

# **A Study into current Design Structures of Modern-day Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games**

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## **Abstract**

This report aims to give a critical view of a genre of games known as Massively Multi-player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). It investigates reasons for play, what makes a game of this genre popular and current innovations in the field. The report also examines the traditional methods of Role-Playing for fantasy games, and attempts to analyse whether or not the genre has successfully made the transition to computers whilst retaining the full experience of role-playing. In addition there is an appendix detailing my experiments in the field of games design based on the research previously described.

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## Introduction

Massively Multi-player Online Role-Playing Games can be described as games that allow hundreds or even thousands of users to “play together” in a persistent-state world, by connecting them via the Internet. They originated from single and multi-user computer Role Playing Games (RPGs), which themselves evolved from tabletop RPGs which in its simplest form needed only a pen, paper and friends to play. As an avid MMORPG player, and an aspiring games designer, I wish to combine these interests to create an innovative MMORPG. There are strong stereotypes surrounding RPGs and players, mostly pertaining to the fantasy theme of many games and the way in which they are played. I hope that by exploring the background of MMORPGs and reasons for play, I can ascertain why the games appear so formulaic, and begin to develop an exciting concept for a game of my own. I plan to achieve this by:

- Researching the history of MMORPGs: Find out where they came from, and why they are played using similar classes, races, and themes.
- Research reasons for play: Look into stereotypes, escapism, and the social nature of MMORPGs.
- Derive a current set of trends/ criteria for a modern-day MMORPG based on current successful games and their history
- Look at new and yet-to-be-released games to find current innovations and revolutionary technology.

In tandem with these research points I will be attempting to create a viable concept for my own MMORPG, which will be submitted as an appendix to this report. I will look at:

- Character design: of both players and enemies
- World design
- Game Back-story
- Possible classes, jobs and activities achievable in the world.
- Play-testing my games concept through traditional Role-Play.

Whilst I realise that I will not have a complete concept for an entire game (balancing player-types and enemies alone would take months of work), I hope to have a broad range of experiments in design and gameplay. As I will be designing and researching at the same time, I will provide periodic updates throughout my report, as to the status of my concept design.

### *The Progress of my Game Concept, part 1*

*Before beginning my research, I had a basic idea of a setting for an MMORPG. In summary, it allowed players to change their body parts and limbs during game play to gain different attributes. I believe this to be something relatively unexplored in current games, and decided to proceed with this concept; whilst researching about current MMORPGS and their popularity.*

## The History of the MMORPG.

To see why most modern-day MMORPGS rely upon a system of relatively similar character classes, skills and themes, I found it necessary to look back at their development across the last century. Role Playing Games originated from war-games, which gained notoriety at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and reached their peak of popularity between the 1960 and 1970s, with medieval-themed games being a firm favourite (Places to go, people to be 1998). The decade prior to this saw the US release of JRR Tolkein's Lord of the Rings, which quickly became a huge hit for high fantasy. It was unsurprising (as the largest consumer of both war-games and Tolkein's books were one and the same (Koster 2002)), that these two elements would combine. In 1970/1971, David Arneson created a set of rules for a high fantasy war-game. The game used the standard miniature figures to illustrate where players are in relation to each other, pen and paper to keep track of players' movements, and dice which were rolled to add an element of chance to actions (such as attacks, fleeing battle). However in addition, Arneson suggested his fellow players act out what their chosen character might say in the given situation. The players became their characters, using only what their character would know about a situation to determine their course of action. Instead of just moving a knight into battle, the player *was* a sword-wielding knight, or an intangibly beautiful elf, confronting a 10-foot troll at the bottom of a dungeon. As predicted, this was immensely popular, and it was not long before Arneson teamed up with Ernest Gary Gygax (who unfortunately passed away March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008) to release a set of rule books and Story Arcs for purchase, later marketed as "Dungeons and Dragons." (Tactical Studies Rules, 1974) (Historical information from Places to go, people to be 1998)



Fig 1.a: Group of people playing a Traditional Tabletop RPG.

Alongside this new phenomenon the development of computers, games and networks was underway. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s new ground was being broken: single user text-based RPGs were created, developing into Multi-User Dungeons/Domains (MUDs). The already familiar fighting classes such as ranger, warrior and mage were kept, along with the fantasy races such as elves and dwarves. Designers often implemented the “levelling up” and Quest methods of game progression, found in traditional RPGs. (Koster 2002)

```
You are thirsty.

< 36h 100m 78v > look ulion
You look at him.
Before you is a mature looking male elf. He has long blue
eyes, and a light tan complexion. He stands about 5 feet 5
like he weighs about 175 pounds.
This elven magus wanders Jora studying its differing specie
Ulion is in an excellent condition.
He is surrounded by a blue and yellow barrier!

Ulion is using:
<floating nearby> a shard of deep blue quartz..it has
.it is emitting light!
<worn on right finger> a lapis lazuli ring
<worn on left finger> a lapis lazuli ring
<worn on body> a robe of the archmagi
<worn on head> Angmar's favorite black hat
<worn on face> the druj mask..it has a soft glowing
<worn on legs> a pair of armored golden eagle leggs
owing aura!
<worn on feet> boots of traveling
<worn on hands> a pair of golden eagle gauntlets..it
ura!
```

Fig 1.b: Example of a text-based MUD

By 1988 the first MMORPGs were released. Gemstone II (Simutronics 1988) was a text-based game not dissimilar to its single-play predecessors, but it allowed many players to game with each other “online.” Its descendant Gemstone IV (Simutronics 1997) still has paying monthly subscribers to date. With the rapidly evolving technology, games systems were able to grow in complexity and utilise more sophisticated graphics ware. Throughout the mid-to-late 1990’s graphical MMORPGs were introduced to the market, with varying success. Accepted games included Ultima Online (Electronic Arts 1997), another fantasy RPG which despite the relatively limited internet access boasted over a million paid accounts and celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> Birthday this year. Everquest (Sony 1999), a 3D fantasy MMORPG was released in 1999, and until 2004 was the most popular game of its genre (Woodcock 2005). With even more powerful technology, widespread internet use and faster connections, a new generation of games was born for the 2000s. East Asian game companies lead the way with Ragnarok Online (Gravity Co 2002), and Final Fantasy XI: Online (Square Enix 2002). In 2004 Blizzard released its own MMORPG, based on its existing fantasy RPG game series, Warcraft. World of Warcraft (Blizzard 2004) is currently the world’s largest online game, with over 10 million subscribers.

## The Formula of MMORPGS

By this point in my research, I found that I was able to break down the current format of online RPGs into a series of points, based on my play experience and the past and current games previously researched (mentioned in the history section):

- Fantasy theme: Players can choose from a variety of races from popular fantasy such as elves, gnomes and orcs.
- Players can also choose from variations of 4 basic fighting styles: Close combat, Long Range, Magic user, and Support (healing).
- These characters can then be geared towards one of 3 specialist fighting styles which work best as part of a group: a Tank (a high defence character which takes the blows from all the monsters the group is fighting), a Damage Per Second (DPS, deals most of the damage to the monsters), and a Healer (keeps the tank and any other fighting players alive).
- There must be a good balance in the design of Tanks, Healers and DPS, so that no one class overpowers another, and so that a dependency is created between them- i.e. players are far more successful when playing as part of a group.
- Continuous system of rewards: completing quests and selling items garners small rewards and experience points, and less frequently a character will “level up” and become stronger overall- a big reward. This creates a feeling of continuous progression, and keeps people playing.
- No ultimate goal: as there are so many players, no one player can accomplish something that radically changes the game’s story, or “complete” the game. The closest a player can come is by reaching the maximum level their chosen server allows.
- PvP: in addition to Player versus Environment (PvE), players can sometimes fight each other (Player versus Player). This can either be in the form of duels, or in some cases entire races can be at war with one another.
- Many MMORPGs also support crafts. Players can take up skills to gather resources and craft their own items, and level up these skills as they do with everything else. However this is normally secondary to the combat, and progression of the character.

