

Massively-Multiplayer Storytelling

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Introduction

Whatever the medium, storytelling is storytelling.

Stories arise from inter-related events – real or imaginary – that happen in inter-related contexts – also real or imaginary. Some of these events and contexts are selected as being relevant and some are not. The selected events and contexts are reported by the storyteller to the storytellee (reader, viewer or player) in a serial, if not necessarily chronological, fashion. The result is the story. How it is told is its narrative.

The contexts of a story make up the story's world. The storytellee maintains a model of this world in their head as the story unfolds. This model is continually updated to reflect the changes that follow from events and new revelations of context. Plots connect subsets of events together causally. Absorbing the story involves attempting to reconstruct these plots, anticipating how they will develop and what their effects will be.

Individuals can benefit from any part of this process. They might gain enjoyment or fulfilment from:

- Contexts, such as settings or characters.
- Events, such as action sequences or dialogue.
- Maintenance of and immersion in their world model.
- The construction of hypotheses about what will happen next.
- The association of contexts as symbols and events as metaphors to divine what the storyteller is *really* saying.
- Understanding the storyteller's art.

Some people, on the other hand, prefer *telling* stories to having stories *told* to them.

MMO Storytelling as Game Storytelling

This chapter looks at how stories are told in Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMOs). As their name suggests, these are first and foremost games, so much of what has been written elsewhere in this book applies to MMOs by default. For this reason, I won't be discussing story *structure* for MMOs here; rather, I'll be looking at the mechanisms by which MMOs deliver story to players.

There are essentially three ways that stories can arise in games: they can be *scripted*, *responsive* or *emergent*.

Scripted stories are written in advance and presented as-is. This is what first springs to mind upon hearing the word "story": it's the kind used by recorded media such as novels, films, comics and poetry. For games, the events of a scripted story and its diegetic context are fixed in advance. There may be choice points at which the

player gets to make a decision that effects how the story progresses, but these, too, are scripted.

Scripted stories have several advantages, but the main one is that they can be told by people who are accomplished storytellers. This leads to polished and meaningful, well-staged experiences. Its main disadvantages derive from conflicts with gameplay: pacing is very difficult; it offers little replayability; the player may like the gameplay but not the story (or *vice versa*).

Responsive storytelling is the kind that can happen in interactive or semi-interactive media such as live-performance dance, theatre, song and stand-up comedy. In these, the events are largely scripted but they can be modified on-the-fly. The way they are presented changes depending on how the audience (players, in the case of games) reacts. Initially, the performer (storyteller) presents a sequence of events, to which the audience responds. The performer uses the response to adjust the context or to introduce new events, streaming subsequent events differently. The audience responds to the changes, more adjustments are made, and so it continues. Note that the interaction here is almost entirely between the performer and the audience: members of the audience can only change the story as a group, not as individuals except in special circumstances (for example, they might be selected to participate in a magic trick).

With games, the performer is the game itself through its various systems. The narrative advantages of responsive storytelling in games are superior to those of, say, a theatrical production or opera, because players don't all have to see the same content simultaneously; even multi-player games can have stories that are responsive to an audience of one. This can be achieved through built-in mechanisms that adapt based on how each player responds as an individual. For example, the skills the player character acquires in a role-playing game (RPG) may emphasise or de-emphasise story elements depending on the player's ability (or otherwise) to overcome obstacles. The disadvantages of responsive storytelling include: it may compromise the gameplay; the game systems may misinterpret the player's responses; if the mood of the player changes, it may take time for this to feed through the game's systems.

Scripted storytelling and responsive storytelling remain exactly that: storytelling. Games can – and do – do both. The third way that stories can arise in games – emergence – is not, however, storytelling *per se*. It only becomes storytelling when its events and contexts are retold later *as* a story. In all human experience, only play, games and accidents can do this.

In games, emergent stories come from unscripted interactions in unspecified contexts that give rise to events. These interactions can be between the players and the game's systems or between players and each other. There is no predefined plot: any plot that does arise does so dynamically from the preconditions and effects of events. Other forms of play outside of games can do this too – jazz and improv comedy performers riff off each other, for example – but games have something that even these freeform interactions don't: gameplay. Gameplay carries the artistic payload of games, connecting play to events in a systematised way – a possibility shared by no other medium.

This is what gives games their unique expressive power. They're not simply vehicles for *conveying* stories: they're machines for *generating* stories (Schell, 2008).

Storytelling in MMOs is no different in this respect. The designer provides opportunities for the players to experience events and to create from the retelling of

these their own stories. As I said, pretty well everything discussed in the other chapters of this book applies to MMOs, for pretty well the same reasons.

That said, MMOs bring with them issues of their own.

Sandboxes and Theme Parks

Story in MMOs is clearly important – the main context alone sets the stage for the entire game (SF? Fantasy? Horror? Historical?). Indeed, so important is story that it has led to two competing and contrasting approaches to MMO design as a whole, disambiguated by whether they emphasise stories that arise by scripted methods or by emergent methods, with responsive methods acceptable to either.

The *sandbox* approach, which is the older of the two, emphasises personal stories that emerge from natural interactions between players and the game environment or between players and each other. The primary design focus here is on the events: the virtual world must be rich enough that interactions can occur spontaneously for many reasons that derive from many sources. This requires the kind of deep, complex gameplay systems that designers find difficult to balance, but it leads to events and encounters that are varied and unpredictable (possibly too unpredictable for some players). The stories that emerge are on the whole more meaningful to individuals, because they arise when the player is engaged in an activity that's *already* meaningful to them – otherwise, they wouldn't be doing it.

