Making MMOGs More Storylike

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Introduction

Good afternoon and thank you for coming. My name is Ernest Adams, and I'm a game design consultant.

For the last 16 years, I've been thinking about interactive storytelling – what its problems are and how to resolve them. I have arrived at some conclusions about the single-player experience that I'm confident about, and at the moment I'm just finishing up a PhD on the subject.

But my research hasn't addressed multiplayer gaming. I stuck to thinking about single-player because that was complicated enough without getting multiple people involved. However, I recently started playing an MMOG – one that is closely connected to a famous story – and I noticed that it didn't feel storylike in many ways.

You might ask why anybody should care. MMOGs make millions and millions of euros or dollars or yen or wohn, they're fine just the way they are, so why bother trying to make them more storylike? You might even feel that MMOGs shouldn't try to be more storylike; that that's not what they are for; that it's somehow wrong to even consider it.

My response to these objections is twofold. First, we don't advance the medium by being content with what we've got. It's not enough to say, "well, they make a lot of money now, so let's not try anything new."

Second, I myself wanted a more storylike experience in my MMOG. And I don't think that I'm the only gamer on the planet who feels this way. If I want it, somebody else probably wants it too, and that is a reason to look into the question.

Qualities of a Well-Formed Story

- **Story must remain coherent in world/character/plot**
  - **Designer's contribution should be coherent**
  - **Player's consistency is enforced by available actions**
    - **(Chat/bad role-playing causes the most inconsistency)**

- **Experience preserves credibility (within its world)**
  - **Even science fiction/fantasy have a credibility budget**
  - **Must not produce absurdities**

- **Player derives entertainment from:**
  - **Playing a role in the game world, and**
  - **Contributing activity to the plot**

- **Pace of plot is fast enough to sustain dramatic tension**
  - **Must not stall, stalemate, or deviate for too long**

- **Few or no random or repetitive events**
  - **Repeated or arbitrary events destroy dramatic tension**

Let me talk for a minute about what "storylike" means, the way I've defined it in my thesis. [READ THROUGH SLIDE]

In a good story there is a balance between the pressure on the protagonist caused by the situation, and the protagonist's freedom of action. If the protagonist has too little freedom, we can't stay interested because he doesn't do anything, just react. If he has too much freedom, he becomes godlike and there isn't enough dramatic tension.

These aren't necessarily the only criteria, but I feel as if they're critical to making an experience feel story-like. We could spend hours arguing about them, but this is my starting point.

The Lord of the Rings Online

The MMOG that I started playing is *The Lord of the Rings Online*. I haven't played a lot of MMOGs, for several reasons. For years, everything I heard was grim – how more experienced players abuse the new ones, and people cheat, and gold-farming, and on and on. I just didn't feel much motivation.

I chose LOTRO in part because it's a universe I already know and love, and I wanted to see what they had done with it. I began to play it, and it seemed as if it managed to avoid a lot of the early problems. It was a welcoming environment. It also, obviously, has a story running through it – the story from the book. You don't get to participate directly in the story, but tangentially – from time to time you get to interact with members of the Fellowship. But as I said, I began to notice problems.

I need to emphasize that I'm not just ranting like a disappointed gamer. I think it's a fine MMOG, and it tries, within the limitations of the form, to do honor to Tolkien. There are many things I like about it. Most of my observations about it apply to other MMOGs as well. But the fact is, this is the one I've played a lot of, and it's sort of a special case because it explicitly contains a famous story. So if we're going to examine these issues with reference to a particular game, LOTRO is the obvious one to start with.

Problems in LOTRO

In the next few slides I'll talk about the problems I observed in LOTRO.
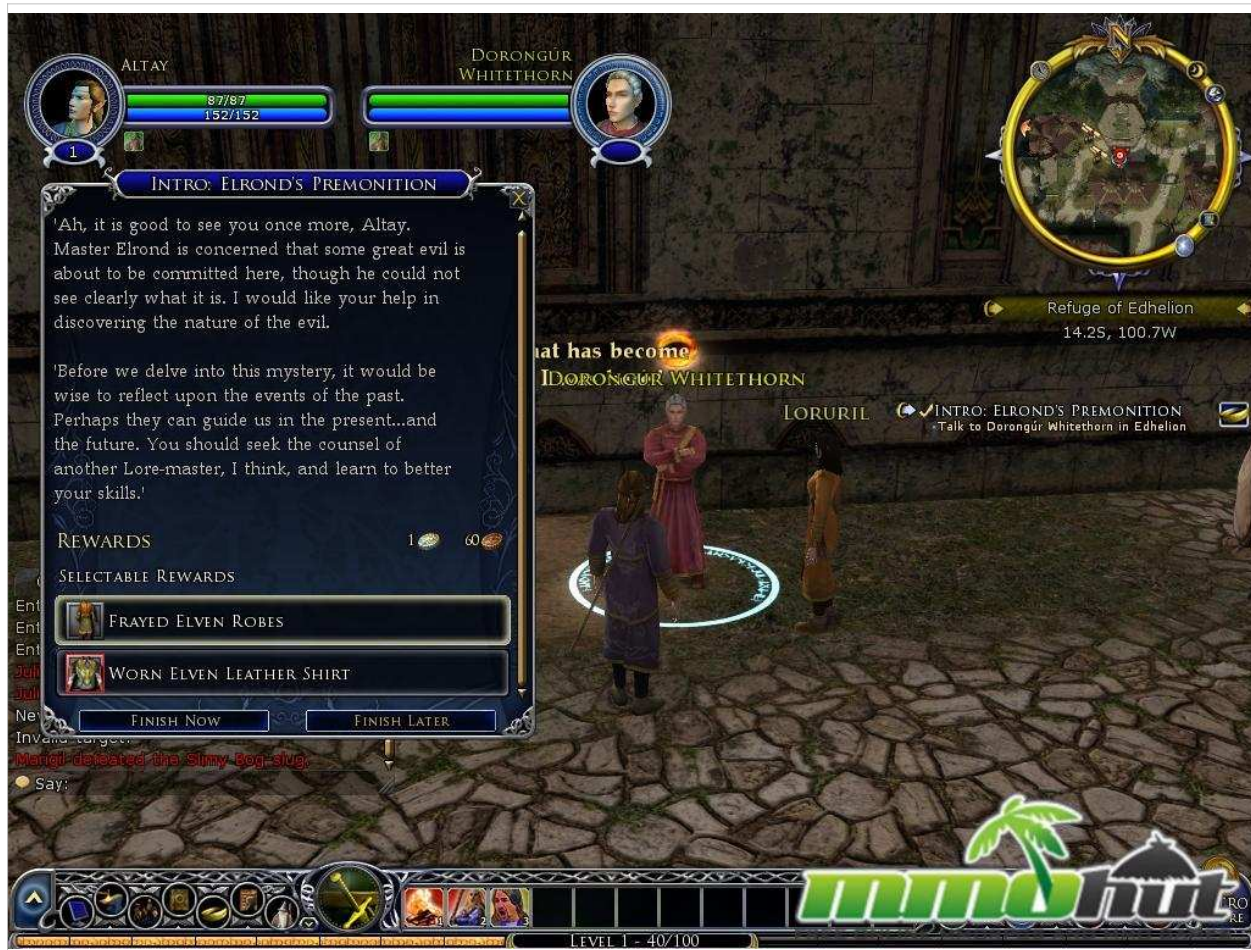
Things Respawn

I'm told in a quest that I must kill Bogbereth, a giant spider who is menacing the world, and so I go off and do it, and ten minutes after I do it, it respawns.

This violates the rule about repetitiveness.

I get credit for having done it; I get experience points; but the one thing I don't get is the sense that I have actually ended the menace. In fact, I haven't ended the menace. It's still just as menacing as it ever was, and it always will be.

Players Have the Same Quest Chain

This is a quest introduction dialog. Dorongir Whitethorn wants our help in discovering the nature of some evil event that is about to happen. In fact, he wants *everybody's* help in discovering the nature of the evil. Even when you come back and tell him, he never seems to learn. This violates the rule about absurdity.

If everyone is going through the same plot, you have the problem of running into people who are at the same point in the plot as you, i.e. doing the same quest, and so competing for resources. Absurd.

LOTRO lets you easily form parties so you can all slay the giant spider together, but when it's a collection quest, then you all have to collect the same identical object -- which means waiting for them to respawn. Again, absurd.

Universe in Trouble, but Trouble Never Comes

The introductory text ("bestowal dialog") for quests often refers to upcoming major events, but they never take place. "We need you to go find these objects before we can undertake the assault against Carn Dûm," and so forth. Then you bring back the objects, and they say, "Thank you. This will really help when we assault Carn Dûm." But they never actually *do* assault Carn Dûm.

After a while, these assertions about how much trouble we're in begin to ring hollow. It's clear nothing really important, such as a huge battle, is ever going to happen.

Can Take as Long as You Want on Most Quests

This violates the rule about pacing; it doesn't sustain dramatic tension.

The alternative is to have timed quests, but they tend to have a simple pass or fail outcome. You don't get quests in which playing faster produces better story outcomes.

Can Abandon Quests Without Consequences

This is not credible in a world that is supposed to be in deep trouble.

Absurdities - 1

The Lord of the Rings Online's mechanism of having moments from the original story positioned in the landscape produces obvious absurdities. When you are in Bree, you can see Aragorn (named Strider at that point) in Bree waiting for the hobbits to arrive from the Shire. When you are in Rivendell, you can see him waiting to depart for the south with the Fellowship. He is literally in two places at once time.

Absurdities - 2

At one point in *The Lord of the Rings Online,* you can watch the Fellowship depart from Rivendell with the Ring. All of them are gathered together, and it is a poignant moment. But as soon as they are gone, they're all back again and waiting indefinitely as before.

Personal Growth Expressed in Numbers

This is a problem that I have with all RPGs, not just LOTRO. This is a personal issue for me, and I don't expect everyone to agree with me. Some would argue that gaming the mechanics is what RPGs are mostly about. But it certainly harms their storylike feel.

