

Lisa B., "Customer Service in Massively Multiplayer Games," June 2005

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I've worked a variety of jobs over the past eight years of my life in a variety of industries, but a common factor to all of them was the emphasis placed on providing excellent customer service. I've seen co-workers and managers terminated solely for failing to provide adequate customer service. As a result, I, as a consumer, have come to expect excellent customer service from organizations that provide the goods and services I consume.

When I began playing Everquest, I had always heard about the poor customer service provided by the Player Relations Department, but had not yet personally encountered a paid employee. Then I had an issue with my character. She was stuck beneath the world and I could not log her into the game. Seeking a solution, I went to the chat room that was designed to give support to players who were having issues that could not be solved by gamemasters (GMs) within the game. The GM, a paid employee, in the chat room was engaged in a conversation unrelated to game-play with other players. I told him about my problem and asked for advice. After waiting in vain for a response, I noticed that a couple of other people who were asking about game-related issues were also being ignored. The GM simply continued his conversation about his Pepsi addiction. Irritated, I asked him why he was not answering any of our questions, to which he replied, "I only answer the questions asked by people who are nice to me." I was amazed (and disgusted) that a paid employee would be so shamelessly rude. I filed a complaint against him, but never received any kind of feedback about it. I ended up having to wait to play the game until the next day, when a different GM was willing to help me.

Having sworn off Sony Online Entertainment (SOE, the publisher of Everquest) products, I was drawn to World of Warcraft, mainly because of the reputation of their publisher, Blizzard, for providing excellent customer service. It only took a couple of weeks of gameplay to realize – and a few months of gameplay to confirm – that Blizzard was falling drastically short of living up to its reputation. The confirmation came when the group I was in collectively experienced a serious bug in the loot system. The group consisted of a close group of friends, plus an "outsider" that none of us personally knew. To prevent any bad situations with loot going to the wrong player, the group leader had set the loot system to "Master Loot," which allows the leader to assign loot to specified group members. We reached the end of an instance, killed the boss mob, and the leader was in the process of assigning the drops to the appropriate players. However, the "outsider" was still able to loot an item off the corpse of the mob, an action that should have been impossible with Master Loot enabled. The "outsider" claimed it was a mistake and apologized, and each of the five of the group members submitted a ticket requesting that the item (which was not tradable) be placed on the correct character. The following day, four of the group members received identical messages from a GM at precisely the same time stating that he could not help us with the issue. Despite our different responses to the GM, we again received identical messages thanking us for playing World of Warcraft which made no reference to anything we had said. It was clear to us that there was no real person on the receiving end of our messages, and that we would not receive any information such as an explanation or steps being taken to prevent the issue from reoccurring. We posted on the forums in hopes of

receiving a response from a real person, but the post was quickly pushed back and never received any attention from a Blizzard employee.

The above two noted incidences are examples of situations that stand out in stark contrast to my experience with customer service as both provider and recipient. I could not understand how these business' policies did not include an expectation for the GMs to strive for excellence in customer service. For these reasons, I knew exactly what my research topic would be long before this class had its first meeting.

While the Massively Multi-player Online Game (MMOG) industry is fairly new, the innate importance of providing excellent customer service is not. Extensive research has been conducted concerning various aspects of customer service. While most of the research pertains to more "traditional" businesses, much of it can be applied to the MMOG industry. A common assessment made in this field of research is that the complaints of consumers are a vital part of a successful enterprise.

Scheuing asserts that customers and suppliers share a symbiotic relationship, with customers playing the active role in creating the value of the suppliers' commodities by inquiring, requesting, and purchasing. (2-3). He notes that many companies seem to forget that they exist because of the customers, and would cease to do so if the customers did not support them (4). Accordingly, it is an important aspect of good business practice to keep the customers happy.

Even the Baldrige National Quality Program, whose objective is "to enhance the competitiveness, quality, and productivity of U.S. organizations for the benefit of all residents," (Baldrige) acknowledges the importance of customer service with this description of its customer service category:

This category examines the company's relationships with customers and its knowledge of customer requirements and of the key quality factors that drive marketplace competitiveness. Also examined are the company's methods to determine customer satisfaction and retention, and these results relative to competitors. (Scheuing 8)

Central to customer service is the treatment of customer complaints.

