

Play Time: An Overview of the MMORPG Genre

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Abstract

This work provides a broad overview of the origins and character of the massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) genre. The genealogy of MMORPG is traced through ‘pen & paper’ roleplaying games, text adventure games, and MUDs. The activities of MMORPG players are briefly discussed, with attention given to exploration, combat, craft, and socializing. Finally, the general nature of MMORPG play is outlined, particularly the player’s attempts to transcend game-imposed limitations by improving their character’s abilities.

1 Introduction

Recent years have brought growth and change to the computer game industry. The popularity of home computers has made it cheaper and easier to play games. New game genres have brought fresh players to the market. Increases in computing power have made practical the most ambitious designs, games that convincingly model worlds both real and imaginary, and portray them with minutely detailed, eye-catching graphics.

As the game industry has grown, so has the internet. By joining computers together, the internet joins people as well, and thus a new input is supplied to the game industry: sociality. The output of this union — a class of entertainment called ‘online games’ — takes many forms, from computerized versions of classic board and card games, to the latest in pyrotechnic, virtual carnage. Many such games are free, or charge one-time fees for play; others charge subscription fees. Some feature gambling with real or ‘virtual’ money. What these games share — and what they offer prospective users — is a massive network of human players, players to talk with, to make friends and enemies of, and of course, to compete against.

One genre within this thriving industry is the MMORPG, or ‘Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game’. The first MMORPG launched in 1996². Since that time, the MMORPG industry has grown tremendously in size and importance. As of 2004, one American game, *EverQuest*,

serves over four hundred thousand players³. *Lineage* and *Lineage II*, both South Korean games, host more than four million accounts between them⁴ (Woodcock 2004). Other notable MMORPG include *Ultima Online*, *Dark Age of Camelot*, and *Star Wars Galaxies*; many more have been recently released or are in production.

The following pages outline the origin of the MMORPG genre, the nature of the player’s activities within that world, and the game mechanics that support those activities.

2 History

The origins of MMORPG gaming can be traced, ultimately, to the mid-seventies.

2.1 ‘Pen & Paper RPG’

The first roleplaying game or ‘RPG’, *Dungeons & Dragons*, was published in 1974. In this and other ‘pen-and-paper’ roleplaying games, the game world exists within the collective imagination of the players and a ‘gamemaster’⁵, who is part storyteller, part referee, and part god. Before play begins, the gamemaster sets the scene by devising an ‘adventure’ for the players, complete with fictional locale, monsters and other ‘non-player characters’, and some plot device to motivate the characters. The gamemaster oversees the players’ actions, describing events within the game, interpreting rules, providing hints, and improvising where necessary. While character development — particularly the increase of skills and abilities — is an important focus in most such games, players are expected to play their characters as roles rather than mere tokens, imbuing them with personality and weaknesses not necessarily their own⁶. As such, roleplaying games are neither ‘won’ nor ‘lost’; the players’ goal is simply to create (and participate in) a compelling narrative.

1. Thanks to David Kennerly and Brask Mumei for their many insightful comments.

2. Two MMORPG were introduced in 1996: an American game, *Meridian 59*, and a South Korean game, *The Kingdom of the Winds*. Accounts differ as to which launched first.

3. Of which, on an average night, as many as one hundred thousand are logged in and playing at the same time.

4. Because many of these accounts are actually held by internet cafés (which, in turn, rent them to players), it is difficult to say just how many play these games.

5. Or ‘dungeon master’, in *D&D* parlance.

6. In fact, most games mandate a certain level of roleplaying by making skill specialization integral to the ruleset.

RPG rulesets vary tremendously in scale. Some are little more than narrative frameworks, party games almost; others constrain or dictate play at a very low level. Though fantasy is perhaps the most popular genre, many variations and combinations of genre have been used in RPG, particularly science-fiction and horror.