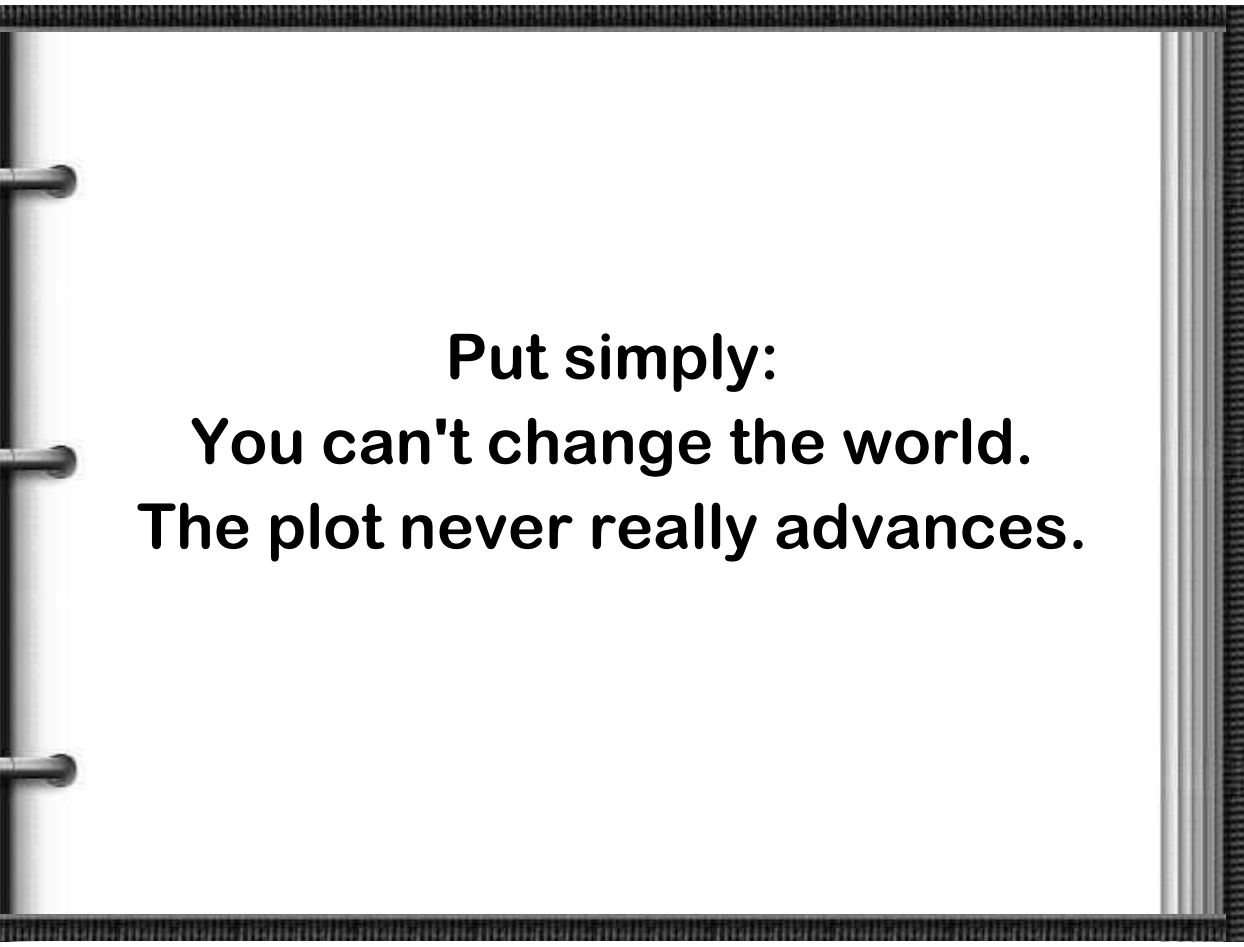## Persistent Worlds are Like Being in the Boy Scouts

Persistent worlds are like being in the Boy Scouts, or in school. They set up an artificial succession of things to achieve. But the fact that you have achieved them doesn't actually change anything about the world. They're all available for other people to achieve as well. The player experiences personal growth, but not meaningful influence on the world.

And of course, that's the way RPGs work: you level up and gain powers and weapons and so forth. But *non-persistent* RPGs – single-player games like the *Elder Scrolls* or the *Final Fantasy* series – also let you change the world. You have your own personal copy of the world, so you can change it dramatically.

Summary of the Problems

- **Respawning enemies**
  - **Violates rule about repetitiveness**

- **Many players have the same quest chain**
  - **Produced absurdities – players seeking identical treasure**

- **The world is under threat, but it never quite happens**
  - **Player's actions don't contribute to the plot**

- **Can take as long as you want, or abandon, quests**
  - **Doesn't sustain dramatic tension**
  - **Not credible in a world that is in terrible trouble**

- **"Tolkien within the game" produces absurdities**

- **Personal growth expressed in numbers**

So, to summarize the problems I've just identified... [READ THROUGH SLIDE]
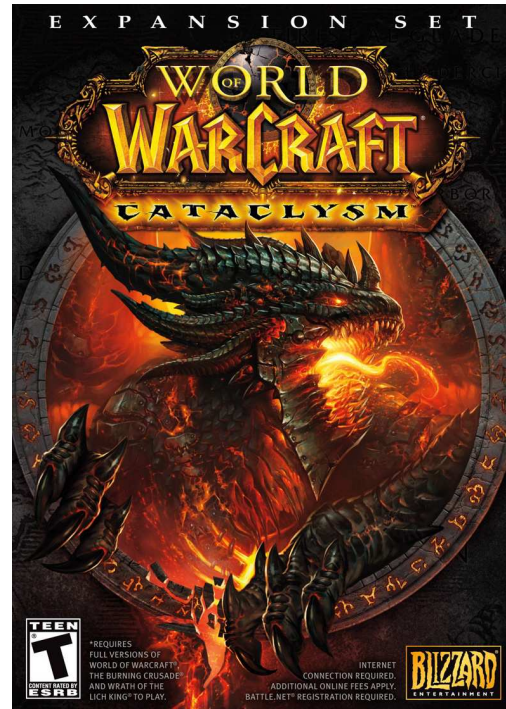
Put simply:
You can't change the world.
The plot never really advances.

Expansions to Advance Plot?

- **Usually include massive world changes, not just plot advancement.**
- **Occur suddenly, overnight.**
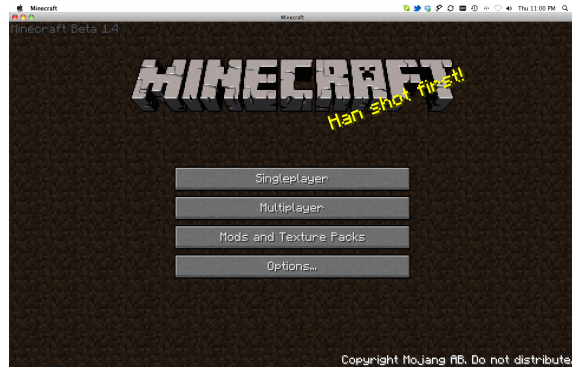- **Changes are not the result of in-game player activity.**

Many MMOGs undergo worldwide changes when an expansion is released, and this can include changes to the plot. *Ultima Online*, one of the oldest, has undergone many expansions; *World of Warcraft* has undergone three major ones. LOTRO has had two or three as well. However, there are problems with it:

• Expansions usually include massive changes to the way the players play, and things they can do. Expansions often add new crafting, new races, new abilities, new elements in the in-game economy. It isn't just adding to the plot, it's redefining the world itself.

• Expansions occur suddenly, overnight. This feels artificial. It's not a smooth, natural progression from the way the world was before.

• Expansions are not the result of in-game player activity. They feel like interventions from the gods. They aren't a natural consequence of the players' own activity.

So, you can make a game somewhat more storylike through expansions, but expansions alone are not enough.

Other Games

Not all MMOGs have these problems, however. I want to look at three games that resolve some, but not all, of these problems.

Second Life

The world can change in *Second Life*, and you can build anything you want, but it has no plot. It does not sustain dramatic tension because you have godlike powers.

Minecraft

In *Minecraft* the world can change *and* there is some tension, because you can be attacked at night, but it's not really dramatic tension – it's just gameplay tension. It's a sandbox. Again, it lacks an overarching plot.

A Tale in the Desert

This one comes closest to resolving all the problems. The world changes, because the game is about crafting and collaborative activity. Most interesting of all, it comes to an end. The players must meet a set of collective challenges, and when they do, it ends. That creates a sort of overarching plot, but the players still have a very great deal of freedom – they can even make and enforce laws. The developers also introduce controversial social elements to see what will happen, like a character who won't speak to female characters.

A Tale In the Desert doesn't really put enough pressure on the player to make it feel like a story while you're playing. From what I've read, I think *A Tale in the Desert* is really more of a social experiment than a story.

Recommendations

- **Create a big world with a large story**
  - It should also naturally generate many small stories
  - The players must be under pressure, but have power
- **Make changes to the world permanent**
  - Player activities must affect the whole world for good or ill
- **Don't use the Hero's Journey story structure**
  - A massive story requires *collective* effort.
- **The story must end (or be a soap opera)**
- **Give every player unique quests to do**
  - Quest failure most *not* stall overall plot (no quest chains)
- **Use permadeath or no death at all**
- **The setting should justify the population size**
  - If you have many players, set the game in a city.
- **Use a more modern setting**
  - Reduces the impact of bad role-playing

Recommendations - 1

These are my explicit recommendations about how to make MMOGs more storylike. Some of them are extreme; you will disagree with some of them. A few, near the end, are either personal or fairly minor. I'm not saying you should implement them all. But I wanted to list them all for you to consider.

Single-player, offline RPG worlds can change, but often don't. Nothing happens to anybody but the player or his party. The story consists of a plot placed into the world, but often it doesn't feel as if the plot arises out of the world. It's sort of tacked on. Online RPGs feel more busy because the all the players are acting, but the world itself is more static. Everybody goes through the same chain of quests.

Create a Big World With a Large Story

Rather than be in a game world where there's one large story that everyone goes through, we need a world which naturally tends to generate individual stories on its own, and has a narrative arc of its own that is independent of any individual. These tend to be large-scale disasters or endeavors:

Exploration, of the New World, the north and south poles, etc.

Engineering or construction projects. The Apollo moon program had an overall narrative arc, but each of the tens of thousands of people who worked on it also had a story to tell.