Barlow and Møller define a customer complaint as "a statement about expectations that have not been met" (11). The analogy is made that a complaint is a gift from a consumer to the good or service provider, and the definition is expanded to include "an opportunity for an organization to satisfy a dissatisfied customer by fixing a service or product breakdown" (11). In this sense, the customer is providing the business an opportunity to exemplify why she should remain loyal. The customer service representative can choose to utilize this "gift" for the greater benefit of her employer, or she can choose to be an ungrateful recipient, and lose a customer. Barlow and Møller argue that, in most cases, the customer service representative only sees the surface "complaint," and not the "gift."

Finkelman and Goland provide statistics on the value of complaints, as they are representative of a larger community which does not complain to the company. They estimate that for every customer who complains, 20 dissatisfied customers remain silent (247). Morgan supplements this statement with a more detailed analysis. According to the White House National Consumer Survey conducted in 1996, 91% of dissatisfied customers who do not make a complaint will not return for future business. Of those who do complain,

but whose demands are not met, 81% will go elsewhere. Regarding customers whose complaints are resolved, 46% will not return for business. If the complaints are resolved quickly, only 18% of customers will not use the company again (Morgan 5).

Customers that do not return for future business are detrimental to the financial success of subscription-based services. This is known to the credit-card companies and other subscription-based companies who focus a large percent of their resources on regaining lost customers, as noted by Griffin and Lowenstein (xiii). They also note that, often, a single lost customer can be regained with \$10 worth of effort, but that \$400 will have to be spent to gain a new customer to replace the lost one (xiii). With such high stakes, Griffin and Lowenstein rightly place heavy emphasis on the retention and win-back of past customers, rather than the acquisition of new ones. They have conducted a variety of surveys focusing on the lack of concern and knowledge that some markets have over reasons for customer loss, with the results illustrating that not nearly enough emphasis is placed on maintaining customer loyalty and regaining lost customers (5-7).

Significantly closer to home, Jessica Mulligan's book, *Developing Online Games*, specifically addresses customer service issues in online persistent worlds. She cites multiple repeated instances of bad customer service that would have been, seemingly, avoidable if these gaming companies had taken the time to study past examples and adequately prepare for worst-case scenarios. She provides a supernal walkthrough for professionally handling a disaster during a game's launch, placing special emphasis on maintaining informative communication with the customers. Despite the fact that this book was written in 2003, and that there have been a number of disastrous MMOG launches since its publication, Blizzard failed to follow the recommendations outlined in this walkthrough during World of Warcraft's own disastrous launch and the proceeding months of comparative chaos. She refers to the community relations department as "the single most important group on the team," and even asserts that "good customer service is the main differentiator between [persistent worlds] today," (223,190).

Fully aligned with Mulligan's stance on the issue, I reached out to the gaming community in hopes of finding some means of resolution. I first focused on communicating with the gamers. My goal was to obtain a range of examples of player's experiences making contact with some manifestation of MMOGs' customer service. I also wanted to take note of the satisfaction level of their encounters in relation to their gaming experience. In order to determine the level of experience of the participants as gamers, I asked questions pertaining to the number of hours they play MMOGs, how many subscriptions they have maintained, the number of times they have attempted to contact a customer-service representative within a MMOG, and their interactivity with the MMOG community outside of games (e.g. message board activity, official forums, etc). Determining their respective experience with playing MMOGs was important because more experienced gamers will probably put their experiences into context with the other games they've played. Also, they will be likely to have an understanding of appropriate situations for contacting customer service representatives, and more familiar with tactics used by those customer service representatives. In order to collect this information, I created a survey at surveymonkey.com that was designed to collect qualitative as well and quantitative data.

In addition to the above mentioned inquiries, I asked gamers to think of one or two specific situations in which they had contact with a MMOG customer service representative and to rate their satisfaction with the received response. The rating was done on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being unsatisfactory, 3 being neutral, and 5 being excellent. The participants were provided with two fields in which they could enter typed responses. The last field on

the survey provided them with an opportunity to leave their email addresses, if they were interested in being contacted for additional questions.

