CHAPTER

3

On Fun

Immersion

What is immersion?

Simply put, immersion is the feeling that *you* are *in* a virtual world.

Don't Mind if I Do

In some religions of the Indian subcontinent, most notably Hinduism and Sikhism, an *avatar* is an Earthly incarnation of a deity or other supreme being.

Okay, so it's not hard to notice that the idea of a supreme being deliberately descending into a created reality bears some similarity with the way that players in the real world descend into an MMO as a character in that world. It isn't surprising, then, that the word "avatar" has been associated with MMOs several times independently. For example, Randy Farmer and Chip Morningstar used it in their early graphical world, *Habitat*; Richard Garriott used it in *Ultima IV*, a non-MMO ancestor of *Ultima Online*; Neal Stephenson used it in his influential cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*; and *Avatar* was the actual title of the 1979 world written by Bruce Maggs, Andrew Shapira and David Sides. "Avatar" was also used as a term in face-to-face role-playing games and as a name for the root user on some Unix systems.

The way the term got into today's MMO vocabulary is somewhat debatable. Textual worlds had always referred to the characters played by players as, well, "characters." When graphical worlds came along, a need arose to have a way to refer to the graphical appearance of a character, rather than to the character itself. The word "avatar" came into use, although it's not clear from where. It could have been imported from Sanskrit yet again, or from any of the sources mentioned above. An extensive 2001 discussion[1] on the subject among MMO designers and developers was unable to reach a conclusion, the result being that *Snow Crash* is usually credited because that's what the researchers for the *Oxford English Dictionary* supposed.

This use of "avatar" in a technical sense to mean a graphical representation of a character persisted among designers, but new players and then the media came to believe it meant the character itself rather than how it looked on the screen. *Second Life* popularized this new definition, with the result that it became the dominant one. People would refer to their character as their avatar.

[1] Raph Koster: *First Use of "Avatar"?* MUD-DEV. 11 Dec 2001. http://www.disinterest.org/resource/MUD-Dev/2001q4/021577.html

Today, the preference for "avatar" over "character" in MMOs is fading. Players seem to have expanded the meaning of "character" to include what it looks like on screen, and "avatar" always sounded suspiciously pretentious. "Avatar" is still a staple of social worlds and some forum software (where it retains its "pictorial representation" meaning), but MMOs have moved on.

As for why there was a pushback in MMOs that favored "character" over "avatar"—well, it may be something to do with the original meaning of the word. An avatar is an *incarnation* of a deity, but it *isn't* the deity. When players play MMOs they don't want to be *incarnated* in the virtual world, they want to *be* in the virtual world. This is a theme I'll come back to again and again in this section: why people play.

Avatar? Don't mind if I do.

Newbie

Although *n00b* is a pejorative term, *newbie* isn't. It simply means someone who is new to an MMO (or, nowadays, to anything else). *Absolute newbies* are new to all MMOs; *relative newbies* are new to this MMO but not to MMOs in general.

The term was invented in *MUD1*, although I later discovered that it had also been invented in British public schools many years earlier (where it was a diminutive of "new boy"). The reason it's in use across the Internet at large is because *MUD1* used it, and it spread from there.

No, I don't expect Wikipedia to reflect this state of affairs.

"Public schools" in Britain are "private schools" in the USA, a rare transatlantic example of the exact opposite words being used to describe the exact same concept. Either way, they're only a good thing for those able to attend them.

Hacker Culture

Back in the early days of computing, a hacker culture developed in computer labs across the globe (described in Steven Levy's book, *Hackers*[2]). This was before the word "hacker" was stolen by the media to mean "a nerd who does bad things to computers"; original hackers were people who played with computers just for the sheer *joy* of it.

I was such a hacker.

Note: you only got to *be* a hacker if another hacker called you a hacker—you couldn't declare *yourself* to be one. It's a bit like the word "cool" at present: anyone who says they're cool is, by definition, uncool. *The New Hacker's Dictionary*[3] describes *MUD* (a program I co-wrote) as a hack, which is why I don't feel bad about saying I was a hacker (but I would have felt bad without giving an explanation).

Levy identified the *hacker ethic* as follows:

- Access to computers should be unlimited and total.
- Always yield to the hands-on imperative,
- All information should be free.
- Mistrust authority, promote decentralization.
- Hackers should be judged by their hacking.
- You can create art and beauty on a computer.
- Computers can change your life for the better.

So where did the hacker ethic come from?

Well, the hackers brought it with them. When I arrived at Essex University in 1978, there was an existing hacker culture already in place; I didn't *adopt* it, though—I already had it. The hacker ethic was just plain obvious—it was *my* ethic as far as I was concerned, and everyone else just happened to share it. The same was true of all the other hackers there.

Back then, programming was not as it is today. There were few tools, few libraries, few resources, few teams—we wrote compilers from scratch as our final-year projects. You couldn't succeed as a programmer unless you *loved* programming—unless you regarded it as *fun*. Only people with an innate hacker's ethic were in the position to *find* it fun.

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[2]Steven Levy: *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*. Anchor Press, 1984.
[3]Eric Raymond (ed.): *The New Hacker's Dictionary*. MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1991. http://catb.org/~esr/jargon/

In other words, in the 1970s programming *selected* for hackers.

That was then. Now is not then.

In *Dungeons & Dragons* alignment terms, hackers were chaotic good: they made their own rules, because they knew best! They acted for the benefit of humanity.

Programmers of the next generation were lawful good: they treated programming as a puzzle-solving exercise, but were still idealistic.

These days, programmers have to be lawful neutral to get a job. They do what the suits say, whatever they say. It's not a world for hackers.

So where have all the hackers gone?

Pseudonymity

When people who don't play MMOs think about them, one of the first things they hit upon is the notion of anonymity. You don't know who the other players are—they're anonymous!

Actually, they're not anonymous, but *pseudonymous*: you don't need to know who is behind a representation, just that it's the *same* person who was behind it last time you saw it. With anonymity, there's no guarantee of any persistent bond between a representation and the person behind it. For MMOs, there is this guarantee.

Whether the representation itself is an avatar, a handle, a signature tune, or a particular shade of green doesn't particularly matter. So long as I can easily tell it from someone else's representation, and no-one else I'm likely to come into contact with has the same one, it's fine.

With anonymity, you can have no reputation. With pseudonymity, you can.

What is Fun?

"Fun" is a wide-ranging term. Here are some things that are fun:

- Making toddlers fall over.
- Hiding your mother's purse.
- Riding a rollercoaster.

Yes, there are plenty more…

These kinds of fun do apply to some games; in such cases, the game exists merely as a structure for having fun doing something else.

What kind of fun do you get from the act of purely *playing* a game, though? I mean games in general here, not some particular draw-moustaches-on-monkeys game for which the visceral attraction of seeing comical simians is the whole point. What is it about playing games *itself* that's fun?

What kind of fun does *gameplay* deliver?

Portable Characters

One of the regularly proposed ideas that designers and developers of MMOs hear is that of portable characters.

The argument goes that it's a real pain to work my way up to the top in one MMO and then have to do it again if I want to play a different one. Why can't I just take everything with me from the first MMO to the second?

Hmm, let's see.

So if I play in world *X* and become a huge success, I can go to world Y and take with me all the trappings of this success, neatly translated so all my world *X* objects become their world Y equivalents?

Instantiate world *X* as *World of Warcraft* and world Y as *Reality* and you have your answer as to why this is a poor idea.

Game for a Survey

Ask drivers what they want most in a used vehicle, and the top answers will concern upholstery, sound system, air conditioning, satellite navigation, four-wheel drive, and the like. Some people *may* mention engine size, but their reasons for doing so will vary (van drivers for power, teenagers for speed, travelling sales staff for fuel efficiency).

Few people are going to say brakes, though, even though brakes are really, really important for vehicles—second-hand or not.

So it is with games. People will play different games for the same reasons and the same games for different reasons. They'll say they want superficial features they don't, and then moan when you deliver them—not even considering critical features such as gameplay. The classic example is that players will forcefully state that they want new, original games—only to spend half their money on games with numbers at the end of their titles instead.

Be cautious and skeptical when presented with the results of any survey about games. Unless the designer of the survey knows a lot about surveys and a lot about games, you need to be very wary regarding its conclusions.

As for media reporting of survey results, raise that wariness to the power of 2.

Games as Story

Games—MMOs included—can *have* story, but are games *themselves* story?

This is an important question. Story, in its multiple forms, has been studied for hundreds of years; techniques have been developed for understanding and improving stories. If games are just another form of story, that means we can draw on this existing body of knowledge to improve games. If they're not, we can't.

What's *your* opinion?

Mysterious but Unmistakably Powerful

In an MMO, you get to be someone you're not. So why do so many people choose to be the same someone else as someone else?

I can perhaps best explain what I mean by referring to the process used in many textual worlds. There, not bound by the limitations of the character creation system's graphics, people could give themselves any description they wanted. There were no limits—they could literally describe their character in exactly the way they wanted it to be seen.

There was indeed a wide variety of extremely imaginative individual descriptions. However, some people seemed to have rather similar imaginations—so much so that their characters were almost clones of one another.

Two of these were particularly prevalent across a wide range of textual worlds:

- Mysterious but unmistakably powerful men.
- Green-eyed women with red hair that tumbles down to their waist who move with the grace of a dancer.

This wasn't just in game worlds—it was in social worlds. Indeed, the phenomenon was first identified by *LambdaMOO* author Pavel Curtis[4].

Why would so many people share the same aspirational identities that they became clichéd? And why those particular clichés?

Look around at your fellow avatars. Are they all wildly different, or are there certain stereotypes for which you just *know* what kind of person is behind them?

Are *you* such a stereotype?

What isn't Fun

Fun in a game is dependent on the mechanics. It can fail in two distinct ways.

Too *few* constraints can make a game *no fun*.

Too *many* constraints can make a game *unfun*.

[4]Pavel Curtis: *Mudding: Social Phenomena in Text-Based Virtual Realities*. Proceedings of *Conference on Directions and Implications of Advanced Computing*, Berkeley, 1992. http://w2.eff.org/Net_culture/MOO_MUD_IRC/curtis_mudding.article

Training Skills

In real life, professional soccer players spend all week training so they can spend 90 minutes playing at the weekend.

Real-world fire crews spend most of their time training rather than fighting fires. Real-world military units spend most of their time training rather than in combat. Real-world astronauts spend most of their time training rather than being in space.

Virtual-world characters spend most of their time applying the skills that were trained in the moment it took to click a button.

You really need to work on the fiction explaining that, people.

Recipient

I'm allowed to use this logo:

Did I mention I'm an award-winning author?

Okay, so I didn't win the award for *being* an author, but that's just splitting hairs.

Book Review: *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*

Anyone wanting to understand why people play games should get hold of Raph Koster's book, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*[5]. It only takes about three hours to read cover-to-cover, helped mainly by the fact that almost every right-hand page is an illustration rather than text. You are going to prefer either the text side or the illustrations side over the other—it's pretty well guaranteed. What's more, in reading the book you'll get an inkling of why; it operates at many more levels than its cheerful veneer would suggest.

This is an extraordinarily accessible book from one of the few game designers who not only thinks deeply about the design process but is able to articulate it in a form that both enlightens and humbles the reader. The basic premise is that games are important. They're important because the brain is a highly efficient machine for recognizing patterns, delivering pleasure when you learn new patterns. Games provide a context for recognizing patterns with no external pressure to do so; this is what people call "fun."

