

What Happens at the End of the World? An MMOG's Closure and Player Responses

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Introduction

On March 15, 2011 at 1:11 pm EST residents of the virtual world *Faunasphere* saw a network disconnect error message flash on their screens, suggesting that perhaps their Internet connections to the site had been lost. But the residents—known as Caretakers—knew better: Big Fish Games had pulled the plug on the casual MMOG they had launched less than two years prior. Shortly after the error message appeared, players gathered in self-created forums and a Facebook group (all set up in advance) to express their grief, share memories, and decide on what they would do next. Big Fish Games had given them a month's notice of the world's impending closure (or “sunset” as such closures are called in the game industry) and so players were able to gather, commiserate and plan their next steps.

But what happened during that last month in *Faunasphere*? How did players react to the closure of the game and the loss of their virtual assets, as well as the ending of an important (to some) activity? Did their play styles change at all, and if so how? And what can those reactions tell us about virtual worlds and their residents, as well as players and their attachments to avatars as well as other game artifacts? Most research that studies the players of online games assumes a timeless place, one without a beginning or ending point. Rather than see play as occurring within the context of a particular game with its own specific timeline and history, much research conceptualizes play as somehow adrift of that grounding. In contrast, this paper explores the answers to the questions just posed, through time spent in the game during its last days, via interviews with former players as well as through analysis of

forum and group discussions. Although many MMOGs have shut down, many more continue to open and age, and game studies scholars know very little about the end of the lifespan for such spaces, particularly how players negotiate and participate in such closures.

About Faunasphere

Launched in 2009, *Faunasphere* was the first massively multiplayer online game developed by Big Fish Games, a casual games publisher notable for its best selling series of *Mystery Case Files* hidden object/adventure games (2006). In addition to being a new venture for Big Fish, *Faunasphere* was a novel entry in the world of MMOGs, featuring a colourful, nonviolent world where players were encouraged to breed fauna and design personal spaces. *Faunasphere* was initially a browser-based Flash game that later became accessible via Facebook as well. It was free to play with a basic account, and there were also premium features and paid subscriptions, as well as a virtual currency (Lux) available for purchase (for more details see Begy & Consalvo, 2011).

In *Faunasphere* players took on the role of an unseen caretaker, whose job it was to care for, breed, and level-up multiple animal-like fauna that inhabited the game world. The game frequently addressed the player directly, always as “caretaker.” This label took hold in the community, where players regularly referred to themselves as “caretakers” or “CTs.” Upon creating their account players were given a starting “fauna,” which was functionally analogous to an avatar or player character, though as we will show the caretaker-fauna relationship was more complex than most fantasy based MMOG player-avatar interactions. Fauna were fanciful recreations of common animals, such as cats, dogs, pigs, and so on. These were given playful names by the developers, such as scratcher, sniffer, oinker, etc. Players could also use their fauna to “zap pollution,” plant trees, and engage with the

environment in a variety of ways to find items and earn experience.



Figure 1: Each Fauna has its own unique lineage.

Players could level-up their fauna through these activities, and upon levelling a fauna would lay an egg, which could be used to breed new fauna. With a free account players could have three fauna simultaneously, but by paying for a premium account could have had as many as thirty. Although higher levelled fauna were slightly better at zapping pollution than beginning fauna, there was no real structural difference between fauna of different levels, apart from the ability to learn certain 'tricks.' When fauna reached the level cap of 20 players could give them a golden collar to mark the occasion, but such fauna were not otherwise more advanced or powerful than other creatures in the game.



Figure 2: Fauna can ‘zap’ pollution in order to gain points and advance in levels.

Unlike in many other MMOGs, players were not instantiated in the world via their characters / avatars. Rather, the game addressed the person playing directly as a “caretaker” who was only visible in the world via his or her mouse cursor. Furthering this fictional identity, players could have many different fauna at the same time. Fauna differed from the characters in a more traditional MMORPG in that players could switch between fauna at any given moment; they did not have to logout or even go back to their homes. Inventories were also connected to players, not fauna. This meant that a player could always access his or her items at any time, while using any fauna. We hypothesize that the player-fauna distinction created by the game enabled players to see their fauna as pets with distinct identities and personalities, as evidenced by many players’ own admission. (Players’ fondness for and attachment to their fauna will be evident through this paper as we relay their responses to our surveys and questionnaires.) The resulting player-fauna relationships defined the nature of the game’s closing, which was characterized by a mix of player outrage and sadness. While these are not unexpected reactions, they are notable in that many players we interviewed expressed

more sorrow at the loss of their fauna and other in-game creations than the loss of their player community. Understanding how and why players reacted to the closing, and how that can inform our understanding of such closings generally, is thus the focus of this paper.