In order to get participants for the survey, I passed the word on to a few gamers I personally knew, and posted on a variety of MMOG related forums. I posted on boards that were devoted to a variety of popular MMOGs, as well as cross-game communities. I closed the survey after I had received 100 responses, and ended up with 75 valid responses after weeding out those that appeared to be illegitimate.

Having collected sufficient data from the player community, I began my attempt to collect information from the developer community. I could not use the same method of posting links to a survey on public boards, since the chance that the majority of the responses would be from players and not developers was rather high. I resorted to private-messaging official forum moderators through the message board private-messaging system, and sent emails to various qualified persons. This effort proved fruitless, as I received no responses in about a two-week period. At the suggestion of my professor and urging of a classmate, I posted an inquiry to the MUD-Dev list (<http://www.kanga.nu/lists/listinfo/mud-dev/>) requesting the participation of those with experience in providing customer service in MMOGs. I was able to conduct six successful interviews via email as a result of having posted to the list. It was my goal to determine, through these interviews, where game developers in general rate customer service on their list of priorities, and what obstacles they face that seem to prevent an overall successful customer service practice from being implemented. I also gave them the opportunity to submit any additional comments that they felt were relevant.

When I began my analysis of the player-submitted data, I focused on looking for patterns in the results from the most and least satisfied players. The first group is the "excellent" category of players. These players rated their most memorable experience with a customer service representative as "excellent." The second group is the "unsatisfactory" category of players. Accordingly, these players rated their most memorable customer service experience as being "unsatisfactory." 10.6% of the total respondents fall into the "excellent" category, while 17.3% belong to the "unsatisfactory" category. The first thing I noticed when analyzing the data provided by the respondents in the "excellent" category was the significant number that failed to provide a detailed account of the situation. The field was either left blank, or the details were forgotten. When asked to note the details of an experience with a customer service representative, including the game involved, the nature of the players concern, the type of response received, and is satisfied, one respondent replied with, "forgot everything about it but that last question, the CSR was very helpfull [sic]." This respondent was not alone; an incredible 37.5% of participants in the "excellent" category failed to provide any kind of detailed account of their situations. Contrarily, not a single respondent in the "unsatisfied" category failed to provide details. This disparity encouraged me to examine the types of complaints noted by both parties, and determine to what extent these problems hindered their gameplay.

In the "unsatisfactory" category of players, 38.4% of the problems reported actually prevented the player from being able to engage in gameplay of any type. These problems included not being able to log in to the game, having stuck characters, and the game crashing upon log-in. The biggest complaint by these players was not the issue itself, but the amount of time they were forced to spend waiting for a response, as noted by one player, "Falling through the world in WOW, asked for in game GM took about 5 hours (pretty slow) they reset my position [sic] so was kinda [sic] happy.. just took ages :(" The wait period described in this situation was the shortest reported, as the rest ranged to a week or more, but is perhaps the worst case because the player sat in game for an unacceptable five

hours in a row, unable to play the game and merely waiting for a response. These situations were in contrast to the ones noted by the participants in the “excellent” category, none of which completely obstructed gameplay. Most of these situations reported bugs found in various quests. Of these bug reports, 100% of the players who were assisted through the problem by a customer service representative did so within City of Heroes. One player relates an extraordinary example of superior customer service:

I was in city of heroes and was on a mission that required me to kill all the villians [sic] inside. I had searched every cornor [sic] that i [sic] could find (it was a cave) and I still hadn't received the mission complete. I sent in a report and in around 15 min i [sic] was sent a tell in game by a GM. I told him what the problem was and he asked me to wait a moment. He located the villians [sic] I had missed and asked me if I was ready to be teleported to them, and then did so. after [sic] about 10 min he sent me another tell making sure i [sic] had gotten the mission finished and wanting to know if I had any more problems. I was very satisfied by the way the situation was handled and the GM was very nice and respectful.

Interestingly, none of the players in the “unsatisfactory” category were relating to events that occurred in City of Heroes (although 61.5% occurred within World of Warcraft).

The majority of players from both categories are what I consider to be hardcore gamers (people who have played for more than 30 hours per week) and all but one of them continue to subscribe to the game in which they've received bad service. This leads to the conclusion that as long as the game is enjoyable for the players, they will not cancel their subscriptions.