The argument develops that games are also an art form. If people are learning things from playing games, then those who create games in some way determine what will be learned. However, although many game designers do have an implicit understanding of what they're designing, few (if any) have an explicit enough understanding to reason about the design process itself. To be able to discuss what is in effect an internalized process, they need a theory of game design; that is what Raph's book aims to deliver.

It actually does reasonably well in this regard, and I'll be reiterating many of its points here myself. The test of a theory is its ability to be used predictively, and although *A Theory of Fun* does not come up with a bounded set of rules that can be applied to determine whether any given game will be fun, it does have a non-exhaustive set that can be applied to determine if a game *isn't* fun. Fail even one of these rules, and your game is looking bad.

The scholarship behind the formulation of these rules, by the way, is considerable; it's one of the glories of *A Theory of Fun* that its results seem to be effortlessly derived. I put this down to its being a book by a game-designer; the crafting of its structure is just so elegant. All is there that needs to be there, yet with imaginative doors that open wider when you push them with thought. Whatever your game-design experience, it will appear just right for you; that's the skill of a first-class game designer at work. Knowing this, at times it's breath-taking.

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[5]Raph Koster: *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. 2nd edition, O'Reilly: Sebastopol, California. 2013.

Of course, if fun *is* learning, this may explain why people *play* games—but that alone doesn't explain why people *choose* to play games rather than learn some other way. Is it only some people who like to learn from games? Or are games only good for learning certain things?

I guess I should fess up that, despite all this praise I'm lavishing on *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, I don't actually buy the Play as Progress rhetoric it espouses. Fun *is* often learning, but it can be other things, too; what's more, it can be these in games. Contact sports, for example, are mainly fun because they allow for a controlled outlet of physical exuberance, not because the players enjoy learning through play. Trivia games are about what *has been* learned, not about learning; the fun comes from feeling superior from knowing more than your fellow players. There are also ways to look at fun in games as a composite of the various different emotional responses that they elicit in players (e.g., Nicole Lazzaro's "four keys to fun" approach[6]).

All this is by the bye. If you put what Raph recommends in this book into practice, you *will* have a fun game. That doesn't mean it's easy, but it does mean it's easier than if you don't take what Raph says on board.

Overall, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* is a fun book, with a fun message. If you're an aspiring game designer, you should buy it immediately if you haven't already. Yes, that is a gold-plated recommendation.

Personally, I could have done without the illustrations, but they make great slides for me to pinch for my presentations, so I'm not about to advocate their removal.

[6]Nicole Lazzaro: *Four Keys to Fun*. XEODesign, 2005. http://xeodesign.com/4k2f/4k2f.jpg

Laughing Heartily

Type /bow in *World of Warcraft* and you get the response, You bow down graciously.

But that's not how I was bowing! I was bowing obsequiously, or slowly, or sarcastically, or flippantly, or rudely, or…

Here's what's supposed to happen, from the olde texte worlde days.

If I type nod, then I just get Richard nods.

If I want to nod emphatically, I type nod emphatically. If I want to nod with a wry smile and a wink, I type nod with a wry smile and a wink.

How hard is that?

Here are some more examples of simple emotes that are strangely lacking from some modern MMOs:

> ;feels a sneeze coming on. This produces Richard feels a sneeze coming on.
>
> :) or :-). This produces Richard smiles.
>
> "hello? This produces Richard asks, "hello?"
>
> "hello! This produces Richard exclaims, "hello!"
>
> say hello! This produces Richard says, "hello!"

These aren't hard to implement. They give players much more expressive capability, they don't jar, and they don't make your character behave in a way you didn't ask for it to behave (thereby breaking your immersion).

Why add the unnecessary and intrusive adjectives? Let players create their own.

Immersion Terminology

What gamers mean by "immersion" isn't what psychologists mean by it.

Psychologists use a definition that is all about swamping the senses in order to trick the mind into believing that something is more real than it is; MMO players use a definition that's more to do with how much they feel they are *in* the virtual world.

Thus, an experienced player in a textual world could feel far more immersed than a new player in a graphical one, but a psychologist wouldn't see it that way at all.

Toon Time

The word *toon* is short for "cartoon."

Originally, it meant what your character looks like on the screen, but shifted to mean the character itself. The word was coined because the word *avatar*, which originally meant what your character looks like on the screen, shifted to mean the character itself.

Every new wave of players brings with it its new misconceptions.

Ludology

Game designers like to think that games are different from stories. Although games and stories can contain similar elements, there are some things that games can do but stories can't. This viewpoint is known as *Ludology* (from the Latin for game, *ludus*).

In the past, though, creators of other new media—theatre, film, television—have also thought this, only to be proven wrong. So are game designers wrong? Or is there something about games that is *fundamentally* unobtainable from stories?

No-Win Situation

As an MMO designer, I don't find them the same kind of "fun" as pretty well everyone else does. I find them designer-fun, not player-fun, and I can get designer-fun from an hour of watching someone else play and maybe reading the help pages. Because I know MMO design so well, I don't actually have to play them to understand them.

When I say this, people often get cross. It's true, though: I don't need to play them. Nevertheless, the cross people will tell me either that I'm out of touch or no good at playing; that's when they don't tell me I'm both. Tired of having to defend myself from such accusations, I therefore resolved to address it at its source and actually play an MMO right the way through to the top level three times over. The one I chose was *World of Warcraft* because that's what all the cool kids were playing at the time (okay, so I was given a free copy of it, which helped me make up my mind). I took a paladin, a mage and a warlock all the way up to the level cap, 60. I also got the epic mounts for the paladin and the warlock, plus the dungeon set 2 for the mage (excluding the head-gear because, although I had all the necessary components to summon Lord Valthalak, I couldn't get one last group for Upper Blackrock Spire before the *Burning Crusade* expansion came out).

I played these characters up to level 60 to acquire credentials: I did it *only* so I could say I'd done it. I knew pretty well exactly what I was in for by level 6, but I persevered nonetheless. I was half-hoping that the cross people who suggested that I don't know what I'm talking about might shut up when I got my first 60, but of course they didn't. Too many of them seemed to need to qualify their own achievements by establishing my place as lower down in the pecking order; I was told several times that, of course, *World of Warcraft* only really *begins* when you reach level 60.

Yes, I *know* that. I *knew* it by level 6. For me, I only need to experience the *design*, not the play; the play is just going through the motions—it's the design I find interesting. Having seen enough, I can extrapolate the rest; I don't have to sit down and play my way through it. Indeed, it's quite painful for me to do so.

To keep my qualifications intact, I took my characters up to 70 with the *Burning Crusade*. I was fairly pleased with this, but then I was accused of being a *WoW* fanboi. In response, I took up a character to (the then level cap of) 50 in *The Lord of the Rings Online*, whereupon I took a screenshot and deleted my account. I later did the same thing in *Rift*, pausing only to give all my stuff to the one person who had spoken more than one sentence to me the entire time I'd played.

I did still have a problem answering the "ah, but the real game is raiding!" point because I'd played *WoW* on a US server (the free copy I was given was for a US server). This meant I couldn't make normal raiding times because of the time difference. Therefore, when *Star Wars: the Old Republic* came out, I zipped a healer up to the max level and joined a raiding guild. Over the course of 137 days of real time, I racked up 33 days of playing time, or about 25% of my life. That gave me the final qualification I needed in order to have a riposte to accusations that I know squat about raiding elder games.

Nevertheless, I'm sure that there are those among you right now thinking up reasons why this does not, in fact, give me any right to talk about MMO elder games. Perhaps I lack playing skills? Well, when I quit *The Secret World*, I was ranked one of the top 50 players in the entire game across all servers. Just because I don't have player-fun, that doesn't mean I'm not actually fairly good at playing.

Back in *WoW*, I'd continued to 80 with the *Wrath of the Lich King*, then 85 with *Cataclysm*. Fortunately, by the time the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion appeared, a few of the more prominent bloggers were now having I-don't-need-to-play-it-I-can-see-what-it'll-be-like moments of their own, so I was spared having to dance with pandas.

So, at last I can say YES I AM IN TOUCH and YES I CAN PLAY AN MMO and YES IT WAS UTTERLY POINTLESS DOING IT BUT I DID IT ANYWAY JUST FOR YOU. In the case of *WoW*, I did it for an accumulated 225 days of `/played` time before I cancelled my account.

Ah, but "today's MMOs are so different that your old experience is worth nothing!"

Great. In order to demonstrate that I don't need to play MMOs, I need to play them.

I just can't win.

May Day

Christmas, Halloween, New Year, assorted other festivals, and national days: every once in a while, the real world changes and becomes something other than what it normally is.

Should MMOs also change at these times?

When the real world temporarily wears a different mantle, it presents a problem for MMO designers: should they embrace the change by putting, for example, Christmassy stuff in, or should they remain apart and offer no support whatsoever?

If they don't go with the flow, many players will do so anyway and will be put out that their home-from-home isn't joining in. On the other hand, if they do take major real-world cultural events on, this will annoy those players who feel it somewhat breaks the fiction (and no, your attempts to cover it with lore or backstory won't help—you're not fooling anybody).

Most MMOs seem to go with the acknowledge-*Reality* approach, and have done so for decades (even *MUD1* did, despite being far more conscientious about separating the real from the virtual than today's MMOs). They still have a problem, though: which events do they put in and which do they leave out?

Unfortunately, different parts of the real world have different festivals. July 4th is big in the USA, but passes without comment everywhere else. Likewise, Chinese New Year, Saint Patrick's Day, Bonfire Night, Eid al-Fitr, Diwali, and Easter are important to some people in some places but not to others elsewhere—and some of them move around the calendar, so can cause collisions.

Which religion or country do you want to insult by not putting its favorite festival in your MMO? Which players do you want to annoy by holding some inexplicable seasonal event that disrupts their fun?

Is May Day a friend or foe of immersion?

Go Grok Yourself

Human beings are amazing pattern-matchers. Msot Egilnsh sepkaers culod raed this snetecne. It doesn't matter whether the pattern is exhibited in the senses, through action, or in the mind: we can spot it.

The more a pattern is encountered, the easier it becomes to recognize. People come to learn the pattern—and then they recognize it automatically. If I were to show you a picture of Einstein that you'd never seen before, you'd know it was of him—even though he died in 1955.

Learning a pattern means you can instantly recognize it, but things don't just stop there: if you encounter a process enough, you can *internalize* it. By this, I mean you can understand it to such an extent that it becomes a unitary concept for you. Complex systems that were once difficult become such that you don't even have to think about them unless something interrupts you—as with driving a car, for example. You may have started lessons by thinking in terms of steering and accelerating and braking, but after a while you just think in terms of *driving*.

Thanks to author Robert A. Heinlein, we have a word to describe this concept of internalized knowing: *grok*. If you grok something, you have an implicit understanding of it to the extent that you just *know* all there is to know about it without having to think.

Grokking raises its head in two ways when it comes to understanding MMOs, both to do with fun. One of them is a red herring, and the other is everything.

Engrossed *vs.* Immersed

It's harder to get people engrossed in a textual world than in a graphical world. However, once a player becomes engrossed, it's easier for them to become immersed in a textual world than in a graphical world.

Presence

Psychologists have a concept they call *presence*. There are actually several kinds of presence, but the general theme is that it's what you get when a mediated experience appears, perceptually, not to be mediated[7].

