

An Analysis of High Level Game Play in EQ

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Part One: Bullies on the Playground

This post is prompted, but not entirely limited to, a phenomenon that has appeared on the Rodcet Nife server, (and other servers, if the posts on the boards are any indication). EQ is by no means the only place we can observe the behavior, but by its very nature it is a perfect breeding ground for it. To this writer it is only the most recent example of fundamental flaws in EQ and how Verant chooses to address or ignore them.

Who am I? Three weeks ago I played a 52 ranger on Rodcet named Skyrain Dreamweaver. Now I don't. The fun is gone. There had been a number of issues that had blunted the fun over the past months, but it is the following that finally made me realize the stress level was higher than the fun level, and for the present anyway it looks like that will remain. Here's what has happened:

EQ is at its core a very simple game with very simple scoring. Players are judged by their levels and the loot they've acquired. There is nothing else. There are no real-world rewards offered in the design of course (Ebay is a whole other discussion), just these measurements of status in the game world much as salaries and Porsches are used to measure status in real life. Verant tell us there are others ways to play the game, and other reasons. This point of view is seemingly blind to the reality of how the game is played by the majority of the player base. We'll explore why this has happened in Part Four: Verant's Adventures in Wonderland.

Verant is faced with a virtual baby boom of high level players. This has caught them off guard. They expected it to take much longer for people to reach high levels. They thought there would be enough new players coming in to smooth the demographics. This hasn't happened. There are now hundreds of 46+ players on Rodcet, and more achieving that level every day. Their response has been three-fold.

1. They added an extra ten levels.
2. They have added higher-level content from individual quests to new zones to the Kunark expansion pack (and Vellious is now right around the corner).
3. Lastly, they have done everything they can apparently think of to make achievement in the game harder and harder. Gordon Wrinn has more than once expressed the Verant philosophy:

"I do think that players should and can trust that we'll do what we can in order to ensure that EverQuest remains a game that people want to play. Afterall, it's been shown that people do not like to play games that are too easy and where there is no challenge in playing. It's been shown that there is no feeling of accomplishment that comes, for

instance, in obtaining an item that "everyone" else has, or has relatively unrestricted access to."

The fact is that the challenge seems to be simply increasing the amount of experience points needed to level, or forcing players to wait for hours on end to get a chance at a rare drop. Remember: levels and loot, that's all there is.

There had been earlier instances of the phenomenon I call "bullies on the playground," but it was possible for other players to find different corners of the playground to play in. With the demographic bulge of players at the top of the xp ladder, this has now changed.

On Rodcet we have a couple dozen guilds at least who are capable of doing planes raids, and taking down some of the most powerful mobs on their own. It was crowded, but apart from the isolated incident, most guilds were getting their chances at the uber-mobs and the planes because those that got there first had moved on.

The most recent attempt to add higher level content has been the addition of the epic quests. Because completion of many (most? all?) of them required loot from uber-mobs and the planes, players who had their complete sets of planes armor and uber-weapons needed to return there for the quests. Now the over-crowding has reached the stage that famous psych experiment in over-population reached decades ago. The mice are beginning to eat each other. It used to be individuals screaming over a stolen kill, or the pre-emption of someone's camp. Now entire groups of people are up in arms. Take a look at the message boards. Listen in game.

What has happened is this: the bullies have taken over playground. Next I'll describe how this is manifesting itself.

Part Two: Am I My Brother's Keeper?

The guild system in EQ was never implemented quite the way the designers have intended. More than one has listed publicly some of the additional things they wanted to do. But in fact guilds have prospered. In the beginning it was individual hunters who grouped together, found some whom they liked grouping with more than others, and eventually formalized these relationships in guilds. This was by design. It helped foster community, a necessity for the survival of any persistent world.

For a long time there were very few guilds. You could do a /who on a zone, find 35 people (overcrowding as defined in those days!), only one or two had guild tags. GMs met in game with guild leaders to finalize each one. Now the situation is reversed. Most players, even low levels who didn't need to be in a guild in the past, now carry guild tags. In fact it's somewhat of a stigma for high-level players not to have one. They are suspect. Maybe they kill steal... maybe they can't play their characters well enough for anyone to want them...

