

Running Massively Multiplayer Games

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Part One

Community Contact

**Customer opinions and sorting out
the facts**

Player Opinions

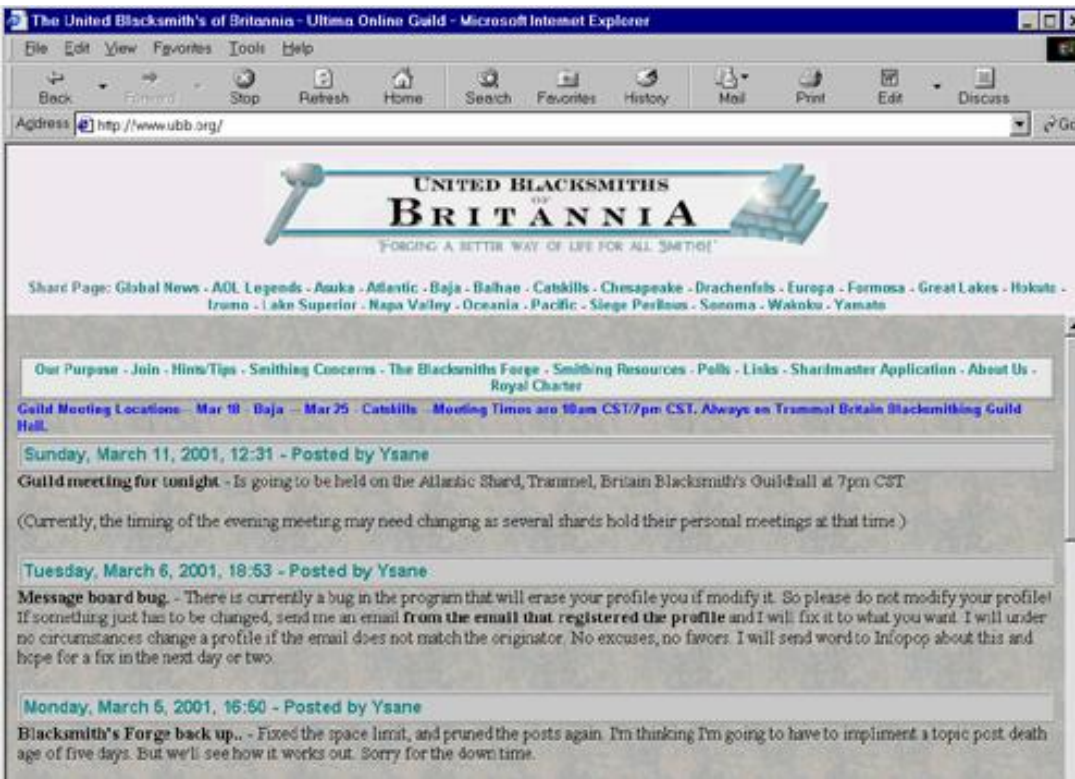
Everyone's got one...

Sorting opinions—what's the bias?

- **Source is self-interested**
 - Will usually argue for improvements to their role
 - Diehard player of the role
- **Source has particular expertise in subject**
 - Will often argue for overly hardcore mechanics
- **Source gave up on role**
 - Extremely valuable input
 - May just suck at it though

Self-fulfilling opinions

- **Extremely common**
 - “This class is the best off!”
 - “This race is the worst off!”
 - “This area has the most loot!”
- **Can only be spotted through rigorous testing**
- **Can be shaped by applying pressure to leaders**
 - “Dare them”



- Often exist for many areas of your game
- Suffer from both types of bias
- Offer hardcore yet directly applicable feedback
- Account for bias, and use them like crazy

Using special interest groups

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Open feedback forums

- **Pro:**
 - **Wide array of opinions**
 - **Different constituencies rub against each other and can arrive at compromises**
- **Con:**
 - **Vocal minorities**
 - **The squeaky wheel gets the grease**
 - **Whatever you tend to answer is what you'll get more of**
 - **Overly hardcore users**
 - **You're lucky to get 10% of your user base on open boards**