Having said this, it begs the question: Why are some MMORPGS wildly popular, where some never get off the ground? The first reason, I believe, is apparent in the question- once a multiplayer game gets off the ground, it becomes well known. Word of mouth spreads knowledge of the game, and groups of friends buy it so that they can play together. However this is not enough in itself to keep people playing. To try and answer this question and aid me in the design of my game, I studied the most popular MMORPG on the market, World of Warcraft.



## *The progress of my Game Concept, part 2*

*By this stage I felt I had a relatively good grasp as to what constituted a modern-day MMORPG. I completed character designs for my game, and opted to play-test my game as a tabletop RPG. This was both extremely fun and a revelation to me, as I have only ever played online RPGs. Whilst I had a rough idea of the story I would lead my players on, once I realised everyone had really gotten into the idea of being able to role-play, I decided to give them completely free reign with regards to making their character, and what they could do in their world, only providing interesting directions to travel in and enticing clues when necessary. This experience really illustrated to me how rigid and surprisingly linear online games are in comparison to a game where the players' imagination shapes the world around them. It was here I began to have doubts about current MMORPGs, and my own initial games model...*

## **Current MMORPGS and Social Play**

World of Warcraft still keeps the same basic humanoid races and fighting classes, whilst adding some of its own creatures to fight for either good or evil (for example, an alien species named the Draenei, or an anthropomorphised bovine race called the Tauren). Characters gain experience, undertake quests, learn skills and “level up” just as in previous RPGs, making it a fairly standard example of modern-day MMORPGs. So what makes it stand out? Critics claim that it is dangerously addictive (Wright 2006), but rarely venture into why this is so. Many of the stories of deaths and suicides caused by online games have been sensationalised by the media<sup>1</sup>, and normally boil down to the type of person that played the game in the first place: A game seen as compelling and exciting by one player, may be addictive to another. The reason most claimed by critics and advocates alike for the game's success (Chick 2003, Wagner 2008), is its social nature; technically allowing thousands of players to interact at any one time. This means that friends can play together, and new friendships can be formed. Players can and indeed must play as part of a short-term group to complete harder tasks, and can also join a guild.

Guilds are clubs, sometimes hundreds of members strong. Being part of a guild is often a status symbol (some are renowned for only taking high-calibre players), and creates a sense of belonging to a tribe- a primal urge of humans. Studies have shown that members of guilds play for longer than a lone player, (Ducheneaut et al. 2006) due to the increased social obligation people feel- many guilds run weekly events and members do not want to let their guild down by not turning up. However, the same study (which looked at the playing styles of people's characters and not just the people themselves) highlighted a factor which I have encountered myself, and seems largely overlooked by most discussions. When talking to people about who they play with and why they play MMO games, many people repeatedly discussed how annoying other players are, how much they hate players that do not know “how to play the game,” and that whilst they have a few core friends, generally they do not

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<sup>1</sup> Details of the most recent example can be found here [http://www.pacificepoch.com/blog/46367\\_0\\_26\\_0\\_C/](http://www.pacificepoch.com/blog/46367_0_26_0_C/), and another such case (although long-since forgotten by the media) is still documented here <http://www.wired.com/gaming/gamingreviews/news/2002/04/51490> and here <http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=31536>

seek to interact with strangers at all. Despite this, they still choose to play online, amongst thousands of others. *Alone Together? Exploring the social dynamics of MMO games* (Ducheneaut et al. 2006) Provides one explanation I find particularly compelling, that people enjoy playing in the company of others, as opposed to interacting with them directly. Players were observed to enjoy having an audience for antics and showing off particular items and status symbols (after all, gaining powerful weaponry is so much more exciting if there are hundreds to admire you for it). Others were also content to sit and watch the world (of Warcraft) roll by, and see the unpredictable actions of other humans, that NPCs (non-player characters, i.e. part of the computer-generated world) could never offer. The paper goes on to suggest that game developers would do well to offer more ways for players to play “in front of each other,” and this is something that I may integrate into my game design.



Fig 2: Screenshot from the World of Warcraft

In addition to the social draw of a successful game, it is necessary to look at why people play Role Playing Games. Neal Hallford defines 6 different play styles in *Swords and Circuitry: A Designer's Guide to Computer Role-Playing Games* (Hallford 2002). According to these player types it can be said that players want one, or more, or all of the following things in an RPG:

- Combat and combat capabilities of a character.
- To solve problems that possibly have multiple/ dynamic outcomes.
- Valuable loot/ items to increase player ability, with the option of making money from selling them to other players.
- A compelling and involving story line
- Quantifiable character progression
- A rich, explorable and interactive environment

As a player of World of Warcraft, it is clear that the game satisfies all of these wants to some extent (except perhaps in-depth problem solving), and so it caters broadly to all areas of the market, accounting in a large way for its popularity. However it seems that the least important and most undernourished aspect of current MMORPGs is the fourth point- an involving storyline that allows users to immerse themselves in the world, and “become” their character.

In fact, World of Warcraft and other such games can hardly be described as a Role Playing Game in the sense of the old tabletop games, as people very rarely *play the role* of their character. To do so, a player would have to ignore all of the statistics of their levels, their abilities, the mathematics of calculating damage, and just see as their character would. However, before engaging in battle in most modern-day MMOGs a player normally has the chance to make a decision as to whether the outcome of the fight would be in their favour. They weigh up their character’s level and skill versus that of their (computer or human) opponent, and so normally engaging in fights is relatively risk-free and predetermined. This is most certainly not in the spirit of a traditional RPG, where so many elements come down to the discretion of the person in charge of leading the tabletop game, or the roll of a die. It is my belief that the calculated method of modern so-called RPGs alienates a lot of traditional players- even when playing on a designated Role-Playing server a player can see all of the previously described statistics. In my opinion controlling an avatar and actively becoming your character are two very different things, and it was at this point in my research I came to the conclusion that I would have to separate the two elements of role playing and Massively Multiplayer Online Games for the remaining topics of investigation.

## **Escapism through MMOGs and RPGs.**

It is a well-known and widespread stereotype that the average MMO gamer is a socially awkward, unattractive, angst-ridden teenage boy who plays online games to escape from their troubled, friendless lives. These views are compounded and reinforced by dated studies- Our Virtual World: The Transformation of Work, Play and Life via Technology (Chidambaram 2001), makes a bold statement when comparing MUDs to Online newsgroups:-

*The MUD experience is based on escapism. Those users need to escape their “Real Life” so they make it a window in the corner of their computer screen and immerse themselves in an imaginary identity in a virtual world. The newsgroup participants do not use it to escape. They do not try to hide their real-life problems and situations.*

I believe that assuming all MMO gamers have problems that they need to escape from, and reasoning that this is solely why they play these games, is wrong and extremely derogatory of gamers and games alike. In addition to more recent studies showing that escapism is only one of many aspects of play that consumers of MMOGs enjoy (Yee 2006), escapism should not always be seen as negative, or as a way of being in denial about one’s personal problems. The same study which reviewed reasons for play also looked at player demographic. It found that the majority of players were single men in full time employment, but also that 36% of all

players were married or engaged. These surveys cast a very different view of the typical player, and indeed the actual variety of MMO gamers makes him or her impossible to stereotype. For these people, escapism is a liberation of self and a method of relaxation. They are “escaping” from a stressful day at work, and rigid social and ethical structures- not from a depressing and lonely personal life that doesn’t bear thinking about. I believe it is more akin to escaping through reading an absorbing book, or unwinding by watching a film.

