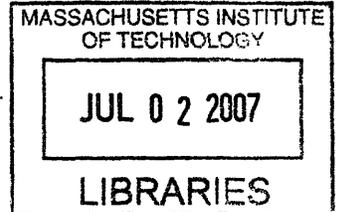


**Customer research, customer-driven design, and
business strategy in Massively Multiplayer Online
Games**



By

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Submitted to the MIT Sloan School of Management on May 10, 2007 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a part of an exploration of how the relationships between the customers of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) shape customer experience, and can be used to diminish customer churn and improve customer life expectancy, two critical drivers for any subscription-based business model.

MMOGs are a very complex product, with a massive level of interaction within the customer base – in fact those interactions constitute a significant part of the appeal. Thus, MMOGs combine aspects of particularly tough online community management, online customer service, and game design/content creation. To be successful, all of those elements need a fine understanding of the customer, their needs and their virtual ‘life’ and relationships within the game world.

This thesis explores the usefulness of detailed, sophisticated interview to gain a fine understanding of customer needs and of the tools necessary to organize communication with, and among, customers. From this knowledge, it projects examples of strategic thrusts necessary to achieve or maintain leadership within this recent, but very powerful and lucrative, business model.

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Foreword

Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) have been the most interesting and powerful business model to emerge in gaming in the last ten years. *World of Warcraft*, currently the uncontested leader of the breed, has about 7 million players who bring in an estimated 90+ million dollars a month — amounts undreamed of mere years before. Its return on investment so far is also an estimated 730%. In a world of plummeting revenue from increasingly commoditized software, and rather unclear prospects for benefit from Web 2.0 initiatives, this is even more remarkable.

Yet, as a young business model, it still can be improved in many different ways.

MMOGs cannot be as polished as offline games when it comes to game designs. They are usually much more complex, having to take into account significant limitations stemming from bandwidth, lag and security, not allowing for a traditional and linear story, etc. Yet their ability to fascinate customers, and to make many of those addicted to playing despite their significant, recurring price is now common knowledge. It is thus reasonable to postulate that their edge comes not from superior game design, graphics, or plot, but from their differentiating characteristic — relationships with other gamers, and collaborating and sharing an experience. As one customer put it: *“I think the addictive quality is linked equally to the social aspects and the gameplay; the slow leveling carrot-on-a-stick model is pretty effective, and has been since Nethack. But the fact that one's playing with other people, who expect them to show up for guild runs and things like that, makes habit and addiction perhaps easier to build.”* Or, in darker but certainly not uncommon terms: *“Speaking personally, one of the times I considered quitting Ultima Online [...] was when I'd been unemployed for 6 months — I decided that UO just wasn't good for me. It wasn't interfering with my job search; as an IT contractor I do all that over the net anyway. But it was certainly becoming a lot more important to me than real life was.”*

As with most marketing-oriented research, this thesis is centred on the customers.

Said customers are addressed in three different ways corresponding to the three different components of my thesis:

- The social components (interacting and collaborating with other players within the game) are a key dimension for the continued success of the business model, yet do not appear to be as developed as they could. Since social interaction seems to be an area where a little work can go a long way, I will explore the issue through Voice of the Customer research. This research is focused on the "classic" segment (sophisticated US and UK gamers in their 20s and early 30s), and was conducted with a strong emphasis on MIT-recommended projective techniques.
- Complementing this research is a massively multiplayer idea-generation process, using the cutting edge Idealyst™ methodology. This massive brainstorm was also centred on how people want to interact and work together (or against each other) in the game.
- Lastly, using this knowledge about customers and complementing it with a recent published MIT anthropology study, *Play between worlds*, I have taken numerous notes using as a frame of reference the MIT-developed strategic framework, the Delta Model, to MMOGs. The Delta Model is particularly centred on existing and potential customers, and was thus considered an excellent fit for this thesis. Since this approach gives even more interesting strategic and operational insight, it will not be published along with the first two parts of the thesis.

This being a MIT Sloan thesis, my interest in social relationships and collaboration in MMOGs is not purely academic. This paper explores the intuition that those relationships can be leveraged to:

- Dramatically **reduce customer churn** throughout their entire life cycle
- **Prolong said life cycle**
- Help MMOG leaders **resist competitive pressure** from other games, and raise

barriers to entry

- Improve customer experience and **word-of-mouth**

This thesis about MMOG customers, and how to retain and develop their business, does include examples of game design to give it a practical slant. Those elements of game design are intended as mere illustrations; while I know what am I doing from the point of view of the management of customers and systems, I make absolutely no claim of having world-class game design skills. Some of those examples probably have been considered or worked upon by actual designers; in fact, during the late stage of my research, I realized several designs close to features that emerged during the writing of this thesis had recently appeared in the more sophisticated MMOs.

Furthermore, I realized during the 434th rereading of this thesis that those features assumed a very constant level of effort on a MMOG — perhaps even an increase of the resources working on the game once it appears that it is catching on. This is not the usual pacing for a video game (where features are thrown out to try to respect deadlines and expansions receive a lesser team), and I'm not certain where most MMO development is nowadays — between my assumption of an endless, full-strength project and the tradition of a very constrained and concentrated push with a much less impressive follow-up.

Throughout the study, I assume that readers are familiar with the subject, and likely have played MMOGs themselves.

Part I – Voice of the Customer research. Existing, desired, and reviled features of interaction with and between customers

1.a/ What did I do, and why

MMOGs include many aspects and dimensions. The core, traditional aspect is the game design and production in themselves ; how big should the Karana plains be, how balanced are the shamans and paladins while adventuring, how easy should it be to become a Jedi, or whether it is still possible for characters to “fall off the world” in Perez Park (provided they can survive long enough for that). This part, while certainly very interesting, is not one in which a person not currently working for a leading game design studio will bring thunderous insight and revelations.

The next dimension of customer experience that springs to mind is the interactions between the players — often mentioned by active MMOG gamers as both their greatest source of long-term satisfaction and constant irritation, and by inactive gamers as the reason why they no longer play. Obviously there is something to be explored there. If we could increase the satisfaction with the social aspects of the game, it makes sense that customer would continue playing longer, would enjoy the game more, would be more likely to recruit outsiders to join them within the game, and would be less likely to jump ship when the Next Big Thing comes. As one interviewee put it: *“Why should I pay 15 bucks a month if what I’m actually doing is just like a console game [and has no social dimension]?”*

How do we do that?

As with many problems in life, the solution is “we talk to people”. More precisely:

- **The methodology** used here is a stripped down version of the FOCUS methodology. As such, it stresses in-depth qualitative one-to-one interviews. The content of those interviews is then analyzed, “scrubbed” and organized to facilitate action.
- **The panel** of interviews is a dozen people. Although this often seems counterintuitive, this is a very reasonable number for properly conducted, one-to-one lengthy interviews. MIT research demonstrates that after 12 to 15 subjects, the marginal return of each subsequent interview sharply drops and nearly 80% of customer needs have been captured.
- Most of the interview is conducted using **ZMET-based projective techniques**. Those techniques are particularly efficient when it comes to obtaining candid, heartfelt and creative feedback during interviews.
- Due to time constraints, the interviews have been conducted among the “**classic**” **segment** when it comes to video gaming — sophisticated US gamers in their 20s and early 30s, with a solid experience in PC gaming. Though it’s a good place to start, many interesting lessons certainly have to be learned in other segments. The current market leader, for instance, was described by an insider as having been built with “white American 14-year old straight boys” in mind, though in practice it actually seems to include design and style elements aimed at another key market : Korea. Unfortunately, my own visit to the Korean and Chinese online gaming scenes will take place after this thesis is over.
- **The respondents were selected** for being articulate, talkative and thoughtful, in order to provide rich and detailed interviews.
- Once the interview structure was adjusted after face-to-face interviews, I experimented and conducted the remainder though **online chat**. This variation on the technique proved quite fruitful, given the profile of the selected respondents.

Since most readers will lack time to peruse the fine tome that describes the FOCUS methodology, my version of a FOCUS interview roughly goes like this:

- The respondent prepares by selecting on Google Images a number of **pictures** he associates with social interaction in MMOGs. The interviewer helps him by defining the subject in a precise fashion, and gives him descriptions and examples to encourage creativity, metaphor and spontaneity in the choice of images.
- The **discussion** rolls from one picture to the other, exploring the feelings, words, experiences associated with the picture and sparking tangents based on details of the picture and mapping how well it corresponds to the experience. Receptive subjects are invited to use the picture to tell stories by imagining themselves in the pictures, talking about who any present character or animal in the picture might be, etc.
- The discussion then rolls on **opinions and experiences** about social interaction in MMOGs in a more open way (since at this point the respondent is usually quite at ease — the pictures are an excellent icebreaker). From the respondent's point of view, the process feels much closer to a conversation than an interview.
- Those interviews are **unusually long** (at the very least one hour, almost two hours in some cases) and in depth, and the respondents were selected for their insight and acumen.
- The .wma files with the interviews are then carefully listened to, with snippets of conversations being noted verbatim on cards; in the case of chat interviews, the logs are reviewed two or three times. The cards are then arranged by theme, sub-theme, etc. until they form a logically built tree of **voices of the customer**.

- **Analysis** proceeds from that tree.
- In the case of this thesis, the tree was compared to MIT **anthropology study** *Play Between Worlds* and to the author's own extensive experience with MMOGs.

This methodology is not quantitative ; experience and research show that points that are made by a small number of respondents can be critical, while points mentioned by nearly everyone might be useless when it comes to actually doing something.

Occasionally, additional questions were asked to larger audience ; the Internet forum rpg.net was chosen for its high concentration of sophisticated gamers in their 20s and 30s when it was necessary to have a few dozen people explain their personal experience with a very specific point. This could be likened to a very short focus group on a precise issue, with 20 or 30 active respondents.

1.b/ What was learned

Generally, the social/people side of those games seem to be as important as the quality of the game itself. During interviews, it was mentioned in quite a few cases that people continued to play a game they no longer genuinely enjoyed so they could be with friends, There were also cases of people quitting a game they thought was excellent because of "all the idiots in there".

