

Designing for Sociability in Massively Multiplayer Games: an Examination of the “Third Places” of SWG

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ABSTRACT

While massively multiplayer games are often touted as successful social environments, it is only recently that game designers have started to develop models and techniques for encouraging interactions between players. One of the most recent examples of “sociability by design” in MMORPGs is Star Wars Galaxies (SWG). In particular, SWG is organized so that players are steered towards certain game locations where sociability is expected to take place. In this paper we critically examine player-to-player interactions in one of these locations: the cantinas. Based on several months of ethnographic observations and computerized data collection, we use Oldenburg’s notion of “third places” to evaluate whether or not these cantinas fit existing definitions of sociable environments. This allows us to formulate several design recommendations for the design of future MMOs.

Author Keywords

Empirical Studies, Sociability, Third Places, Star Wars Galaxies

INTRODUCTION

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) have taken the world of gaming by storm. The most popular U.S. games routinely attract hundreds of thousands of subscribers (Woodcock, 2003). But despite the press hype surrounding them, multiplayer games are not really new: in 1969 a multiplayer version of Spacewars was already available (Mulligan and Patrovsky, 2003: Appendix E), and in the late seventies designers quickly took advantage of the capabilities of the nascent Internet to build online social worlds where gamers could meet and play (Bartle, 2004, chapter 1). However it took a long time before games in general, and multiplayer ones in particular, attracted serious academic attention (Dourish, 1998). As a result, there is a paucity of published data and models to help us



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understand MMORPG phenomena (for a notable exception see Bartle, 2004).

This gap is particularly striking in one area: the lack of sociological research on MMORPGs¹. Indeed, the social nature of these games has important consequences for their design. In particular, game designers have realized the importance of encouraging player-to-player interactions: EverQuest, for instance, has been characterized as “the best example of explicit socialization processes embedded in a game” (Jakobson and Taylor, 2003), and served as a notable example for other massively multiplayer games. Most of these efforts, however, seem to have been done without much guidance from sociology.

Recently, game designers have tried to push the envelope even further by structuring in-game activities to maximize interactions. Indeed, there seems to be widespread recognition in the industry that MMORPGs have, so far, attracted mostly a fairly circumscribed community of gamers: the so-called “hardcore” or “power” gamers. These players have a focus on efficiency, on achieving the game’s goals the fastest. Although they are far from asocial (Taylor, 2003) and they are a necessary part of the social ecology of a virtual world (Bartle, 2004, chapter 3), they do not really contribute to the social atmosphere of the game. To broaden the appeal of their worlds, designers have therefore tried to implement “sociability by design”: in other words, to structure the game’s activities so that players will have numerous opportunities to simply “hang out” with each other and form relationships. One

of the most advanced attempts at designing for sociability is Star Wars Galaxies (SWG).

Sociability by design in SWG

SWG, launched in July 2003, was particularly innovative in its attempt to *create a strong sense of social life embedded in specific game locations*. Indeed, while many MMORPGs have offered cities and buildings for a long time, most of these spaces have so far lacked the social life one would expect to find in such locales. The taverns of Ultima Online, for instance, were almost always empty (Koster, 2004). This is not to say that social hangouts do not exist: for instance, the players have appropriated informal gathering points (like spawn points in EverQuest) and rich interactions are frequent in these locations. In SWG however, the designers have consciously tried to tie some of the game’s activities to particular locations, and structure them so that players are forced to interact.

One of the social spaces SWG’s designers have tried to recreate in their virtual world is the corner bar. In the many cities of SWG (player-created or otherwise) there is always a cantina to be found. These locations serve an important instrumental game function. Indeed, they are one of the few places where the “entertainer” character class can perform their services. Entertainers dance or play music mostly in cantinas. And as watching a dancer, or listening to a musician, are both the only ways of recuperating from “battle fatigue”, most players have to visit cantinas on a regular basis. Entertainers can also provide “mind buffs”, temporary enhancements of players’ statistics that increase their chance of survival. But recuperating from battle fatigue or being buffed is not instantaneous. By design, the SWG team has tried not only to steer players to certain game locations to obtain services, but also to force them to stay for a while. The expectation was that sociability would naturally

¹ Bartle rightly mentions (2004, p. 500) that few sociologists have looked beyond Curtis’ (1992) seminal paper.

emerge out of these repeated and long visits marked by mandatory periods of inactivity. This is based on Raph Koster's law of online world design: "Socialization Requires Downtime"² (Koster, 2004).