2.2 Text adventure games

Around 1975, software engineer William Crowther — himself a *D&D* player — created a computer game called *Adventure* (Jerz). The first of numerous ‘text adventure’ games⁷, its interface consists entirely of text: the game world is described with simple prose, and the player acts by entering one or two word commands (e.g., ‘take lamp’) which their game persona follows. Though perhaps influenced by *D&D*, there is little possibility of character development or distinct play style here, and hence, no roleplaying *per se*. The game is, rather, a collection of puzzles; the player finds and uses game objects in more or (frequently) less logical ways to overcome scripted obstacles. Once the final puzzle is completed, the player has won and the game ends.

Though crude by modern standards, *Adventure*’s natural language interface enables a flexible, comfortable style of interaction that enthalls players even today. By exploiting the simple and obvious power of language, *Adventure* created one of the first computer-mediated virtual worlds.

2.3 MUDs

A few years later, a group of Computer Science students at the University of Essex (lead by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle, another *D&D* player) set about creating their own ‘adventure’ (Cuciz). To the standard text adventure model they added simplified versions of certain *D&D* rules, and more importantly, multiplayer support, the game being run from a central server and accessed by players with telnet clients. They called their game *MUD1*, short for ‘Multi-User Dungeon’, a game that — like *Adventure* — gave name and inspiration to a genre that still survives.

Superficially, MUDs are much like adventure games; the player acts by reading and entering text, and much of the game involves the solution of puzzle-oriented adventures or ‘quests’. Unlike *Adventure*, however, *MUD1* and its many descendants⁸ provide an audience of human players to interact with, along with detailed character development systems. As a result, they present excellent fora for roleplaying.

While some large MUDs charge players for access, most are free, non-commercial ventures run by hobbyists. Many free, open-source MUD servers are available; after obtaining relatively inexpensive server resources, a stock MUD can be set up with no investment but a few hours of developer time. This doubtless explains the large number of MUDs, as well as their often casual nature. Though difficult to track since they appear and disappear with great regularity, as of 2004, over one thousand MUDs are said to exist⁹. Some are highly distinctive worlds supporting hundreds or thousands of players. Others are virtual ghost towns.

2.4 MMORPG

In terms of age, *Ultima Online* is the senior member of the American MMORPG market. Game play in *UO* is much like that of a MUD; players meet, socialize, and launch regular crusades against hapless virtual fauna. *UO* does not look like a MUD, however. Though text is an important part of the interface, game activity is largely portrayed with graphics; indeed, the bulk of the user interface is an isometric view of the character and their surroundings. Graphics, however, are not what distinguishes a MMORPG from its MUD forbears; it is distinguished primarily by scale.

Playing the average MUD is like living in a small town. There being just a few hundred active users, experienced players are certain to know most of their peers. Developers can monitor their world just by standing in the town square and watching; they can deal with problems directly, using the complainants’ reputation as a guide. With tens or even hundreds of thousands of players, MMORPG are not small towns; they are small cities. At this scale, it is seldom feasible for developers to intercede in person; most conflicts must be resolved impersonally, with game rules and company policies, and negotiating or exploiting these becomes part of the game itself. The boundaries between player-citizens are mediated not with porch swings, but with burglar alarms. Naturally, this has a significant effect on the player experience.

Every pure MMORPG, as of 2004, is a commercial product. To play, consumers buy boxes containing client software and documentation for between ten and fifty dollars. Most boxes include a short trial subscription, after which players pay monthly subscription fees for access. Most MMORPG

7. Latterly known as ‘interactive fiction’.

8. The term ‘MUD’ now encompasses numerous subgenres, including MOOs, MUSHes, and MUCKs, Teeny-, Tiny-, LP-, and Diku-MUDs, all of which appear more or less identical to the uninitiated.

9. See <http://www.mudconnect.com>, a popular MUD directory, for an up-to-date count.

charge between ten and sixteen dollars for a month of unlimited game play.