The developers are apparently fully in-tune with this notion, as not a single one of them listed good customer service as one of their top three priorities. However, they did all place the game being fun as one of their top three priorities. Another common element is the necessity of communicating with the player base. When asked what kinds of complaints were commonly received, developers and community managers often cite a lack of information and a feeling of being “unheard.” The internet, as a medium, has made the vocalization of the consumer's objections or complaints easier, and therefore has created a more demanding customer (Mooney and Bergheim 4). This means that, while there are more complaints, there is also a higher demand for a response. The interviewees reported that the typical tactic for dealing with such grievances is to maintain open, personalized means of communication. Grantham and Carr state that “Today [businesses] are formed around service relationships with customers,” an assessment backed by the interview participants' reported effectiveness of maintaining these lines of communication (ix). One of the interviewees, who maintains a free online server for a popular MMOG, thus describes the most effective tactic for dealing with dissatisfied customers and its respective effectiveness:

One on one talking. Players respond when a Game Master or Administrator takes some personal interest in them and their problems. They get to vent about what annoys them and get some feedback and suggestions on how to resolve their problems in a way that maintains the context of the game.[...] It's my direct experience that a lot of "rule breakers" will turn into good players if someone experienced just listens to them and offers a few words of advice.

This is an excellent summary of the most effective way for dealing with unhappy customers, agreed-upon by both the interviewees and the conductors of relevant research.

The biggest obstacle to maintaining customer satisfaction, as reported by the interviewees, is the large number of people affected by every decision. A decision that pleases some players will inevitably displease other players. They note that when an adequate explanation is given to the gaming community the number of complaints is often reduced; however, it seems impossible to prevent complaints all together when making changes to the game. When asked what one thing a community manager would like for customers to understand, he responded with, "We are here to make their gaming experience better. We are here to fulfill their wishes within the game but on a larger scale. We do not select a side, and we make our decisions based on all the information that we have available." This statement reflects the impossibility of pleasing all of the customers, all of the time.

Since one on one communication is so vital, the gaming companies should not place emphasis on making game changes appeal to all players – they know this is impossible. Rather, they should ensure that they have the capacity to give individual attention to the unhappy players. Considering the large player base, this effort will require a much larger employee base. Mulligan goes into extensive detail relating the importance of having an adequate number of GMs, all of whom should undergo vigorous training (189). She also suggests varying levels of power allotted to the GMs in order to make such a large number of them more feasible (202).

Unfortunately, 52% of the gamers that participated in the survey reported having received a pre-generated message in response to a complaint. Not only does the tactic of using pre-generated responses as a means of customer service defy the necessity of personal communication, Wendy Zabava-Ford refers to such a tactic as manipulative (3). Elaborating further on the importance of personal communication, she notes that, "providers who are expected to process masses of customers with great efficiency and profitability tend to depersonalize their service interactions, showing both a lack of commitment and a lack of caring" (89). This reiterates the importance of having more customer service representatives available for response.

When reviewing the data of the surveyed gamers, a number of truths are revealed. The fact that the number of unsatisfied customers is about one and two-thirds times the number of satisfied customers proves that there is a problem with the customer service provided by the MMOG industry, in general. As noted by Karr and Blohowiak in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Great Customer Service*, a significant number of complaints – and clearly, nearly 20% of the consumer base is significant – must be immediately assessed by identifying the desired results, evaluating the current results, and creating a plan to change the unhappy customers into satisfied customers (i).

The fact that the players in the most immediate need of attention – those who were being prevented from playing the game – are the most unsatisfied customers indicates that the system of reporting issues is broken. Under no circumstances should a player wait 5 hours in game for a response from a GM, unable to move her character. Issues that prevent gameplay need to be flagged for immediate attention. No customer should be made to wait longer than 20 minutes for a response, or longer than 24 hours for a solution to the problem to be applied. For issues as easily remedied as moving a stuck character, the wait should never exceed 30 minutes. For more complex issues such as client-side instability, follow-ups should frequently be made until the player is able to access the game.

As for conducting this research itself, the most notable limitation was the time allotted. Ideally, I would like to spend at least two years observing subscription patterns and creating more contacts in the MMOG developer/community manager community. My

interviews with people belonging to this community were very few. None involved employees of the biggest MMOGs who, I am certain, would have additional information to submit and would be more directly related to the player information I gathered.