However, the reality is not that simple: in a previous paper (Ducheneaut and Moore, 2004), we have described how instrumental players and "socializers" collide in SWG's public places. To push the debate further, and to bridge the research gap we identified earlier, we would like to discuss how the design of social spaces in MMORPGs could be informed by earlier sociological research on sociability. Indeed, there is a long and established sociological tradition of studying interactions in public spaces. This has led to theories about the nature of sociability, and the conditions under which it can emerge. We think any multiplayer game trying to design for sociability could benefit from the insights coming out of this body of work.

Research questions

Sociologist Georg Simmel (1949) is widely credited as the first scholar to have seriously examined sociability. He defined it as:

"a distinct social form that distills out of the realities of social life the pure essence of association, of the associative process as a value and a satisfaction [...] Sociability extracts the serious substance of life leaving only "togetherness", the sheer pleasure of the company of others" (Simmel, 1949).

In the physical world, certain public places support and sustain sociability. Oldenburg

(1989) calls them "third places" – according to his definition,

"a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" (Oldenburg, 1989: 16).

This, we think, is a strikingly appropriate description of what game designers would like to achieve with places like the cantinas of SWG. And interestingly, Oldenburg offers a set of criteria defining the character of third places. Inspired by this earlier research, we will therefore address two questions in the remainder of this paper:

- 1) Do SWG's cantinas meet Oldenburg's criteria? If not, what are the main differences?
- 2) What could be done to build better "third places" in MMORPGs and, as a result, better support sociability between the players?

We will address these questions based on several months of ethnographic observations and computerized data collection obtained on a specific SWG server. We start below with a more detailed description of our data and methods.

RESEARCH METHODS

For our study of SWG, we used complementary methods. As a preliminary step, we created characters and conducted a "virtual ethnography" (Hine, 2000; Mason, 1999) of in-game activities. To balance our view of the game as much as possible, one of the authors selected a combat-oriented profession while the other selected a more "service-oriented" one (namely, an entertainer). We logged in regularly (at least

² "Socialization" here means "socializing" rather than "enculturation."

twice a week, sometimes much more, each time for at least two hours) over a six-month period, and progressively became members of the community of players on our server. As our characters evolved, we joined player cities and guilds. Our activities were recorded using a video camera connected directly to our PC's video cards. This provided us with a rich set of ethnographic data, framing our understanding of the game.

Since we were particularly interested in the design of sociable spaces, we then moved on to another phase of our study: we created two additional characters, which we placed in two cantinas on different planets³. We kept them constantly connected to the server for another three months (a total of 98 days), recording publicly visible activity in these two locations. For this we used SWG's "/log" command, which captures the content of a player's chat box into a text file. This file therefore contains a record of all the public utterances and gestures made by the visitors of each specific location. The entire recording was done automatically by using a macro, and we ended up with a total of 740Mb of chat and gestures data. While this data was accumulating, we continued our ethnographic observations with a particular attention for these two locations.

At the end of our study we built a series of tools to process the logs. We first wrote a parser to segment each event (that is, each line of the logs) into its component parts: who is interacting with whom, in what way (gesture or

chat), where (Coronet or Theed), at what date and time, and what the content of the interaction is (text chat or "social" command⁴). After parsing, the data was analyzed by a Java application we also developed to extract patterns of interaction we thought were reflective (or not) of interactivity and sociability in the public spaces we observed.

Using this data, we now turn to our analysis of how cantinas compare to the third places of the physical world.

