

Chapter 1

Introducing Massively Multiplayer Games

In This Chapter

- ▶ What is an MMG?
 - ▶ What do you need to play an MMG?
 - ▶ What happens on your first day, week, and month?
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Massively multiplayer games (MMGs) are one of the most exciting innovations in computer gaming today. Only a few years ago the concept of millions of people interacting with one another from across the globe, connected only through the thin veil of a computer network, was the stuff of science fiction. Novels such as *Neuromancer* by William Gibson and *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson talked about a realm called “cyberspace” where people talked to one another through “avatars” and shaped that world to suit them.

In the space of just a few years, this has moved from science fiction to science fact. “Cyberspace,” of course, is now the Internet, and almost every computer on the planet is connected to every other computer. One of the things that the Internet has made possible is the ability to enter “shared realities” where people from all around the world can interact in a consensual illusion controlled by their computers, where the rules of the real world no longer apply as strictly as you might think.

If this sounds revolutionary, it is. But for now, one of the most popular applications of this is actually fairly simple: the ability for people to play computer games with each other through the Internet. Not only can people play simple games (known as *multipayer online games* or *online games* for short) with just a few people, though, the Internet’s scale also allows for games to involve literally thousands of people at once, in shared experiences that have never been seen before in computer gaming. These games are called *massively multipayer games* (MMGs) because they’re multipayer games on a massive scale.

What's in a name?

MMGs go by many names. Many times they're referred to as massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) despite the fact that that is one of the most tongue-tying acronyms one can muster. Some game companies have actually made this acronym even longer; a "first-person shooter" MMG such as *Quake* or *Doom* might be called an MMOFPSRPG. This is, honestly, just getting silly. Because not every

game involves active roleplaying (though many encourage it) and because it's difficult to have a massively multiplayer game that isn't online, most players shorten this acronym to a more manageable three letters: MMG, for massively multiplayer game. I encourage you to use this abbreviation, and do your part to save the tongues of game players everywhere!

What Is an MMG?

An *MMG* is simply a computer game that is played over the Internet with many other people at once. There are many different styles of MMGs, but they share some common characteristics:

- ✔ The player is represented within the game world, usually as an *avatar* or *character* defined by the player. The type of character is defined by the game's world; if the game world is set in Medieval Europe, the player's character may be a knight, a priest, or a wizard. If the game is set in a futuristic setting, the player's character might be a soldier in power armor or a merchant in a suit and tie.
- ✔ The "story" of an MMG is usually that of your character's growth. Over a period of months, or sometimes years, your character will become steadily more powerful, from a new arrival to a mighty force within the game world able to defeat any challenge.
- ✔ MMGs usually (although not always) have some conflict or contest at their core. The players seek to fight in a colossal war among themselves, or seek to defeat monsters and seize their treasure.
- ✔ MMGs almost always have a monthly fee, charged by the company that runs the game. This allows the company that runs the game to pay for the game's Internet usage, server hosting, and frequent updates, known as *patches*, that often change the game's world dramatically.
- ✔ MMGs run continuously, whether or not you are playing. If you have set up a storefront within the game, people will browse your virtual wares while you may be off doing other things.

- ✓ MMGs usually don't have a clear goal. They are what you make of them; if you want to just log in once in a while to visit, or devote a significant amount of time to mastering the game world, the game will happily accommodate you.
- ✓ MMGs *never end*. You will never see a “victory screen” or a “game over” message like in other computer games. The longest-running MMGs have been played for almost ten years now. If you tire of a game, you can take a month or a year off and your character will be right where you left it.

The most popular MMGs are fantasy worlds based loosely on paper role playing games such as *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*. Players assume the roles of heroes and, through the course of the game, gain *levels*, or ranks of power that allow them to face greater challenges and obtain greater rewards the longer they journey through the game. Other games allow you to fight other players in large-scale battles, or put together online shops that allow you to sell things to other players in-game.

Figure 1-1 shows you what you might expect to see when first entering an MMG.



