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Can A Table Stand On One Leg? Critical And Ludological Thoughts On "Star Wars: Galaxies"

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Can A Table Stand On One Leg? Critical and Ludological Thoughts on *Star Wars: Galaxies*

Timothy Burke reviews *Star Wars: Galaxies*

Sony Online Entertainment: *Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided.* Lucasarts 2003. (PC)

In 2002, looking ahead at the next generation of massively multiplayer online games (MMOG), some observers of the computer game industry placed their hopes for innovations in the upcoming game *Shadowbane* (Wolfpack Studios 2003) with its strong emphasis on unregulated player-vs-player (PvP) combat. However, many more looked to *Star Wars: Galaxies* and *The Sims Online* (Maxis 2002).

About *The Sims Online*, the less said the better. *Star Wars: Galaxies* (SWG) is a different matter. It is still an important player today in the MMOG marketplace. Given this, can *Star Wars: Galaxies* (SWG) be called a disappointment?

Financially, only Sony Online Entertainment (SOE) knows what their real expectations were. In a number of other respects, I do not hesitate to call the game deeply flawed, and I have become known as one of the game's more vehement critics. As a form of immersion into a beloved fictional universe, as a game, and as a model of development process and community management, I have little hesitation in saying that SWG was and remains a mess, sometimes spectacularly so. As a virtual world, however, SWG is much more interesting. Its attempted innovations in this area are so numerous and ambitious that it cannot simply be written off. From the perspective of academic game criticism and ludological analysis, moreover, SWG's world-simulating aspects are a fertile stimulus to further thought and investigation, particularly in terms of the possibilities and problems of economic modeling and behavior within MMOGs. Even SWG's shortcomings are "good to think".

SWG as Immersive Experience of the Star Wars Universe

The term "immersion" remains one of the more contested ideas associated with games, both in discussions between gamers themselves and in ludological scholarship.[1] Whether it exists, whether or for whom it is desirable, and what exactly it is are all up for grabs. If immersion merely means "intense involvement in a virtual world" or "psychological projection

into gameplay", SWG offers that for many players. So does any MMOG, almost by definition. But if immersion means "a feeling that the player has become part of or within a familiar or known fictional universe", SWG has little immersiveness.

It has been a common knock among players to say that SWG is not "Star Warsy"[2]. For some, this was an outright rejection of the strong virtual-world inclination in the game's design: some players assumed a Star Wars MMOG with immersive ambitions should be exclusively centered on fast-paced combat. For many other players, the judgment that the game was not "Star Warsy" had to do with the lack of correspondence of elements of the game to the Star Wars universe established in films, novels and comic books. The rhythms of gameplay for most players also bore little resemblance to the narrative structure of the films or of subsidiary Star Wars media, including computer games like *Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2003) or *Dark Forces* (LucasArts 1995). Most adventures in SWG, especially in the game's early history, have had a routinized, humdrum quality to them—hunting creatures in the wilderness and skinning their hides, or surveying for minerals and placing mining devices--rather than the high-stakes galactic civil war or the moral focus on the Jedi ethos that the fictional universe of Star Wars highlights.

These issues are not uniquely SWG's problem. All current MMOGs have a problem with heroic action and epic narrative. All of them tend to extensive repetition of tasks and activities. All of them lack dynamic game worlds that respond with persistent transformation to player actions. However, these issues afflict SWG far more intensely *because* it is a licensed property. In many ways, Star Wars has been as much a disadvantage for SWG as a benefit. If SWG were merely "Ultima Space Adventures", it might be viewed more tolerantly. A game that claims to allow players to live in the Star Wars universe is going to be held to a different standard.

That being said, there are more specific and avoidable ways in which the developers simply failed to represent a fictional universe known to many players. To quote my own earlier essay on the subject[3], "Star Wars-related content in the game feels like the product of detached, disinterested study. It's like reading a book report by a dedicated, meticulous but unimaginative high school student". Some of this has had to do with the initial absence of or poor implementation of staples of the Star Wars universe like droids, vehicles and space combat. Some of it was in the details of the game mechanics. For example, for months on end after the game came out, the profession of Creature Handler was hugely dominant in the game, as they were able to train and use multiple powerful creatures in combat to almost overwhelming advantage. As many disgruntled players commented, this led to SWG looking more like an exotic version of Pokemon than Star Wars: cities were filled to the brim with characters who were trailing three gigantic creatures behind them everywhere they went. This was changed substantially at a later date, but the initial experience had a major impact on the feel of the game.

