

## When a Story Arc Doesn't

This is the final article on developer-created storytelling in *Star Wars Galaxies*. In addition to having played the game for four months, I searched the internet for interviews with the leading creative people, as well as articles they've written. This background material is extremely helpful in understanding why story in *SWG* is treated the way it is. I've appended a few links to pertinent material at the end of this article, but a Google search will net you even more.

If you take the time to search out a number of these interviews I think you will quickly see that the creators of *SWG* are struggling with their feelings about story and its place in the game. In the beginning there was virtually none, and what story did exist was inconsequential, if not outright harmful to immersion in the world, as I noted in earlier articles in this series. The developers are now attempting to add more story.

Among the promised additions to story was a monthly story arc that former Creative Director Raph Koster described in a recent interview as, "... similar to *Asheron's Call*..." In *Asheron's Call*, a first generation MMORPG, and its sequel, *Asheron's Call 2*, the developers committed to delivering new content, including a continuing storyline every month. To the best of my knowledge they have faithfully fulfilled that pledge every month in both games, delivering story that is significant to the world, providing context for the addition of content ranging from new items and creatures to world-changing events.

Although promised for July the first monthly installment of the *SWG* story arc was delayed until six weeks after the game was released on June 26th. Preceding it at the end of July was a teaser - a typical *Star Wars*-style crawl with letters appearing at the bottom of the screen and floating off into space. This crawl, erroneously called a "prologue" by the developers, set the stage for the first story arc called "The Cries of Alderaan." It informed us that a rebel spy had stumbled across a "...secret Imperial project DEAD EYE, and ...its apprehensive lead scientist..."

Then early in the second week of August the story installment was launched during a large update. A four-panel comic book-style prologue appeared outside of the game on the official *SWG* website. The first panel, showing the planet Alderaan exploding, was captioned, "...Millions of voices suddenly cried out in terror and were suddenly silenced."

The other three panels introduced us to a single un-named character who players decided must be the scientist mentioned in the crawl. Below this was the following text:

### "The Story So Far

Loyalists of the Rebel Alliance and the Galactic Empire have obtained fragments of two separate secret messages. Brave heroes must rally together to get these vital disks back so that they may assemble and decode them. The secrets contained within could sway the Galactic Civil War.

[Click here to view The Cries of Alderaan Prologue](#)

### **Story Objectives**

- Find and assemble encoded datadisks. Give to Faction Recruiter for large Faction Point reward and a Story Badge.
- Help other members of your faction to accomplish the above goal. The Faction that accomplishes this tasks more times will get an advantage in next month's story arc.
- Decrypt the encoded message. The first person to email the actual message to [StarWars@soe.sony.com](mailto:StarWars@soe.sony.com) (email header must be "Cries of Alderaan code" and you must include your character name and galaxy) will win a special faction point bonus. One reward shall be granted per side. We will contact the winners by game mail to confirm the reward."

Trial and error revealed that finding the encoded data disks required the killing of hundreds of hoodlum-type NPCs in the hopes that they would have datadisks on them. Some did. Many didn't. A few weeks after the story debuted the drop rate – the frequency with which datadisks appeared - was increased so that more casual players could complete the story power gamers had finished in the first days. Disks were also being bought, sold and traded among players.

Once players had acquired a complete set of datadisks they "combined" them and took them to either a Rebel or an Imperial recruiter who rewarded the player with a few credits, some faction points and supposedly a badge, although I never received one. The quest took several days for me to do. Ninety-five percent of the time involved camping Thugs.

As noted above in the Story Objectives there was an added step. The messages were still in code. The first player from either faction who was able to decrypt them received an additional faction award. However this deciphering had nothing whatever to do with the game world, but was accomplished in the real world with solutions being emailed.

