

The Decline of MMOs

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Abstract

Ten years ago, massively-multiplayer online role-playing games (MMOs) had a bright and exciting future. Today, their prospects do not look so glorious. In an effort to attract ever-more players, their gameplay has gradually been diluted and their core audience has deserted them. Now that even their sources of new casual players are drying up, MMOs face a slow and steady decline. Their problems are easy to enumerate: they cost too much to make; too many of them play the exact same way; new revenue models put off key groups of players; they lack immersion; they lack wit and personality; players have been trained to want experiences that they don't actually want; designers are forbidden from experimenting. The solutions to these problems are less easy to state.

Can anything be done to prevent MMOs from fading away?

Well, yes it can. The question is, will the patient take the medicine?

Introduction

From their lofty position as representing the future of videogames, MMOs have fallen hard. Whereas once they were innovative and compelling, now they are repetitive and take-it-or-leave-it. Although they remain profitable at the moment, we know (from the way that the casual games market fragmented when it matured) that this is not sustainable in the long term: players will either leave for other types of game or focus on particular mechanics that have limited appeal or that can be abstracted out as stand-alone games (or even apps).

The central issue is that MMOs *don't* actually appeal to everyone. Those whom they do appeal to, they appeal to very powerfully – even transformationally – but not everyone wants or needs what they offer. The word *massively* in the acronym doesn't mean they're mass-market, it merely means that more people can play in the same shared environment at once than can do so in a regular multi-player game. You can have a profitable MMO with 20,000 players, you don't need 2,000,000. However, developers have in general chosen to make their money from volume rather than from pricing, attempting to draw in a wide audience of less-engaged players rather than a narrow audience of enthusiasts. In so doing, they have collectively lost their hard-core players to single-player RPGs and have slash-and-burned their way through almost all the casual players they could reach. What's left to them is an army of butterfly players, flitting from new MMO to new MMO: engaged enough to try the out, but not sufficiently so that any particular one will win their loyalties.

Among non-gamers, MMOs are perceived as being time sinks that you play for a while but then leave when you get bored or the gameplay gets too hard. Among

gamers, they're regarded as unsophisticated and exploitative, with a pay-to-win revenue model that legitimises corruption.

To recover from this, MMOs have to go back to their roots. They have to remember what it is about MMOs that's *fun*.

Causes

The problems plaguing MMOs are not hard to state, but they can't be dealt with unless their causes are identified. So, what are the main issues facing MMOs' decline and how did they arise?

Development costs

MMOs cost too much money to develop. Art, animation and voice assets are required in bulk and are costly. Even these pale alongside the demands of content creation – although at least content creation is related to gameplay. There are three main reasons for these high costs:

- 1) *Marketing*. If your MMO looks gorgeous, features a popular intellectual property, you have big-name stars doing voice-overs, your characters act fluidly and everything oozes quality, then people will want to play it. They will see that money has been spent on the surface quality, so will assume it has also been spent on depth quality. They are, however, likely to be disappointed: most developers spend so much on surface than they have little left for depth. The look and IP of a game is good at attracting new players, but has little to do with making playing an MMO fun. It can aid immersion, but there are far less expensive ways of doing that.
- 2) *Raising the bar*. If players have been groomed to expect an MMO to have superb polish, they won't play ones that don't. This makes it harder for new developers to enter the market and compete, even if their MMO's gameplay is superior. Therefore, it is in the interests of publishers to keep raising the bar in order to reduce competition.
- 3) *Finance*. The way that publishers and venture capitalists generally work, money is available in chunks of particular sizes (for example \$1m, \$5m, \$20m). If a developer calculates that they need an out-of-band amount (for example \$2m) then they are unlikely to be lucky. Counter-intuitively, they have to ask for *more* money than they want in order to get any; their product design must therefore be expanded to justify what is being asked for. You don't actually need a million players for an MMO to be profitable¹, but if you have to make an MMO aimed at garnering a million players in order to justify the money you're asking for (because you can't ask for less), well, that's what you'll do.

