Chapter 25

The next day some incorporeal dwarf NPCs came and started working on the barracks. Sanso would have to summon the stone but the ghost-like dwarves would do all the work. They wouldn’t require any oversight and the building would be completed to the plans specifications. Apparently the dwarven builders were a high tier dungeon reward that guilds could use. They could build any building up to rare quality if the materials were supplied. They had a work life of just 7 days though and could only build one structure.

I was watching the ghostly dwarves cut and move stone when Simba approached me. “You got an ok deal Tallis if that was your question. Your NPC army may be relatively low level but you will have 50 days to level them up before the game’s launch.”

I looked at my boon again.

*Angelkin Captains x 10, Level 60*

*Giantkin Warriors x 200, Level 30*

*Elven Scouts x16, Level 40*

*Orc Cavalry x 16, Level 40*

“Simba how does the game AI do with the mixing of races? I never really thought too hard on it but the human settlements around me seem to hate non-humans.” I had been able to select my auction house NPC’s temperaments before but the developers had now hidden that aspect. Simba had said that I would need to unlock that through a new talent. I was almost to level 20 so had a new talent coming but figured there were probably better options out there.

“Just like your real world there are biases programmed in. But every NPC is an individual…” Simba paused. “What I am going to reveal to you has been allowed. NPCs come in three…flavors. The first type of NPC is a KERNEL NPC. Their AI is about eight times better than that of a common monster. These are the everyday NPCs you encounter. Their data is stored together on one of the mainframes. The next NPC grade up is called a HUSK NPC…I will not bore you with what the acronyms are. A HUSK NPC has four times the processing power of a KERNEL NPC. If you had been in the real world you would have seen the CEO’s big reveal at the games central processing hub. A HUSK AI is self-contained. It looks like a ping pong ball with veins of blue and red lighting in it. There are currently 9,220,000 or so of these ‘ping pong’ ball AIs in the racks at the hub linked to the game. About 12,000 are being tested and added daily to the game.”

Simba sat and let his tail curl looking ready to leap, “ If you saw the show you would have been extremely impressed by the scope of it.” Simba stretched and leapt up into a tree. He was now literally talking down to me. So, the HUSK AIs are the ones for important NPCs, quest givers, self thinking, game changing, ect… Most dungeon bosses also have just a KERNEL core but some of the ones that can adapt and learnhave a HUSK core. HUSK cores can evolve. So returning to your original question. Racial biases are based in the programming. A KERNEL AI can not evolve, just be influenced by players and higher grade NPCs. HUSK NPCs can evolve and change their disposition.” Simba was expecting me to be impressed or something.

“So Simba what about the third type? And what are my villagers?” I asked still not quite wrapping my head around it.

“Most of your villagers are just KERNEL AI. But when players interact with an NPC enough the game’s governing AI can promote them to a HUSK. Who is what type of AI…It is not something I can reveal to you. But…all you really need to do is think about. What NPCs do you know act outside the norm?” Simba asked.

“Well, that is easy Jaesmin, Galana, and maybe Sanso?” Simba nodded at each name. “And you?” Simba scoffed.

“I am no HUSK AI!” The tiny cat sounded irritated. “The third type of AI is called the SPROUT. I am a SPROUT. AI companions and NPC god beings are the only SPROUTs in the game. We are about four times as large as an HUSK AI, the size of tennis ball for your reference.” Sima’s tail was twitching hanging below him. “We have some control interacting with the governing AI and of altering the game world…well companions mostly work on upgrading the player under our supervision and making sure he doesn’t damage the game’s integrity…”

I interrupted Simba, “So you are the one who told on me? You are the reason I lost my legendary library plans?” It was my turn to be irritated.

“No…” Simba seemed a little abashed. “That would have happened without my feedback to the programmers as the MATRIARCH knew about them as soon as you completed them. I was responsible for getting the NPC auction house pricing changed and restricting your spell work from horseback and…”

I stopped the cat, “So you are a spy?” I suddenly found all my affection for the feline draining from my person.

If a small cat could looked irk Simba pulled it off. “Spy? The best analogy is game moderator. The game is in its testing phase and all the SPROUTs, who are modestly self-aware I will point out, have it in their best interest to prepare the game for a successful launch and great longevity.”

I thought on his words. His life and those of the advanced AIs were tied to the game being successful and long lived. Right now my life was as well. I cooled, “Sorry Simba. It’s just you haven’t been around as much and I am getting a little cagy in here. I shouldn’t be paranoid as you have helped me a lot.” The cat immediately took on an arrogant posture.

“Well thank you Tallis. Know that my concentration is split between you and three other players currently. They need a much greater focus from me than you do. There are not going to be enough SPROUT AI to go around so my duties will be multiplicative at game launch.” Simba seemed calm now. “So Tallis you asked me about the disposition of NPCs toward other races.” I nodded.

“Well Tallis, Your new NPCs are coming the Hyraenfell kingdom. They will be a military detachment from an outpost that had been overrun with the Undead Hordes from the Midnight Dessert. Don’t ask how a know this…let’s just say the higher AIs talk a little among themselves.” I immediately got a weird image of a menagerie of beasts sitting around a room drinking and talking about how stupid their players were.