The *theme park* approach emphasises canned story experiences that players follow at their own pace. There will be a *main storyline* made up of a series of shorter storylines called *quests*. There will also be optional *side quests* that can either augment or be independent of the main storyline. The primary design focus here is on the context: good writing, enhanced by cutscenes and voice acting, helps the players participate in quality stories that they wouldn't have experienced if left to their own devices. There's little spontaneity to this, however, and most of the episodic elements of stories quickly become familiar. Responsive storytelling, which can adapt to present new story elements on the fly (for example through procedural content generation (Yannakakis & Togelius, 2011)), can add engagement and interest but tends to lose meaning as a result.

To summarise, then: stories are made of events in contexts; sandbox MMOs emphasise the events; theme park MMOs emphasise the contexts.

It's possible to combine the two approaches by offering different kinds of story at the strategic (long-term gameplay) and tactical (moment-to-moment gameplay) levels. To create an MMO which is sandbox at the strategy level and theme park at the tactics level, either a basically theme park game needs to remove storyline constraints at the strategic level or a basically sandbox game needs to introduce them at the tactical level. Conversely, to create an MMO which is theme park at the strategy level and sandbox at the tactics level, either a basically sandbox game needs to introduce storyline constraints at the strategic level or a basically theme park game needs to remove them at the tactics level. This gives four possibilities, each of which suggests a different solution.

1) To make a theme park MMO be sandbox at the strategy level.

In most MMOs, the game's content at the tactics level (which generally means combat) does not offer a constant degree of difficulty: different *zones* (content-curated geographic areas) will offer different challenges. The established way of introducing a strategic feel in such circumstances is to offer players a broad front of

content along which to advance; the player's choice of what to do next is still limited, but the perception of being railroaded is reduced. This is what *World of Warcraft* does. In some MMOs, however, the difficulty of content is adjusted dynamically to match the capabilities of the player character. In such circumstances, the player will have a genuinely open-ended, sandbox-style choice over which content to tackle next; unfortunately, every choice will feel the same. This is what *The Elder Scrolls Online* does.

2) To make a theme park MMO be sandbox at the tactics level.

MMOs can embrace their inner theme park at the strategic level yet open up play at the tactical level through *player-versus-player* (PvP) combat. Unless the whole MMO is PvP, however, such activities will not be integrated into the main storyline; hard-core PvP enthusiasts should therefore perhaps be questioning why they're playing a theme park MMO in the first place. For players who have finished the main storyline, of course, this objection no longer stands; accordingly, most theme park MMOs will implement PvP content for those who want it.

3) To make a sandbox MMO be theme park at the strategy level.

A sandbox MMO can be made to feel theme park at the strategy level by drawing out what's actually emergent content so that it seems to the player as if it's part of an epic storyline. This can be achieved through group-oriented, factional goals that take a long time to achieve. *Crowfall* and *EVE Online* are good examples of this: there *isn't* a predefined plot, but it appears to the players as they're participating in one of their own, collective making.

4) To make a sandbox MMO be theme park at the tactics level.

Replacing sandbox tactics with theme park tactics is a matter of substituting scripted elements for emergent, event-driven elements. The scripted elements then become available as components for the emergent, strategic gameplay. Short, stand-alone quests would work here, but unless there were hundreds available they'd soon become repetitive. This is not something that any modern MMO has yet attempted successfully, although it could be argued that some of the old text MUDs (which had many more verbs available to them) managed it.

On the whole, MMOs will tend towards being either theme park or sandbox. Although they may dabble in content from the opposite camp, overall they'll stick to their central philosophy. To do otherwise would be to muddle what the designer was saying to the players.

MMO Complications

MMOs make demands of storytelling beyond those made by other kinds of game, largely because of the sheer number and variety of people who play them and the length of time they spend playing.

Given so many players following their own stories all at once, it's almost unavoidable that interactions between them will produce drama (and so new stories). In a theme park MMO, these interpersonal stories can interfere with the stories that the designer wants to tell; in a sandbox MMO, they become part of the stories that emerge from play. For this reason, designers of theme park worlds tend to reduce opportunities for players to interact with one another serendipitously; designers of sandbox worlds tend to increase them.

One edge that theme park MMOs have over sandbox MMOs is the ability to route players through the same early-story events, which can serve as a bonding

exercise. Most players of human *World of Warcraft* characters will be able to sympathise with a rant about the level 11 gnoll called Hogger, for example. This can only go so far, though: because players participate in later scripted stories for different reasons, the context is variable. Designers can't rely on players to play what has been designed as it was expected to be played. This makes it difficult to give stories meaning. For example, someone good at hunting wild animals who has just had a torrid time eradicating undead will interpret a quest to kill a field full of tigers differently to someone who was looking for something to do while improving their skinning skill; neither of them are likely to care about your nuanced tale describing how agonised the local rangers feel for having asked you to assist them in culling a species that they reintroduced twenty years earlier following its eradication a century ago.

Another problem experienced by theme park MMOs is that yes, players may well participate in the same stories as each other, but they all have different playing skills. People often say "I'm not very good at games [of a particular kind]" (bullet hell in my case), but who says "I'm not very good at stories [of a particular kind]"? A player playing for the story can be blocked because of what to them is an interstitial game component. For example, if you're not good at executing jumps and you need to make a series of twelve tight ones in a row without missing any, it's no good improving your character's abilities and coming back later: it's *your* skill that matters, not your character's, and if you couldn't perform the jumps the first time then you won't be able to perform them the second time, either. The same applies to activities in which controller functionality is inverted, or that require you to react to a change in a tune when you're tone deaf. Worst of all are those stories that can't be completed because of issues with the gameplay. Yes, Recursia, buggy boss five in the *Secret World Legends* Hell Rising dungeon, you are indeed top of my list.