Methods

For this study we used a mix of qualitative and observational methods to develop an understanding of how *Faunasphere* players felt about the game's closure. First, after the closure announcement we began regularly reading several threads on the official forums to see how players were reacting. We also wanted to see if and how the community would organize means of communication post-sunset; Big Fish Games had announced plans to close the forums associated with the game as well. The two main groups that surfaced were the "Faunasphere Memories" Facebook group and the "Faunasphere Orphans" forum, both of which were established by community members in advance of the close. We joined both groups to observe discussions and to recruit participants to complete an email questionnaire about their activities in *Faunasphere* and what the game's closure meant to them. In doing so we openly posted in forums about past work on this game, and our intent in gathering information from individuals.

The questionnaire we distributed was qualitative, asking players to talk about how *Faunasphere* fit into their lives, how they felt about other players, and how they reacted to the closure. When necessary we did follow up questioning via email to request further details, or to clarify particular points that informants had made. Most respondents were quite eager to help, and in total we received 26 responses of varying length and detail. While we did not ask for demographic data in these questionnaires, our previous study indicated that *Faunasphere*

players were predominately women over the age of thirty-five (Begy and Consalvo 2011).

Throughout this paper we use pseudonyms when referring to our participants. While gathering our data, we noticed that many used their Facebook name in communications with us (we contacted the majority through their Facebook group), and that many of these names were obviously fabrications. A significant number used a name such as “Quebecker Faunasphere,” which may seem odd to those who did not play the game. When Faunasphere launched it was browser-based, but then moved to Facebook as well. Although players were not required to access the game via Facebook, special gifts were made available to Facebook players. This led to some upset in the original Faunasphere community, as some members did not trust Facebook's privacy controls and did not want to use the site. However, the promise of additional loot eventually lured some to try accessing the game that way, and to do so they create 'alt' or 'fake' Facebook accounts, strictly for the purposes of the game. While not investigated here, such activities are also worthy of additional study, as they tell us about the limits of various players' tolerances for playing games they enjoy, as well as how different game platforms can result in significant changes to games and player identities. Because many players communicated with us via these “fake” Facebook accounts, and we did not ask for gender on the questionnaire, we cannot speak to the gender break-down of this part of our study, but we have no reason to believe they do not fall along the lines as described above.

We also did field research within the game, attending and recording the game's sunset on March 15, 2011 to witness what players were doing, what they were talking about, and noting where they were gathering. In the final few hours we observed a small group of roughly 30 players, including the forum moderators, gathered in the “Rock Garden” which was the game's central public area. Directly after the closure we monitored the Facebook group

Faunasphere Memories, which experienced very high volume in the days immediately following the closure. We continued to monitor this group as time went on (and still do so) and began to play the games the group was discussing as potential alternatives to Faunasphere. In those spaces we also informally observed player activity, both of the ex-Faunasphere players (in their gameplay and in their new forums) and other players generally. That research continues as of this writing.

Studying the End of the World

Although ‘the end of the world’ may seem to be a discrete event, in reality we observed there were several stages that functioned together to constitute ‘the end of the game.’ These stages are as follows:

1. Closure Announcement
2. Pre-closure Activities
3. Closure
4. Decline

Each stage is characterized by player behaviour: how they are reacting to the state of the world, and what their resulting activities are. The stages can also be seen as comprising two larger halves, each of which was triggered by actions on the part of Big Fish Games. The first half, containing stages 1 and 2, was initiated by their decision to close the game and the subsequent announcement. The second half, containing stages 3 and 4, was initiated by the actual closure.

Stage One, the Closure Announcement, began with the email and forum postings announcing the closing of *Faunasphere*. This was not unusual, as most virtual worlds announce their closures in advance of the event, allowing players some amount of time to prepare for the end;

in the case of *Faunasphere* players had one month. The official announcement is a key component of a closure, with how it frames the closure and its specific wording (as well as what is not said) being vitally important with respect to player reactions and subsequent activities.

Stage Two, Pre-closure Activities, is the period leading up to the actual closure. During this stage players negotiate their continued activities, make future plans, (attempt to) communicate with the game developers, and perhaps still play. All of these activities were observed during this period of *Faunasphere*'s closure.

Stage Three, the Day of Closure, is characterized by the actual moment when the game shuts down. This usually features increased activity in the game world for the final few hours of the game's existence. There is the final moment as the game shuts down, and then there is the aftermath, as players either gather elsewhere (forums, games, chat, Facebook groups) or disperse. This period can also be quite active as well, if players are intent on creating tributes to the game, on gathering together to reminisce, or to make plans on where to gather next. Players may also continue to lobby developers via email, petitions and other means.

The final and fourth stage is the Decline, when interest in the game wanes. Some players continue their activities from the previous stage, while others move on—either to other games, or other pursuits.

The closure of a game world can be comprised of each of these stages, and in the case of *Faunasphere* all of these occurred. As such, we focus on each stage in turn, to see how players of *Faunasphere* acted and reacted, and to theorize what these actions might mean.

