A Tale in the Desert: Review

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Abstract

If you could work together with hundreds of other people to create a utopian society, how would you go about it? *A Tale in the Desert* a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) by eGenesis, asks exactly this question, and offers its players the opportunity to propose laws, build great works, and change the course of a story set in ancient Egypt. In some ways, it is the first game of its kind, but more "concept MMORPGs" are sure to follow.

Introduction – What Is ATitD?

Whereas a typical Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) such as Asheron's Call 2 or Star Wars Galaxies follows its predecessors' well-established and profit-garnering model of a combat-oriented game with a character-building treadmill, a few new MMORPGs seek to break away from this mode. At the forefront of such games is *A Tale in the Desert*, produced by a handful of dedicated developers at the independent company eGenesis.

Part of a press release from eGenesis' Web site describes what this game is about, and why it is so different from its forbears:

> A Tale in the Desert is an online game set in ancient Egypt where players work together to build the perfect society. It uses the internet to allow thousands of players to play together in the same world. All of the characters you will see and talk to in the game are controlled by other people just like you, not by a computer. A Tale in the Desert is the first online game to focus on long-term planning and long-term goals rather than combat. Goals include the creation of great works of art and architecture, becoming a powerful leader, and building wealth.

The company's publicity, and almost all reviews of the game, focus on its uniqueness. *ATitD*'s complete lack of violence or combat is nearly unheard of in the MMORPG genre (though The Sims Online manages something similar). The game is competitive, to be sure - players race to be the first to possess a new technology, or to complete one of the many tests of skill - but it is first and foremost about building a civilization. Though previous games such as the *Sim City* series have included architectural and sociological elements, *ATitD*'s massively multiplayer format means that for the first time, the interactions of real people are being governed by in-game laws and systems.

ATitD is meant to appeal to strategists and creators, a specific but significant subsection of the MMORPG-playing population. Nonetheless, it contains a vast range of activities, such that even those who live and breathe the game have to specialize somewhat to master a given pursuit. Furthermore, it's a different game for everyone; each player finds the aspects that appeal to him/her and focuses on those. Such an approach is possible because the virtual environment is so rich, and because the players are left largely to their own devices to explore it.

The Story

Much of the charm of *ATitD* derives from its somewhat authentic virtual recreation of ancient Egypt. This conceit runs deeper than the prominence of the Nile as a landscape feature: every aspect of the game, from its technologies to its overarching plot, depends on the setting and feel of the game. This has its drawbacks - for instance, true Egyptian history buffs might be off-put by some of the technologies that have become available, which never existed cotemporaneously in ancient Egypt. The realism of the game is further weakened by the occasional utterly fantastical incursion; for instance, one of the Trials of Worship features a meter indicating the attitude of each of the gods who must be pleased by the supplicant's rituals.

The Trials themselves are an essential part of the game; it is by passing tests in each of seven Disciplines that the players advance their civilization. According to the game's story, the Trials are the battleground in which takes place a struggle between two fictional ancient Egyptian entities called The Pharaoh and The Stranger. Though the nature of these endeavors varies dramatically from one Discipline to another, according to eGenesis, "they only have one thing in common: they all require you to strategize against other players." This is where *ATitD*'s competitive streak shows through. The diversity of pursuits available in the game is demonstrated by a description of the Disciplines:

- Art – "Create works of genuine beauty for your fellow players to judge." For example, an early Trial requires the player to create a public sculpture, which a certain number of passerby must declare beautiful before he/she can advance in the Disicpline.

- Leadership – "Wisely govern your fellow players." The easiest Trial involves a petition declaring the bearer a good leader, which a number of other characters must sign in order for him or her to advance in the Discipline.

- Conflict – "Master the duel, a test of wits, not strength." Players must achieve increasingly high rankings in the Rite of Command card game (see below) to succeed in this Discipline.

- Architecture – "Build monuments that tower over your fellow players." Some of the game's most monumental structures, such as pyramids, must be constructed to pass the Trials of Architecture.