A majority of players express dissatisfaction at how the social/community aspect actually plays out. From complaints, one gets the impression that the game companies are focusing, for obvious cultural reasons, on making games and not on managing complex human communities. This is understandable ; students of management know well that managing human communities is an extremely complex, volatile and frustrating endeavour. Thankfully, combining managerial knowledge and marketing investigation techniques does give us interesting insight.

In fact, if I may insist on this point, one of my constant surprises when mentoring younger managers, supporting more experienced managers, or even working with smart, high-powered managers such as my fellow Sloan Fellows is the difficulty managers have in profoundly integrating the notion that others have different mental models, learning schemes, framing of means and goals, etc. than they do. This constantly hampers their efficiency as a manager. Since I tend to view MMOG designers and administrators as managers of a community, using unique forms of power and balances, comparing the two is instructive. So let's explore those different mental models.

1.b.1/ Expectations about social relationships leading to conflict

Among the various big lessons from the study, this one certainly stood out, even to the undergrads helping with some of the interviews, which is in itself noteworthy.

As with any social environment, conflict occurs. Conflict, however, can definitely stain the enjoyment of the game and was cited by many respondents as the chief reason why they stopped playing for extended periods, or found the game less attractive than they used to. Investigating said conflicts through anecdotes, asking respondents to imagine what was going on in the mind of the person acting in ways they disapproved of, etc.) revealed that the vast majority occurs due to different expectations about what the game is about.

Key areas of conflicting expectations include:

- **Expected level of violence** between players

Some view these games as outright war between players, some merely appreciate the occasional conflict or ritualized duel. Lack of a precise communication of expectations leads to considerable drama.

- **Expected level of fairness** in player-vs.-player (PvP) conflict

This is a subset of the previous one. Players carry mental models (often pretty strong ones) of what PvP should be, but lack of precise communication means more drama and frustration when the “everything goes and dogs eat dogs” mental model collides with the “high chivalry” one.

● **Expected level of introductions and politeness**

Most MMOs include numerous activities that can only be tackled by a group, rather than an individual. Faced with this, people have divergent mental models. To some, grabbing strangers with but a minimal level of articulated communication is culturally OK, while to others saying hello and politely introducing oneself and one’s goal is an obvious prerequisite. Interestingly, those people might be roughly the same age and live on the same block, yet have divergent “cultures” about such basic social interaction due to assumptions about the game and gamers.

● **Expected levels of chattiness**

Many players count socialization as their main enjoyment of the game, with the combat and looting being somewhat secondary ; a greater number is very focused on success and power, with friendships being incidental. Friction will obviously occur when attempts at discussion collide with results-oriented concentration.

● **Expected immersiveness (or degree of immersion within the game world)**

A significant minority of players comes from a role-playing background, and wants to feel a genuine sense of immersion in whatever the game world happen to be. They will speak in-character, avoid references to events outside the game universe, and will often be quite interested in learning about the history and politics of the game world. Most players, though, have a less sophisticated approach and enjoy talking about the latest Red Sox defeat or Chuck Norris joke. Friction, etc. Of course, there are degrees in immersiveness – many prefer what is called “light role-playing”, a middle ground between the two.

● **Expected seriousness**

While many players are hardcore gamers and will approach the game with a dedication usually reserved to workaholic executives, game developers undergoing crunch-time and MIT graduate students, other play simply for fun and laughs. For the first, having his character killed is a very frustrating experience, for the other it's just a game. Incomprehension between "hardcore" and "splash and giggle" players causes serious conflict.

● **Expected maturity**

The notion of "maturity" was initially felt to be too wide and hazy, and care was taken not to lump too much under that heading. But it remains too recurrent, and the subject of too many frustrations, not to bring up. Many respondents note that "maturity" and "age" are distinct concepts ; many players, the author included, have anecdotes about persons whom they thought were 25 and turned out to be 13, and vice versa. Feelings of a lack of a common ground and of exasperation can easily be triggered by those differences. Interestingly, those feelings are heightened when voice communication comes into play, usually through a Ventrilo or Teamspeak server.

A catalyst in this is that many people want to relax and fool around during some periods of play ; and a lack of shared values when fooling around easily results in offence being taken. Especially since people will unconsciously assume that people they cannot see, and are part of the same community as they are, share their values.

● **Expected experience with game**

A classic source of drama and grinding teeth is the failure to communicate between the old hand who treads through repetitive content by rote, and the less experienced (or more curious) person attempting to orient himself and come up with plans to make it through obstacles. To put it in the most

deplorable Internet vernacular, both the “noobz” and the “doodz” will usually assume that the other party is less than bright.

● **Expected level of effort**

Interesting conflict also erupts around another set of implicit values gamers bring with them to the game: earning vs. entitlement. Those who find it normal that some rewards and abilities demand time, effort and collective commitment will be exasperated at what they perceive as spoiled whining by the others, while players who bring with them the model of “I paid for this and demand to be entertained” will resent the attitude of the others, seen as being elitist and not fun.

● **Expected level of competitiveness**

Lastly, one of the most interesting differences in “cultural” expectations to emerge from the interviews was whether MMOs are a competition. Some, perhaps most, players automatically assume a competition of some sort and strive to have their character be the most competent, fearsome, well-armed and armoured, highly achieving, etc. within the community. This assumption, while it certainly generates high commitment, carries various drawbacks such as burnout, repetitiveness, very long times spend playing, and cheating. Other customers have a more relaxed, less competitive attitude ; their assumptions being that the game is more like a role-playing game, a “touring experience” (like the huge mainstream hit Myst some years back) or a social/chatting playground.

Those assumptions are typical of a new form of entertainment, craft or art ; the pioneers will come in with their assumption, their mental models, even their values from their previous disciplines. It is amusing, for instance, to see how *Diablo* players, *Warcraft* players, role-players, First Person Shooter Games players, *Everquest* players, etc. come to *World of Warcraft* with identifiable mental models, since this mirrors the research MIT’s

John van Maanen did when windsurfing emerged as a new discipline – and how skiers, surfers or sailors came to windsurfing with their own mental models and assumptions. Each had their own approach, which, much like gamers, they considered to be self-evidently right. More on this later.

Those sample sources of conflict have uniformly bad effects on the business:

- **They create negative emotions** (often strong negative emotions) about the game (“I don’t play *Everworld of Lineage Heroes* anymore, the people there are all idiots.”). Those emotions tend to accumulate in a downward spiral, until, after the last straw, the camel stops subscribing.
- Inevitably, **those emotions get transferred toward the game developer**. This is particularly important in terms of marketing, as most marketing practitioners know now that it is the emotional connection, the gut feeling toward the company that is the most potent marketing lever. The previous classic example was the Apple customers, most of whom have an emotional connection with Apple, its products and Steve Jobs. Right now it is interesting to see the intensity of emotions linking many *World of Warcraft* players and Blizzard, the publisher (or *City of Heroes* players and Cryptic). Especially since so many of those emotions are negative.
- **They create negative publicity**, often strong negative publicity, about the game – usually through disappointed users over Internet fora. This is critical, since the reputation of MMOGs seems to largely rest on Internet discussions. (“I’ve played *Everworld of Lineage Heroes*, and it sucks. All players are rude 14-year old on an ego trip.”). Those perceptions also often reinforce negative stereotyping, which makes marketing the game so much harder.
- **They discourage churners from coming back** (“I’d play *Everworld of Lineage Heroes* again since the graphics and the quests are so great and they have new zones, but I can’t stand the morons there.”)

- **They prevent social networks from appearing**, by making most players wary of collaboration after too many negative experiences. This “I no longer do pick-up groups” attitude is extremely common and may obviously result in a player that is not tied to the game by friendship, and is much less likely to recruit friends and acquaintances unless he thinks they can regularly play together.

A somewhat related issue lies around the difficulty of establishing expertise, a quick way to show credentials. For instance, one’s experience as a small-unit tactical leader to help resolve conflict around egocentric clashes where everyone thinks he’s the most qualified to act or lead. This issue, however, is both minor compared to the others and shared with other Internet “places” (such as Wikipedia), so we will not get into this in this paper.

Voices of the customers

Many of these considerations stemmed from descriptions of pick-up group (PUG) and guild social dynamics.

“PUGs are sad.”

“It’s not ‘we,’ it’s ‘you screwed this up for me.’” (lack of common ground creates burden-shifting reflex)

“One of the things that made me willing to walk away from the game was realizing that...channels are here for hanging around with your friends, and these people weren’t my friends”

“...This more disruptive sense of humor...wasn’t the proper and ideal one....” (on maturity)

“I’ve never had General chat on ever since... Don’t even mention Barrens chat... One of my pictures for the interview is ‘I survived Barrens chat’... I was like, OK, I can’t stand this.”

“I also don’t like playing with people I don’t know.”

“Those people can do anything that they want... as long as it’s outside of a five-mile radius from me. As long as I don’t have to interact with them, it’s fine.”

“I DO like to choose who I share my gaming experience with and would rather play a cooperative game with friends than a death match with a spastic racist/homophobic 12-year-old I’ll never meet.”

"I don't know those people, and do not consider fun to play with them, esp. considering the ratio of them that are foul-mouthed 12-year-olds."

"Whenever I do [grouping] with guildies, we talk about things rationally." (implicitly, outsiders don't)

"The best thing was to find a group I knew I had something in common with."

"There was some fun with the gay guild, but not enough grouping together and common effort, so I left."

*"You read Penny Arcade? It's like [Gabe's Greater Internet F***wad Theory.] They could be 14 and total idiots, they could be 21 and in college, they could be 28 and have a nice career, but they still behave like total f***ing idiots."*

[Over a drawing of Beavis and Butthead] "That's 90% of the server. The people... the people outside my guild? That's how they all come across as, for the most part."

*"Every couple of months I'll try to do a PUG... and it'll just bow up because of everyone being a b***head."*

"That's me, [the picture is a metaphor for me]. When I learn I'm gonna join a pick-up, my face is like that."

