



Case Study

Sony Online
Entertainment (SOE):
*Everquest &
Everquest II*

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The Challenge

Sony Online Entertainment (SOE) is well known as a leader in massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), with millions of people around the globe having played popular titles that include *EverQuest®* and *EverQuest® II*.

SOE strives to keep its loyal community of gamers happy while continuing to grow its base. To stay at the top of the industry, SOE listens to what its users want and is always looking for new ways to keep its games fun and challenging. Friendship and community are major components of the SOE gaming experience, and the company's new technologies and services are often designed to support this. As COO Russ Shanks noted, "What brings the players in are the games; what keeps them there are the friendships."

A highlight of this strategy is the company's Station Launcher application that unifies the experience across multiple games, making them easier to access and use and serving as a hub for the players. SOE saw the addition of voice technology to Station Launcher and its games as an obvious and important next step. Voice chat had become an expected feature by many players. But more importantly, it would enhance the gaming experience and foster community by making it easier for players to communicate both in and out of game.

But while voice had become mainstream in MMOGs, it was often poorly implemented. Sound quality was inconsistent, and players who wanted to use voice were often left to work with complicated technology and piece together their own solutions. SOE wanted to give players a new voice experience - something that was high quality, integrated directly into the game, and easy to use. Scalability was also critical, given the large number of simultaneous users SOE supports.

"We had been looking at voice technology for a while," said Shanks. "With Station Launcher underway we knew the time was right to meet the pent up demand for unified, high quality, easy to use voice communications."

The Solution

In evaluating voice service providers, Vivox quickly stood out as the only enterprise-class solution that offered the scalability and quality SOE was looking for. As the Director of Skunkworks at SOE, Nathan Pearce led the evaluation and launch of the new voice service. "Vivox's voice quality was vastly superior to the other services we evaluated, and with their experience we knew they could handle our loads," Pearce explained. "But the icing on the cake was their special technology. Voice fonts, proximity, and connection with cell phones - those features are brilliant, and we think no one else does them like Vivox."

Given SOE's focus on the user experience, Vivox's commitment to customer support and experience in voice integration were also deciding factors. "The Vivox team are experts in voice and they also understand our business, which meant less time getting them up to speed and more time building a good solution," said Shanks.

"But more importantly, they provided strong support both during and after implementation. We obviously have a large customer base, so this was critical for us."

A focus on the user experience

Vivox and SOE worked collaboratively to design a best-in-class interface for the new service. "My biggest concern was the usability of the voice service, and how to integrate it in a way that would be seamless and obvious and easy to use," Pearce explained. "Vivox was very good about giving us feedback based on their other implementations, which helped us to avoid some common pitfalls and prioritize important features."

In developing the voice interface, SOE made extensive use of their usability lab, where they learned a tremendous amount about how players would use the service. Interestingly, this feedback often shaped design decisions that challenged industry norms, such as having the voice service on by default.

Smooth launch at a rapid pace

In launching voice, SOE decided on a phased approach, introducing it into one game to ensure things were running smoothly before moving onto the next game. Thanks to good design by SOE and strong service and support from Vivox, there were very few issues, which enabled SOE to launch in rapid succession. Within six months of announcing its plans, voice was available in SOE's largest games – *EverQuest* and *EverQuest II*.

Future

SOE's vision for voice aligns closely with the company's overall vision of building a strong online community around its games. The company is now working to integrate voice into Station Launcher by the first quarter of 2009, and intends to make it available as a free service with Station Launcher that can be used in or out of SOE games or *any* game. As CEO John Smedley explained at SOE Fan Faire 2008, "Our goal is to let people talk where they want, how they want, in whatever format they want." SOE also plans to introduce voice into other games where appropriate, and will continue to roll out new voice features such as voice fonts, proximity chat, listening on multiple channels, cell phone calling, and telephony-type features such as voice mail.

The Results

In the months following the launch of voice in *EverQuest* and *EverQuest II*, a significant percentage of the players in these games are using the service regularly.



As always, SOE gathered feedback directly from its user community after the launch and found users to be extremely happy with the service. Gamers commented that the integrated voice enhanced social interactions, and also advanced game play by providing more information and allowing them to multitask more readily. Support issues were minimal, which was largely attributed to both the quality of the voice

service and to the time spent upfront in usability testing and design. As Pearce summarized, "We're proud of the ground-breaking technology. And by incorporating feedback from our users, we believe our service is now the gold standard in voice implementations."

For Russ Shanks, the impact that voice will have on SOE's business is clear and it results from giving users what they want. "Vivox has been an excellent partner for us, and we're really happy with the voice service. It's been a successful feature in terms of customer satisfaction, and ultimately customer satisfaction ties to retention."



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About Sony Online Entertainment

Sony Online Entertainment LLC (SOE) is a recognized worldwide leader in massively multiplayer online games, with hundreds of thousands of subscribers around the globe. SOE creates, develops and provides compelling entertainment for the personal computer, online, game console and wireless markets. Known for its blockbuster franchises and hit titles including *EverQuest*[®], *EverQuest II*, *Champions of Norrath*[®], *Untold Legends*[™], and *PlanetSide*[®], as well as for developing *Star Wars Galaxies*[™], SOE continues to redefine the business of online gaming and the creation of active player communities while introducing new genres on various entertainment platforms. Headquartered in San Diego, CA, with additional development studios in Austin, TX, Seattle, WA, Denver, CO, and Taiwan, SOE has an array of cutting-edge games in development.

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