As the mobs became harder and harder, guilds increased in importance. Consolidations and takeovers occurred, much like corporations, to increase guild strength to the point where the highest mobs could finally be conquered. The uber-guilds were born. These were made up for the most part of those players who recognized the only signs of status in the game were levels and loot, and a few others who wanted the greater strategic and tactical challenges taking down a high-level mob offered.

And as long as there was enough loot to go around there were few problems. But the players leveled and multiplied, and soon it was relatively easy for the uber-guilds to take down a dragon or a god. And they were doing it so much those people newly arrived at the higher levels weren't getting their shot. Verant responded by the level cap on those who could fight dragons. Did it work? That's another discussion. But there was a recognition at least that something was "unfair" and needed to be addressed by Verant. Important point to keep in mind: a precedent was set.

The number of higher-level players continued to increase. Squabbling over the planes and uber-mobs increased as well. Verant looked at their options for satisfying players, and rightly surmised that more content was needed. But here is where they made their newest mistake. They made it necessary for everybody, even those who had killed the biggest mobs enough times to feed the biggest great white hunter's ego, to kill them even more times. To make the quests "harder" they made the drops less frequent. So the mobs had to be killed even more often. I have heard it said that Verant may actually limit the number of epic weapons that can be obtained on any server. True or not, result? People feel an even greater need to kill those few poor mobs, and kill them now.

And in the rush to compete with all the other higher level guilds, toes are getting stepped on. More and more. Impassioned and bitter arguments have sprung up when two groups have collided in their attempt to hunt the same mob or plane at the same time.

Some guilds are trying to work through diplomacy to settle disagreements. Two casual "notification" systems have been attempted: posts in the EQ Vault Rodcet Nife Forum (a forum that otherwise resembles the magic marker scrawls on restroom stalls) and a calendar.

Both were of limited success because the bullies, emboldened by Verant's hands off policy ("You can't reserve the planes."), simply ignored them. They have stated that they are going to kill anything they want, when they want, because they can. Alliances have been formed. Uber alliances of uber guilds routinely race to kill multiple uber mobs in a single night before anyone else has a chance. [Since this was first written the calendar has been removed, and most have stopped posting in the Rodcet Forum.]

The two systems collide. More alliances are formed in opposition. (Check the box your game came in. Was any of this listed on the cover? "Have large groups of roving strangers trample on your good time!" "Try and create a new reservation system that others will respect!")

More hard feelings grow. The diplomacy at times mirrors the playground as well. The bullies push people around, demanding they be asked first before others can attempt the greatest prizes. You want to play on the swings? You wait until we're done. You were there ahead of us? Move over, we want to sit on the swing with you. If enough kids band together maybe they can beat the bullies to the swings, and their larger numbers as a group may help protect them! And so it escalates.

The bullies have a response to the complaints about them monopolizing the few high-level hunts: "Why can't we share?" Next we'll examine the playground concept of sharing.

Part Three: A Child's Guide to Sharing

There are two common answers from the playground bullies on Rodcet when these issues are raised. First we have impassioned defenses for their right to have fun. They are big and strong. Why should they wait around for lesser guilds to get their acts together? Why should they stand and wait, not having fun, while others have fun? Interesting philosophy. I'd be curious to see how it would play out at Disney World. Oh wait, it couldn't. Disney governs who goes on which rides when. Even has rules of conduct for the millions who visit every year. Nevermind, doesn't apply to EQ I guess. The other common answer from the bullies is that since there are so many planes-capable guilds, and so few planes, the only solution is "sharing." Interesting use of the word. It is of course an attempt to claim some reasonably high moral ground. "But we want to share! What do you have against sharing?" But what is it really? It is another bully tactic. And here is how it works...

Ashley has been playing with her favorite doll. Her friend Brittany wants to play with it, but Ashley got there first. Brittany is older than Ashley, so she takes the doll, promising to share after she's had her turn. The fact is that what Brittany has done is not sharing, but coercion. Ashley has two choices: to wait her "turn," or to plead her case to a higher authority, someone "bigger" than Ashley: an adult. But the damage has been done. Because Brittany could take the doll, she did.

We see this behavior in children all the time. What do we call them? Ah yes: Brats.

On a plane sharing means two things: incredible lag, and the larger guild gets the most pulls. They can recover faster, get more statics, more loot, etc.

