Designing Goals for Online Role-Players

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ABSTRACT
The increasing popularity of persistent worlds and the predicted rise of pervasive gaming, both having a strong inherent potential for role-playing, stress a classical challenge of persistent world industry: in addition to the regular gamer audience, the role-player audience is growing. Catering to role-players requires re-thinking in the design of game structures and narrative structures. The most fundamental conceptual differences between role-player and regular gamer playing styles regard goals, game worlds and the idea of meaningful play.

Keywords
goal, rule, role-playing, MMORPG, larp, persistent world, meaningful play

BASIC STRUCTURE OF ROLE-PLAYING
Recently, role-playing activity has been seen as separate from the actual games used as the basis of role-playing. Seeing it as a way of playing a game, rather than a game in itself, role-playing can be perceived as game playing motivated with narrative desires [10], focused on creating imaginary worlds [17] and based on making decisions on how personified characters act in imaginary situations [3]. Though any game can be role-played [10], some games suit the purpose better than the others.[1]

Björk and Holopainen [2] divide goals (and rules) into *endogenous* and *exogenous* types – the goals made explicit in the rules and the goals brought to the game activity by players to give it meaning, respectively. This distinction is akin to the three frameworks of role-playing proposed by Fine [6]; the primary (social) framework inhabited by people is equivalent to the exogenous level and the secondary (game) framework inhabited by players is equivalent to the endogenous level, but Fine also proposes a third level; a tertiary framework inhabited by characters. This third layer is the diegetic level (see [17]), where the events portrayed in the game happen.

I have earlier argued that constructing a subjective perception of game world – a subjective *diegesis* – is one of the critically important parts of the role-playing process. In pen'n'paper role-

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[1] As any game can be used in a way that defies definitions of gaming – for instance by dancing around in *Pac-Man* in pretty, choreographical patterns (see [11]). At the time of writing, the three most popular forms of role-playing are traditional pen'n'paper tabletop role-playing, live role-playing and multiplayer online role-playing.

playing these diegeses are constructed predominantly based on verbal discourse during the gaming, while live-action role-players apply real world and online role-players a virtual world as the basis of this construction process. A diegesis consists of the player's reading of all the available representations regarding the state and the properties of the diegetic world. In addition, the diegesis includes player's diegetic plans as well as the interpretations her character has made concerning the game world. Constructing this latter, purely internal part is one central factor differentiating role-playing mindset from regular gaming mindset. [15, 17]

As a diegesis is an imaginary world constructed in collective arbitration process, its contents can be in explicit contradiction with the virtual or real environment[2] used as the foundation in its construction. This means that all diegetic elements need not be represented with virtual artefacts. Just as a larp vampire might control shadows or turn invisible, the virtual role-players deal with non-existent items and intangible actions. A barfight or a sex scene might be staged with emotes, leaving it ontologically unclear if anything actually happened in the virtual reality. Or, character might act as if she had an ID card though none exists within the game architecture. (See [15, 17]) In online role-playing, in addition to the persistent world, the elements used in constructing the diegeses include the fiction and genre – the whole imaginary-entertainment environment [16] – related to the game. The expectations derived from other *Warcraft* computer games significantly influence the diegeses of *World of Warcraft* role-players. One key process in this diegesis construction is filtering; implicitly disregarding unsuitable game elements (often actions of regular gamers) from the diegeses.

For role-players, who pretend to be their characters within imaginary world and make decisions based on their diegetic personas, the only meaningful goals can be the goals set by the characters for themselves – i.e. goals not chosen by the players as players, nor goals endogenous to the game system, but goals willingly chosen by players through the constructions they pretend to be on the diegetic level (see [7, 14]). The voluntary and emergent nature of these diegetic goals means that enforcing them is always problematic. Designing quest hooks efficiently luring the characters on interesting pursuits is a classical pen'n'paper game master challenge.

The role-players tend to disregard endogenous goals, unless they are translated into diegetic goals in the playing process. In the formal sense, dying is not losing: character survival can only be a diegetic goal (see [5]) – though even death may be a diegetic goal.[3] Accomplishing diegetic goals is not an endogenous goal either – often accomplishing them is not even the player's intention. Maybe a player wants her character to fall in tragic love, where the exogenously desirable tragedy is accomplished by diegetic failure. Quoting the community rules of *The League of Vigilance*[4]:

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[2] In persistent worlds and live role-playing games respectively.

[3] This is a formal statement. The mainstream customer might be less enthusiastic about playing losing (see [20]).

[4] www.kapsi.fi/~watchman/TheLeague/viewtopic.php?t=8 (ref. April the 13th 2005). *The League* is active on European *Union*-server of *City of Heroes*.

Which leads us to another thing: actions have consequences. Someone who intentionally causes trouble may get kicked out of the League for the simple reason that there probably no good reason for the other Leaguers to stand for such behavior. However, this should not be considered to be bad roleplaying – in fact, chances are that it's excellent roleplaying. It's true that this may remove a character from the game (or at least from the League), but so what? If it makes for a good story and a good memory, everyone's happy.