The second installment story of the story arc had no crawl, but at release another four-panel comic book page appeared featuring an unattractively drawn Princess Leia, and introducing rebel spy Lyda Skims whose thought bubble is the self-referential catchphrase from Han Solo: "I have a bad feeling about this." Below the graphic was the following text:

#### **"The Story So Far:**

After stealing the plans for a secret Imperial project called Dead Eye, *Rebel Spy Lyda Skims* [You could click on this to get some non-pertinent backstory on the character – Lee], code name Skimmer, is on the run. Hiding from the Empire, even her compatriots are unable to find her and the Dead Eye information she has stolen from the Empire.

Meanwhile, the creator of Dead Eye, Dr. Vacca, vacillates between his loyalty (and fear) for the Empire and his grief over the destruction of his home world, Alderaan. His decision to back one side or the other will determine who controls Dead Eye, and possibly shift the balance of the war. The Galactic Empire and the Rebellion are trying to find ways to convince Vacca to make the right choice.

[Click here to view The Cries of Alderaan Act 1: Codes](#)

### **Story Objectives:**

- Find either a Rebel or Imperial Coordinator on one of the starting planets and undertake the missions assigned.
- Those wishing to help the Rebellion will be seeking information on the whereabouts of Lyda and the information she has on Dead Eye.
- Imperials will be trying to prevent the Rebellion from contacting Dr. Vacca and convincing him to join the Rebellion.
- Whichever side completes the most missions will gain access to Dead Eye.

### **Last Month's Objectives:**

Last month both Rebels and Imperials were tasked with finding, decoding and handing in enemy data disks. The Rebels succeeded in handing in more disks. The resulting morale boost will be reflected in a 10% increase in all faction rewards for Rebel missions for the next month."

The two faction-based quests had a couple of additional steps, but again involved killing hoodlum-type NPCs for disks and pieces of a decoder. The drops were much more frequent and even with the additional quest steps the entire quest only took me two or three hours. In the rebel quest I played, the de-coded information led to Lyda, who needed to be rescued (kill her captors), then I was directed to find and kill the Imperials who were planning to send a message to Dr. Vacca (the un-named scientist in the first story. (I don't remember if Dr. Vacca was finally named when the disks were de-coded in the first installment.)

In addition to the *Asheron's Call* games, mention should be made of *Earth & Beyond* which features the most robust story arc currently available in MMORPGs. All three use the story fiction as context for altering terrain, re-distributing mob spawns, and adding quests and items. In doing this they paint a dynamic world where anything can happen. *E&B* – and I think the *AC* games as well - retire certain installment-specific quests as the story moves on, but also retain other new quests that can be undertaken even as the story moves on. All three use their arcs to add to the overall content of the games.

As can probably be seen *SWG's* approach is far more limited than the earlier games. The drops cease after each installment and the only change to the world is an increase in faction rewards for the winning side. *SWG* developers have said that this current story arc

will be completed with its third installment, and then at some time after that an entirely unrelated one will begin. So any opportunity for adding to a least the illusion of a dynamic, ongoing world is lost.

Also, Rebel players far outnumber Imperial players in *SWG*, so rebels will always gain faction bonuses. Imperials can never win. A nasty design flaw that one would think would have been obvious.

A third flaw is that such a large percentage of the storytelling and even some gameplay (the deciphering of the first messages) occurs outside of the game world, another example of the designers' focus on gaming at the expense of immersion that I mentioned in the first two articles. There is nothing whatever wrong with giving a player somewhere to go outside of the game to catch up on story she may have missed, or to get a preview of upcoming story, but the story must play out in its entirety within the game world if it is to have any hope of preserving immersion and generating emotion.

A fourth design flaw is that in order to participate in the story arc and gain any benefit from it players must align themselves with one faction or another. I had been happily playing a neutral character who was unwilling to choose sides. Story really shouldn't interfere with role-playing. In fact it is one way to encourage it.

Finally there is the common flaw of not bothering to make the quest multiplayer. How hard would it have been to structure the collection and deciphering of the disks the way the British cracked the Nazi Enigma code during World War II? That was achieved by collecting thousands of intercepted transmissions, then examining them for common elements. Each few pieces of a decoded message could bring the solution closer, leading naturally to the second step of two individuals actually cracking the code. Their actions would then have meant something *within* the game world fiction.