- Worship – "Master beautiful but complex rituals." The Discipline of Worship requires its aspirants to choreograph increasingly large numbers of other characters in specified ritual Trials.

- The Human Body – "Maximize your strength and endurance." An initial Trial in this Discipline involves locating a number of different landmark features - a river, the shade of a tree, a rock, and more - and visiting them all within a rather short period of time.

- Thought – "Master the sphinx's riddles." Trials involve intellectual puzzles of various sorts.

It is notable that *ATitD* casts its civilization-building gameplay as part of a greater struggle - The Pharaoh and The Stranger are not abstract entities. The former is the persona frequently assumed by the game's creator, Andrew Tepper, and according to one interview the latter has an increasingly direct role in "trying to corrupt the Egyptians and turn them against themselves" as the game's story progresses. The idea of developer intervention to force the players to make certain kinds of plot-affecting choices is reinforced in *ATitD* by occasional plot events, such as the

discovery of an ancient monument in which was entombed the pharaoh <u>Octec</u>'s remains.

A group effort to demolish the tomb of the ancient Pharaoh Octec

Finally, *ATitD* is the only MMORPG that I have encountered whose story has a limited duration. According to <u>the developers</u>, "the game will end when a major monument of each of the seven disciplines of man is completed. Then after a short break the second 'telling' will start. The game will roughly be the same, but things like charcoal and seed growing will have different formula's [sic]." This temporal aspect helps define the over-arching story, keeping things in focus and discouraging players from ignoring what's happening on a larger scale (such as the Trials) and instead developing only their own resources. It makes the story more important, because when the story ends, the game ends... and everything else goes away.

Interactive Participation

A Tale in the Desert's graphically demanding software and monthly subscription fee somewhat limit its potential audience from the outset. It is worth noting that, as with most MMORPGs, the game's client program updates itself automatically each time the user logs in. This built-in evolution mechanism allows eGenesis to revise the

game as it progresses, a procedure that is somewhat more involved for standalone computer games. *ATitD*s code uses a number of free public domain software libraries. Such pre-written graphical and network support saves the programmers time, and is something of a necessity, given the diminutive size of eGenesis and the ambition of the game. It seems likely that as better free software becomes available, more independent MMORPGs will be created. Such games, unlike most of those that exist today, will be able to afford a great deal of experimentation, and are more likely to push the limits of the massively multi-user virtual world paradigm.

It is one of the game's strengths that it is able to present a fairly intuitive interface (particularly to those who have played similar games before) for the exploration of its visually splendid virtual world, while offering highly-detailed "systems" to model the various pursuits that inquisitive players can discover. Participation in the grand experiment that is *ATitD* can take many forms. These include fishing, various kinds of farming, beetle breeding, firework construction, sculpture, mushroom gathering, painting, a unique card-based sub-game called Rite of Command, and more. Repetitive tasks such as brickmaking and flax harvesting comprise the backbone of material success, but those who prosper in such activities are often in a better position to triumph in the game's more ephemeral (and sometimes lucrative) pursuits.
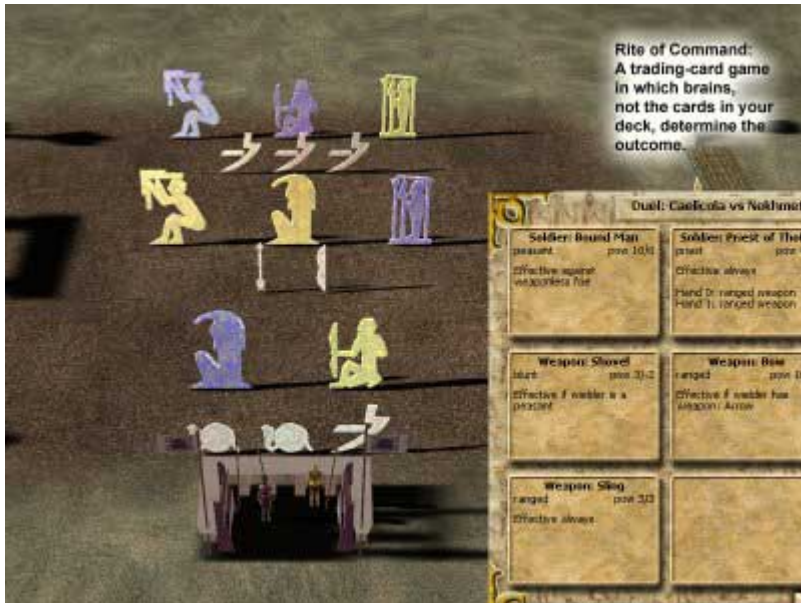

