

Gaming online: taking the labour out of the lobby experience

Introduction

Lobby areas within online games serve important functions and are a crucial staging post for setting up a game. Why then, do they feel like a late addition in many games, and in some cases poorly match the design and production values of the game proper? Drawing on our professional and personal experiences we have pulled together guidelines to help make finding, setting up, and playing online games seamless and fun, as it should be.

Guidelines

Getting the basics right

- Clearly signpost the route to online play. The word 'online' helps: avoid abstract labels.
- Indicate the number of players online, to help players determine the size of the community.
 - Players can also gauge if it's a good time to play and how long it might take to start.
- Avoid jargon, like 'syncing clients'. Keep it simple, friendly and suited to the audience age.
 - E.g., Write it in plain, non-technical English: 'We're looking for other players', or even 'Connecting to other gamers'.
- Provide feedback during setup, matchmaking and loading. That way the players will be prepared to wait for the game to start.
 - E.g., Feedback on how long the process of matchmaking will take, a countdown timer, number of people taking part in the game, how many players are required before the game can start, how the players are split between teams, or even where the players are geographically located.
- Don't force players to make region and language choices if this can be determined from the hardware configuration and game region coding.

Setting things up so the games can commence

- Provide default settings so that games can start quickly.
 - For those who like to tweak, offer the option to edit settings and alter game rules.
- Settings that might be configurable include maps, time limits, difficulty levels, victory conditions, starting items etc. Consider saving these preferences within player profiles.

Finding a game and matchmaking

- Two routes should always be on offer:
 - A quick route for those who just want to start playing.
 - An alternative route that allows specific choices to be made based on preferences.
- 'Quick' routes should be simple and not force players to meet skill criteria, or to complete a tutorial first.
- Skill or rules-based matchmaking should be on offer to allow players to play games based on skill level, map preferences and availability, network speed, language and region etc.
- An option to edit the matchmaking rules may well be needed, as well as the ability to limit matchmaking to trusted parties such as friends and favourites.
- Provide an option to play for fun in a social manner, for those times when players don't want to work on their rank/score (or have their rank/score reduced!).

Ensure players speak no evil and hear no evil

- Game lobbies can be noisy, and on occasion intimidating places. Give careful consideration to where and how voice communication can be used.
 - E.g., Provide an easy to access mute option, to allow abusive players or those using inappropriate language to be silenced. Muting just one or several players should be quick and easy to do.
- Online games may support voice chat between and within teams. Between teams is OK in the lobby area but keeping it within a team during gameplay often works best.

Content is king and choice matters

- For players to remain 'attached' to a game title the content, whether it be maps, levels, missions, objects, or songs, needs to be added to and kept fresh, whether offered by the gaming community or the creators of a particular game.
- To help players make choices, a system of ratings for user generated maps or levels should be available so players can then select the most highly rated or most popular options.

Provide community tools and they will come

- Online gaming is about communities and communities need ways to regulate themselves, as well as ways to form and break alliances or social networks, such as being able to boot players out of teams for 'unsporting' behaviour.
- Players should be able to create profiles, rate other players and create lists of friendly or preferred players. This is particularly important in the case of children's titles.
- Mechanisms for players to form a party and remain as a group should be available. A system of invites and messaging may also be required (via voice, video or text).
- Players should also have ways to contribute to the particular gaming community. Being able to share (and rate) maps or levels is a great way to increase the longevity of a game title.

Let the post mortem and the award ceremonies begin!

Online gaming can be intense, fast paced and lots of fun. Sometimes players don't want the experience to end and that is where tools to review and analyse a game afterwards come in.

- Allow players to review scores, leader boards, rankings, and even videos of gameplay. Ideally allow these elements, or *bragging rights*, to be shared with the wider community.
- Allow players to unlock bonus content, extra maps and levels etc, to reward performances. Selling content is fine, but giving some away generates good feeling towards the developer.

About PlayableGames

PlayableGames (formerly SGR), a division of ExperienceLab, has been studying (and playing) games for years. PlayableGames consists of a team of highly experienced gamers and user experience researchers, a team that shapes gaming experiences for console manufacturers and publishers in the UK and abroad.

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