Figure 1-1:
A typical scene in *World of Warcraft*, one of the most popular MMGs.

As shown in Figure 1-1, the view from a typical MMG is similar to that in many online games, such as *Doom* or *Half-Life*. You are in a three-dimensional space, and objects such as trees and buildings are represented much as if you were looking into a world from your screen. Your character may be unseen;

the view you see on-screen is the view from your character's perspective. If your character begins walking in any given direction, the view changes to represent your character moving through the game world. A window near the bottom of the screen has important messages from the game world, such as what other characters around you might be saying. Other games might depict other characters' speech as comic-book style bubbles over their heads. Clicking on an object or another player with your mouse "selects" it, and may provide information about what you've selected in a window.

In Figure 1-2, you notice some similarities as well as some differences from Figure 1-1. *Dark Age of Camelot* has a different, more "natural" style, as opposed to *World of Warcraft*, so the view is a bit sharper, with more detailed trees, buildings, characters, textures, and so on. In *Dark Age of Camelot*, you can actually see your character as he or she moves around the game world. (This is called *third-person perspective* as opposed to the first-person perspective common in *EverQuest*, another MMG. It's purely a matter of preference, and you can play using either view in either game.) Still, you are moving through a three-dimensional space, and a window near the bottom of the screen contains information conveyed to you from others in the game world.



Figure 1-2:
A similar
scene, this
one from
*Dark Age of
Camelot*.

Stuck in the MUD: The birth of MMGs

The very first MMGs, which started appearing back in 1978, were called multi-user dungeons, or MUDs. They ran on powerful computers owned by universities (often without the knowledge of the computing department's administrators) and were played mostly by college students, because computers capable of connecting to the Internet were still quite rare. However, the game systems of MUDs were quite similar to those seen in MMGs today. Very quickly, literally thousands of MUDs rapidly sprang up all over the world. Many of them still exist today; the "Mud Connector" Web site at

www.mudconnector.com is a good place to begin exploring them.

Although most MUDs are free to play, they do not have the bells and whistles common among today's MMGs such as graphics or sound effects. The most important distinction is that although MMGs are fully three-dimensional spaces, MUDs look (and for the most part, play) identically to the old "text adventure" computer games of the 1980s. Still, because they are far easier to maintain, many MUDs have interesting environments and game systems that are still years ahead of their newer, more graphical brethren.



Most of this book assumes that you are playing a specific type of MMG — one that is based in a fantasy setting, has levels and classes that define the type of character you have, and for the most part consists of fighting monsters within the game world to advance your character's development. This is the most popular type of MMG today, but certainly isn't the only one! I try to keep things as general as possible throughout this book, but if you're playing a specific MMG that is a bit different from the fantasy roleplaying norm, keep in mind that some of my comments may not apply to your game.

What's the Point? The Objective

The point of playing an MMG is to have fun.

I italicized that preceding sentence for a reason. Having fun is the most important thing you should keep in mind when exploring an MMG. If you're not having fun, *something is wrong*. MMGs are, at their core, games. If you're not having fun when you're playing, it's time to take a break. The game will still be there when you come back.

Beyond having fun, though, what is the point of MMGs? It's a good question, and one only you can answer. Here are some common responses:

- ✔ **To compete:** Many people play MMGs as competition. They want to "win," however that is defined within the context of the game — slaying the most fearsome of beasts, or standing atop the virtual corpses of their online enemies.

- ✔ **To escape:** Others play MMGs to live, if for a brief moment, within a virtual world. They want to explore new areas within the game, meet new people, and see what they can discover.
- ✔ **To socialize:** Still others simply play MMGs as a social activity, to meet new people online and to make new friends.

All of these reasons are equally valid, and most MMG players do all of the above at some point. There's nothing stopping you from picking and choosing what you want to get out of an MMG from this list.