These examples illustrate the goal classification:

1. "I want to have fun in this game" – exogenous.

2. "I want to explore Norwegian refugee politics in this game" – exogenous.

3. "By completing the jedi quests and collecting enough experience points, the character may become a jedi" – endogenous.

4. "I want to become the mightiest wizard in the kingdom" – diegetic.

5. "I want to play a man tragically failing in his quest of becoming the mightiest wizard in the kingdom" – exogenous.

The contradiction similar to the last two examples is often a central gratifying role-playing dynamic. If the primary function of role-playing is entertainment, playing an anti-hero can be very rewarding. If the game is used for education or exploration, playing a person not succeeding in her goals is often illuminating as well.

Juul [11] claims that two criteria in defining a classical game are valorization of the game outcome and the negotiability of consequences of the game. The former means that game outcomes are rated positive and negative, and the latter that the possible effect the game has on the world outside is negotiable.

There are many styles and preferences in role-playing. Many of these styles, for instance *narrativism*, *simulationism* and *character immersionism* (see [12] and [4] for the perhaps best-known normative role-playing taxonomies) seek to deny the emotional connection of the diegetic framework and the other frameworks: In role-players' implicit consequence negotiation the players' right to valorize outcomes is often denied. Though the players commonly identify with their characters, and the characters certainly valorize outcomes within the diegetic level, the ludic mindset is used to distance players from the fates of their puppets.

Playing a game styled after *Romeo and Juliet*, a narrativist might commit a diegetic suicide since it would make a great storyline, a simulationist might do the same by deducing that suicide would be what the character would do in the diegetic situation, and an immersionist might do it because she felt like it when playing the character. Juul [11] claims that a game depicting *Hamlet* would be "unthinkable" – playing a game consisting of failed revenge and meaningless death. Role-player mindsets not accepting to valorize any game outcomes make tragedy a sensible and dramatic experience – as illustrated by Koljonen [13] in her analysis of a larp based on *Hamlet*.

MEANINGFUL ROLE-PLAY
Looking formally, Salen and Zimmerman [19] see that meaningful gameplay arises from the relationship of actions and their outcomes, pleasure emerging from players' understanding how

their accumulating actions advance the game towards their [endogenous] goals. Even role-players need goals for their characters to keep the game interesting, although accomplishing them is not necessary. Goals produce conflict, which produces emotions (see [14], also [7]) and narrative experiences sought by role-players. In the context of role-play, Salen and Zimmerman's definition has to be seen from the angle where the players' pleasure emerges from acting as characters with diegetic interests, experiencing their lives whether they succeed or fail in their pursuits. Commonly, the role-players' exogenous goals are met in the process leading to success or failure, regardless of accomplishments or end results. This renders the ideas of "winning" and "losing" meaningless.

The contradiction between role-player expectations and virtual game worlds has lead many online role-playing associations to implement their own rules in order to provide meaningful consistency to the worlds. Quoting the first community rule of *Europe-Chimaera Roleplayers Association*[5]:

> In Character Actions Have In Characer Consequences.
>
> Do not enter into any RP [role-playing] situation where you will find yourself in mortal danger, unless you are willing to face the consequences that result from that RP. If you place your character into a situation where you would realistically die due to your actions, then you should be willing to die (reroll). No one is immortal.

Considering that character development in the game takes from days to months, discarding a character is a heavy sacrifice for diegetic believability and synchrony of diegeses and the virtual reality. Typical players resurrect their characters for hundreds of times during their careers, but *ECRA* players feel that their community makes no sense without real death. They don't want to diegetically cope with the inconsistency brought to the system by resurrection technology; their view on the *Star Wars* imaginary-entertainment environment is in an explicit contradiction to the game. This contradiction is solved through a collective contract stating that within diegeses the characters can't be resurrected, even though it would be technically possible.

DIEGETIC GOALS IN PERSISTENT WORLDS
The most important problem with providing players diegetic goals is that the players must voluntarily adopt them for their characters. In traditional role-playing games, the goals are usually implicitly or explicitly negotiated between players and game masters via the player characters and the non-player characters, making the players committed to the characters' goals. In live role-playing, the players are often provided with characters and goals simultaneously, so that diegetic goals are already written into the essence of the character. In persistent worlds the designers have little information of the prospective questers, as various different characters might undertake their missions.

The criteria of an idealized online role-playing goal might be characterised as: *diegetic desirability*, *diegetic plausibility*, *sensibility*, *consequentiality*, *relative optionality* and *sociality*.

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[5] www.mosentha.com/html/rules.htm (ref. April the 13th 2005). *ECRA* is active on the *Europe-Chimaera* server of *Star Wars Galaxies*.

Diegetic desirability implies, that the character is motivated to perform the quest. This may be accomplished by variety of tangible and intangible means, depending on how much power the designer wants to give the character in choosing whether to do the quest or not. Magical manipulation coercing the character to do something is a poweful, extreme solution; in the other end of the scale completing the quest is the diegetic reward in itself.