Pacing is important in recorded media, but it's difficult to get right for games in general and MMOs in particular. For sandbox MMOs, it's a completely alien concept: in pursuing their goals, players can experience periods of boredom and frustration or feelings of having missed something that might have been fun. For theme park MMOs, pacing is easier to manage in a relative sense, but not necessarily in an absolute sense. Stories have to be drop-in, drop-out, because players have other in-game and out-of-game demands on their time; maintaining a story's momentum can be hard. Furthermore, players can get stuck on content they're meant to breeze through yet sweep past content that's intended to trip them up. Although it's not an MMO, I feel compelled to complain that in 1998 it took me two days to get past a pair of skeleton archers in *Baldur's Gate* which were blocking the route to the final showdown, then when I finally reached said showdown I took apart the principal enemy as if he were a shop dummy made of ice cream.

Not only can play get in the way of story, but story can get in the way of play. Consider the example of tanks (characters that take the brunt of enemy damage) in *Final Fantasy XIV*. This MMO grants tanks experience point bonuses for participating in certain types of common group content, the rationale being to encourage people to take on the role; this is in principle a good idea, but an unfortunate consequence is that tanks can level faster than the story advances. I made a note when my own tank reached level 52 (when I was looking forward to obtaining a particularly overpowered ability) that I was 71 quests and seven dungeons ahead of the main storyline (the completion of which was a requirement to be granted said ability).

Stories in MMOs have to be differing lengths. Sometimes, people just want a short quest that doesn't take long to complete because they don't have a lot of time

right then. However, in a theme park MMO they'll also want a main storyline that plays out over many sessions and could take hundreds, perhaps thousands of hours to complete. Even non-mandatory quests can be substantial undertakings in some games (the monumental Onyxia storyline in classic *World of Warcraft* is a good example). Breaking the stories down into manageable chunks helps, but it can feel a bit like hand-holding and risks (literally) losing the plot. In *The Lord of the Rings Online*, for example, it's hard to feel that the fate of Middle Earth is at one stage entirely dependent on your ability to persuade a milk-cow to return to her pen.

Inevitably, there will be some stories that players love and some that they hate. Although there may be a general consensus as to which quests are good and which are bad, ultimately it depends on the individual player. In sandbox MMOs, where quests are of a player's own making, an unfun quest can be side-stepped, powered through or even abandoned. In a theme park MMO, the same applies to side quests but not to the main storyline (unless it has more branches to it than any MMO currently has); therefore, it will invariably be true that at some point in the game the player isn't enjoying doing what the main storyline insists be done. The way that theme park MMOs address this issue is to offer side quests that can be undertaken in parallel with the main quest, so sustaining the player's interest through the rough times. These can be made to overlap, soap-opera plots style, so that once one has finished the next has already begun.

One of the most obvious differences between MMOs and other games is that the virtual world is shared. Any changes to the environment effected by one player are made for all the other players, too (or at least those playing on the same server). This means that big, world-altering changes are effectively part of everyone's story. If a castle is destroyed for one player, it's destroyed for all players. This isn't a problem for sandbox MMOs, but it is for theme park MMOs. A few weeks after launch, there will always be players at every stage of the main storyline, so integrating a major event into all of these so it makes sense is tricky. Two solutions have been developed for this: *phasing* and *instancing*.

Phasing is used almost exclusively by the main storyline. The basic principle is that the server tells the player different things depending on where they are in a quest. Suppose, for example, you were to visit a castle and see therein a young boy. A short while later, you begin a quest in which the boy is kidnapped. Now when you go to the castle, the boy won't be there. To the player standing next to you who hasn't begun the quest, though, the boy is still there. When you rescue the boy and complete the quest, the next time you visit the castle he'll be standing in his old place again.

Phasing really comes into its own when used for large-scale, permanent terrain changes. The main storyline of the Wrath of the Lich King expansion for *World of Warcraft* has a famous example for a location called Angrathar the Wrathgate. When the player character arrives, the Wrathgate is under siege. After speaking to the appropriate character, a cutscene ensues which depicts a great battle. Thereafter, the armies are replaced by the dead and wounded, and the terrain is scarred by smouldering fires and discarded weapons. Those players who have completed the quest chain will thenceforth only see the aftermath of the battle; those players who have yet to complete it will see the armies laying siege. Importantly, player characters in the area will only be able to see those other player characters who are in the same phase as they (pre-cutscene or post-cutscene).

Instancing is a mechanism by which a small group of players can collectively experience content in a small, pocket universe (the *instance*) that's separated from the rest of the virtual world. No-one apart from party members has access to the instance. The way it works, every time a newly-formed group wants to experience the

content, a newly-initialised pocket universe is fired up for them. There will usually be many such instances in existence at any one moment, each with its own party doing its own thing in private.

Instancing is a boon for theme park MMOs because it guarantees that all player characters are following the same storyline in the same place with minimal interference from the rest of the virtual world. This makes it possible for stories to include events such as tumbling walls, sinking ships and draining swamps – all activities that would be problematic in the wider world. Instancing also helps with content balancing, because the designer can gate the instance to characters of particular ability levels. Some MMOs (*Final Fantasy XIV* is one) allow high-level characters to play in low-level instances by *syncing* them – dropping their character and equipment stats to ones appropriate for the content. In general this works, although players may need to reorganise their interface at the start so as to ensure they only try to use those actions that characters at the synced level are allowed.

