The game play stays basically the same. Instead it is the context around the actual monster killing that has changed. Just as in non-game virtual worlds, it turns out that the social interaction is the very foundation for the appeal of the world (see Yee's chapter in this volume for more about social interaction as game motivation). At this stage of the game, the social networks are still loose and informal for the most part. Every player has his own web of contacts primarily organized by the friends list function in the game. The players perceive belonging to a community but each player's community looks different; in other words, they are personal communities as defined in [6]. With continued playing this will, however, change.

4 The High-End Game: Organized Play

Somewhere around level fifty to sixty and after perhaps a year or so in the game, players start feeling that there is something – more specifically their epic weapon – that they are missing and that it is time to try to do something about it. All classes in the game can take on an epic quest that will result in an epic weapon as reward if it is completed successfully. The epic quests are designed to require the help of more than just a handful of friends to complete. Besides the monsters that need to be defeated for the epic quest, the high-end game also includes many other tasks that require a raid force of up to seventy strong players to conquer.

The personal communities that players create during their time as intermediate players are not strong enough to support the level of organization that the high-end game requires. There are many reasons to be in a guild – such as belonging to a community and protection of the gaming experience from disruptive forces – but it is not until the high-end game that it becomes more or less a necessity. Guilds are formalized social networks managed by the players with the support of a few in-game tools. To start a guild a minimum of ten players have to commit to joining. The person starting the guild becomes guild leader and chooses which other players to authorize as officers. The guild gets a dedicated chat channel and a tag under their names showing which guild they belong to.

The role of an officer in a guild differs depending on the size and type of guild. The bigger guilds have officers dedicated to specific tasks such as organizing raids or handling recruitment while the officers of smaller guilds tend to do a bit of everything. I am a member of a medium sized guild with approximately three hundred registered characters. For about a year I have been involved in managing the guild as an officer, raid leader and for a brief time guild leader. We are a social guild which means that we do not make any particular requirements on our participants in terms of experience level, abilities, play time or attendance and we only raid once a week.

We do, however, require that our members adhere to our guidelines for social behavior within the game. This document – posted on the guild website – covers topics of honorable and fair behavior towards other players and helping guild members in achieving their goals. We also keep a fairly strict norm on language use in the guild channel since many of the participants are combining playing with looking after their kids. The social guilds tend to attract a more mature type of players while raiding guilds often appeal to a younger crowd. Older players may still put a significant number of hours into the game every week but often cannot commit to playing in the way a raiding guild demands. Out of these differences in appeal grows a difference in culture between the two types of guilds.

The downside of not belonging to a raiding guild is that some parts of the world require persistent raiding and these zones are the ones where you can find the best items to equip your character with. An alternative to joining a raiding guild is to join a raid channel. These channels are set up and administered by one or more guilds that wish to raid but lack the critical mass of players within their own guild. They therefore offer access to the channel to players who do not have a guild or are in a non raiding guild but still wish to raid occasionally. The raid channels are of course established to benefit the guilds behind them, but work as a kind of community service to social players with a taste for raiding.

At one particular raid we picked up a person along the way who said that he was looking for a guild to join and asked if he could tag along. Since he was a high level character of a class that we had use for, we were happy to bring him with us. While he handled his job of bringing monsters to the rest of us very well he was also a little too eager to get a cut of the items we were getting by killing the monsters, suggesting that he had special needs for some of the items and that they should be defaulted to him instead of letting the luck of the draw decide who

would get it. The officers running the raid and handling the looting and distribution of items that dropped from the monsters, however, paid no attention to these requests.

When we headed home at the end of the evening he mentioned that he wanted to join our guild. At the time the rules for inviting people into the guild were that at least three officers had to agree that a person was suitable for membership before issuing an invitation. Since there were more than three officers present at the raid we could immediately make a decision and he was invited. This was to be the last time someone was invited to the guild this way.

It only took until the next day before our guild leader received a private chat message from another player in the game issuing a complaint against our recently invited guild member. The complaint regarded a case of “ninja looting” which means that a player takes an item from a defeated monster that she or he does not rightfully deserve (see [5] for more on social consequences of the possibility to “ninja loot”).