CANTINAS AS THIRD PLACES

For Oldenburg, the function of the third place is to serve the community by hosting "regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals" (cf. *supra*). To achieve this however, third places must have a set of unique characteristics. Not all public spaces are third places, even though members of a community often appropriate spaces for socializing that were not necessarily built with this goal in mind. Oldenburg examined in great details what differentiates third places from other public spaces. We focus on the most important criteria below, and for each of them analyze how SWG's cantinas compare to the "ideal-type" (Weber, 1949) of the third place.

Third places are neutral ground

"People can be sociable only when they have some protection from each other. [In third places] individuals may come and go as they please." (Oldenburg, 1989: xviii, 22).

³ Each server is home to 10 different planets. While the planets are the same on each server, players have appropriated them differently. We observed activity in Corellia and Theed to make sure our observations were not affected by the dominant player profile of a single planet.

⁴ SWG offers a very diverse library of 340 gestures or "socials" that players can use to embellish their interactions. They are very frequently used (Ducheneaut and Moore 2004). They are also directional, which allows us to know who is talking to whom.

To see how well cantinas fit this criterion we computed several metrics for each participant. First, we computed how many days they were present in our logs and, for each day, how many visits they made to the cantina. We also computed their average length of stay.

It is clear from Table 1 below that cantinas are visited by a large number of players. Most, however, do not stay very long and do not visit frequently either. Players visited the cantinas five days on average (out of 98 possible). Each day they made two to three visits to the cantina. For a large majority of players, these visits are short: the median values range from 7 to 8 minutes. Incidentally, this is about the time needed to get a “buff” or heal battle fatigue. The average values and their standard deviation, however, are much higher. This indicates that a significant minority of players stays for very long stretches of time, often for several hours (particularly in Coronet).

	Coronet	Theed
Number of unique visitors	7,167	7,277
Days of presence	Median	2
	Average	4.3
	Std.dev.	5.6
Number of visits	Median	3
	Average	11.1
	Std.dev.	32.8
Length of stay (minutes)	Median	6.8
	Average	130.1
	Std.dev.	860.9
		361

Table 1 – Presence, visits and length of stay

	C	T
Gestures sent / day	Median	0.6
	Average	2.2
	Std. dev.	10.1
Gestures received / day	Median	1
	Average	2.1
	Std. dev.	9.5
Utterances / day	Median	3
	Average	13.5
	Std. dev.	66.5
		32

Table 2 – Interactivity metrics

We then analyzed three dimensions of interactivity: for each player we counted how many gestures they directed to others, how many they received in return, and finally how many public utterances they made. The balance of these three dimensions yields interesting insight into what kind of social environment each cantina is. We normalized the three dimensions for each player by dividing them by their number of days of presence, so that the most frequent visitors did not skew the data too much (see Table 2).

Overall this data seems to reflect a relatively low level of interactivity: each day on average, a player goes into the cantina and makes two to three gestures towards other players, exchanges a dozen sentences with them, and receives two to three gestures in return. There are no major differences between the two cantinas.

It is important to note, however, that these interaction profiles are not uniform. To illustrate this phenomenon, we mapped the three dimensions on a graph for each location:

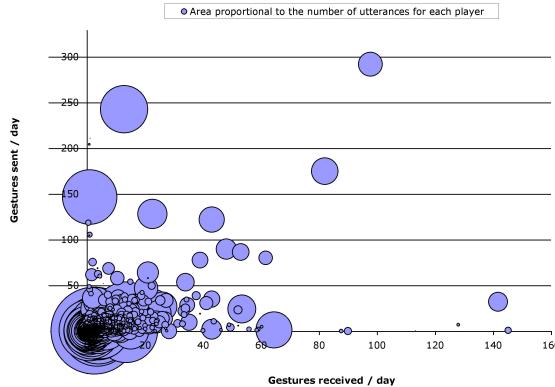


Figure 1 – Interaction profiles in Coronet

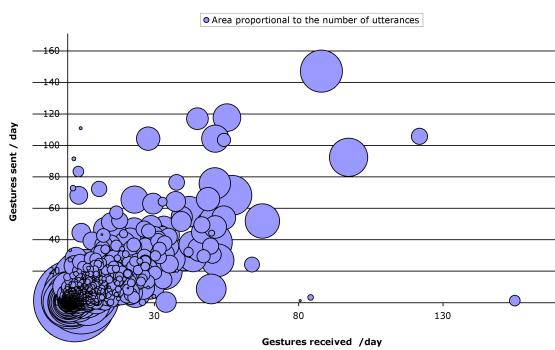


Figure 2 – Interaction profiles in Theed

Here we see interesting differences and similarities between the two cantinas. In both, a large majority of visitors are clustered in the lower left quadrant of the graphs. These are the “customers”: they come in, exchange a few words and gestures with those present while getting their battle fatigue healed, and then leave. This quantitative data is well aligned with our qualitative observations: the majority of players visit the cantina for instrumental purposes (namely, healing). Doing so simply requires watching a dancer or listening to a musician for a few minutes. No interaction with the entertainer is required to receive this service. Some players may chat or gesture with the entertainers or even tip them, but most do not.

In Coronet and Theed, a large number of visitors are apparently extremely talkative, which is sometimes accompanied by sending a large number of gestures. On the other hand they do not receive many gestures from the visitors. This is an indication that these players are running a macro, automatically spewing out utterances and gesturing wildly to whoever is close by. Since they are not truly interactive, however, few of the visitors respond to them with gestures. In Coronet there are many players with this profile, which gives the graph its characteristic unbalanced shape. In Theed on the other hand, the graph is more balanced. While there is a large number of “AFK macros”⁵ also, a substantial number of visitors seem to be truly interactive: they send and receive a large number of gestures, and they are quite talkative without being overwhelming.

Overall this data paints a mixed picture of the cantina as neutral ground. On the one hand, a large number of players are not compelled to stay for too long. Their interactions are very short, and they visit mostly for instrumental purposes. In this sense cantinas may be too neutral: they look like “battle fatigue drive-thrus” where players come in, quickly get a service, and then leave. On the other hand, a smaller but very visible fraction of the visitors has a completely different attitude. They stay for long periods of time, most of it on automatic pilot by running a macro, in order to “grind” experience points as fast as possible. As such, they also contradict the spirit of a neutral ground:

⁵ A term evolved by the players to describe the practice of running a macro while away from the keyboard (AFK).

“Third places remain upbeat because those who enjoy them ration the time they spend there. They leave when or before the magic begins to fade. [...] There is no duty to stay in such a place beyond its ability to provide satisfaction” (Oldenburg, 1989: 57).

SWG’s cantinas, therefore, differ from neutral grounds in two extreme ways. Based on the very short interactions we observed in a majority of cases, it is quite possible that the “magic” mentioned by Oldenburg does not even have time to appear, let alone fade. There is, indeed, no duty to stay in a cantina beyond the ability of the place to provide satisfaction... in a very instrumental sense: as soon as their battle fatigue reaches zero, players run away. For other players, there is a “duty” to stay beyond the ability of the place to provide satisfaction: power gamers feel compelled to leave their characters in the cantinas to accumulate experience points at an accelerated rate.

These profiles are, however, represented differently in the two cantinas. While Coronet seems to be overrun by “drive-thru” visitors and “grinders”, Theed is more balanced. Many of its visitors appear to follow Oldenburg’s principle and have interactive but bounded visits. It is clear, however, that the design of the cantinas affect their ability to function as neutral grounds: while the interdependencies between entertainers and other professions certainly attract visitors, the balance can easily tip in favor of one of two interaction extremes, none of which are particularly beneficial to sociability.

The third place is a leveler and a mixer

Third places are not simply neutral in terms of freedom of movement: they also erase individual distinctions between their visitors.

