

Academic Paper: Storytelling in MMOs

By Paul van der Meer, undergraduate student of information and communication technology at the school of Communication and Multimedia Design of Avans University

Deus Ex designer Warren Spector is not a fan of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs). “I’m one of those people who doesn’t find anything interesting at all in leveling up, finding a +3 sword, or paper-dolling a character with a purple cloak” (Sheffield). This is exactly the reason I don’t play MMOs. I would love to wander around in a world with other players and enjoy the challenges. But I need story and interesting characters. Let’s look at the problems and the solutions to make this happen in an MMO.

Writing in blocks

Medieval bards had an extensive repertoire of folk stories. These stories had several reoccurring elements, just like how most fairytales feature a witch. Bards could generate a unique story on the fly to please the listeners. They did this by recycling the story elements they had and knew. They had several blocks they could use to build their stories.

Janet Murray writes about this in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. “The bardic tradition is a set of formulas within formulas, starting at the level of the phrase and moving through the organization of the story as a whole. Singers of tales had a repertoire of formulaic ways to describe common people, things and events” (Murray 188).

Scholars have tried to dissect these stories to come up with similar blocks. Vladimir Propp categorized hundreds of Russian fairy -- and folktales. He saw more than thirty events, like “Hero unrecognized, arrives home or in another country,” and divided the characters in eight broad types, such as the villain, the helper, the dispatcher or the false hero.

In 16th century Spain the Picaresque novel arose. The most memorable book of this new literary genre was called *Don Quichote de la Mancha*, written by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. At the start, the storyline can only be told in one way; Quichote announces his desire to become a knight and forms a band of companions. But after that each quest stands on its own and could be told in a random order. For instance, the most famous scene with the windmills doesn’t happen in the end, but halfway.

Lee Sheldon mentions the following about this in *Character Development and Storytelling for Games*: “The meaningful narrative, complete with compelling theme, moving climax, and ironic conclusion, is there before us. Each episode in Don Quixote’s quest supports that over-arcng story. The order of the modules is unimportant” (283).

Storytelling in MMOs

Why is story such a difficult thing to implement in MMOs? The short answer is that the player is a hero among heroes.

The main character in MMOs is vague on purpose. His history is unknown and irrelevant. It's up to the player to pick a profession and fill in the rest. The statistics need to be filled out, and they determine the path the player will take. That's why main characters in RPG sometimes have no memory or history; it gives the players a clean slate to start with. The lack of a real main character is compensated by setting and characters to interact with.

This interaction is difficult to maintain when almost all the other characters are main characters as well. If one main character kills the dragon, the rest of the world has a game without a dragon. To prevent that, an MMO has one very happy hero and thousands of bored players. The dragon will never really die, but the player will still get to kill it. As soon as the first hero turns his back on the dragon, it rises like a phoenix waiting for the next slaying.

As soon as there is an event that changes the world in a significant way, the player is moved to a private instance of the world. Here the player can be the hero and kill the beast. After this he or she is returned to the world where it's business as usual. The influence doesn't go beyond the borders of the private "dungeon."

Most MMOs have "events." For instance, in *The Matrix Online*, the NPC (non-player character) Morpheus died under mysterious circumstances during an event. Players can join these events by being there at the right time. This once-in-a-lifetime experience greatly enhances the feeling that being there has significance. But this too is mostly an illusion since the outcome is already determined by the designers. And players are doomed to fill in a minor part in the event which they can rarely steer.

Neil Sorens mentions this in his article "Rethinking the MMO" on Gamasutra.com. "First, a player doesn't feel all that important when there are thousands of other 'heroes' in the same world doing the same things. Instead, the player is just another face in the crowd, trying to get a little bit ahead in the rat race. In the land where everyone's a hero, heroes are commoners."

Legendary game designer Chris Crawford feels that the problem is an even more troublesome one. For games to truly become interactive stories, they need to let go of objects and focus on people instead. "The simple truth -- that stories are about people, not things -- explains the utter failure of games to incorporate storytelling in any but the most mechanical and forced manner. Games concern themselves with things; things you acquire things you use, things you destroy and so on. That's why they're so emotionally crippled -- when was the last time you gave a damn about a thing?" (15).

How can game designers go about implementing a storyline in MMOs?

Step 1: Have an impact on the NPCs instead of the world.

It's not easy to have an impact in an online world. Monsters pop up just after being killed and the big balance of power cannot be disturbed by one player. The only way to fake the unique influence is by creating an individual field or an event with a determined outcome.

Then how can we solve this problem? We don't have to. Heroes don't necessarily change the landscape or the balance of power. We can't all be Luke Skywalker blowing up the Death Star. And we don't need a big statement like that to be treated like a hero. Stories are about people, not things, as Crawford mentioned. So let the influence be shown in the people you meet, the NPCs.

An offline RPG like *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* uses reactions of random NPCs in the street to great effect. After closing a demonic gate in the city of Kvatch, people in the imperial city will notice you and address you as the hero of Kvatch.

At the moment, MMO NPCs are little more than cutout board characters. They have two different things to say: "Can you get me item X?" and "Thanks for item X." They also usually are positioned outside their home for everyone to see and meet. As a result, they live in the big world and are constantly surrounded by numerous players giving assignments to get X or thanking players for bringing X.