Disaster relief, such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. There is an overall story, and everybody who was there also has a story. Hurricane Katrina and the 2011 Japanese earthquake are additional examples.

Total war (as opposed to feuds). In total war, people set aside almost all personal endeavor for collective endeavor. *World of Warcraft* has a vague concept of war between the Horde and the Alliance, but it's not an organized war, it's more like a feud. Individuals can participate or ignore it as much as they like, and it doesn't change.

Make Changes to the World Permanent

The player's actions must affect the world, and his absence or failure must also have real consequences.

Recommendations

- **Create a big world with a large story**
  - It should also naturally generate many small stories
  - The players must be under pressure, but have power
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Recommendations - 2

Don't Use the Hero's Journey Story Structure

A massive story requires *collective* effort. Everybody in Hurricane Katrina, or in the Apollo Moon program had an individual story to tell, but they were all part of a single large phenomenon, and their efforts were dedicated to that phenomenon.

The Story Needs to End

I realize this is one of the most controversial recommendations, but I feel that for an experience to feel story-like, important things have to change, and ultimately they have to come to a meaningful end... unless it's a soap opera. Soap operas consist of multiple small overlapping stories that are tied together by a larger collection of circumstances that affect everyone in them.

Give Every Player Unique Quests to Do

This one is particularly difficult, because it requires you to do a lot more work, and probably to create a quest-generation system rather than handwritten quests. But in order to feel storylike, everyone has to make a *unique* contribution, even if it's similar to what other people do. If it's *literally exactly* like what other people do, it doesn't feel storylike.

Use Permadeath or No Death At All

No respawning! This depends somewhat on your universe, but in ordinary stories, people who die don't come back. On the other hand, in many, many stories, nobody dies at all.

The Setting Should Justify the Population Size

Heroic fantasy worlds with thousands of players make no sense.

Use a More Modern Setting

Anachronistic language harms the storylike quality of a game. If the setting is more modern, the impact of anachronistic language will be reduced.

So, those are my recommendations. I have thought of a game that I want to make that puts them all together, and I'm going to describe it for you.

The Blitz Online

The game world in terrible trouble, and it's taking damage all the time. You can do something about it. If you *don't* do something about it, it will only get worse. It is a large-scale, collective endeavor with individual, unique responsibilities. It's called *The Blitz Online.*

The Blitz Online is an experimental research project that tries to incorporate all the recommendations I have just made. It's a free, educational, multiplayer online game, set during the period of World War II known as the Blitz. It's about the civil defense forces who worked to rescue and protect the population.

Introducing the Blitz

For those of you who aren't familiar with it, the Blitz was a sustained campaign of strategic bombing by the Luftwaffe against Britain, aimed primarily at civilians. It lasted from September 7, 1940 to May 10, 1941, a period of 246 days.

At that period in history, everyone, not just the Germans, thought that aerial bombing was the new ultimate weapon. They thought that the psychological effect of it would be so devastating that the bombed populations would rebel and force their government to surrender. At the beginning of the war, the British government prepared for hundreds of thousands of psychiatric casualties caused by bombing.

It never happened. The British were traumatized, but their morale never broke. By May of 1941, Hitler gave up on the Blitz, and his plans for invading Britain, and decided to invade the Soviet Union instead. The attacks on Britain still went on, but they weren't so continuous. Incidentally, the famous V-1 buzz bomb and V-2 rocket were never part of the Blitz. They appeared towards the end of the war.

The Spirit of the Blitz

The reason I'm interested in looking at this is that the Blitz is not just a period of history. It's part of British people's understanding of who they are, even today. There is enormous national pride about the Blitz. The British feel themselves to be the ones who were tough enough to face down Hitler's bombers, alone at the edge of the continent, when the rest of Western Europe had fallen.

This history has given rise to a myth – the Spirit of the Blitz; the indomitable will of the British in adversity. If Britain was the Gaulish village of Asterix, the Spirit of the Blitz was their magic potion.

YOUR COURAGE YOUR CHEERFULNESS
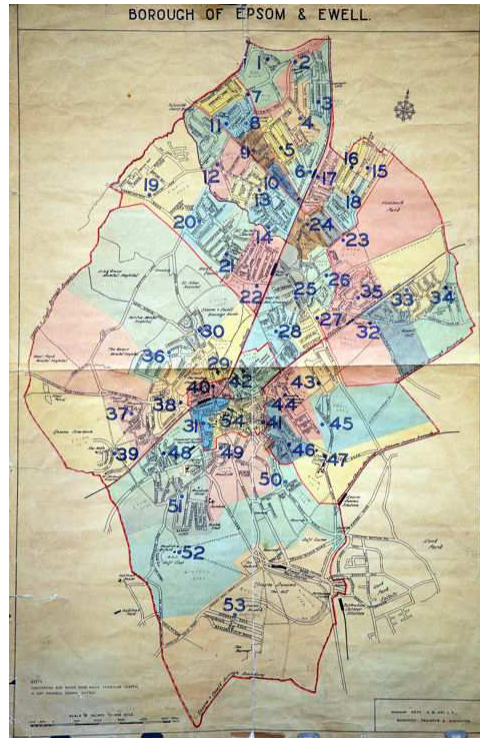YOUR RESOLUTION
WILL BRING US VICTORY

The myth was created by British government propaganda. The government was desperate to create this sense of unity and resilience. But what I find especially interesting is that the British made the propaganda *become* the truth. And I'm going to use that in the game.

Gameplay

- **1st-person MMOG set in London**
  - **Faster than real time**
  - **Set in night/morning hours**
  - **Rest of day passes instantly**
- **Air raid every night**
  - **Not a direct copy of history**
- **Players do civil defense jobs**
  - **Work in assigned regions**
  - **Can assist others after "all clear"**
- **Two types of play**
  - **Responding to bombs**
    - **Like raiding – collective activity**
  - **Commissions (quests)**
    - **Performed alone**
    - **Unique to each player**
  - **Achievements tracked _internally_**
- **Good play helps national morale – The Spirit of the Blitz**
  - **Game ends:**
    - **Whenever Spirit is high enough; or**
    - **On May 10, 1941**

BOROUGH OF EPSOM & EWELL.

Gameplay

The game is a first-person MMOG set in London. It runs faster than real time, as is normal for such games. It's set in the night and morning hours only. The rest of day passes instantly.

Every night there is an air raid. The size of the raid varies somewhat at random. I'm not trying to replicate the real Blitz, and I don't want players looking in history books to find out what happens next. The player must begin at the beginning. A new instance of the game starts every day.

The players do 1 of 7 civil defense jobs, which I'll explain later. They work in assigned regions, and can assist other regions after "all clear" sounds. The map at the right shows the sector layouts for air raid precautions wardens in a part of London.

There are two types of play. One is responding to bombs. This is like raiding – it is a collective activity performed with other people on your team, who may be other players or may be NPCs.

The other type of play is undertaking "commissions" – what we could call quests in a medieval RPG. These are performed alone and are unique to each player. Some may be similar from player to player, but since each player has his own region to work in, they will never be exactly identical. The player's achievements are tracked internally, but the player won't be told what all he has accomplished until the end of the game.

Good play helps national morale – The Spirit of the Blitz. The overall goal of the game is to persuade Hitler that the British cannot be broken, to cause him to abandon the Blitz earlier than he really did. The game will end whenever Spirit is high enough, or on May 10, 1941. If it goes all the way to the end, however, that's sort of a loss condition for all the players collectively.

One of the reasons the game must end is that London continues to take damage all the time it is running. Beyond a certain point the players simply won't be able to to continue playing.

Character Attributes

- **No levels**
  - Personal achievements only visible at the end
  - Some skill growth; can get promoted or change jobs
- **Death is permanent; no health points or healing**
  - Character is immune to bombs but not avoidable dangers
    - (Driving into bomb craters, falling buildings)
  - Player can have a new character if killed
- **Requirements – needed to produce energy**
  - Rest – automatically during daytime; on watch if you dare!
  - Food – automatically during daytime; from WVS
  - Tea – from WVS
- **Energy – consumed by movement and work**
  - When low, player moves and works more slowly.
- **Reputation**
  - Goes up for good, fast work and playing regularly
  - Goes down for poor work, irregular play. <u>You can be fired!</u>
  - Goes up fast for bravery
  - Too much glory-hunting makes it go down!

Character Attributes

There is no leveling up in this game. This game is not about you. It's about helping people to survive the Blitz. Your personal achievements are only revealed at the end. There is some skill growth; you can be promoted within your job to positions of greater responsibility; and can sometimes change jobs.

Death is permanent. With bombs falling out of the sky, the characters are naturally at risk of death all the time. On the other hand, it's bad design practice to kill players off at random. The player is immune to bombs but not avoidable dangers, such as driving into bomb craters, or going into falling buildings. However, the player can have a new character if killed.

The player's main requirements are rest, food, and tea. You get some rest automatically during the day (but never enough); you can also rest on the job if you dare. Food is replenished during the day, but with rationing on, again, it's never really enough. You can also get some from a special character class called the Women's Voluntary Service, whom I'll explain later. Tea keeps you hydrated and it restores energy.

There is only one expendable, energy. Energy is generated by food, tea, and rest, and consumed by movement and work. When your energy is low, you move and work more slowly.

Reputation is another important attribute that players will know about themselves. Players can earn a good reputation through their actions, especially if they are efficient or heroic. Those with a particularly good reputation might get the opportunity to change jobs, which isn't normally available.

Unlike conventional experience points, players can also lose reputation if they shirk their duties or perform them badly. Severe incompetence will cause a player to be fired (and thus kicked out of the game). If you get fired, you can't rejoin the same instance of the game – you have to join a new game.