Stage One: The Closure Announcement

On February 15, 2011, Big Fish Games sent an email message to all *Faunasphere* players that announced, “it is with a heavy heart that we are letting you know that we will be phasing out Faunasphere beginning today and ending on March 15.” It continued, noting that the game would be free to play until the closure, recent purchases would be refunded, and a Frequently Asked Questions site had been established with more information. It ended by stating “you have been more than a customer to us; Faunasphere is a family. We are so grateful for the time we had to help build a world with you.” The email went on to explain where to go for more information, and thanked players for making the game “the rare, beautiful experience it has been.” The letter was signed “The Faunasphere Team.” Simultaneous notices went up on the game’s login site, and the game’s moderators and community managers posted similar notices to the forums.

Predictably, players were shocked, upset and outraged, and many did not accept that Big Fish Games had done all that was possible to keep *Faunasphere* going. One poster expressed her deep dismay, stating “I have cried real tears over the news. I’ve never experienced a game like this before.” Other players expressed how much the player community meant to them, with Mary writing that “this is where I met all my best friends. And I’ve had the greatest journey here. Faunasphere changed my life. Literally.” Others expressed anger and outrage, such as Katherine, writing “WHAT?!?!? ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!? “Phased out’ to NOTHING? NOTHING AT ALL?? I’m SHOCKED, SADDENED AND PISSED OFF. I can’t tell you how much in disbelief this leaves me.”

Many players expressed particular anger over March 15 being chosen as the closure date,

likening it to the “Ides of March” and the betrayal of Caesar. Others made references to feeling “gutted” by the news—an allusion to players’ nickname for Big Fish Games’ forums being named “The Pond” and the use of fish avatars by players for forum posts. Overall, the great majority of players felt hurt and upset, and many demanded more information from the company, including more detailed explanations for why the game was considered “unsustainable.” Yet over the following period of days more detailed answers were not provided, leaving players to instead speculate about why the game was being shut down.

Such player reactions are in line with the little empirical evidence we have concerning players of virtual worlds that have closed. Only a few game studies scholars have investigated such closures, with the focal point of analysis usually centering on what happens afterward, rather than before and during the sunset event. Papargyris & Polymenakou (2009) studied the players of the science fiction themed MMOG *Earth & Beyond*, which included an account of the end of that world, and how some players negotiated the closure and a subsequent migration to a new virtual world space. Just as we witnessed with *Faunasphere* players, they found that at first players expressed great anger and sadness over the closure of *Earth & Beyond*. Similarly, they also documented various players’ attempts to negotiate with the game’s creators to keep it open via paying higher subscription fees. The players we observed on forums and talked with via interviews similarly sought alternative fiscal solutions to keep the game open. Many others were unsure the game was actually losing money, often citing their own spending habits as evidence to the contrary. As Rebecca related on the forums just after the closure announcement:

“I would gladly have paid three times as much per month to save this game from destruction. I know I've been spending at least that much, probably more each month. I really find it unimaginable that no other company would buy this money-making machine.... I know they said they tried all avenues, but boy, some companies are really missing out on a golden opportunity, I would think. Sigh.”

Similarly Tim wrote “Why didn't you come to all of us - the paying members to see if we would have bought the game!” Despite the lack of information given to them, some players attempted to figure out the reasons behind the closure of *Faunasphere*. Most of those posting in the forums and responding via our interviews displayed a lack of knowledge of how game developers and publishers make money, and in particular how online games such as MMOGs and social games are monetized. For example, Susan wrote “I am furious! I have spent so much money on this game! Will be looking into whether this is legal or not!” Allison cited the lack of advertising for the game as evidence for its demise, wondering how invested Big Fish was in its continued success. Similarly Hannah saw the game as ineffectually managed, and with no clear idea of its target audience, “BFG NEVER understood their market ~ older women, they pandered to children and mollycoddled free players. They chastised the people who spent very large sums of money on the game (in some cases over \$1,000 US, pcm). Hopeless, ineffectual management.”

In addition to the closure itself, the continued silence on the part of Big Fish executives as to why the game was closing was even more infuriating to many players. Candace related to us that:

“The closing of Faunasphere without even a single word from Paul Thelen or any CEO from Big Fish Games. This was completely unprofessional, unconscionable, despicable, and disgraceful. Delegating the moderators of Faunasphere to inform us of its closing was the epitome of cowardice and TOTAL lack of good public relations. Perseverance in asking for a more official explanation from Thelen or a CEO was continually ignored and our pleas fell on deaf ears. It would appear that they were unwilling, incapable or simply refused to address this to their faithful customers. If incapability was the issue, then I wonder exactly how the “powers that be” can run a company, if at all.”

Other players went further, directing personal insults at Thelen in particular, such as Becca who wrote:

“I have totally quit Big Fish as a member in protest and they can rot from the head down for all I care. I am friends on FB with most of the Moderators and it nearly

killed them too. I do not believe the "party line" one bit about closing it down...but I certainly do not hold the employees accountable for it. It had to be that pig Thelen...I defriended him and all the BFG sites.”

