

The Significance of Character Generation and Customisation in MOGs

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Abstract

In this paper the player characters in Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MOGs) are analyzed from an end-user perspective, for the purpose of understanding the implications of complex character generation systems, through a breakdown of player and player character relationships and of their significance in game play relationships.

In particular I am looking at the increasingly significant role that the customisation of player characters has in allowing players to experience freedom within MOGs. Character generation systems are a game design feature that is responsive to people's needs and desires as a [role]player, and as a member of a community. These systems acknowledge that player input and customization is an important factor in creating deeper multiple relationships within the game world. This paper expands upon the in-game relationships between the user and the player character, the player character and other players, and the player within online game communities.

1 Introduction

Much discussion of current and future MOG design, by game designers, is concerned with community structures and individual roles for players within these. When asked his opinion on the keys to successful community building, Rich Vogel, ex-producer of Ultima Online and currently the executive producer of Star Wars Galaxies, put personal and social player identity as a top priority[7]. It is the character generation systems and the potential for in-game character development/advancement that allows for large communities of people to establish and develop embodied identities within each game space

In an often referred to paper; a 2001 key note address [6], Harvey Smith of ION Storm speaks of immersive games as being 'currently positioned on the cusp of something almost unrecognizably different'. Smith focuses on 'deeper levels of simulation' and talks

about the ways this opens up games to emergent behaviors, where the player finds a freer experience of game play and is more likely to act in ways unforeseen by the designers. Within these forecast MOG environments (of a certain scale, and with character generation systems of a certain level of sophistication), players ideally have space to socialise, grow and explore, within a responsive live world.

Of particular interest is the underlying importance of the users' experience of 'freedom' within Massive Multi Player Online Game worlds, specifically through character generation and development. This is approached by analysing players' in-game experiences in current MOGs and considering the current processes by which players develop their online entities, and interface with other players and the world. Through outlining these features and functions, and discussing the broader game-play requirements, we are able to highlight the features that give users the freedom to control their online persona and tap into the world around them. These features open the door to a game-state where it is possible to choose a range of directions and develop mutually beneficial and sustained in-game relationships.

2 Character Generation Systems

Massive Multiplayer Online Gaming is taking character generation and development to new levels, and catering to player's desire to be represented as a unique entity within highly populated worlds. The depth of the systems—intrinsic to the openly designed MOG worlds—produces communities of increasingly sophisticated characters.

The player characters who inhabit a self contained, persistent, populated game world differ from those of other gaming genres. Traditional character design elements including visual style, physiological attributes and costume, personality and convincing motion [1] as discussed by Tony Gard, are still vital to their design. However, MOG characters are neither simply fixed individual characters like you might see in story-based linear adventures, nor team characters as

seen in online team-based 'shoot 'em ups'. Indeed they are both. MOG characters consist of assembled components of character generation systems. They are an amalgamation of units chosen by differing player personalities, which take the character traits in unique directions. These character generation systems have enough depth to allow thousands of players to create and retain and develop a character that is uniquely their own, and yet still continuous with the world.

Online characters take time and effort to put together because of personal investment and other non-retractable decisions made by the user. The character generation system is the front end of a MOG. Before playing a title, you embark on the character selection process, which comprises a number of decisions where you choose from a collection of skill-based, political and appearance-based options. The player's appearance is decided through physiology, gender, clothes, and a name. The detail level of in-game characters and the player's ability to customize the appearance of their character is increasing with the graphic sophistication of the game-worlds.

The release of each MOG aims to impress players through the sophistication and style of the player characters. Looking specifically at the head of a player character as an example, Everquest [released in 1999] within a class set offered selections of facial features such as face type, hair, eyes and facial hair, and limited color swatches for selecting hair color, and facial hair color. In Anarchy Online's [released June 2001] character selection, you are offered a choice of around 20 heads within your class and gender character set. These heads incorporate a hairstyle and face markings. Earth and Beyond [released September 2002], gives the option to individually altering skin color, hair colour, hair style, piercings, and eye colour with RGD sliders, and also has scalable and place-able markings. Star Wars Galaxies [in development] has spoken of the ability to fine-tune the modeled facial characteristics of their characters down to the detail level of the shape of a nostril. Through detailed customization of player characters, players are given increasing scope to design an embodied online identity.

Your skill base and political alignments within the game world is decided—in current MOGs—from inside the character selection interface. Each of these has tiers of effects on your experience as a player and your experience of the world by predetermining alliances and abilities. Importantly, the strengths and abilities of your character also determines which role you take in team play. Before making these decisions players usually reach outside the game world and scan official and fan-based sites to gather information on the possibilities offered. The two standard character development formats are 'class-based' and 'skill-based' systems. In a 'class based' system, used in

most MOGs, eg Everquest and Anarchy Online the character skill sets are predetermined and the result is that players work within pre set roles, a system highly encouraging groups. A 'skill-based' system, more often found in single player titles allows players to build player characters with an open selection of multiple combinations. Both options lead to enduring or high level characters being comprised of the most efficient template for acquiring in-game rewards.