Here's an example: suppose you are waiting in your car at a set of traffic lights and someone coming up behind doesn't quite stop in time. There's no damage done, but you're not happy. When you meet up with your friends later, you say, "some idiot ran into the back of me this morning." You don't say, "some idiot ran their car into the back of my car this morning," even though that's actually what happened. You might say something like that as a passenger, but not as a driver. This is because, when you're driving, you regard the car as an extension to your body.

The same sort of thing applies to chopsticks, computer mice, puppets, mechanical digger scoops, MMO characters, …

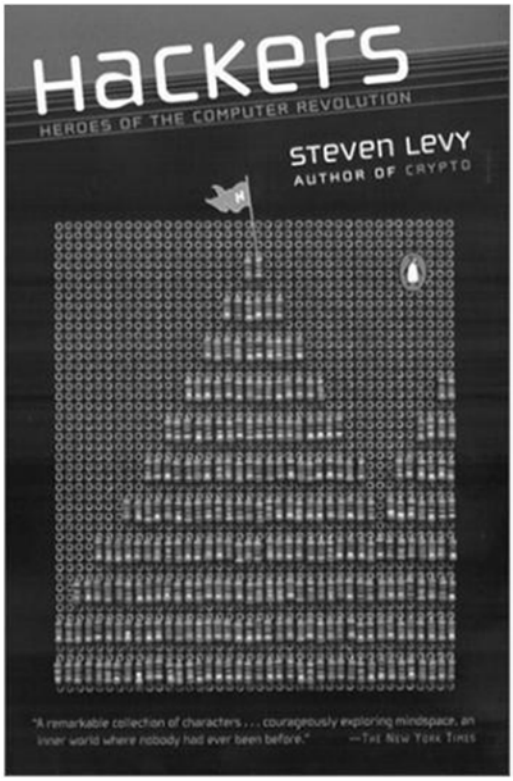
When you control your character in an MMO, there's actually a lot of hardware between you and that character—and the character isn't even a physical entity. Nevertheless, once you've been playing awhile you can control it effortlessly. You're effectively treating your character as if it were part of your own body. That's presence (or *telepresence*, if you want to differentiate this particular subdivision of presence from other subdivisions).

The concept of presence is strongly linked by psychologists to that of immersion. This is indeed the case—for the definition of "immersion" that psychologists use. Unfortunately, this definition is not in line with what *players* mean when they say "immersion."

Players mean something altogether more special.

[7]Richard N. Held and Nathanial I. Durloch: *Telepresence. Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 1, pp 109-112, 1992.

On your Second Read



If you remember by the time you get to the end of this book, look at the title and subtitle of Levy's work in the light of all I've said by then. They're … apt.

Olton Hall

The role of the Hogwarts Express steam engine in the *Harry Potter* films was played by Olton Hall, a Great Western Railway "Hall" Class 4-6-0, number 5972. It was built in Swindon in 1937[8].

[8]Rail UK: *BR/GWR Collett 4-6-0 Class 4900 Hall No. 5972 at Woodham Brothers Scrapyard 1966* http://www.railuk.info/gallery/album_search.php?offset=22&first_id=1&last_id=59&item=&album=2

Inter-World Trust

If a number of virtual worlds *completely trusted* each other, they could implement a protocol for the transference of characters and property between those worlds. What you'd have as a result would effectively be a single virtual world with a bunch of different "countries," not multiple virtual worlds. It can work, though.

I know it can work because I actually implemented this with *MUD1*. The restrictions on how much memory a program could use on the mainframe during prime time changed, and *MUD1* became too big. I therefore created another world, *Valley*, that sat next to it geographically but was small enough to be played during the day. Out of prime time, when *Valley* and *MUD1* could both be run, it was possible for people to walk from one to the other and back. Thus, it wasn't so much that players were transferring between *different* virtual worlds, as that they were transferring between different parts of the *same* world.

This exercise was only possible because *MUD1* could trust what *Valley* told it, and *vice versa*. For a more general system, though, this issue of trust is a big problem. One rogue world would completely compromise the whole system. If my MMO is easier than your MMO but characters can transfer between them, you can guarantee that players will come to my MMO, level up (or skill up or kit up or whatever), and then return to your MMO to brag about how great their character is. This is not something that other people in your MMO will necessarily appreciate.

Social worlds are more likely to buy into the ideal of each being part of some same, glorious meta-world because they're not competitive in the same way as game worlds. Even they face problems of trust, though: if everyone in *Catworld* is a cat, what happens when you try to enter it from *Carworld*, where everyone is a car? Does *Catworld* trust *Carworld* not to send it any visitors? Or does *Catworld* have to act as its own gatekeeper, converting any non-cat visitors (such as cars) into cats? It might even have problems accepting visitors from *Felineworld* if they have the same names as existing players of *Catworld*.

So the upshot is that you *can* have inter-world travel, but unless the worlds 100 percent trust each other, the recipient world has to be able to decide how much of you, if any, to admit.

Narratology

Looking at games from the point of view of film, literature and theatre, games are texts to be read. Like drama, they are a medium that allows individuals to assume a different role and act out different scenes. In that respect, games are just another form of story—a viewpoint known as *Narratology*.

Yet games are very non-linear, whereas even the most *avant garde* theatre is still heavily linear by comparison. When you try to fit games into existing theories of literature and drama, it's very, very hard—you have to reduce the definition of what constitutes a "story" to a point where it's almost vacuous.

You *can* do it, though.

That said, why is it we're only noticing this now, with computer games, when games as a concept *predate* narrative? Animals play games, but they don't tell stories. If games were just another aspect of narrative, why hasn't this been spotted before? Perhaps games *are* something different?

You're Only Supposed to …

In the 1969 caper movie, *The Italian Job*, a group of British criminals steal a shipment of Chinese gold headed for a bank in Turin. They then make their escape in three minis, taking a splendidly bizarre route to avoid the gridlock caused by their earlier modifications to the traffic control computer's files.

I guess I should have given a spoiler alert, but if you haven't already seen *The Italian Job*, you must be purposefully avoiding it. Well, either that or you could be something other than British, in which case it won't be a movie you're likely to see anyway…

Floyd

The 1983 text adventure, *Planetfall*, designed by Steve Meretzky, is legendary among game designers.

The premise of the game is that following some explosions aboard the spaceship you work on, you escape in a pod and crash-land on a nearby planet. There are signs of civilization, but not of people. While trying to figure out a way to get back home, a series of clues gradually reveal what has happened, what the implications of this are, and that you don't have a lot of time to find a solution.

Early on, you encounter a very endearing robot called Floyd, who seems to be the planet's only remaining inhabitant. He not only helps advance the plot, but he's a great source of comic relief. When you save the game, for example, he says "Oh boy! Are we going to try something dangerous?" During the course of the game, players came to grow very fond of Floyd and his engaging, child-like ways.

Warning: spoiler ahead.

Thus, they were very shaken when Floyd sacrificed himself so they could win. "Floyd a good friend, huh?"

Vicariousness

You don't get to change the protagonist's nature in a novel; the author does. You're experiencing the narrative second-hand: you identify to a greater or lesser degree with the protagonist, and absorb his or her experiences, but you can't influence how the character's character changes because books aren't interactive.

This is how narrative has been for time immemorial. You don't get to be a hero from reading a book—the protagonist gets to be the hero. All you can do is try to put yourself in the protagonist's shoes and look for resonance between the character's situation and your own.

Improving Players

Imagine if novels started off as an easy read but got progressively hard to follow. Why would you continue to read a novel if it just got harder and harder as you read it?

Imagine watching a movie that was clear at the beginning but became impenetrable by the end. Why would you continue to watch a movie if it just got harder and harder as you watched it?

Imagine playing a game that was easy to start with but became more difficult as you played it. Why would you continue to play a game if it just got harder and harder as you played it?

Well, games *do* do that.

No-one can be good or bad at a book or a movie, but they *can* be good or bad at a game.

Players *improve* as they play.

Real Life API—Educate

CPopulation::Educate

int Educate(CKnowledge *rcKnow*)

- *rcKnow* Specifies the knowledge to be understood.

Remarks

Improves the population's knowledge of *rcKnow*. The nature of the improvement is dependent on, and defined within, *rcKnow*.

- Knowledge of a factual nature is transmitted very well.
- Knowledge of a procedural nature is not transmitted well.
- Knowledge about thinking is transmitted very well.
- Other SDKs may offer complementary or superior equivalents to **CPopulation::Educate**.

Return

0 on success, otherwise:

- **E_PDE**—population denies education to some of its members.

Games & Learning

When people play games for fun, they're trying to grok them. This means they actively *want* to learn something.

Idea! Why not use games to teach people things? Games are fun, education is unfun; therefore, combining the two will lead to fun education!

Well, as I said before, it's because it generally leads to unfun games.

The trouble is, educationalists who want to teach something via a game will too often try to make the thing they are trying to teach be the central plank of the game. Classically, if they want to teach people how to add up, then they make the game have addition as its core mechanic. It's possible that this can work (although easier to do in puzzles than in games), but it's missing the point. This is somewhat ironic because *missing the point* is the best way to learn in games.

I can name all the countries in Europe. I can do so not because I ever sat down and learned them, but because I've played so many games featuring a map of Europe that I just picked them up through osmosis. None of the games I played which taught me this geography were *trying* to teach me it, it just came as a side-effect.

All games that contain facts teach you those facts. Facts are the easiest things to get across in games. Anything you need to learn by rote can be taught in a game, simply by making it be involved in the gameplay. My kids can find every capital city in Europe because we play a travel game I designed which involves moving between capital cities in Europe. Okay, so maybe they don't know what Ljubljiana is capital *of*, but they know it's a capital and its whereabouts on the map. The game isn't *about* capitals, though, it's about travel; capitals are just what you happen to travel between. The game would be just as much fun if I'd made up the map and the city names; my kids would still have learned the locations, but this way what they learned has some real-world relevance.

Skills are *not* easy to teach through games. I don't know offhand what 123*123 is, but I do know that I can work it out in my head, and I also know that I wouldn't like playing a game where I was required to do that. Unfortunately, this is exactly the kind of game that educationalists aim at because skills are precisely what they want to teach people. This is why many of their efforts are so miserable. The thing is, you *can* teach skills in a game, you just don't make it that those skills are *required*. Rather than building the gameplay about mathematics, so that the person with the best mathematical skills always wins, you build it about something fun and make the mathematical skills merely *incidental* to the gameplay.

The best kind of skills that games teach you (and *all* games that aren't pure chance do this) are high-order problem-solving skills. People can really benefit from these, and games are probably *the* best way to learn them. However, these in-demand skills are by their very nature non-specific. This is rarely acceptable in the classroom because educators don't just want to use games to teach, they want to use them to teach *particular things*.

Okay, that's fine, games can be pressed into doing that—just so long as you don't make those particular things comprise the game mechanic. If you really want to get the most out of games *and* be specific, concentrate on facts: games are *good* at facts.

In Tanzania, there's a crater with a floor area of 260km^2 and walls 610m deep. It's the world's largest unbroken volcanic caldera. The chances are you've never heard of it before; however, when I tell you its name, some of you will immediately recognize it and you'll remember it for ever more. Okay, maybe not the exact spelling, but probably the basic sound, and certainly the fact that it exists. It's called Ngorongoro. *World of Warcraft* players who thought that the name Un'Goro was made up: now you know it wasn't. Furthermore, in 20 years' time, when you're on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* and they ask you which of these four national parks in Africa contains a large crater, you'll be able to answer.