Although many players were clearly deeply upset at the news, many continued to play *Faunasphere*, often times more so than they had in the past. These activities define the next stage.

Stage Two: Pre-Closure Activities

As the final month went on many players told us they were increasing their playtime in *Faunasphere*, for a variety of reasons. For some it was sentimental: many players wanted to visit their various spheres, different zones, and to finish goals and projects. Some responded that they wanted to gain a sense of closure in some way: this often involved goal completion as well as getting one or more of their fauna to level 20—the maximum level—and thus obtaining a golden collar for it. For example, Amber explains that during the last month she “got 5 more fauna to level 20.” Similarly, Rebecca related that she “played a LOT, even more than usual, including staying up all night the night before the game shut down to finish things up. I finished decorating several spheres (my main priority) and levelling up as many fauna to level 20 as I possibly could. ... I also took screenshots of every sphere I created and of my final ‘flock’ of fauna.” Katrina reported that “I spent the normal amount of time after work, but in the last week, I have to admit, I scrimped on the whole sleeping thing in favour of additional FS time. Probably 2-3 hours after work additional.”

For some players, the closure meant more than simply increasing playtime—it changed the way they played the game. Beatrice explained that “instead of just exploring and decorating and chatting I spent my time zapping to level those Fauna. I got the 4th gold collar March 14. Those four level 20 Fauna were the only ones I took to that level in two years.”

Yet for other players, the announcement had the opposite effect: they either stopped playing entirely or greatly reduced their time spent in *Faunasphere*. After the announcement, Becca told us “I couldn’t play. I cried all the time I was on so I quit,” while Hannah recalled that “I had hardly played at all since the closure announcement.” Belle reacted even more strongly: “I played very little after the announcement because I was so upset and felt betrayed [...]” Jackie said that immediately after the announcement she was “grieving” and did not play for two weeks, before returning for the final two. Jolene went through a similar process: “In the first week after the closing announcement, I was too upset to play. Every time I would try to open the game, I’d start to cry, and so I’d close it again. After that, I was able to play a little, but not nearly as much as I had been.” Whether increasing or decreasing playtime, the closure announcement clearly changed the play habits of many players.

Such reports suggest that although players may pursue activities of interest to them in online games and virtual worlds, and those interests may differ between players, scholars need to also take into account the state of the virtual world being studied. While most of the virtual worlds researchers investigate are fairly stable, our findings show how the imminent threat of closure changed how players approached the game—altering their frequency of play and play styles, sometimes in very dramatic ways. A player previously interested in exploring and building a world may turn to the pursuit of achievements, for example, if she feels that time in the world is limited—or vice versa. This could also occur if a player feels her own time in a game is limited (if she feels the need to quit soon, or believes the game will be ending soon without any actual evidence). Thus when analyzing why and how a player engages with a game, it is critical to take into account the state of the game world in question and players’ feelings about it. It is also important to consider the players’ own daily activities, otherwise

we may only be seeing one small slice of in their larger gaming career.

Stage Three: Closure

Most of what we know about MMOG and virtual world sunset events has come from games journalism rather than scholarly studies. Some MMOG sunsets have attempted to play into the fiction of the game. For example, *The Matrix Online (MxO)* planned to have all player characters online in the world crushed at the final moment, although server lag precluded much impact to the dramatic event. Likewise *Tabula Rasa*, which released a new patch two weeks before the game's closure in 2009, did so with the announcement that a final massive "Bane Assault" would mark the end of the world. Yet most MMOGs have no final plans for their world endings, as they are designed around a model that encourages (and demands) endless play, and a world premised on persistence, rather than an abrupt interruption or dramatic conclusion. One notable exception would be *A Tale in the Desert*, which runs "Tellings" of the game world that last for approximately 18 months each. Each Telling is a discrete period of time, and when a Telling concludes, achievements are tabulated, player feedback on game systems are taken into account, and a new Telling begins.

One detailed account of such closing events is Pearce's study of players of *Uru Prologue* and their subsequent travels from that space to *There.com* and *Second Life* (2009).¹ Pearce argues that such closures are critical events that can tell us much about how individuals play in virtual spaces, and the importance of the structures of virtual worlds in shaping that play. In particular Pearce demonstrates how denizens of *Uru* wanted to find a space similar to their originating world, yet being unable to find something perfectly parallel, adapted their identities and activity online as they slowly migrated to other worlds. She writes:

¹ A notable difference between Pearce's study and our project here is that she came to the *Uru* community after their original game had already closed.

“On the last day of *Uru*, many players assembled in-world, gathering in hoods, or visiting each other’s Ages. Owing to varied time zones, not all players were able to be online at the strike of midnight [EST], the scheduled shutdown time. A core group of TGU members gathered in the garden of Lynn’s Eder Kemo Age, talked, told each other stories, and played hide-and-seek. As the time approached, they moved into a circular configuration close enough so that their avatars would appear to be holding hands. Several players recall the clocks in their “r1” (real-life) homes striking midnight, the screen freezing, and a system alert message appearing on the screen: ‘There is something wrong with your Internet connection,’ followed by a dialogue box saying ‘OK.’ As one player recalled: ‘I couldn’t bring myself to press that OK button because for me it was NOT OK” (2009, 88-89).

