

Because Players Pay:

The Business Model Influence on MMOG Design

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ABSTRACT

The authors explore Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG) business models in order to characterize two main problems: big initial investment and continuous expenditures. The four main actors of a MMOG environment – game producer, Game, Players and Business Model – are analysed resorting to Actor Network Theory in order to understand their alignment in Business Models and how they can influence game design. The conclusion ends in the fact that the Business Model, directly or indirectly, influences and constrains the game design in the following ways: the high economic risks inhibits game design innovation, the players have power to demand poor game design decisions while the virtual economy games simply embrace the business model into its design.

Author Keywords

MMOG, Game Design, Business Model, Actor-Network Theory, Massively Multiplayer Online Games

INTRODUCTION

To create a Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) is a great challenge. Its success is measured not on the number of copies sold, but on the number of registered players and the total time it is maintained online. A MMOG is meant to be played by the largest number of players, through the longest period of time possible. This fact creates a whole set of new challenges for the game design, new technological problems and new forms to operate the business; and all this to promote two things – player base and game sustainability. It is a battle fought in three fronts:

- Game play longevity - the game must be fun to play for a long time;
- Infrastructure scalability - a good MMOG system is expected to deal with several thousands of simultaneous users;
- Economic sustainability - the business must generate income to support the continuous costs of running a MMOG;

The whole problem reaches new levels of complexity when we realize that these factors are interdependent. The specific influence or relation that is object of study approached in this article is the influence of the business model over the game design. We will start by pointing the economic difficulties of maintaining a MMOG, in terms of defining and managing the business. Then we will map influences from an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) based analysis in order to relate the four actors involved in a MMOG: the game producer, the player, the business model and the game itself.

THE BUSINESS PROBLEM

The multi-billion dollar computer games industry [2] is diversifying. Most of the games are still being developed targeting the goods retail supply chain. Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), however, require a business models that allow the sustainability of the game throughout a much larger cycle, hopefully years, but the key question is: are these business models adequate?

The production of a computer game usually involves different entities such as game developers and the publisher, but in this paper we will group and name them as “game producer”. The client of the computer game is the player.

Using the terminology developed by Osterwalder [4], the Business Model Ontology (BMO), we can propose some basic characteristics of a good business model:

- **Revenue model is congruent with the cost structure**, i.e., one where the investment and maintenance costs from the supplier are compensated in an opportune timeframe relatively to his costs.
- **The customer has to understand the proposed value** (utility and quality of the product) throughout the supplier/client relationship.

Next, we will discuss the particularities of MMOG business models, stressing the differences against the single player game.

Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference

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