Too many clones

Most MMOs play exactly the same as one another. It doesn't matter what the genre is – Fantasy, Science Fiction, Superhero, whatever – the gameplay is pretty much the same and has been since *DikuMUD*. There are three main reasons for this, all of which are consequences of high development costs:

- 1) *Re-use of technical assets*. We saw this in the days of text MUDs, when people would take a complete game engine and use it to create a new game curiously

¹ The upcoming MMO *Camelot Unchained* being developed by veteran designer Mark Jacobs, has a \$5M development budget that can be justified by 50,000 subscribers (onlinewelten.com, 2013).

similar to the new games everyone else using the engine created. The worlds would change but the games wouldn't. Of course, if you have invested millions in making an MMO engine it makes sense that you would want to use it for more than one product, but if little changes except the setting then eventually players will see through that. Production lines create identical products cheaply – that's the whole point of them. It does mean the products *are* identical, though.

- 2) *Fixed tools*. If your quest-creation tool only allows 11 different types of quest, your new MMO will only have 11 different types of quest (and it will, definitely, have quests). There are only a certain number of ways 11 varieties of quest can be spun before players will notice that they're all basically the same. Clones are bad because if players leave one MMO to play another and find it's basically the same (or is worse), then eventually they'll leave one and not come back to MMOs at all.
- 3) *Fear of failure*. MMOs cost so much to make that if they fail it can be catastrophic for a developer. There is less chance of their failing if they use a proven model, therefore developers go with the proven model. The way that company management sees it, if they develop a clone then they're rolling a die: on a 1 they get back their stake; on a 2-6 they get back ten times their stake. For a non-clone, on a 1 they get back their stake; on a 2 they get back a thousand times their stake; on a 3-6 they lose their stake. This is exciting if the stake is \$1, but frightening if the stake is \$50,000,000.

Player type imbalance

People play MMOs for different reasons which can be characterised *as player types* (Bartle, 1996). All of these player types are needed if an MMO is to be healthy. For example, an MMO with achievers but no socialisers will shed achievers, because low-level achievers will find that there are no players that they are "better" than and so leave. Likewise, an MMO with socialisers but no achievers will mean players have little to do and will leave. Today's MMOs have two main sources of type imbalance:

- 1) *Revenue model*. The switch from subscription to free-to-play is bad for achievers. It doesn't matter how much you try to persuade them otherwise, *any* payment for *any* gameplay-affecting item or service is pay-to-win. Anything that improves your chances of getting something gameplay-affecting is pay-to-win. Only purely cosmetic items are not seen as pay-to-win (and even some of those are unacceptable if they give the impression you've achieved something you haven't). Pay-to-win attracts socialisers but puts off achievers (except cheating achievers). Achievers are the core audience for MMOs; they've long been abandoning them for single-player games. When an MMO is designed around a revenue model rather than around fun, it doesn't have a long-term future.
- 2) *Elder game*. When players reach the end of the levelling game, they start a new game. This usually involves raiding or player-versus-player, along with daily quest and instance grinding. This elder game is a completely different experience to the levelling game and is not generally appealing to socialisers. Learning various boss dances is rarely fun unless you know everyone involved, and PvP is dispiriting when you get killed over and over by better (or richer) achievers. There are only so many alts socialisers will level up before they leave for pastures new.

Player expectations

Each MMO player has their own idea of what the MMO paradigm involves. They won't play if they see things they don't like; they are also reluctant to play if they don't see things they do like. This is irrespective of whether these views are ultimately self-defeating (Bartle, 2004). The reasons for this are:

- 1) *Trained by experience.* This follows from the fact that so many MMOs are clones. Players play an MMO and observe it to have particular features. They play other MMOs and observe them to have the same features. They come to believe these features are intrinsic to what it means to be an MMO, although actually they're probably not. For example, there's nothing that says an MMO *must* have character classes and levels, but most do and so players expect both. If an MMO differs in one dimension (for example it has skill sets instead of classes) then it might be given a chance; if it differs in several, though, many potential players will decline to play because what's being offered is too different to what they've been trained to expect.
- 2) *Short-sightedness.* Most players can't or won't see beyond the short-term. If a feature has a short-term disadvantage and a long-term advantage, they will not go through the pain to reach the gain. Likewise, if a feature has a short-term advantage and a long-term disadvantage, they will take the gain then leave when the pain comes (then in all likelihood decry competing MMOs that don't have the very feature that caused them to leave).
- 3) *Expanding audience.* The attempts at inclusiveness in today's MMOs mean that many casual-style players (unsurprisingly) treat them casually. They see them as limited-period activities that have a player half-life of three months. There's no point in starting one that has been going awhile because you'll be so far behind the power curve that you'll never catch up; it's better to wait for someone else to bring out a new MMO and try that instead. As a result, players rarely become sufficiently invested in an MMO to play it for long. People used to play text MUDs for two years before they quit (and some never did quit); this is rarely the case for today's MMOs.