3 Game activities

Having purchased a box, the player installs the client and connects to the game site. After establishing an account, they create one or more ‘characters’, these being the personae which embody the player within the game world¹⁰. The details of character creation vary greatly between games, but generally the player chooses a game profession or specialization, assigns starting physical and skill attributes, and selects a name, gender, and some details of the character’s physical appearance. The character is then ready to enter and interact with the game world.

Most MMORPG players devote a great deal of time to game play. In one study, *EverQuest* players reported spending an average of 21.9 hours per week in-game. 13.3

3.1 Exploration

MMORPG worlds comprise large and diverse geographies, and exploring these is an essential part of game play. Though their virtual nature offers a theoretically unlimited range of forms, existing MMORPG geographies are broadly similar in structure.

New characters invariably start in cities. Though usually safe places, protected from wildlife and hostile players, the great size and activity of a large city can be daunting to a new player. As in the real world, cities are places to trade, to receive training, healing, or employment (i.e., quests), and to meet other characters.

Cities are separated by expanses of wilderness. Within these are caches of natural resources, such as forests or gold veins, along with creatures or ‘mobs’¹¹, many of them dangerous to adventurers. Wilderness areas thus are places to gather resources or gain experience through combat. Crossing them is an important mode of travel in the game world.

Throughout city and wilderness are scattered small areas of special interest. Broadly analogous to the ‘adventures’ presented in pen-and-paper games, these areas offer distinct settings¹² and a high concentration of mobiles and valuable items, all related by some theme or dramatic conceit. The combination of great risk and great reward presented by these areas is one of the primary motives for player cooperation and socialization, and characters often explore them in groups.

3.2 Combat

Exploration of the game world results inevitably in combat. In fact, such is the focus of existing MMORPG; most character skills relate directly or indirectly to combat ability, as do most game items, and most play time is spent preparing for, engaging in, or recovering from battle.

Fighting offers great benefits to the character. Careful players will fight most battles on very favorable terms, making victory almost certain. When they prevail, a character is entitled to loot their opponent’s body, which may yield money or valuable items. Combat also improves a character’s skills and attributes, thus preparing them for more dangerous opponents. Most characters are highly specialized, their skills focusing on missile or shock combat, offensive or healing magic, or some limited combination thereof. Players exploit this by fighting in groups, which makes the hunt a very social exercise.

While combat is generally fought between characters and mobs, many games allow combat between player characters, a practice called player-versus-player (‘PvP’) combat, or somewhat confusingly, ‘player-killing’ (‘PK’)¹³. Though riskier than hunting mobiles, PvP holds great appeal for some players. Unsurprisingly, this is a contentious topic in MMORPG, one that opposes distinct notions of fun and fairness in the game world.

Characters do not always win their battles, and if they neither win nor escape then of course they ‘die’. But players invest hundreds or thousands of hours in their characters, and — dramatic consistency notwithstanding — few would care to see the loss of that investment. Therefore, in existing MMORPG, death is impermanent. After ‘dying’, the character is resurrected (using whatever justification suits the genre) in a safe place. Usually they are missing items they carried in their previous incarnation, these having been left behind on their ‘corpse’. Since these are often valuable, it is common in MMORPG to see characters find and loot their own bodies, rearm, and perhaps avenge themselves against the creatures that slew them.

Players can expect to experience character death scores or even hundreds of times throughout a character’s career.

10. Note the distinction between the player’s account and their characters; a player may have many characters, but usually has only one account. Also, characters do not incur subscription fees; accounts do.

11. ‘Mob’ is an abbreviation of ‘mobile’ (terminology that originated with MUD1); as such, it describes a single creature rather than a group.

12. An enchanted wood perhaps, or a graveyard, or the classic ‘dungeon crawl’.

13. This term has a more literal meaning in South Korea, where in-game rivalries have inspired real-world violence between players. Players and police call this practice ‘offline PK’. (Levander 2001)

3.3 Craft

While most MMORPG activities are easily recognizable as play (or have precedents, at least, in other genres), ‘craft’ is a relatively novel game element.