Community leaders

- **Can serve to shift a large audience your way**
 - They can advocate your perspective to their group
- **Will tend to be people who represent a diverse array of sub-factions**
 - Odds are they are more than half politician if their group is large
 - Willingness to compromise
 - They derive authority from your contact with them

The Trade-offs of Close Contact

Or, basic lessons in Machiavelli

Wish-fulfillment

- You are selling them *their* wishes
 - If you start selling *your* wishes, they will react negatively
- Sell them what they want
 - Be willing to abandon cherished ideas
 - You are in service of growing the community
- Sell them what they don't know they want
 - There's plenty of room for creativity

The Importance of an Ethos

- **Early adopters are driven by a passion**
 - Should have been the focus of your marketing
- **You need a mission statement**
 - If you abandon it outright, you lose those core users
 - Be willing to morph it to accommodate competition
- **People want to feel part of something bigger than themselves**
 - Use “us” not “you”

The “Appearing Human” factor

- **People dislike impersonal service**
 - Automated answering machines, etc
- **You want the image of a small, customer-centric shop**
 - Dole out human details in small doses
 - Be very careful never to endanger employees
 - Let the passion leak through
 - It’s OK to discuss business realities

Temper, temper

- **Don't lose your temper**
 - It can be sometimes useful to be offended, if you have an audience and the attacker crossed the line
- **Useful alternative tactics:**
 - Express disappointment over bad behavior
 - Express sadness that you cannot make them happy

Handling hard cases

- **Make an honest effort**
 - They may well represent a significant constituency
- **Don't talk to them after that, they'll argue forever**
 - Whatever you reply to is what you'll get more of!
- **Express *to others* regret that you cannot make them happy**
 - These others may turn into your defenders

Overpromising

- **Very easy to do**
 - Part of marketing efforts, getting carried away
 - Honest changes in priorities
- **Address as quickly as possible**
 - Be honest and direct
 - This is where having hardcore users know about business realities can help you
- **Use caveats *all the time***

Silence

- **Your presence draws the whiners**
 - You can ruin a good community by asking for input
- **Control the information**
 - If you don't, someone else will
- **Dead silence is a bad idea**
- **Some problems *can* be made to go away by ignoring them**
 - Cases where actions speak louder than words
 - Cases where they dig their own hole

Honesty

- **There's really little reason to be duplicitous**
 - They figure it out fast
 - You'll trip over yourself
- **Respect your audience**
 - They are smart people
 - Plus they have the money you want
- **Buys you goodwill for the real screw-ups**

Part One

Community Contact

Question & Answer

Part Two

Design Choices

**What to change, how much, and
when?**

Metrics

The less-biased information source

What to track?

- **Be aware that metrics can lie too**
 - You might be too selective in choices
 - Can be “cold” compared to opinion
 - Can be self-fulfilling
- **Let’s look at some examples of metrics**

Kills

- **Track what objectives are achieved and what rewards they give**
- **Sort by frequency of achievement**
- **Figure out why those achievements are frequent**
 - Over rewarded?
 - Overly easy?
 - Badly placed? (bottom-feeding)
- **Why are others less tackled?**
 - Lack of rewards
 - Overly hard?

Kills

VNUM	ML	AL	LSL	%S	APS	TK	Total Party Levels Versus Mob Level		
11714	13	17	4	3	1	758		+++++++	+++++++
30702	1	4	1	14	1	767			++++
20910	13	15	4	4	1	919	---	++++	+++++++
11711	6	30	3	5	1	973		+++++++	+++++++
23001	50	36	17	2	2	1043	--	+++++++	+++++++
20913	26	22	7	6	1	1285	-----		+++++++
22534	16	2	20	0	2	1565	+++++++	+++++++	+++++++
11657	16	16	5	3	1	1874	-----		+++++++
32741	31	26	12	3	1	2047	-----	+++++	+++++++
7643	1	8	1	3	1	2048			+++++
11606	25	24	6	4	1	2507	-----	+++++++	+++++++
32739	36	26	12	3	1	2958	-----	++	+++++++

Player geographical location

- **Similar assessment to previous**
- **Do you have a concentration of easy or hard objectives?**
- **Have you made poor layout choices?**
 - **Need to analyze traffic flow based on player goals**
 - **Don't forget to account for social factors**
- **Check for self-fulfilling prophecies**