Given this account, we expected to find that players of *Faunasphere* would place a premium on being together in the space, and they would also treat it as a highly emotional experience, with both positive and negative expressions of emotion arising during the event. What we found both confirmed and challenged those expectations.

Although a few individuals couldn’t be in *Faunasphere* for the actual closing because of work or other obligations, many people we talked with cleared schedules or otherwise prepared for that final day. For example, Amber reported taking the day off from work so she could be there for the closing. Candace recounts her experience: “I stayed up for two days and just hours before the close, I fell asleep. I so wanted to be there and let all my fauna run in their spheres. I wanted to feed them and say good bye to all of them.” Lucy “booked the day off work and played almost 24 hours straight.” Rachel was also there: “I was there for the closing, even requested the day off work. I denned and fed all my fauna. I then took my hooper from beta out and about in the worlds.” Other players, such as Katrina, had to find closure beforehand: “I wasn’t there for the closing. I had to work. So I did what I could do Monday night, and then signed out for the last time. I’ve got to say, it was really sad. We all had a very big emotional investment in FS and it was a hard thing to have that yanked away.” While Rebecca was also unable to be there for the closing, she reported “staying up all night the night before the game shut down to finish things up.”

In game shortly before the close, we encountered various players traveling through the world, many taking final screenshots and revisiting favourite locations. One described the activity as being a ‘memory walk’ (personal communication, 2011). In interviews, many players described their final actions as akin to what Jackie called “closing a summer home”—preparing things for a long time closure, a shuttering of a structure, or the acknowledgement of a seasonal ending.

Many players admitted to also preparing their fauna for their own impending absence, at the same time acknowledging the silliness of the activity. As noted above, Rachel reported feeding and walking her hooper (horse). Amber described her final moments of play:

[I] made sure that each and every fauna was happy and had plenty of food and I cried, which is exactly what I am doing right now, lol after all they are just pixels, but i can't stop crying. [...] I took the day off work, I went to all the different worlds and said goodbye to people as we passed. During the last 5 min. I started throwing all my food from inventory on the ground (did not want anyone to starve) lol and I cried.

Allison recounts a similar experience on the day of the close:

I spent the morning taking each of my 9 fauna out alongside my daughters fauna at the same time (this was a little hard for me to do alone) to make sure they all got a chance to get out, and I spent a little time with each of them. I had them all do their tricks for me and fed them well and made them as happy as I could.

At the end, Rebecca treated her fauna in a similar fashion: “Right before I left I ‘unhid’ all my fauna (I kept most hidden in sphere to cut down on lag) so they could frolic.” “Hiding” fauna effectively made them invisible in one’s sphere in order to improve game performance, but Rebecca speaks of hiding as though it were akin to kenneling a pet dog or cat.

Finally, as 10:00 am PST drew near, player activity diverged. Some individuals made their way to public spaces, gathering with friends and other players to be together, set off fireworks, say goodbye and wait through the final moments.

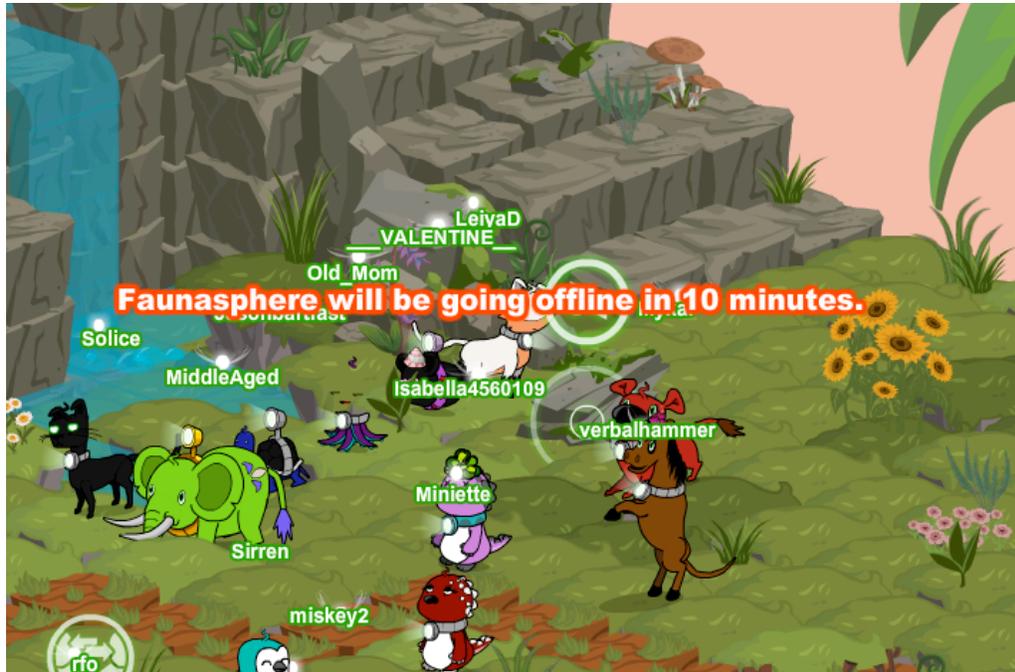


Figure 3: Players gather with their avatars in a public place as the countdown begins.

