

Less Is More

Chinese Menu Quest Systems & Storytelling

Chinese Menu quest systems are low-end mechanisms for easily adding “many” quests to a game, either single player or multiplayer. They are called Chinese Menu quests because they are built using a simple matrix that resembles the menus in Chinese restaurants where diners choose items from several columns or categories to make up a meal. The difference is that in games the game engine chooses the items.

While they are very helpful for quickly adding a lot of content, they should not be relied upon as the entire quest system in a multiplayer game. Even with random variables they can quickly become redundant and boring, and players soon figure out what is going on. Once they do, willing suspension of disbelief, and the immersion that should follow, suffer.

In structure Chinese Menu quests are simple Fed-Ex type quests, either delivery or kill. Fed-Ex quests are the most straightforward and prevalent of *all* quests in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs, the most well known of the virtual worlds found on the internet). They are called Fed-Ex quests because they resemble how Federal Express and other delivery services work in real life. In a typical MMORPG delivery quest the player receives an item from one NPC and takes it to another for a reward. A Fed-Ex kill quest NPC asks the player to slaughter a specific “mob” to receive a reward.

(NPC stands for Non-Player Character. The word “mob” is short for “mobile,” and was coined by Richard A. Bartle, one of the creators of the first MUD (Multi-User Dungeon, a precursor of MMORPGs). It was used to describe characters and creatures controlled by the virtual world’s engine rather than players. Now the characters are called NPCs and the creatures are mobs.)

Both types of Chinese Menu quests are built on a simple matrix. Here is one for delivery quests:

Column A	Column B	Column C
NPC1	Item1	NPC5
NPC2	Item2	NPC6
NPC3	Item3	NPC7
NPC4	Item4	NPC8

Any NPC from Column A gives a player any item from Column B to deliver to any NPC from Column C. The engine doesn’t choose until the player queries it for a quest. Even a dozen NPCs or items in each column provide a reasonable number of permutations. A basic system will simply randomize the variables, but this could mean that the game engine chooses the same NPC and item many times in a row, immediately revealing the

shallowness of the enterprise. Shuffling variables so that the result NPC1/Item3/NPC6 for example, will not occur again until all other permutations have been exhausted goes much farther to preserve the illusion of there being many “new” and “different” quests.

Chinese Menu quests have been around for decades. In *Dark Age of Camelot* (which made a big deal about them in pre-publicity) they are called tasks. In *Star Wars Galaxies* they are called missions. Similar to other science fiction MMORPGs like *Anarchy Online* and *Earth & Beyond* the missions in SWG are given by Mission computers as well as NPCs.

First let's take a look at *DAOC*'s tasks for players new to the game. Other than having to run all over a realm to find out which NPCs have tasks to offer (needless busy work), the tasks couldn't be simpler. For a kill task an NPC from Column A says a stock phrase with the variables from the menu embedded in it: “Please kill a <ItemX>, then return to me for your reward.” The tasks are keyed to a player's level so the items in Column B change over time, helping the willing player to skate over the redundancy. The quests are generic enough and not written so explicitly as to sound like single player quests endlessly repeated. The player gets the assignment, kills the beast, returns to the NPC for the reward.

SWG is another case altogether. New players can get missions from either Mission Terminals or NPCs. As of this writing however the rewards for NPC quests are mostly useless. I received two sets of pens and a used travel ticket “stub” (the travel tickets are electronic devices – they disappear upon use – so the concept of a stub is anachronistic to say the least). Since the terminals grant a good wad of credits for successful completion of the mission, most players do those.

The major difference between the two games is that *SWG*, treats the key menu elements of the matrix differently, then adds an attempt at storytelling that is completely at odds with the structure of the Chinese Menu and the reality of the world. Don't get me wrong. I am one hundred percent in favor of storytelling in virtual worlds, and quests are an excellent storytelling tool. However in this case the quests do more harm than good to storytelling, the players' willing suspension of disbelief, and immersion in the virtual world.

Here is how it works. You click on the Mission Terminal and choose either Delivery or Destroy missions. We'll choose Destroy. You get a list of five quests. In Column A (literally) you have the name of the NPC initiating the quest. In Column B is the title of the quest. In Column C is the credit amount of the reward. In Column D is the direction and distance from the terminal where you can find the mob.

