

Through the Looking Glass: Player Perceptions of Game Administrators
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Abstract

We talk about the importance of why we want to interpret player perceptions of the administrators and creators of their games. In doing so, we create a framework for understanding the player's rights and rules they agree to follow and thus, define the player's position in the hierarchy of game administration. Having interviewed participants to better understand their perception of the game administrators, we found both support for and against the hypothesis that GMs and CMs act as scapegoats for the companies they work for. We then hypothesize future uses of an in-depth study focusing on the same issue and its potential for shaping the MMO community.

Overview

With the burgeoning MMO genre of games the potential for growth is virtually unlimited in the industry. With this potential, the industry has seen the rise of many corporations and games from Ultima Online to Everquest and World of Warcraft. What separates these companies and games? As she is quoted in Bynum (2005), Jessica Mulligan (2003) suggests in her book *Developing Online Games* that the main difference involves the customer service and that "good customer service is the main differentiator between [persistent worlds] today" (p. 190). This is mirrored by Grantham and Carr who state that "today [businesses] are formed around service relationships with consumers" (*An Inside Guide* iix-ix). Additionally, Scheuing (1995) writes that "to prosper, an organization must choose, nurture, and cultivate its customers carefully (*Creating Customers* ix). Bynum also suggests that what future games will need to present to the customer is a functioning and friendly interaction between customer and organization (p. 7).

Deciding to take this research one step further, I began to look at the relationship that existed between the player and the Game Manager (GM). Specifically, I was interested in how each side perceived the roles and actions of the other. What are the perceptions of GM control in massively multiplayer online games by players, and how do they affect game play? Are the GMs viewed as policemen or as benevolent guides watching over the players? As the popularity of these online games increases, the interaction between players and GMs also increases.

Any business model understands the importance of good relations with its customers and because of this it is important to understand the player characterizations of the in-game GMs. I think the growing necessity for proper communication between these GMs and the players more than justifies research into this area because if effective communication is to exist, it requires an understanding of both sides.

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Player rights?

We begin by looking at the basis for player control in MMOs. In 2000, Ralph Koster wrote an A Declaration of the Rights of Avatars which argues that real world law naturally extends into the virtual world. He accomplished this by mimicking the French declaration of the rights of man and the bill of rights and in doing so attempted to map out the relationship between player and creators; the creator's job was to provide enduring content and rules and the player's to agree to the terms of conduct that the creator set forth.

Among the arguments that Koster makes is that "mud admins... have an obligation to listen [to the players]" and that "players have a right to know why the admins did the things they did". Both of these arguments have come under some criticism by scholars and game designers. With regards to administrators listening to player concerns one commenter responds by pointing out that the administrators are not the ones who actually develop the content; all they do is settle issues. The role of the GM is to enforce the rules and help with player issues in the virtual world. When the issues become involved outside of the virtual world, Community Managers (CMs) act as the liaisons between company and player. So, while an admin might be charged with lending an ear to a player of their game, there is very little that the GM or CM can actually do to bring the player suggestions to fruition other than to act as a messenger and pass them on to the developers.

The latter argument has a big flaw. What happens when the players do not like the administrators? Ultimately, the administrators are the ones in power and the players have no real say in getting rid of administrators, short of deactivating their account, which makes it a moot point. During an informal in-game conversation, Richard Bartle (2006) suggested that control should rest in the hands of the creators and GMs but once that control is abused, they should be punished for it and lose their power. Unfortunately, this still does not answer the question.

Along those lines, research into LambdaMOO led Lastowka and Hunter (2003) to disagree with the concept of a democratic process that could take place within the virtual worlds because of the inherent inability of the 'Gods' to remove themselves from the design and coding of the game. They mention that "the closest things to democratic participation in today's virtual worlds are game discussion boards," (p. 79) and complain that recent games are distancing the player and GM. In addition, they point out that while the game discussion boards are the most vibrant form of communication that exists between the player and GM, the GMs and developers often overlook or ignore the boards completely.

This idea of authorship fits in with the recent adaptation of virtual worlds to be designed towards a specific purpose. Nickell, Moore, and Ducheneaut (2004), in their paper about Star Wars Galaxies, explain that game coders are beginning to design specific sociable locations such as the cantina into their game. If designers are implementing features that encourage sociability then it does not seem far fetched that these same designers can 'encourage' levels of communication with their players. If developers are beginning to design specific features into their games with a purpose in mind such as these cantinas, why can't they code in features into their games that will bring together or separate the community and its GMs? As games continue to move into uncharted territory, keeping the free flow of interaction between these two levels becomes increasingly important and as such,

developers need to begin including functions designed to facilitate communication in the future.