Alternately, other players instead chose to return to their private spheres, in order to be with their fauna rather than with other players. For example, Caroline reported that “I went to the Rock Garden and said goodbye to some friends there, and then went back to my sphere to be with my babies.” Beatrice also chose to spend the final moments with her fauna:

“I was there until the bitter end. I felt crushed and devastated. I wanted to be with many of my friends in the Rock garden but my heart fell when I left my sphere so I spent the last hour with my Fauna, watching them play and feeding and denning them and saying ‘goodbye’. Yes, I know they weren’t real living animals but to me they were the joy of my life.”

Allison also faced the choice of whether to be with other people or her fauna while the game ended:

“I went out into the rock garden and looked around for a hatless fauna. I wanted to give a hat to a caretaker that had never owned a hat before so they could have a little joy before the game ended. No luck except someone that wanted my hat anyway but was already wearing one then tried to hide it from me. I did find someone in Mire Knoll. Then I visited a few different world gates and went to my sphere ready to face facts and say goodbye. I laid out more goodies for my fauna.”

As the time ticked down closer to the end, players in the public space that we were observing

became more active, shouting thanks and messages of affection to fellow players as well as game moderators, several of which were present in the Rock Garden. More and more fireworks went off, fauna did tricks for the assembled crowd, and caretakers increasingly changed the fauna they were 'using' in the space, bringing out either old favourites or rare breeds. Yet the game did not end at 1 PM, instead continuing on for another eleven minutes. At first players said nothing, they then began to hope that perhaps this was a reprieve, but then the network connection error message appeared.

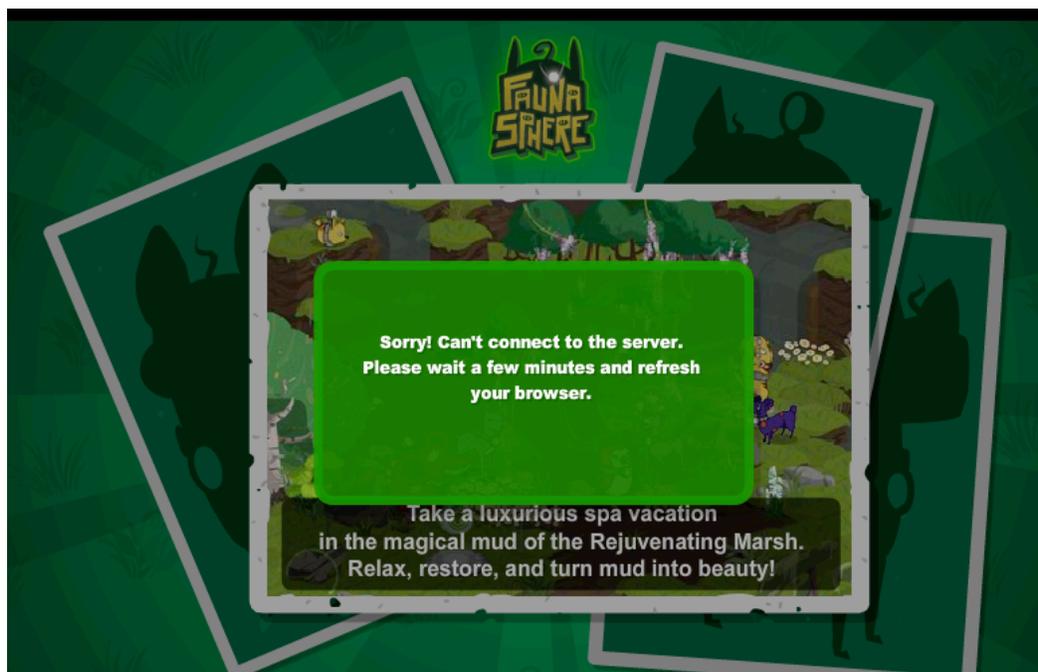


Figure 4: The ending of the game.