Item usage

- **What's the most commonly used item in the game?**
 - **What weapon is most often used?**
 - **What armor does everyone wear?**
 - **Don't forget that many will choose to be different in appearance disregarding "optimum" choices**
- **What does word on the street say "sucks"?**
- **Players are very very good at finding optimums**

Game economy management

- **eBay may well be your best metric**
 - Currency exchange to real-world dollar indicates your level of inflation
- **Currency inflow, outflow**
 - Know your faucets and drains
 - Where does money accumulate?
- **Rate of goods production and deletion**
 - You need to adjust these knobs, make sure you can!
 - You'll usually need to add more drains

Population breakdowns

- What's the most popular role?
- Is your advancement broken? Look for "breakpoints"—these are exit opportunities
- What level do people start over at?

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Can you automate?

- **If you have a regularly tweaked value whose value is predictable based on other inputs**
- **Make sure it does not feed back on itself**
- **Case study: UO's skill table**
 - **Started as a floating table**
 - **Feedback loop exacerbated trends**
 - **Moved to static table**

Part Two

Design Choices

Question & Answer

Part Three

Making the Switch – Production to Live

Forming the Live Team

- **What composes a Live team?**
- **When do you form a Live team?**
- **What type of person do you hire for Live?**
- **What do they do before production?**

Phases of Test in an MMO

- **What should be ready for test**
- **Running a Test Server**
- **How many testers**
- **Internal testing**
- **Outside testing (closed)**
- **Outside testing (open)**
- **Full open test**

Making the Transition

- **Handling the Transition**
- **Making a implementation plan**
- **The pacing difference**
- **Inter-team communication**

What Needs to be there before you go live?

- **Community Interface**
 - Web
 - In-game messages
- **Front-end systems:**
 - Billing
 - Registration
 - Login
 - Patcher
- **Back-end systems:**
 - Metrics Collecting
 - CS Tool Suites

Part Three

Making the Switch – Production to Live

Question & Answer

Part Four

Going Live

Go when you are ready!

- **Don't be pressed to release before the game is ready**
- **Short-term vs long-term thinking**
- **It's a service not a product**
- **You only get one launch**

Communicating with the Community

- **Via Web**
- **Chat**
- **In-game methods**

Publish Process

- **Schedule (Production Plan)**
- **Documentation Process**
- **Version Control**
- **QA Plan**
- **Bug Fixing**
- **Balance Issues**
- **Emergency Fixes**
- **When to publish**
- **Who should publish**

Metrics to Measure Your Success

- **Feedback Loop with CS**
- **Feedback loop with QA**
- **Feedback loop with Community**
- **Feedback loop with in-game monitoring systems**

Balancing Live and New Content

- **Implementing new content in the game**
- **Implementing new systems in the game**
- **Developing an expansion product**

Patch, or expansion?

- **Is it big?**
 - **Forget broadband exists, mmkay?**
 - **Many users may have it, but it's freakin' expensive to YOU**
- **It is a marketable upgrade?**
 - **It is very important to have a fresh presence on the store shelves**
- **Is it something everyone should have?**
 - **Never introduce balance inequities with upgrades**
- **Have you been neglecting the users?**
 - **They expect, therefore deserve regular content and will tell you so vocally**

Introducing new content

- **Within fictional context**
 - Eaten up by hardcore players
 - Best used for non-obvious upgrades
 - Can also be disseminated via website fiction, etc
- **Outside of fiction**
 - Practically a necessity for any game-altering changes

A fundamental lesson

**START TIGHT,
LOOSEN UP
LATER**

Stakeholder input

- **Players are stakeholders just like your execs are**
 - **Without them, your execs don't have jobs either**
- **Update centers**
 - **Keep them in the loop on proposed changes**
 - **Give them "comment time"**
 - **Amend based on feedback (hey, free design work!)**

Stakeholder input

- **Test servers**
 - Can be difficult to attract or retain users here
 - They can easily develop a sense of privilege, so wipe often to create the expectation
 - Recognize them—this is thankless work
 - *Listen* to them. This is the commonest mistake made.

Where's the focus?