"I don't really have the temperament to deal with that. I get mad. I fantasize about hitting people. I managed not to break anything, but I certainly wanted to."

"The other rogues in that chat channel are very, very immature. My reason for setting down the game is that I didn't want to interact with people of my class within my guild."

*(After a loot dispute) "I spent about three hours of my life arguing with this guy... we both [behaved] like a***oles."*

"It's not so much that [the group] is hamstringing me in any way, but more that I'd feel like an ass leaving, say, midway through a dungeon, but sometimes I REALLY want to."

"Most often, I find this is the progression: You're happily going along in a reasonably effective group and all's well. Then, one person does something "stupid". I'm putting that in quotes, because most often they just don't know any better. But now, one of the heretofore quiet groupies has a meltdown and starts spamming the party chat with accusations and nooblols, and it all sort of goes downhill from there."

"Homophobia is the other big one that I'm getting really, really tired of seeing... and that's one that's pretty much never policed, it seems."

"There's a lot of teenagers playing these games, and they give people a chance to feel in control when they may not be in real life. And not only teenagers - adults with issues or who may not be as in control of their real life as they'd like to be."

Predictably, while the segment being engaged has numerous Voices about issues pertaining to lack of maturity, our one outlier (a respondent who, while technically not the youngest, was felt to be the least mature) had a mirror image Voice:

“It’s the people who think they know everything that are really annoying.”

So what can we do?

What we’ve got here is failure to communicate; therefore it makes sense to create tools and a language to facilitate the communication of expectations and prevent misunderstandings and friction. This is, basically, playing matchmaking – and we can easily compare this task with what we might design for a dating site. Unlike what one may think given the stereotypical view of gamers, both activities are fairly similar.

Interestingly, there already exists a language and tools to describe the salient characteristics of the avatars – class, levels, “con”, “faction”, flags, etc. – and the task of describing the salient characteristics of the *player* does not have to be dissimilar. This is especially true if we assume that players may want to vary his characteristics and expectations from one character to the next, or perhaps even from one game session to the next.

Here are examples of some key features to facilitate communication of expectations about the game, and a better alignment of expectations within the game environment:

- **System of toggles** allowing to set expectations along the various axes (e.g. player X prefers to associate with 20-25-year olds and is a chatty, serious, low-competitive, light role-player); said expectations can be read when examining the character, for instance when reviewing profiles of people who are available for grouping.

- **Algorithm** encoding the level of matching between one and any other player. Just like most games have a system that allows for instantly gauging the level of threat a given creature poses to a given player, instantly gauging strong compatibility or incompatibility of expectations would give immediate, value-neutral social clues allowing players to either break the ice or thread carefully. It also removes much of the unknown as to what style of communication would be proper when addressing someone, and allows for easier recruitment within guilds.
- **Creating**, for each copy of the game world (“server”, “shard”, “realm”, whatever) a synthetic/average profile of the players’ expectations on the server – with perhaps a “target” profile set for each server, and a system strongly recommending servers depending on the expectations. This allows for more informed choices and less friction between people with different expectations, after reviewing what server is “hostile” or “friendly” toward one’s play style. Load balancing among servers is certainly important, but a positive customer experience is even more crucial.

Such qualifiers might also lessen the feeling of anonymity, which many gamers feel is a determining factor in socially irresponsible and disruptive behaviour.

I.b.2/ Guilds/clans as the key social unit

Most MMOGs will have three major types of social units:

- **Short-term**, small groups (2-6 people), usually formed out of convenience for a specific objective to be achieved in the near future
- **Long term** “guilds” (or, in a less pseudo-medieval context, “clans”, or some game-specific jargon such as “linkshells”)
- **Alliances** between guilds, often occurring when the game offers some objectives that can only be achieved through assembling and directing a lot of manpower

“Guilds” vary a lot in size and character – from a half-dozen real-life friends who just want to fool around together to hardcore, highly competitive organizations with paramilitary discipline and hundreds of members. But they are the long-term social glue holding the players together.

A friendly, fun, well-functioning guild can prolong the subscription of its members for months, if not years, and definitely encourages recruiting Internet and real-life acquaintances and friends to join the game and the guild. Lack of such an organization, on the other hand, will produce a sense of isolation and alienation, and a life on the social periphery of the in-game community. Though there are actual, hardened loners, many players playing outside of a guild they feel comfortable with do so because they could not easily find one, and have grown disenchanted with their interactions with other players they met at random.

The guild is also very important when it comes to learning those complex games – support from strangers is often poor (it usually boils down to “lol u noob”), while a nascent network of friends that answer questions and offer advice dramatically increase the comfort and interest of newcomers. As experience increases, the role of guilds in turning players into long-term adopter of the game become very explicit to some customers: *“There's not a lot that's original about LotRO, but it still seems like a great game, at least interesting enough to try for a while. If I were to play it long term, I'd probably have to have a good guild.”*

Given how central a guild, or a lack of a guild, is to customer experience and churn, the frequent lack of customer-friendly tools to manage them is puzzling. Players often express dissatisfaction about how messy the process of finding the right guild for them can be, how frustrating coordination between guild members can get, and how time-consuming it can be for those in charge. Especially since the frustration of people running the guild very easily bleeds over to the common members; if one’s guild leader always complaint about the time she has to spend running “placeholder” characters to store the

guild's shared possessions (or "guild bank"), it becomes difficult not to feel guilty about that.

Long-term groupings such as guilds are doubly important, since interviews revealed a very consistent and very strong enjoyment of a sense of "efficient togetherness". The feeling of the group acting as a powerful, well-oiled machine, using excellent coordination and experience to topple considerable obstacles and achieve telling victories, is considered as particularly elating and is often cited as the number one reason to play MMOGs. Such coordination generally occurs in long-term groups with genuine affinities and growing experience; when they occur spontaneously, the players often seek to make the relationship with those with whom they shared that experience longer-lasting.

Metaphors of ballet dancing, SWAT units, elite military units, bands of ancient Scottish raiders, famous sports teams, and the like abounded in the choice of pictures to illustrate the social experience in MMOs, and most respondents were enthusiastic when telling the interviewer about such moments of graceful, efficient collective effort; almost all answers to the "best memories of MMOG experience" were one such moment.

Voices of the customers

"I was surprised at how mad it [attrition from the guild] made me." (A guild leader reflecting on a classic disintegrating guild situation) "The frustration from losing folks, it's so... I don't even know how to put it in a picture."

"There's this sort of guild camaraderie."

"I get a lot of laughter out of guild chat. At one point we spend an entire night coming up with 'Charlie Brown specials that should never be'."

"...This large group of people who have just accomplished something and are elated."

"Well, the Guild is fun. You can trust people not to mess up. If you have a random pickup instead, well, it's sad."

"This sense of people moving around, it's like a dance."

"To have this synchronization, this organization and this success, this rhythm..."

"You get the most in the shortest time...."

"You just watch for your cues from what people around you are doing. You don't even need to type."

"Nowadays everybody knows their roles and the fights aren't chaotic, not as chaotic as they used to be."

*"In the handful of cases where my opponents/teammates weren't flaming a***oles, the game still felt meaningless because it was devoid of any long-term relationship."*

"The people in the Guild bring me the materials and I use them to enchant. And if someone in the Guild needs something enchanted, I'll do it for free. But not for people outside of the Guild."

"It's the general experience. Going along and doing great things as a team. Usually martial-based."

"In this photo [illustrating my feelings about WoW teamwork], I like that they look excited about what they're doing"

"This is the sweet taste of cooperative victory, it's related to teamwork."

"MMOs are a connective medium."

"It was a big morale boost for the guild. Everybody was so excited that we could move on up to this, that we could kill this guy... It's like passing a test. We passed this hurdle that had been giving us trouble. It was getting intense toward the end. It was tough. It wasn't easy."

"I would change their guild interface. Creating ranks and promoting people, it's... just awful... As we've expanded, I've had to add ranks...every time we wanna make a change... I have to reorganize [everything manually] and I have to promote or demote everyone in the guild... everybody. 73 people to click."

"There needs to be an easy way to communicate with your guild, though not when they're not logged in as their guild character - CoH's global chat was the ruin of a few supergroups - because they didn't need to be logged into the supergroup to chat anymore, the feeling of community was diminished."

"If there are ranks that have game effects you need to be able to promote and demote people when they're off-line (CoH bad at this, UO good)."

"The ability to give members custom, visible titles is nice and can help with the role-playing."

"I wish there was a better inter-guild collaboration. Something that would allow us to talk with them a little more in-between raids... but adding a channel is just another layer of thing that's going to be ignored. Guild alliances are a big thing when you're doing it. There's gotta be an easier way for us to talk."

"[As a guild leader], I do more meetings and handshaking that I've ever done in my life because of this game... I'm pushing myself... I have a responsibility... I do a lot of talking to strangers, which... I don't normally do. It's definitely taught me a lot of managing."

"Guild forums, past a certain size... are just necessary. We make [reading the] forums mandatory... [since] I've loaded the calendar into it."

"I don't want to overplay [this notion of commitment toward others]; I don't personally think "I must go online or [my guild leader] will fire me!" or anything like that, but it's possible for a multiplayer game to require commitments in the way a singleplayer game doesn't. For instance, let's say you and some guildies agree to go beat up Lord Obstacle the Be-looted on Thursday night... if you can't make it, there's a chance they won't be able to go."

"EQ2 has a bunch of things WoW doesn't, but among them is a recruiting interface that allows you to see which guilds are looking for people (and usually with a few icons to indicate the style of play the guild fosters), and especially a guild bank."

"It was a lot of fun to be able to really sort of gel together under stress and work out our tactics and so forth."

"Guild uniforms are nice, especially in a game that doesn't allow you much (or allows too much) customization in character look."

So what can we do?

Historically, guilds have been largely self-managed, with members pitching in time, technical skills and occasionally money to build some web space and (usually) private fora, and advertising on web discussion boards to make their guild better-known. A revenue source is thus lost (selling tailored subscriptions to web space and tools for managing guilds, using the advertising space, etc.), the orientation of customers is not facilitated, and the potential facilitation of integration of in-game and out-of-game communication is lost.

