

# **Everquest: An Equation for Addiction**

**Whalen Rozelle**

**3/18/02 Lowood**

## **An Equation for Addiction**

Wolfwalker pulls himself over the sand dune. A halfling in the middle of the Oasis of Marr, he is busy honing his druidic skills by hunting down a group of orcs that have been terrorizing traveling merchants and gypsies in the area. Spotting an orc priest, he casts a spell that commands local flora to ensnare the surprised orc. After Wolfwalker proceeds to pummel it with fire spells, the orc falls dead. He rifles through its pack and finds five silver coins, the spoils of combat. In a dark room, I chuckle to myself, and type in the commands to make Wolfwalker, my avatar on Everquest, sit down and recover from the fight. Glancing at the clock, I notice that it is five in the morning. School starts in a mere three hours. Pausing to consider this, I shrug and turn back to my computer—the only source of light in an otherwise pitch-black house. “Just kill one more orc,” I mutter to myself, and realize that I won’t be getting any sleep. Again.

This night – and early morning -- exemplifies the experiences of many gamers that have played Everquest. A massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), Everquest continues to dominate its genre. The game hosts a subscriber base of over 400,000, even after three years and even though competitors have released a number of newer game releases since Everquest’s initial launch date. Through looking at Everquest’s history and design, I will delve into the question of why Everquest has been able to capture and hold a large fraction of the online-gaming market, and what techniques its designer used to develop such and fun, addictive game.

Everquest takes place in the imaginary world of Norrath. Because most MMORPGs take place in an open-ended world, game creators usually invent intricate stories and histories to instill life into the game. Everquest is no exception. Verant

Interactive, Everquest's design company, decided to incorporate religion and deities into their game's history. According to legend, the gods in part had created Norrath in their image. They either directly created beings or altered what had previously existed. For instance, "on the surface of Norrath did Tunare create the Elves and [...] Rallos Zek the Giants." "Innoruk, [the] Prince of Hate snatched away the first Elven King and Queen [and] rebuilt them into his own dark sadistic image" (History of Norrath). However, while the designers generated a lot of Everquest's virtual world through divine creationism, they did not engineer in predestination; instead they decided to remove the gods from Norrath and leave it in chaos. Such an environment provided ample opportunity for the players to mold their own presents and futures.

In fact, this call for adventure and the freedom to shape the world are high on the marketing agenda for Sony Interactive, the publisher of Everquest:

It is in this age you find yourself, an age filled with wonder. The elder races have begun to reclaim their former glory. The younger races have matured, and an active economy stretches across Odus, Antonica, and Faydwer. And while conflict and battle is hardly rare, it has also been centuries since open war has plagued the lands. A myriad of alliances and factions exist, friend and foe plot and scheme, and the world of Norrath is ripe for action. Equip yourself for adventure, seek allies and knowledge, and head out into a rich world of dungeons, towers, crypts, even planes and realities beyond your imagination. Learn skills, earn experience, acquire treasure and equipment, meet friends and encounter enemies. [You] assume the role of a noble human knight, a vicious dark elf thief, a greedy dwarven merchant, or whatever suits your desire (History of Norrath).

This method of creating a story and leaving the rest to be discovered or created by the player is common to MMORPGs. According to Ken Karl, producer of Asheron's Call, "the goal of an MMORPG is to have players impacting the world" (Lecture 3/14). In Everquest, it is an explicit goal of the game to let players interact in the world and choose their own destiny. Ultimately, in Everquest the players themselves influence the shape and trajectory of the gaming environment, Norrath. In fact, many characters that

rise to fame inside the Everquest gaming community are honored with items named after them or by becoming part of Norrath's official history. Even if players only hear of these items by rumor, this gives them an even greater feeling that they are part of the world.

As it states in the description of Norrath, players have many options open to them, and it is the extent of the options that makes MMORPGs special. For example, a player can side with good and play the role of a knight, helping those in need and vanquishing evil. Or, he can promote evil by meddling in the dark art of necromancy and attack guards of good cities. While such choice is not limited to MMORPGS, it is nature of the choice that is special. Some regular role playing games (RPGs) may allow players to choose whether they are good or evil. But, in these traditional games there still is a lack of human interaction to the story. According to Ray Wininger:

Computer story games, on the other hand, have an inverse set of strengths and weaknesses; they can show you the imaginary milieu and thrust you into a pitched gun battle, but they ask your imagination to supply the 'interaction' and 'open-endedness' that complete the escapist milieu (Wininger).