- **Fixes?**
 - **Anything that generates calls has to go to the top of the queue.**
 - **A batch of bugfixes in every patch is always well-received**
- **New content?**
 - **Focusing only on bugs can cost you the content-hungry (odds are they learned to live with any non-showstoppers)**
- **Strike a balance once bugs are under control**

Where's the focus?

- **New users?**
 - **You need fresh blood, but your current customers are more important than new ones, and give better ROI**
 - **Do not betray current customers based on pursuit of higher numbers.**
 - **Put another way: satisfaction ratings count more than growth figures**
- **Retention?**
 - **Be very wary of only adding hardcore or top level content**
 - **"Database deflation"**

Part Four

Going Live

Question & Answer

Part Five

Customer Service for Live Operations

Customer Service for Live Operations

- **In-Game and Technical Support**
- **Topics covered:**
 - **Why Customer Service?**
 - **Why do Game Developers and Publishers Traditionally Fail in this Area?**
 - **How can we do better at delivering MMOG Customer Service?**
 - **Goals of Customer Service**
 - **TOS, ROC, EULA, Policies**
 - **Training and Monitoring**
 - **Tools**
 - **Challenges of 24x7 Operations**
 - **Continuous Improvement**
 - **Q&A**

Why Customer Service?

- **Is it an unfortunate necessity or integral to the experience?**
- **Consumer Expectations for Social environments, examples:**
 - **Disney theme parks**
 - **Bowling Alleys**
 - **Bars**

– **Gordon, Rich, Raph**

Why do Game Developers and Publishers Traditionally Fail in this Area?

- **The function of customer support for stand-alone games**
- **The standing of customer service within the hierarchy of a publishing company**

– **Gordon, Rich, Raph**

How can we do better at delivering MMOG Customer Service?

- Mission and Goals
- TOS, ROC, EULA issues
- Training and monitoring
- Challenges of 24x7 operations
- Measuring results
- Continuous improvement

– Gordon

Goals of Customer Service #1

- **Our commercial goals**
 - Convert as many new players to subscribers as possible
 - Retain current players as long as possible
 - Be there for the consumers when they need us
 - Be cost effective in delivery of the service
 - **Other potential goals**
 - Be the best in the industry (benchmarking)
 - Turn service into a profit center
 - Can you think of others?
- Gordon, Raph, Rich

Goals of Customer Service #2

- **Challenges in reaching the goals**
 - **Consumer desire for service is greater than commercial delivery capacity at today's pricing (do the math)**
 - **Setting consumer expectations for service levels appropriately**
 - **24 x 7 operations**
 - **Being responsive *and* effective in solving the consumers problem**
 - **Being able to say "No" effectively when the service problem is really a game mechanic issue (real world examples)**

– Gordon, Raph, Rich

TOS, ROC, EULA, Policies #1

- **What does all this alphabet soup mean?**
 - **TOS – Terms of Service**
 - **ROC – Rules of Conduct**
 - **EULA – End User Licensing Agreement**
 - **Basically, the rules service providers publish which set the legal conditions by which consumers access that service and/or software**

TOS, ROC, EULA, Policies #2

- **What do these agreements cover?**
 - **What the relationship between player and provider is (legally)**
 - **Who will do what, and who is responsible for what (mostly what the provider is not responsible for in practice)**
 - **How the provider expects the consumers to behave within the environments offered (social rules)**
 - **Why can't anyone write these things in English?**
 - **Gordon, Raph, Rich**

TOS, ROC, EULA, Policies #3

- Links to the major online game agreements:
 - <http://www2.station.sony.com/en/termservice.jsp>
 - <http://www.station.sony.com/services/procedures.jhtml>
 - <http://everquest.station.sony.com/support/policies/conduct.jsp>
 - <http://www.uo.com/agreement.html>
 - <http://www.uo.com/conduct.html>
 - <http://www.uo.com/harass.html>
 - <http://privacy.msn.com/tou/>
 - <http://zone.msn.com/asheronscall/start.asp> (click on Game Help link to get to code of conduct)
 - <http://www.daoc.com/> (click on Customer Support link, then click on Player Policies)
 - (show related excerpts)