Making guild selection easy (possibly using the language for the description of game expectations outlined above), and making communication within the guild less frustrating and less difficult is setting up is an important first step in including players in social environment they like, thus considerably diminishing the risks of churn. Not leveraging those links, however, would be a marketing loss. From the interviews and browsing guild web sites, the key points seem to be:

- **A sense of belonging.** Cues that materialize and express the sense of togetherness of the guild create a positive feedback and loyalty toward the guild and, thus, the game. Well-organized photo albums, membership rosters, stories, and anecdotes, etc. are key, but in-game cues (such as customized headquarters, trophies commemorating collective achievements, uniforms, or symbols such as cloaks, tattoos, gang-style colours... allowing one to represent his organization) are also eagerly used or wished for.
- **A sense of achievement.** Collective achievement, the sentiment of having overcome together, is the most powerful positive feedback in MMOGs – and thus a feeling one wants customers to experience often. Besides from combat encounters that take an unusual amount of manpower and coordination to overcome, collective quests and the ability to improve the common lot of the guild go a long way to reinforce this positive feedback, especially if they give the guild well-publicized prestige among other players. Even players who actually prefer to play solo seem to find their enjoyment of the game, and loyalty toward it, significantly increase when their individual work contributes to a collective effort.
- **A facilitation of everyday in-game life.** Having simple tools bridging the off-game and in-game world is important in making the game friendly toward guilds, and leveraging their binding effect. This includes shared arsenals and vaults, detailed rosters, internal “needs lists” and “can do lists” to make exchange of resources and services fast and without having to formulate awkward requests for assistance, ability to IM off-game guild members if they allow it, lists of events where guilds can click to declare that they are looking for allies to tackle the event, standard guild recruitment webforms and workflows, etc. Those functionalities remove obstacles toward getting a sense of belonging, facilitate achievement and allow the leaders to enjoy themselves more, with positive repercussions for the guild’s ambiance.

- **Shared values.** Some guilds find that constant profanity and insults (usually involving homosexuality) are the height of hilarity; conversely some are LGBT-friendly and will not tolerate the gay-bashing that seems omnipresent among US teenagers. A misalignment around shared values will make belonging impossible. Thus, finding out what are the most common rules in guilds and standardizing them so they can be picked and chosen from a menu (and searched!) can prevent negative game experience and a feeling of harassment and general idiocy turning the customer off the game.

Reinforcing the key social unit to provide this sense of belonging, friendship and team achievement is a key mechanism to master, but one needs not stop there. As previously noted, links exist between guilds and those politics, alliances, or rivalries can often become critical aspects of the game. The ability to formalize and map out those networks, declare bonds or wars, hold meetings, send envoys, etc. can provide endless intrigue for a relatively low investment, and is a basic and essential dimension of play, as anybody who ever monitored large groups of children can attest. Creating basic social networks a la LinkedIn (or friends lists a la MySpace) within the gameworld would also be an interesting experiment, and likely reinforce customer bonding with the game even further. The larger the social web the players find themselves evolving in, the more difficult this network of relationships, vendettas, and favours owed is to transport to a rival game.

Multiplying ways to get things done as a guild is also a positive, reinforcing mechanic for gamer loyalty. Those respondents who could compare *Everquest II* with other games noted the difference, since *Everquest II* is more developed in that aspect: “*What I have found is that guildies take a lot more pleasure in doing quests that increase guild status.*” People generally appreciate the warm glow that comes with the notion their efforts are directly helping their guild brothers and sisters, an unsurprising but perhaps underused social dynamic.

In terms of game design, more attention paid to limiting “guild drama” is likely to be a worthwhile investment – a severe enough crisis within a guild, either with tensions exploding or with a sinking feeling that “this isn’t going anywhere”, can ultimately cost the game dozens of customers per crisis and certainly gets in the way of the customers doing their job – which is having fun and telling a lot of other people about it. One of the respondents, for instance, detailed a very uncomfortable situation in *Ultima Online*, which involved a dozen different guilds (and thus hundreds of people) and dragged on for months. The three “great destroyers” of guilds seem to be:

- **Genuine real-life people issues**, often involving sex. Those are somewhat outside the boundaries of game design and the game developers’ control. As one guildmaster recounted, *“To my shame I think that there was one person who was forced out [of my guild] by another member, but I never got to the bottom of that.”* A striking example of this kind of drama was witnessed by a respondent on *Dark Age of Camelot*, *“A real-life mate of mine ran a huge DAoC guild. (He and another friend started it, and it just grew and grew). A few of his officers would try to undermine his authority, set up their own guilds and drag his members away, other things like that. Also drama would spill over from real life into the game or vice versa. One of the worst things I think that got done to him is that one of his officers outed him. [...]I think he was just trying to upset my friend enough to make him quit the game.”*
- **“Non-manifest destiny”** when a guild discovers it lacks the oomph (usually in terms of number of people it can mobilize at a given time) to attempt the hardest, most complex content. This high-level content is both where the most sought-after assets (weapons, armour, magical spells, etc.) are, and where the attention of the players focuses – it is the cool kids’ “it” place, the Valhalla, the place where some of the prestige is going to rub off on you and give you a bit of a rock star aura. Thus, people attracted to this content out of greed, fascination, a need for recognition, etc. will end up reneging on the guild that is not going anywhere to join a big, achieving guild – sparking numerous issues around their “treason” and increasing the malaise of the remaining members. And even after this, it is not uncommon for the “upwardly mobile” player to discover he does not like his new

social environment but cannot go back to his dejected comrades. In early stages of the game, the high-level content can be so prestigious that the most powerful guilds will go out of their way to prevent “lesser” associations from entering it !

- “**Loot drama**” when the group obtains some rare and powerful item (which normally entails a lot of collective work) seems to be the main social killer. The three main variants are:
 - **Unethical appropriation**, usually referred to in a less academic way as “ninjaing” or “ninja looting” (eg, using stealth, speed and deceit to steal the goods like a poor man’s version of the dreaded Japanese medieval spies)
 - **Contested attribution** – feelings that it is not fair that person X ended up with the Big Weapon given the circumstances
 - **Optimization** – feeling that having person X end up with the Big Weapon is not the most efficient choice since person Y would put the Big Weapon to a much better use given his character’s abilities (the “this is a monk’s weapon” drama in *EQ1*, the “hunters should not roll on melee” drama in *WoW*, etc.). This is often a rationalization of the previous one – person Y is usually the player making the complaint, or a person sharing the same interests.

Those problems tend to have so far been tackled from a game designer’s perspective – such as making content for smaller groups, or the very complex management of “itemization” (what desirable assets can be found where, how often, how useful they are to each of the specialties available to characters, etc.). Different perspectives from the world of management, though, can be used to reduce drama and misery and prevent it from getting in the way of word-of-mouth. Without going into details:

- Small groups attempting to tackle big content are a **collaboration issue**; the manager’s natural response is to provide a structure facilitating communication around those needs between the small groups. A “neutral” place where it is okay

to list the content you'd like to join forces on, protocols on how the gains from that expedition could be shared, and ways for both organizations to view each other as people and not "those strangers" is a good start.

- **"Loot"** is a reward system for collective efforts; both managers and marketing people (with "loyalty programs") have some experience with this that are applicable to the "contested attribution" and "optimization" issues.

To illustrate the point about having a less emotionally charged way for guilds to work together, I'll refer to an anecdote from one respondent – a guild leader who absorbed several very small guilds with the "non-manifest destiny problem". When one such small guild asked for an alliance to be considered, they felt so bad about the loss of face it entailed for them that they overcompensated, setting a very formal in-game meeting at the town hall and expressing concerns that they had better individual equipment than the bigger guild they were asking for help.

Another interesting lead user experience was when an *Ultima Online*-playing respondent recounted one of his most positive experiences in his MMOG career – having his guild be accepted as a "real" role-playing guild by existing role-playing-oriented guilds on his server. To do this, he basically had to make his case in front of a jury of guildmasters. Such a protocol is not too surprising – UO is the earliest MMOG to retain some market footprint, and had time to develop fairly unique (and complex) cultural traits. Encouraging such decorum and formal inter-guilds politics is an interesting direction, though – it pulls players in a far greater social web, and it can definitely feel important when one is immersed in the game's dynamics.

1.b.3/ Face-to-face meetings are the next step for some

The interviewees spanned the full range as to the proportion of real-life people within their guild and/or friends, from local guilds entirely made up of real-life friends to

people who have never met any of their associates (due, for instance, to unusual working schedules and playing hours).

Yet, they unanimously pointed out that a chasm existed between real life (generally abbreviated RL) people and more virtual acquaintances, and that even the briefest RL meeting was more efficient at creating bonding than months of virtual collaboration. This was made doubly interesting since, given the structure of the interview, this line of questioning normally came after the respondent narrated his or her collective triumphs along with, usually, a majority of people whom they had never met.

This factor proved more important than I expected. mostly because, due to my workload, I tended to play late at night with people who were largely one or more time zones away. Another factor is that my “generation” of Internet users, from the mid-90s, more or less assumed that real-life meetings between Internet friends and acquaintances on a large scale were unworkable. This seems to be changing; the best illustration might be the huge success, in 2006, of the convention organized by the very popular geek site *Penny Arcade*. While *Penny Arcade* does have a vibrant community around its comic strips and articles due to its unique tone and obvious talent, MMOG community likely have an even higher power of attraction.

Voices of the customers

“With real people...it’s easier to talk to them. The other people just aren’t as funny or cool.”

“There just can’t be the same sort of bond, because there isn’t the same possibility for contact.”

“I prefer to play multiplayer games with my friends, rather than strangers.”

“There is a bit of aloofness with Internet friendships. It’s not as big as actual friendships because we haven’t met in person yet.”

“We had a guild picnic, so it’s not anonymous anymore. You have a face you can put with the name.”

“When we started, it was just myself and ten real friends.”

‘It’s necessarily weaker in WoW [than in a real-situation]. There’s no way to capture the same thing. You’re not together, you’re not in the same room, and there can be no physical contact. Unless you meet them, there cannot be that sort of bonding.’

