



CITY OF HEROES

City of Heroes Diary, Volume 7

NCsoft Producer Brian Clayton discusses the objectives for the current initial beta of Cryptic's superhero online title.

✓ Updated: 21 May 2012 2:24 am



Posted: 7 Jan 2004 6:04 pm



By IGN Staff

Now the greatest metropolis in America, Paragon [City](#) began in the 18th century as a quiet group of colonial coastal villages. By the time of the bloody Civil War, its location had helped it become a major port. After that conflict came decades of prosperity and continued expansion as a center for industry, science and commerce, which left it particularly vulnerable to the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed. The collapse of the economic order brought both social and political chaos. Various criminal elements, both organized and random, quickly moved in to take advantage. Through bribery, intimidation and murder, the mobs seized control. Corruption became ubiquitous. With every politician and cop seemingly on the take, there was no one to stand up for the ordinary citizens and the cause of justice - until The Statesman.

Over the ensuing decades, Paragon City attracted more super-powered heroes than anywhere else on the planet, but even their combined efforts proved unable to eliminate crime completely. As a result, when [Cryptic Studios' City of Heroes](#) launches this year, players will take up the cause of good. Using a system that allows nearly countless variations, they will create avatars that will then set forth to



prosperity has drawn a number of formidable villain organizations. These groups will offer up a diverse range of nefarious and powerful adversaries including supervillains, aliens, madmen, underground monsters, gangsters and more. With the intriguing project slated to launch later this year, [NCsoft](#) Producer Brian Clayton discusses the objectives for a critical phase, the current initial beta.

Have you played City of Heroes?

YES

NO

Beta Phase 1

In December's Diary, Road Map to Launch, Executive Producer Jeremy Gaffney presented the high-level plan that's in place to take this project all through beta and up to release time. In this month's diary, I'd like to take the opportunity to do two things. The first is to introduce myself - for many of you have never heard my name, although I've been associated with the game (working behind the scenes), for months now as a Third Party Producer. The second is to delve a little deeper into the details of our Beta Phase 1 objectives, and explain how we're executing on them for maximum results.

My name is Brian Clayton and I was brought on board as an [NCsoft](#) Third Party Producer a few months ago to work closely with our external developers to ensure high-quality production value. I'm currently working on-site at [Cryptic Studios](#), and will continue to do so through game launch. Basically, you could consider me an "arm" of NCsoft placed at Cryptic to help manage the development of the game and ensure excellent communication between the two companies. I come to this



and supporting online games over the past five years - and I've been an avid online gamer since the old BBS days! I'm excited to be associated with such a high quality massively multiplayer online game, and look forward to contributing to its success by incorporating proven methods and strategies I've learned from my previous online game development experiences.

Everyone at Cryptic and NCsoft has done a fantastic job preparing the product for beta. We currently have a few hundred testers consisting of employees, friends and family, and community members. By late January, we hope to have roughly 1,000 people enrolled in the beta testing program. You'd be amazed at how many teams of people are working together to ensure that the beta is a success! Not only are internal employees "voluntarily" testing the game, but external development teams working on other yet to be released NCsoft published products have asked to get involved. All are giving us very valuable feedback - and also seem to be having a lot of fun! However, fun aside, betas are nothing if not serious business, and there's a very important question we need to be asking ourselves at this point. What constitutes a successful beta? In our present stage, we're focused on gathering constructive player feedback and conducting data collection and mining. Gathering this information is the first step in our quest to create a thoroughly entertaining and balanced online gaming experience. But let's dive a little deeper into these aspects. Here's what I've learned from past experiences running betas and how we're applying that information to [City of Heroes](#).

Objective #1: Player Feedback Acquisition

Let's begin by discussing the joys of beta testing feedback. It is with great anticipation that every online game developer and publisher releases their product into its first phase of beta. However, this is where the reality check begins. It is understood quickly that you're probably not going to please everyone - some may love the game while others may think it totally sucks. Assuming a development team can have thick skin, keep their egos in check and keep the big picture in perspective... they will be able to take advantage of this raw feedback and let it assist them in creating truly compelling entertainment. The key to leveraging



and give them the necessary orders and tools to communicate their feedback effectively.

