The Loner

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All About Me

- 12+ years MMO design experience
  - *Meridian 59, Shadowbane,*
  - *The Old Republic*
- Columnist, *Game Developer*
  - *"Design of the Times"*
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- I like to explore common design questions, especially within MMO design

Classic MMO Questions

- PvP or Carebear?

- Game or World?

- Levels or Skill-Based?

- How Can I Change the World?

- Permadeath?

The newest eternal question

- "Can I solo?"

- This is usually voiced as "Will I be able to play by myself, or do I have to join some stupid-ass vent-requiring guild of idiots to complete mind-numbing raid content that no one actually enjoys?"

Why is this an interesting question?

- Because not so long ago, the answer was unequivably "no".

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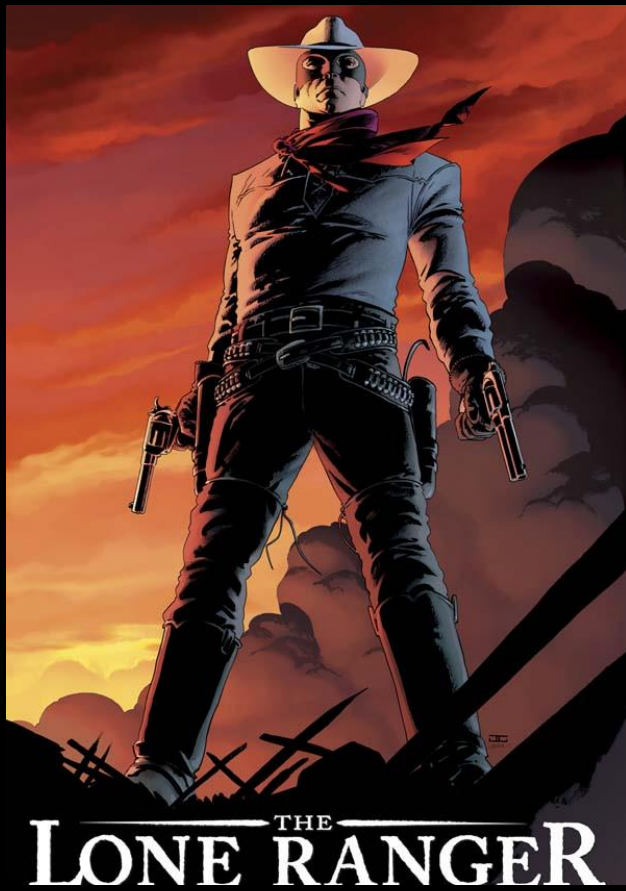
- But now, it's yes.

Multiplayer zealots: "We demand multiplay"

- And they see loners as antisocial or broken

But the loner is also a hEROIC archetype.

The Magic of "Massive"

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Design Takeaway 1:

- **'Massive' is our Unique Selling Proposition.**
    - **It has to be – for everything else, we're competing unfairly.**

Design Takeaway 2:

- **Solo play is the default state of any MMO design.**
  - People solo for a LOT of reasons, all of which valid.
  - Sometimes, 'solo' play is a result of the player being in a 'broken' state
  - But very often, it is by choice

- It is now **unacceptable** to make an MMO that you can't play solo

So let's talk loners

- *And the unique design challenges each provides.*

Loner 1:
"The new kid in town"

- The new player is a tabula rasa.

- No connections, no friends, no clue

- Friends that do come may quit.

Design Takeaway 3

- **Many people want to be able to learn at their own pace.**

Remember Design Takeaway 2:

- Solo play is the default state of any MMO.

"It's like being naked in Times Square."

- **It is possible to feel alone in a crowd.**

The 'Hollow Earth' Problem

- The later you come into the game, the more likely you'll enter dead space.

- And be forced to play alone, even if you don't want to.

Loner 2: "The Daria"

> In general, other people are a tragedy – but they are occasionally entertaining.

Consider Casinos

☺ Palatial casino designs actually fight against building social critical mass.

Consider Casinos

Newer casino designs have lower ceilings, more alcoves, feel 'full' faster, create social critical mass.