To cite another major example, player-vs-player combat was built around the battle between the Empire and the Rebellion. This decision seems wholly sensible, but in the interest of achieving game balance, the developers initially treated these two factions as morally, dramatically, mechanistically and even visually symmetrical. In the first six months of the game's

development, you could walk up in broad daylight to a uniformed recruiter for the Rebellion in most major cities and receive a mission while Imperial players did the same around the corner. In the early months of the game, major cities were filled with rag-tag bands of identical-looking players shooting at each other while NPCs walked around disinterestedly—hardly the image of the films' pitched battles between desperate, furtive, idealistic Rebels and remorseless, fascistic and militaristic Imperials. Neither faction had any sense of distinctive connection to the fiction behind it. Early on, gameplay quests undertaken for the Rebellion or the Empire led to bizarrely wooden encounters with badly simulated major characters from the films.

The handling of Jedi characters was one of the game's most apocalyptic misfires. Nothing was more anticipated or discussed by players during the early design and testing of SWG: how would players get to be Jedi? How would the developers keep their promise to keep the numbers of Jedi down and to make Jedi secretive, given that Jedi were rare or non-existent in the time period within which the game is set (between the films *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back*? Could the developers get Jedi players to behave with some respect for their place in the game's underlying fiction? How could Jedi possibly be balanced with other professions?

Eventually the secret came out, with some hints from the developers: players could become Jedi once they had mastered and discarded a randomly selected number of other professions. Essentially, this made being a Jedi exclusively the province of hardcore, powerlevelling players, given the time and difficulty involved in mastering even one profession in the game—it was the grind to end all grinds, the most extensive treadmill ever seen in a MMOG to date, and one which incidentally devalued other professions because players trying to become Jedi simply used macros to automate their way through those professions. Once Jedi began to appear, Jedi players found that the profession was exceptionally difficult to advance in, particularly because Jedi suffered permadeath, unlike other players. Jedi complained that many of their skills did not work or were underpowered. Fixes for this inverted the situation, making Jedi exceptionally overpowered, and with their numbers rising steadily, led to a situation where player-vs-player combat was largely done only by Jedi players and a few other exotic hybrid templates. The massive overhaul of the Jedi system changed the mechanics of the grind involved and the integration of Jedi into the game, but the damage had been done.

In terms of immersion in the Star Wars universe, it would be hard to do a worse job in designing a Jedi system. The system guaranteed that Jedi would become more numerous over time, rather than being secretive or hidden. It guaranteed that most of the players who became Jedi would possess a play style directly at odds with the fictional ethos of the Jedi as they appear in Star Wars, that they would be Bartle-type achiever-killers[4]. At one point in the development of the system, one could find "light-side" Jedi lounging around star ports indolently waiting for other players to massacre—not exactly a picture that makes one think of Luke Skywalker or Mace Windu.

Even the smallest details in the game seem to break a sense of connection to Star Wars. There are languages for different alien races, but at launch, all players could quickly learn to speak all languages, more or less, and so in practical terms there were no languages, and so none of the exotic flavor they added to urban scenes in the films. The famous musical score for Star Wars was used for dramatic effect, but sparingly. And so on.

SWG as Game

None of this might matter if SWG were a compelling game, an environment where constraining rules led players to compete for clear objectives and experience the satisfaction of concrete outcomes. Or, to follow a simpler definition I've set out elsewhere, if the major activities in SWG were designed primarily to be "fun" and were experienced as such by most players.

MMOG players in general complain of game designs that are built around "treadmills" or "grinds". SWG at launch was one of the worst offenders in this regard. Not only did it have a grind, but it managed to have a grind which was both too hard and too easy all at once, where the beginning, middle and even end state of character development was often barren, where neither the journey nor the final result liberated the player from routinized, fetishistic labor.

SWG's initial design departed significantly from the highly combat-centered character templates of most MMOGs, essentially funneling gameplay along three major tracks: crafting professions like weapon smith or droid engineer; support professions like doctors, dancers, image designers and musicians; and combat professions like rifleman, bounty hunter and commando. SWG had a vision of player interdependence deeply buried in its core design, so that these were not merely separate specializations of gameplay, but were all required to interact with one another in profound ways. This has changed substantially since the massive "combat upgrade", with the game increasingly resembling a normal class-based MMOG design.