‘An interesting thing that I noticed was that when I went to [the convention] when I was a guildmaster I didn't have to buy my own drinks. When I wasn't a guildmaster, I did.’

“I think the main thing is does is de-anonymize the other players. It makes them real.”

So what can we do?

Conventions (“cons”) have been organized by key MMOG publishers to provide players with occasions to meet. Given the usual economics for such events, they often go for size in order to be profitable. Said events, from ethnographical data, seem to be as efficient at creating and reinforcing human bonds as one would expect ; the ethnographical narration in *Play Between Worlds*, for instance, starts with a convention.

If one is to tirelessly work at reinforcing the ties between the players, identifying “nests” of customers meeting the minimum requirements of profitability and having local contractors organize the event along strict guidelines seem to be a worthwhile investment of time, especially if it builds upon successful prior community-building work.

White it’s not face to face, the use of voice servers such as Ventrilo or Teamspeak seems quite common among the respondents who are part of a structured guild. This type of functionality seems to become more common – a company like Vivox, specializing in incorporating IP telephony in games and virtual worlds, is thriving, and the MMO being worked on by video-gaming legend Lord British, *Tabula Rasa*, relies heavily on voice communication.

The use of voice seems to have mostly started with hardcore players needing a high-communication-bandwidth method during intense engagements – typing, even with so many acronyms, abbreviations, jargon and phonetic spellings that it becomes incomprehensible to outsiders, is relatively slow and is hard to mix with the use of the keyboard to perform actions within the game. While it’s certainly interesting in terms of user interface, I’m mostly interested in its ability to reinforce social links within medium-sized units, such as raiding parties with 20 to 25 members.

While I do not use voice servers myself (it sucks for those interested in immersiveness), the Voices of the Customers is fairly clear that for most the voice “anchors” the relationship in a way that is much better than speed-typed text, though still quite inferior to face-to-face meetings. It also considerably heightens the feeling of togetherness: *“Once we killed the guy, the Teamspeak server just erupted. There was yelling and screaming and cheering... It was like [the Metallica show on the picture].”*

A handful of respondents, while on the subject of communicating complex things in a short time, also had the image of an American football coach drawing a little diagram with Xs and Os and arrows to explain which player should do what. Having the ability to enter a “tactical session” with the players piling around the “coach” and visualizing his drawings as he explains might be a way to handle the frustration of inadequate communication; it also brings very positive and exciting images from sports to the game. Many of the best-organized guilds in MMOs already have a “battle leader” whose role is to explain the tactics and who should do what. Such a “virtual whiteboard” technology, used to show both real-time doodles and pre-prepared diagrams to other members of the party, might even be enticing enough to be sold as a modest upgrade to the subscription of its user.

I.b.4/ The critical points of contact are a negative customer experience

Marketing professional, service professional, retail professional, Delta model strategist... all obsess about the so-called “moment of truth” where the customer comes into contact with the service. When it comes to computer/network-borne services, those moments of truth are often communication with customer/technical support, or dealings with company representatives and moderators on company-run Internet fora. Good

experiences there can save a mediocre product or make a great one into a triumph ; poor experience can ruin even an excellent product.

In the case of MMOGs, there are usually three levels:

- **In-game “gamemasters”** who intervene to fix technical issues, conflict between players and other disruptions when requested to help by players. The average player does not often call upon those.
- **Out-of-game technical or commercial support** dealing with billing issues, major technical issues, complex cases involving EULA violations, etc. Many players will never encounter those agents.
- **Internet discussion fora**, which often reach a tremendous size and volume of discussion. In the segment being engaged, nearly all respondents were at least occasional readers of such fora.

While opinions about the first level were generally good (which did not seem to be the case in the early 2000s), impressions about the other two were not. Comments about technical/commercial supports mapped well with the usual litany of complaints about low-cost customer service – a bundle of classic issues, which already have been explored *ad nauseam* in numerous publications. Having years of experience with those and not wanting to retread that complex ground in this paper, I will concentrate instead on the Internet forum level.

The content of the interviews did not deviate from what one can pick up by reading said fora, and can be summed up as:

- **Grave doubts** as to whether most posters in those fora genuinely belong to the *homo* genus, or at least the *sapiens sapiens* species. The level of noise, immaturity, flame wars, and posturing can be quite terrible.
- **A pervasive feeling of “them vs. us”** relationship between company and customers. Customers routinely ascribe fairly fantastic motivation to game developers (such as having their pets among the various specialties available to

in-game characters, and over-favouring them in the array of capabilities they are given), and are constantly and relentlessly demanding a greater implication in the evolution of “their” game.

From a neutral marketing point of view, having customers who are highly motivated about the product and stepping over each other to provide feedback and suggestions would seem to be a marvellous blessing, especially if one comes from an industry flirting with commoditization. In the actual management of the relationship, it would seem there is too much of a good thing for many companies to handle gracefully.

Voices of the customers

“...they [message boards] respond faster... also say some pretty ridiculous things.”

“The Blizzard [forum] itself is a lot of noise... a lot of white noise. You really gotta look around for the good stuff.”

“But it's an interesting phenomenon. If one were to take the forums seriously (and I don't particularly), one would come to the conclusion that a huge number of people just outright HATE these games. I haven't seen this level of complaint in any other kind of video game context.”

“One person says: “Gee, this class is rather powerful. How do I beat them?”, and the next moment you've got people advocating suicide, and wishing people dead in a fire, and telling them they should have been aborted. It's... weird.”

“Yes, there's a definite animosity, that I think comes out especially in PVP discussions, where people are generally at their most competitive.”

“I think it's really, really shocking how much naked hate comes across those pages.”

Interestingly, the outlier previously mentioned (the least mature of the respondents) described the *World of Warcraft* message boards as being “amusing” while the persons more typical of the segment were heaping elaborate (and often grandiose) curses on it – I will spare the readers the innumerable expletives that make up the Voices of the Customer about the official *WoW* message boards. Again, we have an obvious discrepancy in social expectations.

So what can we do ?

Like Nutella crepes, Internet fora can be endlessly scaled up, and that definitely makes them better in the mind of most consumers. This, however, requires a different mental model than the one prevailing in many service industries – a mental model where the Internet fora is one of the main engines of product growth and evolution, and a large amount of power over it is relinquished into the hands of the unwashed masses. With communities that have developed an underlying impression of adversarial relationship, this is even more counterintuitive – and possibly even more necessary.

Those principles (scalability and player participation) can be implemented like in the following example:

- **The forum is divided in several levels** – for the sake of example, three levels we will call the Pit, the Agora and the List.
- Suggestions, complaints, feedbacks, outrage, etc. start in **the Pit**, a section that is not normally read by the publisher. Each post incorporates a poll of sort, where each poster can express his support and opposition through one of the classic reasons for supporting or opposing (“ I disagree since I feel it would hurt game balance”, “I agree since this sounds like a fun new thing”, “I disagree since I fail to see the value of this”, “I agree that this thread is useful reading for other players”, etc.). More verbose people can of course add posts to the thread. Support/opposition are anonymous.
- **Voters have a weight**, reflecting their relationship with the games. Being a long-time subscriber gradually adds weight, being a guild officer or leader adds weight based on the size of the guild, volunteer activities add weight, having one’s thread move up or down the hierarchy changes one’s voting weight, supporting a successful proposition or contributing to the demise of an unsuccessful one earns weight, supporting a proposition that goes nowhere costs a little weight, etc.
- Threads that reach a certain threshold of approval by the masses reach **the Agora**. At this point, the clutter and repetition should be largely diminished. This level of

forum is mostly intended for customers who wish to participate (or just vote) but do not wish to deal with the noise of the Pit. No new thread can be started in the Agora, except for the publisher's.

- **Enough negative feedback will make a thread drop one level.** Below the Pit is the Dungeon, which is read-only.
- **Company representatives read and interact with the Agora.** They can kill or freeze threads, along with a detailed reason why. The Agora is scoured by volunteer moderators applying the noise-reducing rules from more successful fora (people who want to fool around with threads consisting of endless “orly”, “yarly”, “no u”, “lol”, “u r ghey” or “I am in ur base killing ur doodz” can do so in the Pit).
- If a thread garners enough support within the Agora, it reaches **the List**. At this point, the game designers are committed to taking action to accommodate the suggestion, complaint... as with all other items on the List.

The List is a relatively brief list of what should go into the next push or extension for the game, with a link to the Agora thread discussing each item. Every one can vote on List items – but the List votes are a “one man, one vote”, weightless system. Items move up or down the list depending on how much support they receive. There is a countdown until the date the List will be frozen (and a new List will start), and each item has a numerical value indicating its estimated workload, Scrum-style; there is an estimated value for the “workforce” budget for the next extension, allowing customers to make informed choices as to what to vote for.

All employees of the editor with senior design responsibilities can enter items directly at the List level. The head of game design can also designate two items as “pet projects of the chief”, which are automatically #1 and #2 on the List – but voting still

goes on for those, and the “chief” can relent if he or she so chooses (no doubt to the applause of the customers), withdrawing “pet” status.

A relatively simple system along those lines has various managerial advantages:

- It rationally minimizes resources spent on monitoring fora
- It encourages customers to spend time on ads-supported web pages by offering them a sort of game on the side of the game
- It allows even the “silent majority” to vote and play a role without expending much effort on tiresome debate and refutations
- It ensures a reasonably orderly customer feedback, and cuts on the drama from customers feeling they are ignored
- It gives a clear sense of rules and fairness and cuts on the churn generated by out-of-game communication with the company
- It gives a clear sense of influence and a certain sense or ownership of successful ideas to the participating customers – another strong source of emotional loyalty and positive word-of-mouth
- It allows for real-time testing of ideas, both internal and external, to maximize the efficiency of resources and investments – and may cut on the “not invented here” effect
- As some readers may have guessed, it duplicates many of the effects of predictive markets. Besides from being trendy, predictive markets have a particularly valuable capacity to predict market trends before they fully occur.

