A Taste of Democracy in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs)

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1 Introduction

Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) are digital environments in which players, just like people in any other social context, form groups, interact with each other, and have conflicts. In traditional games (e.g. board games), players may choose to appropriate rules in ways that they consider will improve the play experience. However, this change is hard, or even impossible, in virtual worlds such as MMOGs, where players have to follow the rules that have been designed by the creators of those environments [Lessig 2006]. Williams argues that “[...] issues of code and interface are paramount, as it is software that enables, and often prevents, certain kinds of interactions between certain kinds of participants.” [Williams 2006]

One of the most popular MMOGs is World of Warcraft (WoW). The possibility of change in this game is higher than in others, as third-party programmers can create additions to the user interface, called add-ons. Prax and Laaksoharju, researchers at Uppsala University, Sweden, want to make us of this option to facilitate a more democratic power structure in WoW. This will allow them to study whether players will then be aware of the possibility to modify the game to their advantage. This goal of democratization can possibly be achieved by integrating in the game a collaborative decision-making tool, ColLab, as an add-on. This integration will serve as a platform for groups of players to share their opinions on conflicts that should be studied by the leader of the group [Prax and Laaksoharju 2012].

The proposed tool allows different parties to include their points of view regarding a particular conflict, and decision makers (i.e. the leaders of the group) to follow how arguments have been applied. In ColLab, a structure for arguments is presented in such a manner that it invites to a proactive, solution-oriented discourse [Laaksoharju 2012].

2 Contribution by the author

I joined the team to implement a first version of the add-on as a pilot study. I conducted user studies, during which I acquired knowledge about the game experience by observing experienced users play, and also by participating as as a new player. This proved to be very useful for the integration, especially regarding the players’ potential expectations of the visual aspect and interaction with the tool.

For the implementation of the first version, I studied topics such as possible communication protocols for data synchronization, paying special attention to guaranteeing anonymity when needed. I also considered different possibilities to store the data for each discussion and distribute it to all of the players participating in that process.

For a better integration in WoW, I designed the look and feel of the tool and the interaction with it to carefully incorporate the same style and elements of the game. Then I implemented a first version of the add-on that included its basic features and tested it with players.

I used the feedback collected in these tests to improve the design of the tool. Not only the interface was modified but also the features of the add-on. One of the most important changes was the addition of a new step to the decision-making process. The original discussion design had three main steps: creation of arguments for and against alternative solutions to the discussion, voting for these arguments, and summarizing the voting results. I added the optional step of voting for a solution.

I created low-technology prototypes and tested them with a different group of players, who pointed out design weaknesses and strengths, and suggested new ideas. I also conducted and analyzed interviews, asking for the testers’ opinions on topics such as the tool effect on the game experience, and the potential use and usefulness of the add-on. The interviewees also gave input on issues such as anonymity in the creation of arguments, and the consequences in the actions of the group after the tool had been used. The interviews showed that the addition of the new step allows the users to have a more complete discussion and the researchers a more complete analysis. The evaluation process, including the interviews, can be read in [Grande 2014].

3 Future work

Future work includes the evaluation of a high-quality prototype, which will recreate a complete discussion based on a given template, and the full implementation of the tool. After this is completed, it will be possible to collect data that, complemented by interviews and questionnaires, will be analyzed to draw conclusions about the possible effects of the game’s power structure on the players.

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References


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1ColLab can be found and used here: http://interact.it.uu.se/collab