

EDC&I 589: Presentation Summary

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Virtual Worlds Spill-Over

The rise of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) has brought the world of computer gaming closer to the real world in terms of social interaction and the constant struggle to pursue happiness by improving skills and acquiring material wealth. This may at first be surprising but if one looks at the kinds of games these are and how they are set-up, the sense of it becomes clear.

In a traditional pencil and paper role-playing game (RPG), players pretend to be characters they've created to explore an imaginary world. Another player known as the "game master" or "storyteller" is in charge of presenting the world and situations the party of characters explore, telling them what happens when they try to interact with the world. Usually, the characters have attributes and skills which describe the characters.¹ For example, in *Dungeons & Dragons* characters have six attributes—strength, intelligence, wisdom, dexterity, constitution, and charisma—which are represented with numbers from 3 to 18. Also, the characters can gain skills in brawling, horse riding, tracking, etc. Over time these attributes and skills improve as the characters gain experience and rise in character levels. Experience is usually awarded for completing quests, overcoming obstacles, or role-playing (acting) well. For example, it could take 1,000 experience points (XP) for a level 1 character to rise to level 2. Upon reaching level 2, the character might gain a new skill. Players tend to become very attached to

¹ The role-playing system described here is only one subset of role-playing. Some players see role-playing as first and foremost a game where players act out their characters. The social interaction is of utmost importance rather than the improvement of character stats using stats-based, die-rolling combat. This bifurcation of playing styles is sometimes described as "role-playing" vs. "roll-playing."

their characters over the course of a campaign, having spent a great deal of time investing in character improvements and “leveling.”

Most MMORPGs take this general idea and escalate it to keep players attached to their characters so they keep playing and paying the monthly subscription fee.

Furthermore, in most MMORPGs not only do characters improve but the equipment characters can use also improves. For example, a sword that deals out a large amount of damage can only be used by characters of level 25 and above or by characters with a minimum strength. There is a constant enticing going on. Upon reaching the level needed for the sword, players find that their characters can strive for an even higher level and get an even better sword. Another design decision, based on casino gambling practices to encourage players to keep playing, is the randomization of rewards. For example, killing monsters causes the monsters to drop treasure or loot. The loot they drop and the quality of the loot is random with certain monsters giving better chances of dropping something good. This randomization creates an effect where players continue playing to see what the next monster will drop hoping that all the time they’ve invested for that day was fruitful.

This attachment to characters and the constant struggle for better (im)material goods has interesting social side-effects which are spilling over into our real world. Because players want their characters to improve and acquire better equipment, some players are paying real money to other players in return for this better equipment. Here in the U.S., a very lucrative business has sprouted selling virtual items on the Internet for games like *EverQuest* and *Diablo 2*. Some players are even committing crimes over their greed and attachment. In Japan, a player hacked into another player’s account and stole

her virtual items. In Korea, a player was beaten for killing the character of a real-world gangster in a game called *Lineage*. In fact, the Korean mafia has started setting up turf in the game and doing some virtual gun-running.

The motives for buying items and committing crimes are the same motives one finds in real life. The only difference is that players believe they are improving their lives in a virtual world instead of the real world.

References

Stuff written by Julian Dibbell

His article in Wired on how *EverQuest's* real economy, *real* dollars, matches that of Bulgaria, and more importantly, takes a look at possibly *why*:

<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.01/gaming.html>

http://www.juliandibbell.com/playmoney/2003_11_01_playmoney_archive.html#106910648485851172

This is an amazing blog entry hinting at virtual item running sweatshops in China. He makes mention of most virtual item selling businesses being run by individuals or small groups of people who make mid-6 figure salaries. He compares that with IGE, who employs dozens of people, most of them overseas contractors doing the actual gun-running.

Here's his account of a failed attempt at a virtual item sweatshop in Tijuana:

<http://www.juliandibbell.com/texts/blacksnow.html>

Virtual trading sites

EverQuest Gamers Superstore

<http://www.mysupersales.com/>

This page is for an online store for virtual items in the most popular on-line game, *EverQuest* (AKA *EverCrack*).

VRitems

<http://www.vritems.com/>

This site is run by two of my high school friends and they won't tell me how much they make, suffice it to say the junior partner was able to pay off all his credit card debt and student loans within two months of joining the senior partner. They deal with *Diablo 2* which isn't technically a massively multi-player on-line game (MMOG). I'll describe the difference in class.

The Gaming Open Market

<http://www.gamingopenmarket.com/>

The Gaming Open Market lets one convert US dollars to virtual currency *and* lets one convert one virtual currency to another virtual currency!

Real/Virtual Crimes

Does Virtual Crime Need Justice?

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3138456.stm>

This page deals with issues of virtual items being stolen and sold. An interesting question is if these crimes would happen if no real money was being passed around.

Where Does Fantasy End?

http://www.time.com/time/interactive/entertainment/gangs_np.html

Taking the virtual vs. real issue to a whole new level, this article points to the very real beatings and assaults happening in Korea over virtual events. Also, mentions the Korean mafia getting in on the virtual goods trading action.

Addiction Fallout

EverQuest-Widows

<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/EverQuest-Widows/>

The website of a support group for people whose significant others or relatives were addicted to *EverCrack* which resulted in a break-up in their relationship.