Everquest, along with most other MMORPGs, is at an advantage in its storytelling aspect compared to other computer games. It can still show the player the imaginary through its graphics. But, there is also open-endedness to the game. The path of the game is not preset. There is true, unplanned interaction within the story because there are other players in the game, some of whom choose opposing paths.

This open-ended quality of Everquest is one of its most appealing factors and perhaps has made it so long-lived. By being able to choose different paths, the players can affect the game differently—opening up endless possibilities for the game's future. One example of this occurring was during an event put on by the Game Masters (GM). A group of unusually small Cyclopes were playing a game near a commonly occupied area.

Most players reacted in a bloodthirsty manner, as they usually do, and decided to attack the group. This wasn't out of the ordinary, because the vast majority of monsters in the game are there to be killed. However, some of the young Cyclopes began to call for help and question why they were being attacked. At that point, a smaller group sympathized with the plight of the monsters and began to simultaneously heal them and convince the other group to cease attacking. From the actions of the smaller group to save the creatures, several Cyclopes survived and told their story that contained both history and the potential for future quests (Author's experience). However, Everquest did nothing to force the players to do so. Had the Cyclopes been killed, the possibility for the continuing storyline and historical information would probably have been lost and would have changed the future of the game. The players have a role in how the game develops. Because they help create the world, they feel a greater bond with the game and become more immersed into it.

Everquest is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. The MMORPG genre is comprised of games where the player controls a character in another world, and the world is populated by many other players. One of the defining aspects of Everquest, like other MMORPGs, is the sheer number of people playing in the same environment. Multi-user domains (MUDs) are the broad genre that contains MMORPGs. In a MUD, players from different locations connect through the Internet to play a game. Following this tradition, Everquest gamers first connect to the Internet through their own service provider and then to one of Verant's servers to play. The servers keep track of a player's locations, statistics and interaction with the environment and relay any information needed back to the player. In this way, these games became unique in that for the first

time they allowed thousands, indeed tens of thousands, of people to play a game in the same environment at the same time.

To find the beginnings of MMORPGs, such as Everquest, one must travel back to the early days of computing. Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle created the first MUD in 1980 at Essex University (Bartle). Although it was designed to be a “large-scale up-and-running multi-player Adventure,” seeing the connection between the Essex MUD and MMORPGs is not as easy compared to later MUDs. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when dial-up modems became commonplace in the home, various MUDs were developed for a larger audience. Some of those games, what Ken Karl terms “the First Wave,” are more readily identifiable as MMORPGs ancestors. The most influential games were probably the mainstream fantasy MUDs, such as Three Kingdoms or Gemstone, because they had a similar design in terms of the gameplay and social aspects.

Everquest’s more immediate origins lie with Verant Interactive (formerly 989 Studios). Brad McQuaid, a programmer at the time, proposed the idea of a graphical, commercial MUD. He was subsequently hired by Sony Interactive Studios to develop the game. There were 23 people on the original design team, with John Smedley and Brad McQuaid acting as management and many others who developed multiple aspects of the game (Interview with Insiders). For instance, Geoffrey Zatkin, who is now largely credited as one of the main designers of the game, was hired as a level designer and got promoted first to world builder and finally game designer (Zatkin bios). Another example is Bill Trost, who was a game designer, artist and lead world builder (Everquest Trilogy manual, 140). Although he was officially commissioned to design Everquest in 1996, Brad McQuaid was able to use previous design projects within Verant to develop

technology and graphics engines that he would later use with Everquest. Taking that design time into account, EQ spent roughly four to five years in the development cycle.

On its release date of March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1999, Everquest became an immediate success. Acquiring over 50,000 subscribers during its first month alone, it quickly surpassed Ultima Online as the premiere MMORPG in the market. In fact, it gained subscribers so quickly that their servers frequently overloaded during the first months of operation. Before EQ's release, the world of MUDs comprised of older, online text-based games and one mainstream graphical MUD—Ultima Online (UO). With UO as its sole competitor, EQ was one of the first into a relatively unexploited market of gaming.

