

Join into your own Rift: a Housing Case for Player Housing

Earlier this week we were treated to the news that Trion Worlds is going to offer free character transfers between "select servers" once Update 1.3 hits. Now, how useful this will be is anyone's guess -- as some have noted, this may just be a clever ploy to redistribute the population from high-pop servers to low-pop ones -- but generally it's been met with applause from the community. I remain impressed as a consumer with how fast and aggressive Trion is pumping out content, and the fact that this is a free transfer once per week is really cool considering how most other subscription MMOs charge for a similar "premium" service.

Whatever Trion's motive and however it'll play out, I do know this: The company needs to continue to bring the heat to the competition. It's vital that RIFT distinguishes itself from the rest of the pack in some way, whether it be polish, originality, speed, customer service, or innovation.

Today I'd like to make a case for what I think should be high up on Trion's development schedule: player housing. We know it's something the devs have discussed, with some very much for and some very much against, but I'm hoping it's gone past the brainstorming phase. Why should we care about what might seem like fluff? How could housing work in RIFT? Tune in after the jump, same Bat-time, same Bat-channel to find out!

Swords to plowshares

One of the problems with modern MMOs is their extreme focus on combat as the be-all, end-all of the gaming experience. Jef talked about this a little in the Soapbox yesterday, but I want to back him up on this. While I love RIFT and appreciate that there are some elements of non-combat play, such as artifact collecting and vanity pets, there really isn't much to do outside of endless killing.

Without going into a massive rant on the subject, I'll merely say that this model of gameplay is poisonous to the long-term success of any title. People need variety to stay interested, even if they do enjoy the main course. JACK

Way back when I was first following Warhammer Online, it was disconcerting to me to hear the developers' dismissive attitudes toward what they saw as pointless "fluff" in the game. "Who needs fluffy silliness when you can have an endless war!" they roared. But nobody wants an endless war; we need breaks and downtime and other activities so that the war remains interesting instead of "all that there is." Eventually, WAR's devs slowly reversed course in this stance by offering vanity pets, although by then it was too little, too late.

Now whether you agree that player housing is the way to go or not, I don't care, as long as we can come to a mutual understanding that a game that has but one option on the menu -- combat in various disguises -- is going to have a playerbase hungry for other possibilities before long.

Why we fight

So why player housing? What's so special about this system that isn't universally adored in the MMOs in which it appears? The more I think about it, the more that the synergy between this system and RIFT's dynamic content seems obvious: We should be fighting to protect our homes.

I've always thought that housing is necessary in MMOs because it gives players a connection to the game, a sense of belonging and place that can't be totally filled with your avatar or guilds alone. We may explore the world, but housing is a small part of it that belongs to us, not to some virtual king or the beasts of the wild. It's always nice to have a place to return to at the end of a long day, a place where you can kick up your feet and recharge.

Moreover, if Trion made a full-fledged housing system that wasn't merely ornamental but offered functional benefits, we would form an attachment to it -- and want to make sure it stays safe. While I like how the rifts, invasions and zone-wide events unfold in the game, RIFT has yet to make me truly care whether or not the bad guys succeed in their dastardly plans. Meridian and Sanctum are never sacked, and I'm fighting more for rewards than to protect and defend the land.

But what if our homes were at stake? What if the enemy could not only conquer but occupy until violently thrown out of places that are rightfully ours? What if we logged in one day to find that all of the goodies, the amenities, the visible accomplishments of our deeds were inaccessible because the Endless Court was squatting in our cottage? On that day, we may learn why we fight indeed.

Creative outlet

If you were to ask me how players can express their creativity in RIFT, the best I can currently come up with is the soul system. Yes, there's a lot of room to tinker with builds and come up with interesting class combinations, but that's pretty much the extent of how far the game goes to give you a way to put your imagination into practice (if we're being generous, I'll include the wardrobe here as well).

Systems like the housing in EverQuest II, the supergroup bases in City of Heroes, the anything-goes philosophy in Minecraft and the extreme dollhouse simulator in The Sims all show that interior decoration is a hit feature with gamers. Yet for reasons I can't fathom, there's a contingent of MMO gamers who sneer down on this system as if it sullies the good name of mindless violence. Fortunately, I'm pretty sure they don't speak for all.

Player -- or even guild -- housing in RIFT could give players a pile of tools to express themselves creatively and add a whole new social element to the game (which is, according to Trion, supposed to be "the most social game ever!"). I won't belabor this point, but I will urge you to look at any MMO in which creative tools are given to players (such as CoH's

character creator or Lord of the Rings Online's music system) and then see how many times reviewers and bloggers mention those as highlights of the game. RIFT needs a creative highlight of some sort, and I think housing is perfect for this.

Sending a message

Finally, RIFT should include player housing to send a clear message to the MMO industry that this is not just an antiquated system that should be the sole domain of niche titles but a standard feature that major MMOs should have. And, oh, why doesn't yours?

Trion's made no attempt to hide the fact that it's nipping at World of Warcraft's heels and beckoning to those disenfranchised players with a promise that Trion is the company that will treat you right where Blizzard has failed. I can think of no better way for Trion to establish itself as a threat to Blizzard's slow and stubborn development process than to offer something that the frozen giant has resisted for years. Seriously, for as much as I respect what Blizzard's done with WoW and how much I enjoyed the game, it's always irked me how many excuses the dev team has as to why it can't be bothered with player housing instead of just shutting up and doing it.

Trion could just shut up and do it. And if it did, the devs would be my personal heroes.

Whether they're keeping the vigil or defying the gods, Karen Bryan and Justin Olivetti save Telara on a weekly basis. Covering all aspects of life in RIFT, from solo play to guild raids, their column is dedicated to backhanding multidimensional tears so hard that they go crying to their mommas. Email Karen and Justin for questions, comments, and adulation.