One more peculiarity: glory-hunting is frowned upon. Players who consistently seek to maximize their reputation will eventually start to lose it instead. (They're also likely to get killed.) The British don't like pushy, self-aggrandizing people, and that kind of behavior is counterproductive in wartime.
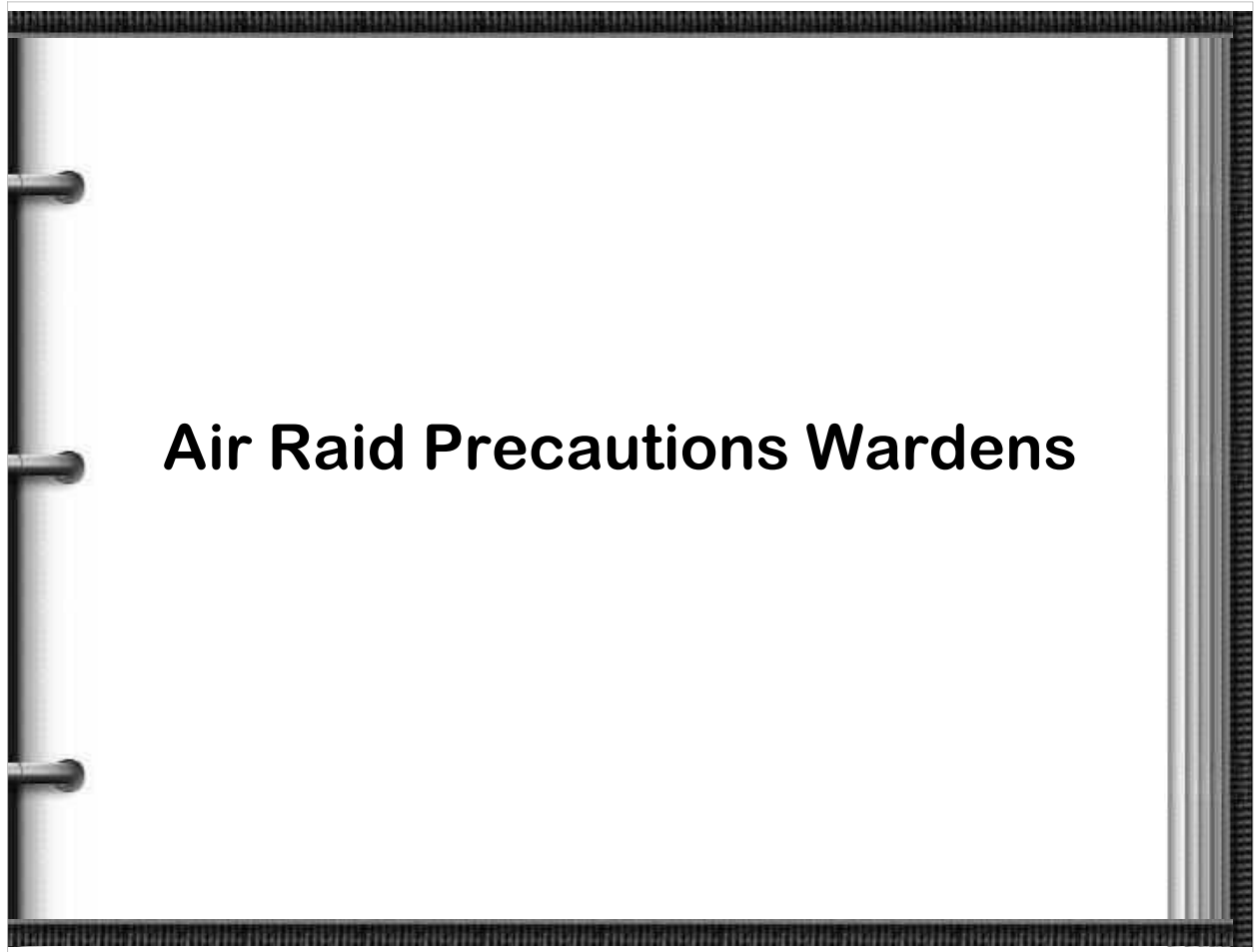
The Only Buff in the Game

The Only Buff in the Game

Tea is the only buff in the game. Tea has a psychologically restorative effect on the British that other people don't experience; whenever something bad happens to someone in Britain, even today, the first thing that happens is that they are given a cup of strong, sweet tea.

You can see from this picture that even when their houses have been blasted to smithereens, the British will still drink tea out of china cups.
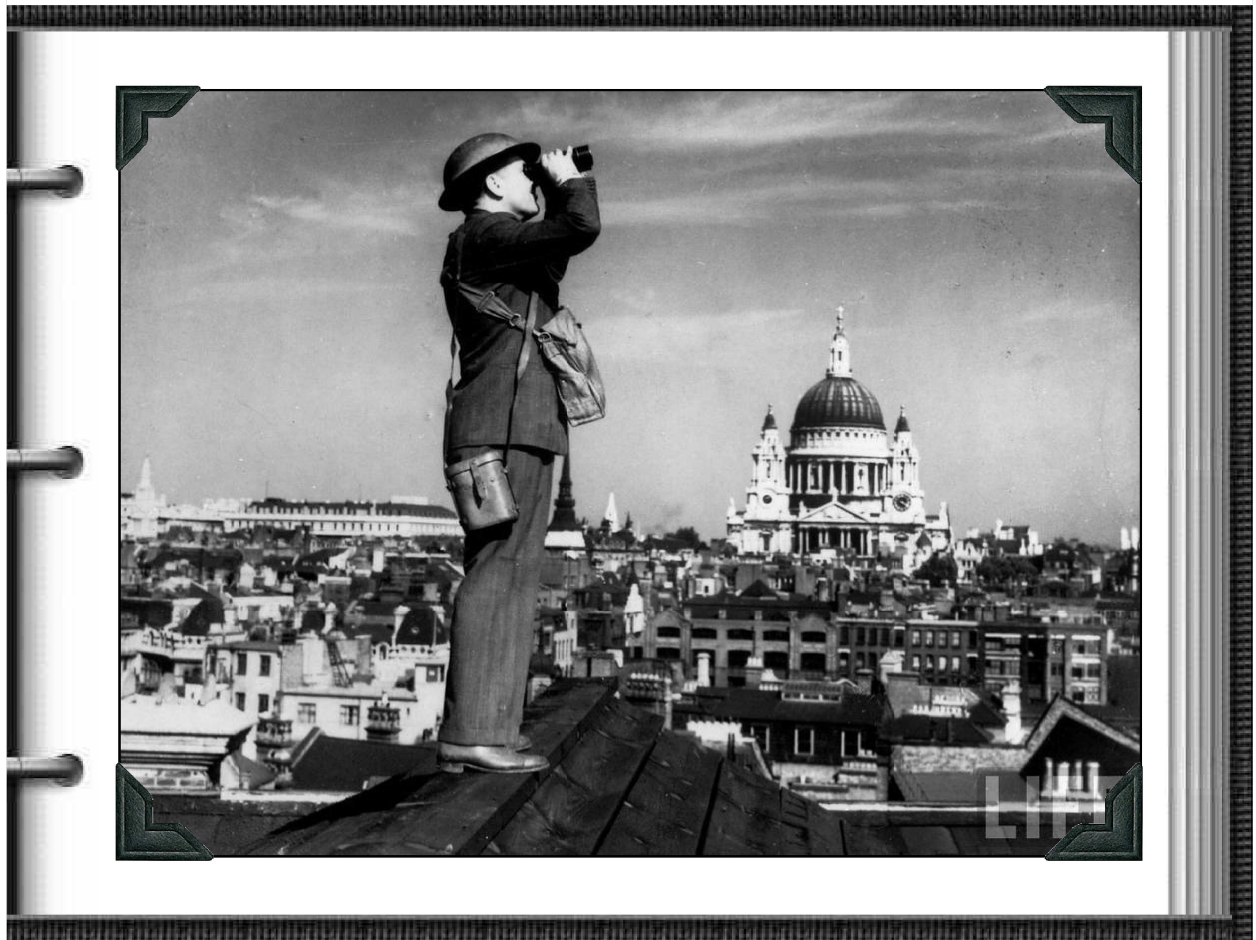
Air Raid Precautions Wardens

The jobs in the game require collaboration, some more than others. You'll collaborate either with other players or NPCs, and you'll mostly get your instructions from NPCs. Like most MMOGs, there will be a lot of NPCs in the game, both as members of the general public (who will often become victims) and as leader characters who give instructions and quests. I'm now going to go through the different jobs briefly.
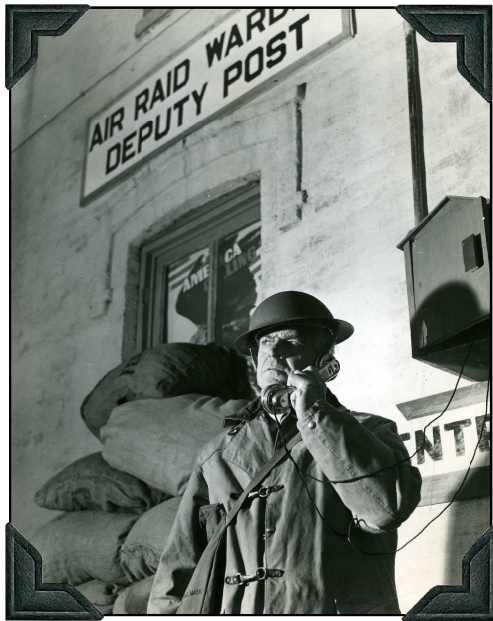
Air Raid Precautions Wardens