The success of Everquest has done much for the genre of MMORPGs. Along with the other members of its generation, Ultima Online, Asheron's Call and Dark Age of Camelot, Everquest has helped attract 800,000 subscribers to the world of MMORPGs. Everquest dominates the market with over half of the subscribers. After this unimagined success, many new games were announced, including Star Wars Galaxies, Everquest 2 and Asheron's Call 2. Without Everquest's initial success, however, it is doubtful that companies smaller than Sony or Microsoft would have been able to risk investing the millions of dollars that was needed to research and design the next generation MMORPG. While Everquest was not the first graphics-based MUD, it expanded the genre's popularity, added to its unique technological base, and allowed for further development.

Part of Everquest's success undoubtedly has also been due to the realistic nature of the action environment into which the player is inserted and lives out his virtual life and to the flexibility that is engineered into the game. In Everquest, the player creates a character based on medieval lore ranging from wizards and warriors to druids and bards,

and then sets foot into the world of Norrath. He can then do a variety of actions: seek-out-and-complete quests, contact his class' guildhall and train in skills, or arm himself to kill the local vermin and gain experience. Undoubtedly, it is in part this variety of sub-games that keeps the interest of participating players and caters to a broader number of people.

That freedom of action provided in the gameplay is also expressed in the presentation of the game. Players are offered several different perspectives to play from. The most commonly used perspective is the first-person view. This view is used for normal activities like fighting, trading or traveling.



Antracus and his skeletal minion attack an orc oracle: An example of 1<sup>st</sup> person view mode

However, in the spirit of unconstrained game play, Everquest also allows for a third person viewpoint. From that angle, you can rotate 360 degrees around the character as well as up or down. While the perspective is not as practical, it still provides a good way to admire the graphics and take group screenshots at large events.



**Antracus and his skeletal minion with two friends in the game, from a 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective**

One of Everquest's strengths is its design towards allowing the player to pursue, and indeed create, a variety of objectives when playing the game. In a typical first person shooter (FPS), there is only one goal: killing all the enemies and beating the game. Occasionally, there will be a secondary goal of saving an innocent bystander or some other closely related objective. But, there is not much variance to the game. In Everquest, goals are not pre-determined, and are only really limited by the player's creativity or desires.

To further examine the these factors that have heavily influenced Everquest's design, in the next part of this paper I look at several of the most common goals of the game. The fundamentally one of the basic goals for almost everyone is to become stronger and more powerful. This can be accomplished by two means—slaying monsters for experience and items or questing. Success in either task helps the player move up in EQ society, improving their status and allowing them to move up in the future even quicker.



**The same fight between Antracus and the orc, this time in semi-transparent mode**

One hypothesis of EQ's success may be that it has tapped into one of the fundamental desires of individuals: to consistently make progress. In other words, one of the major cultural quirks of our society that impacted the design of Everquest is our need

for progress. As Ken Karl stated, “our society is a progressive one, and people expect that same progress they feel in real life to be in the game as well.” Since the country was formed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the United States has had a history of almost unimpeded progress. Today, the major value of most parents is to provide their children with the opportunity to lead a better life than their own. All this culminates into a collective expectation of progress, and that is carried into the game industry—including Everquest. Because fighting monsters for experience is the most effective means of character progress, this became the central design aspect and goal of Everquest.

As expected from the title of the game, quests are an integral part of Everquest. They range from delivering packages to another non-player character (NPC) in another town to complicated multi-step quests that can take months to complete. The rewards for questing varies based on the level of difficulty and the amount of time put into completion. Hence, the progress a person makes in EQ and the rewards that he gains is satisfying to the player. EQ is tapping a fundamental emotion of humans.

