

The Quest for Story: NPC Quests in Star Wars Galaxies

Last time when we looked at simple Chinese Menu quests, I mentioned in passing the lowest level of NPC quests in *Star Wars Galaxies* (those assigned by Non-Player Characters). In the first weeks of release these not only lacked worthwhile rewards, they were severely bugged. Apropos of our discussion here one particularly annoying bug was this: accept a quest from one NPC, and all NPCs acted as if they'd given you that quest. They still lack worthwhile rewards, but that particular bug has been squashed. Now NPCs respond, "I can see you're busy working for someone else..." Then they offer to "free you of your prior obligation" so you can work for them.

This is of course no better immersive storytelling. The total illogic of the first response (unless all NPCs were Borg with only a hive mind) has been replaced by one that still begs questions like "How can they see we're busy?" "How can they unilaterally free us of prior obligations?" But remember *SWG* is concerned almost entirely with *game* solutions to design problems without consideration of solutions that support both the game and story.

An additional example of a *game* solution would be the waypoints, those shining pillars of light that guide us to targets, places of interest, and so on. The *SWG* engine requires that the targets these waypoints mark be spawned (appear in the world) only when players come within range. Players complained that the new waypoints were often in entirely different directions from the initial direction onscreen arrows pointed (both on the radar and in the action window), and logged this discrepancy as a bug. So designers added a text message upon reaching the general area where the target of the mission actually spawned to the effect that the exact waypoint had *now* been determined. The solution made it clear the change in direction of the arrows was not a bug, but it still made no sense in context of the "story" of each mission.

(Another bug that was recently fixed is the moment at which the player is asked if she'd like to accept a mission from an NPC. Up until the fix players were forced to accept a mission *before* being told what it was. This often resulted in players having to then abort missions that turned out to be wholly inappropriate to their professions, another reason players shied away from NPC quests, and remained dependant on mission terminals. Happily this now has been reversed, and players can learn what is asked of them before signing on the dotted line.)

Before we get to the types of quests in *SWG* we are going to focus on today I should mention there are also faction missions available from terminals, and profession specific missions available from their own terminals have been recently added. But these are identical to the Chinese Menu quests described in the first article.

There are three levels of NPC quests in *SWG*, divided into destroy missions (where you kill something, and possibly deliver something) and deliver missions (where you deliver something without bloodshed). As mentioned above the lowest levels still have useless rewards. One wonders at this design decision, given that it trains players to disregard

NPC missions of all kinds. Why bother with them when the mission terminal rewards are so much more substantial? Beyond that, these missions are standard Fed-Ex single player quests with no attempt having been made to write them as if they existed in a multiplayer universe.

This is a pet peeve of mine, and I gave a short talk on it at a mini-conference on multiplayer games during this year's GDC. Basically it boils down to this: *all* quests in *SWG* are written as one offs, as if a single player can solve them, yet they reappear as if that player never existed. This is the antithesis of an important rule for retaining players in online games: "Let them feel as if they can change the world." But it isn't necessary to write single player quests even if you don't want players to change the world. It is so easy to do true multiplayer quest creation in this lowest common denominator type of quest, why *not* do it? Why write quests that can adversely affect the retention of your player base and their immersion in your world if you don't have to? The most rational answer to this is not particularly flattering to designers: they don't know any better.

The story in the low level quests is equivalent to story in mission terminals, although it can have an additional twist or two. The second NPC in some deliver quests for example may add additional information, or lead the player to believe what the first NPC said was incorrect.

My final observation on the lowest level of quests in *SWG* is that the designers have recently added a graphic above the heads of the NPCs who assign these quests. It looks like an "I" in a blue circle as large as the character's head. Since these quests are worthless for loot or storytelling, it is a good way to avoid talking to these NPCs. I strongly doubt that was the intention for the graphic's addition however. No comment on whether it somehow fits into the fiction of the world.

The next level of NPC quests in *SWG* are so-called "story" quests. In "story" quests the NPC assigning the quest may add additional information when you complete it, or foreshadow more assignments. The word "story" is in parentheses because these are not stories by any definition. They are "situations." This word of course is used to describe "situation" comedies on television, now commonly shortened to "sitcoms." Any sitcom on TV today has more "story" in it than these quests however. A situation is defined as simply an existing state of affairs that is resolved. In *SWG* this is achieved by the completion of a destroy or delivery assignment. I'll return to this fast and loose way *SWG* plays with definitions in the final essay on the monthly storytelling in the game.