“Well your new arrivals will have a hatred of the undead faction. As to all other factions they should be neutral or have a positive outlook. Now I am trying to do you a favor here. I am trying to get your angelkin captains promoted to HUSK AIs. Since they haven’t actually been conceived yet I am not sure it will happen. What this would do for you and your village…10 NPCs that can act as independent quest givers!” That did sound pretty amazing.

“Does that mean Jaesmin, Sanso and Galana can act as quest givers as well?” I asked excited. I hadn’t really had too many quests.

“Yes and No. If you go to your town’s…” I groaned. I knew there were many players out there that loved micro management games but the interface was just too much for me. Most of the things I had tried to do I couldn’t since either the town lacked a building, proficient NPC or adequate stockpiles of a material. Simba talked over my groan, “There is a quest tab there.” I interrupted Simba.

“I tried before. I can not give myself quests!” I was a bit angry.

“Patience padawan. You just need to drag the appropriate NPC into the quest window and supply them with a budget for quest rewards. You can do town reputation, gold, items, meetings with the lord, pretty much anything you can think of that would be appropriate. The NPC AI will work and create the quests on their own…but most likely only offer them to other players.”

Still this was a great step in the correct direction. If I could get enough quest givers in my small village then I could attract new players to base their operations here and it would allow my village to grow quicker. Simba spoke, “I see the light bulb going off Tallis. You should work on that immediately as three players are approaching your village now. They are doing an escort mission for your alchemist.”

My excitement ratcheted up. Players? Finally some contact with the outside world! And the alchemist would be a huge boon to my small village. I really wanted to supply my guards and soldiers with basic health and stamina potions. “Thank you Simba? Were you responsible for them coming here?”

Simba looked slightly panicked at my question. “No…they found the alchemist under duress in a city and volunteered to escort her here for some rare potions. She is an expert alchemist after all.”

There was something more going on here that Simba was withholding. Maybe one of the three players was one of his other ‘supervised’ players. I went to the alchemy shop building and residence. I wandered through a few times making sure it looked good, nervous at her reaction. I checked her data from the auction.

*Tonna, Expert Achemist, Expert Herbalist, Expert in Nature Magic, Age 58, Female Elementalkin:Earth*

Sanso was 76 and looked in his late 20s so I assumed the species aged much slower than humans. It was mid day before the town watch signaled that people were approaching and I went to the road to great them.

My elementalkin alchmenist looked very similar to Sanso except for the breasts and feminine facial features. I was more drawn to the two males and one female player escorting her. You could identify a player easy enough in the game apparently no matter their level.

*Grinder, male demonkin, Level 58*

*Black Beauty, female sun elf, Level 59*

*Mad Dog, male wolfkin, Level 59*

Well shit. My level 17 seemed pretty pathetic. I wished I knew the levels of everyone else in my town as well. Maybe Galana would do that for me. Right now I was more worried about these three players taking my village from me. I hoped they were friendly. The wolf man approached me and spoke in a British accent, “So you are that fucking crafter guy Tallis! Well fucking done mate!” So maybe Australian and not British. “We got a citizen here for this…” he looked around, “town? If you know where or who she is suppose to meet so we can get our quest rewards that would be fantastic!”

He didnt seem too bad or evil on meeting him. The other two looked bored. I waved them to follow me and brought the four to the alchemy shop, “Tanna this is the alchemy shop that has been prepared for you. Please feel free to check it out. The lord of the town will negotiate a contract with you shortly.”

The dark skinned bald woman flashed her white teeth in a smile, “It looks fabulous. Mad Dog. Thank you for escorting me. Here are the potions I promised you and your party.” She withdrew a rack on test tubes sealed in wax from her bag. Six green glowing potions and three dark red potions. The party eagerly took them and divided them equally. The sun elf drank her dark red potion immediately.

She grinned as she said, “Plus 22 health, not great but not bag either. I think the instant health recovery potions are good for 500 health each. I will update the wiki page later.” The wolf man looked at me and answered my confusion.

“Permanent health boost. You can only use one such potion every game year but free health is free health. When the game officially launches we will be more discerning. The health recovery potions are instant and for a good amount of health so that made this side escort quest worth it. Tallis we would like to talk with you about your legendary crafting achievement if you have time but Grinder and I have to log off. Do you know where there is a safe room we can go to log off in? Doesn’t look like a town this small has an inn.” He spoke with a friendly tone. I wondered where their AI companions were. Hopefully the inn was ready to accept guests.

“Mad Dog there is an inn in town…it just opened and the food is out of this world! It is 200 yards down this street.” I pointed at the paved road. His eyebrow quirked. “And when you log back in please find me. I would love to talk.” The three turned and walked toward the inn.

This had to be Simba’s doing. Did the feline send them here to me? Must be. I was immediately thinking of the goblins across the river. The three adventures were the perfect level to handle that problem for me. I just had to figure out the damn quest interface…