Ultimately there was no diegetic reason offered for the world's end, perhaps because the fiction of the game world was never premised on any sort of larger battle, war or assault. Instead the world of the fauna was largely a peaceful one, where the greatest threat came from pollution, whose only attack was to deplete a fauna's happiness. After the world's closure, however, attempts to access *Faunasphere* (as well as all of its official forum pages) were rebuffed with the following image:

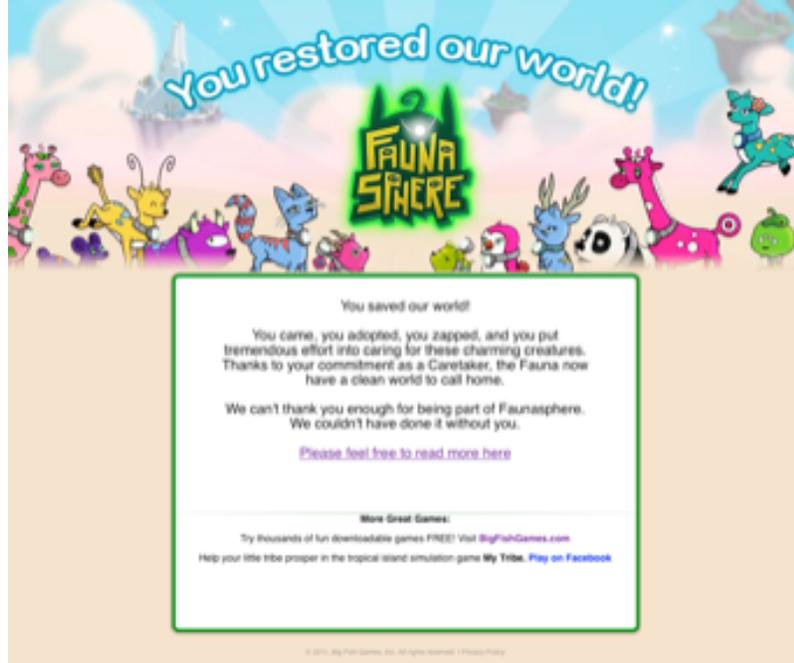


Figure 5: All Faunasphere-related Web sites, including the game and forums, have been replaced with this message.

The message is an allusion to the ubiquitous pollution, which has now apparently been permanently removed from the world of the fauna. Yet the pollution trope was not overly prominent in the game as a fictional element driving the story, as pollution continuously re-spawned and was primarily used to gain experience for fauna. There were few long-term goals or tasks regarding pollution. As such, the idea that the world is now “clean” is somewhat strange, but does offer a (flimsy) diegetic reason for the game’s end.

Overall, the final sunset was a somewhat disconnected and confusing event to observe. We had expected to see large groups gather in the game's public spaces, yet many players did not attend such gatherings, or if they did so, only attended briefly before returning to their home spheres to 'be with' their own fauna. If so many players had espoused the social nature of this space and the importance of the friendships they had made there, why would they sequester themselves at perhaps the most dramatic moment of the game's lifespan?

Such activities raise important questions about how players relate to virtual worlds and online games, as well as how game structures contribute to those practices. For many players,

although friends and community were important parts of *Faunasphere* (and those parts could potentially continue through to other games and online spaces) a key component was the game itself—and specifically the fauna they had bred and raised. For these players, being with their fauna at the end—spending time with virtual creatures—was more important at that moment than being with human friends. In a sense, the fauna had become their friends, their family. While other friends might later be contacted on a Facebook group, the fauna could not. Thus, it was important to players to spend those last few minutes with their virtual creations. Such findings paint a more complex picture of player behaviour in virtual worlds than previous research has found. Given the fiction of *Faunasphere* and the different relationship players had with their fauna avatars, a variety of player activities emerged at the closure. Such activities push us to consider how different virtual worlds will result in different player attachments to avatars, to the world itself, as well as to the player communities within them.

As somewhat of a parallel, Pearce noted that during the *Uru* closure “many of the Uruvians felt their avatars were dying” (2009, p. 239), which mirrors the pervasive sense in the *Faunasphere* diaspora that their fauna died with the game, even if the player community continued onward, in other places. Yet a distinction here is that for Uruvians the avatar was connected to a sense of one's self in the world, while for *Faunasphere's* Caretakers, fauna were beloved pets.

While at first blush that finding may seem minor, we believe it underscores a bigger point. As argued in a previous study (Begy and Consalvo, 2011), the fiction of an MMOG is more central to player behaviour than much virtual world research has yet accounted for.

Faunasphere offered players no central avatar figure to represent themselves with, no monsters to slay, and no equipment to find. Instead, it cast players in the role of the invisible

“caretaker” responsible for breeding and raising “fauna” in a world they could shape and personalize, where the most violent action involved zapping cubes of pollution that regularly appeared and might occasionally fight back. Even then fauna were never killed or even hurt – they simply ran out of energy and reappeared back home. We argue that such different fictions and rule systems, as well as the platforms on which the game launched (both the Web and Facebook) had key implications for our findings, and for how game studies must (re)conceptualize players’ relationships to virtual worlds, the avatars and other objects present within them, as well as how platforms are key contexts shaping player activities within games.

Stage Four: Decline

A unifying thread cutting across all discussions of MMOG closures has been evidence that players do not simply disperse and stop playing—instead many actively work to form groups and relocate their play activities elsewhere, often investing great energy in the search for a new virtual ‘home’ (Papargyris & Poulymenakou, 2009; Pearce 2009). Their activities point to a determination to keep playing together in some manner, and to do so in places that match their interests and/or values, as well as to keep playing with a select group of friends or family.