Don't try fireballing tigers, though. I'm guessing that doesn't transfer so well from *WoW* to RL.

Flow

In evolutionary terms, if you didn't learn, then you got **eaten by bears**. Therefore, those organisms that evolved mechanisms to encourage learning did better than those that didn't. As a result, it should come as no surprise to discover that people (being very good at learning) are hard-wired to find it an enjoyable experience.

Put another way, the process of grokking something is pleasurable.

Of course, once you grok enough similar games, you grok the whole concept they embody. If all Fantasy RPGs seem the same to you, that's either because you have too little understanding of them or too much.

Okay, so when you're playing a game for fun, you're trying to grok it. Once you've mastered it, though, it stops being fun—it's "no fun." If you haven't mastered it and are making no substantial progress, it also stops being fun—it's "unfun."

So what about in between?

Unfun games are too hard. You get frustrated and eventually stop. *No fun* games are too easy. You get bored and eventually stop. Yet some games stay fun for extended periods. What's going on here?

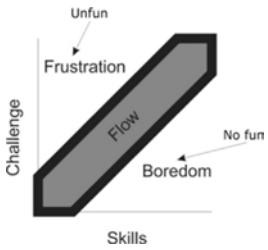
Psychologists have a concept called *flow*, which was proposed by in 1975 by Mihály Chicks-sent-me-high (pronounced "Csíkszentmihályi"). Flow is a Zen-like state that people can get into when they're doing a task that is neither too easy nor too hard for them. They don't *have* to get into it, but they can.

There are eight components of flow:

- *Clear Goals*. Expectations and rules are easy to grasp.
- *Concentrating and Focusing*. You limit your attention field and dive deeply into it.
- *Loss of Self-Consciousness*. Action merges with awareness.
- *Distorted Sense of Time*. "Was I really doing it for that long?!"
- *Direct and Immediate Feedback*. Success and failure can be easily recognized.
- *Balance between Ability and Challenge*. It's never too hard and never too easy.
- *Sense of Personal Control*. You feel that the activity is dancing to your tune.
- *Intrinsically Rewarding*. The effortlessness of your actions itself feels worthwhile.

Hmm, does this sound familiar to you? Like, maybe when you're playing a game?

Well, this is the argument made by Raph Koster in his book, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*[9]—and he's right, there *is* a connection between flow and fun:



If you experience flow in games, it will indeed be fun. However, you can experience fun *without* flow. In particular, you can be having fun already and *then* go into a state of flow. Flow is sufficient for fun, but it's not necessary.

So flow is not a psychologist's synonym for fun, even in regular games. For MMOs, it's even less so.

Personally, I think flow is a red herring. MMOs *are* about grokking, but they're not about flow. It's *what* you grok that makes MMOs compelling, not merely the fact that right now you are grokking it swimmingly *well*.

Seamlessness

Earlier, when I was talking about portable characters, I mentioned that one of the "new" ideas that come up every so often is that of being able to move between MMOs seamlessly. You're playing in one world, you pass through a door, cross a river, walk out of a forest, whatever, and you're now seamlessly in another world without having broken your immersion. Wouldn't that be great?

Hmm. So even if the worlds trusted one another completely, this is still an idea with a number of issues.

- **Design**: it'll be as if you're reading chapters of an enormous book that have all been written by different people. Unless there's a system in place to ensure they all conform to the same style, you'll spot the difference whether the designers would like you to or not.

[9]Raph Koster: *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. Paraglyph Press: Scottsdale, Arizona. 2005.

- **Experiential**: as I'll be explaining over the coming pages, people play MMOs to become themselves by being others. They have to feel at some point that they have "finished." That's not going to happen for a world that's made up of many worlds, because there's effectively no end to it.

- **Technical**: converting what you have in one world into an analogue in another world is not easy. If I have a bow and arrow in Neanderthal World and I walk into Wild West World, do I keep my bow or does the software have to work out what kind of handgun cognate I should be packing? If I then walk back into Neanderthal World, do I get the same bow I had before or a different one because of imperfections in the mapping? Or do I get to take with me the rifle I found in Wild West World?

- **Legal**: as I've mentioned, back in the early days you could walk from *MUD1* to its sister world, *Valley*, seamlessly. Nevertheless, this idea has been patented several times since then, so if you want this kind of seamless transaction today, you'll have to speak to the people who will sue you if you don't.

- **Security**: if I can create my own MMO, why wouldn't I award myself god-like powers and then walk into someone else's world to exercise those powers there? I could give myself the best equipment, a glowing reputation, the ability to move faster than the speed of light—anything I want. You may have trusted my world when we first connected, but since then I've become egomaniacal.

If all of these issues were addressed, it *would* be great, though, wouldn't it?

No, sorry, it wouldn't be great. Designers simply wouldn't accept players coming to their MMO bringing with them the reputation, gear and power they've acquired in another MMO, for the exact same reason that the real world wouldn't accept it: what players tend to want to transfer between worlds tends to be fundamentally non-transferrable.

Two Definitions of Immersion

Psychologists have two ways of looking at immersion[10]:

- *System immersion* concerns how persuasive an environment is. An environment in which light casts shadows is more immersive than one in which it doesn't.
- *Immersive response* concerns how persuaded users of an environment are by it. An environment in which people feel they are present is more immersive than one in which they don't.

Presence is the wire that connects these together. If the environment resists presence (i.e., the system immersion is poor), then the player will struggle to experience it (i.e., the immersive response will also be poor). Likewise, if an environment is not persuasive, players will struggle to feel immersed in it.

Neither system immersion nor immersive response captures what *players* mean by the term "immersion," though. Both can be factors, but neither *is* immersion.

[10] Mel Slater: *Measuring Presence: A Response to the Witmer and Singer Presence Questionnaire. Presence* 8(5), pp 560-565, 2003. http://www.cs.ucl.ac.uk/staff/m.slater/Papers/pq.pdf

Elementary

Rift is an MMO in which rifts open from elemental planes, and elementals pour through. There are six elements: water, fire, earth, air, life, and death. Fair enough.

So, I'm playing *Rift*, and my character is some kind of fighting priest who can heal, but who can also do a bit of damage. I have spells with names like Dehydrate, Spirit Rupture, and Drown (which "fills the lungs of the target with sea water").

So, if I'm attacking something that's made of water, I might expect Dehydrate to do considerable damage. Against a fire elemental, though, well there's no water to remove, so it should be pretty ineffectual. Likewise, filling with water the lungs of a creature that lives under water shouldn't really do much—only mammals have lungs anyway. Similarly, casting Spirit Rupture on an inanimate object (such as a wardstone) shouldn't do it a great deal of damage as it has no spirit to rupture.

None of this happens. The damage that a spell does is pretty well independent of the elemental nature of the target. I don't have to select my spells carefully, adapting for different opponents: I just use the same ones every time. I do have *some* decisions to make (don't use Crushing Wave if it might blast your opponent into some enemies and so set those on you too, that kind of thing), but the whole six elements thing just isn't a factor. Given that this is a game about elements, this seems rather unsatisfying.

This is almost always how it is with MMOs that have elements in them. I've no idea why.

Too Immersive?

MMOs are immersive experiences. They're more immersive than books, movies, TV, and coloring-in pictures of flowers. Surely this level of immersion is dangerous and must be banned?

Well, no. The real world is even more immersive than MMOs; if you want to ban MMOs on the basis that they're too immersive, you're going to have to ban *Reality*, too.

Griefing

It used to be that the term *griefer* had a very specific meaning in MMOs: it meant someone who deliberately did something for the pleasure in knowing it caused others pain.

To old-timers like me, that's what it still means. What does it mean to modern MMO players, though?

Well, nowadays, griefing can mean a range of things:

- Deliberately causing others pain for the pleasure of knowing this (e.g., attacking someone not because you like it, but because you know they won't like it).
- Deliberately doing something pleasurable which you know will cause others pain (e.g., ganking newbies).
- Deliberately doing something pleasurable which indirectly causes others pain (e.g., exploiting a bug to get more money).
- Deliberately causing others pain but not feeling there's anything wrong in it (e.g., scamming them).
- Deliberately causing others pain but believing they Okayed it (e.g., winning at PvP).
- Unthinkingly causing others pain through selfishness (e.g., ninja looting).
- Accidentally causing others pain through error or incompetence (e.g., Leeeeroy).
- Unknowingly doing something someone else doesn't like (e.g., outbidding them in an auction).

Lots more—player vernacular changes all the time. So much has the term *griefer* lost its potency that people will now talk instead about specific kinds of griefing, such as *training* or *kill stealing*. However, the reason the word *griefer* got used in the first place is because it's *really handy*. If we can't use it any more for what it used to mean, we need a replacement.

So the next time you complain that someone "griefed" you by picking the flower that you were going to pick after you picked the one after the one you're currently picking, see if you can think of a new word that would describe someone who deliberately caused your raid group to wipe on its final attempt after four hours of trying, just because they knew it would spoil everyone's evening.

Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment

Flow is about achieving a balance between challenge and skill. If something is too hard, it's unfun; if it's easy, it's no fun. The aim of designers should therefore be to keep players in the zone where challenge matches ability: where there is flow, in other words.

W-w-what?!

There's a theory of game design which suggests that if the aim of the gameplay is to keep people in the flow-state zone, then the game itself should adjust its difficulty levels dynamically to ensure that this is the case. If the monsters are giving you too hard a time, then artificial intelligence techniques can be used to monitor this and make the monsters easier. Likewise, if you're breezing your way through content, you must clearly be finding it too easy to be fun. If it were made a bit harder, you'd enjoy it more.

This concept actually has a fairly long tradition in computer game design. Racing games have long used *rubber banding*—a technique that makes sure you don't get too far ahead of or behind everyone else, so the race remains exciting.

I *loathe* dynamic difficulty adjustment (DDA).

Players are *all different*. The proposition that they all like a balance between challenge and ability is reasonable, but that doesn't mean the balance point is the *same for everyone*. If you and I have the same skill level for a game, one of us could still think it's too easy, while the other thinks it's too hard. The notion of "challenge" isn't absolute, it's *relative to individuals*.

It's also easy to game. I never bother much with technology research in *Civilization V*, because I know that the technology output of AI opponents is buffed/debuffed to match my own. In a race game, if I know that no matter how fast I go the cars behind me will speed up to remain in contention, the smart thing for me to do is to drive slowly so as to trick the AI into thinking my skills are poor. It will then slow down the cars it controls, to keep me in the flow zone. Thus, when at the start of the last lap I zoom off like a rocket, the AI is caught completely off guard. The rubber-banding mechanism itself becomes part of the game mechanic, to be exploited accordingly. It's a component of the very system it's trying to regulate.

This leads me to what *really* annoys me: the way that the concept of "challenge" in a DDA game feeds into itself. If I know that whatever decision I make will lead to gameplay appropriate for my abilities, then this isn't a tuned level of challenge—it's *no challenge at all*. I can't do anything wrong! I can't do anything right! Whatever I do, no matter how well or how badly, the outcome will be the same. Augh!

Sometimes, I *want* to try pushing myself: if the game tones down its opposition, how can I do that? Sometimes I *want* an easy ride: if the game beefs up its opposition, how can I do that? Do I set some difficulty level? Plenty of games have that feature *anyway*, we don't need DDA for it!

This almost killed *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* for me. *I'll* decide what I think is and isn't fun, thank you very much.

So what has this to do with MMOs?

Well, would *you* go into an instance for which the difficulty and loot levels were automatically adjusted to match the gear levels of the party you were in?