Both men and women served as ARP Wardens. While others were hiding in bomb shelters, these people had to stay outdoors and watch.
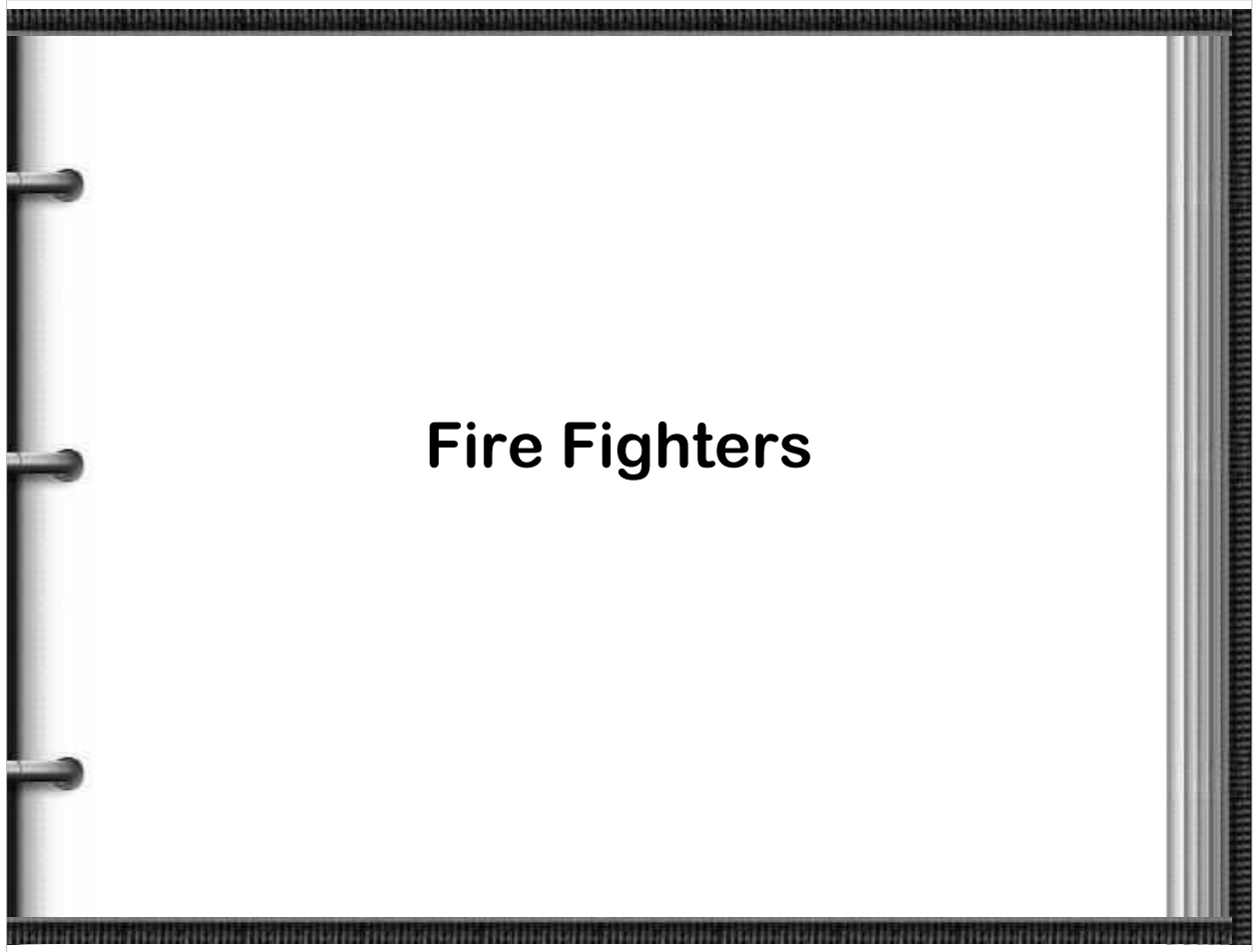
Part of their job was to enforce blackout regulations during quiet periods, patrolling their district and ensuring that no lights were showing from buildings or vehicles. They also had to watch for incoming bombers and and bombs dropping...

… and report their locations. The marked the positions of unexploded bombs, put out incendiary bombs, and did minor firefighting. Among their tools were sandbags and buckets of water.

Fire Fighters

Fire Fighters

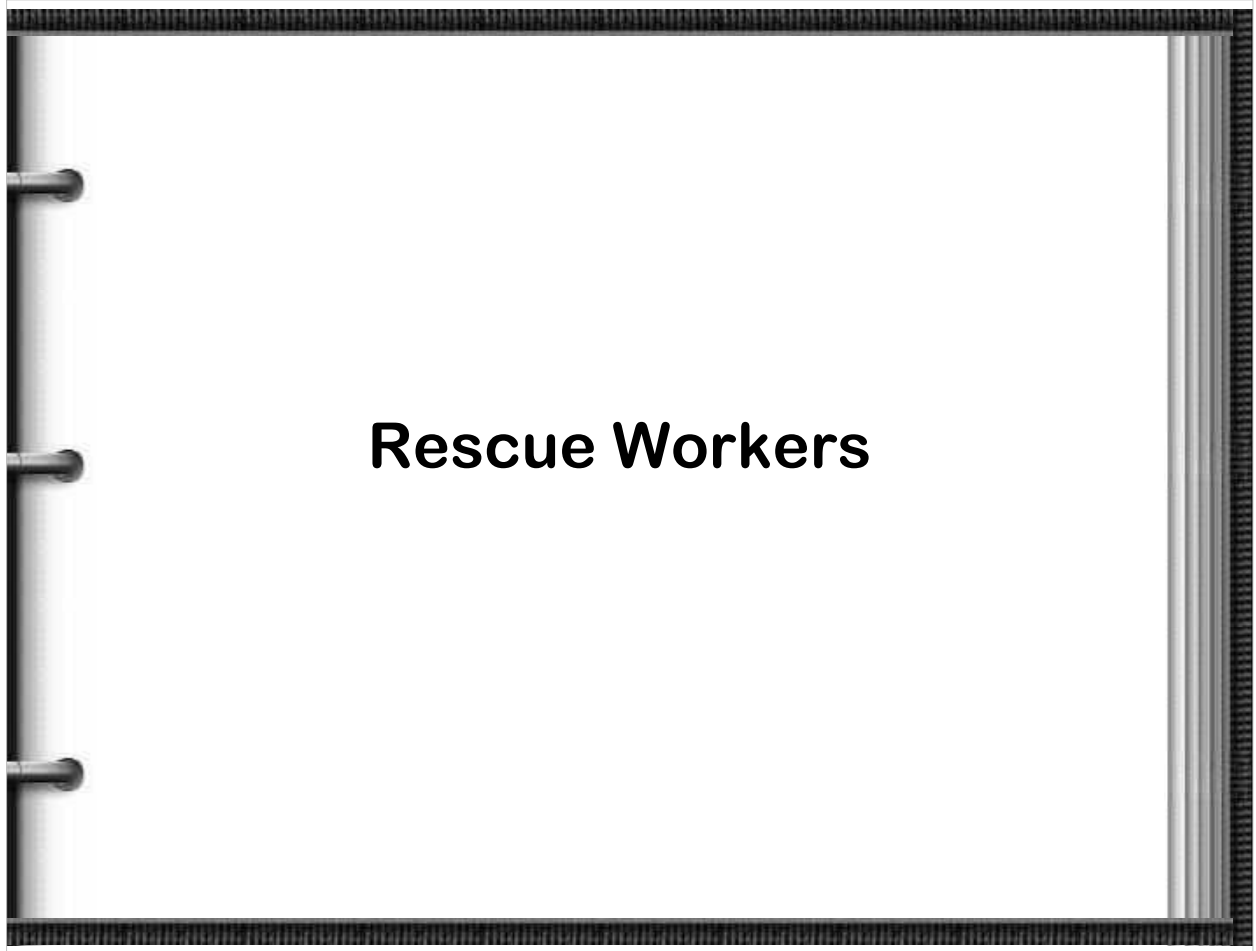It's pretty obvious what fire fighters do, and they had some of the most dangerous and difficult jobs.

Fire fighters' jobs were often made even more difficult by blocked streets, broken water mains, and – most terrifying of all – broken gas mains.

I used to think that only men did fire fighting, but then I discovered the picture on the right.

Rescue Workers

Rescue Workers

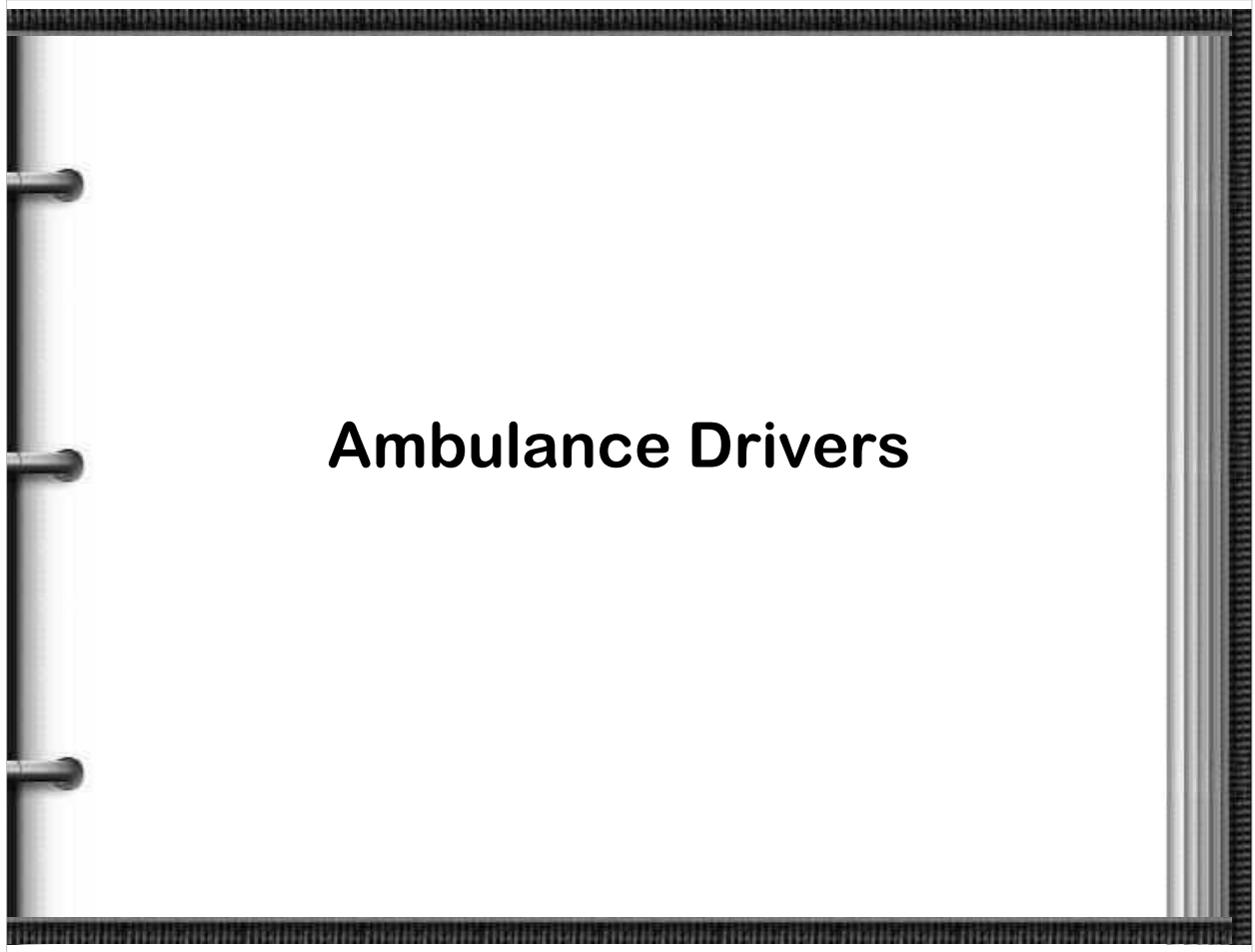Their primary job was to dig victims out of collapsed buildings and get them into ambulances.