But, technology and communications makes the maintenance of this aspect of the game difficult and this in turn affects how they design the game. While quests can be a long and involved process, one of Everquest’s design flaws is its limitation in possibilities. Quests, once implemented, stay the same. As a result, when a group of people solves a quest, the solution to any puzzles or riddles circulates to everyone. Many people complain that all the quests involve killing a monster for an item, but realistically, this must occur. A good example of why this is can be seen in older games like Dungeons and Dragons. A facet of many pen and paper Dungeons and Dragons game is the riddle. When used for the first time, riddles are tricky and players who solve them

deserve reward. However, if solving a riddle in Everquest gave experience and an item, the quest would lose its difficulty almost immediately. Solutions would be on Internet for all to see, and anyone could finish the quest without thought. Therefore, Verant recognizes that some risk must always be present in order to justify reward, and makes the player kill monsters to finish quests.

Another major goal in the game is to amass wealth, which obviously has its own parallel in the real world of human motivation. While killing monsters and completing quests can amass wealth, a common and effective method for increasing ones worth is to trade. In Everquest, and all other MMORPGs, economies arise based on both scarcity and perceived value—and these economies change. The benefits of having trading being a feasible method of acquiring wealth is that it balances the need for what is termed “blood thirst,” where all a player does is to hunt monsters. If the best way to accomplish any goal is to kill monsters, that is all anyone will do in the game, and make it very close-minded. However, being able to make a profit by analyzing the current demand for new items, obtaining them and proceeding to sell them for a much greater value than their worth adds another facet to the game that can keep players interested in playing longer (Ken Karl Lecture 3/14).

The obvious influence on the economy and trading aspect of Everquest is the United State’s business culture. Living in a capitalistic economy and a materialistic society makes money and the amassing of wealth extremely positive. Again, just as players carry their need for progress into the game, players always want to have more money, obtain more items and become rich. This helps in developing the economy and allowing trade as a feasibly option because of fluctuating prices. If the game were to

calculate the value of items based on scarcity alone, trading wouldn't be viable because of the lack of fluctuation. However, players influence the game by creating a demand for certain items. If a trader can find out that an item is in demand, he can sell it for more money than he purchased it for. This combination of human need for immediate gratification and the flexible design of Everquest's economy allows for this aspect of the game to flourish.

The last common goal of the game for many people is to socialize. Most activities in Everquest, especially when a character is high level, take hours to set up and complete. I have personally experienced a time when a group of friends and I tried to set up a Nagafen raid—where several groups of people travel to a high level area of the game and kill Nagafen, a powerful dragon. After contacting acquaintances in the game for two hours, we managed to get the required twenty-four people together. It took another two hours just fighting to the dragon's lair, and we were rewarded with the dragon killing almost everyone. After another half hour of resurrection and recovery, we finally managed to kill the dragon, divide up the loot and teleport everyone back to the nearest city. The raid took just under five hours, and that time is not overly long for a group of people who don't know each other that well (Author experience). The amazing thing is that only a fraction of those five hours were spent fighting or directly accomplishing anything. Because of this phenomenon of inactivity, Everquest has jokingly been referred to as "Evercamp" or "Everwait." What balances out the "downtime" is the chance to converse with the people you play with. During the raid, I met around ten new people and became "friends" with a few others. While many critics may say that players do not accomplish much in a set amount of time, what makes Everquest fun and

interesting is also the interaction and socializing between the players in addition to the activity.

Another interesting aspect of the common goals in Everquest is analyzing how players go about achieving these goals. As I mentioned above, most beginning players go through an initial stage of blood thirst. Bartle, co-creator of the first MUD, agrees that “the first thing most new players do on meeting another player is attempt to kill them.” While players cannot attack other players on most Everquest servers, this basic rule holds true in a sense—players will spend most of their initial experience on the game trying to kill things. Players who do not abandon this approach to the game are termed power-gamers. These are people who try to plow through the game by themselves as quickly as possible. While this was a valid method of advancement in older MUDs and Ultima Online, Everquest was revolutionary in its attempt to discourage solo play. Of the fourteen different classes in Everquest, only two of them are designed to be able to hunt monsters efficiently by themselves, and it is still safer and more profitable to group with those classes (Author experience). Verant designed high level encounters with monsters to be exclusively for a group, and much of those encounters actually require multiple groups.