The guild leader then proceeded to interview the accused, the person issuing the complaint and one more person who had been in the same group at the time of the incident. He then posted all this material in the officer-only section of the guild website and requested comments from the other officers. After a few postings back and forth between the officers it was the guild leader who decided that the person should be removed from the guild.

The last thing a guild wants is rumors of questionable behavior to start spreading on the server, since the reputation of a guild affects the reputation of all its members and will make it harder for the guild to form alliances with other guilds. So as a direct consequence of the incident the officers decided to tighten up the recruitment process. Now applicants to the guild have to post an application on the guild website and then spend some time in a special recruitment channel in the game before they can be invited. This increase in rules, guidelines and formalized procedures is typical of guilds growing in numbers and reputation on a server. It also leads to the officers of the guild spending more and more of their game-time on community management.

As an officer in general and a guild leader in particular, the nature of play shifts dramatically from mostly minding your own business and helping out others when needed, to management responsibilities that take up more time than the actual monster killing. Besides making sure that the guidelines of the guild are adhered to, officers spend much of their time reading up on how to tackle certain monsters, screening guild applicants, managing guild bank money and items and keeping the guild website in shape.

Somewhere in the middle of all this, the actual killing of the monsters still works more or less the same as at level one but the scale and complexity of what it means to play the game has reached a level that makes the gaming experience completely different from that of a beginner player.

5 The Endgame: Players Turning Against Players

Before the first expansion for Everquest was released there was a very limited selection of monsters to kill at the very high-end level of the game. The guild leader of one of the first raiding guilds on one of the first Everquest servers told me that after having done all the other content in the game, there were only two monsters left of interest to them. It was the two dragons Lady Vox and Lord Nagafen. His guild was the first to defeat the dragons but another was not far behind. Despite a fair amount of rivalry between the two guilds they managed to stay out of trouble by taking turns killing the two dragons. The situation became more complicated when a third guild on the server became strong enough to challenge the dragons. The limited resources in the game had created a volatile situation.

At one point one of the guilds failed in an attempt to kill one of the dragons and when they came back later for a new attempt, the next guild scheduled was already there setting up for their turn. The exact details of what happened that night may differ depending on who you ask, but everybody agrees that things got ugly. Players tried to get players from the other guild killed and the verbal exchange between the raid forces was harsh and abusive. The incident led to an outright war between the guilds and both sides lost members as a result of it.

Peace finally came when all the involved guilds agreed to follow a web-based event calendar operated by neutral players. With the aid of this calendar, guilds could make reservations for a monster they wanted to kill and the others would stay away from it until their turn came. The event calendar was successful in making rival guilds share the limited resources equally. But eventually one guild decided that they were not going to honor the calendar anymore and would try to kill any of the dragons whenever they would see fit to do so. This guild could be described as a rogue guild, a guild that thrives on gaining a reputation – but not for being good and honorable but for being bad and doing whatever they feel like.

Most servers have one or a few of these guilds and they are always the source of huge amounts of discussions and complaints on the community message boards. While the majority of players harbor negative attitudes towards the rogue guilds, there are also players who are attracted by their boldness and attitude. The impact of these guilds on the servers is undisputable. Once a guild had publicly declared that they were not going to honor the event calendar, the initiative was in effect dead since it required backing from all parties to work as intended.

Things had, however, changed in the game world. New continents and monsters had been added to the game and the two dragons were no longer the most rewarding or prestigious targets. Since there were more possible targets to choose from, the need to take turns for the monsters was no longer as pressing. The issue of bottlenecks still existed though.

When the epic quests were introduced in The Ruins of Kunark – the first expansion of the game – many players wanted to kill the particular monsters that held the pieces they needed to complete the quest and receive the epic weapon for their

class of player. At the time the dragon Zordakalicus Ragefire, needed for the cleric epic, took several days to spawn again after it has been killed. The discrepancy between supply and demand created a severe bottleneck and according to [7] the waiting list for a shot at killing Ragefire was over a year on some servers. Other servers had no waiting list, but instead had to deal with large groups of players waiting around, hoping to engage the dragon first whenever it would spawn leading to a situation reminiscent of the one with Vox and Nagafen.