It required a lot of people and the conditions were often dangerous.

Rescue workers also worked to demolish unstable buildings. Other people often pitched in to help, such as this policeman, center right. Women did not do rescue work.
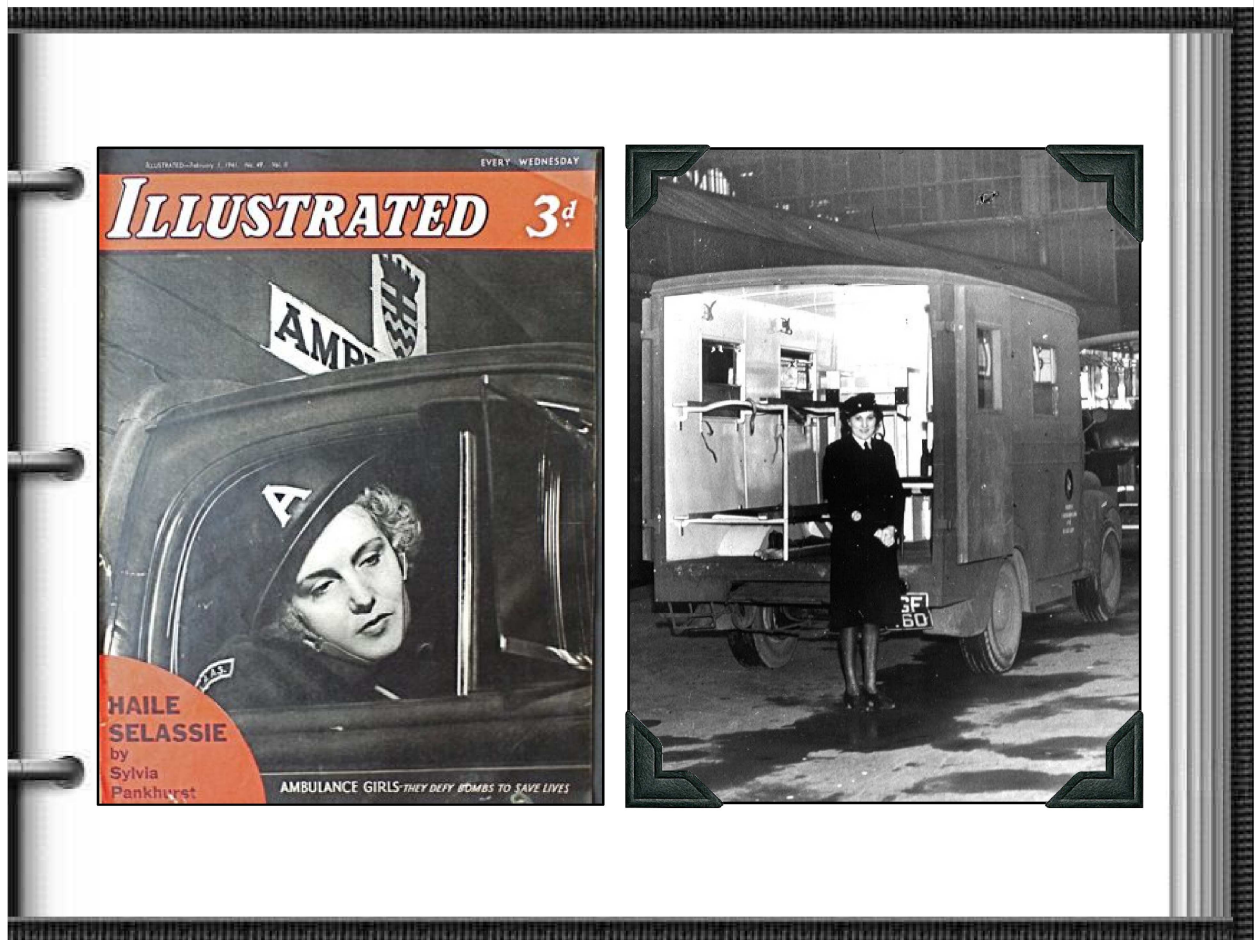
Ambulance Drivers

Ambulance Drivers

The concept of paramedics, as we know them today, did not exist back then. Ambulance drivers were just that: drivers.
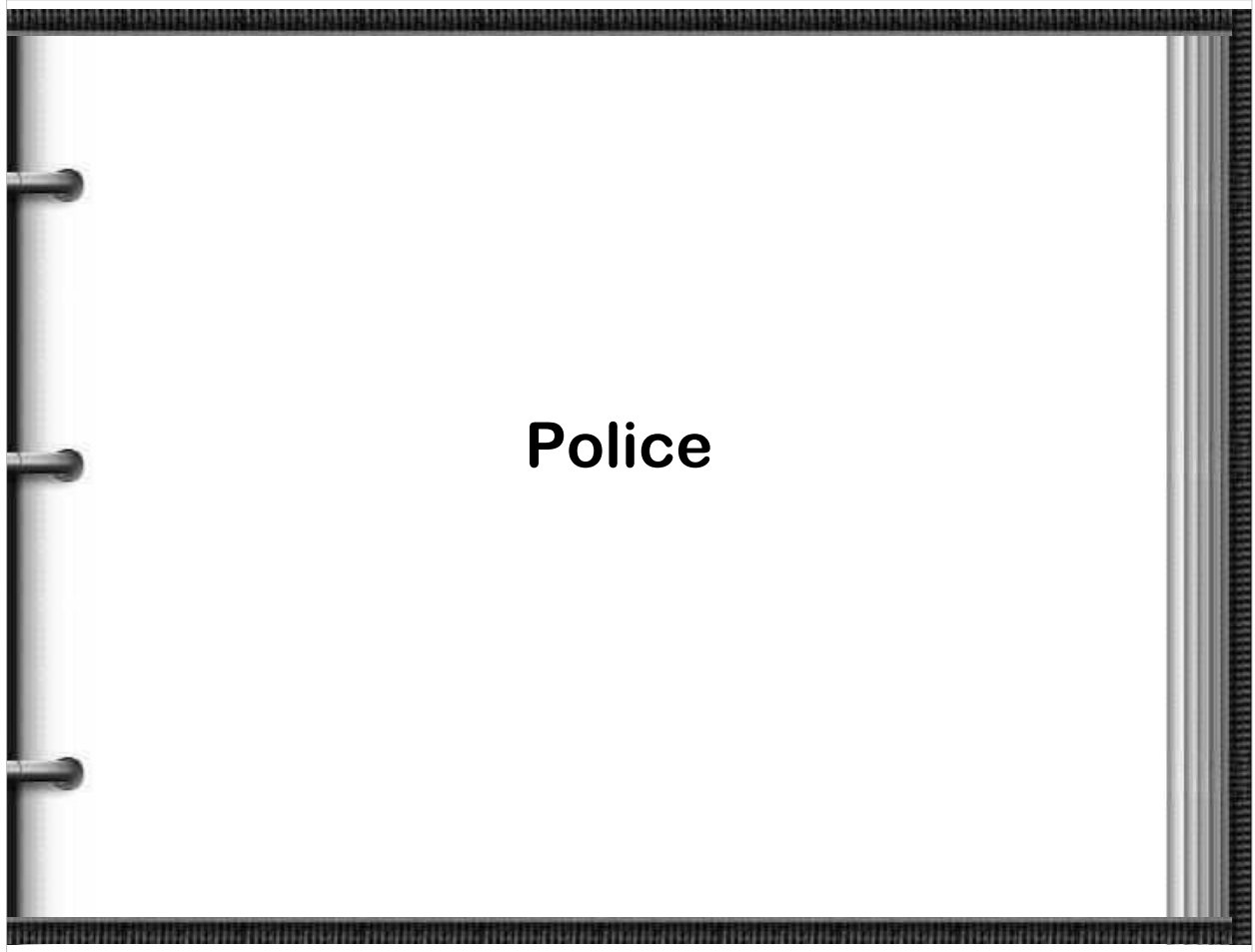
Their job was to drive to the scene of destruction, often through bomb-damaged streets, collect and drive the victims to the hospitals, and to collect bodies and body parts, and drive them to the morgue.

Incidentally, if this game is implemented fully it will certainly be the most violent video game ever made. The player will not be causing the violence, however.

Many ambulance drivers were women. Their vehicles were often hastily-refitted commercial vans.

Police

Police

The police were much reduced in numbers by conscription. As a result, petty crime thrived during the blackout.

The police patrolled their beats, guided people to shelters, prevented looting, arrested petty criminals, and helped the general population any way they could.

They also were responsible for keeping order, assisting rescue workers, and closing off areas containing unexploded bombs. There will be no female police in the game; at the time there were only 300 women police officers in the whole country, and their work was largely indoors; they didn't walk beats.