Part of the problem that emerged before the combat upgrade is that when players were properly equipped, buffed and gathered in groups, there was virtually nothing in the game that could withstand them even briefly or offer any kind of challenge. Moreover, there was enormous repetition in player-vs-environment hunting. One could wander an hour from any city on the entire planet of Corellia, for example, and still come across essentially endless numbers of spawns of low-level creatures that virtually no one bothered to hunt. Once you had seen your five thousandth gubbur[5] or durni[6], you were not willing to shoot one even out of boredom.

Player-vs-player combat suffered from the outset from extremely serious balance issues—at any given moment in the game's history, a single template or skill more or less completely dominated competition, though the particular such template or skill changed often as the developers frantically tried to balance the competition. Part of the problem was also that some of the mechanics of combat had a kind of baroque and contradictory character: if you were not fully buffed, it was relatively easy to kill yourself by using your special combat skills during a fight.

Socializing and support professions, on the other hand, were often enormous fun in the hands of dedicated players. Musicians and dancers who directly controlled the actions of their characters had access to a set of creative and performative game mechanics[7] that no other MMOG offered. The doctrine of interdependence, however, meant that entertainers were required for one kind of crucial healing of combat players—and this in turn led to many cantinas being filled with dancers and musicians using recursive macros to automate their activities for hours and hours on end, which was not particularly fun for either the entertainers or the audiences who depended upon them. Support professions whose services were not commonly needed

by most players when the game went live, on the other hand, like image designers, tended to find it very difficult to advance and not particularly fun in other ways to play. From the standpoint of having fun, it can be bad to be needed too much, but equally bad to not be needed at all. Most support players either had nothing active to do, or were effectively reduced in their gameplay to being NPCs who must constantly and passively service other players.

Crafting is the area of the game that I was most personally drawn to when I was playing actively. It was extremely central to SWG, but has been substantially disrupted by the later "combat upgrade". Players in the early history of the game could craft weapons, armor, buildings, vehicles, foodstuffs and drugs (which buffed players), clothing, genetically-engineered animals and droids. Player crafters were the only source of many of these items, and were always the best source in terms of quality and effectiveness.

Crafting was a hugely complex, intricate activity. A crafter began his career with a limited number of schematics that allowed him to make particular items in his area of expertise. As he gained experience, he could move up skill trees that opened more and more schematics of greater quality and power[8] to the character. Schematics required resources, and the more advanced the schematic, the more detailed and complex the requirements were. Players had to search for rare resources, some of which were only available once every three or four months (real-time). Upper-level schematics also required identical subcomponents manufactured with the help of a player-operated factory. A few advanced items sometimes required components manufactured by another crafting profession. Some also had slots for the addition of optional rare components that greatly increased the item's power or effectiveness. Players with the appropriate skills could operate vendors that sold the player's wares to other players.

Like so much else about SWG, however, the system was sometimes less than the sum of its parts. It appeared to be built on a solid foundation of "mini-games", of risk-reward decisions made during the crafting of any single item such as experimentation or materials choice. However, sometimes experimentation did nothing. In some crafting professions, the relative quality of the resources or components used in manufacture made no difference to the final result. In most others, only the best-quality item made with the best quality materials was even remotely possible to sell to other players.

Let me lay out the example of weapon smith, which I pursued myself. Within several weeks of the game going live, it became clear that only a master weapon smith, the final tier of the profession, would be able to actually **sell** what he made. There were a great many reasons for this. First, there was the "weapons certification" system that controlled interdependencies between combat professions and crafters in which combatants gained the ability to use the most advanced weapons quite early in their development, but weapon smiths could only make those weapons once they were masters. This meant that the demand on the combat side bottlenecked at a much earlier moment into a small supply pool, and that combatants would accept nothing less than the most advanced weapons. It had more to do with a hurried change made during Beta in which "schematic revocation" was removed from the game—originally, a master crafter would lose the ability to make simple components as he advanced up the skill tree, creating a

forced market interdependency between lower-level crafters and higher-level ones—the masters would have to buy the components from apprentices and make the finished items. With that system out of the game, in most professions, masters could do it all, and do it better, and had production capacities that allowed them to outstrip possible demand easily. (In many crafting professions, a single master crafter could satisfy several weeks' worth of the aggregate demand of hundreds of other players in a single night of work, which understandably led to a massive glut of the early economy in a number of areas.)