Design Takeaway 4

- **Other people _are_ content.**

- **Maintaining social density is crucial.**
- **Social critical mass is crucial.**
- **The irony of feeling alone in an MMO is inescapable.**

Snobbery

- **A lot of Darias will only play socially with their friends.**
- **But their friends may be**
  - **Offline**
  - **Busy**
  - **In a full group**

Design Takeaway 5

- **Many people believe that everyone who isn't in their circle of friends or guild is a complete idiot.**

  ⊕ **Don't make them depend on strangers.**

NO PUGS

Design Takeaway 6

- It's still worth improving the odds of Pickup Group Success.

  ✧ **But, repeat, don't make them depend on strangers.**

NO PUGS

Loner 3:
"The Sociopath"

- Doesn't understand what is appropriate social conventions

- The real problem is when they also don't care.

Design Takeaway 7

- All new players start as sociopaths. It's the designer's responsibility to teach them what is appropriate.

Design Takeaway 8

- **The designer cannot ignore sociopathic behavior. Options:**
  - Teach them appropriate behavior
  - Channel behavior into gameplay.
  - Remove them

Interesting Factoid

- Studies of drivers in traffic found its more difficult to be rude once you've made eye contact.

- Studies of panhandlers have proven its more likely you will give money once you make eye contact.

- Reducing anonymity of others also reduces one's capacity to dehumanize them.

Loner 4:
"Mr. Lunch At his Desk"

- ☣ Playing on a very strict timetable.
- ☣ Playing at unusual hours.
- ☣ Playing on a non-gamer box
- ☣ May not have Voice Chat available.

- ☣ May want to group, but social friction makes this untenable.

Design Takeaway 9

- Your game should always have ways your character can progress in hour and half-hour chunks of playtime.

- This should be true even at max level.

Loner 5:
"The Introvert"

- Reaching mass markets does not mean we're now reaching mostly extroverts.
- According to Myers-Briggs, 50% of the population are introverts.
- And we will always skew towards introverts.

CDC 2009 Research

- The majority of adult video game players are (still) introverts

- But it also says they look at the internet as a source of social support

Design Takeaway 10

- Encourage extroverts to take the lead in recruiting.

Design Takeaway 11

- Allow introverts to advertise passively.

Loner 6:
"The Adrift"

- Some people are alone unwillingly.

- In this case, being solo is a broken state.

Design Takeaway 12

- There are ways to mitigate social disintegration.

- Give tools to find new social circles

- Consider allowing multiple affiliations.

- But the game has to acknowledge this will take time.

Loner 7:
"The Unworthy"

- Want to be part of 'the club', but aren't sure they have the chops.

- Sometimes, they don't.

Glory and Shame

- Glory is why players want to take part in huge multiplayer experiences.
- Shame is what keeps them from trying.

Design Takeaway 13

- Ensure that casual players can compete with, and get into the recruiting pool, of more hardcore players.

Design Takeaway 14

- Ensure you have low-skill builds or other newbie-accessible means of providing value.

Design Takeaway 15

- Try to have a place and way to practice their team-based skills without peer pressure.

Loner 8:
"The Vacationer"

- "I need some 'me' time."

- This player wants to escape his in-game obligations.

- Studies show that most people desire a minimum commute of 20 minutes

- Provides me-time to escape work-home pressures, gives time and safe place to sing, cry, grieve, even pick your nose.

Design Takeaway 16

- Acknowledge that some people just want to be alone, even if they normally play with a social group.

- Allow them to progress

- Allow them to hide.

Loner 9:
"The Commitment phobic"

- "Er... I'll call you."