You *would?*

What kind of player *are* you?

Spider Lore

In *MUD1*, there was a silken thread lying on the ground. If you picked it up, you discovered it was a spider's web and you were stuck in place. A few seconds later, a giant spider appeared and automatically killed you. You could, however, escape the web by setting it on fire before the spider arrived.

Now the thing is, spider webs aren't actually all that easy to set on fire—indeed, you could legitimately call them fire-resistant. I didn't know that at the time and neither did most players, but enough did know that every few years I'd get a complaint about it telling me that cobwebs shouldn't burn.

That's fair enough. The interesting question, though, is why people would complain that I had cobwebs that burned but *not* complain that I had a spider the size of a sheep.

Playing for Kicks

So, I was playing *World of Warcraft* back in the early *Cataclysm* days, and I queued my warlock up to run a random heroic instance. The queue was 46 minutes long. When I finally got to the front, I found myself a new member of a party that was standing in front of one of the optional bosses at the end of the Halls of Origination. The other party members were all in the same guild as each other.

They said "hi" and I said "hi."

They said "r?" and I said "yes."

Then, they kicked me out of the group.

I couldn't have been there for more than 30 seconds. I thought I'd be returned to the front of the queue, but no, I wasn't. I had to rejoin it, whereupon I discovered I'd have to wait 51 minutes for another group.

If I played MMOs for fun, I can see how this might have been a tad annoying.

Achievers

People who treat MMOs as if they were games are called *achievers*. They give themselves game-oriented goals and set out to achieve them. Such goals include:

- Going up levels
- Obtaining treasure
- Downing raid bosses

Achievers say things such as:

- busy
- Only two bars to go
- LFG 25 VoA
- Ding 105 :)

Achievers do not like their achievements being undermined. If someone paid real money to buy the same high-status object that the achiever got through dedicated play, that would do it.

System Immersion

Here's the standard theory of how increased perceptual realism leads to a greater sense of presence.

When you can control your character in a virtual world without having to think about the interface, this is presence. You feel that you are "present" in that other environment.

In general, the more the target environment gives the appearance of being real, the easier it becomes to establish presence:

- Black and white silent movie.
- Black and white talkie.
- Color movie.
- Color movie with stereo.
- I-MAX cinema.
- Disneyland *Star Wars* rides.

However, if it's not quite right, then this can stop presence dead:

- 1950s 3D movies.

The reason for this is that evolution (or, if you're one of those people who don't believe in it, then your imaginary friend) has created a human brain which is hard-wired to be able to process real-world visual scenes very quickly and efficiently—we have a whole cortex devoted to it. People don't usually have to think consciously about interpreting what they can see, they just *do* it. What's more, they can't *help* doing it.

You're predisposed to believe whatever your visual cortex tells you. Therefore, if you look at a representation of an environment and it *seems* real, you'll be more inclined to believe it *is* real.

System immersion concerns the creation of stimuli that together persuade the brain that you're somewhere other than where you really are. In this view, presence is therefore an emergent consequence of system immersion.

That's the standard theory.

Anyone who thinks it explains presence in MMOs is sadly mistaken, though…

Ludology *versus* Narratology

Ludology and Narratology are in direct opposition: they can't both be right. Here's how the battle between them panned out.

The narratologists were the first to stake their claim on computer games, the charge being led by Janet Murray in her influential book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*[11]. Murray argued that MMOs (well, MUDs as they were known back in 1997) opened up new opportunities for storytelling, but couched this in terms that made it clear she felt that games were, nevertheless, only a *form* of storytelling.

Around the same time, Espen Aarseth took on the challenge of actually applying traditional models of literature to computer games (including, specifically, MMOs—Aarseth had played *MUD1*). He concluded that existing tools were not originally designed for games and weren't up to the job; to make them work, they would have to be extended. To this end, he developed a powerful new theoretical framework that he called *ergodic literature*[12]—literature that requires non-trivial effort to get through. Aarseth's formulation was highly insightful; it became (and remains) a central pillar for New Media Studies.

Aarseth criticized Murray's work for its inability to account for the non-linearity of games. Although his own theories extended existing theories of literature to bridge this divide, it was apparent to him that the difference between them was so great as to amount to a separation. Games do benefit from story, but story is incidental: what's important is *gameplay*. Aarseth can therefore be regarded as fundamentally a ludologist.

The narratologists nevertheless took enough substance from Aarseth's work to assert that their position was still basically sound: games are an *exotic* form of literature, but they remain, when all is said and done, a form of literature. This line was held fairly successfully until the ludologists counter-attacked.

A famous paper written by Gonzalo Frasca in 1999[13] disputed that Narratology was a helpful way to look at games. He argued that games are games first, stories second (if at all). If you want to understand a game, you should study it *as a game*, not as a narrative (a position echoing Aarseth's). When people describe a game, they do so in terms of rules and play, not text and reading.

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[11]Janet H. Murray: *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. The Free Press, 1997.

[12]Espen J. Aarseth: *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

[13]Gonzalo Frasca: *Ludology meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences between (Video) games and Narrative. Parnasso* v3, Helsinki, 1999. http://www.ludology.org/articles/ludology.htm

After much discourse over the course of several years, eventually the narratologists retreated. It was Janet Murray herself[14] who explained the conclusion:

- Games are not subsets of stories.
- Objects exist that have qualities of both games and stories.

She also suggested that the Narratology position was itself an invention of the ludologists—she had never been as hard-line as ludologists had made out, and was far more open to having a variety of tools in her toolbox than ludologists had given her credit for.

Nevertheless, the ludologists had made their point. Games are worth studying first and foremost *because they are games*.

Pepper

MMO developers will consciously tolerate a certain amount of aberrant behavior, as it adds drama to the game—it gives people something to talk about. A small number of griefers will add to the sustainability of the community.

This is something we've known for years. Only when an objectionable play style starts being taken up by so many people that it seriously disrupts overall play will developers change the MMO's rules to prevent said objectionable play style.

A little pepper will spice up an otherwise dull meal. What you don't want is for someone to empty a whole pot of pepper onto your plate.

[14] Janet H. Murray: *The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology in Game Studies*. Proc. DiGRA 2005, Vancouver. http://inventingthemedium.com/2013/06/28/the-last-word-on-ludology-v-narratology-2005/

Portable Characters Again

One of the reasons usually offered for having portable characters that can move from one MMO to another with impunity is that the players want it. Okay, so *seamless* travel may not be an option, but transferring characters from one MMO to another must surely be possible in one form or another?

Hmm.

So, go out and grab hold of some *World of Warcraft* players. Tell them that players who reached the end game of *EverQuest* in 2002 are going to transfer to their server and have all their *EQ* gear translated into equivalent *WoW* gear. Tell them that they'll be joined by end-game players from *Runescape*, as well as by people from *Ultima Online* who have bought their gear using real money. Oh, and there'll be players from *Second Life* who created their own world and gave themselves insanely high-quality gear because hey, they could.

Warning: wear body armor when you tell them this.

Some players might indeed want to be able to move from one game to another *themselves*, but could they all stomach it when they saw *other* people doing it too?

A Narrative Experience

When asked, many players say they kinda like the idea of having a narrative experience in their MMOs. So adding a narrative experience to an MMO is a good idea, then?

Hmm … what makes such a narrative experience "good"? What makes it *so* good that you'll spend two to four hours a night, every night for a year, to experience it?

The problem with narrative in MMOs is that there is no fun in it. There can be fun in it when it's *your story* that's unfolding as you play, but then it isn't really a narrative any more—it's a game.

The Game Allows it

Remember Egor? When people play games on computers, they often assume that if the computer lets them do it, they can do it. Only if it doesn't let them do it is it against the rules.

This is fine for single-player games played against the computer, as it's only you who's affected. If you play a save/lose/reload strategy to beat AI opponents, for example, you're doing something "the game" allows, but it's not itself part of the game. Should you therefore use it relentlessly? Well some people might, but others might refrain from using it so their eventual victory feels more earned. The former would complain if the random number seed was saved (so that reloading didn't help); the latter would complain if the game design forced you to use trial and error (e.g., there's no way of knowing in advance which is the one door that isn't booby-trapped).

When you play a single-player game, it's up to you how much you push at the rules. When you play a multi-player game, it's not this simple. Some people might be playing the game where you don't train guards on people (because use of a dominant strategy spoils the game for everyone), and some might be playing the game where you do do it (because "the game lets me"). If two people are playing the same MMO but different "games," it's unsurprising that conflict can arise.

This gray area is one beloved of griefers. They can do things that annoy the hell out of other players (thus bringing enjoyment to themselves), but claim that they're doing nothing wrong because "the game allows it."

Presence in Context

Without feeling some degree of presence, people couldn't play MMOs. It's a hugely important factor.

However, without computers people couldn't play, either. A computer is not the reason people have fun in MMOs, although it is an important enabler. The same applies to presence.

Persuasion

Standing someone in a room in which every sensory stimulus is presented so as to give the impression that the individual is in a different physical location may mean that this person is *immersed in the virtual environment*, but it doesn't mean they're *immersed*.

Making a virtual world seem real is *persuasive* of that virtual world, but despite what presence theorists would have us believe, it's *not* what makes it immersive. The most powerfully immersive virtual worlds discovered to date are *textual*, not graphical—they have barely any presence-enhancing, sense-tricking properties at all. Yet how can that be?

Graphics are very good at persuading players new to MMOs that they are in a virtual world. Text is hopeless at this, which is why so few new textual worlds are being played any more. Text has a real problem with system immersion, whereas graphics revels in it.

However, once the players of textual worlds have stuck with it awhile, their imagination kicks in. At this point, text's immersive power rapidly surpasses that of graphics. This is because players' imaginations automatically adapt to give a best-fit match to the world. Do objects cast shadows in a textual world? Yes, they do—if they need to. If such things are important to a player, they will be supplied by their imagination; if they're unimportant, the player will not even notice their omission.

In other words, system immersion and immersive response are *the same thing* when the imagination is doing the rendering.

This isn't intended to be a pro-text rant (I know you won't try a text MUD whatever I say). I'm just using the example of textual worlds to show that immersion is not reliant on the persuasiveness of the environment. You can be immersed where there is no direct sensory stimulation at all.

Come to that, presence isn't quite what it seems, either.

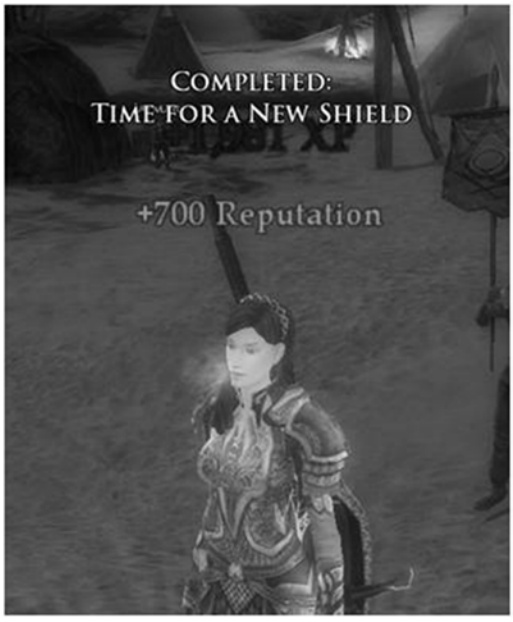
Unfanboied

So, I was given a free collector's edition of *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar*. Okay, well, I'm given a lot of such freebies, it's no big deal.