Lack of immersion

Immersion is the sense that you, the player, are *in* the virtual world – that your character *is you*. It's an incredibly powerful state which MMOs are particularly geared up to deliver and that very few other activities can equal (Bartle, 2003). Today's MMO players rarely get to experience it, though, despite the fact that the better textual worlds of the 1990s successfully had a very deep sense of being "real but different". This is because:

- 1) *Depth is difficult.* Today's graphical worlds are excellent at making a world *look* real, but as a consequence it's harder for them to *behave* real. Characters jump into a river without making a splash, then swim across it in full armour without sinking, to emerge without being wet and with the glass of milk they've had in their backpack for several years still as fresh as the day they bought it (Bartle, 2011). This happens because animating all these effects for every object is simply too expensive an undertaking (it was far easier in text, where it merely had to be described in words).
- 2) *Other players grief.* To protect players from one another, MMOs omit common functionality that objects in the real world exhibit. This makes the virtual world less immersive. For example, doors either don't exist or, if they do, can't be opened or closed; this is to stop players from shutting one another

in or out of buildings. Objects that are dropped on the ground are instantly destroyed before they land; this is to stop players from dropping thousands of pieces of rubbish to flood the MMO's database and slow it down. Objects can't easily be transferred between players; this is to degrade the services offered by gold farmers. If a world doesn't behave as it "should", it won't feel realistic and immersion will be harder to attain.

- 3) *Revenue model*. If you want people to buy in-game goods and services for real money then real money has to be involved. Real money is sufficiently important to players that, however you disguise it, they *will* regard it as being real. Unfortunately, the more real that they see in the virtual, the harder it becomes for them to sustain the conceit that the virtual is separate from the real – an essential component of immersion.

Lack of understanding of design

MMO designers don't appreciate the power they have. They wind up doing design-by-numbers, unaware of *why* things are the way they are, just that things *are* that way. Many don't even know what worked in the past, let alone what could work in the future. There are several factors contributing to this:

- 1) *Design as art*. Game design in general and MMO design in particular is an art form. It's not treated as such either by the game industry or by the wider world. Designers aren't seen as authors but as content creators. There is little opportunity to use MMOs to *say* anything, even though their origins were *all about* saying something (Bartle, 2010). If designers aren't allowed to express themselves through their creativity, why are they designing?
- 2) *Industry recognition*. When designers are formally recognised, it's usually as a result of the commercial success of their games. This success may have little to do with design at all – it could be due to marketing, for example. Brilliant designs might not be recognised because of sales that are modest for other reasons (such as dated graphics). There are some very famous game designers who aren't actually all that good at design, but their lack of ability is only apparent to other designers; the rest of the world fetes them.
- 3) *Insufficient study*. There is very little academic study of game design. There is certainly nothing to compare to the depth of study of literature, theatre, photography and film. This is because games are regarded as low-brow culture of little importance. Until we get a game version of *Cahiers du Cinema*, it's likely to stay that way, too. Because game design isn't properly studied, that means the same mistakes are being made over and over again. This is particularly true of MMOs, which routinely try out "new ideas" that are actually old ideas known not to work.

The above aren't the only problems with MMOs – there are plenty more – but they're among the most important. Furthermore, they feed on each other. For example, many MMOs are released early to recoup the cost of making them, which means they're often buggy or missing features, which in turn means players don't play them for as long; the developer therefore has to release the first expansion earlier than planned so as to retain players, which means that it, too, is likely to be less than perfect.

Knowing what the problems are isn't the important thing here, though: knowing what the *causes* of the problems are is. That's because if you know the causes, you can fix the disease, not merely hide the symptoms.