What can I say about the quality of the writing? Very little. There isn't much to go on. It is serviceable. It presents the situation and steps players through it. But I want to mention three tell-tale signs we can use to detect less than professional writing. Remember the first line of text in the first panel of the first installment? "...Millions of voices suddenly cried out in terror and were suddenly silenced."

It tells what happened, but notice the two instances of the word "suddenly." Repeating it can be used for emphasis as I did with "first" in the paragraph above. But repetition adds nothing to the text quoted. This is called "tomb-stoning," a term borrowed from newspapers to describe columns lined up one atop the other, creating a boring layout on the page. Simply changing one of those suddenlies to "abruptly" or "swiftly" would have helped. Better yet is to compound the meaning of the sentence by adding another element beyond speed such as "forever" or "mercilessly" for the second "suddenly." Another possibility is simply to drop the first "suddenly" and let the alliteration at the end of the sentence stand on its own.

The second sign is the failure to identify the character in the first installment comic. He may have been given a name in text from the recruiter (as I said I don't recall), but it is a failure in the set-up of the story not to identify in some way this major character.

Third is the self-referential dialogue quoting Han Solo. Winking at the audience like this is admittedly very seductive. It raises a cheap chuckle from the audience watching *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* when the sign above the café in the opening scene tells us its name is Obi-Wan. It was used to better effect in the first *Scream* where we get the speech about the stupid things characters always do in horror films, then watch as these characters do it too. But it remains a cheap trick, and when you have so few lines of text to spare using it for the punchline actually suggests the author needed to borrow it because he or she could not come up with anything better.

A story arc is by definition a story which arcs over an ongoing entertainment experience. In the case of daytime soap operas story arcs can last many months, even years. I believe *Asheron's Call* has featured three major story arcs in four years. *Earth & Beyond* is still on its first at its one year anniversary.

Yet even after comparing *SWG*'s story arc to that of *Asheron's Call*, *SWG* designers have chosen to make it little more than a several-step quest that other games feature by the dozens or even hundreds. By limiting its affect on the world and on PCs it is rendered insignificant, and its hype confuses and angers players. Why go out on a limb and promote a feature that doesn't have a prayer of standing up to competitors?

Worse, to me anyway, is that rather than building on previous efforts like *Asheron's Call* and *Earth & Beyond* it is a step backwards. That such a high profile game like *Star Wars Galaxies*, based on such a story-rich license, should do so little to embrace that tradition and translate it into its virtual world is a setback to storytelling in *all* virtual worlds.

You would think that given the loss of life on Alderaan, the scientist's moral dilemma and Lyda's peril, some emotion might be generated. But there is none: all interest in the playing out of the tale is reduced to camp and kill gaming, indifferent text, and a story split between the virtual world where it belongs and a website.

*The Cries of Alderaan* is just one more example of, "See? If *they* can't do it, it can't be done!" a self-fulfilling prophecy that has now only gained in stature thanks to *Star Wars Galaxies*.

Links: <http://swvault.ign.com/news/2003-09-10.html> where LucasArts Producer Haden Blackman answers the concerns of a player in an SWG Discussion thread labeled "The Seven Deadly Sins of SWG." Former *SWG* Creative Director Raph Koster is arguably the most respected talent working on massively multiplayer games. He has been interviewed and quoted many times. I commend to you his informative website at

<http://www.legendmud.org/raph/index.html>. Have a look at the debate between Raph and Jessica Mulligan, an insightful writer on online games, and current Producer of Asheron's Call 2. It can be found here: [http://www.skotos.net/articles/BTH\\_33.shtml](http://www.skotos.net/articles/BTH_33.shtml). Also see Richard A. Bartle's book, *Designing Virtual Worlds*, particularly "The Story of Story" in Chapter Seven.