The final important story problem that MMOs have which most non-MMOs don't have is that they never end. Non-MMOs that have no ending, such as the *Sims* series and *Minecraft*, tend to be toys rather than games (that is, you don't *play* them, you play *with* them).

There's no gameplay reason why MMOs should never end – indeed there's an argument that it's perhaps more satisfying for the players if they do end. The reason they don't end is essentially because the developers want to keep the players playing and paying. This isn't a problem with sandbox MMOs, but it is for theme park MMOs. Sure, the game doesn't end – but the main storyline does. Players who were playing for the story are effectively left bereft by this.

Theme Park MMOs do still make stories available at this stage, but they go nowhere. Designers primarily use three devices for this:

1) Old scripted stories.

The simplest way to give story-hungry players something to do is to encourage them repeat what they've already done. This isn't always possible for regular quests because of issues to do with phasing, but it's certainly possible for instances. If offered rewards in the form of currency or the chance of obtaining a rare item, players will often enjoy repeating old content. They could, of course, always do this by creating a new, secondary character (an *alt*) and re-running all the old content from scratch.

2) New scripted stories.

New scripted stories are by definition going to be anticlimactic, as they quite literally follow the main story's climax. They are often long, drawn-out affairs in which players gain access to (*attunement* for) late-game instances – in particular *raids*, which are instances that involve many more players than do regular instances.

3) Daily quests.

Daily quests are usually fairly short activities (20 minutes or so each) that give players a reason to log in every day. They typically involve gathering resources, manufacturing items or slaying enemies at the behest of a faction that will offer a reward in the form of currency that can be exchanged for items or enhancements which will gradually raise a character's overall *item level* (ilevel). This may help them qualify for entering high-level instances or raids. Daily quests can include scripted content (either old or new), but this rarely makes narrative sense. My notes for *Star Wars: the Old Republic* include the line "If my character has just inherited a vast space fleet from putting down a rebellion, why am I going into this same cave to rescue the same prisoners I rescued yesterday to help out the same officer who's standing in the same place with the same sob story about his incompetence?".

Overall, the problem that theme park MMOs have is that they're effectively two games. The levelling game is all about story and solo play; the post-levelling (*elder*) game is all about group play and grinding through dailies. The people who like the former are unlikely to prefer the latter; if they did, there would be no levelling game, just an immense elder game – a sandbox MMO, in other words.

Lore and the Fiction

All non-abstract games have a *fiction*: that which you have to buy into to accept the truth of the game's reality. It's what you know *not* to be true that you're willing to believe is true while playing the game.

The fiction of a game tells you how things are, but not how they got that way. The *lore* of a game is the backstory to the game world that informs the player what happened in it before the game started. The lore is the pre-game plot that led to the snapshot that is the fiction.

For example, the fiction might say that you're a sorcerer on the side of good in a medieval fantasy land where magic works but the forces of evil are on the ascendant. The lore might explain that following the opening of the Duumgate, the demon lord Cxthrik and his horde of Plibrathr minions flooded through from the plane of Jstau to conquer the peaceful world of Nbrialamianafol in the name of the crimson-skinned dual god Wiquvi-Shalamaan, near whose shrine you have coincidentally been shipwrecked in the coastal city of Kroopton, with no memory of your former life but a burning desire to participate in the war on one side or the other. It'll probably flesh it out a bit more than that.

A game's fiction is largely presented pre-game (along with a general indication of what gameplay is involved). This is because players need to know in advance what setting the game has if they're decide whether or not it's appealing to them. Further details of the fiction will be released during play (for example the names of spells), but these will rarely make much difference to the player's overall understanding of the setting.

A game's lore is drip-fed into the game through scripted stories. Knowledge of lore may have a minor effect on gameplay (the alert player may realise it's telling them where to look for specific objects, say), but on the whole it's more to do with bringing depth and emotion to the game, so providing impetus for any main storyline. Depending on the player, the revelation of lore can be perceived as either play-enhancing information or mere flavour text (with players taking the latter view outnumbering those who take the former by at least an order of magnitude).

It's important to note that lore is backstory from the point of view of the first players of the game, not later players. For theme park MMOs, there's usually little difference between the two, but for sandbox MMOs there could be a whole period which is backstory for the new player but is lived-through history for the veteran. This backstory is not lore. *EVE Online*, for example, has seen many emergent, game-wide stories play out since it opened in 2003: to someone starting to play the game today, this is all context that explains why the game universe is set like it is; to someone who started to play in 2003, it's context that resulted from a series of events in which the player participated.

Because theme park MMOs have such an enormous appetite for content, their lore must be extensive, extensible, detailed and multi-threaded.

- Extensive, because the lore must cover many aspects of the game's world and its past, whether social, technical, geographical, demographical or personal. If a designer wants to place a village, say, then the lore should tell them who lives there and why they live there.
- Extensible, because as the game grows new content will need to be added. The lore must provide sufficient hooks for this to happen. If the lore runs out of steam, the players will notice: new story will derive from contrived interactions between lore-significant characters rather than the breaking in the present of waves that originated long into the past.
- Detailed, because the richer the lore, the more it can inspire both players and designers. The world will seem richer and more immersive to the players. It will offer more opportunities for developments to its designers
- Multi-threaded, because then the past is interwoven causally in many different ways, with several on-going plots unfolding at any one time (including the present). Pro tip: if you want to create the general thrust of a game world's history, design a board game for the period and play it through. Stop when everything is up in the air, and use that as your starting point for your game's lore.