Diegetic plausibility requires that the quest offered to the character is appropriate considering the character's status, power and past exploits (relating to the imaginary-entertainment environment). The fiction should provide a good justification for characters being resurrected every time they die, if that design solution is to be used without breaking diegetic consistency.

Sensibility means that the events occurring during the pursuit and accomplishment of the goal must make sense from the character's point of view. One typical case of non-sensibility occurs when the quests are not truly designed for multiple players, but just reset after they are completed by one player. Problems occur when several characters can complete identical, supposedly unique quests, or when one character may do a unique mission several times [20]. In *Star Wars Galaxies* the quest objectives are typically located close to the mission terminals; the logical consequence is that the imperial outposts where players do imperial missions also have the strongest presence of enemy mobs.

Consequentiality implies that pursuit and accomplishment of goals has consequences, either positive or negative. Consequences are the prerequisite for both inner and external conflict – in a world without consequences conflict is meaningless. In *Star Wars Galaxies* inconsequentiality of the galactic civil war leads to rebel and imperial characters regularly consorting with their diegetic enemies.[6] Also, if persistent worlds are seen as places instead of games [1], a place without chances to make a difference is a regulated public space rather than a playground supporting creativity.

Relative optionality is a criterion derived from the fact that the game designers can never foresee all the various personalities potentially doing their quests. A non-branching quest structure based on completing quests in linear order is often problematic for role-playing: if all actions have consequences, an elf with an orc friend is in trouble if the endogenous game structure forces her to complete an orc-slaying quest.

Sociality criterion is based on the common notion [6, 9, 16, 17] that role-playing is social activity and a social process. Goals encouraging the players to act together help in building diegetic communities and provide role-playing opportunities.

Mass-producing this kind of meaningful narrative experiences – sensible, character-motivated, plausible, consequential, social and relatively free – is not an easy task. The goals to be adopted by characters can be provided in all three frameworks:

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[6] *World of Warcraft*, in which player actions have even fewer consequences than in *Star Wars Galaxies*, solves this exact problem by preventing all communication between the alliance and the horde.

1. Social framework to diegetic framework   (Goals introduced by game masters)

2. Game framework to diegetic framework   (Ready-made and randomly generated goals)

3. Within diegetic framework   (Goals emerging from diegetic communities)

The typical quest-based goal structure is based on the second framework, where role-players need to translate endogenous quests into diegetic goals. Some strategies have been adopted in, for instance, *World of Warcraft* and *City of Heroes*. The former includes a huge number of scripted non-random quests, which are relatively desirable, plausible, optional and social. However, the illusion shatters when the characters discuss their accomplishments afterwards, since all the paladins have slayed identical foes with identical names. The latter uses the genre (and the imaginary-entertainment environment) to justify and to make sensible the fact that the same super-villains are defeated by one hero after another. As is typical for games relying on endogenous goals, accomplishing goals in these two games have few consequences other than the reward reaped in character advancement and treasure.

Eve Online demonstrates a strong attempt at generating goals diegetically. The game structure works as a platform for emerging player activity, which is also supported by the game operator. Though endogenous missions provided by the game architecture are repetitive and non-sensible, the goals emerging from the diegetic communities often manage to satisfy all six criteria. Game operator support for player activity is facilitated by the lack of mirror universes – all *Eve* players inhabit a common persistent world, enabling the developers to focus and customize their efforts to this unique instance of the game without having to produce generic content usable on various servers.

Goal generation by game masters has been tried out in three ways within persistent worlds: The players of *The League* and *ECRA* doing game mastering are not largely supported by the game operators, possibly because game master volunteer programs have run into legal and practical problems in the past [18]. *Eve Online* is an example of high-level operator-based game mastering, where content is produced and community action is facilitated to a certain extent by employed developers.

CONCLUSION

At the point where the players create themselves another layer of endogenous rules, making the accomplishment of the original goals extremely difficult, the certain thing is that they are not served by the game. Groups like *ECRA* and *The League* seek to use their environments to role-play despite the contradictions between expectations and game architectures. For these role-players the requirement of consequentiality is the paramount, achieved by restricting the options that game system offers with additional rules, in order to give it more meaning.

In practice, generating enough meaningful quests randomly is problematic (see [20] for a possible solution). Hence, it may be necessary to look for the solution in the traditional role-playing styles. These methods include quests created by game masters, and quests created by and emerging from the social systems in the game. The economically viable methods social framework content creation include volunteer game master networks. Efficiency of game mastering can be increased by focusing in socially emergent activities of large player

communities instead of individual characters or teams. Communities pursuing conflicting goals tend to generate easily acceptable diegetic goals.

Catering to the role-players is a big challenge for persistent world design. However, the value of this audience is more significant than its size would suggest – at least according to Mulligan and Patrovsky [18], who claim that realistically playing role-players both encourage others to follow the suit, and keep other players in the game longer. Ideally, the role-player is simultaneously a paying customer and a free content provider.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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