A few of the tools our beta is using to assist testers in providing feedback to the development team are message boards (duh!), weekly e-mail updates, in-game bug reporting, evaluation mechanisms, and customer service monitored play sessions. The reporting utilities of choice for the developer and gamers alike are the in-game reporting tools. When players use the "/bug" reporting feature, it not only gives us their personal detailed description of the bug, it also automagically includes a ton of information on the player's current location, inventory, mission, etc. This detailed information is important in assisting our QA and development teams in reproducing and resolving issues efficiently. Players tend to like this mechanism because it allows them to report bugs and other issues instantaneously - instead of having to leave the game to report them on the message board.

Another tool that we expect to be incredibly useful (and will be available to beta testers soon), are mini-evaluation forms. These will be available to players after specific events in the game occur. Upon completing things like missions and boss battles, or after acquiring powers or enhancements, the game may display a brief rating form asking players to voluntarily provide feedback on difficulty, fun factor, return on time invested, etc. What makes these rating pop-ups so effective is that they reach out to the serious gamers who don't necessarily like to provide feedback in a public manner - and therefore may not express their concerns at all. But, by allowing testers to click a couple of radio buttons and quickly get back to playing the game, these mini-evaluations will allow us to gather useful information that perhaps would have never been reported. It's true that these systems are not foolproof and can be horribly skewed in the best (or worst) interest of a particular style of play or power set / archetype, but this information is only part of the feedback equation. The next objective will be the checks and balance on the information received from the testing community.



If there's anything my previous online game development experience has taught me, it's that the only information that can be 100% trusted is what the game play data tells us. Don't get me wrong, even factual data can be misinterpreted and can create quite a quagmire, but combined with calculative testing, proposed solutions can be quickly proved or disproved. It's imperative during all beta phases that every possible piece of game data be logged and easily extractable. Without data collection and mining, there's no factual way to support developer gut feelings and beta tester feedback on recommended improvements and balance.

In our game, an example of one the most important data sets tracked is "Experience per Hour". This is monitored on an individual and archetype (class) basis over a variety of different time scales. The data can be distilled numerous ways to provide enlightening perspectives on how the game is being played and can also flag areas that require additional tuning. A couple of examples of how we use this data are in our pursuit to achieve archetype balance and to track down exploits. Other examples of data mining and analysis performed are measuring the balance and effectiveness of power sets, enhancements and inspirations.

Similar tracking is also performed on the hardware. We use MRTG (Multi Router Traffic Grapher) charts to track bandwidth, CPU, memory and player usage to identify software or hardware bottlenecks. This information is often cross-referenced with data stored in the game logs. Tracking hardware performance will be most useful when we begin running the beta on the final hardware specification, which is scheduled to occur within the next couple of weeks.

Objective #3: Responding to Feedback and Mined Data

We are rapidly implementing improvements to the game based on data mining results as well as beta tester feedback and will continue to do so through the end of January. At that time, we'll lock down all feature changes. February through game release will be dedicated to balance, bug fixing and polish. A subset of the development team will begin work on the first post-launch content update, which will also take into account ongoing beta feedback.



improved features from the community and players. It can be a challenge to determine what's necessary for launch and what to include in a future update. But, what I can promise is that the game will not ship before it is absolutely ready. When is that exactly? Based on the feedback and data we have right now, all I'll say is we're on track. It is true that we are currently only in phase one of beta, and there are many more to come, but so far, things are going remarkably well. In future phases we'll focus on load testing, high-level game play and using the beta as a PR and marketing tool. If you're interested in keeping track of the beta the most up to date information on the game can located on the [official website](#) and in the [City of Heroes forums](#).

I'd like to say a quick thanks to our loyal fan base for their continued support and enthusiasm. We will be adding many more people to the beta soon, so stay tuned!

I look forward to seeing you in the game.

Brian Clayton

Third Party Producer

NCsoft

Was this article informative?

YES

NO

In This Article



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