If anything, MMGs are sometimes *too* open-ended. Some people have a hard time finding enough structure to choose a goal they're comfortable with. There very rarely is a storyline for you to follow in MMGs, unlike other computer games in which you start from a clearly defined beginning and progress to a dramatic ending. In MMGs, there simply isn't an ending. It's up to you to decide if you're happy with the amount of structure and pacing that the MMG you're playing is providing you with.

So, really, the answer to "what's the point of all this," is simply to have fun. Any other goals within the game are for you to accept, or not, at your leisure.

The Things You'll Need to Play

MMGs have some basic requirements to start playing. These requirements are generally not as stringent as the most cutting-edge of video games, but it's still worthwhile to review what's needed. I go over most of this again in more detail in Chapter 3. The basic requirements are as follows:

- ✔ **A computer:** Although some MMGs now are playable via consoles (most notably *Final Fantasy XI* from Square Enix, which is playable on the PlayStation 2 and soon on the Xbox 360), generally playing an MMG on a console is more expensive due to the console's unique requirements (such as add-on hard drives or keyboards). The great majority of MMGs are played using Windows PCs. Two popular MMGs, *World of Warcraft* and *Shadowbane*, are also available for both Windows PCs and Macintosh computers.
- ✔ **A 3D accelerator video card:** With the exception of a few older games (such as *Ultima Online*), MMGs require a reasonably fast 3D video card to display the game's 3D environments. Again, the best card on the market isn't necessary, but the better the card you have, the better the game will look. Newer games, such as *EverQuest II*, can be very demanding on your hardware and look their best only on the newest 3D video cards.

The first MMGs

What was the first commercially available MMG? This is a subject that is often argued about, because the definition of an MMG is sometimes a matter for debate. However, the first massively multiplayer online Internet game that appeared in store shelves isn't a matter for debate: It's *Meridian 59*, originally published by 3DO in 1996. (Previously, games such as the original *Neverwinter Nights* and *Sierra Network* would be played exclusively on closed networks, such as CompuServe and AOL.) Created by Mike Sellers, Andrew Kirmse, and Damion Schubert, among others, *Meridian 59* (or *M59*) was ahead of its time in many ways, but poor marketing by 3DO, the Internet's growing pains, and a Byzantine pricing structure (most players were billed by the hour) kept it from being more successful.

The next MMG on the market, *Ultima Online*, was published a year later, in 1997. Developed for Origin Systems by Richard Garriott, Starr

Long, and Raph Koster, among many others, *Ultima Online* (or *UO*) was the first truly commercially successful MMG, with hundreds of thousands of players. By the time *EverQuest* (developed for what is now Sony Online Entertainment by Brad McQuaid, Steve Clover, Bill Trost, and many others) was released in 1999, MMGs had proven themselves to be far more successful financially than anyone could have hoped.

By the way, all of the games I mention in this sidebar are still alive and well, including *Meridian 59*, which survived the bankruptcy of its original publishers, was purchased by two ex-developers, and is now maintained as a labor of love. In fact, to date, the only way an MMG has ever closed has been if the company decided to stop maintaining it. Even the oldest MMGs have a number of hard-core players willing to stay with them for literally years and years.

- ✓ **An Internet connection:** Although a broadband Internet connection (such as cable or DSL) isn't required for most MMGs, it's definitely recommended, because a dialup Internet connection causes your gameplay to slow down dramatically when many people are on-screen. Due to the frequent delay of information from satellite to computer, a satellite Internet connection is *not* recommended for use with MMGs. The delay makes MMGs (or any other online game) unplayable.

"Wait a Minute! I Have to Pay Money? I Already BOUGHT the Game!"

One thing that surprises most new MMG players is that they have to pay for an account before even starting to play. Almost every MMG has a monthly fee associated with it, usually around \$15.00 (U.S. dollars).



Guild Wars, from ArenaNet and NCsoft, is currently the lone exception to this rule. Although you won't pay a monthly fee to play *Guild Wars*, the developers plan on selling expansion packs separately to add more content to the game. Still, if you really don't want to pay a monthly fee for an MMG, this is definitely a viable option.

