Chapter 6
Questing for Standards:
Role Playing Games in Second Life

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on movements toward de facto standards for role playing games in the freely accessible and configurable shared virtual environment of Second Life. All users can not only freely join, but also construct and implement role playing games of their own design. Consequently, new games are constantly emerging, and others either persisting or failing. The resulting body of practice has implications for business, technological, and social dimensions of computer games. To elucidate these implications, this chapter presents the case of the Role Play Nexus, a venue created for role playing game designers, managers, and players to share experiences, questions, resources, and proposals for sustainable ventures and communities in Second Life. Issues, controversies, and problems are identified, and solutions and recommendations discussed. Source material is drawn from transcripts of public lectures, discussions and demonstrations, from interviews, and from participant observation.

INTRODUCTION

Second Life provides tools for communication, content construction, and commerce, and nearly all content is generated by users, either for their own purposes or to give or sell to others. Anyone with a moderately powerful computer and a broadband internet connection can freely enter Second Life and create content such as avatar features, clothing, equipment, buildings, and scenery using building tools included in the standard viewer client. Further, users can freely write scripts that control the functions of avatars and objects, allowing them to write their own rules. Consequently, tens of thousands of users from all over the world are

doing so twenty-four hours a day, three hundred sixty-five days a year.

Among the most popular activities being pursued, and content constructed for, is role-playing games. If users with basic accounts (which are free of charge and allow content construction) gather in freely accessible venues, they can establish and sustain a role playing game and its attendant community at low – or no - financial cost. Players thus typically join and leave games and communities for gameplay, management, or social reasons, unencumbered by subscriptions and fees. In this free and open marketplace and laboratory, new games are constantly emerging, while others are either persisting or failing. In the absence of predetermined or artificially limited rules, structures, philosophy, and policy, a wide variety of approaches are taken, the wheel is reinvented again and again, and lessons are learned – or not.

Technological challenges include the ability of Second Life's infrastructure and programming to operate smoothly with many scripted functions and large numbers of users in one location. Renting virtual land for an ambitious dedicated game space can cost hundreds or thousands of US dollars per month. A business dimension is found in the various ways role-playing entrepreneurs attempt to recoup this overhead, and in the potential use of Second Life role playing games as testbeds for projected commercial game ventures (Werribee, personal communication). Social challenges are many, such as overcoming time zone and cultural differences in communities with members scattered around the world, the pitfalls of social and community communication via online text chat, and the consequences of design and management roles being taken on by people lacking experience in these areas.

That tacit if not explicit standards of good practice are being sought, if not already emerging, is strongly suggested. Role playing game developers in Second Life are at this moment beginning to share experiences and ideas, and to

pursue collaborative construction of a body of knowledge and models of community development and management that best fit the medium and the player base. This effort offers a potential bridge between research and practice. Also of interest is the progress of independent shared virtual environments using Second Life's open-source server software, and the future of role-playing games with user-generated content in user-generated online venues from the perspective of guidance for future research and development (Sideways, 2008; Second Life Update, 2009; Mistral, 2010).

To elucidate these implications, this chapter presents the case of the Role Play Nexus, a venue created for role playing game designers, managers, and players to share experiences, questions, resources, and proposals for sustainable ventures and communities in Second Life. This will be achieved by providing the context and background of role playing games in Second Life, and of the establishment of the Nexus, examining topics of particular and sustained interest in Nexus discussions, and reporting philosophical approaches and practical methods used and proposed by designers, managers, and players. Issues, controversies, and problems of widespread concern in Second Life role playing games are identified and discussed, and suggested solutions and recommendations presented from the perspective of implications for business, technological, and social aspects of computer games.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Concerning Methodology. Case studies, interviews, and participant observation are appropriate tools for discovering and presenting developing and emerging trends in rapidly changing business, technological, and social environments (Yin, 1984; DeWalt, 1998). In addition, case studies in particular have an important role in providing sound footing upon which to establish and refine theory (Glaser, 1967).

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