“[Third places] do not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion.

[...] the charm and flavor of one’s personality, irrespective of his or her station in life, is what counts [...] beyond the contexts of purpose, duty, or role” (Oldenburg, 1989: 24-25).

Here it is worth noting that SWG’s design runs exactly against this principle. Indeed, cantinas were designed so that players would visit them *because* they know the roles of the people within it (namely, entertainers). Players are strongly cast into roles when they cross the doors of a cantina: some are there to perform a service (musicians, dancers) and others are there to benefit from this service. Most visitors have a purpose: to get healed, or to buy a buff.

In this respect, SWG’s cantinas clearly do not fit one of Oldenburg’s central criteria. But another part of the “leveling” function of third places is that they encourage interaction:

“[In a third place] everybody knows just about everybody. [...] A third place is a mixer.” (Oldenburg, 1989: xvii).

It is true that cantinas are densely populated (around 7,000 visitors for each). We also computed the average daily number of visitors: 314 in Coronet, and 373 in Theed. The question, however, is how many of these players would count as acquaintances. Hence we computed simple social network metrics: prestige (how many unique visitors interacted with each participant, based on their incoming gestures) and centrality (how many unique visitors each participant interacted with, as expressed by their outgoing gestures).

		C	T
Prestige	Median	1	2
	Average	3.9	7
	Std. dev.	8.9	16.7
Centrality	Median	1	1
	Average	4	7.2
	Std. dev.	11.6	25.6

Table 3 – Centrality and prestige

On average, a player in Coronet interacts with 4 different people during all of his visits. Out of a daily number of visitors of 314, this means that each player “knows” at most 1.2% of the population – far from everybody. In Theed, the ratio is not much better (7 out of 373, that is, 1.9%). Cantinas would therefore appear to be fairly impersonal places, if we follow Oldenburg’s criterion to the letter. But it is worth mentioning that cantinas may also be victims of their own success: of course, in a heavily trafficked place, the overall proportion of people anybody knows is always smaller. But still, being able to interact with four to seven previously unknown people certainly sounds desirable. While cantinas may not be exactly comparable to a tiny English pub, it seems they still allow some previously non-existing connections to be created between people. In this they are a mixer, albeit not a very thorough one.

Playful conversation is the main activity

“Nothing more clearly indicates a third place than that the talk there is good; that it is lively, scintillating, colorful, and engaging” (Oldenburg, 1989: 26).

To test this criterion, we computed additional metrics to gauge the “liveliness” and “engaging” nature of the conversation in SWG’s cantinas. First we computed a “signal-to-noise” ratio (S/N): the proportion of

unique sentences (not repeated continuously) in the entire communication channel.

	Coronet	Theed
Total # of sentences	699,135	616,076
Unique sentences	247,766	438,689
S/N ratio	0.35	0.71

Table 4 – S/N ratios

Here we see important differences between the two locations. In particular, Coronet’s cantina has a much larger number of automated players: overall only a third of the talk is genuinely interactive. Theed, on the other hand, is probably a more sociable space: about two thirds of the talk is genuine player-to-player exchanges. This is consistent with our ethnographic observations. Coronet is considered the number one “grind hall” where entertainer experience points can be gained most efficiently by using macros. It is rare to be able to talk to someone, as two players highlight humorously:

01:37:07 Player A: you know, you are the only girl that isn’t a windup toy here tonight

01:37:46 Player B: and you too say different things... w/o being on a loop

01:37:57 Player B: i think they used to call them...

01:38:01 Player B: conversations?