"The Commitment phobic"

- Leery of long-term time commitments or scheduled events
- Possible real-life distractions
- Concern about falling with a group of incompetents or bad leadership
- Deep dislike of drama

- May have had a bad experience

Design Takeaway 17

- **Help people find compatible social groups.**

Design Takeaway 18

- **Voice, in general, is a good thing, but many introverts and commitment phobes will see it as a barrier.**

Loner 10:
"The Garbo"
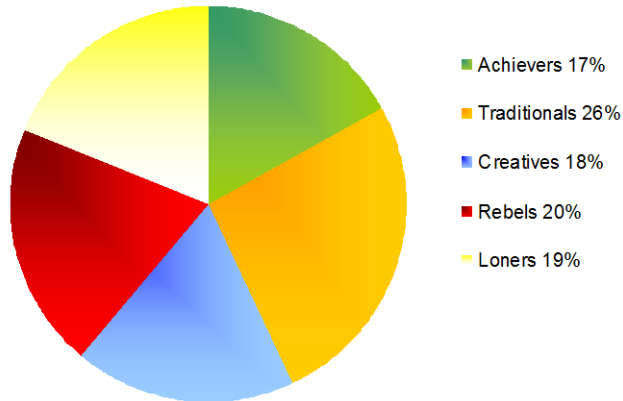
- "I just want to be alone."

Design Takeaway 19

- Acknowledge that some people just like the level (or whatever) game.

habbo hotel

(Data shamelessly stolen from the web)

FIVE USER SEGMENTS SIZES

- Achievers 17%
- Traditionals 26%
- Creatives 18%
- Rebels 20%
- Loners 19%

- 46% Boys
- Size of segment grows with age

VALUES Security, unsocial IRL
PERSONALITY Passive, generally unsatisfied, insecure, shy
ATTITUDES Quite positive towards homosexuality, but not foreigners. Somewhat supportive to computer piracy and similar
INTERESTS Focused areas of interest, like computers, comics, role-playing, gaming, science
CONSUMING TRENDS Selective consumers, not interested in trends nor environment

Design Takeaway 20

- Making a solo game that is as compelling and replayable as your 'massive' game is extremely difficult.

Are massively single-player games the answer?

- My opinion: no

- The social makes it sticky.

Consider the Corner Bar

- **A social space**
- **Frequently social activities:**
  - **Trivia**
  - **Speed Dating**
  - **Book Clubs**
  - **Gambling**
  - **Watching Sports**

- **How different would bars be if they forced you to take part in these activities?**

- **How much stronger is your link to these social spaces if you choose to do so?**

The Big Takeaway

- **Does your solo game act as a barrier or an onramp to your 'massive' game?**

We build communities

- **Returning customers**
- **Strong social ties**
- **Outspoken evangelists**

- **Devoted social gamers are our goal.**

But

- **"Massive" gameplay is way more hardcore than most designers give it credit for.**

"Massive" is hardcore

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"Massive" is hardcore

If you want to grow your 'Massive' gameplay

- You must coddle your casual players, and convert them.

- In the meantime, they're flying solo.

Casual/hardcore is a continuum

Level of Investment	Sample Activities	Reward Cycle
Casual	Character Creation, Newbie Quests and Areas	Seconds
Interested	Adventuring Levels 5-25, Low Level Battlegrounds, Chatting	Minutes
Committed	Adventuring Levels 25-50, Crafting, Grouping	Hours
Devoted	Running Instances, 10-man Raids, Guilds	Days
Hardcore	25-man Raids, Rep Grinding, Competitive PvP, UI Modding	Weeks

Casual/hardcore is a continuum

Level of Investment	Sample Activities	Soloability
Casual	Character Creation, Newbie Quests and Areas	Almost purely solo
Interested	Adventuring Levels 5-25, Low Level Battlegrounds, Chatting	Light, often puggable
Committed	Adventuring Levels 25-50, Crafting, Grouping	Medium, puggable
Devoted	Running Instances, 10-man Raids, Guilds	Light commitment, or heavy puggable
Hardcore	25-man Raids, Rep Grinding, Competitive PvP, UI Modding	Heavy commitment

You must overcome:

- Shyness
- Performance Anxiety
- Disdain for Idiots
- Time Constraints
- Commitment Phobia

It takes time to overcome these obstacles

- Does your game have enough solo gameplay to get you there?

- Is your game still fun if the player doesn't?

Questions?