You might think paying a monthly fee is somewhat odd — after all, you already paid for the game at the store. However, MMGs have a good deal more support available than other computer games. Unlike most games, a development team continues working on the game even after it's been released to the stores. This team, usually called the *live team* (so called because it's formed after the game goes "live"), is responsible for keeping the game updated, free of bugs and *exploits* (cheats, in other words), and every so often adding new content to the game.

MMGs also have a full complement of online Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) or Game Masters (GMs) who are on-call within the game to help with problems that might occur. I talk more about customer service in Chapter 6, but generally, the customer service folks are there to solve problems that you can't solve by yourself, such as being literally stuck on an object, such as a chair or a tree, which prevents your character from moving. As this prevents you from playing the character any further as long as you're stuck, it's one of the more serious (and unfortunately more common) problems that can happen when playing.

Finally, there's the fact that running an MMG costs a good deal of money. MMG servers tend to be among the most demanding client/server applications on the market today, and MMG development companies learn quickly how to handle the demands of thousands of players logging into a game at once.

In addition to the monthly fee charged by the game company, MMGs often have *expansion packs*, sold in stores, which add more explorable content or new classes to the game. MMG developers do this for three reasons:

- ✔ It allows for players to add content without having to have a huge Internet download.
- ✔ It keeps MMGs in stores (most computer games only stay on store shelves for a few months, where most MMGs are already several years old and still going strong).
- ✔ It's an opportunity for the game companies to make more money. (Duh.)

Still, expansion packs are almost always worth it. Some games, such as *Dark Age of Camelot*, actually update the entire game with expansion packs to keep it up-to-date and competitive with newer MMGs.



If you're starting fresh with an older MMG, several expansion packs may be out already. To save wear and tear on your pocketbook, look for compilation packs in stores, such as *EverQuest Platinum* or *Dark Age of Camelot Platinum Edition*, which include most expansion packs up to the present.

Managing Your First Milestones

If you look ahead through this book, you'll see that I talk a lot about firsts. Your first day, your first week, and your first month are all pretty important milestones when playing an MMG, especially when compared to other computer games that you probably completed after your first (and only) week. In the following sections, I explain exactly what you can expect as you get started.

Your first day

Your first day will be spent getting acquainted with the game. Don't expect to run out and slay any dragons (unless, well, they're very small and don't move quickly). You'll start by installing the game onto your computer, creating an account so that you can log into the game, and finally creating a character to experiment with. Don't get too attached; most likely this won't be the character you spend the rest of the game with. This first character is just to poke around the edges and get comfortable with the game. You'll want to create another character when you're more comfortable with the game and have a good idea of what style of character you want to play for the long term. If the game has a tutorial or starter area designed to teach you the basic fundamentals of how to actually play the game, go through that before anything else. Not only does the tutorial show you how to play the game, in most games, it's also a good place for the game's developers to give new players a leg up, such as a free experience level or some in-game money. At this point, you want all the help you can get!

Your first week

Your first week of playing a new MMG will be spent deciding which character you want to spend time developing. There are many types of characters (I call them *archetypes*) in MMGs, and only you can select the archetype you'll be happiest playing. You'll probably switch a lot between characters, trying to decide which one is the best for you. And you'll still be learning the various ins and outs of the game itself.

Your first month

Your first month will see you decide on a *main*, or primary character, that you'll develop going forward.



At least hopefully you will. I personally have a difficult time deciding on a character in any MMG, which causes everyone I know to mock me unmercifully. Don't let this happen to you! Or, well, you can. Just be prepared to have your friends and loved ones call you “permanewbie” and other mildly insulting epithets.

You'll join with other characters, in *groups* of players that gather together briefly, to solve a common problem, such as fighting monsters that would be too difficult for you to fight individually. By the end of your first month, you'll probably be seriously considering joining a *guild*, a permanent group of players that cooperate in playing the game together.