Is there a higher authority in Everquest? No, not really. To their credit Verant polices certain social aspects of the game: harassment, racism, and a few others. Of course, if they didn't, they'd risk legal action. But what about something like disputes over the facilities, the activities, the fun stuff in the game? The policy is explicitly to NOT get involved. But wait, didn't we mention they nerfed the level limits on dragons? Wasn't that a precedent?

Sharing has been institutionalized for adults, because believe it or not there are adults who never learned all their social lessons properly. At a tennis club for example you do indeed reserve courts for a set period of time. And if someone steps on someone else's reservation, they risk penalties imposed on them. If they refuse to accept the penalties, they can get kicked out of the club. Even public courts post rules, but there is an important distinction. Public courts are for the most part free. Tennis clubs charge dues. You pay for your fun. And part of the responsibility of the club is to do everything it can to guarantee the fun for all members.

Everquest is not free. We pay for our fun. You'd think we'd have a right to expect those who govern Everquest to take the responsibility to do everything they can to ensure we have it. What has gone wrong?

Part Four: Verant's Adventures in Wonderland

The fact is there is a great difference between the game originally envisioned by the designers, the game I think they truly believe they HAVE designed, and the game their player base is actually playing.

They have trouble coming up with solutions because they don't SEEM to see the problems. It's no wonder communication between players and Verant can at times resemble the Mad Hatter's tea party.

1. In answer to players' complaints about long camps, we're told that's only one way to play the game. Players will be disappointed if that's all they do. But it's the ONLY way to get the best items in the game. Even the epic quests are simply longer strings of FedEx shipments and camps. And as was pointed out in my first post there are only two ways to measure success in the game: levels and loot. High-level players are judged as much by what they are wearing than any skill they might have at playing their characters. "Is that a complete suit of thorny vine?! You rock, bro!"
2. GM "events" like Halloween are a perfect example of no solution at all, only damage control the day after. Here we have an "event" where nothing really happens except every low level in the zone gets slaughtered until an uber guild moves in and reaps the drops. I was intrigued by Absor's admission that he likes being a victim. Bill Troost's defense of the player as victim as part of the "story-telling was equally illuminating. There's a word for people who like to be victims. It's called masochism.
You REALLY think people are paying you their money to be VICTIMS? Not heroes? But VICTIMS? Ignoring Joe Campbell, Tolkien, every action/adventure film ever made, all tabletop RPGs and MUDs, Psychology 101, and god knows what else, simply to try and defend an event structure that had not improved one iota on the Halloween "event" from a year before? I guess you can't really learn from mistakes, if you don't see you've made any.
3. The recent comments in response to casual players are a perfect example of how they fail to recognize the importance of the other game scoring device: leveling.

I've talked with a great many game designers. To a one all understand that "waiting" as a game dynamic is a terrible thing to design into your game. Yet it is at the core of the "challenge" in Everquest. Enforced boredom (You want that Testament of Vener? You wait.) brought on by static camps from the lowest "quest" item to the highest uber-mob is a fundamental aspect of the design of the game.

How can casual gamers possibly hope to compete for these drops. And who is Verant to suggest that they're playing the game wrong if they even expect to? Levels and loot aren't important? But isn't it how Verant chooses to keep score? Yes, EQ HAS turned its back on casual gamers. Of course it has. And of course they're penalized by the narrowness of what it means to "advance." The designers have been mesmerized by the hard core gamers, and their demands for more and more. The baby boomers want their toys. And EQ has no more ways to respond than make more items available, make more camps and longer ones.

What the epic quests would do to competition among the higher levels for the few resources should have been obvious. Gordon Wrinn should not have been allowed to announce publicly how all the quests were working, and the long time it took to design each one. How do these things happen? Here's one possibility:

How many "designers" does Verant have working on Everquest? At times they seem to outnumber Q&A.

I'm reminded of a cartoon an artist friend had posted above his desk. It showed a classically stereotypical artist complete with pointy beard, beret, smock, palette and brush, poised before a blank canvas on a tripod. He is standing at the end of a long table lined with men in suits. The caption was: Art by Committee. Now, whether EQ is art or not is not the issue. But the fact is that committees rarely manage to make ANYTHING great or enduring. The Porsche was not designed by a committee. "Hamlet" was not written by a committee. Neither was "MULE" for that matter.