Making wine is a very complex process, and tasting fine
vintages can permanently improve a character's perception

Commonplace objects can be arranged in any
configuration to create fantastical sculptures

Each stage of a firework can be finely tuned for best effect

Success in Rite of Command, an in-game trading card game,
allows one to advance in the Discipline of Conflict

Like any MMORPG, *A Tale in the Desert* offers a wide range of possibilities for interactions between players: online friendships, guilds allowing for mutual advancement, virtual weddings, and more. Such interactions necessarily exist only insofar as the players of the game pursue them, but *ATitD* facilitates socializing better than most games of its type, and its players tend to be friendly, cooperative, and helpful. This is clear from the outset: the first task of a new player is to find a mentor, who will guide him or her through the basics of the game in exchange for success in the Discipline of Leadership. Because a user knows his or her mentor from the outset, it is difficult to feel isolated or helpless - fortunate, since it's almost impossible to get very far in the game by oneself.

Social interaction - culture-building - really does reside at the core of *ATitD*'s "civilization-building" play. It is up to the players of the game to discipline one another, determining what is and is not acceptable to them. Crass behavior will typically cause unceremonious ejection in an MMORPG, but eGenesis' policy is different: "We do not have a policy against offensive behavior, but be aware - if you offend the other players, they have the power to punish you [in whatever ways the player-generated laws of ancient Egypt specify]. They can even exile you permanently from the land of Egypt - game over, don't come back. If you choose to

behave in a way that is annoying to other players, we will not protect you from the wrath of the other players."

Thoughts and Conclusions

The commercial strategy of eGenesis is to create a game that is many different things to its various players, but also one unified story to all. The *A Tale in the Desert* experience includes elements of community-building, personal advancement, artistic creativity, world-altering great works, politics and law, strategizing in a limited-resource environment, time-sensitive action, and a grandiose epic storyline in which everyone has a chance to play a part. How great a part, of course, depends on how involved a given player has been - how much time he or she has spent in the world, how many Trials he or she has passed, and how many resources his or her guild has accumulated.

The lawmaking system is one of *ATitD*'s most remarkable features

The game self-consciously raises an interesting question: can this virtual civilization construct a better government than exists in the real world? Admittedly, such a question glosses over some factors - for instance, no one starves in *ATitD*. Indeed, death was only recently introduced, and only occurs on <u>unique occasions</u>.

The aspect that appeals to most players, and is most emphasized in the company's publicity, is one common to many roleplaying games: character advancement, both in terms of wealth and ability. This is further compounded in *ATitD* with a persistent world, which can be added to by players in a lasting and arguably meaningful way. The roughly-one-year cycle of the game does detract from the monumental character of such contributions, however.

Finally, there is the voting system, the passing of laws that change the nature of the world. This is the most powerful kind of interaction present in ATitD, though it has limitations – a potential law requires a certain number of signatures to get beyond petition stage, and a certain proportion of "yes" votes to pass. The game's developers do differentiate between in-game laws ("characters may attempt to steal belongings from other characters, but those caught doing so by the previous owner are subject to property confiscation") and out-of-game features ("there will be some way to domesticate and grow mushrooms, without having to hunt for them in the wild").

A Tale in the Desert is perhaps the most revolutionary MMORPG since the genre's inception. It is, in <u>the words of its founder</u>, a "social experiment." What sort of culture will be created, particularly as the game refines itself through multiple tellings, remains to be seen; but it will likely be a society unlike any that has yet existed on this Earth.