Except this time round I was given two copies of the client. Also this time round, my elder daughter was looking to try out an MMO and our week of failed attempts to install *Age of Conan*'s launch patch meant she had to cast her net elsewhere. *LotRO* was convenient, so she went with that.

I decided to play, too. It meant I could more easily defend myself against accusations that I was a *WoW* fanboi.

My daughter made it to level 37 (out of 50, which was the cap at the time) before it finally got too much for her that every level was pretty much the same as the previous level. I, however, soldiered on, and duly reached the top. I thought the name of the quest I did it with was mildly appropriate:



Yes, it's another female paladin captain, but this is what happens when I let my younger daughter create my MMO characters for me.

Unfun?

Patch 3.2 of the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion to *World of Warcraft* introduced a new boss, Emalon the Stormwatcher, to the Vault of Archavon instance.

What a pain! For a start, you can only get into VoA when your side holds Wintergrasp, and the way the instance locking works you basically only get two shots at it per week (one 10-man regular raid plus one 25-man heroic raid—the latter is where the achiever quote "LFG 25 VoA" came from). The fight itself is a beast. The first five PUGs I tried it with all wiped before they got anywhere, despite multiple attempts.

The sixth, though, was different. We wiped, yes, but in so doing we sensed something: we were good enough to *win* this. We tried again, and again, and on the tenth attempt we took that sucker and his stupid exploding alts *down*. We were elated! Ohhh *yes!* Finally, he was *owned*. **In your face, Emalon!**

Sometimes, people find things fun when the challenge is way, way *above* their ability level.

No Fun?

Prior to the release of its *The Burning Crusade* expansion, the level cap in *World of Warcraft* was 60. The first thing I did when I hit it was to go kill Hogger in Elwynn Forest. He gave me so much grief when I was level 9, he *deserved* it. Ho *boy*, did it feel good! Muahahaha! **Eat that, Hogger!**

Sometimes, people find things fun when the challenge is way, way *below* their ability level.

Reductio ad Absurdum

Nowadays, it seems, you get to qualify as a griefer simply by doing something more than once that someone else doesn't like.

By that definition, I grief my students by setting them examinations.

Too Real

In the same way that everything on the stage in a theatre is there because someone consciously put it there, every action carried out on the stage is undertaken because someone consciously undertook it. Anything that happens by chance immediately reminds the audience that they're watching a play.

This isn't all there is to it, though. In his famous philosophical study of theater[15], Bert O. States points out that actions carried out on the stage by inanimate objects—clocks, fire, running water—can also snap the audience out of their immersion. This is because the audience members perceive what they see as being (literally!) staged; and as such, it has an aesthetic quality. Working clocks, fire, and water are *too real* to have this feeling of being staged.

Children are also too real. When you see one on stage, you always think how well or badly they act "for a child." You switch from the frame of the play to the frame of the performance. Animals are even worse: no matter how well-trained they are, they don't *know* they're in a play any more than running water does. This, incidentally, is why actors say "never work with children or animals": it's not the fact that they're uncontrollable or scene-stealers, it's that they're illusion-breakers.

MMOs have no problem showing fire or running water; they have no problems showing animals; the only problems they have with children are to do with the range of sizes they can have, which entails a lot of expensive animation work. They do tend to have a problem with clocks, as game time rarely matches real time. Most clocks in today's MMOs are non-functional textures.

Players of MMOs are frequently reminded that they're in MMOs, as *Reality* often intrudes. However, could anything in the *staging* of MMOs ever be considered "too real"?

Personally, I'd like to get to the point where the way MMOs are staged is actually a thing.

[15]Bert O. States: *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*. University of California Press, 1992.

Two Sides of the Same Coin

In the same way that procedural and declarative semantics are two sides of the same coin, so are Narratology and Ludology.

Narratology looks at games as story, which is to say as statements rather than processes. However, in order to make sense of this, it has to construct a reading—itself a process.

Ludology looks at games as a process—you play them. However, in playing them, you accrue a personal narrative (I've called it a "history" in this book), which is entirely story.

So, you can look at games both in terms of story structure and as the creation of story through action. Which one you choose depends on the reason why you're looking. Narratology can't say a lot about gameplay, but it can still say useful things about what the player experiences. Ludology can speak volumes on gameplay, but is it really the best way to describe look and feel?

That's how the debate finally ended, and it brings us to the present *status quo* (well, the present as I write this—I can't speak for when you read it).

It's not *entirely* over, though. See, if it's useful to describe games in terms of story, might it not be equally useful to describe novels in terms of gameplay? In other words, if you can beneficially use "reading" to describe "play," why not use "play" to describe "reading." We have, indeed, already seen the beginnings of this in Ian Bogost's book, *Unit Operations*[16].

Perhaps Ludologists have as much to offer story as Narratologists have to offer games.

[16]Ian Bogost: *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2006.

Third Places

There's a concept in Sociology (first identified by Ray Oldenburg) of *third places*. These are informal gathering spaces such as bars, coffee shops, post offices, and bookstores—places where people go to get away from their first two places (home and work). Third places are public, but neutral ground; people can escape their everyday concerns there, simply enjoying the company and conversation.

One of the perennial questions that people ask about virtual worlds is why they're so compelling. One of the answers that are perennially supplied is that it's because they're third places.

Well yes, they are. That's not why people play them so much though. It can't be: there are plenty of convenient real-world third spaces around that people could use instead of virtual worlds, and many people do indeed prefer them; why don't the ones who play virtual worlds go there? Also, although people do have a need for third places, they don't have that need for several hours a night, every night, for months or years on end.

Besides, it's more complex than that. Sometimes there are third places *within* virtual worlds, such as banks, auction houses, and cantinas. Players go there when they're not questing or grinding or whatever it is they do "normally." Designers have for years deliberately engineered such spaces, giving players a non-compelling reason to visit them, but one that will allow them to dally long enough for social interaction to occur by serendipity.

I guess a sociologist could argue that what starts off as a third place over time becomes a first or second place, which then requires a third place of its own.

Yet people don't play virtual worlds *because* they're a third place—they're just one possible third place among the many available. People play them because of what they can *do* in them.

Reasons to Design

Here are some possible reasons that MMO designers design MMOs. One of them is valid, the rest aren't:

- Purely by accident.
- They wanted a new challenge.
- They get to create what they play.
- They're only obeying orders.
- It's part of their grand scheme for world domination.
- It's fun.
- For the money.

Which do you think is the key one?

Anniversary Achievers

July, 2013: *The Secret World*'s one-year anniversary. It's celebrated by a week-long event across all servers. The event does not go entirely to plan.

Okay, so in *TSW* you progress by getting what they call AP (Ability Points). If you do quests at the time of this event, you can normally rack up about 10 AP an hour. In the celebration event, though, you get 10 AP for participating in the killing of any one of the eight bosses that are roaming the world, or 20 AP if you drank the potion Funcom gave you to double AP gain temporarily. These bosses have 15,000,000 health points and it takes an army of several dozen characters to kill them. Each one only spawns once every few hours; if you miss it, you have to wait. You are not expected to down many. The fights are all about co-operation and organization. They'll bring players together.

So, quite a good event, then?

Hmm.

If you have a friend on your *TSW* friends list, you can issue them a "meetup" request. This takes you to your friend's server. You may have missed the boss on *your* server, but it could still be alive on your friend's. It's also possible to set up a communications channel that players can read from every server.

More hmm…

This is what happened: a cross-server channel ("anniversity") was set up. Spotters were posted on every server. As soon as one of them saw an event boss spawn, they informed the channel and anyone who wanted to kill that boss made the spotter a friend. These (temporary) friends then issued

meetup requests, which the spotter accepted. Seconds later, a hundred players had descended on the boss; ten minutes later, it was dead. You could kill five to seven bosses in an hour this way, racking up 50 to 70 AP. There was a two-hour cooldown on the reward for downing each individual boss, so after you'd killed all eight, you either took a turn as a spotter or you switched to an alt and repeated the process. There were regularly 800 people on the anniversity channel. AP were raining on them from the skies.

It wasn't just AP, either. The bosses dropped other stuff, some of which was useless (fireworks, pets) but some of which was not. In particular, they dropped rare signets (which are end-game equipment enhancements) and black bullion (which at the time was *TSW*'s currency for endgame items). My alt wasn't yet qualified for the endgame, but garnered enough black bullion to buy some handy, over-powered gear with it.

It got worse (for Funcom). A ninth boss had been positioned in the middle of one of the PvP zones ("Fusang Projects"). If you wanted what it dropped, you needed to go into the PvP zone for it. PvP was never tremendously popular in *TSW*, so there weren't many PvP servers set up. Suddenly, more people wanted to get into Fusang than it was geared to accept. You could find yourself queuing for six hours to enter Fusang and still have to give up because the queue was more than six hours long.

To fix this queuing issue, Funcom needed a patch. The patch couldn't be implemented until the next Tuesday (patch day)—which was supposed to have marked the end of the anniversary event. Patching in a Fusang fix meant that Funcom had to extend the anniversary event for another week in order to assuage the anger of all the players who still wanted the pet that the ninth boss dropped. As a result, AP continued to rack up in abundance, thereby helping people max out their characters and shortening the length of the elder game.

Ah, achievers.

Paradoxically, the event proved so popular that Funcom now repeats the format several times a year, and doesn't insist you're friends with someone to meet up with them.

Look on it as emergence in action.

Design Flaw

All games have the same design flaw: they can't stop people from not playing by the rules. It's intrinsic to what a "game" is.

As a player, all you can do is stop playing with those people who break the rules.

How do you do that in an MMO, though?

Double Presence

The concept of presence is Boolean: either you're sensing it or you're not. You may have to put in more or less effort to sustain it, but you can't be in a state of "near presence." Either it clicks or it doesn't. A phrase such as "some degree of presence" means you can hold it intermittently, not that you're 75% there.

Similarly, if you're already experiencing presence, you can't experience nested presence. If you're drawing with a pencil, you can feel that the pencil is part of your body; if you're controlling a robot arm, you can feel that the robot arm is part of your body; if you're good enough to use a robot arm to draw with a pencil, then you can feel that the pencil is part of your body, but you can't feel that the robot arm is—it's just part of the mediation process now.

If you go for a walk and have a daydream, can you have a daydream within that daydream? And when the second daydream ends, come back to the first one? No, you can't: you can have a chain of daydreams, but when one ends you don't automatically snap back to where you were in the one that invoked it.

So, imagine you're in an MMO and you come across a place where, several months ago, the lower-level version of yourself had a hard time beating some mob (yes, Hogger, I *do* mean you). You might drift off into a wistful daydream, reminiscing about how you used to wander around here, how everything was fresh and exciting and new, how there was that time you spent ages trying to catch fish but couldn't work out how to do it. Ah, happy days.

Then, you snap out of it. Where are you? Sitting in a chair looking at a computer screen? *No*—you're in a virtual forest on a horse. You had the daydream while in the virtual world—which *you never left*.

If presence alone were necessary to explain immersion, this should be impossible. You shouldn't be able to experience presence while already experiencing presence. Yet in MMOs, you seemingly can. Why are MMOs different?

The answer is that the "you" in "you never left" really is *you*.

Double Flow

On the face of it, flow and immersion look very similar; might it be that they're two ways of looking at the same thing—that what players call "immersion," psychologists call "flow"?