It's imperative that the lore in theme park MMOs is done right. This isn't simply so that players will be impressed by attention to detail – it's for commercial reasons, too. If the virtual world uses bought-in intellectual property, the plug can be pulled if you stray from it too far; if it uses your own, you can monetise it. People will be cosplaying your characters; people will be buying presentation models of your characters; people will be buying plushies of your cute creatures; authors will be contracted to write stories set in your universe; fans will be writing fan fiction set in it, too, which you don't want to be mocking in nature.

For this reason, most large-scale MMOs will have a team of people working on the lore. OK, so it may be a team of one for a sandbox world, but there will still be someone on the payroll who is Guardian of the Lore and whose proclamations on the subject are definitive.

The main downside of lore is that it's often unappreciated by players. A small minority will be absolutely obsessive about it, picking it apart looking for the slightest excuse to read more into it than is there. Almost every other player will pay insufficient attention and be largely ignorant of even the most important elements; as a perhaps somewhat extreme example, a level 25ish *World of Warcraft* player once asked me, in-game, "What's this Horde people keep talking about?"

To designers, lore is both a source of ideas and a useful tool for explaining gameplay. For example, if players demand changes of which the designer disapproves, "it's incompatible with the lore" can be used to rule them out; conversely, if the designer makes changes of which the players disapprove, "it's implied by the lore" can explain why they're essential. Furthermore, otherwise inexplicable new gameplay can be covered by adding new lore – although there may be issues if said new lore comes with implications of its own ("if elves have this magic, how come the humans ever conquered them?").

Finally, those MMOs that don't use licensed intellectual property have a further card up their sleeves: their designers can ride roughshod over the lore if that's what it takes to introduce a new system. Should the lore ever get in the way of something important, it can simply be rewritten so it doesn't. Players greatly dislike such acts of retroactive continuity (*retconning*), but gameplay trumps lore in MMOs if that's what suits the designer.

Quests and Quest Chains

I've mentioned quests and quest chains a number of times already in this chapter, so perhaps ought to discuss exactly what they are.

Before games appropriated the term, quests were large-scale, long-term adventures that might take years to complete. The quest for the Holy Grail and the quest for the Golden Fleece are typical examples from mythology. In role-playing games (of which MMOs are a prominent example), they have a rather more specific meaning, though. There, quests are basically atomic pieces of scripted story. The player is given a specific task, with text or a cutscene explaining why they need to do it. When they have done it, the quest completes and the player character receives a reward of some kind. A follow-up quest may also open up.

A single quest can be a story in and of itself if it's set up such that meaningful events will emerge in the process of its completion. A quest from a merchant to go lay flowers at the shrine of his wife doesn't sound especially thrilling, but fighting your way across a wolf-infested wasteland only to find that the shrine is guarded by undead is perhaps more worthy of a tale. It might well be saying something, too, if the merchant was so jealous and protective of his wife that he was constantly fending off perceived rivals for her affection, condemning her to a lonely, resentful existence.

Although individual, scripted quests can comprise stand-alone stories in this fashion, it's nevertheless the case that most quests are links in a chain that tells a single story as a whole. Such quest chains can be of any length, with the longest (main storyline) ones possibly involving scores of shorter quest chains; this can amount to several hundred individual quests in total. Most side-quest chains will only be four to six steps long, however, which gives enough room for them to have a formal beginning, middle and end without dragging them out indefinitely.

Quests – even very easy, short ones – will always come with a reward. In most MMOs, this will be primarily in the form of experience points, but material rewards can also be given according to a quest budget set by the designer. The last step of a long quest chain will always have a material reward, unless the developer actually wants disgruntled players to lay siege to their office building.

Quests dominate theme park MMOs, but in sandbox MMOs they're a more amorphous concept. In these, players decide on their goals themselves, and whether they call the effort to accomplish these goals “quests” or not is up to them. There may be formal, prewritten quests at the start of the game, but these are almost always tutorial in nature. Also, the game itself may have a grand end condition, the achievement of which qualifies as a quest by any definition: in *Conan Exiles*, it's to remove a magical band that's imprisoning the player character within the game world; when you do finally remove it, the game for your character ends.

Unlike the quests that players themselves set (“get to level 60 before my exams”), the quests that game sets have to be satisfiable in ways that it can detect. If it can't test that the player has accomplished a set task, it can't issue the reward for it. This means that for practical purposes only a limited number of quest types are possible. A negative consequence of this is that quests all start to look alike after awhile; a positive consequence is that tools can be written to write individual quests more easily (which is just as well – *World of Warcraft* has over 25,000 of them).