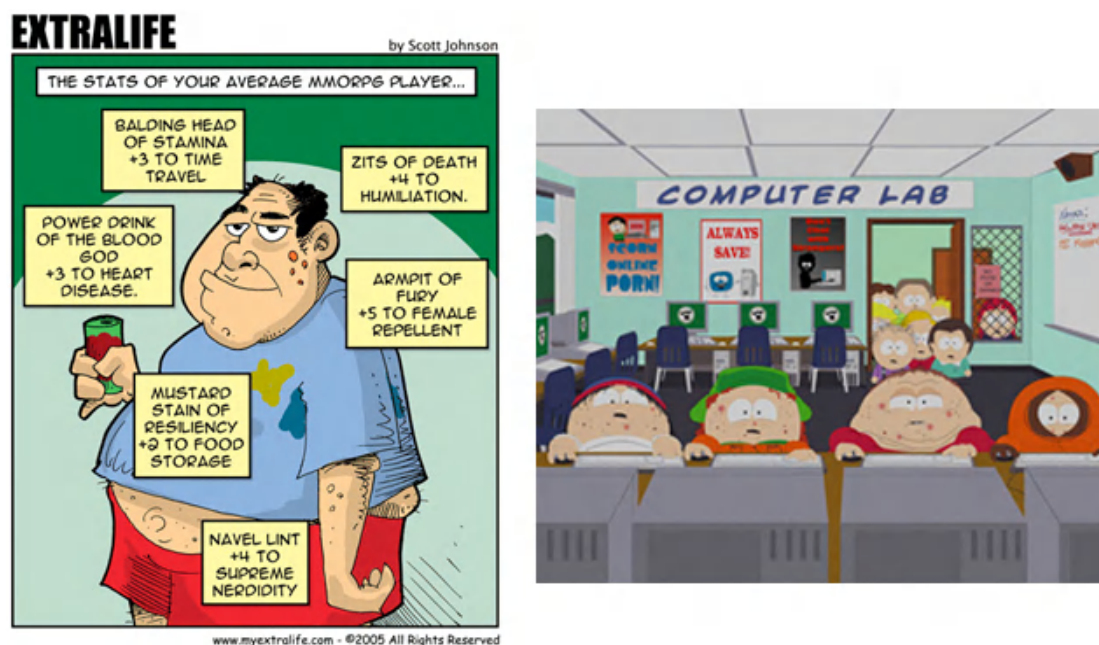


Fig 3: Examples of the stereotypical MMORPG players from the internet and television

This is contrary to the escapism felt by tabletop role-players. *In Theory of Fun for Game Design*, (Koster 2004) the author explains role-playing very well, writing, “The emphasis is on collaborative storytelling. You can construct your character any way you want, use any background, and take on any challenge you like.” Collaborative story-telling using your own character requires a much deeper form of escapism, and to be truly successful in tabletop games requires a certain level of skill. Players must suspend disbelief despite what their eyes, ears and fingers tell them quite clearly- their friend is not a 7 foot tall one-man army with the ability to conjure a glowing orb, nor are they in a dimly-lit forest surrounded by bodies and mysterious shadows; they are in fact a 5’8” animation student sat with you in your living room with a pencil and paper and dice<sup>2</sup>. However, this form of escapism is far more absorbing if pulled off successfully, when players succeed in truly “becoming” their character and creating the world around them.

Whether this sense of true escapism through role-play can be achieved on a massive scale, I am unsure. The old, text-based MUDs forced players to use their imaginations, which drew people in to thinking about their characters and their environments. I believe that providing stunning visuals can be an asset to players who are already adept at visualising themselves in another world, but does not encourage others to develop their imagination skills, and think about a place as a real, unpredictable, dynamic environment.

<sup>2</sup> Based on personal experience while play-testing a very early version of my MMORPG concept, by trying it out as a tabletop game with a group of friends.

### *The progress of my Game Concept, part 3*

*It was at this point in my research that the way I thought about MMORPGs and how to go about designing one changed dramatically. I believed I had come up with an original concept when in fact I was just adding to and altering an already long-established formula, and one that I now felt was not even successful in offering a role-playing experience. Although the game setting and premise are still interesting and original, I do not think that using the “tried-and-tested” methods of game quests and continuous little rewards to get players hooked on the sense of progression in the game will be innovative or successful.*

## **Current Innovations in MMOGs.**

With behemoths such as Second Life (Linden Lab, 2003) and World of Warcraft (Blizzard, 2004) eclipsing fledgling MMOGs, it can be difficult for innovations to break through the genre. Nevertheless, a few games are worthy of note for their efforts to add something new to persistent online worlds:

*Tabula Rasa* (NCsoft Europe Ltd, 2008) promises a multiplayer online action packed science fiction RPG with “Ethical Parables,” which the game’s website describes as enabling users to “Encounter ethical decisions while attempting to complete goals or missions that affect the people and environments around them.” While it is somewhat a matter of opinion as to whether this has been delivered in-game, they also offer an innovative cloning system. Rather than starting a new character when a player feels like trying out a new class, they are given the ability to clone their character at certain points, keeping their current level. The new character keeps your predecessor’s surname, but you pick a new first name, essentially forming a family. *Tabula Rasa* has also declined to use the “Auto Attack” method of combat- as opposed to your rate of attack in combat being determined by your attack and weapon speed, with *Tabula Rasa* one mouse-click denotes one hit. The amount of damage your hits do are still calculated by your skill level and weapon, but certainly this would go some way to making a player feel more involved in combat.



Fig 4:  
Screenshot from  
*Tabula Rasa*

*Sword of the New World* (HanbitSoft, 2007) claims to revolutionise MMO gaming by introducing “MCC,” or multi-character control. This allows a player to control a family of up to 3 characters at a time, either all at once, or by switching to one character and leaving the others on “auto-pilot.” Whilst this certainly is not new to games (the Final Fantasy series (Square Enix, 1987) has used MCC for years), it has never been utilised in a multi-user setting, and provides a nice variety of game play, especially for those who prefer to play alone.

*Fable 2* (Lionhead, 2008) has not been announced as an MMOG, but most certainly attempts to draw the user in to traditional role playing. As disclosed at this year’s Game Developer’s Conference<sup>3</sup>, A player’s character can have a wife or a husband (even in a same-sex marriage), children, and a pet dog which will act as a guide for the character, pointing him towards enemies or quests. The game designers are intent on evoking emotion from the player, and have promised to make players face tough moral decisions which will have drastic and permanent affects on the world around them. Currency will also be earned outside of the main game, through other third generation console services and, controversially, gambling.



Fig 5:  
Screenshot  
from Fable2

Unsurprisingly, people have been asking what the “Next Big Thing” for MMO gaming will be for years. An 8 week long series of interviews conducted by GameSpy.com (Kosak *et al.* 2003) looked at the future of MMORPGS back in 2003. A panel of developers talked about emerging technologies and they all cited User-created content (UCC) as something that would play an important role. Allowing users to create their own world, by having a permanent effect on it is something I find particularly exciting, and Jessica Mulligan, Executive Producer for Asheron's Call (Turbine, released 2005), envisages a similar future for games during the panel discussion:

*Imagine fighting an apocalyptic creature and having the whole side of a mountain blown out permanently, or players creating safe commons areas and donating features such fountains, games, tables and chairs, wedding chapels, etc. I really want to have players be able to build floating cities, grade new roads between points of interest, that kind of thing.*

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<sup>3</sup> The Game Developer’s Conferences are a series of annual meetings of many of the world’s leading game companies to showcase new technologies. More information can be found here <http://www.gdconf.com/>

The group also talked about “private dungeons,” which was described as allowing a small group of players to enter their own private dungeon. This was later successfully implemented into World of Warcraft (amongst other MMOGs), enabling groups of people to enter “instances-” a separate instance of the dungeon is created for each party using it, so a more rigid storyline can be used, and even a few very basic puzzles have to be solved to progress.