Fixes

All the above problems can be fixed. Unfortunately, part of the reason they persist is because those involved are reluctant to take the medicine, either because they don't feel the patient is ill or because they believe the proposed cure will make the patient worse. Nevertheless, changes *will* eventually be made: MMOs simply have too much promise for it all to be squandered by turning them into non-MMOs.

What follows are ways and means by which MMO developers and players (and indeed the wider world) can restore MMOs to their rightful position at the forefront of computer game design and experience.

Development

The ancestors of today's MMOs are text MUDs. These began as monolithic entities, but over time became more modular – partly because of their own “clone MUD” phenomenon. They developed a layered architecture, enabling radically new games to be built on existing software. In comparison, today's MMOs are still very monolithic; it's hard to swap out one component and replace it with a wildly different one while leaving everything else unchanged. A particular manifestation of this is that too much is directly coded-in that could be scripted.

Taking a more modular approach to MMO systems architecture could reduce development costs, but its real value lies in how it addresses two other points:

- *Clone reduction.* Modularisation allows for more variety in MMOs. Text MUDs exhibited far, far more individual difference than do today's MMOs (Bartle, 2007); there's no reason why today's MMOs can't diverge from the norm too if the costs (and therefore the risks) of experimentation are reduced. The wider the choice, the better the market.
- *Immersion improvement.* If different physics modules can be plugged in, the world can feel more realistic. Text worlds had superior physics to today's graphics-heavy MMOs. If existing art and (particularly) animation assets can be swapped in and out, again, the world can feel more detailed and accrue more assets. It shouldn't be as hard as it is for the giant insects developed for new MMO X to be added to existing MMO Y. Art assets – even ones for dry *versus* wet clothes – only need to be created once to be usable indefinitely. Ultimately, players are paying to be immersed: immerse them!

Size Doesn't Matter

Today's MMOs are designed to be vast worlds occupied by teeming masses of players. However, most of those players will be spending their time in 4-6 person instances – it's irrelevant to them how many other players there are in the wider game. There's no need for an MMO to be able to support 10,000 simultaneous players per shard; most players don't know more than 250 other players anyway.

The two main reasons for having large numbers of players per shard are marketing (“see how many players we have!”) and immersion (“the world feels more real if there are more people in it”). The former only works if the people you're marketing to want to be anonymous, ineffectual nonentities; the latter is true, but doesn't require the people to be real.

Worlds should be made smaller-population and there should be more of them. Cloud-based servers allow this. If you have 100,000 players, then instead of 10 servers of 10,000 players each, try 400 servers of 250 players each. This would affect:

- *Player impact.* When you're one player among 250, you're more important than one among 10,000: you're a somebody, not a nobody. The game is more fun and retention increases.
- *Specialisation.* Servers can be set up with different general rules (no PvP, unrestricted PvP,, immortality, permadeath, whatever). They can even be leased to guilds who want to play by their own, non-standard rules: role-playing is enforced, only magic-user characters are allowed, play-to-win is permitted, everyone communicates in Latin, ...
- *Artificial Intelligence.* AI-controlled characters can make the world seem busy and make your accomplishments feel more appreciated by the population. The Storybricks work with *EverQuest Next* is an exciting recent development here.

Remove the Elder Game

Have your MMOs actually end for individual players. Players are playing MMOs as a journey to self-understanding. When that journey comes to an end – when they “win” – they will continue to play because the pressure is now off. We know this because that's exactly what happened in text MUDs. We only have interminable elder games today because the business side of MMO development companies became frightened that if they let players finish a game, the players might stop playing quicker; in fact, the opposite is true.

The great appeal of *Star Wars: the Old Republic* was its emphasis on story. When players reached the end of their character's story, that was a high point; what followed was a huge anticlimax. The game descended into the same raid/PvP/grinding elder game as every other MMO. If, instead of adding more end-game content, the developers had stuck with their story-first mandate and created more levelling-game content, people who were playing for story – which most were – would have kept coming back with different characters to experience those new stories. As it was, they built up a few alts and then drifted away.

EVE Online has no elder game; or, rather, if it does have an elder game, the whole game is that elder game. It has a shifting web of alliances from which new content continually emerges. The fact that corporations can be eliminated and that in theory it's possible for one to win adds meaning. If it worked like the typical realm-versus-realm elder game and had permanent factions that could never be eliminated, that one, tiny difference would render all conflict ultimately meaningless. An end provides meaning.

