

HSSC 213: Cyberculture

Assignment One

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Introduction

Dark Age of Camelot (DAoC) is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. Each player controls a character on a server through a graphical interface on his or her client computer. Its stated purpose is entertainment, but it is also a source of community for many of its members.

Involvement

I am recently not nearly as involved in the DAoC community as I have been before. At peak involvement I would spend about three hours daily in the game, and this went on for about four months. Inside the game, I am a Celtic female Warden named Aabinnia.

External Structure

On the outside of the virtual world, the game works about like this: Mythic Entertainment ¹ sells a graphical client and maintains a collection of servers on which the game is played. The first month of play is free, but after that every player must pay \$12 per month to continue playing. Mythic rationalizes this charge with the cost of server maintenance.

Obviously the game requires an internet connection and a reasonably up-to-date computer. It also requires at least a couple of hours per day of leisure. These things do not come without cost, so most players of the game probably belong to the middle or upper classes in Real Life.

Typically, between 500 and 2500 players are playing on a given server depending on the time of day. Most of the interaction between players occurs inside the game, but there is also a host of DAoC-associated web sites with message boards that receive heavy posting; on some boards the discussion focuses on aspects of the game itself, while others serve as a game-less form of interaction for players.

There are 20 servers, some of which have specialized rules. I play on a server called Nimue, which is a "roleplay" server. Roleplay servers have all the basic rules plus the requirement that everyone must remain in character at all times.

Basic Rules

Each server runs an instance of the world. In each instance of the world there are three realms, each with its own unique style and attractions. For example, I am a member of Hibernia, which is the realm of enchantment and mysticism.

¹<http://www.mythicentertainment.com>

The three realms are pitted against one another in a never-ending struggle to control certain territories. One of the purposes of the game is to defeat ones foes in other realms, and in doing so gain power and prestige for oneself, one's guild, and one's realm.

Players spend most of their time in their home realm. There, they meet other players, run errands to make money and gain experience, perform quests to obtain magical items, and hack monsters. Inside a player's home realm, he/she is safe from invaders from other realms. After enough experience playing within their home realm, players are allowed to travel to the frontier zones where they battle players from other realms.

It should be noted that players devise a multitude of other pastimes for themselves. Many become craftsmen, who earn meager livings by making weapons and armor to sell or give to other players. Also, especially on the roleplay servers, players make up backgrounds and destinies for themselves and act them out as best they can within the framework of the game.

Internal Structure

Within a realm, players may choose to join a guild. Guilds are official groups of players that join together primarily for community, but also for the valuable connections (and cool clothes!). Each guild has one or more guildmasters with the power to promote members, demote members, invite new members, and expel members from the guild. Below the guildmasters there is a ranking system, which can be set up however the guildmasters desire. For example, in some guilds there is a strict heirarchy — prospective members might be the lowest rank, then new members, then veteran members, then officers. Officers usually get promoted based on services they provide for the guild, time spent with the guild, or simply power and experience. Higher ranking officers are usually given some specific powers of the guildmaster.

Other guilds have less structured organization; in particular, one guild I am familiar with is set up with two ranks: guildmaster, of which there is only one, and everyone else. It is proclaimed to be a democracy, in which all the important issues are decided by direct vote of all members (or all members who can make the meetings). It is interesting to note that technically the game framework does not support this democratic system, rather the particular guildmaster is bound only by his word to carry out the will of the group.

Aside from guilds, players tend to make many friends within their realm. Almost nothing is done alone (doing anything alone is very rare and goes by the term 'soloing'); most often players go adventuring in groups of 2 to 8. 8 is the technical limit of group size for monster-hacking sessions — the really big battles only happen in the frontier zones.

At the very top level of the power structure, there are administrators that have more powers than everyone else. Players practically never see them, because they only appear in rare critical situations. When they do show up they take the form of a floating sphere (or so it is rumoured), and can do basically anything, up to and including deleting a character from the system.