Unfortunately the customizable, user-created and entirely immersive world has yet to be created, but I believe that it is these elements, not the addition of bells and whistles to an existing system of addictive “character progression” that would be truly innovative to RPGs. As to reasons why more user-created content and other revolutions in game-play have not been made available, is down to speculation. I believe it could be due to a number of factors- the most obvious one being the “if it isn’t broke, don’t fix it” attitude. Despite the obvious stagnation and similarities in modern-day MMOGs, they are wildly popular and generate huge amounts of income through sales and monthly fees. When it seems that anyone can release a successful game on a pre-existing formula, why bother to experiment with something new, and risk failure?

Another point is the technical limitations that designers face. I know little of game mechanics for MMOGs, but have been informed by fellow students that games reduce loading times and server requirements by hosting as much of the game environment on client PCs as possible, and update that data through patches which are downloaded periodically. Software such as Second Life, a world comprised almost entirely of user-created content, suffers severely reduced graphic quality as a result, and in a market which is always looking for an improvement in graphics, having to take a step back to accommodate better game-play is a huge risk. Finally, Second Life also illustrates another issue that must be taken into account for these new worlds- who owns them? Linden Lab, the software’s producers, famously allow users to have complete ownership of the content they create, including any scripts they write and objects they make- whether the users then go on to make a profit from them or not.<sup>4</sup> It is this kind of freedom that players would need to have if they truly wanted to create their own worlds and stories, but implementing this with market demand for better graphics and low loading times may just be beyond reach, for now.

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<sup>4</sup> Users can rent “land” from Second Life, and set up a shop to sell items (in an in-game currency that can then be changed into USD) that they have created using in-game object building tools and an open-source script. Details on their Intellectual Property rights can be found here [http://secondlife.com/whatis/ip\\_rights.php](http://secondlife.com/whatis/ip_rights.php)

## Conclusions.

I was saddened to hear of the death of Gary Gygax, co-creator of the original Dungeons and Dragons (Tactical Studies Rules, 1974), whilst writing this research paper. No matter how far along in the research I progressed, elements of the original Fantasy RPG could always be found, and players' stories of impossible adventures made real as a result of playing the game were everywhere. One article (Schiesel 2008) detailing his death contained an old interview with him, which touched on his discomfort over the way RPGs had been translated to online games. He is quoted as saying:

*There is no intimacy; it's not live, it's being translated through a computer, and your imagination is not there the same way it is when you're actually together with a group of people.*

Whilst I disagree that an online experience could never be the same as physically sitting with a group of friends, I do agree that modern online MMOGs do not come anywhere close. I came to a conclusion at the end of my research on escapism, that graphics at the moment are an unnecessary hindrance, preventing players from using their own imaginations and creating something they can really believe in with a group. It is also my personal opinion that although the questing and levelling system is an excellent tool for encouraging tabletop role-players to use their imagination and collaborate, it does not translate well to online-gameplay, as it is not these things that make role-playing fun- it is the dynamic world created by players using those devices. I realise that creating a true MMORPG<sup>5</sup> would lose a lot of existing MMOG players, as games are now so watered-down in an attempt to attract wider audiences and thus make more money, that a true RPG would be rejected by a lot of players. However I believe that a smaller community with a common goal, such as is found in groups of people Role-Playing, would be a far more rewarding game. In traditional RPG groups, there is a general consensus to Role Play, to progress a storyline, and not take liberties with your character that would hinder other players experiences- if this was the same online, an amazing experience could be achieved.

I believe that a true RPG would hinge on what a role-player wants to do (i.e. believe they are another character, and go on an exciting adventure), which can be given in so many new ways utilising technology, rather than relying on methods far better suited to pen and paper. My research quickly took precedent over my "Game Design" deliverable pack, as you will have read how I realised that my way of thinking was just that of the huge companies trying to rework the formula to bring out another World of Warcraft clone. Unfortunately this means that I have not had as much time as I would have liked to delve into the specific mechanics of character balancing, or how any of the innovations I would like to see would be implemented. However, my research succeeded in changing how I think about Role-Playing as a genre of game and so I can suggest elements that were I to start from scratch in designing my game, I would prioritise over designing classes, jobs etc.:

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<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, I tried to start a discussion inside the World of Warcraft, by saying "I don't think WoW is a real RPG; discuss!" This got me verbally slaughtered, and kicked off a huge argument between several younger players. It is not recommended.



- Puzzles: Not Quests where everything is spelt out for you (i.e. “go kill 10 boars, they’re right over there, then come back to me”), but riddles and stories possibly even created by fellow players. Huge physical puzzles which could, for example, require players to actually build something in the world, or have multiple solutions. As a very basic illustration, say there was an apple high in a tree that players wanted to get. A tall user could jump, an agile player could climb the tree, or a crafty user could fashion a ladder... or if they could chop wood to make a ladder, why not just chop down the whole apple tree?
  
- User-Created-Content: I cannot express enough how important I think this is, as it is a fantastic way I can see of allowing players the same use of their imagination in a game, as they have without the game at all. Although limitations of computer graphics can never match a human’s imagination, allowing players to have a say in the world around them would create much stronger ties to a game-world, and foster a sense of collaboration. This could possibly be achieved through in-game creation tools, or even continuous polls and competitions online, where winners will have their worlds/ stories/ buildings created by a game’s design team. Allowing players to have their own home in the game, such as in Second Life, is an existing tool that already goes a long way in creating a sense of belonging to a world. It would also provide the opportunity for role-players to display the fruits and rewards of their adventures. Although in apparent contrast to my previous decisions that mathematical statistics being displayed to the user hinder RP experiences, I believe that they would work well together. Opening up the construction of the world to a player, and removing the visible statistics of their own personal character would allow them to become far more immersed in the environment.
  
- A Permanently changeable environment and constantly-moving story arcs. It has been argued that players would feel pressure to keep playing, otherwise if they took a break and returned in a week they would not be able to just pick up and play again. I believe this negative affect could be easily counterbalanced by providing, for example, email updates of story advancements in the world. Or perhaps the next time a player logged in they had the option of reading what had happened since they last visited. Personally I believe that logging in after a week and finding the city I was living in completely burnt to the ground would be distressing, but also terribly exciting.
  
- True Community: fickle guilds with high turnover rates and a label of good or evil leave a lot to be desired in making a community that truly cares about each other and would fight to the death against sworn enemies. Collaborative projects with permanent rewards for your community as a whole are needed to unite players, and if the advancement provided by forming a united society can be shown, rival communities would hopefully want to work together to compete.

I realise that the picture I paint is of a utopian online world, and that as such it would probably be flooded with players looking to spoil it. I believe that only making the rewards of cooperative story telling and content creation great enough would allow good-faith gamers to outnumber those wanting to make mischief.

I feel that unfortunately I have not achieved my original aim, which was to create an exciting, innovative MMORPG based on research into reasons for playing and currently successful games. However I have successfully explored many of the reasons for playing MMOGs and RPGs, begun experimenting with potential games concepts, and most importantly gained understanding of player-relationships and mentalities. In order to further my understanding and ultimately propose a brand new, truly innovative MMORPG, much more research and experimentation needs to be done.

## **Next Steps**

I plan to continue studying the audiences of modern-day MMOGs, and work more closely with technically-minded students to explore the feasibility of implementing some of the aforementioned ideas into a persistent online world. I also plan to design and carry out experiments, aimed at both tabletop and MMOG Role-Players, to test my theories of computer graphics versus imagination, in the hope that a way to combine the two can be found. I also found play-testing my own RPG as a tabletop game to be fun and the greatest source of inspiration for my current stance on game-design, and I intend to further work at carrying the *feeling*, and not necessarily mechanics, of this experience over into the world of MMORPGS.