While the developers tried to eliminate some of the problems stemming from players fighting over limited resources by simply adding more content and making the end-game more diverse, they were reluctant to shorten the spawn time of Ragefire with the motivation that the cleric epic is a powerful item and that “in Everquest power and rarity usually go hand-in-hand.” [7]

The designers continuously have to deal with the trade-off between frustration and sense of accomplishment. If a quest is too easy in terms of time investment or manpower, the items gained from it will not be regarded as very special by the players. On the other hand there are players who know that they will never see large parts of the content of the game since they cannot make the commitment required. This leads to an ever changing environment where the developers try to find new ways of accommodating different styles of play with every new expansion of the game – at the same time as older content is under constant revision.

One of the defining traits of Everquest is that players exclusively fight against non-player characters and not against each others as in many MUDs and other MMOGs. In the endgame, however, when the selection of attractive targets becomes narrower, the guilds tend to turn against each other. While players still cannot directly fight each other, rivalling guilds are effectively competing for the monsters and the playing experience once again shifts for the individual player. Many players who initially were attracted to the game partly because of its non-competitive nature are deterred by this development and choose to never go into the endgame by not joining a raiding guild although their character has become strong enough to pass the entry requirements. Most of these players are bothered by the fact that there is a large number of zones and even larger number of monsters that they never will be able to see because it only is the raiding guilds that have the force required to reach those zones. Others thrive under these conditions and claim that it is at this point that the game truly begins.

6 The Final Level: Death

The following interaction took place in Plane of Knowledge, a hub in the game world that always is full of players, on a Saturday in September 2004. The names of the characters have been replaced with generic names. Since the communication in the game more or less constitutes a language of its own, I have added some explanatory remarks. All of this was said in the out of character channel which is a

way of reaching all players in a zone without having to use the more intrusive shout channel.

Monk says, 'Bye bye Everquesters... monk gona go FD [feign death is a monk specific ability used to fool monsters that you are dead] one last time in Qeynos [one of the hometowns]if i knew you, well met.....see you on EQ2 [Everquest 2] or WoW [World of Warcraft]'

Player 1 says, 'Bye Monk!'

Player 2 says, 'Take Care Monk.. gl [good luck] man'

Player 3 says, 'Fare Well MONk!!!'

Player 4 says, 'Bye Monk'

Player 5 says, 'Be safe mon'

Player 6 says, 'MONK NOOOOoooo not EQ2'

Player 7 says, 'Farewell friend'

Death is a constantly present part of life in Everquest. A character that dies in the game respawns at a predetermined location and can run back and reclaim the possessions from the dead body, only suffering a minor penalty to the experience level. But since there is no final goal to the game, the player will sooner or later have to make the decision to stop playing the game altogether. While the Everquest game system is constantly evolving and many additions have been made following requests from the player community, there is not a single line of code or advice written to help players who want to quit.

Once a player stops paying the monthly subscription fee, the character lingers on in a kind of limbo for an undisclosed period of time before eventually risking deletion from the database and being gone forever without a trace. I have come across many examples of how players react to and try to deal with this issue. Some players sell their characters for real money [4]. Others keep paying without playing or give away their characters. I have also encountered players paying for other people's accounts to keep those characters alive. There is even a guild called Zombies of EQ that works as a support groups for former Everquest players [8].

When Sony announced that the Planes of Power expansion to Everquest was going to include something called graveyards, my first thought was that they finally had addressed the issues of the inevitable death of characters in the game, but unfortunately these were only designated areas for corpses to respawn in order to make them easier to retrieve. But what if graveyards where players really could bury their characters when they are done with the game were implemented? Maybe a culture of funeral ceremonies would develop within the player community where friends and guild members could say farewell to the character in a way that would provide a sense of closure both for the player who is leaving the game as well as those who have developed a relationship to the player within the game. While a high score list is a fitting way for gamers to leave a trace from their encounter with a coin-op game, and a "hall of fame" website is a suitable addition to a racing game, the persistent nature of MMOGs creates special needs for the kind of traces the gamers should be able to leave behind them when they go.