On Nimue and the other roleplay servers, if a player fails to stay in character and it bothers another player, the botheree is asked to submit a written complaint to the admins. Then the botherer receives an email warning (in Real Life) from the admins informing them of the complaint. If enough players complain repeatedly about a particular provocative player, that player is subject to being removed from the game. It is made quite clear that Mythic Entertainment owns all virtual characters and items and can modify or remove them at any time.

Because of billing issues, no player is ever purely anonymous. However, the only people with access to a player's Real Life information are the Mythic admins, who obviously don't take such access lightly. Thus players are generally free to describe their Real Life selves however they want with little consequences for lying. Fortunately this is not generally an issue, because role-playing is central to the game and therefore discussing Real Life is not important, doesn't happen often, and is certainly not required.

Values

Experience, maturity, prudence, leadership, knowledge, connections, and spending a lot of time in the game are all important values to the community.

When a player first starts, the community labels him or her as a “newb”, and does not generally respect him or her as much as more experienced players. It is important to distinguish between players and characters here; experienced players may play inexperienced characters and not be labelled as a “newb”, because they are familiar with the nuances of the game and they don't make the same mistakes as new players.

One of the most interesting things to note in playing the game is that the community strongly values maturity. The typical image of computer gamers is of young boys, rarely if ever portrayed as mature. However most of the people I meet in the DAoC community are my age (19) or older, and it is not surprising to meet people in their 30s, 40s or even sometime 50s. I have met several mothers and even a few married couples who play the game together. Most players disapprove of immature (generally young) gamers who run around spouting the latest lingo and bragging about their abilities.

When adventuring in a group, each member of the group has a responsibility to the rest of the group. If one member does something stupid, the whole group pays for it. Thus being reckless is frowned upon while being prudent is valued.

Leadership is valued greatly, especially among the more experienced players. Organizing a large group of players, say 100 or more, to assault an enemy stronghold is a near-impossible task. The leader that can pull it off is priceless in a battle between realms.

The more alert players who carefully think about the game and pay attention to the details are given higher value. They know where to go to find certain things, they know how to act in certain situations, and they are generally good people to hang around if one wants to be successful.

If a player doesn't know the answer to a question but knows someone who does, that's almost as good as knowing the answer. Because of the structure of the game, players can message any other player that is on the same server in the same realm instantaneously. Thus asking for help usually has immediate results. Players who can come up with information on demand through their connections are envied; connections are one of the reasons players join guilds.

Finally, players who are on-line a lot and participate a lot are given much higher value than ones with spotty attendance. This is in part because a lot of time spent playing translates into experience, maturity, prudence, knowledge, connections and sometimes leadership. However it is also because they are viewed as active participants in the community. Also, the technical system is such that playing a lot earns a player more power and status, and allows one to do more different things. The more play time, the more benefit one gets from the game; this results in long hours in front of the computer for many.

More on Community

The central reason for playing the game is community. The role-playing aspect is often fun, and the various gamish things one can do are entertaining, but there would be little depth if not for the community. I often log in only to stand around and talk with friends; the monster-hacking sessions that stand out as a great time are the ones that are spent in excellent company.

Inside the game, community is literally everywhere. I feel almost patriotic with respect to the Hibernian realm especially when, for example, another Hibernian comes running through the city shouting “All that are able to arms! Midgard has taken Dun Crauchon!”, and players start chattering excitedly while gathering into a large group to retake the fortress. And when I take part in the birth of a new guild, I feel responsible to the guild's well-being, and the success of my guildmates. All the while I am making an array of interesting friends. The whole experience is filled with community, and community is the reason the experience has value.

Conclusions

Community is, if not the sole purpose of DAoC, the central attraction in the game. Mythic Entertainment has harnessed the notion of community, and structured the rules of the game accordingly. It is easy to see why they want to do so: when one is part of community on so many levels, it becomes increasingly difficult to leave. And the game succeeds.