01:38:07 Player A: lol

We then computed the same values for each participant (average daily values in Table 5; individual plots in Figure 3):

		C	T
Unique utterances / day	Median	2.5	3
	Average	5.8	7.4
	Std. dev.	12.3	14.9
S/N ratio	Median	0.96	0.97
	Average	0.76	0.77
	Std. dev.	0.35	0.35

Table 5 – Individual S/N ratios

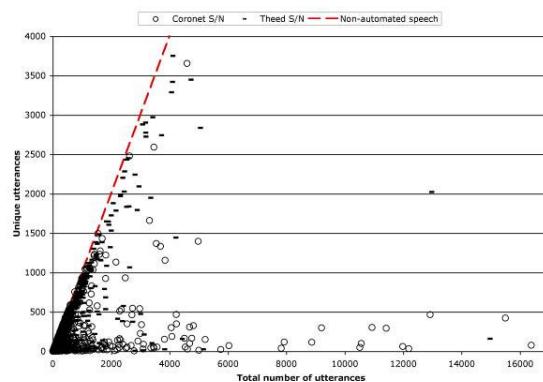


Figure 3 – Individual S/N ratios in both cantinas

Interestingly it seems that, on average, Coronet's visitors do not automate much of their speech ($S/N = 0.76$). While their average number of unique utterances per day is fairly low (about 6), it seems that for most people these are genuine interactions. The low S/N ratio for the entire cantina is therefore due to a minority of extremely vociferous players who constantly repeat the same sentences over and over again, as can be seen on Figure 3.

By contrast, note in the same graph how different Theed's visitors are. There are fewer players running macros producing large amounts of redundant text, which explains why the average individual S/N ratio is much closer to the ratio for the entire cantina. This paints two strikingly different pictures. In Theed talk is indeed lively and varied, a necessary condition to the emergence of sociability. In Coronet there is more life and

diversity than immediately meets the eye, but a small minority of players set a dominant tone of mindless droning and lifeless monologues. As Oldenburg said,

“The conversational superiority of the third place is also evident in the harm that the bore can there inflict. [...] Conversation is a lively game, but the bore hogs the ball, unable to score but unwilling to pass it to others” (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 29).

“Spammers” are indeed the bore of Coronet's cantina: they hog the conversational ball and create unfavorable conditions for the emergence of sociability.

But while conversational liveliness is an important component of a third place, the tone of the conversations is equally important:

“Compared to the speech in other realms, [conversation in third places] is more dramatic and more often attended by laughter and the exercise of wit. [...] Those who would keep conversation serious for more than a minute are almost certainly doomed to failure” (Oldenburg, 1989, pp. 29, 37).

We decided to compute an “index of fun” – how many joyful utterances and gestures (for example, “/laugh”, “/giggle”, “rofl”) were used by each player during each hour of their visits.

	C	T
Laughter / hour of visit	Average	15.4
	Std. dev.	64.9

Table 6 – Index of fun

This metric may sound strange, but it is in fact grounded in past research:

“It has been noted that the average American laughs about fifteen time per day. Fifteen time an hour would be a conservative estimate for those in a third place on one of its lesser days” (Oldenburg, 1989: 52).

In table 6, we can see that each cantina is almost exactly as upbeat as Oldenburg’s standard - it is clear that humor plays a significant role. Moreover the data is once again quite skewed and a smaller fraction of the population jokes and laughs much more than others. These “humorists” are very important and contribute greatly to the social atmosphere of the cantinas. In the example below, note how one visitor makes fun of one possible “grinder”:

21:48:35 Meryl Stryfe: my holocron said for me to master dancer:)

21:49:00 Jaremko Di-Sonei: My holocron told me to uninstall SWG..))

We saw countless examples of this kind of gentle teasing that is characteristic of third places:

“Much humor within third places plays on a characteristic impoliteness, which really communicates affection. [...] Much is communicated by these personalized excursions into low humor. The victim and the assailants have known each other for sometime. Their relationship is not fragile. An invitation to a duel of wits has been extended. A fraternity exists here” (Oldenburg: 53).

Therefore, while “spammers” and “grinders” pollute the conversational space, their numerical importance can easily hide the number of genuine, humorous and playful interaction between the cantina’s visitors. Even if we know that visits are, on average,

quite short, it is clear that a great many people are having a good time. In this respect cantinas clearly play a role analogous to the third places of the real world.