Women's Voluntary Service

Women's Voluntary Service

This is the major support class in the game, and is only open to female characters.
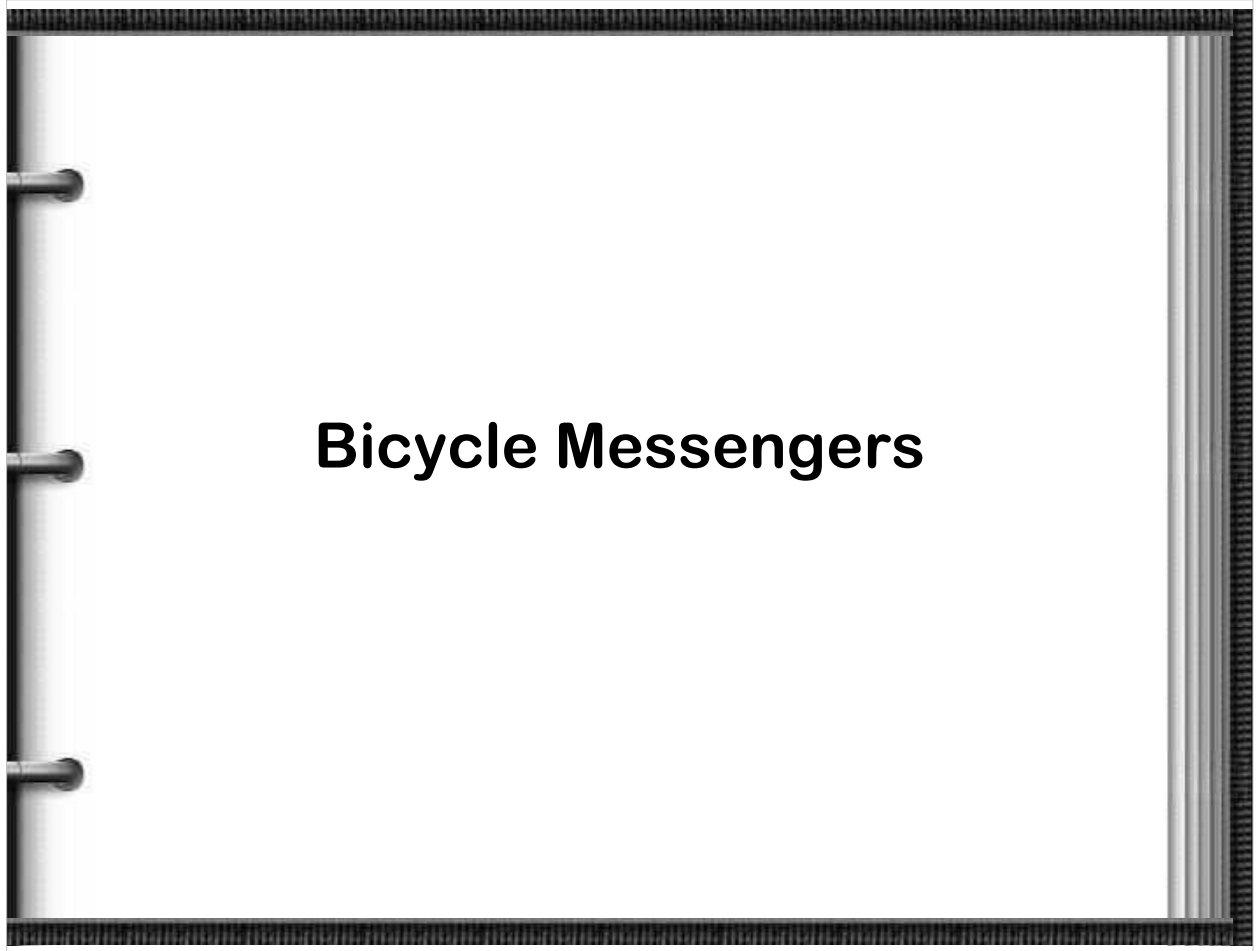
The WVS did a vast number of different tasks. They assisted bombing victims with food, blankets, and temporary housing. They also collected scrap metal and assembled medical supplies. This is the job with the most variety, and also the one with the most commissions ("quests").

The WVS had mobile restaurants complete with ingredients, cooking stoves, tables and chairs. They would drive to an area where people were working and feed them. They are critically important in the game because they are the other players' primary source of food and their only source of tea.

Don't get the impression that these are merely tea ladies, however. They often worked in dangerous conditions, as this woman's medals can tell you.

Bicycle Messengers

Bicycle Messengers

The bombing naturally tended to bring down phone lines and disrupt communications. Bicycle messengers were used to transmit information when there was no other way to get it through.

The messengers could get through areas that were too devastated by bombing for a vehicle to pass. Some of these people were teenaged boys and girls.

Those are the seven jobs I have included. Now I'll take a look at some jobs that I didn't include.

Not Included: Fighter Pilots

Fighter Pilots

Fighter pilots are too solitary; they don't work as a team, at least not in the way that I want, and in any case it's not a civil defense job. Finally, at this stage of the war, the night fighters were nearly useless because they didn't have airborne radar.

Not Included: Anti-Aircraft Gunners

Anti-Aircraft Gunners

I left out antiaircraft gunners for three reasons: it's not a civil defense job; they don't move around enough; and because they lacked radar fire control, they accomplished almost nothing.

You will see and hear AA guns and fighter aircraft, but you can't play those roles.

Not Included: Doctors and Nurses

Doctors and Nurses

They would be good to include, but they mostly stayed in their hospitals, and it's hard to turn their work into a reasonable first-person experience. I have chosen the jobs I did because I wanted roles in which the people moved around a lot, which is normal for MMOGs.

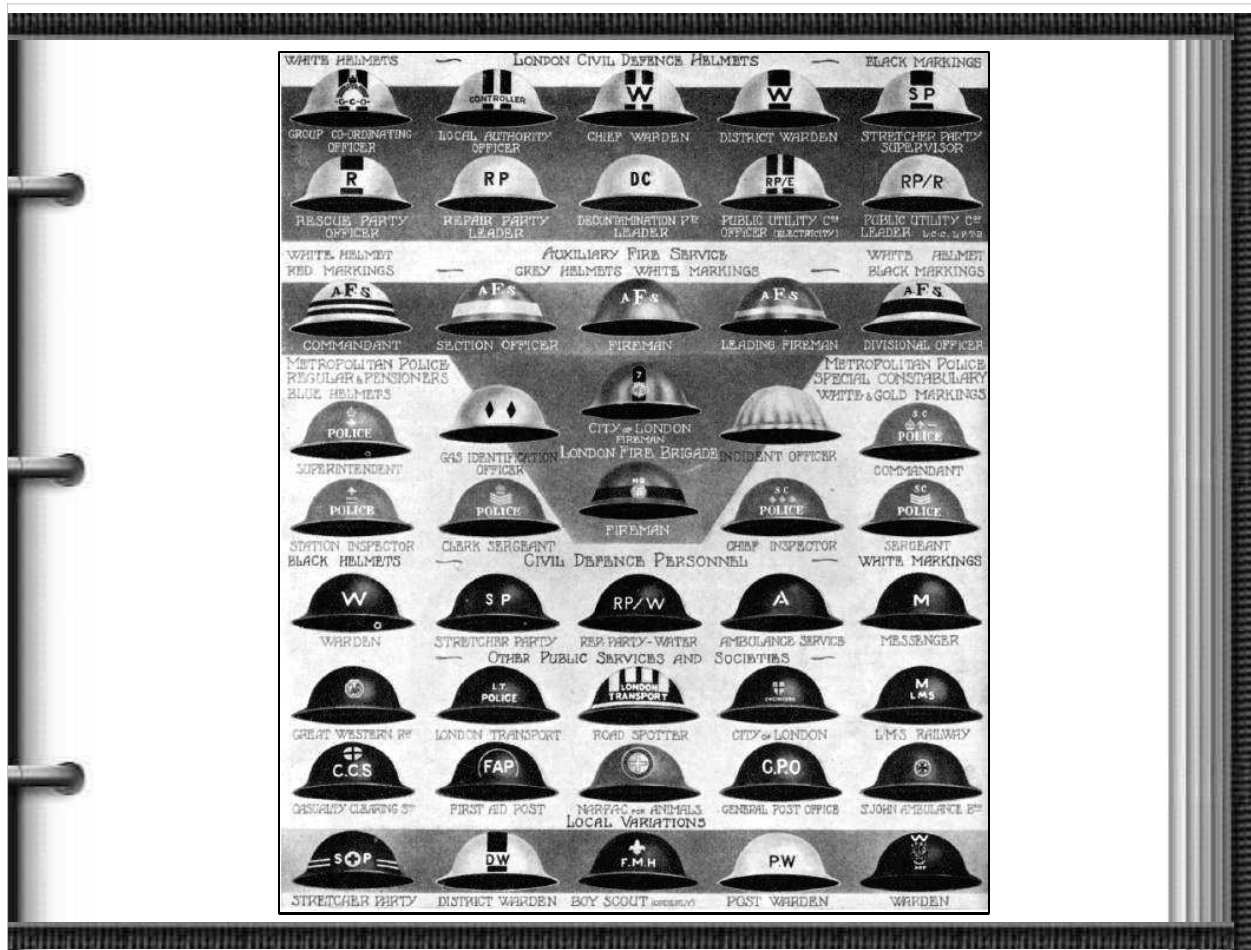The ambulance drivers will see doctors and nurses as NPCs.

Not Included: Bomb Disposal Units

Bomb Disposal Units

Quite a number of bombs failed to explode. The Luftwaffe estimated it was 5 to 10%, and the British thought it was as high as 20%. The fuses in the early bombs were sensitive to moisture, and of course they *were* bombing Britain! After the Luftwaffe realized how much disruption it caused to remove an unexploded bomb, they started dropping a few duds on purpose.