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Fig 1a: Image [online], Group of people playing a Traditional Tabletop RPG at Origins Game Fair. Image available from <http://www.originsgamefair.com/2007/about-us2/archives/origins-2004-archive/2004-photo-gallery> [Accessed 8 March 2008]

Fig 1.b: Image [online] Example of a text-based MUD, courtesy of <http://reality.org/category/second-life/> [Accessed 8 March 2008]

Fig 2: Image: personal screenshot from the World of Warcraft. For game information please see (Blizzard 2004) in the games section of this bibliography.

Fig 3: Images [online] Examples of the stereotypical MMORPG players from the internet and television. Left image courtesy of <http://myextralife.com/strips/10-12-2005.png> (used with permission)  
Right image screenshot of *South Park*, Series 10 episode 8, Make Love not Warcraft, 2006. TV, Comedy Central. 4 October 2006.

Fig 4: Image [online] Screenshot from *Tabula Rasa*. Image from <http://www.gamefaqs.com/computer/doswin/image/516716.html?gs=34> [Accessed 8 March 2008]. For information on the game, please see (NCsoft Europe Ltd 2008) in the games section of this bibliography.

Fig 5: Image [online] Screenshot from *Fable 2*. Image from <http://www.gamefaqs.com/console/xbox360/image/927246.html> [Accessed 8 March 2008]. For information on the game, please see (Lionhead 2008) in the games section of this bibliography.

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## ***Appendix: Experiments in Conceptual Games Design***

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## **Premise** *(not immediately explained to player)*

It is a well known conspiracy theory that man alone did not build earth's great wonders. Many theorised that benevolent alien visitors helped us accomplish the Pyramids and Stonehenge; mysteries such as crop circles and sightings of UFOs were perceived by enthusiasts as an attempt to make contact. They were wrong. They were all wrong.

On August 21<sup>st</sup> 2008, 3 colossal aircraft each with 10,000+ smaller ships in tow, settled over The Great Pyramid, Stonehenge and Mystery Hill (a 30-acre wide series of tunnels and monoliths in the Eastern USA) respectively. The 3 alien-built wonders were beacons, markers of the 3 landing zones. The crop circles were the testing of earth's resources, which had been monitored for centuries. With earth's resources now past their peak, the Tenumrai had come to collect their harvests while there was still something left. Lapok Thor (see **figure 7a** and **7b**) was leading the "reap", answering only to the council of Mil (see **figure 8a** and **8b**). As Lapok's troops began to drill their oil and gather their surface crops, Mil noticed the extent to which the planet's inhabitants relied on that which they were collecting. They ordered Lapok to leave enough for the humans to rebuild, but to the commander Man was just an inconvenience and a thief of his people's produce- and Mil was a gnat in his ear. At his command, his troops turned on the Council, but they had followers of their own, willing to die for their cause. With Mil occupied, Lapok Thor sent spare units to the corners of the Earth, ridding the land of thieving humans. Acidic gas poured from the UFOs, eating flesh and bone of Man, and Man alone.

Meanwhile, the battle for Tenumrai supremacy was taking place, and Lapok's forces were slowly gaining the upper hand. As Mil saw the xenocide miles below their own battle, they fled and landed on earth, gathering victims whose brains and central nervous systems remained in tact. With their ships full, and the upper atmosphere guarded by the entire Lapok army they left for a remote corner of South America (see **figure 9**). The only chance Mil had of surviving is if they could restore the bodies of the fallen humans, and hope that the saved people would aid them in the fight against Lapok to reclaim their planet.

## **Game overview**

Players game as a human saved by Mil. Player's body was nearly destroyed by the enemy, and Mil surgeons have had to attach replacement limbs and torso (see **figure 10**). Once inside the world, player can fight with Mil and other players to reclaim earth, or not, but there are significant rewards and new body-parts for those that earn the respect of Mil by fighting with them. Player can buy limbs and other items from Mil, but must pay in items of use to the aliens, and alien body parts. There are also human vendors who sell man-made clothes, weapons and armour, but they will charge dollars which player must also earn by killing money-carrying enemies / mugging NPCs (Non Playing Characters).

As in familiar RPGS, players gain experience (which they can keep track of via an experience bar), and "level up." However, they are never shown numerically how much experience they gain from activities (including monster killing), and so will have to observe what gains them the most experience. Upon levelling up players will be given a number of reward points with which to increase their basic statistics (Strength, Speed, Dexterity, Accuracy, Luck). Players will have to discover additional benefits or disadvantages of these points themselves (For example, more strength means the player can carry more items and lands harder hits in combat, but it decreases the effect his Speed points have).

Players will still also be able to take on quests, but will be given little direction regarding how to complete them. An NPC will say something such as "If only I had more rat tails," and it would be up to the player to find rats, which may be much later in the game. To accommodate this, players would need to be able to hold, and keep track of, up to 50 quests at one time. Completion of long quest chains would fulfil mini-stories pertaining to the individual lives of in-game characters.

Towards the higher levels of the game players will learn that they can, should they be sufficiently respected by their allied aliens, integrate alien body parts with their own to varying

degrees of success. Incompatibility of body parts will cause greater decay of limbs, and so will require more maintenance. Making alien-human hybrid limbs provide the greatest success rate. Players will also be able to purchase more advanced alien weaponry, whilst making the most of modern-day standards of armour and artillery (see **figure 11**).

## **Skills**

Players can use their level reward points to develop an aptitude in some life skills, but skills can be learnt by any player (for example, a player with high Dexterity would make a more successful surgeon). Life skills include:

### **Junior Skills:**

*Med Student* - Can mend body parts which degrade over time

*Forager* – Can collect wild resources to consume (regain hit points) or sell

*Tinker* - Can make small weapons and identify items used as weapons

*Costumier* – Can make basic clothing and identify items useful for cloth-making.

*Sallywag* – Can attempt pick pocketing and sneaking of NPCs.

### **Intermediate Skills:**

*General Practitioner* – Can attach human limbs for himself and other players, avoiding the costly Alien fees. However player must be in a settlement with a surgery.

*Hunter/Gatherer* – Can forage meat, fruit and wild vegetables and combine into simple dishes.

*Weaponsmith* – Can make strong weapons and shields.

*Armourer* – Can identify cloth and metals, and make basic armour as well as advanced cloth goods.

*Cat Burglar* – Can pick pocket money and items more successfully, and stealth past enemies.

### **Professional Skills:**

*Surgeon* – Can attach human and alien limbs, even outside of towns.

*Chef* – Can forage food and cook dishes to completely restore health and body-parts.

*Weapons Master* – Can make strong weapons and integrate alien technology.

*Self-Defence Technician* – can make strong and fast armour from Kevlar.

*Hustler* – Can steal, sneak undetected for long periods of time, and craft objects of little value which can be sold for high prices.

## **Game-play**

### **Character Creation:**

Players start by creating a new character. As opposed to traditional RPGS where you choose classes and races, here you choose body parts. To aid in the mystery element of the game, players are only told basic details of the body parts on offer and will have to use logic and learning to find out which parts are good for which.

### **First Steps- the tutorial ground (see figure 12):**

When the player enters the world, they awake in a metal one-man chamber, upon walking out of it they are greeted by a friendly, faintly glowing alien. A tip will appear on the screen. *“Right Click on characters to interact with them”* If the player right-clicks on the nearby alien, an option menu will come up, which at this stage will only have “talk” listed on it. Tip, *“Right click again to choose how you will interact.”* At this point the camera is in first-person mode, so the alien speaks directly to the player.