The consequence of this in the case of weapon smith was that the aspiring player had to "grind" to the top rank by making items that possessed no possible utility to anyone, that were discarded as soon as they were made. In the course of working towards master rank, a weapon smith likely made and then destroyed hundreds of thousands of valueless pistol or rifle barrels, each one requiring numerous units of steel, which had to be mined or purchased, with each act of manufacture requiring navigating through a complex series of screens and mouseclicking multiple times.

I do not think that anyone has experienced this kind of activity as "fun", though there are always Bartle-type achievers who feel strongly that to have fun in a MMOG one must first pay one's dues, preferably as painfully as possible. In any event, it was a system which promised much more than it delivered in terms of a game. Whether the economy that resulted was fun, or a proper game, is an issue I will take up in my conclusion.

The Management, Design and Community Relations of SWG

SWG's developers have explained failures of immersion in Star Wars by appealing to the exigencies of designing a game. They often have explained failures of gameplay by appealing to the exigencies of the Star Wars license. If that isn't enough, they have attributed other failures in the development process by appealing to the exigencies of the MMOG programming as a whole, or specific shortfalls in their own resource budgets. When all of those explanations fail, they have blamed the players. Finally, they have apologized and pledged to do better in the future, whereupon the whole cycle has begun again.

Conflicts between players and live development teams are a standard part of the MMOG marketplace—one of the reasons that consultancies like the Themis Group[9] carved out a successful business niche. SWG is not unique in having a fractious relation with its customers, but it is at the negative end of the spectrum. I have speculated before[10] about the sources of SWG's clear problems at the level of process and management: understaffing or under resourcing, internal personality clashes or design disagreements, bad code management or internal organization are all possibilities.

The only thing that is clear is the result. In the first six months of play, the list of major systems that were working even marginally well was vastly outstripped by non-functioning systems and game-breaking technical problems. Every subsequent patch and development of the game brought serious technical issues. Again and again, when the developers moved to fix one system, they frequently broke another. When they added new content, it often suffered from severe bugs that took months to address. When they balanced one profession, they unbalanced another. They moved at a snail's

pace when it came to fixing game-destroying exploits and bugs, and as a result profoundly disrupted gameplay that became "normal" when they finally did address an exploit. Major duping bugs, though reported in detail by players, were left alone for months after launch. Exploits in missions that allowed players to rapidly generate staggering sums of currency without any risk in very short time periods were left in place for months after launch. In August 2004, the game's forums were in an uproar because players lacking the proper skills to operate vendors were scheduled to lose their vendors in the next major patch[11]. This seemed sensible enough, until you added that the players who were operating 'illegal' vendors had been doing so for over a year. For much of the game's life, there was no comprehensive publicly available list of known issues maintained by the developers, and frequently developers maintained that systems were working or bug-free when players knew full well that they were not.

What is more important is that the development team has struggled to an abnormal degree with predictively modeling how players will act within the game, while also often having what appears to be a poor understanding of actually existing dominant modes and forms of gameplay in the present. Following SWG, I have lost count of the number of hastily made changes that have resulted in wrenching and seemingly undesired transformations to combat balance or the internal economy of the game. The recent combat upgrade had propagating effects on the rest of the game's systems that the developers either failed to anticipate or decided were tolerable "collateral damage" in moving the game to some new mechanics. The developers have had little understanding of the incentive structures and resulting behavior that their designs created, or continued to misattribute player behavior to sociological externalities, e.g., believing that players are predestined to play a particular way regardless of what the game offers.