Imagine the following: An NPC sits inside his house (private area). Let's call him Frank. Frank talks about a terrible tragedy. His only daughter has been kidnapped. Instead of having one bit of text, you can ask questions and actually converse instead of clicking two times to accept the mission. When you complete the mission and return, the NPC is very happy to see you. His daughter sits next to him and thanks you.

The difference is that the player now has an impact on that character and because he talked with him in a small private setting, there was a sense that it really was a private meeting instead of being surrounded by other players. And the conversation showed a human side of the playable character as well, giving the player more to care about. Now take this story and make it bigger. A lot of quests later, the player goes down a copper mine and finds out a woman requested your help. Enter a (private) office and there she is: Frank's daughter. In true epic fashion we see a character return and this gives the characters the chance to have a conversation that covers new ground in their relationship. This doesn't have to be big, but even dialogue such as "Frank has picked up painting again" can do the trick. Influence can be the little things.

We now have created relevance and this can be relevant to a lot of different players because the daughter in the office can easily be replaced by another person for another player. And this doesn't have to mean that a lot of extra work has to be done by the design team. The game already has to remember which quests have been done, so why not remember which character would be ideally suited?

Step 2: Let a social NPC-network be an important part of the statistics.

MMOs revolve around statistics and all the quests are focused on changing those numbers. This is done by items or money so you can level up. Because of this, Crawford feels that games will never have stories that are as powerful as novels or movies. Taking away the statistics in an MMORPG probably turns it into a different creature. And that is not necessary; the statistics can work in favor of the story.

Start out with an NPC (John) that distrusts the player. Let John give the player a quest. Solve the quest and the distrust is gone, opening up new quests because John introduces you to a group of friends. Instead of getting a slightly better sword, the player has connections and information. But now you find out that the group was behind the kidnapping of Frank's daughter! Here's a dilemma: do you try to do quests for the group or do you tell Frank? Without changing the inner workings of the MMORPG there is a shift of focus. The skill points are now replaced or enriched with information points. Knowing characters is now just as important as having items.

And while players interact with the NPCs, they also flesh out their own character. It's still far away from a motivation in the classical sense, but players can make their character grow. What if you start out as a sour nobody, but end up with NPCs that greet you warmly when you pass them on the street? Or perhaps you just want to get rich and buy a nice piece of land with a big house. The type of conflict is theirs to pick, and the paths can be numerous, but when the NPCs and story arcs are interesting, the motivation will come and the leveling up will be the growth and the personal change of the character.

Game designer and author Dave Morris offers a great example of how players themselves can add background. "In GURPS (Generic Universal Role-Playing System), players can take handicaps such as persistent enemies or dependent relatives. These give them more points to spend on creating the character, and at the same time they start to sketch in a background. The game doesn't even have to tell me who that enemy is -- as long as he shows up every few days and tries to kill me or steal my treasure, he becomes one of the things that cements the reality of my avatar." (Essay appendix interview with Dave Morris.)

Step 3: Write the story arc in a modular fashion.

It's trickier to set up storylines instead of having two quests that have nothing to do with each other. But it's definitely possible; *City of Heroes* is set up with threads that intersect later on in the game. But doesn't this take away freedom? Haven't we forced the player to find out about Frank's daughter first, before we reveal that John's group was behind it?

Probably there is an ideally dramatic way of exposition, but with a simple adjustment there is an equally interesting alternative. For instance, if you haven't spoken with Frank first, then the kidnapers could simply not tell you that piece of information. And send you out on a new quest where you accidentally meet Frank or Frank's friend looking for the daughter. It's easy to come up with a couple of lines or an event that prods the player in a certain direction without forcing him or her. If the player desperately wants nothing

to do with Frank or his family, that's fine as well. There are a lot of other ways to further their own personal story.

The most important thing is that the story is played out in modules. Instead of forcing one after another, it is better to create a batch of quests that have meaning. There shouldn't be a definitive order in the way they need to be played. Think back to *Don Quixote*. You need a starting point and a couple of scripted events in the middle, but the rest can offer all the freedom the player wants. Of course, big quests work this way already, but the trick is to give the subquests relevance to each other.

The ending is something else. There isn't one in MMOs since the designers want the players to keep on playing. Right now they have to come up with bigger challenges (enemies and rewards) for the players who have already reached the highest levels. But there is another way. Let's assume you played a character that wanted to have a big house. And after a long time of playing you get the big house. But then a new NPC shows up and threatens to burn down your nice house. Inciting to play further and protect your house, meet new NPCs along the way and find out more about this fire starter. Writers could use the same mechanic or scene to threaten a player to give up his million-dollar horse, his magical sword, or whatever is most valuable to the player based on the game statistics. Just like the bards or the GURPS, a designer can use a formula to motivate the player or even a group.

Television series with ongoing stories do a similar thing. In *Lost*, one solution often is the start of a new problem. This new quest doesn't have to be bigger or more difficult than the previous one; it just has to shed new light on the character.

In the end the MMO doesn't need an enormous change, a huge AI, or a costly amount of work to become a place where people can feel like an unique hero.

Paul van der Meer is a student at the Communication and Multimedia Design school at Avans University working toward a bachelor's degree in information and communication technology.

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