Current MOGs lock you into the skill base you initially select. In 'class-based' systems you select a profession with predetermined abilities, and in a 'skill based' system although presented with more options, specialisation provides access to more focused skills. A player interested in game play centred around exploring would choose a multi-skilled profession with an emphasis on mobility and outdoor skills, as opposed to a player interested in being a specialised fighter whose abilities focus on slaying and stamina—a key skill for battle-centric team play. Interestingly, many players have more than one character, giving them a deeper experience of the world through contrasting styles of game play, and seeing different parts of the world through the position of various alliances. Political alignments have the role of encouraging group play by instigating an 'us and them' scenario, and uniting large numbers of people under a common banner.

Many MOGs in development are expanding character development beyond the locked-down 'class based' models that have their routes in traditional role-playing games. Diversifying team roles, and creating flexibility is a focus of Star Wars Galaxies and Horizons, whose character advancement techniques allow players to switch professions in-game, rather than the current method for switching characters—which is to start a new character. While these advances in character development are expansions of current systems, rather than alternative approaches, that deliver the player an experience with greater diversity and continuity.

With the decisions involved in the character selection behind them, the player enters the game world. The initial experience in-game is of seeing the character contextualized by the game space and the other players. The player begins the process of familiarising him/herself with the character's locomotive and expressive actions, accessing and using the communication channels, and initiating game-play. The dominant player character set-up in MOGs is a humanoid bipedal character that exhibits realistic and hyper-real human gestures and motions. While chat is the most sophisticated form of inter-character communication, the character's actions can convey degrees of expression. Player characters have body emotes such as waving, dancing and doing back flips, that are enacted by the player character at the players discretion.

Largely they are 'cute' functions with no application to game play in current MOGs, so are used largely to amuse or to enact a response in another player character. Ways of using the player character's movement and action range from standard getting about and fighting to mimicking standard body language, such as jumping up and down on the spot to show someone where you are when meeting in a crowded square.

3 Relationships Between the Player Character and Other Players

Multi-player gaming environments are largely about the enjoyment of occupying a world full of other player characters and the team play that comes with that. Indeed, usually the first thing you look for in a new MOG are other players, or more specifically, whether there are many of them. The variety of social interactions occurring within the world outlines the breadth of social interaction; from the camaraderie of missioning with team mates, wrangling for information, sensing onlookers, engaging in idle banter and many more. It is often through observing other characters and interaction with them that the potential of the world is revealed. The freedom of choice and diversity offered through character generation and development is evidenced in every character you see. These characters display information about themselves; personal style, status and alliances are evident in the range of outfits and items acquired along the way and paraded by the crowds. The people you chat with pass along much information, from how to navigate around the world, to particular methods of character development. Through the information at your disposal, and depending on your interests or intentions that day or moment you are able to choose if or how to engage in contact with other players.

Within a MOG game space, interaction with other players is at once a human-to-human and a character-to-character exchange. Here the physical, social, and political signifiers are at work in MOG communities that operate in real world communities, but they are mediated by the fact that people extend their persona into an imaginary situation. Generally people don't want to discuss the real world but are present in game to uphold and be immersed within the continuity of the game world. In-game information exchanged in MOGs, such as Anarchy Online, is fluid. Players can quickly derive a lot of information about characters within their field of view. A character's visual appearance, alignments and skill level are a badge of the player's passage through the game, such as how long they have been playing for, their affiliations in the game world, and whether they are a danger to you. Their appearance can even tell you something about their sense of humor. The ability to access information about other characters gives you solid ground on which to initiate contact. Pulling up the character's

statistics gives you exact details of the character's breed, gender, profession, level, political alignment, and clan or guild membership. This allows you to hypothesise whether you can get information from this player, if will they be interested in conversation, if it is possible to form a team and so on. Similarities often build alliances: i.e. teaming up with a player around the same level allows both players the benefit of team play.

In-game facilitation of player-to-player and player-to-world communication in MOG worlds makes them highly connected places. Communicating via multiple text chat channels gives you multiple communication levels, covering public and private, local and global domains. Game developers often say the best source of information on a game is the players themselves. Conversation, meeting and trading with people beyond your site range are all reliant on the chat channels. Your character is a savvy, well-wired collection of communication ports, communicating on a macro and a micro level simultaneously. It is not uncommon to stand in a crowded area where the chatter is broadcast through the vicinity channel, while you talk privately with a friend who is two cities away. At the same time you can scan for a new acquisition on the global broadcast shopping channel.

