Hardcore Gamers and Casual Gamers Playing Online Together

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Abstract. In this paper, we discuss why Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG) need to attract both hardcore and casual players and study the evolution of MMOG features for this purpose.

1 Hardcore Gamers and Casual Gamers Must Play Together

As opposed to the casual gamer, a hardcore gamer dedicates most of his leisure time and sometimes even more to his favorite virtual world. Indeed, the average duration of a normal game session can be huge in traditional MMOG like Everquest [4] or Anarchy Online [1]. These games are designed to reward the time devoted to it. Gathering a team of complementary players, traveling through the virtual world to get to the desired location, finding rare items, fighting very powerful Non Player Characters (NPC) are tasks which take time and dedication to complete, but give the final gratification its meaning.

Why MMOG need to adapt to the casual gamer market: Economically speaking, the costs currently involved to develop, deploy and maintain such games imply a high number of monthly subscribers for a game to be profitable. To enable the development of more and different MMOG, it seems then necessary to extend their audience. The more obvious way is to reach the casual gamer market.

Moreover, MMOG suffer from a bad reputation, often described as addictive desocializing games, equivalent to a drug (Evercrack is the nickname of Everquest). Whereas research in this area does not yet explain if MMOG themselves create addiction or attract an audience predisposed to addiction, legislations are discussed all around the world to try and control this issue. This image could be corrected by the design of game-plays more suitable to short playing-sessions.

Why MMOG need to keep the hardcore gamer market: the success of such a game is highly dependent on the construction of a community. The main feature of a MMOG is to involve each player in a parallel society where they can pursue a second social life. Virtual societies are organized in a number of hierarchic players regroupments. The existence of such organizations is one of the basic features of a MMOG, the very purpose of these games being to interact with other players. These regroupments can sometimes count a very important number of players. Planning a play session for such an organization, managing
common resources, distributing responsibilities, defining and enforcing the common life rules inside the sub-community, and moderating personal conflicts are essential tasks for everyone playing experience. These responsibilities are very time consuming and ask for a strong dedication and good knowledge of the game. **Hardcore gamers** are the people who build the virtual society without which any MMOG would be pointless.

## 2 MMOG Game-Play Features Review

### 2.1 Growing by Interacting with the Virtual World

We will here describe the features involved in the growth of a powerful avatar.

**Competition with the Environment:** by achieving specific tasks, the player can accumulate *experience points* which will be transformed into enhancements of the avatar abilities. This mechanism is commonly called *Player versus Environment* (PvE) and most often consists in killing hostile Non Player Character (NPC). Experience points can sometimes also be obtained through the achievement of *quests* or *missions* assigned by the game.

In a typical MMOG like Everquest, this mechanism is the main feature of the game-design and to ensure the longevity of the game, gaining experience is a slow and sometimes tricky process. If the player actions result in the death of its avatar in the game world, penalties are applied. The avatar can lose experience levels, and has to retrieve its equipment at the location of the unfortunate event. Mistakes thus have very time consuming consequences on the growth of an avatar. Also designed and launched at the beginning of the popularization of the MMOG genre, Anarchy Online provided less frustrating features for the *casual gamer*: the experience loss was limited to the former experience level, and it was possible to retrieve all the equipment of the avatar easily. Still, getting experience was a long process and game-designers have been trying to find alternatives to retain casual gamers. In Eve Online [3], avatar learning, once triggered, grows according to time and not to player actions. In World of Warcraft [7], the player gets an experience bonus for being out of the game under some specific but easy to match conditions. These alternatives are risky to deploy: while they allow casual gamers to keep the pace with hardcore gamers to a certain extent, it is necessary to ensure that the growth of the avatar is not the only reward provided by the game-play (for instance, by making quests entertaining by themselves). Otherwise, it may be perceived as a very unfair mechanism for hardcore gamers.

**Items:** avatar abilities can also be enhanced through the possession of specific objects of the virtual world. As these items are only powerful in comparison with other items in the world, they have to be rare and difficult to acquire. In most of the MMOG, including recent ones, finding these objects requires the gathering of a high number of very skilled players with complementary avatars, and a very long and difficult fight against one or several NPC. The expression *camping* thus describes the activity of waiting the spawn of a specific NPC in order to kill it in loop until the drop of a highly desired treasure. In Anarchy Online like in other MMOG, turns between player guilds had to be arranged outside of the