– Gordon, Rich, Raph

TOS, ROC, EULA, Policies #4

- **Advice for these agreements**
 - **Get an intellectual property lawyer (a really good one)**
 - **Fight to keep it as simple/readable as you can, but listen to the legal advise you get**
 - **Ensure you can update these often, because you will have to do so**
 - **Don't believe you can anticipate all possibilities, so leave yourself room to maneuver**
- **Gordon, Raph, Rich**

Training and Monitoring #1

- **Why bother with training and monitoring?**
 - **Consistent delivery of service is critical to the consumer perception of the experience**
 - **Complex game environments require significant training and orientation**
 - **Ability to wield in-game power is quite seductive, ensuring it is not abused is a consistent challenge**
 - **Without monitoring you have a flawed view of how service is actually being delivered, and of the performance of your service representatives**
 - **Measuring things tends to improve results, as what management pays attention to is what gets the attention of the organization**

Training and Monitoring #2

- **What should we train for?**
 - **Standard customer service issues (being polite, how to defuse emotional situations, how to enlist the customer in solving the problem, etc...)**
 - **How to solve in-game problems, and how to teach players to solve them in future without calling for live support**
 - **Our specific in-game tools and systems**
 - **How they can report/escalate out-of-ordinary issues in their chain-of-command**
 - **Gordon, Raph, Rich**

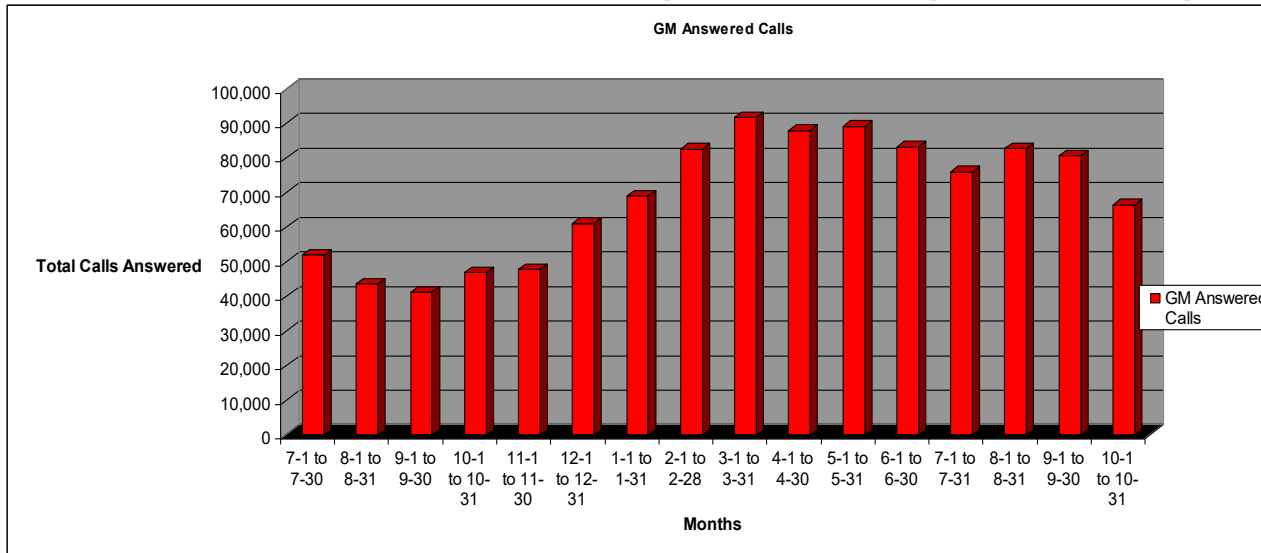
Training and Monitoring #3

- **What should we measure?**
 - **Customer satisfaction on a per call (per representative) basis**
 - **Types of calls taken**
 - **Frequency and length of calls**
 - **Average, max wait times (down to the hour)**
 - **Abandoned call rates, average times**
 - **Regional and server differences**
 - **Basically, you need to measure in every axis you can think of. 😊**

– **Gordon, Raph, Rich**

Training and Monitoring #4

- **Graph all these statistics over time. It will give you an early warning when something in your service changes and show you progress against goals**