Being part of a group allows access to team play and its rewards, skill sharing and other team benefits. As Mike Sellers [5] discusses, groups—both temporary or permanent—are the basis for 'social bonds' for MOGs. Sellers outlines the principles of facilitating the creation and support of groups and group roles, and their importance in a dynamic, live, sustained worlds. Methods of grouping vary depending on the permanency of the group and the style of game-play. Temporary groups, where you team up with other players who answer your 'looking for team' broadcast across the game world, give you an instant team for an evening session. Sometimes the result is great; other times requests are left hanging in the air, or people leave along the way. Permanent groups, or guilds offer an organized solution through sustained relations with other players in a formalized approach to group dynamics. The consistent and sustained relations offered through these constructs can occur over months and years.

The alteration of player character appearance—requiring secret knowledge—is powerful in the game world. Players can exploit the system by degrees and this either regarded favourably, or as 'illegal' by game producers and in-game communities. Tweaks of the system that do not effect the underlying structure of the game play—such as changing the visual effect on characters—offer memorable and retold moments that you take away from a game space. In Anarchy Online, the ability to become very small is really powerful. Miniaturising your player character so that

it is not much higher than a regular player character's ankle or knee displays a hidden knowledge; marking you as a player with ability to access and use hidden knowledge.

4 The Player Within Online In-game Communities

MOG gaming sessions are unique because of the live people and events encountered within them. Online gaming worlds are bounded networked communities, places where players gather, participate in and share a locality, its practices and its social constructs. As discussed by Mizuko Ito [3], networked and geographically disparate players can compete and socialise in a world space and community that is continuous with other social places, and has its own practices and discourses. By defining networked localities as such Mizuko Ito's stance outlines the strengths and attraction of players to the living breathing localities that are MOGs.

Much press has been given to MOGs as the fastest growing gaming genre, one that is gaining increasing social significance. The popularity of these worlds is evident through the user bases of the market leader. South Korean gaming company NCSoft's Lineage — a Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), has the largest subscriber base of any user-pays online content in the world, with four million subscribers. Two of the foundation games for this generation of MOGs have subscriber bases in the hundreds of thousands: Ultima Online currently counts 225,000, and Everquest has 430,000 subscribers. These massively popular games, built around RPG gaming experiences, are all never-ending worlds that offer diverse ways to inhabit and participate with others in a collective game space.

There is no distinction between virtual and real world economics and legal systems in MOGs. Ownership and intellectual property issues have been raised, possibly because players invest a great deal of time and experience in building their player characters, while producers are keen to retain control of their world and all its assets, the detailed bodies and in-game artifacts. This says a lot about the depth of game play. As mentioned by Reynolds [4], when the player characters become increasingly customizable and therefore more and more personalised, the intellectual property of in-game content has to be re-addressed by game publishers. The legality of the sale and trade of in-game items from current MOGs was tested in the courts in 2002, when the Blacksnow Interactive verses Mythic Entertainment case represented a litmus test for the ownership of player-created content. The case centered around the emergence of virtual economies and their exports into the real world, where in-game characters and artifacts are sold for real currency, which routinely occurs on e-Bay and through other online auc-

tions. It was ruled that the terms of the End User License Agreement and the included arbitration clause gave Mythic the right to prevent the sale of their in-game content. End-user license agreements of games such as Everquest and AOL now specifically state that selling, buying or auctioning characters, items, coin or copyrighted material violates the end user license agreement, and is therefore illegal practice. Despite this, trade continues, and with the increasing levels of player-created content, the issue continues to be debated.

Increasingly, the facilities available to players in-game are expanding, a current example being the information on game play being embedded into the game world itself. In line with the depth of the game play and the time and the dedication invested by players over long periods of time there is a large resource of online services available for any given MOG. Official and unofficial game-specific sites, portals dedicated to the MOGs genre [e.g. <http://www.stratics.com>] all provide information, commentary and forums around in-game structures and events. Within MOGs currently in development, Neocron allows you to access information relating to game play through in-game terminals—continuity that allows you to remain in-character, in-game to scout around for information rather than leaving the game space. This further expands the parameters of the MOG world. The link between on-line connectivity within game space, and a further folding of the real world into the virtual occurs.

5 Conclusion

People's motivation to be unique, to explore social landscapes, to learn and evolve, and to take control of one's life within the game begins with character generation systems. Mass populations comprised of players and their characters—with their own cultures and nuances—are the results desired by game designers. By discussing the design and uses of in-game character generation systems, ongoing character customization, and the character's place in the world I am looking to understand the end results in current MOG worlds and the systems that implement them. By looking at the use of player characters and their impact on in-game relationships, developing understanding of character design for future MOG worlds that look towards providing a game-play experience with a depth and complexity paralleling the players 'lived life'. In particular, I seek to understand future character generation systems that use increasingly more realistic graphics, and produce increasingly simulated bodies that are 'living' in these 'networked localities'. Localities with community, legal and economic systems that are as material as those in the players' 'lived' life.

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