Most profoundly, however, I am not sure that SWG can ever recover from the extremely deep conceptual contradictions nestled deep in its design. Characters initially climbed skill trees as they developed, and there were at launch clear remnants of an early design idea that players might be "jack-of-all-trades" combining an eclectic range of diverse skills, without the constraint of classes as they are typically implemented in MMOGs. But fixed professions were added later, and then tightly constrained the choices players could make in terms of skills development, even more so since recent major changes. There was initially an impression of a broad range of choices, but in many cases, professions only had about half-a-profession's worth of actual skills (or less). This contributed to the existence of a "grind" in many cases (where players have to march through empty or useless skill trees they have no interest in to get to the skill they want). The design also straightjacketed players inside of professions which look conceptually exciting but turned out to be hollow or almost wholly unimplemented in the first year of live play, such as Smuggler, Ranger, Squad Leader, Image Designer or Politician. (Smuggler still remains a largely hypothetical profession.) It was a system that had all the disadvantages of a pure skill-based design *and* a pure class-based design without the advantages of either.

Similarly, the game's design was deeply premised on forcing interdependence between players, but many changes late in Beta and since abandoned piecemeal aspects of that interdependence, leaving an inconsistent patchwork of moments of forced interactions that players largely

resented. Antagonistic or contradictory models of "ideal" economic activity and faucet-sink management of currency flows existed within the game at every level. Virtual world commitments to realism and immersion collided violently with mechanisms design to promote ease of gameplay. The consequence was that much of the game was a Rube Goldberg mess, and it is small wonder that the developers often broke something when they fix something: it might have been impossible, given the game's developmental history, to know what was going to happen technically when the code was changed.

There is an interesting question embedded within this history. Are some MMOG players perpetually dissatisfied, or is their retention as customers largely independent of whether the development process is well managed or customer service effectively delivered? Are the players who are attracted to the idea of SWG, for whatever reason, essentially impossible to drive away, and those not attracted to its core precepts impossible to retain?

The Virtual World of SWG

These questions seem important because SWG does offer a virtual world with unparalleled depth and complexity in the MMOG marketplace. The world of Norrath in *Everquest* may be bigger and filled with a wider variety of opponents and locations, but it lacks the capacious economic and socializing dimensions of SWG. The world of *Ultima Online* (Electronic Arts 1997) may have a richness of internal history that SWG does not yet have, but for every world-simulating system UO can offer, SWG can trump it with two more. *A Tale in the Desert* (eGenesis 2003) may offer a more intricate economy, but its graphics and gameplay are vastly simpler, and it lacks combat. Alongside SWG, a MMOG like *City of Heroes* (Cryptic Studios 2004) does indeed look like what some of its critics say it is, a simplistic first-person shooter with persistently kept statistics of player performance. Both as player and as scholar, I am most interested in world-simulating MMOGs, and so for all my criticisms, I am still drawn to SWG. Against that siren call, perhaps no failure or misjudgment is fatal. Or perhaps grand ambitions demand gentler and more tolerant appraisal.

There is a great deal that SWG offers to a player seeking a virtual world, much of which remains intact despite major changes to the game's mechanics over time. It may not be the fictional universe of Star Wars but it is **a** world. Character creation is fantastically detailed, and results in characters who are as individualized and identifiable physiognomically as in real-life. Characters have a striking range of animated emotes available to them, many of which are triggered automatically by appropriate words used on chat channels. The worlds themselves are visually rich: the plains of Corellia are filled with wheat-like grasses that sway in the breeze and populated with creatures who simulate ecological relationships, with predators appearing near to and sometimes actually stalking their prey. The worlds have a real sense of organic, lived-in geography to them, and each has a distinctive look and feel.

Player housing is implemented on a scale that is unprecedented in MMOGs[12]. There are sprawlingly massive player cities, densely packed commercial districts of players hawking their wares, remote settlements and hermitages, and so on. An individual player house may be decorated in a wide variety of ways. Characters have a wide range of clothing available to them. The tools for socializing and role-playing are astonishingly rich and varied. The user

interface for the game is heavily customizable and includes a wide variety of tools, including support for a range of play-enhancing macros.

Only a few MMOGs with crafting have tried to make crafting into a **game**, with a competitive, risk-reward character. Few MMOGs had the courage to essentially get rid of NPC vendors altogether and center everything on a player-run economy. The cycling of resources, the variety of rare looted substances that can enhance crafted objects, and the complexity of schematics produced an economy that at its best was both elaborate and vibrant. A tremendous amount of game activity in SWG has revolved around the making and exchange of items and currency. Players were able to make choices and dynamically shape the look of their game world and their characters in profound ways.