Rules and regulations

If players have rights, then they also need to have limitations on that power. How then, do the players know when they have broken a rule? What determines when a GM steps in and begins actively participating in an in-game situation to resolve some conflict? According to the terms of service for some of the most popular MMOs, nothing has to happen. For example, the End User Licensing Agreement (EULA) in Everquest II states that "you have no expectation of privacy in any such communications and expressly consent to such monitoring of communications you send and receive." In fact, nearly all of the EULAs for major games from World of Warcraft, to Lineage II go on to say the same thing. Of the few hundred lines of legal jargon in the EverQuest II EULA, the only lines that really pertain to GM control and interaction and define the boundaries of the game for the player exist in a few short sentences. The same is true for Star Wars Galaxies where the letter of the law is in the "violation of the spirit of the game" (Star Wars Galaxies). For what is supposed to be the basis for player-GM interaction, the 'spirit of the game' seems like a very vague concept for such an important document.

Fortunately however, developers have been designing more specific context for what is and is not allowed within their games. World of Warcraft for example, has a very extensive naming policy section and both SOE games, EverQuest II and Star Wars Galaxies, have a terms of use agreement in addition to a EULA that define more specifically the dos and dont's of their games along with Lineage II which includes a 'rules of conduct' page.

World of Warcraft's naming policy is unique because it attempts to regulate another level of immersion within its virtual world. While all of the EULAs have a policy against allowing players to have trademarked or copyrighted names, World of Warcraft's policy is special because it is specific about each offense with regards to names (Terms of Use Agreement). Indeed, it is this specificity which leads to the massive number of complaints about player names that the Warcraft GMs handle everyday.

Lineage II writes something unique when it mentions the use of its global chat channel. Whereas all of the EULAs demand appropriate language and behavior in their respective channels, Lineage II states that there will be monitors watching the global chat channel for high level players and "due to fact that this communication channel has the ability to impact every player on the server, NC Interactive will not tolerate any inappropriate behavior of any sort." In addition, in the rules of conduct requirements for Lineage II, players may not participate in guilds based around racial or sexual bigotry and harassment. What makes these rules unique is the extent to which they are clearly defined. This is important as more and more people will begin to push the envelope of what is allowed and what is not and in order to keep up with an adapting player base, the developers and the GMs will need to begin specifying their rules more clearly. When this is done, then players will then understand better the role of GM and be less critical as a whole of GM and developer performance because there will be less vocal instances of discontented individuals who may have felt shafted by the GMs for an issue that wasn't very well defined by the EULA or terms of service.

Theoretical perspectives on authority

Levy's (2001) research into Australian adolescents has shown that in "attitudes towards ... police, and the law were, in general, positive" (p. 333), and that as adolescents aged, their opinions of authority remained constant. Levy conducted a survey of nearly 400 high school students and placed them into three general categories, non-delinquents, institutional delinquents, and non-institutional delinquents and the results indicated that while the institutional delinquents had a reduced positive response to authority, they were all generally positive.

It is then interesting to ask why there is so much turmoil involved with being a GM. Warner (2001) suggests that those in low-power positions are "motivated to perceive accurately the behaviors of high-power persons because such perception is necessary for optimizing outcomes" (p. 235). In doing so, those in low-power positions, namely the players who play online games are motivated to keep watch on those in high-power positions, or the GMs because it is possible they believe they can gain an advantage or more power for themselves. If we were to consider the relationship between GM and players like an organization, then Warner also predicts that when the organization has "impermeable boundaries ... in an unstable hierarchy, individuals are more likely to notice bias that discriminates against group members with whom they share relevant identities" (p. 224). This could help to understand why players often complain to GMs about specific class problems or blame GMs for ignoring a "class" or "server" issue and sour the perceptions of the GM by the player base.

Indeed, Gouveia-Pereira et. al. (2003) suggest in their research of adolescents that the evaluation of relational and procedural justice affects the legitimacy of institutional authority. In other words, the more the players feel that the rules protect them and are unbiased, then the more likely the player will support the laws (p. 314). Sousa and Vala (2002) further expand on this idea when they go on to say that "the more the authority is perceived to be interactionally and procedurally just, the more the members ... will accept and support organizational change" (p. 104). It is important that the organizational framework remain procedurally just, as this provides the framework through which players retrieve information about the changes that are going to affect them and help the process of assimilating of the new changes (Sousa p. 103).