The bomb disposal squads had a huge role to play. Unfortunately, it consisted almost entirely of digging deep holes. I can't think of a good way to turn the actual process of defusing the bomb into something realistic, and I don't want to include mini-games. In any case, the job doesn't vary enough to make it interesting.
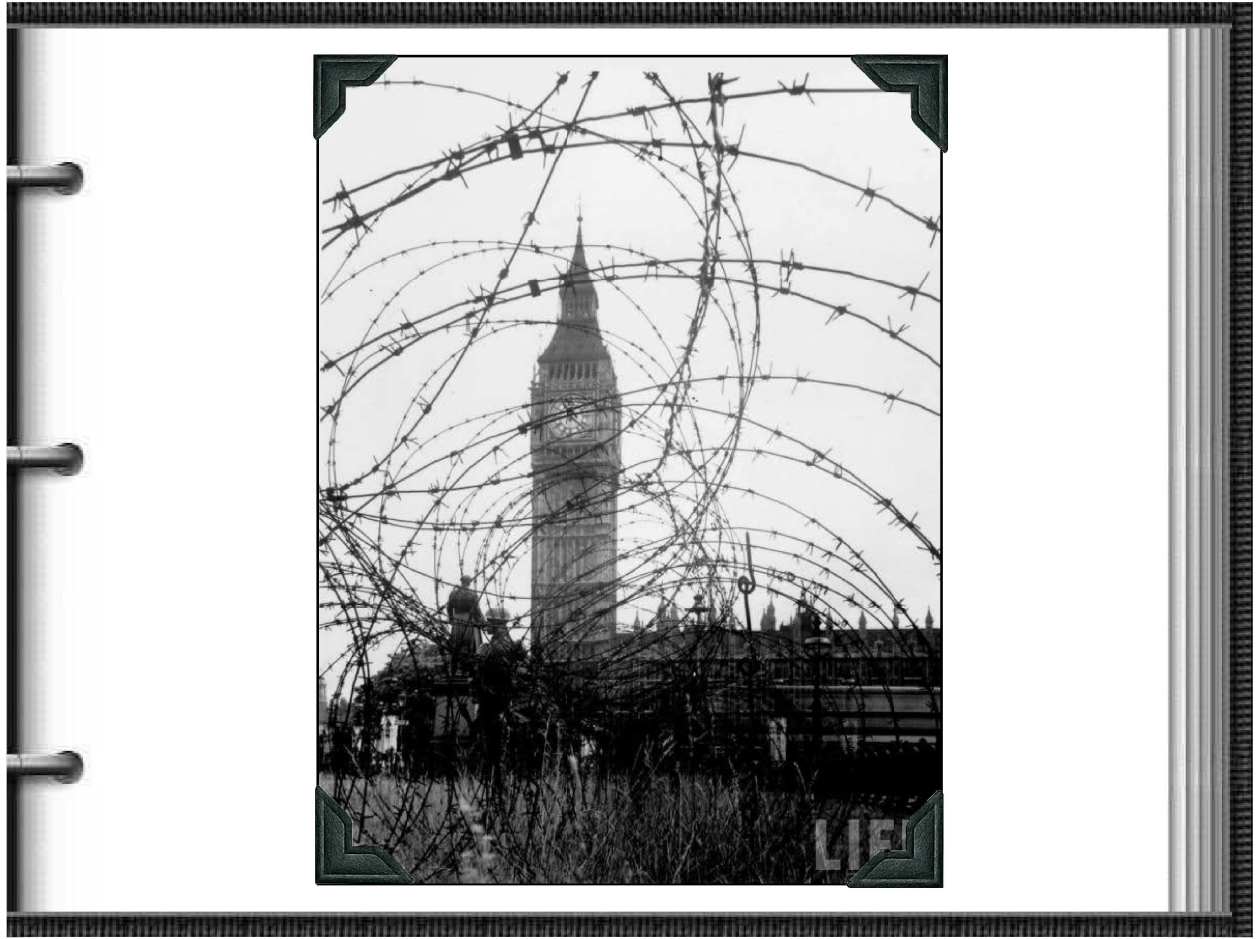
Incidentally, these are far from the only kinds of jobs there were, as you can see from the wide variety of helmets in use at the time. I had to condense them to a manageable number.

I've also left out all the people who did repair work in the daytime, such as these men working on pipes under the road. People were needed to fix the roads, as well as water, gas, and sewer pipes, and telephone and electrical lines, but I simply couldn't include them all. Also, most of their work was not done at night.

Setting

I'm planning to set the game in London, because that is the iconic city of the Blitz. I realize this isn't fair to Coventry, Hull, Belfast, and the many other cities that suffered. But it has to be set somewhere, and the familiar landscape of London makes it an obvious choice.

The Blitz in London is also very well documented. After the war the London County Council compiled a series of maps of the bomb damage, which will be invaluable for determining the areas hit and the extent of the devastation. The map above is one of them.

Players will be dispersed all over the city and in many jobs they will be assigned specific regions to work in. I want *The Blitz Online* to feel as if no place is truly safe. The player may have a home to go to, but it's at risk of bombing like every other place in London.

Life Pictures/Getty Image

Also, obviously, World War II was not fought in black and white, although we can be forgiven for thinking that it was. This game will be in color.

Apologia

Apologia is a Greek word meaning "explanation" or "justification."

I need to emphasize, particularly as I'm delivering this talk in Germany, that the Blitz was far from the worst tragedy of the war. The Blitz lasted 246 days. In that time, about 43,000 British people were killed. But the Allied bombing of Hamburg, Operation Gomorrah, killed the same number of people in only **8** days.

This is a picture of the German town of Wesel, about 100 km north of Cologne. As you can see, even the bomb craters have bomb craters. There was only one British city that even came close to looking like this, and it wasn't London. Nobody knows exactly how many German civilians were killed by bombing during the war, but could easily be 10 times as many as in Britain.
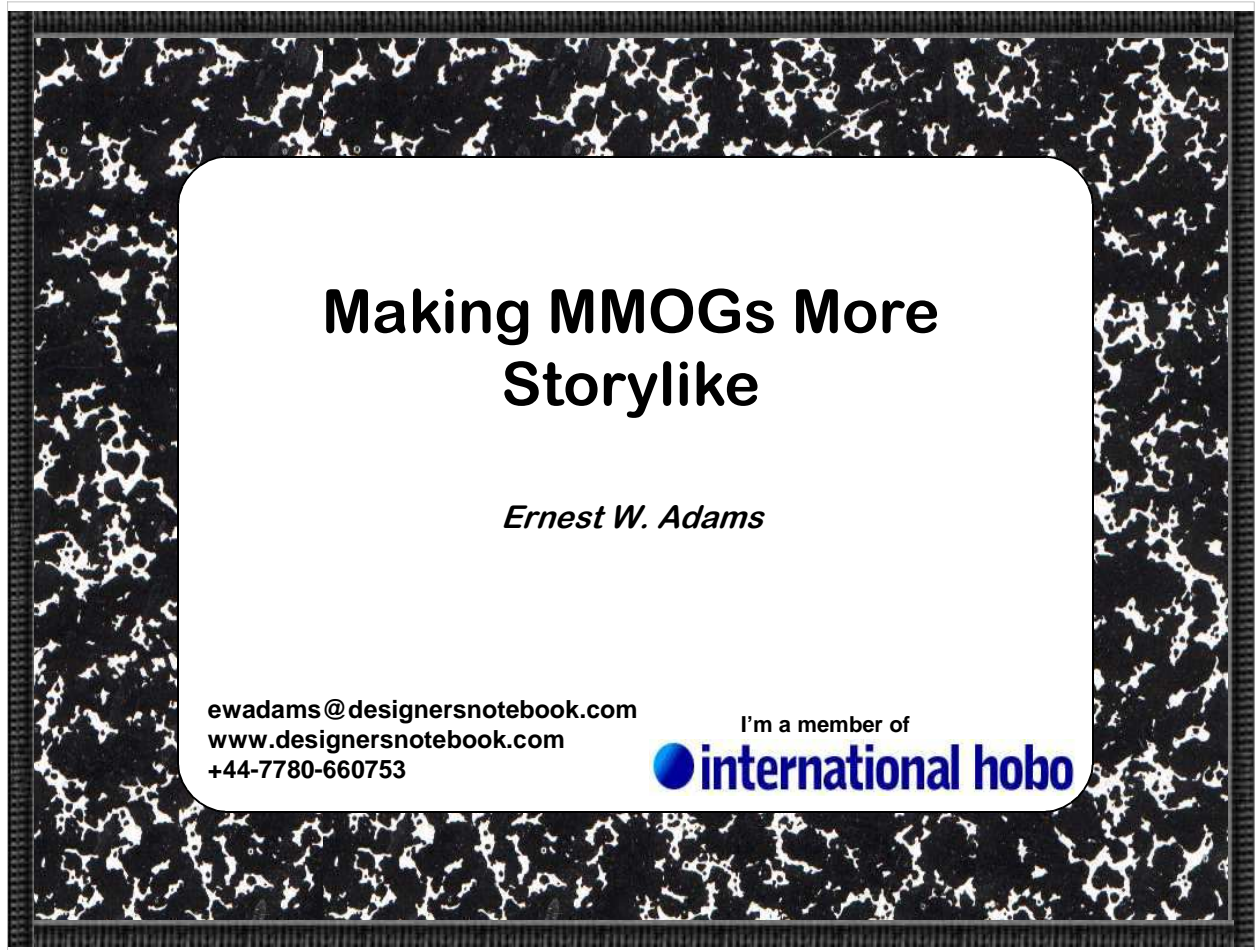
The Blitz Online is not about strategy or politics or the ethics of warfare; it's simply about social cohesion and saving lives. I chose the Blitz in part because it *was* survivable. There's no point in making a game about being a civil defense worker in Dresden or Hamburg. There's nothing you can do in a firestorm.

You might ask if I'm not just gamifying a tragedy. I don't feel that I am. All the job roles are defensive ones, dedicated to saving lives rather than taking them. I have intentionally designed the game to reduce the player's sense that it *is* a game. It's not meant to be played strategically; you're not supposed to try to maximize your own personal gains. There's not a lot of feedback about how well you're doing. You only get that at the end.

How *The Blitz Online* is More Storylike

- **Entire world is intrinsically endangered and getting worse**
  - Player is under pressure at almost all times
- **World changes constantly and permanently**
  - Player's actions have a direct effect on people and landscape
  - No exact repetitions of events; each bomb strike is different
- **Global plot has a narrative arc taken from history**
  - Shelters open – "Satan" bombs arrive – first night fighters
  - Player must begin at the beginning; story has an explicit end
- **Death is permanent; nothing respawns**
- **Each player's quests are unique**
  - (Many similar, but in different parts of the city)
- **Quests are important and urgent**
  - Cannot refuse or abandon them without consequences
  - Faster performance produces better results
- **Economy is extremely simple**
  - Most numbers and game-like elements are hidden
  - Emphasis is on cooperative performance, not maximizing points

[READ THROUGH SLIDE]

Making MMOGs More Storylike

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Conclusion

I realize that this game breaks just about all the rules. It's an experiment, and I wouldn't expect any commercial product to try all these ideas at one time.

There are major technical challenges, since the buildings must deform and degrade realistically under fire and blast effects. We wouldn't be able to model the entire city of 8.6 million people, and might have to choose specific areas to construct.

But this is not just a thought experiment. I really want to make this game, as a free, educational experience. I'm starting to think about possible sources of funding right now – the BBC, the Imperial War Museum, or other humanitarian organizations.

If you have any suggestions, I'd be happy to hear them. Thank you.