One person can have a vision certainly. Two? Of course: Sid Meir and Bruce Shelley. Even three or more. Maybe. But every time you add another pair of eyes the vision starts to blur. Without a guiding hand to hold all of the threads, and tie up all of the loose ends, visions unravel. And what started out to be a sweater looks more like an ever-growing expanse of patchwork.

The epic quests? Each one done by a different individual who apparently had lost the telephone extension and email of all the others.

One final chapter will plant a signpost at the beginning of a route out of Wonderland.

Part Five: Are we having fun yet?

Is addiction fun? Only part of the time.

What could Verant do about the fundamental problems of EQ, if they could wake up one morning to a satori, and discover there ARE problems?

Well, they could take the road they have in the past. Deny there's a problem, then scurry to address it in the next expansion (Trying in Kunark to reduce those static spawns that are "only one way" to play the game for example.) Then address it by adding more of the same. Higher mobs, higher weapons, the need for 50 people to kill one thing instead of forty, increasing rarity of drops. It is a game after all of levels and loot, remember? If there were anything else to EQ, their solutions would address it, wouldn't they?

I repeat: there is a great difference between the game originally envisioned by the designers, the game I think they truly believe they HAVE designed, and the game their player base is playing.

Until some recognition of that occurs, don't expect anything approaching a legitimate solution.

Wonder why the demographics are so skewed to the high end? The mantra we hear chanted in the halls of Verant most often in the face of criticism is that now there are over 300,000 registered players of EQ. Therefore they must be doing something right! Something, yes, everything... well... There are more registered than AC or UO, yes. But it's such a drop in the bucket of internet users, even internet gamers, I'd be embarrassed. And remember how long ago they announced that first 200,000? And how long it took to get half of that this time? Do a graph. Would you buy that stock?

The fact is that even the hardcore are getting restless, and there are promising competitors emerging on the horizon.

So what are we left with in the meanwhile? More and more loot? More and more waiting? And at the end a higher end game where the players are forced to govern themselves like some teeming crucible of democracy disguised as entertainment.

What about that signpost to a solution? There are two parts:

First, stop being defensive. As hard as that might be. Stop it. Stop blaming your player base. Gordon Wrinn: "It's a bit depressing. On one hand we have a ton of players asking for more GM interaction within the game, more quests, better stories, etc., and on the other we have the hecklers who scream any time we make an attempt to drag them away from their 4 hour stop-watch campfest that they complain constantly about... ..There are many dynamic quests, and contrary to popular belief they usually entail something beyond GMs just running out and killing everyone. If people would take a second before nuking the central character, maybe they'll find out what it is all about."

There was also a sad quote from one of the "designers" at the recent launch party. I wish I could find it now, but basically he was insisting there was a full, rich storyline in Everquest, and that people were simply failing to uncover it. This is such a page from the

amateur writer's scrapbook, it needs to be mentioned. Successful writing is 1) inspiration and talent and 2) the ability to present the work to the audience so that it can experience it. If you fail at number two, one is meaningless. Stop blaming your audience if they don't get it!

People are simply playing the game you designed. If it isn't the one you wanted to design, or thought you designed, then change it.

If you truly feel that the calendars and scheduling conflicts are immersing players even more in the world of Norrath; if you truly feel the bullies have a right to their fun more than others simply because they are bigger and stronger; if you truly feel the uber-guilds should have fun at Halloween events while lower level characters get to play victims; if this truly IS the vision, then sit back, and let the good times roll.

But if you suspect there may be serious problems, and you can get beyond blaming your customers, start accepting responsibility. Re-examine the design openly. Trust your players a bit more. If you play black box management of your player base ("Epic quests are all working." "No problems with rangers."), when you finally do try to improve something, you shouldn't be surprised you get more backlash than thanks.

And govern the world you have created. Everquest is not a free public playground. People pay money to play here. It is not their responsibility to ensure that all players in the playground have fun. It is yours.

Believe it or not there is much that I find fine and entertaining and beautiful about Everquest. I would have not spent the past three weeks researching and writing this, if I didn't mourn what EQ could have been. Might be. But it is a flawed gem, and it is fracturing along the fault lines.

Is Everquest fun?

Not anymore. Not for Skyrain. Not at level 52. So he asked me to write this to try and express his frustration and sadness. I hope I have in some small way done him justice.

Skyrain Dreamweaver
52nd Level Ranger on Rodcet