Tools

- **You have to have tools to deliver service**
- **The better they are the better and more cost effective your service**
- **Tools should be prioritized and judged on how quickly and effectively they deliver service to the consumer**
- **They pay for themselves within weeks typically**
- **Examples (knowledge bases, queuing systems, email response systems, CRM systems, logging...)**

Challenges of 24x7 Operations

- **Your consumers play 24x7, and this is one of the implied promises of a MMOG**
- **You have to be there for them when they need you, because you never know what might happen. There are always issues that can't wait until the next day**
- **You need 3 shifts of people x 2 to cover a week. Six people for all line jobs within the service!**
- **Managing the hiring, scheduling and monitoring of a 24x7 operation is something you need experienced management to accomplish effectively**
- **There are no shortage of surprises and emergent issues in servicing a MMOG**
- **And it never ends...**

Continuous Improvement

- **Since the service is ongoing, the challenge is never become complacent, to always look for the next way to improve service delivery**
- **As the largest variable cost item within an online service, budget pressures are continuous, so finding productivity gains is a necessity**
- **The customers will teach you what is most important to them in service, you just have to listen to them (and interpret their feedback correctly)**

Part Four

Customer Service for Live Operations

Question & Answer

Customer Service for Live Operations Part 2

- **Topics to Cover**
 - **Integration with entire Live Team**
 - **Launch challenges**
 - **Web board issues**
 - **Connectivity issues**
 - **Account Administration issues**
 - **Discipline and Banning**
 - **Security issues**
 - **Q&A**

Integration with the Live Team

- **Tight communication required**
- **Customer Service is a key feedback loop for development and service management**
- **Customer Service is a key partner in running a service, must have a strong voice in setting priorities (top service call generators must be continually addressed)**
- **This is typically the largest variable cost in running an online service, so profitability is directly affect by how efficiently you deliver service!**

Launch Challenges

- **The tone of your relationship between consumers and customer service is set at launch**
- **This also the time that most service problems are likely to occur, and that the service delivery tools will also have issues**
- **If there is ever a time to over-invest in customer service, this is it**

Web Board Issues

- **Your boards are also an integral part of your service**
- **Set your policies at launch and enforce them uniformly**
- **You have to decide if your boards will have the same rules as your game, or something even more strict since most are available to be read by non-subscribers**
- **Service monitoring and delivery tools have a high payoff here**

Connectivity Issues

- **This is an often overlooked area of service, but very necessary**
- **No matter how latency adaptive your game, internet issues will cause service problems**
- **You need to have the expertise to help customers understand and solve their problems (and the ability to detect when your service has a problem!)**
- **You can't fix most of these issues, but you can educate the consumers**
- **Build tools for customers to trace and understand these problems (I can't believe that no service I'm aware of has supplied a symmetrical trace route tool yet!)**

Account Administration

- **Primarily concerned with registration, billing and credit card issues**
- **Registration failures are common – reg code reuse, dyslexia, web issues**
- **Get smart about letting consumers know when their credit card will expire, don't let it be a surprise**
- **Account transfers and account theft complicate the job of this group**

Discipline and Banning#1

- **You need to decide what your policies in this area will be and follow them uniformly**
- **As with so many things, it is easier to become more lenient than clamp down, so I suggest your policies start firm**
- **While you can give a list of many behaviors you do not allow, you will never be able to make an exhaustive list, the audience is just too inventive (rules lawyers abound)**
- **You will need to keep records on every customer contact, discipline and bannings are more often due to a pattern of behavior than a single incident.**

Discipline and Banning#2

- **Why ban consumers, isn't there a better way?**
- **Is there a case for forgiveness and redemption?**
- **What are appropriate banning offenses? (hacking, harmful exploits, real world threats, racial/other harassment...)**
- **How can you prevent banned consumers from returning, and do you want to?**
- **Tools and more tools...**

Security Issues

- **Client hacks / Account Theft**
- **Server hacks**
- **DOS Attacks**
- **Client memory hacks**
- **Bitstream hacks, encryption**
- **Protecting privileged access**
- **Physical security issues**

Customer Service for Live Operations Part 2

- Q&A