*“Ah you’re awake! I was just finishing your recomposition, and I’m not quite done. In fact I err... didn’t quite get around to attaching your left arm. What? You want to see? Well you’ll need to switch to a different camera mode- know how?”*



**Options: Yes (skip to next dialogue) or No (briefly describe how to change camera angles, let user try, resume dialogue)**

*“Ah very good! Well, I don’t have the necessary tools over here, so take this arm and talk to surgeon Malfès; he’s about here somewhere, usually by the operating table.”*

**Player receives Basic Arm (item description: an everyman’s arm, not particularly strong but looks functional).**

The player is now given his first taste of freedom. With only an arm in his bag, he is free to explore the world. After walking around a bit he will have come across the surgeon (who explains that he will buy alien and human body parts off you, and attach limbs to you. He can also sell you a few upgraded limbs, but you cannot purchase them until you have proved yourself as an ally of Mil first). He offers to attach your limb for free, this time. There is also a shady looking human in a trench coat standing outside the pub- interacting with him will give players the option of “Talk” or “What’s under your coat?” The former will give an explanation of paying for human items with human currency, the latter will open a buying/selling dialogue and show some basic items for purchase. It is now up to the player to explore the nearby tavern, houses and forest, and decide how they want to advance their character within the world story.

## **Combat**

If a player chooses to engage in combat rather than trying to avoid, sneak past or flee enemies, they will have to choose and execute each of their attacks (i.e. no automatic-attack function). Different attacks can be chosen through familiar numbered “hot-keys,” but it will be up to the player to attack as fast as they can, or try to jump and dodge the enemy’s attacks while aiming their own blows with the mouse. All players will be given the option of combining long and short range attacks, and it will be up to them to find the most beneficial balance of weapons and skills for their fighting style. Examples of weapons and attacks are:

- *Crossbows*
- *Sniper Rifles*
- *Heat seeking mini rocket launchers*
- *Throwing knives*
- *Alien plasma gun*
- *Alien paralysis gun*
- *Shield-charge*
- *Knuckle-duster punch*
- *Switchblade/ scalpel*
- *Bayonet*
- *Pistol*
- *Alien Fire hammer*
- *Alien quake staff*
- *Alien arm punch*

## Play Testing

With the basics of an RPG concept I was advised to test the idea out as a tabletop game first, as all this required was a pen, paper, dice and friends. I rounded up 3 friends, only one of which had ever played a tabletop RPG before. To simplify the game and reduce the time it would take to teach players how to play, I designed 4 categories of body parts:

- **Strength:** Lands heavy blows, can carry many items, but slow travelling and attack speed.
- **Speed:** Quick to travel distances, lands rapid but weak blows, has a chance to flee combat. Cannot carry much weight.
- **Attack:** Can use a number of different attacks but unable to flee battle, if attacking legs are chosen, player has a chance to kick an enemy. Good at locating foes' weak points.
- **Survival:** Incompatible body parts degrade less slowly, and overall damage taken in battle is reduced. Player can also make basic repairs to body parts. Weak fighter.

To help players, I made very basic graphical representations of their character, creating arms, legs and torsos for each category. On the back of the body parts I wrote information about the part such as its strengths, weakness and what parts it would work well / poorly with. The players were then allowed to make up their character out of a combination of any of the body parts, bearing in mind logistical limitations- for example having a heavy upper body and muscular strong arms would slow down lean legs designed to run fast:



*Fig 13: Simple representations of body parts were used to allow players to construct characters (and photos of players were used as heads)*

I then acted as the “games master” (the player in charge of leading his fellows on an adventure), and followed a pre-prepared short script to introduce them to the world. The script closely resembled the world as described in the “Tutorial Ground” section of this concept pack. Once they had an understanding of the world they were in, I described to them what they could see, and asked them where they wanted to go. From here on I had to ad-lib and adjust the situation based on their choices (as they, being good friends, decided to completely rebuff my hints at quests for half the game). I gave them each a piece of paper with their basic statistics and attacks so that they could keep track of their inventory, health, skills etc. It was then up to my discretion as to the enemies they faced and what they would find, but the outcome of their attempts at combat would be decided by rolling a die, and then combining the score with whatever bonuses their weapons / body parts gave them (actual calculations hidden from players, performed by myself).

PHALIS XAVIER

Heal - Awesome  
 Arms - Attack - double punch  
 Body - Attack.  
 Wands - DEX  
 Speed - Moving speed  
 Chance 2 feet  
 +2 inf

HP	65	65	65
MP	35	35	35
SP	35	35	35
SKILL	35	35	35
THROW	35	35	35
CASTER	35	35	35

Fig 14: Samples of the records players kept as they progressed through their game

- very sharp scissors  
 - pieces - wavy  
 - woolly half (an)  
 - ~~...~~  
 - ~~...~~  
 - ~~...~~  
 - ~~...~~  
 - ~~...~~

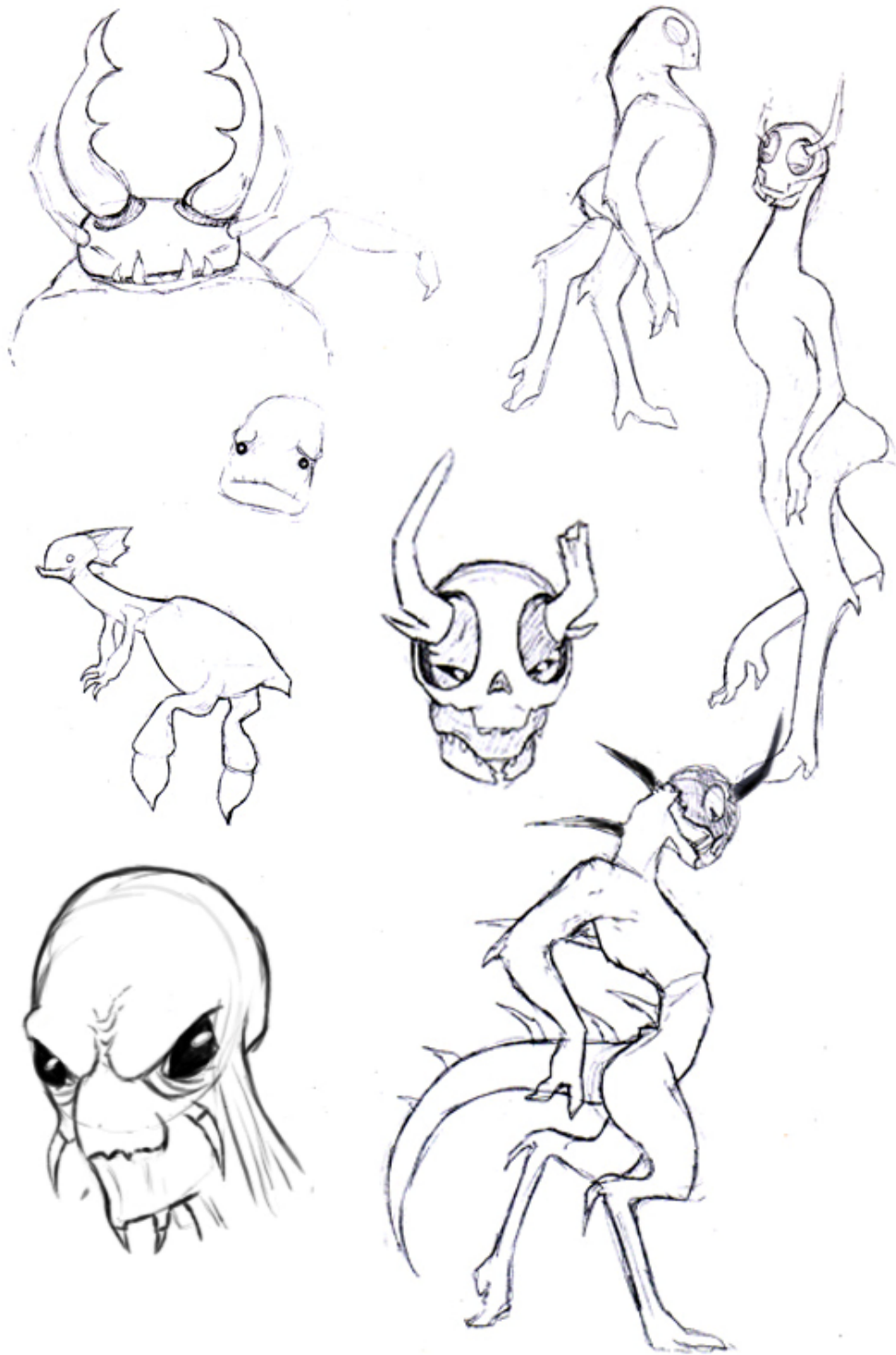
Justification  
 \$0. Am drunk. Have nuts.  
 Brick is glowing. Have made friends with some  
 people with no arms. They are level 1. I am level 1  
 Am in pants. No hat. ~~in~~. Wounded low, No wrap  
 from range  
 20 HP. Injured by gogamesh. Rage +  
 24 HP. Healed dan. Been fighting for ages  
 30 HP. 23:00. Johan Gephadger. HRP =  
 Levelled up. Alcohol +  
 healing ability + pos. head. i  
 72 HP - outside pub. del shield (strength) + last carry. higher degrade  
 give me the mo. leg - (strength) + def.  
 I have \$5. hands - strength + 5 dmg. low def  
 3 HP. spent \$5 making di. P=80. 70  
 71 HP. Slept in a d. Journal + amulet. I cannot read.  
 80 HP. Johan gave me some tissues.  
 I still cannot read.  
 79 HP. Mean man hurt me.  
 83 HP, 74 HP.  
 84 HP. Ale Dons cheese.  
 82 HP. 80 HP. I cant read. I am level 3.