The world-simulating capacities that the game offers in combination with a graphical engine that strongly encourages psychological projection into the game world puts SWG into a different league than any of its competitors. Most of the game's major problems could fairly be attributed to the depth of its world-simulating ambitions. If *City of Heroes* or *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment 2001) had relatively smooth launches and post-launch development, that may have a great deal to do with the limited conceptual ambitions of both games. SWG reached for something far vaster, and if it fell on its face in many ways, it may still in its ruination be grand enough to satisfy players who will settle for nothing less than a complete virtual world.

SWG: A Ludological Reflection

For game scholars, SWG is a reasonably fertile platform for further study. Some questions about it will be difficult to answer due to the unusually strong defensiveness of its development team and corporate management, which at one point led to the closure of the game's official forums to outside viewers. We have reached the odd point in the history of MMOGs where managers aggressively combat the spread of negative news as this is considered (accurately, I think) to influence the decision of other subscribers about whether to continue with a game. It is almost like the old idea of the "mandate of Heaven" in the political history of China: when a game is perceived (rightly or wrongly) to be bleeding subscribers, it starts to actually bleed subscribers, and a snowball effect gains speed rapidly. As one commentator at the website Terra Nova observed, this is part of the unresolved tension between subscription multiplayer games being both "a publishing industry and a service industry"[13]. This contradiction can make it difficult for scholars seeking information or cooperation from developers, however.

SWG, by striving to become a virtual world in the tradition of *Ultima Online*, certainly has put a number of interesting propositions about the internal politics, economics and sociology of MMOG gameplay on the table in new ways. Moreover, from time to time, the developers have provided important data about these issues that amplify ethnographic observations of SWG's gameplay. There are a lot of issues of interest to game scholars that could profitably be centered within SWG: studies of psychological investment in avatars, questions about the changing structure of quest design and the debates between narratologists and ludologists that this informs, questions about the future of the MMOG marketplace, quantitative tracking of the in-game economy, and the always compelling problems of community formation both inside and around a MMOG.

To recount my own sense of discovery within the game, one of the pieces of data that has been published by Raph Koster[14] helped me to think beyond the conclusions of a paper on MMOG economies that I gave at a 2001 conference in Bristol[15]. In that paper, I offered a typology of economic playstyles intended to complement the famous Bartle typology, some observations on the relational field connecting those playstyles, and some questions about how the design of virtual economies interacts with player behavior. The most important open question for me was whether there was some kind of economic or social design which might allow for a fuller or richer expression of player strategies, and whether player behaviors derived most powerfully from the sociological and psychological predicates that players bring to MMOGs or from the structure of rules and gameplay established by developers.

For me, observing SWG has resolved that last question in particular. Raph Koster[16] (for whom I have tremendous respect) and his SOE colleagues have a strong tendency, derived in part from the tradition of Bartle's typologies, to understand player behavior as coming almost entirely from outside the game, from fixed consumer or gameplaying preferences, from cultural norms, or even from fixed constructs of "human nature". Koster's data showed that after a year of gameplay holdings of in-game currency on all servers followed a power-law distribution, with the vast majority of wealth being held by a mere handful of individuals. This apparently was a relatively satisfying finding for Koster, who commented, "This isn't necessarily something to be discouraged by - rather, we take it as a sign that the game economy is replicating characteristics of the real world economy. Since one of our goals was to have a game economy that can provide ongoing interesting strategy gameplay, seeing real world patterns manifest is something we were looking forward to"[17]. There's a strong sense that he—and perhaps other developers—think this distribution is the consequence of some intrinsic tendency of all economies to follow a power-law.

In his documentation of the SWG economy, Koster acknowledged the role of duping in pouring massive amounts of counterfeit credit into the game's economy and concedes that this helped small numbers of individuals to quickly compile fortunes that were hugely disproportionate to the holdings of the average player. No doubt some of the plutocrats were directly involved in the duping, but many of the early SWG billionaires had nothing to do with it. They were merely in the right place at the right time, crafting and selling the very best in weapons, armor and other items that were regarded as "must-haves" by other players, and able to charge any price they liked as a result—prices which could be met because of the in-flow of counterfeit or exploited currency.