These "story" quests are still one offs, not truly multiplayer, and remain Fed-Ex in structure. I have nothing whatsoever against the principle of Fed-Ex quests. But *all* missions, quests and stories in *SWG* are not only Fed-Ex in structure, but are obviously the same gameplay mechanic as the Chinese Menu system described in the first article in this series. This lack of any attempt to alter the mechanics involved at any level results in the sameness of the experience despite different trappings (there is a small difference to the experience in story quests as we'll see shortly) and players quickly becoming bored with the quest system in general, skipping over any attempts at storytelling, and simply

grabbing the quests that fit their criteria. More than one player in the *SWG* forums has expressed the opinion that quests in *all* MMORPGs are *always* boring. Blame for this opinion lies squarely in the lap of designers and writers.

How then are story quests different from the simple NPC quests in *SWG*? They are strung together in a line. One NPC can give a series of quests (some destroy, some deliver), each of which comes to a single conclusion. Depending on the NPC there can anywhere from two to four quests in the series. I tried a couple dozen of these, using lists on the Allakhazam website to find some, and adding a few of my own there. (My character name is Skyrain Dreamweaver, if you'd like to look up my contributions!)

The stories are still just situations, played out in several linear steps, but often left unresolved because to resolve the situations would be to alter the world, and at this level most designers, myself included, don't want players to be able to do that. So we avoid structuring them to hide the fact that nothing ever truly changes, right? Well, not here.

Players may start to get interested in the character of a musician who is actually a spice smuggler (Sigrix Slix), or one of a series of government officials taking bribes, but since the situations clearly beg resolution, yet get none, they are incomplete and dissatisfying as stories. Not to mention the fact that the rewards (usually monetary) are as inconsequential as those of the lower level quests. If, as we are left to presume, the stories are meant to be their own reward (the enjoyment of experiencing them), we are left just as dissatisfied.

Okay, now we come to the third and potentially the most interesting level of quests, since they offer the opportunity to interact with well-known Star Wars characters. Once you choose a faction, and complete enough faction missions from terminals to join either the rebels or imperials, you can find faction specific missions assigned by some old friends. I chose rebel. I had no interest in becoming an imperial and risking Darth Vader's windpipe crush firsthand.

I traveled to Corellia, home of the secret main base of the rebel forces. Of course since there are *no* secrets in multiplayer games, it was easy to get the coordinates. Once there I immediately spotted C-3PO and R2D2. It should come as no surprise that C-3PO does the talking and translating for R2. I have to say that after playing for two months this was the first moment when I felt like I was actually inside a Star Wars universe. Wedge and Princess Leia were nearby, too. Each NPC gives you four assignments, then suggests you go talk to the next NPC in line. I completed all of the quests up to getting my first one from Princess Leia, but stopped there because I couldn't go farther without help from other players.

Unfortunately the delight at meeting these characters is quickly dampened by the fact that the game mechanic driving the special NPC quests is yet again identical to all other quests in *SWG*. All are single player Fed-Ex destroy or deliver missions that play out exactly as all the others we've looked at, whatever the level. At least the programmers

must have been pleased at being able to use similar code for *all* quests. And furthermore the rewards are still inconsequential: broken equipment and few credits.

In one four part series of quests you help a rebel spy at an imperial research facility ruin the empire's plans for silent running droids. Along the way the spy is identified and seriously injured. Since no attempt is made to personalize the spy, his plight in the last mission of the series where he is severely injured becomes simply another by the numbers rescue mission, no different from any other missions despite what should be at stake. We don't care whether he lives or dies. And anyway whether he lives or dies doesn't matter because he will be alive and well for the next player in line to do that quest. The episode will replay again and again like the film *Groundhog Day*, but with no NPCs having any realization that they are doomed to repeat the same actions over and over.

These are not major world-changing quests, nor do they need to be. But the same story outlined above could have been made multiplayer if several of its absolutes were simply left open. Instead of a single spy with a single mission, we could have seen the inner workings of the rebel spy network in action through many missions with similar mechanics (A spy's job *is* repetitive!). This umbrella espionage theme for this group of missions would create far more opportunity for real storytelling. We could have traveled to distant planets; met engaging NPC characters we came to care about; felt as if we the players were in this struggle together, helping the *ongoing* battle against the empire even if we will not see its outcome anytime soon.

And that is the key word for me: *ongoing*. Here we have a persistent, supposedly *ongoing* world. But its only day-to-day storytelling is revealed in missions and quests that are static; often illogical within their own world fiction; mind-numbingly redundant in configuration; always unresolved and never involving. They remain solely a game mechanic without heart, without soul, and without true story.

Next time I'll conclude this series with an analysis of the ongoing monthly storyline in *Star Wars Galaxies*. Right now it looks like it will be a very short article.