The reason it is easy to encourage grouping is because of Everquest’s design. Everquest runs a class-based system; that means that each player chooses a class, and their avatar then acquires that class’ strengths and weaknesses. These aspects of the class become even more distinct as the avatar gains levels, until a solo player can no longer fight efficiently and is forced to group with different classes. This method of forcing social interaction was revolutionary for an online game, where social interaction

previously could be player against player or optional. Working together encourages both grouping and forming friendships, two of the best qualities of Everquest, and it is derived from the game's design.

Another area of MMORPGs that Everquest revolutionized is graphics and technology. Although 3-dimensional (3d) first person shooters had already established themselves as commonplace in the game market, there were no MMORPGs that were 3d until Everquest's release. Verant and Sony Online Entertainment took a chance at releasing a game that required a 3d accelerator card, something certainly not in every home in America at the time, but with the overwhelmingly positive reaction to the graphics, it was a successful gamble.



**A screenshot of the city of Qeynos—an example of the quality of graphics for an MMORPG**

One of the effects of Everquest and the subsequent 3d MMORPGs had on the genre was that it permanently changed the graphical requirements of new games. If a MMORPG was released after Everquest that wasn't 3d, it would fail horribly. One example of this was with Lineage: The Bloodpledge, a Korean MMORPG, coming to the United States. Although it was a huge hit in South Korea, boasting over two million subscribers, it failed to make it past the beta stage in the US (Lowood 2/26). One of the main problems was that the game ran in Ultima Online's outdated "2.5-dimension" system, inferior to true 3d. Even though the social aspect of Lineage was its main feature in South Korea, online gamers demanded progressively better graphics, so anything that wasn't 3d wouldn't sell after Everquest.

In addition to making technological leaps in graphics, Everquest boasted an easy-to-use interface that made social interaction easier. One of the best social aspects of Everquest's UI is a system with different chat channels. A player can give private messages to anyone in the game, have a chat channel that goes to the group he's in, or use the auction channel in order to buy and sell items. By also giving the player the option of filtering the channels, Verant lets players customize the game to fit their style, which is a design aspect that is used in most of the MMORPGs after Everquest. They took this a step further in their Scars of Velious expansion pack when they added the ability to resize and move client interface elements such as spell effects, the chat box, etc.



An example of Everquest’s UI—notice the different text colors and the customizable client interface.

Besides the amount of content in the game, the main reason for Everquest’s success is how the psychological aspect of the game was designed to match the desires of the gaming community. For instance, Steven Poole’s *Trigger Happy* states that a game must strike a balance between “initial reinforcement for the player to want to keep going” and maintaining game difficulty to keep players interested (Poole, 174). In Everquest, players can advance to level five in a matter of a few hours by killing the harmless populace of rats and spiders around their hometown. The player’s character is always stronger than a monster of relative level and receives a slew of new spells every few levels. This places the player into a mindset where he believes both that his character is worth playing and that he will quickly receive new abilities. This belief is extremely

strong. I have often talked with players in the game who are stuck in a “hell level,” a particularly difficult level to advance through, that keep killing the same monster again and again (Author experience). After several hours of doing so, they might have advanced 5% of the total level. Why should they sink an inordinate time into a game with so little reward? They play because of the desire to get new or skills. Going along with the design idea that Everquest must be progressive, the game is designed to always have something better to attain—whether it be prestige from a title, a stronger weapon or more powerful spells.

In addition to rationing out rewards at designated intervals, Everquest’s marketing techniques plays into the theory of cognitive dissonance laid out in Loftus’ article, “Why Video Games Are Fun.” Everquest players are required to pay a monthly fee of ten dollars. Many would think that this aspect of the game would detract from its value, and in fact, many arguments made by non-subscribers against Everquest consist of the monthly payment being the largest reason for not playing. However, for those who buy the game, the monthly fee becomes a reason to play. Many subscribers feel that they *need* to play Everquest; to get their money’s worth, because they pay every month. By doing so, they simply get more caught up in the experience of the game and keep playing—and paying.