HP	65
MP	35
SP	35
SKILL	35
THROW	35
CASTER	35

Naturally the first place they wanted to visit was the pub. After one of them got barred they found some useful information pertaining to a nearby village (with another tavern), and decided to head off. Along the path carved into the surrounding forest, a hooded assailant fled a nearby house and into the path of the group (currently down to two members as one realised he could forage for berries). By the time Daniel (the forager) had caught up with the group, Simon (a speed/attack build of character) had crept behind the enemy and grabbed him by the throat, allowing Ed (an illiterate (at his request) strongman) to attack him mercilessly. The fallen enemy was unmasked and found to be a human, with bloodied hands...

As the adventure continued the players unravelled a plot of insider-sabotage against the allying aliens, and also gained extra skills. Whilst the level of freedom I gave them regarding what they could and couldn't do in and outside of battle was extreme, it made the story far more entertaining and engaging as players could interact however they wanted with any element of the world around them. It was this aspect that fascinated me and had serious implications for my games design, as the levelling and quest system would seriously restrict a player's freedom, and create a very linear feel to a game. However the players responded well to the basic concept, and were enthusiastic about the ideas of interchangeable limbs, part compatibility, and the plot of an alien race fighting amongst themselves on Earth.

Figure 6: Early alien concept sketches



*Figure 7a : Enemy Alien Concept Sketch  
Pictured without armour*

**Enemy Alien Race- main adversary**

- All wear skulls of most prestigious kill as mask
- Spines down back, elbows, legs
- Thin sinuous legs are weak point but enable very fast running
- Extremely powerful arms- normally fights without hand-held weapons

**Personality**

- Entirely focussed on self- preservation.
- Complete disregard for all life except that which is of use
- Underhanded and prone to using devious tactics in and out of battle
- Is strongest when fighting as part of large raiding parties

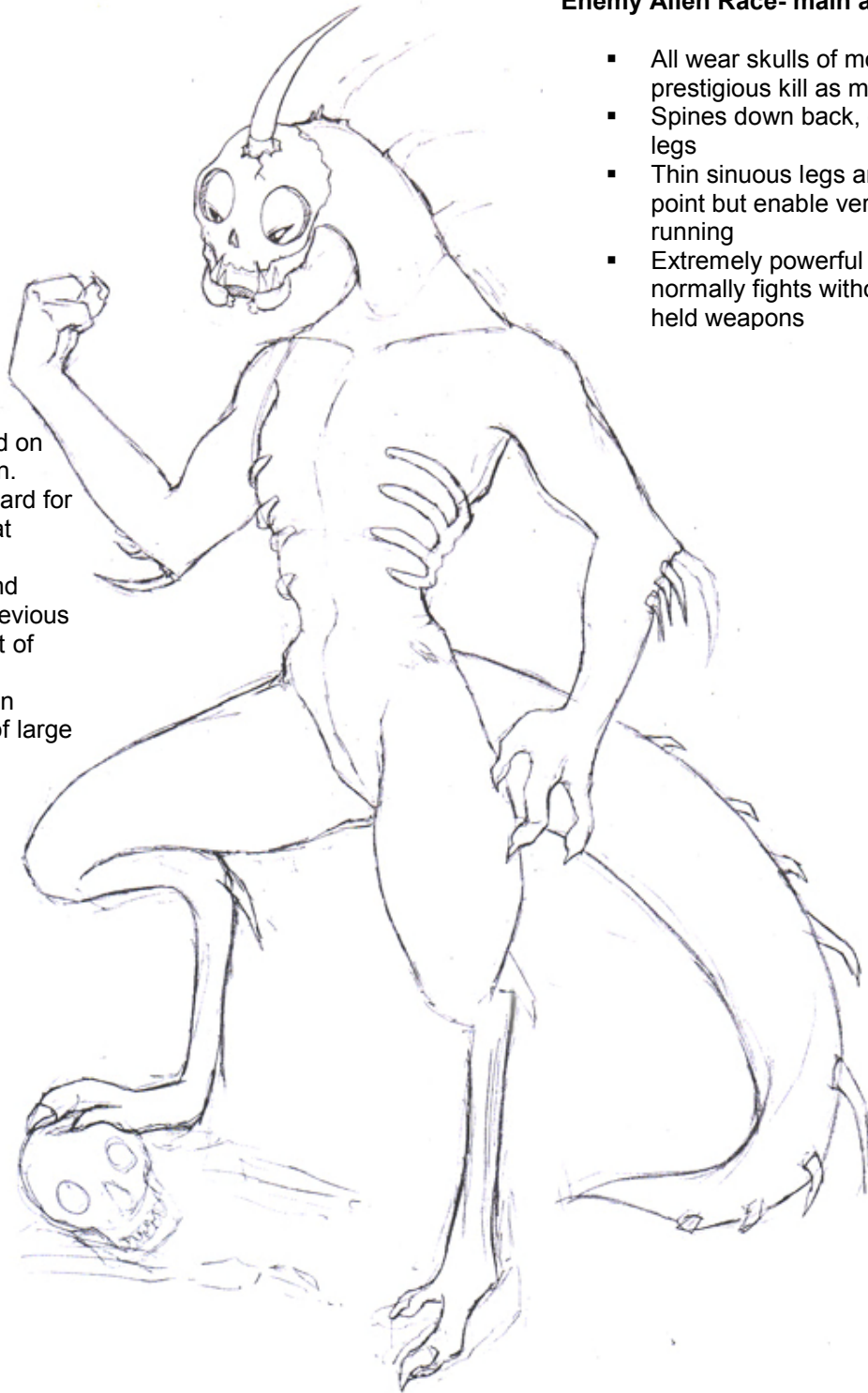


Figure 7b : Enemy Alien colour swatches.