Positions of power

If the players expect the rules to be fair and unbiased, and they expect the GMs to be the arbiters of unbiased rules, then what happens when a complaint is raised by an individual who takes it to the GM? How does the procedural policy influence the player's perception of the GM? Tyler and Blader suggest that the procedures are important because they define the supervisor's identity within the group, and that in turn affects their "attitudes, values, and behaviors" (p. 349) under the Group Engagement model. This model can be applied to the player/GM relationship because a GM has all of the responsibilities of a supervisor that involve reprimanding and keeping the players in line. Using the framework of Sousa and Vala, the GM might be seen, "as a true representative of the department and the workgroup, but not the organization as a whole" (p. 117). Thus, while the blame is placed on the GM, there may be no negative perceptions towards the business as a whole. My hypothesis is that this indicates that the role of GM may very well be

synonymous with scapegoat for the organization. Their job is to soak up the complaints to keep the perception of the business as a whole positive.

Design

The goal of this research was to understand the feelings and concerns of the player base regarding the control of GMs. To accomplish this task, I wanted to look at how the GM's role as a community liaison between developers and players influences player perceptions of the GM.

In order to find participants for the study, mass recruitment messages with my topic and e-mail were placed on the WoW and EQ II main forums. In addition, in-game 'tickets' were written in an attempt to contact GMs directly so that I could gain a balanced perspective on the player/GM relationship. Unfortunately, neither one of those recruitment methods yielded any results. In fact, I received the cut and paste response that they "are unable to comment on internal policy". This sentiment was also relayed by other GMs and those acting as 'guides.'

An example occurred an interview with a player in EQ II who was unable to comment on any matters pertaining to being a guide whatsoever by SOE policy. I speculate that they refuse to allow outside knowledge of their internal policies because they fear leaving themselves vulnerable to a legal attack of some sort. I do not fully understand the rationale behind this policy as it would seem the best way to treat the situation would be to offer freely and publicly all non-identifying procedural policy. This left me even more determined to understand the perceptions of the player base because I feel that it is important the companies comprehend the perceptions of the players to whom they are unable to talk to.

After this setback and a few tweaks to the content and direction of my paper later, I sent out a new recruitment message to various WoW and EQ II guild forums and received more participants through that method than by general postings.

Due to time constrictions because of my numerous setbacks, I conducted eleven of the twelve interviews in-game with the twelfth being over an instant messaging system. Two respondents were sent email versions of the interview questions and responded through that format. All of the interviews conducted in-game were recorded using screen capture technology and a log was kept of the interview that took place in instant messenger. Each respondent answered 15-20 questions that tested their conceptualization of the roles of the GM, and CM, and asked them their perceptions of the people in those roles ranging from positive, negative or neutral. Each interview lasted approximately half an hour and all of the respondents had reached the level cap for their respective games.

Results

Of the 14 in-depth interviews conducted, only three gave positive responses for their perceptions of GM performance in-game. Seven respondents gave negative responses and four gave neutral answers. Perhaps the most startling results were that when asked what the most important issue they felt needed to be addressed regarding the player/GM relationship, all of the respondents answered in one of two ways. One group suggested that the GMs needed to know more about the games they were administrating so that they could "stop relying on scripted responses" and quit being "mindless drones that cut and paste" the issues related to the player.

One player recounted a story about how their characters couldn't start a mission because it was broken and the GMs couldn't figure out why, so they just kept giving her the scripted response. Her perception of the events were "disappointing" and she recounts that GMs are

very nice people and sometimes you get someone who is helpful but mostly, they seem programmed and tell you the same thing no matter what your problem is... they don't know what they are talking about but babble on about stuff in the most friendly way. (Deris)

The second group of responses all had to do with streamlining the communications process between the GM and the player. Suggestions included "faster response times" and "easier forms of communication". One interviewee mentioned average wait times in the hours instead of minutes and said that it felt like were "pretty much like a customer of a large corporation". Admittedly, that is exactly what these game firms are, large corporations out to make a profit so it does not seem such a far stretch that the player base would have complaints like this.

A majority of the negative responses towards GMs occurred in reference to World of Warcraft, whereas in other games such as Ultima Online and Everquest the GMs were seen as friendly and helpful. One interviewee explained a little further that the GMs at the beginning of EverQuest were amazing but as time went on they became progressively worse and worse until they

just stopped really caring or even trying to prevent stuff or punish hackers. [A friend] started using hacks at the end of his eq career, and used a hack to find the location of a GM in a zone, and then used another hack to warp right in front of him. GM said "umm you aren't supposed to do that" and left. (Warban)

This sentiment was shared throughout the interviews by most of the people who rated the GMs negative or neutrally.

While three interviewees rated the Game Masters positively, only two gave the Community Managers a positive rating with eight neutral and four negative responses. Those that did respond positively gave responses such as "I have a very high opinion of them... hard job and they do it well". In addition, it was important to note that of the fourteen interviewees, only three considered the forums and official websites to be valuable sources of information. While everyone had some experience in using the message boards, most of the interviewees regarded them as "worthless" or "a ton of trash". Despite this however, most of the interviewees also seemed to agree that the Community Managers were fulfilling their jobs and one interviewee stated "I think the development team is truly incompetent or simply enjoys to jerk them around" (Roban). This is an interesting contradiction in opinion that would seem to follow Sousa and Vala's argument which has the supervisor being turned into a scapegoat for the company.