So you're sitting around waiting for the healer to mana up. Are you immersed? Yes. Is this a flow state? No, there's no ability or challenge, you're just waiting.

So you're arguing with your guild mates about last night's wipe. You say the first problem was that the hunter's pet pulled the pat, and the second problem was that the tank engaged the boss before everyone had healed up after the first problem. Are you immersed? Yes. Are you in a flow state? No—you're angry!

So you're moving through a zone and spot a useful herb. You go to pick it, and then spot another, so you go pick that, and you get into a rhythm of finding the herb, killing whatever's guarding it, then looking for another. Only when your bags are full do you notice that you've spent an hour gathering herbs. Were you immersed? Yes. Were you in a flow state? Yes. Are you still immersed? Yes. Are you still in a flow state? No. You just came out of a flow state; flow states don't nest, so how can you still be in one?

You can experience fun without flow; you can experience flow while having fun. Flow is *not the same thing* as fun.

You can experience immersion without flow; you can experience flow while immersed. Flow is *not the same thing* as immersion.

Can you experience immersion without fun? Can you experience fun without immersion? In general, yes: immersion and fun are *not the same thing*, either.

However, in MMOs at least, what you find fun depends on the degree to which you are immersed, and the degree to which you are immersed depends on what you find fun. They're in a symbiotic relationship.

People play MMOs to become immersed, not to experience flow. If you want to experience flow, do a 1,500-piece jigsaw puzzle.

Story

There are three kinds of story in computer games:

- History
- Backstory
- Narrative.

That's what I call them, anyway. The player creates the first one, and the designer the other two.

Norms as Rules

There are plenty of things which, if everyone did it, would ruin an MMO.

If everyone were a loot ninja, people wouldn't group because of the unfairness; if everyone were a gold farmer, there'd be no-one to sell gold to; if everyone used exploits in a battleground, the battlegrounds would only contain people who thought one-shotting and being one-shotted was fun.

If there's a dominant strategy, then either everyone uses it or everyone agrees not to use it. If it's no fun when everyone uses it, then social norms develop not to use it. If one person breaks ranks, then everyone has to break ranks—which means less fun for everyone except conceivably the one who broke ranks.

If *you're* the one who broke ranks, expect to be called a griefer. Saying "the game let me do it" will not save you.

Core Belief

Personally, I believe that there's a core sense of identity that holds a personality together; I don't see the human mind as being an onion that you can peel the layers off until there's nothing left. Sooner or later you hit something irreducible.

People can easily believe their own lies; MMOs allow them to believe their own truths.

Levels of Immersion

People who play MMOs over time gain progressively deeper levels of immersion.

We have two entities involved: a player (human being) and a character (in-world object). How the former regards the latter is a measure of immersion.

The lowest level is *unimmersed*. An unimmersed person regards the virtual object associated with them as just that: an object. It's like a data file or a word processor document—something you manipulate in order to achieve some end, nothing more.

Next up is *avatar*-level immersion. Here, the player regards the virtual object as a distinct personality—the player's *representative* in the MMO. The player will refer to the avatar in the third person ("he was attacked by an orc"), almost as if it were capable of independent thought. This maintains a distance between player and object; it's as if the player accepts there is a connection between the two, but doesn't want to admit to anything beyond that.

Sooner or later, the player acknowledges that the in-world object they control is, in some sense, a reflection of their own self: this is *character*-level immersion. A character is the player's *representation* in the MMO—a personality that the player wears. It can be referred to in either the third person or the first person ("I was attacked by an orc").

Finally, we have *persona*-level immersion. This is the player *in* the MMO. There's no distinction between player and virtual object, they're one and the same. You're not role-playing a being, you *are* that being; you're not projecting a self, you *are* that self. There's no indirection, no filtering: *you* are *there*.

Persona-level is as deep as it gets; it's sometimes called "full immersion." Players will always use the first person when fully immersed, except when referring to a particular alt. After all, if that really *is* them in the virtual world, it would be weird not to.

Advergaming

Oh gawd, please no.

At first when people wanted to make money from web site content, they did it by charging a subscription. That didn't work because who wants to pay a subscription for every single web site they ever visit? These days, unless the content is very good or very specialized or very pornographic, web sites get income from advertising instead. Hey, if it works for Google.

What about MMOs? Who wants to pay a subscription for every single one of those they ever play? Well, several million *WoW* players, obviously, but who else? Surely the thing to do is to make your MMO free and support it with commercials?

No no no no no!

Okay, so if the ad is *in context*, it can work. It can even promote immersion. You're playing in an MMO set in 1920s New England, you walk into a grocery store and see a prominent sign for Del Monte canned peaches: that's fine, it makes sense. What do you care if Del Monte paid for the sign in real life? If the shop sold a range of virtual objects with a gameplay purpose to them, you may not even notice it was an ad at all. They had Del Monte canned peaches in 1920s New England.

However, if it's a sign for a Nissan QASHQAI all mode 4x4® then you're not in a 1920s world any more, you're in the real world and you're not happy. *Out-of-context* ads are A Bad Thing.

Many MMOs have ads in them naturally. Players sell things to each other in-world, and they shout out ads for those in-world products. This is fine, it's what you'd expect. If the ads are for out-of-world products, though, that's when the problems start. It's not an issue for those social worlds that are integrated into *Reality* anyway, but in game worlds (MMOs) it can be immersion-busting. You really don't want to see an ad for the latest Brad Pitt movie when you're in the mood to slaughter orcs, whether it appears discreetly to one side of your interface, is posted politely on a nearby wall, or shows as an interstitial while you're switching between servers or characters. You just want to kill orcs, dammit! And no, not orcs with Brad Pitt's face!

Even if the ads are witty, intelligent, and amusing, they'll still annoy. They'll annoy so much that players will consider paying *not* to see them. At that point, the operators will set up ad-free servers that people pay a different way to access. This then leads to the ludicrous situation in which advertisers pay for their product to be shown to people in order to make those people pay to avoid seeing them.

Oh, and they hate the advertiser for spoiling their fun, too.

In-context ads are fine. How do you know Del Monte didn't pay me to use their name as an example, back there? I could have chosen Kellogg's cornflakes or Campbell's soup. It was in context, so you didn't notice it. *That's* how ads should work in virtual worlds.

Except, maybe if you saw the *same* damned logo *everywhere*, or ads on *every* available surface… In-context can become out-of-context if overdone.

Still, I trust our advertisers to be restrained.

Yes, that was sarcasm.

Believe it or not, in the olde days *developers* used to have to pay *advertisers* to use their brands. If you wanted an in-game sports ground to feature realistic marketing boards, you had to hand over cash to have those boards show real-life brand names.

How Times Change.

Preference

It's small wonder that people prefer the stories they get from playing games to the stories they get from reading books or watching movies.

In a game, through play, you make your own story, personal to you, with a meaning personal to you.

With books and movies, you're trying to divine scraps of relevance to your own existence through subjective identification or objective analysis.

Unrealistic Worlds

Here are just some of the things that a time-travelling player of an early text MUD would find laughable about (to take an example) *Lord of the Rings Online*:

- If I kill some orc and it was carrying a sword, why was it hitting me with a stick?
- The only way to be a Scholar is if I'm also a Farmer and a Metalworker? Uh?
- Why do all the NPCs wear the same clothes when it rains as they do when it's sunny?
- These troublesome animals you want me to kill don't actually seem all that threatening…
- How come I suffer morale damage when I fall off Weathertop? Did I somehow "flee in fear" before I hit the ground?
- I can walk through people? And horses? But I don't fall through my own horse when I sit on it?
- Didn't I see you depart with the Fellowship from Rivendell not ten minutes ago, Legolas? Why are you back here issuing mundane quests?
- You can dye metal armor? But you can't paint it? But you can paint the walls of your house? But not walls in general?
- Why do I merely suffer morale failure but the bad guys suffer death?
- In the middle of a fight, time stopped and these combo buttons appeared—just the same as what happens in real life fights…
- Flowers appear to be every bit as open at night as they are in daylight.
- Why, when I salute, does it say I salute smartly? I wanted to salute bitterly.
- What's with this "make it look as if I'm wearing these clothes when I'm actually wearing *these* clothes" system? Either you're wearing plate mail or you're not!

- How come those bad guys aren't running to stop me killing their buddies? I can see them—why can't they see me? And does this sword come with a silencer, so they can't hear it striking armor?
- So… you let people wander around called Arraggorrnn?

Okay, so I am such a time-traveler, which is why I've mentioned some of these already. Don't pretend you don't have something similar in your own MMO of choice, though. The question is, why don't you actually *care* about such discrepancies?

Story as History

History is the (re)telling of an inter-related sequence of episodes. In games, these episodes encapsulate how the interactions between player and game unfolded. Players perceive history at a personal level, both within a single playing of the game and across several playings of it. It's the best kind of story for players because it means interesting and important things happened to them.

If a player has no history, that means nothing interesting happened in the game (and therefore that it was useless). Designers, of course, want interesting things to happen because then interesting choices have to be made. They want games that players, having played them, can recount to each other. They therefore try to arrange for events to occur in a compelling sequence, so as to enhance the player's experience. As for what that compelling sequence *is*, well that's another, er, story…

All good games enable history. *Tetris* enables history. Yes, it's an abstract, single-player game you always ultimately lose; nevertheless, if you'd just played a game you could excitedly tell someone else how you got a string of T-shapes and S-shapes one after the other and you built like this tower thing and they just kept on coming but you'd managed to keep space for a single straight piece and you were hoping one was going to show but it was all T-shapes and S-shapes and then finally, just as you were almost at the top, you saw one in the queue, flipped it in the split-second after it as it came out, then shunted it to the edge, dropped it into its slot and took our four rows at once.

That's a history. A game design embodies an indefinitely large set of possible events, a player threads their own path through them, and that path—that *history*—is their tale.

Pulling Up the Ladder

Many people who organize pick-up groups that result in a recorded achievement will only accept people into their group who already have that achievement.

Achievers apparently don't do irony.

Player IDs

Even though players can't look forward to being able to move their characters freely between game worlds any time soon, that doesn't mean that *some* data can't be transferred. They may not like it, though.

Suppose that all the major MMO developers hated one another to distraction. Is there anything about which they may nevertheless still feel able to co-operate? Well, yes there is—actually, there are several things. One of them, though, is preparing and sharing lists of problem players.

The main requirement for this would be some formal industry body (which we need anyway) that could act as honest broker to provide yes/no answers to "has this credit card been banned by another member of the scheme before?" The organization would need to have the right to withhold information from developers, though, because, well, developers are gamers, and some might be tempted to exploit the situation (say, by listing their most profitable players as problems so that other MMOs won't take them if they try to leave).

I'm sure there are hideously complex data protection laws in the EU that would make this kind of system a nightmare, but the USA seems somewhat less worried about such matters as far as I can tell.

If we have credit reference agencies, why not player reference agencies?

Everyone loves a blacklist!

Intention in Griefing

Intention is important in griefing. If someone ninja-loots because they need what they looted, that's just plain theft. If someone ninja-loots something useless to them because they know *you* desperately want it, they know how mad you'll be that they took it, and they get a kick out of knowing they've made you mad—*that's* griefing.

Not Present, Not Correct

Psychologists have looked into MMOs as exemplifying a kind of what they call *presence*, but (like so much theorizing about computer games) have usually done it to support their general theories, rather than to develop theories specific to MMOs from the actual evidence.