*Largest image denotes preferred coloration*



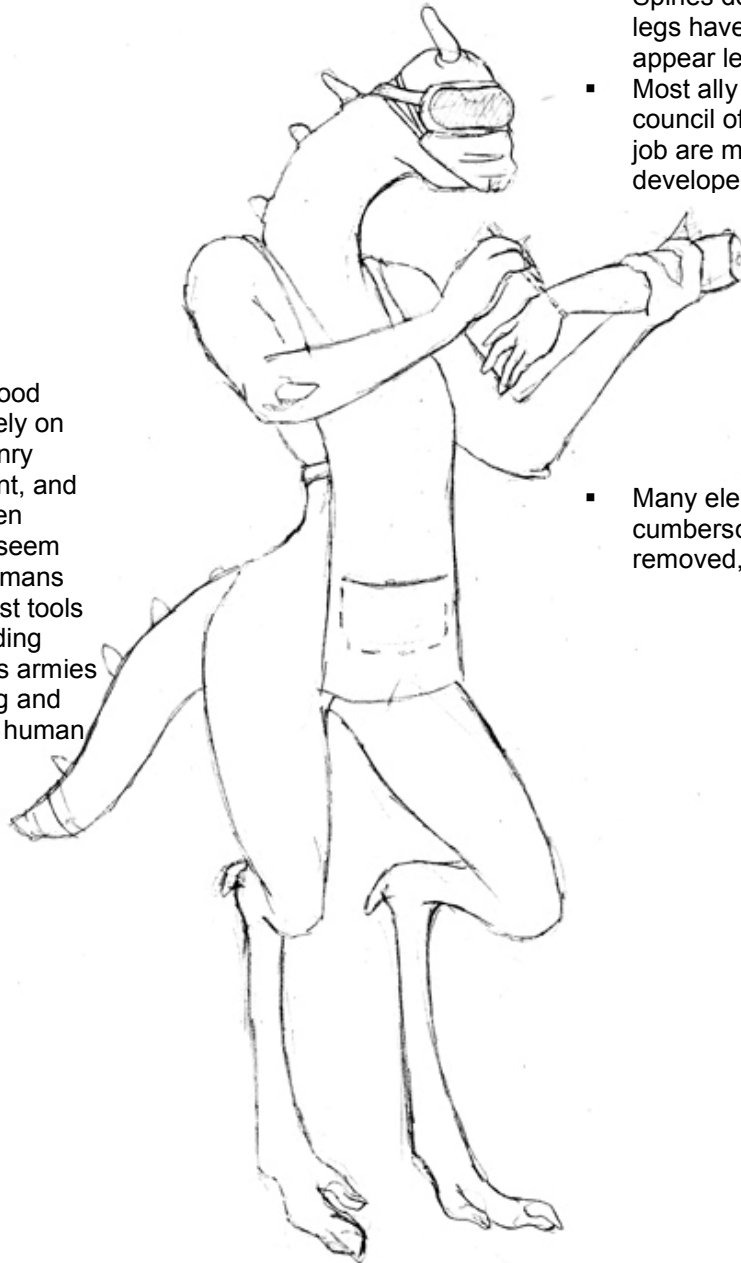
Figure 8a : Mil Alien Concept Sketch

**“Friendly” Alien Race- main ally**

- Their face is so hideous to human eyes that many cover their features to avoid scaring fragile people.
- Spines down back, elbows, and legs have been filed down to appear less threatening
- Most ally aliens once sat on the council of Mil, and due to this office job are much less physically developed than their foes.

**Personality**

- Not naturally good fighters, they rely on custom weaponry
- Highly intelligent, and skilled craftsmen
- Although they seem friendly, the humans are still foremost tools to aid in defending against Lapok’s armies
- Condensing and belittling of the human species



- Many elect to have their cumbersome tail shortened or removed, and so are more nimble.

Figure 8b : Mil Alien colour swatches.

Largest image denotes preferred coloration

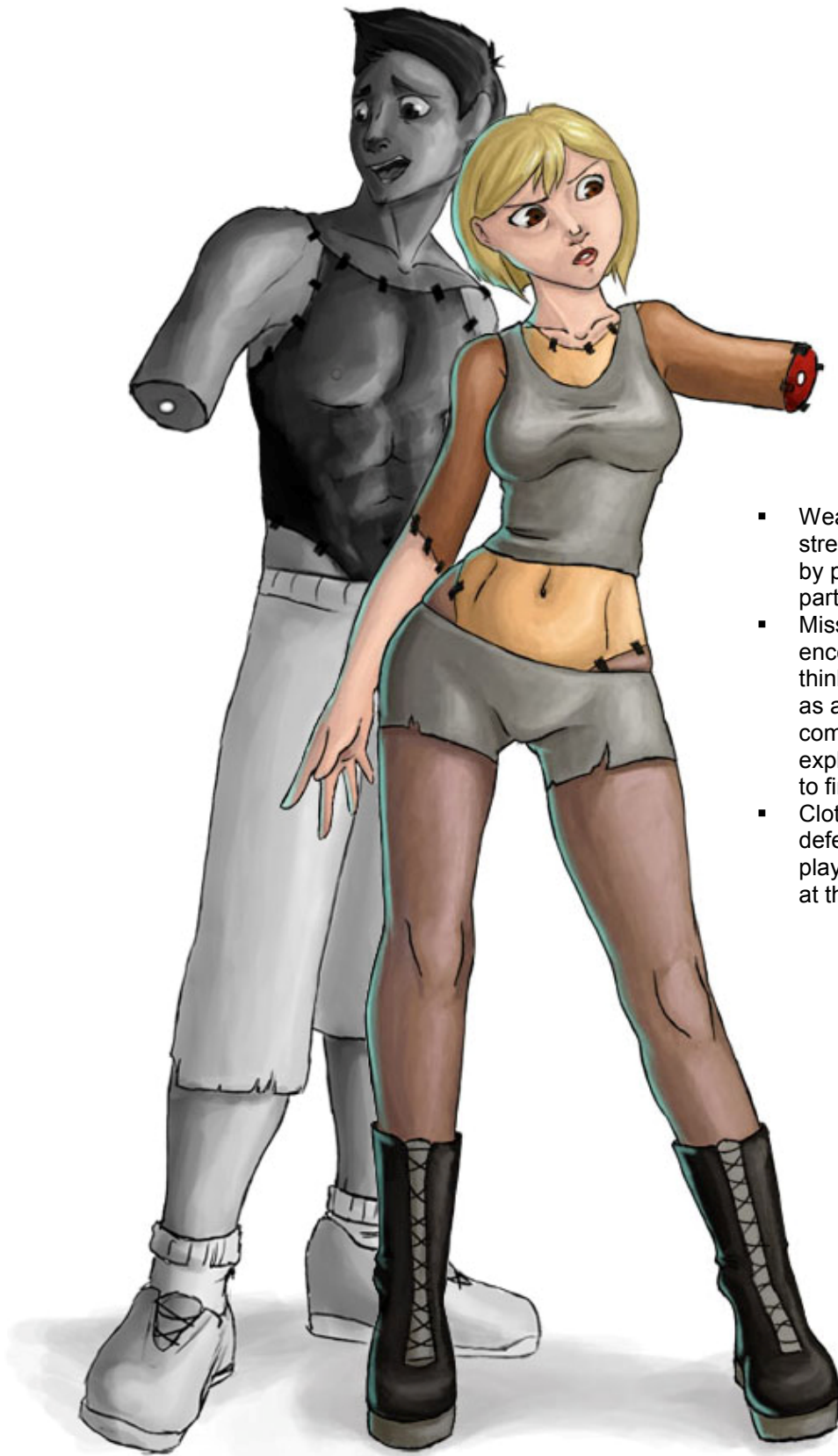




Figure 9 : Friendly Alien Base location



Figure 10 : Example starting characters.



- Weak body parts with strengths determined by player's selection of parts.
- Missing an arm to encourage players to think about the body as a mixture of components, and to explore surroundings to find another arm
- Clothes offer no defence, nor enhance player characteristics at this point

Figure 11 : Example High- Level characters.



- Players can utilise alien and robotic body parts
- Deep alterations can be made to player physiology, for example the female has an eye implant which aids in locating and targeting foes.
- Alien-enhanced modern armour provides protection and, in some cases, benefits characteristics
- Human and alien weaponry can be used with sufficient skills in that area.

*Figure 12 : Concept Environment sketch of Tutorial Ground.*