The main advantages of removing the elder game are:

- *Retention.* Players currently leave an MMO because they become frustrated it just drags on and on without giving them release. It becomes boring – more like work than play. If you acknowledge that they've won, they have nothing to prove: some will indeed drift away after a month or two, but many will continue to play just for the sheer fun of it². This may seem unlikely, but experience from text MUDs shows that it actually works: there are people who are still playing *MUD2* over 20 years after they “beat” it.
- *Marketing.* If your players leave when they like you, they'll come back for your next MMO. They won't think, “oh, yes, their games are OK but eventually I got bored”, they'll think “oh, I remember – what an incredible experience! I'm going to try their games again!”.

² This assumes that your MMO is actually fun.

- *Revenue model.* People who pay to skip content or to pass through it quickly will be able to replay it at a more leisurely pace once their need to “finish” has been assuaged. This time, they may even pay to skip the content they didn’t pay to skip last time...
- *Immersion.* If an ending makes sense then it makes the virtual world more immersive. An “escape from a prisoner of war camp” game *should* end when your character escapes. A “war between two factions” game *should* allow for one faction actually to win. The world feels less realistic (and therefore less immersive) otherwise.

Educate players

People who are playing a casual MMO today will not be playing one 5 years from today. They will have grokked the concept. Either they’ll be playing other casual games or they will be playing more sophisticated MMOs. If you want them to play your MMO, then you need to educate them:

- *Teach what MMOs offer.* Glorify and reward the positive features that different types of players find fun. Teach your players what they want from an MMO, then make your MMOs give them what you taught them to appreciate.
- *Celebrate designers.* Movie-making used to operate a “studio system”, whereby a film was associated with a studio rather than its director or actors. This eventually fell apart because directors were poached by other studios (or set up their own) and their creative importance became apparent. Film improved as a genre because of this as it reduced risk: audiences would follow a favourite director or actor, meaning that even if a film flopped it still recouped *some* money. Games are still generally stuck in an equivalent “developer system”; players think of a “BioWare game” or a “Rockstar game” or even a “Nintendo game”, but not a “Rob Pardo game”. Until players learn that game design is important, they’ll follow the studio; this means that if a game flops, the reputation of the whole studio suffers, rather than that of the designer.

Let designers design

Designers know what the problems are that face MMOs, and often have an intuition as to how to solve them. These solutions could be far more creative and acceptable than the ones I’ve outlined here. Unless designers are allowed to design, MMOs are going to remain stuck in the doldrums.

- *Let designers take risks.* They may not be able to prove that something will work, but if they’re not allowed to try it then it never *will* be proven. Of course, it may *not* work, but that’s a known risk and known risks can be managed. Don’t expect that every game will be a hit; just expect that the games that succeed will more than compensate for the ones that fail.
- *Allow for revolution.* MMOs evolve, but sometimes evolution isn’t enough: revolution is required. The reason that *Minecraft* was developed independently wasn’t because the idea of a voxel-based world hadn’t been thought of by designers at big studios, it was because these designers weren’t allowed to explore the idea.

These aren’t the only ways to address these problems – there are others. They are presented merely as examples of showing what is possible. It may be that larger studios are too invested in the *status quo* or too unresponsive to be able to act on

them. However, they *will* be acted on in time, and virtual worlds will be all the better as a result.

Conclusion

MMOs are losing sight of what it is that makes them special. As a result, there is a growing audience of former players who are waiting for a game to appear that recaptures this essence.

Some studios do recognise the problem and are trying to innovate – *The Secret World* and *Age of Wushu/Wulin* (九阴真经) are recent interesting examples. However, the majority of MMO developers are sleepwalking themselves to obscurity.

Having identified the problems, solutions can be proposed. The ones listed here are quite radical at times, but nevertheless practical. They *are* solutions, but they may not be the *only* solutions. The reason they were given was primarily to draw attention to the problems, rather than to persuade people of the individual merits of particular ways of dealing with those problems.

If MMOs continue as they are, then a few years from now people will wonder why they were ever considered to be anything special. The first developer able to remind them will become very successful indeed. If today's developers wish to survive, they need to accept that they have a long-term problem and to make difficult decisions as to how to solve it. If they don't change, the world *will* change around them.

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