1.b.4/ Lack of enforcement of the social order

This factor is in many ways an offshoot of the “differing expectations” customer experience. During interviews, it was mostly mentioned as examples of player-on-player violence (or, rather, character-on-character); a physical assault, or harassment (such as using the /spit command to have a character eject saliva on another), or behaviour seen as remarkably inappropriate. Having people with the same expectations gravitate toward the

same servers for the game world (as previously suggested) might improve things, but will not likely be a magic bullet – those rarely exist.

This issue is significant, since during the interviews customers often expressed a sense of violation during those incidents, even though it occurred anonymously and through the screen of fantasy avatars. Many of them were surprised about the strength and irrationality of those feelings; from the material it seems that the fact they did not have any control over the situation was the root of the irrationally strong feeling of violation. Unsurprisingly, such feelings do little to promote business growth and positive word of mouth.

“Hard” solutions have been tried so far – tweaking the rules of the game to prevent offensive behaviour (filtering out the /spit command, finding ways so a superior party cannot swoop into a fight in progress and claim all the rewards, discouraging strong characters from killing weak characters merely to bully them, etc.) and having gamemasters act as a sort of police to break up and adjudicate conflict between players. From customer interviews, those do not seem entirely satisfying, and the ranks of gamemasters cannot grow proportionally to the number of players if one expects to fully reap economies of scale.

Voices of the customers

“...A lot of people get very frustrated when they are taken advantage of....”

“Being ambushed has been a substantial portion of my World of Warcraft experience.”

“If I’m not doing anything hostile to someone else, they should leave me alone....”

“Our server actually has a guild called ‘Leave Us Alone’.”

“Being a [guild] officer is exhausting... you spend most of your time shielding the rest of the guild from drama between members. I did not realize so much was going on before [being an officer].”

“I hate general chat... but I have to keep it on. As a guild leader, I have to know what’s going on, just to see if somebody’s badmouthing us.’

“Those people would flag for PvP and would come stand between you and whatever you’re doing, hoping you’d accidentally hit them and get flagged. Or people trying to trick you into getting killed.”

“This kid spits on her, using the /spit emote, and that drives me berserk. I don’t allow that.”

“It would have taken him ten minutes to grind through my hit points, so I turned my back on him and just stood there. That kid was gonna to jam me up, just because he could? That’s just...”

“We seem to have a small reputation, I think it’s just us being laid back and cool, and knowing what we’re doing. This is very important.”

So what can we do?

“Hard” enforcement solutions can be supplemented by “soft” solutions wielded by the participants themselves – which, as managers know, tend to be more efficient than the manager-as-a-cop could ever be. As a simple example, let us quickly consider a system of “black” and “white” marks – allowing players to symbolically express approval or reprobation about somebody they interacted with.

In the example system, those marks cannot be given on the fly – one has to make an effort and spend some time, allowing for a “cooling off” period (for instance, one has to go to the mercenary hall in a major town to drop a black or white stone in the “file” of another character, activating the “option” for a mark he took when actually interacting with the other person). Some sort of additional cost must also be built-in – casting a “mark” costs some currency such as experience points. Those costs diminish the longer you go without casting a mark on someone, and increase exponentially if the network described by white marks is too dense (to prevent groups from systematically white-marking each other). Marks are visible when one checks a character out (for instance, when scanning the people available for grouping), possibly with some simple preferences (such as “ignore marks cast by members of the guild The Dark Elite Uber Tigers of the Black Hell of Chaos Murder Elite Dark Ninja Pirate Elite”).

The one mark given to the person can be commented upon from a menu at any point by the player who gave them (with choices such as “great group leader”, “nice and pleasant person”, “very knowledgeable”, “inappropriate behaviour in my opinion”,

“leadership did not meet my expectations”, etc.), taken off, and might be used as a basis for a small system of badges. The comments are intended to break the anonymity factor, which triggers such a large part of inappropriate behaviours, while the badges provide ego boosts, a reward for those with exceptionally good collaborative skills, and a way to assert credibility in disputes. It will also help with crises stemming from jumping to negative assumptions – say, when somebody is accidentally disconnected just after taking some valuable asset, and others assume he’s ninjaping – since all involved have an interest in understanding what happened.

Reputation mechanics are very important since they greatly facilitate transactions between players, such as committing to spend time together adventuring. As an illustration, allow me to take the example of eBay.

A degree of trust is essential in eBay for a transaction to occur, otherwise neither the seller nor the buyer are inclined to first the move and risk not being paid or not receiving the goods. The problem would normally be solved by establishing trust between the parties, but this is nigh unfeasible in the context of massive Internet auctions. Thus, the reputation built in eBay substitute for trust, allowing people who do not even know each’s other name to enter in a commercial transaction.

Spending time together is not as critical as sending money or goods to unknown parties, but it is still an important investment, especially for customers who have a limited play time. Being able to enter the ‘transaction’ knowing the other players are reputable and unpleasant things are much less likely to happen is much easier, *especially* if this is combined with information about play styles and generally being on a copy of the game world with like-minded individuals.

Marks can also serve as a low-intensity “hard” enforcement – by having black marks cast by particularly popular players (with a lot of white marks and comparatively few black ones), the marks act as a sort of curse the severity of which varies with the ratio of black vs. white marks. Truly disruptive players are usually a small minority causing lots of trouble and mobilizing disproportionate resources in enforcement, and having a way to trace them as they become increasingly powerless and ostracized may

help. Although this is not always touted, one truth of marketing is that you do not want to keep revenue-destroying customers!

In keeping with our thrust of tying the gamers to the game world as much as possible, the marks in our example system should be suspended when the player ends his subscription. Quitting means that one's accumulated role in the "karmic justice" of saluting the good and burdening the bad suddenly evaporates, and many people are very reluctant to let that happen. Injustice is a very powerful motivator.

In a very similar spirit, formalizing the exchange of favours might be efficient at creating ties and enforcing a satisfying sense of "just" and "fair" experience. This can be as simple as being able to issue an IOU marking a minor or a major favour. One can always see who he has helped, who helped him, and has a tool, framework and language in place to facilitate the return of a favour in proper measure with the initial (minor or major) help. Again, this creates a social mesh among gamers, and leaving the game knowing you will never return favours that are in other people's favours list will be difficult for many players.

1.b.5/ Repetition and one-true-wayism heighten personal conflict

Unsurprisingly, gamers join the game for excitement; if the action becomes tedious and predictable (known to many gamers as "the grind"), chances of conflict heighten as some will try to relieve boredom at the expense of their fellow player (known to many gamers as "griefing" or "trolling", depending on the actual behaviour). Likewise, repetitive situations where one set of tactics is widely but not universally known to be the most efficient will encourage intolerance toward lack of experience or different assumptions.

Those "grind" situations not only increase risks of disappointment with the game, they also diminish the odds of having a collective exciting victory occur, since there is

not much excitement in the “grind”. Given the importance of such victories, this is a problem. This is even more of a problem since, for very classic psychological reasons (the “overvaluation of the held” or “loss-averse” mechanic), most players will seek the least dangerous and thus most repetitive and predictable fights; in the words of one lead designer, they will bore themselves to death.

Voices of the customers

“Learning new content is one of the best times of the group dynamic...striving together is more unifying.”

“It’s more fun when things go wrong, or have the potential to go wrong.”

“I really like when you run into unexpected things....”

“Everybody seems to know what is going on and you don’t... You’re not doing what they expect you to do, so they start calling you names...”

“None of [our guild] can stand grinding.”

“Boredom. I’m not terribly interested in loot or what have you, and most of the time my group experiences are decent in terms of player behaviour, but — and I’m gonna pick on WoW in particular here — sometimes the instances go on for so very long, and are so repetitive, that I can’t help but want out.”

(about PvP) *“For me, it’s exciting, since players are so much more dangerous than critters, and it gives me more of a sense that I AM playing with other people, in that they can impact what I’m doing.”*

So what can we do?

Proposing situations and fights that are less mechanical in their resolution is the obvious solution; like with all obvious solutions, this is far easier said than done, especially since the comfort level of players with unpredictability and risk of defeat vary widely from one person to another and from day to day.

A possible solution is to start experimenting with more random enemies in clearly identified areas, and see what happens. For instance, if the light-blue-skinned tribes of goblins in the Not-Very-Good-Place are known for breaking the routine (because they have tables of random tactics interfering with their normal AI, such as “everybody attacks

any present magician for ten seconds” or “goblins A, B and C run away and come back in twenty seconds with double their number”), chances are that only groups looking for some chaos and a change in the routine will go to the Not-Very-Good-Place to fight our friends, the light-blue-skinned goblins.

Such fights, which have been deliberately chosen, might be an efficient way to create strong bonds through shared hardship, excitement and tension – or renew levels of trust between players that became commoditized through routine encounters. However, those solutions mostly have their root in game design, an area in which I have little experience.

1.c/ What was learned from what was learned

1.c.1/ A systems dynamics approach to the content of the interviews

FOCUS-type research (in fact, pretty much all market investigation methodologies) relies on dividing the customer experience into small bits that can then be analyzed, as was done above. This sort of approach, though, is inevitably suspect to the MIT graduate student, who as everybody knows has likely received training in systems dynamics and system thinking and exists at the very pinnacle of human intellect, though taste in clothing may vary.

Without needlessly going into system description jargon, my thrust in investigating how to develop the social role of MMOs could be described as studying how to create a self-reinforcing loop of camaraderie with the game, with the “engine” of that virtuous circle between the ties between the players. The factors in the previous section (conflicting expectations, face-to-face contact, off-game communication with the developers and community, etc.) could be considered as being obstacles, “brakes” that prevent that self-reinforcing loop from flowing freely and building up. The normal

approach in system thinking is not to “force” the creation of positive things, but to remove obstacles to their growth.

