

## **The Learning Guild: MMORPGs as Educational Environments<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

There are currently more than 25 million people playing MMORPGs<sup>3</sup> (Massively Multi-player Online Role-Playing Games).<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most famous MMORPG in the Western world is EverQuest,<sup>5</sup> which launched in 1999 and quickly became a huge success. Its sequel, EverQuest II (EQ2),<sup>6</sup> was released in 2004 and will be used for illustrative purposes throughout this paper.

In EQ2, players explore a rich 3D environment set in the fictional, geographically vast world of Norrath. A player can create multiple characters by choosing from a variety of classes and races (e.g., humans, trolls, dwarves, elves, etc.). They interact with other real players and computer-generated NPCs (Non-Player Characters) and embark upon quests for treasure and experience points, which are a measure of a character's advancement and improvement in skills.

Players can choose to play solo, find pick-up groups of random players, or join a guild. Guilds are associations of players who choose to come together to achieve common goals. These goals might be social, monetary, or military. Guilds are composed of a Guild Leader, the Guild Officers (whose duties can be varied), and Guild Members. Since some quests cannot be completed without a group, guilds often function as a ready-made pool of players who have already established a relationship with each other and who will group together to accomplish quests that are difficult to solo.

This essay will explore the use of MMORPGs, and especially MMORPG guilds, as educational environments.

### **The Purpose of Educational Environments**

Educational environments have been evaluated on a variety of characteristics. However, the fundamental purpose of an educational environment is to facilitate learning. In order to do that, they must exhibit, among others, the following features:

- *Reality*: the educational environment is close enough to reality that students can easily see how to apply the knowledge they gain from the educational environment to the real world
- *Safety*: the educational environment provides a safe buffer to the real world so that students can make mistakes without fear of injuring themselves or anyone in the real world (physically or emotionally)
- *Control*: the educational environment is under the constant supervision and control of experienced, accountable adults
- *Efficiency*: the educational environment imparts knowledge to learners more efficiently than just random experience(s) in the real world

Each of these features will be examined within the framework of MMORPGs.

At first glance, MMORPGs would seem to have less reality than traditional classrooms since MMORPGs are fantasy-based games set in virtual worlds. Upon closer inspection, however, MMORPGs expose learners to reality in ways not possible in the traditional classroom. For example, MMORPGs are populated with real people who have their own agendas. In addition, it is quite easy to become immersed in the virtual world of an MMORPG while it is very difficult to pretend that a traditional classroom is anything other than a classroom. In stark contrast to traditional classrooms, the psychologically addictive qualities of MMORPGs have received some attention in the press and have been the subject of a number of researchers.<sup>7</sup>

MMORPGs obviously offer more physical safety than traditional classroom environments. Anything, even dying, can be quickly and easily reversed in a virtual environment. Given the trends in school violence, this may be a significant advantage. Every year, nearly 2 million students are victims of violence in U.S. schools. In two recent academic years, a total of 85 young people died violently in schools.<sup>8</sup> MMORPGs also offer certain emotional safety features that are not present in traditional classrooms. For example, role-playing allows students to engage in activities without fear of failure or repercussions to their real-life persona. Shy students or students who are not natural risk-takers can benefit from this feature of MMORPGs.

Due to the presence of real people who are not under the control of anyone, MMORPGs offer less control than most traditional classrooms. It could be argued that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Teacher-controlled classrooms are a by-product of the industrial age where mass-production of identical products was the ultimate goal. Having every student on the same page of the same textbook every day of the school year is an example of this kind of thinking. With the advent of the Information Age and the possibility of customization of learning, this no longer seems like a desirable goal. As long as the educational goals of the MMORPG experience are clear, the lack of direct teacher control does not appear problematic. The less teacher control, the more likely learners are to take ownership of their own learning. Those MMORPG players with the desire to learn more and advance quicker take a great deal of time to research their virtual character and virtual world with real world sources (e.g., Web sites, books, other players) in an attempt to more efficiently utilize their virtual gaming time.

The efficiency of MMORPGs as educational environments has not been tested, mainly because they have not been used as such in any systematic way, although there have been a few experiments.<sup>9</sup> It is our belief that once MMORPGs are sufficiently tested that they will prove to be very efficient learning environments. The next section will discuss a few strategies for utilizing MMORPGs as learning environments and for maximizing their efficiency.