Savvy players choose two missions at a time (the limit) to get the most return for their journey. They keep clicking a refresh button that presents them with new choices until they get two missions fairly close together geographically, so the missions can be completed in the least amount of time. The trouble begins with the fact that the selections are randomly generated so players can get the same NPC asking for help

regarding the same problem several times on a page. Not only that, when players ask for details of the mission they get this canned setup story for the quest, written in many cases as if the NPC were speaking directly to the player instead of having left an announcement on the terminal.

This is particularly off-putting when the stories are written in character, openly revealing opinions, character flaws and idiosyncrasies nobody in their right mind would disclose to the public at large, let alone anyone they were looking to hire.

In the following example the hiring NPC is a droid named... Imbecile...

“Greetings, Milady Chantallir requires me to commission a hunter, or party of hunters, to assassinate a designated specimen or specimens of local wildlife. Once you have committed this gratuitous murder, Milady’s serving droids will collect the victim and prepare it for her upcoming “Cuisine & Culture” fundraising banquet. Milady has instructed me to remit payment after you have inflicted the brutal death.”

Gratuitous? Inflicted? Brutal? I guess Imbecile is a good name since as soon as Milady is informed of what her droid thinks of her wishes, he’s going to end up on a Jawa scrap heap. The point here is that if it is an official announcement, it needs to be written as an official announcement to preserve some sense of verisimilitude. If character is going to be injected, it must be done with a bit more subtlety.

The next problem is that some of the mission stories could make sense as multiplayer missions, but most are one-offs (see the example below) where the situation *should* be resolved after a single success, but it never is. We are yet again presented with single player quests masquerading unsuccessfully as multiplayer.

On top of that every story is unnaturally vague to the point of absurdity to cover the fact that the type of mob you’ll be asked to kill is randomly generated. In each of these missions we are presented with an NPC explaining about a very specific situation, but forced to be oddly coy, refusing in the text to tell you the name of the critter responsible or where it can be found. For the specifics you must look in the randomly generated columns. And the reasons for killing the mob often don’t make sense in context.

Let’s look at another example from the same page. (In both the example above and this one notice how the writers struggle with the unnatural limitations forced on them by the menu structure.)

“My family wrangles shaaks on the Grass Plains. This season predators have been hitting us hard. Two nights back, my oldest went out hunting them. Last night he called in, but today we’ve heard nothing. We’re worried, but we can’t leave the herd. We have enough savings to hire a hunter for a rescue mission. Here are the coordinates from his tracking beacon. Please help, and quickly.”

The “predators” are revealed in the Target field of the mission details screen as hermit spiders. Right below this mission’s listing is the same mission from the same NPC sending you in a different direction for a different amount of credits and the “predator” is gnorts.

In storytelling terms we are faced with an NPC who is what? Blind? Forgetful? A liar? One such might be interesting, but *all* the NPCs behave identically however much the attempt has been made to differentiate them as characters.

And we *never resolve the dilemma*. The missing boy is never mentioned again. We just blow up a lair of creatures, the generic game mechanic of all the destroy missions. Then it’s on to the next mission, laid out in identical text, to rescue the next boy in the family tree (assuming the parents are so prolific that they can churn out sons as fast as rabbit-like gnorts drop babies), or is it the same son who can’t keep out of trouble?

Since the location of the mob is not given in coordinates (despite what the example says), but only a direction and distance, the game adds arrows on the radar screen. Then to spare players chasing all over the landscape when they get close to their objective, the game provides shafts of light descending like deus ex machinas from the sky to illuminate the player’s goal. There is absolutely no indication in the world what generates the lights. We know what does: the developers, heedlessly applying Band-Aids to gameplay issues without considering what these solutions may do to immersion and storytelling.

Finally, if any illusion of a real world remains, it is shattered by the *game* (not the NPC who initiated the quest), giving you a simple text message that the quest is completed and that your credits have magically appeared in your bank account, or have been distributed on the spot if you’re within a group. Again, gameplay solutions at the expense of immersion.

In *DAOC* the developers are on record as not being interested in developer-created story in MMORPGs; not believing it can be done anyway. So it’s ironic that their “less is more” approach feels far more true and immersive than *SWG*’s misguided attempt. If you don’t believe in stories, better to leave them out as *DAOC* does (at least in its tasks).

On the other hand there is no reason storytelling can’t occur in Chinese Menu quests. But care must be taken that its insertion doesn’t conflict with how that specific virtual world operates; how people behave; and how jobs and hiring are accomplished in the real world. Storytelling demands the same level of care and expertise and logic as programming. It’s a constant shame of our industry that it so rarely happens.