Third places have regulars

“It is the regulars who give the place its character. [...] third places are dominated by their regulars but not necessarily in numerical sense. [They] set the tone of conviviality. [They provide] the infectious and contagious style of interaction” (Oldenburg, 1989: 33-34).

We focused on the “regulars” by isolating and running separate analyses for players who were present at least one day a week (days of presence ≥ 14), a third of the time (presence ≥ 33) and half the time (presence ≥ 49).

Players visiting the cantina for...	C	T
14 days or more [% total] – G1	422 [5.9%]	628 [8.6%]
33 days or more [% total] – G2	36 [0.5%]	100 [1.4%]
49 days or more [% total] – G3	4 [0%]	23 [0.3%]

Table 7 – Number of regulars

Depending on the cantina observed and how stringent one’s definition of a regular is, the proportion of regulars ranges from about 9% to being negligible. These numbers are quite low and indicate that, at any time, the cantina is mostly populated by transient visitors. This is consistent with our ethnographic observation: although initially there appears to be a recognizable set of regulars, they tend to disappear after about two weeks, which is the average time required to master the entertainer professions. This reflects the instrumental use

of cantinas as “grind halls” rather than as sociable places.

However Oldenburg is careful to emphasize that regulars are not necessarily important in the numerical sense: instead, they “set the tone of conviviality.” Therefore we recomputed the “index of fun” for each group of regulars:

	Coronet	Theed
G1	8.9 ($\sigma^2=17.7$)	12.6 (20.2)
G2	7.1 ($\sigma^2=8.4$)	11.7 (8.8)
G3	1.6 ($\sigma^2=2.1$)	12.5 (6.6)

Table 8 – Index of fun for the regulars

It appears that the regulars in both cantinas are not being more humorous than the general population. In fact, in Coronet they are noticeably less so, up to the point of using almost no “fun” emotes and utterances. They clearly do not set the requisite tone for a third place and, in this, SWG’s cantinas are starkly different from third places.

DISCUSSION

Our analyses of interactions in Theed and Coronet’s cantinas have shed some light on how successful these places are at encouraging sociability. Overall the picture is mixed. On the one hand, cantinas can be too much of a neutral ground, with a low retention of visitors. Most visits are short and instrumental. There are few regulars and, even when there are repeated visitors, they may simply be “grinding” experience points on a macro instead of interacting with the other visitors. Finally, playful conversation does not seem to be the main activity (but it is clearly a fraction of the total activity, in proportions that vary depending on the cantina observed).

On the other hand, cantinas are successful at attracting a large fraction of the game population. They are densely populated and this guarantees that, despite the “noise” of

grinders and spammers, a small fraction of socializers will be there to genuinely interact with the visitors. However the proportion of these socializers varies enormously between the two locations, with Coronet being almost entirely overrun by instrumental players while Theed is closer to a social hangout. In cantinas players get to interact with four to seven previously unknown people – low numbers at first sight, but which compare favorably to third places of the real world. Most importantly perhaps, it looks like when players actually take the time to interact, they are having a good time – reflected in their substantial use of humor.

Our analyses raise important questions regarding how to “design for sociability” in MMORPGs. We have shown evidence that the “Socialization Requires Downtime” law is, at best, imperfect. To promote sociability, SWG’s cantinas could at minimum improve in the following areas:

- Promote regularity: regulars are the heart and soul of a third place. A good way to promote regularity is to give frequent visitors a stake in the place (Oldenburg 1989, p.40). Active socializers (which could be easily identified with our metrics) could, for instance, be given limited property rights in the cantinas of the main cities. As regulars they could be authorized to change the décor, have access to separate rooms, and be allowed to operate a business from within this densely populated space.
- Urban planning: centers of activity are spread far apart in SWG. The cantinas in Theed and Coronet are simultaneously densely populated but infrequently visited because they are close to major space routes: players quickly stop on their way to other areas. Adding to the problem, player cities are isolated in the “suburbs”. If players were

allowed to live in high-density apartments close (or even above) each cantina in the main cities, patterns of visits would probably change. The distinction between player- and developer-created areas might have detrimental effects on sociability.