### **Strategies for Using MMORPGs as Educational Environments**

MMORPGs, such as EQ2, are fully formed and fully functional worlds, albeit virtual ones. To utilize them as educational environments requires the instructional designer to create an online portal, an entryway controlled by the instructor. Such a portal must contain a backstory or explanation of who the student is and the role he or she will play within the course and within the MMORPG. In order to maximize the benefits of MMORPGs, it is extremely important to maintain the metaphor of the game and to create explanations and roles that are consistent with the backstory and the roles embedded in the MMORPG.

In addition to the backstory and roles, the instructional designer must create quests (assignments) that are consistent with the MMORPG. These quests should be able to be completed by (a) individual characters, (b) groups of individual characters, (c) collections of characters (guilds), and (d) groups of collections (i.e., multi-guild quests). Below are some examples of these kinds of quests in the area of economics (EQ2 has a market economy):

1. There is a rumor of a very rich player who is trying to become even richer by creating a monopoly on certain unnamed raw materials. Select ten raw materials and track their prices on the market for the next two weeks. Identify any raw materials that you think are being manipulated by forces beyond normal supply and demand.
2. There have been complaints that weaponsmiths are price-gouging by colluding on weapon prices. Form a group of 6 players and calculate the production costs of 6 different types of weapons. Survey a representative sample of crafters to ascertain normal labor prices. Identify any price-gouging weaponsmiths.
3. You are a member of a guild that is trying to develop a strategy for investing guild wealth. As a guild, analyze the economic trends and the factors affecting the EQ2 economy and create a forecast for future economic trends. Develop a set of recommendations to guide the guild's investments.
4. Analyze the economic position of at least ten other guilds. Identify as many areas as possible where it might be possible to cooperate with these guilds in order to improve the economic position of both your own guild and another guild. Create a plan to do this and present it to the other guild(s).

The instructional designer must also decide how to organize the learners. Depending on the goal(s) of the instructor, students could be 1) assigned to be members of a guild that is already created for them (a Learning Guild), 2) directed to create a single guild for all course members, 3) allowed to join any guild they wish or to not join a guild at all (be un-guilded). There are a number of advantages and disadvantages to each of these approaches, but these options are just one example of how MMORPGs offer certain opportunities that are not available in traditional educational environments. It is, of course, possible in a traditional classroom to organize students into small groups or have the class work as a group or even give students the option of whether to join a group. However, it is not possible in a traditional classroom to duplicate an entire world populated by real people (who are not in school) and all the myriad possibilities as well as realities that an MMORPG offers.

One of the problems of utilizing MMORPGs as an educational environment is that the game experience is very different at the upper levels of the game than at the lower levels of the game. In addition, it takes many hundreds of hours to reach the upper levels of the game. Thus, if it is deemed important for students to have upper level experiences, then it may be necessary to provide them with characters that are already advanced to the necessary level. In fact, if it is important for students to experience every level of the game then it might be necessary to provide them with different characters at different levels (note that every EQ2 account can contain 6 different characters each of which has two dimensions – adventurer and crafter). For example:

1. Level 0 – students can create their own character
2. Level 10 Predator and Level 50 Woodworker
3. Level 20 Fighter and Level 30 Jeweler
4. Level 30 Paladin and Level 20 Armorsmith
5. Level 40 Wizard and Level 40 Tailor
6. Level 50 Ranger and Level 10 Craftsman

Thus, students could be exposed to different game levels as well as different game activities without having to invest more time than could possibly be expected in a single semester.

Depending on the goal(s), the instructor can choose to play several roles: (a) guild leader, (b) guild member, (c) a member of another guild, (d) a non-guilded player, or (d) a non-player. There are instructional advantages and disadvantages for each of these roles and it is possible for an instructor to

play all of these roles if he or she creates several different EQ2 characters. Clearly, one obvious advantage of MMORPGs over traditional educational environments is the ability of the instructor to develop a much richer perspective on the educational environment by playing these different possible roles instead of being limited to just the perspective of the instructor.

### **MMORPGs and Academic Content**

The biggest question educators have with using MMORPGs as educational environments is how to deliver their academic content. There are a number of different possible approaches. First, multi-disciplinary subjects are a natural in a virtual world that is just as complicated as the real world. However, it is also possible to study individual traditional subjects as well. For example, below is a small sample of subjects that could be studied within EQ2:

- Economics: EQ2 has its own monetary and market system that players who want to acquire the best in-game items must master.
- Geography: EQ2 has a vast geography with many lands that offer different kinds of topography and transportation systems.
- History: EQ2 has a detailed history of the world of Norrath and its inhabitants.
- Psychology: EQ2 has real players from around the world that must constantly interact with other players and the virtual environment.
- Sociology: EQ2 has groups and guilds that must constantly interact with each other and their environment.
- Anthropology: EQ2 has many different classes and races, each with their own cultures.
- Language: EQ2 has many unique concepts and words (many of them acronyms) as well as many unique beings (e.g., fairies, giants, gnolls), each with their own language.
- Physics: EQ2 has its own physical laws, most of which are similar, but not identical, to the real world.
- Philosophy: EQ2 offers a fertile environment for discussions of ethics, cosmology, metaphysics, etc.