The collection and use of myriad game items is a major focus of MMORPG play. Most are created *ex nihilo*, entering play when some mobile is destroyed, or when a quest is completed. It is also possible, however, to produce items through something resembling the real-world production process.

Craft starts with raw materials. Each game offers its own array of matériel: wood, ore, pelts, or substances more exotic. If a character has the requisite skill — mining or lumberjacking, for instance — they can travel to the nearest mine or forest and extract such materials on their own. Otherwise, they may buy them from another character¹⁴.

Having acquired materials, the player employs their character’s trade skills and relevant fixed capital to produce a finished product. Often there are intermediate steps in this process; a smith in *EverQuest* must convert ore to ‘metal bits’, bits to ‘files’, and files to ‘studs’ to produce studded armor. Unskilled characters often fail in these tasks, consuming material without producing output. Since practice is the primary means of improving trade skills, developing a skilled craftsman can be expensive in game terms, and requires hours of play time. On the other hand, skilled characters generate significant game income through the sale of their wares. As with game items in general, most craft items are combat-related. Even cooking skills display a sometimes martial aspect, producing foods that augment combat ability or heal.

Though popular with some players, game craft is extremely repetitious. Moreover, the production process is entirely prescribed by the game. While character skill levels determine the probability of success and perhaps the ‘quality’ of output, there is no room for creativity; combining materials of a particular type necessarily produces a fixed range of output¹⁵. As such, craft is something like work, and something like a simple game of chance.

3.4 Socializing

Perhaps the most pervasive and compelling game activity is social interaction. Players communicate within the game client using text messages, which may be sent to specific players, to groups, or (by ‘shouting’) to entire areas. Some players also use media external to the client, such as instant messaging or voice communications.

Sociality takes many forms, but a few institutions stand out for their ubiquity and their effect on MMORPG play.

In craft, as in other areas, characters excel through specialization. Some products, however, require input from several trades, and if one character lacks the requisite skills, they must contract work from other players. In this way, the craft process encourages sociality. The sale of finished products also rewards social behavior, as player characters often pay more for goods than NPC merchants. Many game worlds feature areas that, by accident or design, act as marketplaces. Characters crowd these areas seeking partners in trade, haggling, arguing, and otherwise socializing all the while.

Characters are highly specialized in their combat skills as well. Most games categorize characters by ‘class’, this determining their profession or combat specialization. Players exploit this specialization by hunting in mixed teams called ‘groups’, which range in size from two or three to perhaps a dozen. Some groups are regular events organized by friends; others, impromptu ‘pick up’ groups made up of strangers. Though solo play is possible, group adventure offers a safer and more efficient means of advancing one’s character. Meanwhile, the minutes or hours spent waiting for mobs to spawn provide many opportunities for friendships to grow.

Unlike groups, ‘guilds’ or ‘clans’ are formal organizations that persist between game sessions, perhaps for years at a time. Guilds vary in size from just a few players to more than a hundred, and offer a range of benefits to their members, including protection from player killers, opportunities for socializing, and guidance or other assistance for new recruits. Membership is highly conspicuous, as a character’s guild is usually listed after their name. It is thus an important status signifier as well.

All but the smallest guilds are lead by groups of officers, these typically being chosen by consensus. Loot from guild actions is often distributed communally. Other property is held communally as well, such as meeting halls and supply caches.

Though they originate within the game world, many guilds also manifest a presence outside it. Some maintain websites, where they host guild rules, rosters, calendars, and

14. As with game currency, large lots of game commodities are often sold in real-world markets.

15. An exception of sorts is found in *Ultima Online*. Characters in this game are able to own ‘houses’, spaces other characters cannot enter without the owner’s permission. It is common for players to decorate these, and while the game offers a few items for this purpose (potted plants, furniture, *et cetera*), players have created apparently novel furnishings by dyeing and ‘stacking’ other items. A classic example is the piano, an *ad hoc* item made up of sundry small articles such as cloaks, tables, and ‘fish steaks’.

bulletin boards. Many players maintain friendships with guild-mates even after quitting the game. Guilds themselves sometimes move *en masse* to colonize new games.