7 Discussion and Conclusions

The world as a process

Everquest is both a game and a virtual world. As a game, it needs to drive the process of playing forward. Exactly what that process is can only be determined individually and at given points in time since different players have different motivations for playing and these motivations change over time. The most important driving force in the game, however, is to increase the abilities and experience level of one's character. The pursuit of experience points could be regarded in terms of a number of possible paths traversing geographical space. Right outside all hometowns are beginner areas with low level monsters that players can kill to gain the first few levels, but soon they need to move on through the world in order to keep the experience points rolling in. The issue of where to go next once the experience gain starts dropping off is a constantly hot topic among the players.

This gives rise to a need from the players to map the game landscape in two different ways. The first is the traditional geographical maps which show which zones are adjacent to each other and how to get from one place to another (figure 1). The second is a process-oriented description showing which zones provide the best trade-off between difficulty of the monsters and gain in experience.

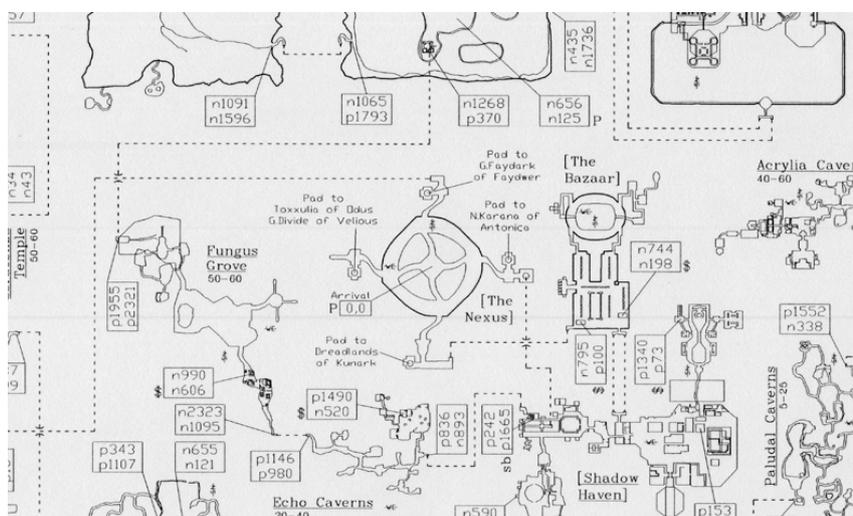


Figure 1. Area of a spatially oriented map of the moon Luclin.

While the first map shows the shortest way from one place in the virtual landscape to another, the second way of describing the world focuses on the optimal way to develop the statistics of your character. The process oriented progression through the game becomes even clearer in the high-end game. In figure 2 the high-end zones are ordered in a flow-chart telling players how to progress through the zones to finally get to the Plane of Time, the most rewarding zone in the game at the time

when this illustration was made. It also tells us that this world can be understood as a flow of people through the environment working their way towards their goals.

In the case of Everquest, the process that the world is there to support – or provide a pleasurable resistance against, depending on how you look at it – is the development of the player’s characters. The process oriented nature is, however, nothing unique for the MMOG game worlds. In earlier studies of general purpose virtual worlds I have come to the conclusion that virtual worlds need an activity of some kind to keep them going. The activity provides the driving force that propels the process on which the world depends forward. This should both help us understand the success of MMOGs and tell us something about how to create successful virtual worlds for other purposes.

