

\$100 Million Question: Is Heroes of Telara the World of Warcraft killer?

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With \$100 million in financial backing and three massively multiplayer online games in the works, Trion World Network Inc. is aiming to lead the charge against the sub-par game saturated MMO market and become the top contender in the field. But with the popularity of World of Warcraft and the dedication of it's fans, can **Trion** topple the MMO giant?

VG**Tribune** met with Trion last Wednesday in a behind-closed-doors appointment and from what we saw, we think their MMO *Heroes of Telara*, which has been in development for three and a half years, has a fighting chance at becoming one of the top contender in the MMO field. Here's what we learned:

If you haven't seen Telara's debut trailer yet, take a look below and get ready for a bit of a surprise afterwards.

The trailer above is composed completely of in-game footage. Senior Designer of *Heroes of Telara* Hal Hanlin made it clear that no pre-rendered footage was in the trailer above and that this was video taken directly from the game as it ran on a computer. I can say from personal experience that Hanlin isn't bluffing. I saw the game in action and it looks stunning.

Not only are the graphics slick for an MMO, but the thing that truly stands out is the dynamic, ever changing experience that is promised. I can't tell you how many times I've played an MMO to see the same farmer, baddie or event happening in the same exact place day after day. What Hanlin promises is mind blowing for a massively multiplayer online game and I'm sure every MMO gamer will know this. Up until now all that changed in an MMO were the players and their individual actions, but HoT promises much more will be changing.

"Every time you log into our game you see something different, you experience something different," Hanlin told VG**Tribune**. "And we can do that because the [game] client knows what things look like and sound like. And I can tell the server, using events, to do anything I want with that stuff.

I can say, 'Hey, 15 ogres. You know what an ogre looks like and sounds like. Put them over there!' And when I tell the server to handle that it controls all of the number crunching and you see 15 ogres rampaging this village.

... You can control all of that on this [server] side very flawlessly ... This isn't high minded theory... we've got this actually working in 3 announced games."

Trion has combined this dynamically changing world to create an interesting gameplay mechanic. Opportunities to become a hero of Telara are everywhere according to Hanlin. See a farmer warding off some monsters from his flock? Doing the right thing by killing off the monsters and saving his flock earns you his respect and brings you one step closer to becoming a hero. As players accumulate fame from heroic deeds such as saving a farmer's flock or saving a town or region from a throng of monsters, their fame grows and they become well known in Telara. And as for the farmer? Oh, he'll remember you when you pass by again. He might even cheer you on.

What happens if players choose to avoid saving the farmer's flock or doing the right thing in other instances? According to Hanlin, nothing; the world continues as it was. Despite the lack of consequence for choosing the "evil" or unheroic action, this mechanic along with the ever changing world might prove to be a game changer in the MMO game arena. Who knows, with presumably more than three and a half years of development consequences might already be implemented and tight lipped game developers aren't letting us know about them. If not, the game's vague 2010 release date leaves some time to develop negative consequences for "wrong" choices.

As all MMO players know, the quality of level grinding alone is what ultimately keeps players coming back. For those non-MMO players, level grinding is the completion of go here, kill this many "x" or go there, collect this many "y" quests along with the killing of thousands of monsters in order to reach that coveted "level up" over and over again. HoT gives players experience points for these heroic deeds so it can prove to be the MMO that solves the repetitiveness of level grinding.

Hanlin also noted that he and the other developers will be listening to the comments, wants and needs of the HoT community to keep the game truly changing. "We want to have you guys eventually help guide us," said Hanlin. Tell them what you want and they will "write a few events and throw them out on the server" for them to occur throughout the land of Telara as players explore.

When players first begin an MMO they create their character and pick a class such as Warrior or Mage which is usually bound to their character. Most MMOs do not allow players to change their class on the fly, but few allow the opportunity to create subclasses that players can apply to their character once they reach a designated level. *Heroes of Telara* aims to change this rigidity by allowing players to switch classes on the fly. Players can level up any classes they wish at any time they wish. Characters can gain new classes when players find "class cards" by defeating enemies in combat.

Hanlin showed an example of the class system to VG Tribune by killing an enemy who could summon minions. Once he killed the so called "Grave Lord" he took its class card, equipped it and could then raise minions himself that would fight for him.

Another annoyance gamers have encountered with many MMOs is the hoops they have to go through to play with friends.

Does the following scenario sound familiar?

"Hey man, I've got World of Warcraft too!"

"What server are you on?"

"Shadow Council."

“Oh. I’m on Earthen Ring. You can start a new character from scratch on my server or you could pay \$15 dollars to get switched over.”

“Oh. No thanks. I just finished switching to this server a few weeks ago to play with some of my other friends actually.”

MMOs have become such a big segment of the PC gaming market because of friends wanting to play with each other. Without that vital interaction between friends an MMO might as well be a single player game. For game companies to charge players for switching servers to play with their friends especially when they’re more than likely already paying a monthly subscription is asinine. According to Hanlin, HoT players will be able to change servers as often as they want, wherever they want at no charge at all. “Play with anybody, anywhere, anytime. we don’t want to draw barriers around you,” Hanlin said.

“When I was looking for a new project to get started with, I looked all over the place. I was looking for a company that had a vision that I thought was really progressive; that wasn’t stuck in what is and really wanted to look for what could be,” said Hanlin. With stunning graphics, innovative gameplay and a fresh take on massively multiplayer online gaming, Trion World Systems may just have a true competitor for World of Warcraft on it’s hands with *Heroes of Telara*, and at the very least a solid footing for a great MMO in 2010.

Edit: Somehow I forgot to mention the all important subject of price. Will *Heroes of Telara* be based on a monthly subscription fee or will it be free to play with the addition of microtransactions? Hanlin noted that the monetization of HoT was still not confirmed as they were exploring their options to see what worked best for them, but Hanlin did mention that a free to play model with microtransactions for some items or bonuses was not yet out of the question. With an MMO of this size and an investment of \$100 million a monthly based subscription fee is the most likely mode of monetization as it will be the model that allows for the quickest recoup of cost and quickest route to profitability despite the industry’s trend towards free-to-play games.

Many believe that World of Warcraft’s fan base is so large and dedicated that competing MMOs would have to be free-to-play with microtransactions in order to win over it’s player base. Unless HoT is the best thing since sliced bread (aka World of Warcraft), it’s likely that it would not overtake WoW’s player base if it implements a monthly subscription based revenue model similar to WoW’s. Of course, if it did implement a monthly fee model it looks highly probable that it could thrive in it’s own niche of players that could spread the word to those World of Warcraft players who are looking for something different.