On the Quest – Standards & Practices for User-generated Online Games & Their Communities

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Abstract: We report on the progress of an effort, the Role Play Nexus, to identify best practices and develop de facto standards for user-created and user-managed role playing games using the medium of Second Life. The case of the Nexus indicates the ability of spontaneous, non-commercial, informal game and community development to identify issues and practices, and generate concepts, mechanisms, and standards of significance for educational, research, and commercial online game design and operation.

Keywords: Online communities, role playing games, Second Life, standards and practices, user creation, user generation, user management

Introduction

The shared environment of Second Life is distinguished from other widely known "virtual worlds" such as MMOs ("massively multiplayer online games") by the fact that nearly all content, from buildings, vehicles, and furniture to the hair, skin, and clothing of avatars, is created by users. What sorts of interactions and activities they engage in, and how these are regulated and mediated, are freely chosen by users themselves[1].

One of the most popular activities in Second Life is role playing games. The settings, rules, membership, ownership, and practices of these games are all user-generated. Some emulate the tightly-scripted mechanics of MMOs, while others use open-ended collaborative storytelling or LARP ("live action role playing") styles. These games and communities are generating a massive body of practice, with potential implications for understanding and managing online games and communities, that has gone largely unreported and unexamined.

Newly established and documented is the Role Play Nexus, a forum for creators, operators, and players of role playing games in Second Life to share knowledge, experiences, techniques, content, and proposals for participation in and management of such games and their communities[2].

Here, we report on the progress of the Role Play Nexus effort in 2010, as it moves from identifying challenges and issues facing role playing game communities in Second Life toward developing de facto standards of good practice, and discuss implications for creation and management of online games and communities. Data is gathered from public performances, transcripts available online, and personal communications.

1. Establishment of the Role Play Nexus

1.1 Background

As Second Life has moved from the stage of "early adoption" to mainstream use, users have encountered patterns of common experience, including challenges and issues facing role playing games and their communities[2].

1.2 The Role Play Nexus

1.2.1 Nature and Venue

The Role Play Nexus holds events, organized and carried out on a voluntary basis by interested users, on topics and themes related to creating, managing, and participating in role playing games and communities in Second Life. It is located in the Second Life mainland region of Mul (64, 224, 1001), with a circular central seating and discussion area surrounded by panels dispensing information and transcripts of past events[2].

1.2.2 Topics and Issues in 2009

Nine lecture and discussion events were held from October, 2009 to the end of the year, on topics such as "What is RP in SL?", "Narrative in Roleplaying", and "Flawed RP Communities". Issues that continued to dominate discussions included identifying different styles of role playing and evaluating their validity or suitability for the online medium, sustaining a role playing venue and community, and challenges inherent to the Second Life medium and online communities in general, such as cost, communications across time zones, and pitfalls of text-mediated communication[3].

2. Progress of the Role Play Nexus

2.1 Topics and Issues in 2010

Thirteen lecture and discussion events have been held at the Nexus so far in 2010 (as of July). The trend of topics and issues has moved from challenges, problems, and pitfalls (such as "Cold Hearted Roleplay", dealing with personal trauma from events in role play, and "Supersize Me?", dealing with the phenomenon of oversized human avatars) toward consideration of the future ("2010: Whither SL RP? Trends and Observations").

Focus has come to center on specific attitudes, practices, and methods for improving game design and operation ("Creating Consistency and Coherence in Long Term Role Play", "The Intricacies of Making Machines in Second Life", "Investigation Skills and Role Playing", and "RP Management – Flexibility, Available Resources, and Balancing Work and Fun").

Of particular note is the topic, "What Role Play Means To You", which was intended as a single event, but grew to four sessions due to lively and productive sharing and discussion of fundamental assumptions and definitions, and of connecting them to effective practice[4].

3. Discussion & Conclusion

3.1 Discussion

The activities of the Role Play Nexus have brought forth a wide variety of issues and challenges facing creators, operators, and participants. Some of these are specific to the medium and venue of Second Life, but most are, or are likely to be, common to online games and communities in general. These include infrastructure costs, maintaining effective communication among individuals living in time zones spread across the world, and the lack of nonverbal affect cues in text-based communication.

Consensus was developed on a variety of assumptions, attitudes and practices, such as the need for a core stakeholder group sharing stewardship of a core concept, careful metacognitive assessment of personal motivations, goals and values to evaluate potential for successful collaboration, and rigorous clarity in identifying roles, tasks, and privileges, both within role playing activities and in "out of character" community management.
Explicit codification of a de facto "Role Play Nexus Standard of Practice" is not yet planned or proposed. Nonetheless, a clear trend in that direction seems evident.

3.2 Conclusion

We have reported on the progress of the Role Play Nexus effort in 2010, as it moves from identifying challenges and issues facing role playing game communities in Second Life toward developing de facto standards of good practice, and discussed implications for creation and management of online games and communities.

The case of the Nexus indicates the ability of spontaneous, non-commercial, informal game and community development to identify issues and practices, and generate concepts, mechanisms, and standards of significance for educational, research, and commercial online game design and operation.

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