The most important piece of information gained while conducting this study is that personal communication is a vital component to the satisfaction of customers. Game play, stability, and other issues, of course, are essential to the success of a MMOG, but only through excellent customer service will game companies be able to maintain the vast majority of their player base, and gain even more players through this reputation for providing exceptional care for its customers. In the near future, it will be interesting to observe subscription patterns in relation to the number of major MMOGs available for play. I suspect that the success of a game, no matter how superior the design, is fleeting without a means for providing the type of customer service that players demand. In the approaching years, an increasing number of MMOGs will continue to ship and the competition they provide may make companies place more emphasis on customer retention. Under these circumstances, impeccable customer service may find its way to top of the priority list of MMOG developers, finally providing the type of customer service that consumers have come to expect.

Appendix

Sample of the survey for gamers:

1. Please indicate the greatest number of hours ever played in a one week period for each game.

	Have never played	Do not play on a regular basis	Less than 10	10-20	20-30	30-40	More than 40
Anarchy Online	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
City of Heroes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Dark Age of Camelot	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Everquest	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Everquest II	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lineage II	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Shadowbane	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Star Wars Galaxies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Final Fantasy XI	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
World of Warcraft	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ultima Online	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. To which games do you currently subscribe?

Anarchy Online

City of Heroes

Dark Age of Camelot

Everquest

Everquest II

Lineage II

Shadowbane

Star Wars Galaxies

Final Fantasy XI

World of Warcraft

Ultima Online

Other (please specify)

3. On average, how many hours do you spend per week reading game forums?

	Less than 3 hours	3-5	5-10	10-15	15-20	20-25	25-30	More than 30 hours
Official Game Forums	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Server Specific Forums	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Guild Forums	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Gaming information sites (alkkhan.com, easteronline, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. Through what means have you communicated with MMORPG customer service representatives?

Pre-generated in-game response

In-game conversation

Email

Telephone

Chat room

Other (please specify)

5. About how many times have you contact a MMORPG customer service representative?

- Never Once Twice 3-5 times 5-10 times More than 10 times

6. If you can think of an interaction with an MMORPG customer service representative, please describe it below. What was the game, and what was the nature of your concerns? What sort of response did you receive from the csr? Were you satisfied?

7. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing "unsatisfactory" and 5 representing "excellent," how would you rate the level of customer service that you received?

- 1 - Unsatisfactory
 2
 3 - Neutral
 4
 5 - Excellent

8. If you can think of a second interaction with an MMORPG customer service representative, please describe it below. What was the game, and what was the nature of your concerns? What sort of response did you receive from the csr? Were you satisfied?

9. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing "unsatisfactory" and 5 representing "excellent," how would you rate the level of customer service that you received?

- 1 - Unsatisfactory
 2
 3 - Neutral
 4
 5 - Excellent

10. I am also hoping to talk with a handful of people about their feelings on this topic. If you would be willing to participate in a game interview, please leave an e-mail address at which you can be reached. Your information will *not* be shared with any third parties.

Sample of Interview Questions for MMOG Customer Service Representatives:

Please only answer the questions that are applicable, and reply with "N/A" to those that are not. Also, keep in mind that every question is optional. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question, please skip it. Thank you for your participation!

As an MMOG decision-maker, what are your top three priorities?

As an MMOG support employee, what are the major challenges in satisfying customers?

What are the most common types of customer complaints?

What are the respective typical tactics for dealing with these types of complaints?

Do you think these tactics are generally effective?

On a daily basis, how many customer complaints do you typically field?

If there were just one thing that you wanted your customers to understand about your job, what would it be?

If you could change anything about how your organization deals with customer complaints, what would it be?

How do you think the customer service challenges faced by MMOGs differ from those faced to other types of customer service situations?

What is the name of the company you work for? (Optional)

What game(s) are you currently working on, or have worked on in the past and for how long? What was your job title when working with these games?

Please feel free to make any additional comments about your experience(s) with MMOG customer service.

I am trying to find more people with whom to discuss these issues. Do you know of anyone who might be willing to chat with me? Can you recommend any places where I might post inquiries?

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