Typical quest components include:

- Go and click on this object, monster or non-player character (NPC), which may be near to or far from here. Perhaps do so while carrying this special package (a *FedEx* quest). Perhaps click on several objects (a *gathering* quest). Perhaps perform this action immediately before or after clicking. Perhaps do it without being detected (a *stealth* quest).
- Go and kill this monster. Perhaps kill a certain number of them (a *kill 10 rats* quest). Perhaps, instead, collect special objects that you only get from killing this type of monster.
- Accompany this NPC for a while (an *escort* quest). The NPC will either be slow and weak and will stupidly attack nearby creatures, or it will move so fast that you'll have trouble keeping up with it. In either case, there will be particular points along the journey when scripted events take place that invariably involve a fight. Sometimes, the NPC doesn't move at all, with the scripted events triggering off a timer instead (a *defence* quest).
- Read this text. Most players won't, and will click through it. All they want to know is what they have to do to advance to the next quest in the chain. They will be cross if you examine them on the content of the text.
- Watch this cutscene. Players often will do this, but can't be relied upon to remember many of the details. The main problem with cutscenes in games that have a lot of them is how the player character speaks. Either they're silent (as in *Secret World Legends* and *Final Fantasy XIV*) or they have a voice or accent you don't necessarily like (as in *Star Wars: the Old Republic*). Designers might argue that silence allows players to project themselves onto their characters better, but it's a feint; the primary reason is that silence doesn't require expensive voice actors.

A long quest chain will almost always climax with the defeat a powerful enemy – a *boss*. Bosses usually have unique looks and higher stats. If they have no significant behaviours that players need to know of in advance, the encounter is deemed *tank and spank*. If there's a tight time limit in which the boss must be killed, it's deemed a *DPS race* (*DPS* meaning damage per second).

Bosses that appear later in the game will often have scripted behaviours associated with them, some of which involve complex mechanics such as requiring player characters not to stand in fire. The challenge here is to learn what and when the boss's behaviours are expected (the *dance*), then to react appropriately during actual combat. This activity is hardest for tanks, as they have to position the boss, interrupt its worst excesses, keep alive from regular damage and dance the dance when the boss makes its move; it's one reason why tanks are not a popular character class to play (the other one being that when they're not in a group, combat is too slow). If a fight reaches a stalemate, the boss may put surviving player characters out of their misery by *enraging* – massively increasing its damage-dealing and defensive statistics. This could also be how a *DPS Race* ends.

Long quest chains may contain sub-quests. A simple “go and collect this object from this person and bring it back to me” main storyline quest (actually two quests – click on the person, FedEx the object back to me) may look uncomplicated, but it could be that the entrance to the person's room is blocked by a guard who will only let you pass if you deliver hot food to three colleagues. This guard will be unkillable, but strangely won't be on the front line fighting the forces of evil. As a consequence, you now have a *nested* quest in which you need to buy or make three items of hot food (a *gathering* quest) and deliver them to the guard's colleagues (another *FedEx* quest), then return to the guard who will thereupon let you enter the room. This will

complete the first of the pair of quests you started out to achieve; whether you get the object to FedEx back to the original quest-giver or are told to do something else first will depend on how cruel the quest designer is.

As well as main storyline quests and side quests, some MMOs have quest chains that are specific to the character class of the player character. These will usually play into the main quest, with one blocking progress in the other if the player doesn't advance them both in parallel. In some exceptional cases (*Star Wars: the Old Republic* is the most notable), each character class gets its own main storyline. Even having just one main storyline is expensive to implement, so having several is prohibitively so; it does add significant replay value, though.

Theme Park MMOs will usually deliver their main storyline through a chain comprised of hundreds of quests, possibly including solo instances, group instances and even raids. Occasionally, there may be lengthy cutscenes (one in *Final Fantasy XIV* is half an hour long). There could be several branches to the story on offer, too, either in an *and* relationship (complete them all in any order) or an *or* relationship (complete any single one of them). Then, when the main storyline comes to an end, the game becomes nothing to do with story and all to do with treading water until the next expansion appears to reinvigorate it.

I confess to having been somewhat cynical in this section, so will end by asserting that quest designers can do a stupendously good job at times – especially when the quests are narratively driven and aren't just words to cover for action. The ones in *Secret World Legends* are superb in this regard, for example: they always try to say something, rather than merely provide instructions on what to do to get to the next step.

Expansions

Although I began this chapter by stating that I wouldn't be discussing the story structure of MMOs, I shall nevertheless spend some time looking at the action structure that accompanies it. This is because it tends to follow the same objective format every time, regardless of what the story is subjectively saying.

I'll illustrate this using instances as an example, because they offer the designer the greatest flexibility in terms of the events and contexts that they afford. Even so, whatever meaning storywise is attached to the instance's events, they will almost always follow the same pattern – basically alternating between killing monsters that have no special abilities (known as *trash*) and killing bosses. Especially powerful trash and especially laughable bosses may be called *mini-bosses*.

Overall, then, the story in an instance needs to account for action sequences that can be summarised as follows:

```
while (trash or boss)
{
    while (trash) kill(trash);
    kill(boss);
}
```

Some MMOs, such as *Secret World Legends*, don't have trash in their instances. Others, such as *Final Fantasy XIV*, often only have one boss in theirs. Most will have both, though. In longer instances, the first boss will usually be a *DPS check* (that is, a DPS race which, should the players lose it, is telling them that the whole instance is beyond their capability).

This, then, is how the gameplay proceeds in an instance. The challenge for the instance author is to map it onto the story while managing pacing. Killing trash equates to periods of low intensity; killing bosses equates to periods of high intensity. Players can be afforded some control by allowing them to skip past occasional trash or mini-bosses if these are not essential to the story.

This same sequence also describes how action normally unfolds in quest chains. The gameplay elements that intersperse the story elements typically involve clearing or evading trash to reach some goal, possibly with a mini-boss (a group of tough monsters would count) to mark the end. For regular quests, the iteration will only execute once; for long chains, it will execute many times. Indeed, by stepping back far enough it can be seen that the main storyline itself will follow this same format. The bosses of quest chains are mere mini-bosses for the storyline as a whole. Furthermore, the entire main storyline can be seen as one iteration of the loop when *expansions* are considered.