In addition to the subjects above, EQ2 offers its own slant on geology, biology, chemistry, botany, religion, politics and many other traditional subjects.

Instructors could choose to establish guilds to study a single subject or to tackle multi-disciplinary problems. It would even be possible to establish several guilds, each of which would study one aspect of a multi-disciplinary problem and then co-operate on a final project. The opportunities for the study of academic content within MMORPGs are just as rich as they are in the real world.

### **Conclusion**

Eighty-one percent of today's teenagers play video games.<sup>10</sup> Educational environments are competing with those video game environments whether they want to or not. But, some would say, why not try to reproduce those video game environments within the educational community instead of using existing commercial environments such as EQ2? The answer is quite simple. MMORPGs such as EQ2 cost millions of dollars and years of development to produce. Individual educators have no chance of creating courses that could compete with commercial MMORPGs. Even entire educational institutions do not have the money or talent to compete with commercial corporations such as SONY Online Entertainment (the parent company for EQ2).

It is also true that there are MMORPG “engines” that allow programmers to modify the content.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is possible to build an MMORPG course utilizing one of these engines. However, the amount of money and time to do so would still be staggering and some of the features of existing commercial MMORPGs would be eliminated (e.g., millions of players, real players with their own agendas, etc.) Clearly, both the cheapest and highest quality option is to use environments such as EQ2 to deliver educational content, rather than designing uniquely educational MMORPGs.

MMORPGs obviously represent some very interesting and educationally powerful environments. It is up to educators to harness both their entertainment value and their power. Perhaps the first step is for more instructors to become familiar with MMORPGs. We invite you to join us on the Mistmoore server of EQ2. Just send an in-game tell to Elgeir (Dr. Riegle) or Visionaree (Mr. Matejka).<sup>12</sup>

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is the third in a series of essays on the implications of MMORPGs for education. See <http://coe.ilstu.edu/rpriegle/mmorpg/> for other essays on this topic.
- <sup>2</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 10 January 2006 <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=guild>.
- <sup>3</sup> Woodcock, Bruce. “An Analysis of MMOG Subscription Rates.” 10 January 2006 <http://pw1.netcom.com/~sirbruce/Subscriptions.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> For more information on MMORPGs, see “MMORPG.” Wikipedia. 10 January 2006 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MMORPG>.
- <sup>5</sup> “EverQuest.” Sony. 10 January 2006 <http://eqlive.station.sony.com/>.
- <sup>6</sup> “EverQuest II.” Sony. 10 January 2006 <http://everquest2.station.sony.com/>.
- <sup>7</sup> See for example Yee, Nicholas. “The Daedalus Gateway.” 10 January 2005 [http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/gateway\\_intro.html](http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/gateway_intro.html).
- <sup>8</sup> See National School Safety Center. “Review of School Safety Research.” 10 January 2005 <http://www.nssc1.org/studies/statistic%20resourcespdf.pdf> for more statistics on school violence.
- <sup>9</sup> See Delwiche, Aaron. “MMORPG's in the College Classroom.” Trinity University. 2003. 10 January 2005 <http://www.nyls.edu/pdfs/delwiche.pdf> for what we believe is the first use of MMORPGs as an educational environment.
- <sup>10</sup> Lenhart, Amanda, Madden, Mary, and Hitlin, Paul. “Teens and Technology: Youth are Leading the Transition to a Fully Wired and Mobile Nation.” Pew Internet & American Life Project, 6 July 2003. 10 January 2006 [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Teens\\_Tech\\_July2005web.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Tech_July2005web.pdf).
- <sup>11</sup> For more information on modifying existing games, see “Mod (computer gaming).” Wikipedia. 10 January 2006 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mod\\_\(computer\\_gaming\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mod_(computer_gaming)).
- <sup>12</sup> We would like to thank Joseph Kurbec, aka Arturias, the leader of the EQ2 Guild, The Exiled, for reviewing this essay for accuracy and suggesting several important improvements.