4 Game mechanics

Traditional games and sports are relatively abstract. Though games like ‘Risk’ and ‘Monopoly’ draw inspiration from real phenomena, they do not model them to any meaningful extent. By contrast, roleplaying games seek to model a world much like our own.

Though traditional games sometimes employ referees to interpret or enforce rules, they rely ultimately on voluntary player compliance; referees can identify and perhaps punish rule variance, but they can hardly prevent it. This requires that game rules be widely known and easily applied. By contrast, a computer program ideally enters no state without the approval of its designer. There being no obvious need to implement state changes that contradict game rules, such eventualities are disallowed. As a result, there appears a homology between the code of a computer game, its rules, and the context or ‘reality’ these create, since each defines not only what should happen, but what *can* happen¹⁶. Since rules are enforced automatically, players need not (and often cannot) understand them except in a general sense.

The rules of MMORPG resemble those of pen-and-paper roleplaying games. Characters and items are defined by a range of statistics describing their physical characteristics or their suitability for various purposes. When certain actions are attempted — i.e., a character casts some spell, or sells items to an NPC merchant — these values are used in calculations that determine or modify the outcome. In determining whether an attack succeeds, for instance, a number of factors might be considered: the attacker’s weapon skill, the defender’s armor, the strength of enchantments on the combatants or their equipment, and a large measure of chance. If the attack is successful, a second calculation might be made to determine damage. Even simple actions can entail numerous, complex calculations involving statistics from multiple items, characters, and mobs.

Obviously, the player’s ability to act within the game is largely a function of the statistics that inhere to their character and equipment. Players naturally seek to maximize their abilities, and thus character advancement becomes a primary focus of MMORPG play.

New characters enter the game with little power or wealth¹⁷; their skills and attributes are undeveloped, their equipment sparse and ineffective. One means by which characters advance is gaining ‘levels’, these being the most

significant measure of power in many games. New characters start at ‘first level’. As they defeat mobs and complete quests, they are awarded ‘experience points’, with more difficult challenges offering greater amounts of experience. When a certain number is accumulated, the character ‘gains’ a level, which in turn confers increased toughness, improved skills, and perhaps eligibility to undertake new quests or use new equipment. As such, ‘leveling’ is cause for minor celebration among players, and recent gainers often shout their new level to other players in the area, who respond with a round of congratulations.

Characters also advance by collecting equipment and other property. Mobiles often ‘drop’ items when they are killed, including weapons, armor, food, or currency. Other times they drop things that — though not useful themselves — are necessary for the completion of a quest, or the manufacture of another item. While drops are somewhat random, specific creatures offer a fixed range of possible loot, with certain items (an ‘orc fibula’, for example) dropping only from specific mobiles (the ‘orc slaver’), and perhaps rarely at that. It is thus common for players to spend hours hunting one creature in pursuit of the rare drop that completes their quest or complements their equipment.

5 Conclusion

In less than ten years MMORPG have created staggering enthusiasm, controversy, and profits. Many surprising phenomena have emerged during this time, and close inspection shows contemporary MMORPG design to be fraught with unresolved tensions and unmet potential. Observers can expect many more surprises from MMORPG as the genre matures.

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16. An obvious exception to this relationship is the problem of programmer or designer error. Play strategies that utilize bugs are called ‘exploits’ by developers; common examples include tricks that duplicate items or incapacitate player characters. Though the boundary between clever play and ‘exploitation’ is occasionally vague, most games punish exploits by temporarily or permanently banning players. Another issue is player speech. Though most games filter obviously obscene language, no algorithm can match the great breadth and depth of human profanity. Prescriptive rules thus exist to guide and sometimes punish player speech.

17. The distinction between player and character should again be noted; the player may be a veteran gamer (and their skilled use of the character will show this), but the new character *per se* will have few skills or abilities.

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