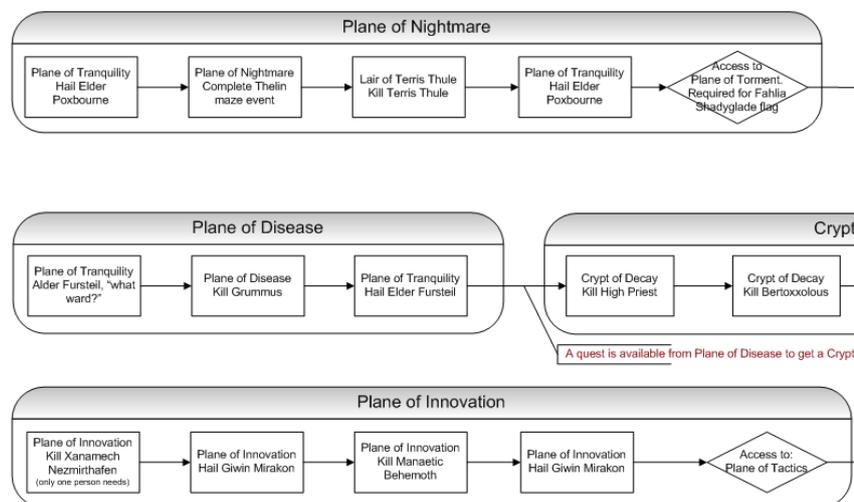


Figure 2. Excerpt from a process-oriented map showing how to get to the Plane of Time.

One world?

From the very beginning Everquest has struggled with the problem of its own popularity. For one thing, the number of players wanting to be in the same world at the same time leads to technical problems. Without any restrictions to the number of players that can be present at the same location at the same time, the fact that all the player’s movements and actions alter the state of the world which has to be distributed to everybody puts a big strain on the networking and processing power of both clients and servers. On top of that, the fairly advanced graphics in the game puts a strain on the rendering capabilities of the participants’ computers. All these factors contribute to a lag between the issuing of an action by the player and the actual execution of that action. This lag is of course especially annoying if your life is in the balance, which it often is when fighting monsters is on the agenda.

Besides making the technology handle all the people who want to play the game, there is also the issue of having enough content in the world for everyone as was

discussed in section 5. With the release of a number of expansions that all add more territory to explore and more monsters to fight, the developers have tried to reduce some of the bottlenecks on the paths of progression through the virtual landscape and create an alternative solution to the same problem as the event calendar aimed to resolve. In the fourth expansion – Planes of Power – the trend towards creating alternate progression routes was broken with the introduction of the so called flag progression path: The new zones were divided into tiers and access to higher tier zones was given by killing certain monsters in the lower tier zones giving the character a “flag” – an intangible check mark that works as a key to the next zone. The beginning of the flag progression path can be seen in figure 2. In the figure we can for instance see that a player has to kill the Manaetic Behemoth in the Plane of Innovation – a tier one zone – to get access to the tier two zone Plane of Tactics.

Again the focus of many players was turned towards the same monsters with traffic jams as the result. The rogue guilds found a particularly sinister way of benefiting from the situation. Since a guild cannot go to any zones beyond the zone they try flagging their members for, a rogue guild that already has that flag can reduce the competition in the zones they are hunting in by making sure that they kill the monster that gives the flags to get there whenever it spawns, an activity known as “cock blocking.”

The developers again reacted to the situation, but this time with a new strategy. Instead of creating a wider range of content, something called instanced zones was introduced. What makes the instanced zones special is that a new copy of the zone is created every time a group of players enter it. In Gates of Discord – the seventh expansion – progression through the new zones is based on the completion of a number of “trials.” These trials take place in instanced zones - which means that a guild can begin a particular trial and another guild can arrive five minutes later and start the same trial. For each guild, an instance of the same zone with the same monsters in it is created. The need to wait for particular monsters to re-spawn is thereby eliminated, as is the possibility of blocking other guilds by keeping monsters inaccessible.

The instanced zones, however, break one of the more fundamental principles of virtual world design. This principle – we can call it the singular world rule – states that all the participants are part of the same geographical world and if two participants go to the same place in that world, they will meet each other. This rule was in one sense broken already from the beginning of Everquest since there are a number of servers all running their separate copy of the game world. But the instanced zones further weaken the concept of a singular world that all participants are part of. Here the players can still communicate with each other and thus share the same social space, but if they are not part of the same instance, they cannot meet with each other.