Expansions are how theme park MMOs are extended with new content (sandbox MMOs need only use patches; “expansions” for them are like paid-for patches). When a new expansion appears, the MMO switches from being a raiding or PvP game back to being a story-driven, levelling game. Little of the high-end gear that players spent hundreds of hours to acquire will be worth much after a few levels of the new content.

Expansions can be used either to reveal new lore or to bring about the consequences of old lore. Each expansion will come with its own main storyline, implemented as new quest chains. Rarely are these likely to be satisfying, because the player already has closure on their personal story from the pre-expansion game; anything additional feels tacked-on (which is fair enough, because it is). If, in an effort to avoid this, the main storyline pre-expansion was left open-ended, that in itself would have been irritating to the players (like reading a book that you thought was stand-alone, only to find it’s the first of a trilogy); worse, they henceforth know that it’s *never* going to be closed, because openness is the technique the designer has chosen to employ to add every expansion’s story.

Expansion stories may or may not follow on from the previous storyline, but they are unlikely to deviate from the usual theme park MMO action pattern: undertake a series of quests to get to the bad person; beat the bad person; either this really *was* the bad person, or oh no, the bad person was but an underling of the *real* bad person, go back to the first step.

The storytelling problems for expansions are threefold.

Firstly, they have to have their own story to them. This will usually involve picking some character out of the game’s lore and making them the expansion’s big bad; their defeat signals the end of the expansion’s storyline. The events of the expansion then become part of the lore for the next expansion. As with instances, the challenge for the designer is to make the story meaningful while adhering to a structure largely determined by the requirements of the gameplay. Unlike the protagonist in a movie, who may endure setback after setback but still pull through to win at the end, players in a game in which they suffer setback after setback are likely to quit; if the story is telling a tale of rising conflict with some defeats and some victories, but the gameplay is mirroring this only with a tale of successive victories, the resulting dissonance will be hard to disguise.

Secondly, the story will begin at the start of the expansion for existing players but not for new players. These will follow the original main storyline to its grand finale, only for the expansion’s storyline thereupon to pick up almost immediately. This can seriously undermine the impact of the original story. There’s no period of

apotheosis, during which players can bask in their success, because no sooner has one disaster been averted than another one appears. Also, all the content that was created for players to occupy themselves with while waiting for the expansion to appear will still be there for the newly-arriving players, but they'll play right past it. The joins will be blazingly obvious. Managing the pacing both for players who are starting the expansion after a year of unstoried, non-levelling play and for players who are still on a storied, levelling treadmill is a substantial problem. Only games in which the players know the lore and the plot in advance (such as *The Lord of the Rings Online*) have much of a chance of sustaining the narrative, and even they will leave once-busy social hubs as ghost towns after expansions have moved the action elsewhere.

Thirdly, expansions push back the horizon. A game that seems daunting with 60 levels is going to seem even more daunting when subsequent expansions raise the maximum level to 120. Even players who love story may find there's too much to consume. It's therefore often the case that mature MMOs will foreshorten the levelling game by speeding up the rate at which experience points are gained. As I mentioned earlier, in extreme circumstances this can cause the player to level up faster than the storyline can handle. Solutions include allowing players to skip parts of the main storyline or (in drastic cases) redesigning the world completely so that much early content is entirely removed and the main storyline itself is extended to feed into the storyline of the expansion (as famously occurred with *World of Warcraft's* Cataclysm expansion).

Having said all this, it's nevertheless the case that accomplished storywriters can indeed make riveting, emotionally impactful stories that are self-contained within expansions. *Final Fantasy XIV* is quite famous for this, and the fact that it can do so in a world that has characters riding around using anything from motor cars to giant chicks makes the accomplishment all the more remarkable.

Goals

Players of MMOs have goals: situations that don't currently pertain which they wish to pertain (or that do currently pertain which they wish to continue to pertain). Breaking these down or ordering them introduces sub-goals, which (as the name suggests) are themselves also goals.

Some goals are diegetic, such as one to rescue beached mermaids by placing them in an enchanted bottle (a gathering quest in *Rift*) or to harry forces at an enemy space station to divert attention from an up-coming battle elsewhere (a quest of the kind that might emerge in *EVE Online*). Some goals are non-diegetic, such as one to annoy other players without provocation for the simple pleasure of having done so (a favourite of grievers everywhere).

In theme Park MMOs, the game's quest system gives players goals, but players can also set their own goals; the MMO is unable to prevent this, because player agency is implicit in the very concept of what a game is. In contrast, sandbox MMOs can in theory avoid giving players any predefined goals at the character level whatsoever. Self-defined goals are therefore mainly the province of sandbox games. Attempting to achieve these goals involves no scripted plot, but nevertheless rich and rewarding stories can emerge during the player's endeavours – even if these ultimately end in failure.

Players can create such personal goals for intrinsic or extrinsic reasons.

In theme park MMOs, extrinsic goals rule. For reasons explained earlier, most players eventually set their goals based on the rewards (experience points, equipment, reputation, whatever) that the game gives their character. They will choose the quests that optimise the rate at which they will obtain these rewards. There is an element of intrinsic motivation to it if the journey is more important than the destination, as might be the case for players who are in it for the story; it may also be that players will avoid certain types of quest because they have intrinsic objections to them (escort quests are universally disliked).