From this perspective, a different light is cast on the way the collaboration debate was usually conducted in MMO design. Without devolving into esoteric minutia, the two major approaches were:

- **The *Everquest I* school**, where forced cooperation was a very deliberate design choice. The game world is harsh, the characters have specialized and complementary skill sets, and most achievements are going to be done by a well-coordinated strike force, with considerable experience in fighting together.
- **The reaction school** (of which current market leader *World of Warcraft* is an example). As significant numbers of gamers resented the collectivist approach deeply etched into *Everquest I*, those games took a stance where content oriented toward solo characters or very small groups was quite viable for much of the game, and the interdependencies between players were carefully reduced. Interestingly, numerous customer complaints continue about the facets of the game that remain geared toward complex collective pushes.

Few people, even among gamers, are genuine misanthropes. From conducting the interviews to discuss obstacles to socialization with sophisticated customers, and seeing the dynamics from a systemic point of view, one gets the impression that the issue of the *cost* of socialization is actually the crux, and that varying the amount of solo content is trying to fix the symptoms rather than the problem. This is especially true if we want nearly all customers to be enmeshed in a rich web of social relationships they would be reluctant to leave!

The cost of socialization can be overly simply described as two major costs:

- **The error** part of the trial and error process in attempting to meet with people you enjoy
- **The burden** of asking for help and support from those people

Behaviour intended to avoid those costs is very common. The “no more pick-up groups for me, ever” players prefer a slower, less convivial game to paying the cost of encountering incompatible people. The “mule” players, who develop characters with special skills solely so they do not have to depend on other players with such a character, invest a lot of work into avoiding the cost of asking. An example of a customer finding this cost to be too high: *“I've had zero luck meeting people in-game, I've grouped up a few times with decent people, but unless we happen to be perfectly synched in leveling we'll probably never speak again. It doesn't help that no one wants to talk, and on the off chance that they do it's never in character. That's probably the thing that's brought me closest to quitting, and the one that I will eventually quit over. For a social multiplayer game there's vanishingly little socialization to be had.”* As another customer expresses it: *“It's just me and a few pixels, despite the fact that so many hundreds of people are online playing the same game at the same time.”*

From the previous section, we have possible means to bring down those costs. For instance a language describing what the gaming preferences of all the guilds on the server are brings a lot of security, much like a first date with somebody whom you know shares a passion for your hobby. Likewise, integrated web sites for guilds always telling you who can help with what and with a board that makes it trivial to announce you’re looking for eyes of newt and wings of bat to curse McBeth (and to give or receive those) can dramatically reduce the second, much like in-game automated marketplaces made trade between characters grow explosively. As any person who has done sales or dated strangers knows, the fear of social rejection, refusal and incompatibility is a very significant part of most personalities – with the obvious exception of Harvard students.

Thus, rather than trying to position an imaginary toggle between “independent” and “interdependent” to reach some hypothetical sweet spot (and the notion that this spot is the same for all players is likely mistaken), one might explore ways to make interdependency a pleasurable space to be in.

I.c.2/ Cultural models in learning the game

The segment being studied is composed of sophisticated customers, for whom learning how to play the game was not a major obstacle (except for the complex space simulation EVE, with which many struggled). Yet we can gain insight by exploring with them why they found those games to be accessible. This part of the analysis, unlike chapter I.b is thus not directly based on difficulties expressed during the interviews – rather it lists the assets you implicitly have to have to learn a MMOG.

The three main factors isolated from interviews were:

- A willingness to surmount the initial “lexicon shock”
- The same mental model for learning as the developer uses
- Cultural assumptions about pseudo-medieval fantasy worlds and MMOs shared with the developers
- The Internet savvy necessary to locate communities that can provide help, and how to communicate with them

Lexicon shock

Before I even mention the more scholarly and complex stuff, it should be pointed out that the first obstacle for the newcomer is a barrage of acronyms and slang that pretty much rivals IT when it comes to opacity. Having somebody explain you that he’s “LF2M DPS for RFK hvae healbot pally PST” is, at best, daunting. It is in fact a complex amalgam of:

- Straight abbreviations to avoid typing recurrent terms – though those abbreviations can sometimes be quirky
- Jargon that is clearly intended to establish barriers between the in-crowd and the rest
- Jargon inherited from other games, which only makes sense in those games (the “PST” abbreviation above only makes sense in *Everquest* but has crossed over to *WoW*, for instance; the jargon “mob” is likewise inherited from early MUDs, and is used by most players without a clear understanding of where it comes from.)

- Text messaging (“texting”) and message boards spelling conventions (though those are far more developed in Europe than in the US)
- Pure memes and shared references, ranging from the understood by most (“he pulled a Leeroy here”) to terms that only makes sense on a specific side of a specific server for a specific game (“you just got Woowoo’d”, coined after a Kirin Tor Horde player in *WoW*), while borrowing heavily from Internet memes (Chuck Norris jokes, “ninja and pirates” geek jokes, /b references, etc.)
- Parodies of other subcultures (say, a satire of l33t spelling conventions or emo poseurs, usually intended to mock young members and wannabes of those subcultures)... or even jokes around common misspellings (such as the omnipresent “rouge” for “rogue”).

Even worse for newcomers, this staggering semantic soup seems to be growing thicker as time go by. Many memes simply do not die, the in-crowd continues to erect jargon as a barrier to entry, newcomers simply ape the vocabulary without fully understanding it (triggering semantic shifts), etc.

As one customer puts it, “[This image of a dictionary is meant to] illustrate how difficult it can be to get around all the MMO lingo. Starting a game, especially if it's one's first, immerses the player in a storm of acronyms, each more confusing than the last. I remember trying to get through all the specific vocabulary at first, and it was brutal. Mobs conned grey to me, apparently, and I had no idea what the hell any of those words meant (well, ok, I know what grey means). It gets easier as one learns the terminology, of course, but I think it's absolutely bewildering to the new player.” He then continues: “It would be nice to have some of the terms explained in a manual or something like that, yeah. At least the more common ones like DPS, tank, pull, kite, etc.”

Of course, the people trying to enter the field have little choice but to eventually ask, which often means going through a negative social experience. *“Even in games like WoW, whose forums can be extremely unpleasant to players asking “stupid” questions, the questions don't stop rolling in.”*

Mode of learning

The dominant mental model for learning is what MIT’s John Van Maanen calls the “surfer” model – jump into the waves, try to stand on the board and discover how to surf by falling a lot and discreetly looking at other surfers to see how they do it. This

assumption that this is how you learn things seem widely shared by MMOs developers, and the games are noticeably slanted toward it.

This fashion of learning is not the only one – though it is admittedly difficult for most people to understand how different learning models can be. Van Maanen’s study was based on observing the early days of windsurfing, and how people coming from other sports would learn this entirely unknown new discipline by applying their existing assumptions on how to learn. Thus, while “surfers” (people coming to windsurfing from traditional surfing) got better by getting rolled by waves a lot, “sailors” (coming from recreational small-boat sailing) were busy reading the few existing books and studying how the sail should, in theory, be positioned, and “skiers” talked with each other a lot and trained and experimented as a tight group.

During the interviews and complementary Internet discussions, many customers simply answered the question about how they learned by *“trial and error”* – many even wondered why such an obvious question was being asked. (*“Does it seem familiar? hrm.. Learning through trial and error, and using friends and research as tools. um... wait, are you talking about that one game, what is it called... um.. oh yeah, Real Life!”*) People with a different learning style found the experience less obvious, such as skiers (*“The game part was solved through mutual agreement... we figured out what the group needed (at least, in our primitive view of EQ), and someone did that. Heal, nuke, tank... that was pretty much understood in the early trial and error/group discussion and formation stage.”*), or sailors (*“My first time playing an RPG was Final Fantasy 1. I read the manual cover to cover. Twenty times.”* Or *“Laugh if you want but for the pure neophyte, these strategy guides do explain quite a bit about the bones of MMOs.”*).

Understanding those styles is important for the game designer or community manager, since the natural reflex when confronted with a different learning style is to judge it to be “wrong” and that the person using it is lazy or stupid. This reflex may explain in part the poor faring of game manuals at most companies.

Cultural assumptions

Nearly all respondents explained that they explored MMOs armed with appropriate, pre-existing mental models about such games and about their usual universe – knowing what a falchion or a halberd is, and finding familiar a sentence such as “the King’s outposts have been raided by unusual-looking kobolds”. Some Voices on learning were:

“I’ve been playing MMOs since AOL’s Neverwinter Nights in 1991”

“But the games are similar enough that if you’ve gotten good at one of them, it totally changes the way you learn the next one. Like in DaoC, at the beginning everyone was big into crowd control in groups and over time it shifted to AE damage. In games after that, people tried AE much sooner”

“A partial list of shared basic axioms: hybrids are generalists, support builds are better at grouping and worse at soloing, the balance between ranged damage and melee damage will probably be off for a while, nonstandard encounters are often buggy for the first few patches”

“Kinda came naturally as an evolution from playing MUDs and MUSHes 10–15 years ago, and in the case of those it was an outgrowth from computer-based adventure games.”

When their assumptions are different from that of the developers, confusion ensues. For instance many gamers had an assumption of what “a paladin” is, and discovered that the *World of Warcraft* assumption of what “a paladin” does was different from their implicit understanding, triggering frustration about playing a character that is “wrong” compared to their mental image of it.

All those assumptions usually take months if not years of exposure to heroic-fantasy and sword-and-sorcery tropes, not to mention video game designs and interfaces, to become instinctive.

MMOs have gone even further with sub-cultures appearing within an already narrow subculture – and those sub-subcultures can have a clear elitist slant. The best example might be the PvP culture in many games – very proud of its experience with a very specialized and violent activity, and dismissive of newcomers, sometimes called “care bears”.

Internet savvy

Even for the “surfers”, interviews consistently revealed that what they called “trial and error” nearly always includes reading web sites and hanging around fora and boards on the net to solve those difficulties with which trial produced too much error. Some Voices on that subject were:

“After I had a feel for everything, concretizing it with formulas and numbers from www.wowwiki.com.”

“One thing that helps is reading up on character templates and listening to people you know.”

“For games where I sign up after other folks have hammered on it a bit, there's inevitably a bunch of community websites that do a better job of explaining than the official documentation, so I rely heavily on those.”

“I also read forums a fair bit, and check to see if anything interesting can be found on gamefaqs.”