In the eighth and latest (as of this writing) expansion – Gates of Discord – the developers have once more adjusted the direction of the development of the world and moved away from instanced zones. Alan Crosby, Community manager of Everquest explains the change like this. “We do feel that the task system [quests

given on demand] is a better solution than instanced zones, as they will not remove you from the community and isolate you in a little area by yourself. With tasks you remain a part of the world at large.” [9]

The singular world rule has not been debated much in the past. It has always been seen as desirable by the virtual world design community; maybe because it seems to dominate virtual world fiction completely. But when a world becomes as large as the worlds the science fiction authors write about, we realize that there is a distinct difference between design ideals and the best solution in practice. In this regard, Everquest works as an interesting test-bed for virtual world design concepts.

Researchers at the door step

In game reviews and research presentations alike, it is very common to hear references to character creation, exploration of the hometown and endless killing of low-level monsters such as rats, snakes, and spiders. The problem with these descriptions of the game is that it does not capture the typical experience of the game for the people who actually play it. You only create your character once, and although you can make more characters, most players only ever make a few and put substantial play time into even fewer. Once the character is created, however, it can be developed for years and years within the game. By character development I do not just mean the way the statistics of the character such as experience level, skills and abilities are developed. More importantly, the social networks within the game that are slowly developed over time contribute significantly both to the possibilities of success in the game as well as a rich and rewarding gaming experience.

As I have tried to show in this text, the experience of the game changes dramatically based on where in the process the player is. This is easily overlooked since the layers existing beyond the current position are in many ways hidden to the player. I myself have several times thought that I had reached a status quo where the gaming experience would not change dramatically again – only to be proven wrong by continued play. The understanding of the properties of the game world goes hand in hand with a more developed experience of the game as a player. I understand that not everyone can spend years on the same object of study and I do believe that there is a place for snapshot observations of game worlds and game cultures. My point is rather that there are things to be seen that cannot come through any other process than immersion over long periods of time.

It's all about the learning

If you ask Everquest players why the game appeals to them you will find a more or less even mix between exploration, achievement, socialization, empowerment and escapism. This list pretty well corresponds to the typical ideas of what games in general provide to their players. If you instead look at what the players do, you realize that much of the activities revolve around learning more about the game world and passing on that information to other players.

Studying tactics for how to defeat certain monsters or how to get to a certain place is typically thought of as a meta-activity by the gamers themselves. It is something that is needed to do in order to advance in the game, but not considered gaming as such. It is perhaps not surprising that the learning aspect is diminished when gaming pleasures are discussed since learning can be connected to work, school and studies – which is exactly what a significant portion of the Everquest players want to get away from when they play. It is nevertheless always present in the gaming activities and a substantial time is spent on learning more and more about the game world. Reputation in the game is also closely associated to the knowledge a player has about zone geography, the value of tradable items, tactics for killing monsters or the history of other guilds and players.

After two years of playing and studying the game I have started to interest myself more and more in questions connected to leaving the game and have begun to interview people who contemplate or have decided to leave the game after having played for a long time. In these interviews the issue of learning plays a strong, almost dominating, role. Most players connect the loss of passion for the game with having seen as much of it as they can hope to see at their level of play and having so much knowledge about the game that it in some regard has become transparent to them and therefore lost its mystical appeal.

This is where my two roles in the game merge. Both the quest of satisfying my needs as a player and my quest to grasp the structures of the game are tightly connected to knowledge and understanding of the world, and to reaching a point where my experiences have reached a state of saturation. I have several times experienced that I have reached a point where I know what I need to know and that it has become time to move on to the next study. But every time I have found new information or some aspect of the game that I had been previously unaware of, and I have been pulled back in again. After years of playing more than an hour every day on average I have to conclude that virtual worlds not only can be seen as processes as well as places but also that these are processes are in a constant state of change and development; they are dynamic. This means that the inside view always can be developed further by continued participation as long as the world continues to exist.

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