In sandbox MMOs, intrinsic goals rule. These are self-determined either by individual players or by players working in groups. Goals are set based on the player's own internal priorities. The end goal could give some direction, but the play itself is *autotelic* (Fine, 1983). The choice of goals results in a game that is fun in and of itself – for that player. Players who have different tastes may avoid the very same goals at all costs.

Sandbox games are designed for this kind of play. They contain many opportunities for creating sub-goals and nested sub-goals. *Conan Exiles*, for example, involves exploring, building bases, leaving caches, constructing outpost shelters, gearing up, capturing thralls, raising tamed creatures, defeating bosses, acquiring resources, manufacturing equipment, and much more besides. Even if they're playing the game on their own (it is available single-player), players will find that the interactions they have with the environment and its non-player inhabitants cause many conflicting goals to present themselves; multi-player, it's even more the case that player choices can make a real difference to the virtual world.

Theme Park games are not good at this kind of deep, emergent gameplay, but then they don't need to be. They can implement it to some extent if the designer wants, by giving quest goals that are vague about how best they can be accomplished; they can also provide non-quest, achievement goals such as visiting hard-to-reach locations. It may not even be necessary to give the player the goal at all, as is often the case with crafting: no-one tells the player to go and gather herbs to make health potions, but the player does so anyway because they want the potions to increase their character's survivability.

The problem theme park MMOs have with goals that lead to emergent gameplay is not, therefore, one of creating such goals (which players can still do, albeit not as well as in sandbox MMOs); rather, it's that completing these goals isn't usually a lot of fun. The limited depth of the game world means that the interactions can get quite samey (typically, moving around while killing any monsters that get in the way), so much so that players call it *activity grinding*. One particular form of this, *reputation grinding* (to get on the right side of a group of powerful, unaligned creatures) is particularly notorious for being boring. Mini-games, such as fishing, can offer more leisurely interludes, but in time they become repetitive, too.

Some games, such as *Black Desert Online*, try to have it both ways. They are theme park at heart, but have sandbox elements – especially in the elder game. There is a risk, however, that it splits the game in two: one for producers (sandbox); one for consumers (theme park). If the sandbox rewards are the higher, those players who prefer theme park will feel obliged to participate in sandbox activity so as to level up faster. This, they will find frustrating; they may leave as a result. If the theme park rewards are the higher, sandbox enthusiasts will feel that they are unappreciated, second-class players; they may also leave as a result.

This kind of interplay between players who give themselves self-directed goals to produce items and players who pursue game-directed goals to complete quests gives rise to a hybrid game's economy. Crafters gather resources themselves and buy

key components from combat specialists; from these, they make finished goods which they sell to the combat specialists for money that they can use to buy more components. Combat specialists use the goods produced by the crafters to fight enemies, from which they obtain components they can sell back to the crafters and money they can use to buy replacement goods.

This works only so long as the two groups are in equilibrium. If there are too few combat specialists to buy crafters' goods, or too few crafters to make them, a game will gradually shed players. This happened in the case of *Star Wars: Galaxies*, which was renowned for its exceptionally good crafting system. Unfortunately, it attracted too many crafters (about 60% of the player base), which adversely affected the economy's balance. In the end, to arrest its decline, its developers installed a major patch that introduced what they called the New Game Experience. This effectively did away with crafting entirely, causing around 30% of players to leave in the immediate aftermath and more later (Koster, 2018); it was not a popular move, although to be fair it did stabilise the player base that remained and added perhaps three years to the game's lifespan.

In general, players start out preferring theme parks and end up preferring sandboxes. This is forced on them anyway when the levelling game ends and the game pivots, but for many players the slide happens well before then. A possible design envisages graduated, parallel paths that players can switch between as they progress through the game; theme park play would start off in charge, but sandbox would eventually pick up the reins. Sadly, this may be too difficult to achieve in a single MMO, not least because of balance issues; also, players have so many different backgrounds and experiences of playing other MMOs that it would be testing for a designer to ascertain when best to emphasise theme park over sandbox. The result could effectively be two games in one. This is effectively the case now, of course, with the level-up theme park, tread-water sandbox model for MMOs and expansions; the ideal would be to do it in parallel, though, rather than serially as happens at present.

Conclusion

The important stories in games aren't the ones that the games tell the players, but the ones that the players tell themselves. MMOs are designed to create circumstances that will engender this. In sandbox worlds, players construct personal narratives by interacting with a deep, reactive environment and with other players; the stories unfold emergently and responsively as players interpret the events that befall them. In theme park worlds, players follow pre-written narratives that require them to perform certain tasks so as to progress; the stories unfold to a script but with responsive possibilities, especially if other players are involved.

The main problem for theme park MMOs is that their main storyline either ends before the first expansion or it's never going to end, ever. In either case, the game has to pivot to more piecemeal narratives at the end if it wishes to retain its players.

The main problem for sandbox MMOs is that the player can run out of goals. Either there's a final goal before the first expansion, or there's never going to be a final goal. Sandbox MMOs can't pivot to a different kind of storytelling because they themselves occupy the far end of the storytelling spectrum. Developers who wish to keep hold of their players have to resort to throwing wrenches into the system by

introducing disasters or new enemies; this is the game design version of stirring up an ant's nest with a stick.

In the long term, sandbox play will come to be seen as the superior; this is because the more experienced at MMOs players become, the more the shallowness of theme park play is exposed. That said, attracting players to sandbox MMOs who haven't cut their teeth on theme park MMOs would be very difficult; the two need one another.

It really does depend on the player, though.

What kinds of stories do *you* like?

Somewhere, there's an MMO that delivers exactly those kinds of stories.