The final aspect of Everquest’s design that makes it so addicting is its replay value. Replay value of a game is determined by how long a player will continue to play the game after he has won or bought the game. Everquest’s immediate advantage is that there is no way to “beat” the game. No matter how far a character advances, the player will always be able to kill a different monster or obtain another item. This is because the

game can be changed almost at will. While Everquest updates content *en masse* through releasing expansions, other MMORPGs, such as Asheron's Call or Dark Age of Camelot, can do monthly updates that the player downloads (Ken Karl). This way, the game is always changing, with new places to explore, quests to complete and monsters to kill. In addition to the game being endless, there are many of the goals are undefined and unrestrictive. The player can choose what he wants his avatar to be—whether he wants to become a trader, a power-gamer, or the leader of a guild, he can do it.

Perhaps the largest reason why people keep playing Everquest is for the social aspect. Due to the both the design of the game being geared towards social interaction and the sheer number of subscribers, players quickly build up a community around the game. This is encouraged, because the social bond between players in the community keep them playing the game well beyond when the average player would stop (Ken Karl). The impact of Everquest's player community can be found anywhere on the Internet. Ranging from large, well-managed informational sites to smaller, personal homepages, the amount of Everquest content that is seen out of the game is incredible. For the obvious reason of wanting to develop their game further, Verant encourages this community by giving interviews with their design team or up-to-date news on patches and changes to the game. They even allow some of the better player-authors to write parts of Norrath's history (History of Norrath).

Small aspects of Everquest, like allowing players to add their stories to the history of Norrath, are what make the difference between a player staying in the world of Everquest for just the first month and playing for years. Besides being on the forefront of graphics and interface technology, Verant was able to utilize both traditional techniques

of design, such as developing an incredible amount of content, as well as psychological techniques—calculating when to give rewards at certain intervals of the game. All these aspects of design, technological, traditional and psychological, came together to create an engaging world where hundreds of thousands of players choose to live their lives through avatars—the world of Everquest.

# Bibliography

Author experience. Having played Everquest for over two years, I have experienced many events that are representative of opinions and ideas in this paper.

Bartle, Richard A., "A Voice from the Dungeon," *Practical Computing* (December 1983): 126-130.  
<<http://mud.co.uk/richard/avftd.htm>> Visited 3/12/02

Everquest. Designed by Verant Interactive. Published by Sony Online Entertainment. Released 3/16/99.

Everquest Trilogy Manual. Produced by Chris Kramer, Dave Silviera. Published by Verant Interactive and Sony Online Entertainment.

Gamespot.com. "Gamespot's Best and Worst of 1999." CNET Networks Media  
<[http://www.gamespot.com/features/1999/p4\\_01a.html](http://www.gamespot.com/features/1999/p4_01a.html)>  
Visited 2/9/02

"History of Norrath." Harpy Head's Tavern. Sony Online Entertainment.  
<<http://everquest.station.sony.com/hht/>> Visited 3/14/02

IGN.com. "Brad McQuaid Interview."  
<<http://rpgvault.ign.com/features/interviews/bmcquaid.shtml>>  
Visited 2/9/02

"Interview with Insiders—What Kind of Person Designs Games Anyways?"  
<<http://et.sdsu.edu/rcarson/industrywebquest/interview.htm#kwhite>>  
Visited 2/10/02

Loftus, Geoffrey et al. "Why Video Games Are Fun," pp. 10-42 in *Mind at Play: The Psychology of Video Games*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.

Lowood, Henry. "Virtual Worlds I: Narrative Structures: RPGs and MUDs." Lecture 3/12/02.

Lowood, Henry. "Culture: The International Scene (Europe, Japan, Korea)." Lecture 2/26/02.

Karl, Ken. "Virtual Worlds II: Massively Multiplayer Games." Lecture 3/14/02.

Otherworld Express. "Interview with Bill Trost"  
<<http://express.stratics.com/Issue151/interview.htm>>  
Visited 2/10/02

Poole, Steven. *Trigger Happy: Videogames and the Entertainment Revolution*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000.

Wininger, Ray. "In Defence of Computer Games," *interactive fantasy* 1.3 (1995)

Zatkin, Geoffrey. "Geoffrey Zatkin Bios."

<[http://www2.connectnet.com/users/saber/public\\_html/resume.html](http://www2.connectnet.com/users/saber/public_html/resume.html)>

Visited 2/10/02