While some *Faunasphere* players were too upset to do much after the game shut down, others immediately gathered in places such as the Faunasphere Memories group on Facebook where they posted screenshots of their fauna and the sunset event, and commented extensively on one another's responses. While initial reactions were of great sadness as well as anger, most (but not all) group members eventually became less emotional, and used the spaces for sharing remembrances as well as discussion of other games that might be worth attempting.

For example, many players posted pictures of their fauna, as well as screenshots of gatherings held in game just before its closure. There was general discussion of the high points of the game and calls for more contact between ex-players. Likewise there were proposals for a petition to present to Big Fish demanding the game be reopened, the circulation of an open letter to Paul Thelen demanding more information about the closure, as well as strongly expressed sentiments about Big Fish and many statements from individuals stating they would be boycotting all future Big Fish products.

One interesting feature to emerge was artwork created by the members, including mashup screenshots (which featured different fauna grouped together or in comic form; or perhaps a player's fauna along with her new Glitch avatar), videos and other memorabilia.

Eventually splinter groups formed, as for example some ex-*Faunasphere* residents were admitted into the alpha test for *Glitch*, and began enthusiastically discussing that game. “Glitchers” set up their own separate Facebook group to discuss the game, yet many still participated on the original FS Memories group space as well. They also created an identity for themselves within Glitch as “FS Refugees” with a forum and in-game chat channel, in order to more easily find one another, and share new and older experiences. They also took pains to either name themselves with their *Faunasphere* name, or to make lists and announcements of players' 'real' '*Faunasphere*' and 'Glitch' names, so that fellow ex-FSers could find them.

While the *Faunasphere* Orphans forum has since closed, the Facebook group remains remarkably active, nine months past the closure of *Faunasphere*. Players continue to post screenshots and videos of their fauna and spheres, as well as chat and share information about

their fellow players. While volume has decreased, much of the spirit of the original group remains, and members obviously see themselves as part of a continuing community.

Conclusion

Players of *Faunasphere* have continuously challenged what we usually take for granted about online gameplay, particularly in the MMOG space and its related theorization. For example, much player-based research (including our own past work on this topic) has been concerned to figure out the play styles of players, their interests and motivations for play (Bartle 1996; Yee 2006). Such work has led to the creation of more or less rigid taxonomies of 'player types' or styles of play. Yet the activities of *Faunasphere* players during the month before sunset makes such categorizations seem simplistic. As much as we had originally found that players enjoyed completing goals, breeding their Fauna or decorating their Spheres, players proved willing and able to radically change their play styles in this short period of time. That was likely due to the impending closure, but it is worth investigating in other contexts and in other games. For example, players such as Beatrice who normally were not interested in levelling fauna stated that she had “made a promise” to several of her fauna to get them to the maximum level, in order for them to attain gold collars. She thus began 'grinding' in a sense, in order to achieve that self-created goal. Likewise, some players drastically increased their playtime to finish goals or spend more time socializing with others, while other players did the opposite—either quitting completely upon hearing the initial news, or cutting their playtime down to almost nothing, due to their uncontrolled emotions (both grief and anger) about the impending end.

Thus we are forced to ask ourselves if players not only change their play frequency over the life of a game (and over their own play history), but also if the *way they play* and the *reasons*

for playing themselves change. Obviously in this case we saw evidence that they did. Which suggests that play styles, interests and frequencies may be much more fluid and context dependant than most research allows for. But perhaps it was the extraordinary event of the sunset that drove such changes? Perhaps this was the case. Yet in other games, there are rumours of shutdowns, of server mergers, and generally diminishing support for the space. This too must play a role in how players choose to invest their time (or not) in virtual worlds. We need better, more refined studies of the life courses of players, to more adequately capture this activity.

We have previously argued that the fiction (Juul 2005) of an MMOG should be considered when analyzing player activity, as it provides a meaningful context to those actions (Begy and Consalvo 2009). For example, achievement in a game like *Faunasphere* may be very different from achievement in an MMOG such as *World of Warcraft*. As we have shown here, the current state of the world plays a role as well and needs to be considered when analyzing player behaviour.

This line of research also calls for studies of other online worlds as they are in the process of closing. While the four-stage process we have outlined in this paper fits the closings of *Faunasphere* and *Uru*, similar studies of closing worlds is necessary to determine if this process is universal, or was particular to these two exceptionally non-violent, unusual games.

Games

Earth & Beyond. Westwood Studios, PC, 2002.
Faunasphere. Big Fish Games, PC, 2009.
Tabula Rasa. Destination Games, PC, 2008.
A Tale in the Desert. eGenesis, PC, 2003.
Uru Prologue. Cyan Worlds, PC, 2003.
World of Warcraft. Blizzard/Vivendi, PC, 2004.

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