This might sound like capitalism in action, but most players who were in the right place at the right time got there the way that players often gain an advantage in MMOGs: through massive investment of repetitious real-world labor time plus an avid insider's knowledge of exploitable bugs or flaws in gameplay. The earliest master crafters on most servers either grinded methodically for 24 hours a day, using resources delivered in bulk to them by guild members or friends (and sometimes letting other guild members control their character while they slept) or they used a crucial exploit available in the early game whereupon a crafter could gain full experience for making items automatically in a factory. Players using the exploit simply

acquired, or were given by friends, the maximum number of factories and vaulted quickly to the master tier. Once the exploit was stopped, the gap between the earliest master crafters and other players could only widen. The pumping of credit into the economy from both legitimate missions and exploitable ones, plus duping, meant that massive sums of currency flowed to the few early mastercrafters. This subsequently allowed them to strongly dominate the market in rare enhancements added later which have become the major source of market differentiation among mastercrafters. The legitimate, non-exploitable credit faucets also were tightened considerably later on, meaning also that later entrants to the economy have had to do much more to earn much less.

So much as in the real world, actually existing oligopolies were achieved through the active if often unconscious assistance of the virtual state—with the additional problem, discussed below, that this "state" is invisible and exterior to the game world. SWG's economy is a *political economy*, not a "natural" one. The players who defended the subsequent distributions as normal[18] not only misunderstood its history (and, as I noted in my Bristol paper, often cite a fairly fractured set of real-world economic tropes in their representations of the state of things), but also tended to fall back reflexively on something rather like the labor theory of value, arguing that distinctions within the virtual economy were the product of hard labor and therefore morally legitimate. Yes, but this is labor outside the virtual world, not inside of it, and the productivity of that labor is largely a mechanistic function of time spent multiplied by the efficiency of exploits and the use of out-of-game social networks.

The deeper problem is that Koster—and some players who ardently defended the game—take the game's economy to be "working as intended" not merely because it bears a mimetic (at times, almost hyper real or Brechtian) resemblance to the real world, but because players in the game engage in economic activities, because there are many transactions, because there are many shops, because many items get produced. This is rather like saying that chess is working or is satisfying because you have to move your bishop diagonally. The question of whether the game is fun or good or set in an interesting virtual world is not determined by whether players do in profusion what the game's structure dictates they must do in profusion. If players produce items, run shops, or transact—or exploit the game to gain massive plutocratic hoards--that is because SWG's core rule structures require them to do so, require them to be not just economic actors, but *homo economicus*.

At the 2003 State of Play conference in New York[19], legal scholar Yochai Benkler expressed frustration with the announcement that the MMOG Second Life had implemented a model that granted players intellectual property rights over objects they created in the game world. Benkler asked why this was regarded as daring, when the truly daring thing might be to rethink the normative framework of property and individuality in a virtual world, to experiment rather than simply import a contradictory 200-year old real world legal framework governing intellectual property.

My frustration in this case is somewhat similar. Does a virtual economy that follows a Pareto distribution or centers on mechanisms of hyper-accumulation make one think of the fictional universe of Star Wars, give one a sense of experiential immersion in a galaxy far, far away? Star Wars the

fictional property seems to have wealth and poverty, so perhaps so. However, is the role that players want to play in such a universe, their sense of desired imaginative investment, more about being Uncle Owen and less about being Luke Skywalker? No one comes into *Ultima Online* planning to play an anonymous serf, and yet, a massive social foundation of serf-like labor ought to be the essence of economic realism in a faux-medieval setting. If Koster is satisfied with a power law distribution of wealth because it is realistic, why doesn't he also want most players to be explicitly framed as a laboring class within a pyramidal economy? Somebody is doing manual labor down in the spice mines of Kessel, after all.

Is there an economy that we can imagine which is world-simulating *and* evocative of the central imaginative and narrative structures of Star Wars at the same time? Can't we be more imaginative, as long as we are experimenting? Why not try to see if we can build a virtual world whose economy is a part of a storytelling strategy, part of making an exotic shared fiction, rather than an economy that returns us right to where we started?