In order to test this hypothesis further we look at the results for generalized perception of the companies behind the games. Examples such as Blizzard, SOE, and Verant were given and in regards to this question, three people gave positive responses. This time however, fewer respondents regarded their opinions of the companies as neutral compared to negative, with a majority behind generalized disappointment. As expected, none of the positive responses for the corporation in

general also had positive responses for the GMs. In addition however, none of the people who responded positively for the corporations as a whole could come up with specific examples of situations where GMs had helped them in-game. Instead, one interviewee considered himself a “fanboy” and another said that he was “generally satisfied with the way the games turned out.”

Discussion

The most obvious point of discussion is the resounding negative or at least lack of positive reception towards the people who effectively run the games. If that is the case, then there must be another reason for why people continue to play them. Most likely it is the content and social connections that keep the largely disgruntled player base paying for the subscription fees. Unfortunately, statements like this are merely conjectures and it would require much further research to discover the true reasons why the players remain with the game.

The cursory evidence collected here seems to corroborate the hypothesis that the GMs and CMs act as scapegoats for some of the players, but not all. Indeed, there is an equally large percentage of the player community that seems to regard the exact opposite opinion of what the Sousa & Vala hypothesis would predict. Indeed, one self-aware respondent wrote,

I have a fairly low opinion of GMs and guides, but it isn't exactly rational. It's just me reallocating my distaste with the policymakers of the game, because they are closer at hand. (Ardsmor)

I think a growing percentage of the players understand the “GM stigma” that so often gives GMs the negative reputation in a game, and instead see them as hard working people who are just in a bad position. Unfortunately, 14 people are not enough to make any sort of valid claim as to this hypothesis.

Conclusion

We've discovered that many players reject pre-made copy and paste solutions and instead yearn for individualized answers to their problems. The only way this is ever going to happen is if the game companies decide to drastically increase the size of their customer relations staff and give them all training on the game that they are managing. The only way that GMs can overcome the hurdle of understanding the game is to play the very game they manage. It is a bad sign when players know more about a game than the people running it.

Given the opportunity, I think a study should be done that tracks player perceptions over the course of a few years so that the changes in understanding and perception can be recorded over time. This way, researchers could determine how the changes in company policy affected the player's perception of the company and its representatives. Additionally, it would give the company's insight into how the players react to different policies so that a better policy can be fashioned from the one now regarded as unsatisfactory.

Appendix 1. Sample Recruitment Message

Hello,

My name is Travis, and I am an undergraduate student enrolled in a course on virtual worlds at Trinity University in San Antonio, Tx. Our class has been participating in EverQuest II for the past four months with characters ranging from level 15 to 30.

As part of an ongoing research project I would like to speak to players over the age of 18 about their perceptions of GM management both in-games on the forums. The interviews that are conducted will be completely anonymous and can take place via e-mail, in-game, or over an instant messaging system. I will preserve the confidentiality of all participants.

If you are willing to be interviewed about your thoughts on this topic, please contact me at:

mmogms@yahoo.com

I understand the gaming community is bombarded with survey requests that never lead anywhere. This request is different. Our class is committed to sharing its research findings. At the end of the semester, all student papers and presentations will be linked to the course web site and made available to anyone with an Internet Connection.

For more details about our course and research project, visit:

<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwhich/worlds/faq.html>

Thanks in advance,

Travis

Appendix 2: Sample Questions

1. What is your gaming experience?
 2. Have you ever read through the EULA or TOS for a game that you played?
 - 2a. If so, did reading through it inform you effectively of the rules of the game?
 3. What is your perception of the role of GM?
 4. Have you ever contacted/been contacted by a GM regarding an issue you had in-game?
 - 4a. How did the GM respond to your issue?
 - 4b. How did the response leave you feeling?
 5. Based on this and your own opinions, how would you characterize your general perception of the GMs for the games you play?
- Changing gears slightly...
6. Do you ever check the forums or official websites to hear about community messages?
 - 6a. If yes, what is your opinion of the forums that you visit? Are they helpful?
 - 6b. If no, why not?
 7. What do you think the role of the Community Manager is?
 8. Do you think the Community Managers for your game fulfill their roles effectively?
 9. What are your opinions on the corporations behind the games? Ex. Blizzard, Verant, etc.
 10. If you could make one suggestion to a GM or let one issue be known, what would it be?
 11. Any comments you'd like to make?

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