“I didn't have many problems with either EQ1 (my first MMO) or WoW. I think it's because I love to read forums.”

Of course, one has to know where to find those communities, how to use their interfaces, about the etiquette and vocabulary, and how to avoid some traps – for instance, being careful about how old community-written guides are, since they can quickly become obsolete — and distinguishing fact from opinion.

Four-dimensional world

Another point is that many people seem to become easily disoriented in the complex environment of a MMORG. During one interview, I was reminded of my early hours of playing *Everquest I* back in 2000. The city of Qeynos, from which I was operating, is objectively very, very small – yet I kept getting completely lost in an area that was smaller than a modern city block. More recent games introduce ways around that, often by having friendly guards give directions, but the risk of getting hopelessly and frustratingly lost is always present for the newcomer. As one respondent put it –

“This picture [is a] sort of a response to how overwhelming it can be to try to find one's way around a new MMO... especially if one hasn't tried that type of game before. These things are BIG.”

Other sources mention inexperienced players feeling some degree of motion sickness; in *Play between worlds*, the author mentions that beginning with a very short avatar running around in twisting caverns was somewhat nauseating for her.

Joy in repetition

A core mechanism of those games is repeating similar actions over and over again to attain goals and achieve success and status in the game. This is largely due to the number of hours of entertainment MMOs are intended to provide (having a one-shot content is economically unsustainable in the current models), but is also partially linked to a preference for bounded, repetitive, ritualized actions and interaction that seems somewhat common among the current population of so-called “hardcore” gamers and the developers, designers and testers working on the games and content. This could be called the *Diablo* effect – after the landmark success from Blizzard, which was to some extent a proto-MMO.

While this taste for repetition is self-evidently shared by enough people to achieve success, it also obviously promotes burnout and locks out customers. The burn-out aspect is well illustrated by what Bioware game designer Damion Schubert called “players boring themselves to death,” by designing strategies that are so optimized, so safe, so rational that they flush much of the fun out of the game. Having worked with autistic children, I can certainly understand the pattern leading to those extremes – but the problem is of course that this mechanistic behaviour brings high rewards, and anchors the social expectations about success within the game, skewing the notion of “success” and promoting burnout within an ever-expanding number of gamers.

Fresher video game scenes, such as South Korea, do not have those shared mental models developed to that degree, and have numerous MMOs with long-playtime activities that do not gravitate toward this fascination for repetition among much of the “hardcore” playing scene.

So what can we do?

Games are increasingly good at making things easy for those with the surfer learning style; *World of Warcraft* has often been praised for that. It includes lots of scattered, short information when you need it; some key, immediately relevant facts are explained in a short video as one starts playing (e.g., those who have chosen an undead character are treated to a moody one-minute crash course in the history of the Forsaken – the culture their character comes from – and the dangers it currently faces); and the places and people where the game begins are artfully designed to facilitate trial-and-error learning and prevent frustration and disorientation. Even with this, barriers to entry for the customer remain high.

Once armed with a knowledge of learning styles and feedback from customers, one can even suggest some systems to considerably drop the churn and negative word-of-mouth in populations who are not “trial-and-error” types.

“Sailor” customers, who want to read and study facts and figures before they go in, are usually disappointed by game manuals (which have a very derogatory reputation among many gamers not understanding the sailors) and are aware that MMOGs evolve and the manual likely already has obsolete bits. Their need for codifying, formalizing and organizing knowledge can be met, however, through a wiki. Such customers can excel at taking over the manual for the sake of people sharing their style and, with proper guidance, can produce and maintain amounts of documentation that will satisfy even the most hardened sailor.

“Skier” customers can also be addressed through the proper system. As a quick example, the game world could include “school” buildings where experienced players are available to discuss, through an out-of-game simple web or IM interface, with in-game or out-of-game people who prefer to learn through discussion and sharing. Those who spend a lot of time as an “instructor” character and receive good grades from those using their advice might receive increasing rewards for their availability and pedagogical acumen – for instance, when out there adventuring and not teaching, successful instructors might

make the acquisition of experience easier for themselves and their comrades. Being a teacher is also a good way to catch promising recruits for one's guild, and for some it is its own reward: *"I've given people walking tours of Undercity before, which was kinda fun."*

Most MMOGs avoid the classic pitfall in game design – they do not resort to lengthy infodumps, and go to considerable lengths to scatter around information in very small, bite-sized amounts. Still, getting explanations across to players that are often very impatient and want to **do** things, not listen passively, is a challenge. Segmentation along the lines above is an excellent way to solve the problem for people who are not impatient; for the others, being able to catch them within a guild they like as early as possible seems to be the best answer. As we saw, there are very few “pure” surfers; trial-and-error involves asking questions when things get frustrating and the game is in danger of losing the player. If those questions can be asked very quickly to people who feel they have a duty to respond constructively, the chances of losing the player drop considerably.

I.c.3/ Preventing customers from playing with each other is bad

This is one of the observations that seem fairly obvious in retrospect, given the subject matter – but I must admit it took a LOT of repetition of that basic concept before it really sunk in my brain. Obviously, if we want players to associate with large numbers of people they like, preventing them from being with people they like is bad. “I’ve stopped playing because my buddies out-levelled me and I’ll never play enough to catch up with them,” was somewhat common during the Internet discussions.

Barriers to this “freedom of association” include:

- **Power levels**, when a weak or strong character wants to associate with other characters of very different power. The “exemplar” system of *City of Heroes* was praised with impressive regularity despite being somewhat contrived, and a mechanic where a group is linked by a pact and has all of its members level up at the same pace was mentioned.

- **Servers with different rule sets** (usually PvP vs. PvE, forcing respondents to abandon a community they like for a gameplay they like, or vice-versa)
- **Different servers altogether** (the common “I wish I could join you guys, but my main is on server Suchandsuch” regret)
- **Different factions** (hero vs. villain, alliance vs. horde, etc. The quest in *Everquest II* allowing someone to defect from his faction (Qeynos or Freeport) to join the other was also praised, though not to the same degree as COH’s exemplars.)

The sinking feeling that one must abandon a favourite character with lots of time played to join friends, or that playing with friends is becoming impossible and one is stuck with random associates, is not a situation that is desirable in the game design. Further, when solutions exist, such as paying to get transferred from one server to the next, they are usually perceived as being far too expensive. While the price for this service is an interesting short-term benefit for the publisher, it may not be a good policy for the long term.

Extro

The above is but the results for a short, very low-cost study of one specific aspect of one specific American customer segment tastes in MMOG.

As with everything, this data is mostly interesting when used to achieve customer bonding as part of a coherent, fully integrated strategy; flailing with initiatives that are not part of such a strategic framework is normally suboptimal.

Such strategic uses of Customer Voices are considered in a further document – while time is short, it would be un-MITesque not to use some formal strategic models to discuss business.

Part II – Online ideation process

II.a/ Final form of this initiative

After several opportunities were assessed (most of which simply died due to lack of time to create and cultivate partners within the industry) the ideation process eventually centred on developing intelligence about customer needs and suggestions as part of the beta phase of the launch of Turbine and Midway's new major project, *The Lord of the Rings Online*.

The schedule for that launch, however, means the results will only be available after the deadline for this thesis; various concerns about confidentiality were also discussed. Due to those constraints, those results will be written up as a separate white paper.

II.b/ The Idealyst process

The core of the process is very simple: it's a forum-like website. The participants can do three main things:

- **Offer "core" ideas and suggestion** ("I think players should be able to ride giant eagles")

- **Build on other people's suggestions** ("Furthermore, I think we should be able to fight other flying creatures when riding eagles!")

- **Challenge other people's suggestion** ("I challenge this as it doesn't match the books. Only Gandalf ever did it!")

Participants gain points for suggesting ideas, building upon other folks' ideas, having their ideas built upon, and successfully challenging ideas. The game encourages collaboratively building upon the most popular ideas. The whole process is very similar to a brainstorming, through it is superior in many ways from a methodological standpoint (no conformity effects, no unspoken judgments, limited anchoring effects to be gained by speaking first, possibility to have criticism since the context makes it non-confrontational, clear interest to consider and work upon the ideas of others, etc.)

The end result is a sort of “ideas forest”, with a series of “trees” made of “roots” (the core ideas, whether put in by the design team at the beginning of the game or thrown in by customers), and a “tree” that rises and possibly branches out based on concepts brought by people building upon the idea. Not only does this provides a number of suggestions and a rough idea of how successful they might be, it also allows for simple testing of responses to concepts from the design team (how well it flies and what tweaks are necessary to make it more interesting). It also results in suggestions for long-term development of a core concept – which works well with the iterative nature of online games development, where features can be refined and expanded as time and game expansions go by.

An online, forum-style, collaborative ideation game is very well adapted to the population of Internet-savvy MMO gamers; however, it is much more adapted to aspects of the game that are NOT viewed as being zero-sum. Idea generation about game balance (“which abilities should the high-level Beastmasters of Zul have?”) carry a context of conflict – for instance PvP lovers would likely feel there is a limited “stock” of such abilities, and that every PvP-friendly ability is taken from the “stock” of PvE-friendly abilities, and vice-versa. By contrast, the questions in this study (“How should a guild be manifested in the game world?”) are not zero-sum.

I am conflicted about the two possible ways to conduct this:

- **The marketing and strategy approach** is to conduct those consultations segment by segment, in order to harvest solutions that are custom-designed to

provide maximum satisfaction for each segment. This is also the approach that holds the stronger possibilities to offer surprising suggestions, outside of the usual cultural context and mental models of the game designers.

- **The collective intelligence approach** is to have as large and as diverse a group of gamers as possible participate in the game, since MIT research shows this is the most efficient way to conduct such projects.

The beta population for the *Lord of the Rings Online* being what it is, the collective intelligence will have to be used and it is unlikely to generate data about which of the two approaches produce what sort of results.

Generally speaking, the process is low-cost (though it works better when rewards are handed out at the end to the high performers, according to its designers), does not require much effort compared to other approaches, and generates a critical resource – pertinent data on customer needs and ideas from the front lines.