Is a power law distribution fun? Does it actually offer, as Koster puts it, opportunities for strategic gameplay? This would be my harshest critique of Koster's claims: the answer is for me is no, not much. The players at the upper end of the distribution got there not by playing the game as the most active or aggressive exploiters of development mistakes and negligence, but by being the players who played spent the most time in the game. The consequence within the economic "game" is the same as it would be in player-vs-player combat, the same as it often is in MMOGs: a few players dominating for all time. Defenders of the game protested about six months after the game went live that there was no barrier to entry for a new player, but this was and remains flatly incorrect. The top end of the income distribution possessed not just sufficient wealth in terms of currency but sufficient hoarded top-quality resources and rare enhancement items that they could not only dominate the economy but if they so choose choke off and underprice any later would-be competitors indefinitely. They might not have bothered to do so, but this was like not fighting an opponent who is so inconsequential that they are not worth the time to kill. The only threat to the top end of the distribution was boredom, because they have all the wealth in the universe and nothing to spend it on.

Compare this with a gameplay model aimed instead at reproducing fast-paced price competition between Mom-and-Pop stores in a constrained retail economy with clear upper and lower bounds of economic success. It is not that capitalism is not fun, or is not a good model for a game—it is a question of what the appropriate capitalist model is. SWG's developers have settled for a model that mimics the historic rise of monopoly capitalism or the appearance of oligopolies, a model that underwrites plutocratic accumulation. I would suggest that of all the "fun" or game-like modeling of capitalism that one could implement in a persistent-world MMOG, this may be the least fun, the one that turns persistence into the gaming equivalent of hardened arteries, a fixed social structure that deters later entrants to the game.

So does this economy simulate a world, give one a sense of virtual verisimilitude? As I've said, absolutely, but even here, once you see how SWG's economy works, you then have to ask whether the answer might—or might not--be to push for even more verisimilitude. I argued in my Bristol paper that it was best for future MMOGs to think about implementing even

more elaborate closed economies with more choices and branches, more player autonomy and control. SWG does a lot of that, but it leaves me thinking that either much more is required, or that the proposition that virtual economies make virtual worlds is itself flawed.

Think of what SWG's economy actually lacks as a virtual world. Currency comes from nowhere and flows to nowhere: there is no "state" of any kind. It is a very simplistic faucet-drain model, and yet, one could imagine a version of SWG where mission payouts were set by players to accomplish things players needed accomplished, and returned to political entities run by players to be spent as revenue on necessary infrastructure, military operations and so on. The problem here is of course players would use such systems to twink other players, level too rapidly and so on, and that players find it too much trouble to regulate themselves when handed too much power over the game world, or so the story oft told about *Ultima Online*'s early days goes. The result of SWG's simple faucet-drain model is not just that it weakens it as a game and as an immersive fiction, but even as a world-simulation.

Player-conceived economic innovation, which I think is really what most people regard as being classically "fun" or "game-like" about entrepreneurial capitalism, is impossible in SWG. You cannot make an item that the game's developers haven't already allowed you to make. You cannot paint a painting that isn't already painted, write a book that isn't already written, craft a gun that isn't already designed for you by the developers. You can't gain a competitive advantage by building the better mousetrap, because everyone has to build the same mousetrap. You can only decorate your store differently than others, publicize your offerings more craftily (in-game and out-of-game), offer items that other players do not bother with because of low demand. You cannot do anything truly new. Not that any other MMOG allows you to, but SWG, by placing crafting as centrally within its design as it does, awakens the desire for still more, makes players realize the height of the silicon ceiling, sharpens the disjuncture between the creative desires they bring to thinking about economic life in the real world and the ways they'd like to act on those desires in a virtual world. As a player, I'd like to be the Steve Jobs of SWG, but the game's design allows me only to choose between being Wal-Mart, a cut-priced underseller like Crazy Eddie or a marginal player whose economic activities are a kind of decorative character shtick like a funny hat or an amusing name.

For me, observing SWG's economy sharply accentuates the question of where MMOGs-as-virtual-worlds need to go in the future. It is possible, as one observer argues[20], that they need to implement economic models that are much more sophisticated in conception and design than simple faucet-drain models, that are more dynamically responsive, that are even more like the everyday economies we already live within. But it is also possible that MMOGs do not need economies at all. I begin to wonder if all the interesting ludological things a MMOG can do-- achieving a virtual world, or immersion into a fictional universe, or even most simply, being *fun*-- may depend on moving MMOG design dramatically away from most of the driving gestures and aspirations, good and bad, that informed the sprawling, contradictory mess called *Star Wars: Galaxies*.

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Notes

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