- Partition the conversational space: despite their interesting architecture (a main floor, separate alcoves, back rooms), cantinas are a single conversational space. Players should be given the option to isolate themselves from the “noise” of the spammers simply by moving to a separate room. This way both instrumental players and socializers could share the same environment.
- Encourage and reward gregariousness: right now, SWG’s powerful macro facility is detrimental to sociability. Players can automate too much of their interactions with other players. In particular, advancement in social professions like entertainers is too tied to instrumental goals (basically, have as many people as possible click on an avatar). It should be possible to detect who is actively socializing and reward them for it.

CONCLUSION

We would like to conclude this paper with a more theoretical question: what is the granularity of third places in MMORPGs? By design, the SWG team has assumed there is a one-to-one mapping between sociability in the real world and in-game sociability. They consciously tried to reproduce the corner bar and pubs of old. Our analyses, however, show that this effort partly backfired. Yet we had many long, playful and repeated interactions with other players during our ethnographic observations. Overall we were left with the feeling that, despite the fact that cantinas may not be the central locus of sociability, SWG as a whole was a pretty sociable environment.

Therefore we would like to suggest that, potentially, the entire game world could be a third place. When we reuse Oldenburg’s criteria on a game-wide basis, interesting possibilities emerge:

- The entire game can be a neutral ground: indeed, players can in theory log in and out as they please. Still, the game is structured in such a way that there can be a “duty to stay beyond the ability of the place to provide satisfaction” (Oldenburg, 1989, p.57). Outside of the cantinas we met many players, other than entertainers, who were also “grinding” XP despite the fact that the activity was clearly not enjoyable (weaponsmiths are a clear example). Neutrality seems to be a persistent problem, no matter what the observation scale is. Talks of “MMORPG addiction” reflect this preoccupation (Yee 2002).
- At a game-wide level, players can clearly go alone at any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there. The Friends List makes this particularly easy: upon logging in, the player is immediately alerted of the presence of his friends. Logging in and seeing a friend online is often the occasion of a lively round of conversation via instant messaging. The same is true of guild chat and involves not only two, but several, people.
- The entire game is a leveler. While players have in-game roles that can take too much importance in places like the cantinas, the mediation of the avatar still allows much more inhibited conversations between the players than during face-to-face encounters. MMORPGs benefit from the same partial anonymity as other computer-mediated environments (e.g. Sproull and Kiesler 1991).

- Playful conversation is the main activity game-wide. Here the rich environment of the Star Wars universe provides a constant background for jokes, play on words and other forms of humor. Whenever players band together to accomplish a mission, the overall tone is almost always humorous. As most activities other than “grinding” artisan or entertainer XP cannot really be automated, players parties roaming the wilderness are often much more interactive than what we observed in the cantinas.
- There are regulars in the entire universe of the game. While people move on and cannot reliably be found in specific locations, a large fraction of them still logs in regularly to play. For instance, even if someone is “done” with the entertainer profession and leaves the cantina, they could be found later as the mayor of a player city, or roaming the wilderness as a scout. Regularity in MMORPGs might be better expressed as frequency of play than frequentation of specific locations.

To confirm these hypotheses we would need to have access to a different data set, which we simply cannot collect: it would be interesting, however, for SWG’s team to compute similar metrics to ours on a galaxy-wide basis and seriously examine the results.

In any case, designing for sociability on a worldwide rather than place-by-place basis seems to be an increasing trend in MMORPGs. To attract more of the coveted “casual gamers” segment recent offerings have let go of building strong in-game social spaces altogether, facilitating instead association between the players no matter where they are located. The upcoming Tabula Rasa embodies this principle, as does the newly available City of Heroes. We wonder, however, what might be lost in the process. A comparative analysis of sociability in SWG against sociability in one

of these competitors would certainly be fascinating.

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