We're never going to understand what's going on while this kind of attitude prevails, but until psychologists find what happens in MMOs interesting enough to study for its own sake, things aren't going to change.

Interference

Back in the olde days of ye *MUD*, wizzes could drop mobiles anywhere they liked. Sometimes, where they liked was on top of or close to player characters.

This is something that works well *if* the players involved are up for it. Sometimes they're not. If they're not, they tend to regard it as interference in their play.

Wizzes could also attach to a mobile and control its movements (i.e., play as the mobile). They could therefore make it behave differently from usual—more cleverly or unpredictably, say. Again, this is something that works well *if* the players involved are up for it. If not, they regard it as a form of cheating.

Of course, if players who don't like interference aren't aware that it *is* interference, they can't complain. If the mobile concerned could conceivably have done everything on its own, it looks more like bad luck than a wiz's attempt to brighten up a dull period of play.

Unfortunately, what to some players is a dull period is to other players a nice relaxing flow experience. Generally, therefore, it's not a good idea to allow privileged players or admins to interfere surreptitiously with the way an MMO works automatically unless the player being interfered with explicitly requests it.

Unrealistic

The less work the brain has to do to sustain the illusion that a virtual environment is real, the easier it becomes to do so, and therefore the more persuasive that environment is.

This is why graphical worlds beat textual worlds. You look at a picture, and the processing power of your visual cortex effortlessly converts it into a scene inside your head. You don't have to think about it because your in-head hardware can just *do* it.

This doesn't mean you see everything uncritically, of course. If something looks wrong, it will jar; jarring breaks immersion. Having been jarred, you have to decide whether you wish to override the jarring and accept what you saw as fiction, or to find some way to switch it off, or to stop playing because it's really *too* irritating to dismiss.

Most of the time, people will choose to ignore it when they see something that doesn't make sense. However, this puts an extra load on them: they have to filter out the things that don't make sense before these reach the conscious mind and jar it.

For example, many MMOs have lax collision detection. You put on a sword, and it cuts through your cloak as you run; you make a potion, and your staff goes right through your head as you do so; you rear up your horse, and your feet stick out from its belly. The first time you saw it, you were surprised; now, you just ignore it.

These are differences at the level of visual processing. They can, however, lead to differences at the cognitive level. For example, you can ride through creatures so big that you can see their (hollow) insides, but you get caught on a tiny branch of a tree—that can't be right, can it? You can swim across a river and emerge looking exactly the same as you did before you got wet. You can stop running part-way down a flight of stairs and notice you're floating slightly above them.

These differences are more problematical because they rub up against logic. You can jump higher than a person's head but not over this waist-high wall—why is that? Well obviously it's because the designer doesn't want you to jump over the wall, but why in fiction terms is it impossible? It makes no sense. You have to will yourself not to notice if you're to continue playing.

There are similar issues entirely at the cognitive level. Where are all the doors? Surely, if you had the slightest idea of security whatsoever, you'd have doors in your building so you could, you know, **lock people out**. You might also notice that 25 meters away down the corridor, right where they can **see and hear** the massive fight you're having with their friends, is a bunch of orcs just standing and watching. Perhaps they're making sure that their pet worg has a **pair of plate mail boots** hidden about its person, so that when it dies you'll have something to loot? Naturally, these boots will be a perfect fit for the first humanoid to wear them, whether male or female, tall or short, human or **cloven-hoofed cow person**.

All these anomalies gradually chip away at the persuasiveness of an MMO's environment. You have to accept each one as it is, even though your mind is telling you, "eek, that's not what I'm used to!"

Back in the textual world's days, having a degree of verisimilitude was regarded as a selling point. If you swam across a river, not only did you get wet, but **all your biscuits turned to mush**. The word used to describe things that didn't make sense was *unrealistic*. People would say things such as, "dragons shouldn't be able to use bows, it's unrealistic."

Now given that dragons themselves are (spoiler alert!) imaginary creatures, it would perhaps seem rather moot to decry their archery skills as "unrealistic." However, it's not. Given a world in which dragons do exist, their anatomy is such that taking aim with a bow would be next to impossible.

In the real world, everything conforms to the same set of physics. This is so ingrained in your understanding of the world that you don't have to think about it. Let go of an egg, and it's going to fall and go splat. You have a working model of real-world physics that you can use predictively without a passing thought.

If an MMO conforms to this physics, you can use the same model: this helps persuade you that the MMO is a real place—it reflects the physics. If it doesn't, and it jars, then that impedes immersion. *This* is what players meant by "unrealistic."

Morbid Griefing

There's an argument that, if you take an emotive word and you apply it to things which are not quite at the intensity it describes, then that will cause those other things to be regarded with the same strength of alarm as the primary case and people will treat that equally emotively. Society will therefore be the better for it.

For example, in MMOs the strict, formal definition of *griefing* is very strong. People do *not* want to be accused of being a griefer! By widening the term to apply to less intense but still socially undesirable activities, it could be argued that people will realize that these are unacceptable, too. As a result, they'll stop acting like jerks and MMOs will be much more pleasant environments.

Unfortunately, this has the effect of diluting the original meaning of the word. In real life, the definition of *obese* was extended to include people who were merely overweight, so as to shock them into exercising in preference to being labeled "obese." This did not last long, though: after a while, people began to regard "obese" to mean the same thing as "overweight," rather than the other way round. Nowadays, doctors and dieticians have to talk about *morbidly obese* to capture the meaning *obese* once had.

If you have a powerful word and over-apply it, it loses its power.

Maybe we'll have to talk about *morbid griefing* before people will understand what we once meant by the term.

A Bit of a Gamble

In MMOs, you kill things and they drop stuff. Most of the time what they drop is rubbish, but sometimes you get something unexpectedly valuable. Usually, the harder the mobs are to kill, the greater the chance you'll get something good from them, but it's still a bit of a gamble as to whether you'll get anything good or not.

Is it an *actual* gamble, though? There are lots of laws about gambling. The USA pretty well bans it over the Internet, for example. Should MMOs such as *WoW* be subject to anti-gambling laws because they use this kind of game mechanic?

What about the case of the Chinese MMO *ZT Online*? In that game, there are chests that, when you open them, sometimes have something really good in them and sometimes don't. You can *buy* those chests for real money, one at a time. Indeed, you can buy the chest and open it in a single click. It's like pulling the handle on a slot machine.

To me, the above looks a lot more like gambling than does *WoW*'s system of loot tables. In *WoW*'s end-game, you're killing bosses in the hope that they'll drop the item you want, but the time taken to do it and the fact that you may not succeed in even getting to the boss is enough to make sure players don't get into a gambling flow. In the leveling game, players will rarely (if ever) kill monsters repeatedly in the hope of getting a rare drop—they just want the XP so they can move to the next quest. You can definitely get into a flow state with the *ZT Online* example, but whether anti-gambling laws take such things into account is another matter.

I'm sure there's a definition of "gambling" somewhere that could cover just about any transaction.

Explorers

Players who try to find out as much as they can about an MMO are called *explorers*. They usually begin with the topology (*breadth*) of the world, then gradually move on to its physics (*depth*).

Explorers say things such as:

- Hmm…
- How come this basilisk dropped two spines?
- Well, yes—why wouldn't you be able to do that?
- Try pulling the fire elemental through the waterfall.

Explorers know more about an MMO than any other kind of player. They probably know more than the designer, come to that…

Story Structure

Stories are not merely ordered sets of sentences: stories have structure. The earliest recorded recognition of this is courtesy of Aristotle, who proposed that stories have three acts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. He took more words to say it than that, but the full, lumbering quote is rarely given so as to spare the reader. I shall follow this convention; you can thank me later.

Aristotle also identified the difference between events as they *occurred* and events as they are *reported*, which is a little less obvious. It's a particularly useful observation in understanding game narratives because, although players *experience* a sequence of events, they don't list every last one when recounting their experiences to other people—they only mention the interesting ones, plus those relevant to explaining the interesting ones. This is what makes player stories histories, rather than transcripts.

A couple of thousand years after Aristotle, modern literature's take on this began with English novelist E. M. Forster in 1927. He drew a distinction between *story* and *plot*. A story, he suggested, was a chronological sequence of events ("the king died and then the queen died"); a plot is the causal structure that connects events ("the king died and then the queen died of grief"). In a classic narrative, you read the story and discern the plot.

Games are not like this. In a game, you play the plot and discern the story.

A student of literature could regard the playing of a computer game as the unfolding of a story through play. This is perfectly valid: the story in question is that of the player, their *history*. However, this unfolding is not achieved through the following of a narrative, it's achieved through the following of a plot. Actions have consequences: they cause events. Players undertake actions, therefore they cause events to occur; in so doing, they create multiple fragments of plot; they favor those that advance the narrative.

Is this narrative predetermined? In some sense, it must be at least partly so because the game's design limits what can occur. Is the *plot* predetermined, though?

Okay, well at this point we run into some minor problems because game designers tend to mix up their vocabulary (and yes, as a fully paid-up game designer, I'm guilty of this myself, too). When designers talk of a "plot," they invariably mean one of two things: a goal ("rescue the monarch's child") or a *fixed* plot ("kill the ogre to get the sword to defeat the dragon to rescue the monarch's child"). The former isn't a plot *per se*, but it implies that players will have to create a plot through their actions in order to achieve it. The latter is a predetermined plot because it's in some sense already written.

Games only really *need* the first of these, but the second can help give direction. In the general case, a game's plot doesn't have to be fixed as it will be created on the fly by the player through their actions. When this occurs—as it must in every game—gameplay provides the challenges, conflicts, and decisions that the player drives through as plot, and which in the retelling becomes story (history). The "plot" here is created organically through the chaining together of the player's decisions.

A fixed plot (a game may have a small set of these) lies on top of this stratum. It can be there to add context, or to provide goals, or for its revealing of the narrative to be the goal. Whether a game *has* such a plot is for the designer to decide. Something like *Tetris* does not have—nor need—a fixed plot: it's all at the level of "here's my goal, let's see what I can do to achieve it." On the other hand, a game like *Pillars of Eternity* has a strong fixed plot: it's at the level of "if I do this and I do that then I'll find out what to do next."

Much of the conflict between ludologists and narratologists arises because they misinterpret each other's terms.

My opinion: games *are* different from literature, but that doesn't mean literature's tools can't be repurposed to help in the understanding of games.

What are the Odds?

Some MMOs have lockboxes as a money-making system. These are either normal drops that you need a paid-for-using-real-currency key to open, or they're boxes you need to pay to obtain in the first place. They may have something very valuable in them, but then again they may not.

This looks like gambling. Normally, though, gambling regulations require the house to state your odds of winning. MMOs tend to say *what* you can win, but not the actual chance you actually *will* win. Is that… right?

Collusion in Banality

The majority of attempts to make MMOs interesting are not recognized as such by most players. What most players want is for their MMO to be exactly the same as the first MMO they got into, only better. The more deviation an MMO exhibits from the first one that they got into, as it was when they got into it, the less likely they are to accept it.

There are two tragedies associated with this:

- Most players are doomed never to find the MMO they want because they aren't willing to accept the changes that would make it the world they want it to be.
- Most new MMOs are doomed to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

I worry that some of the improvements that are being touted as solutions to boredom are only going to make things worse. I have no doubt that procedurally-generated content will be fun—hey, I enjoyed playing *Rogue* myself—but it seriously dulls what MMOs are about. Likewise, trained puppet-masters performing for the benefit of rapt crowds will be fun—hey, I enjoyed *D&D* myself—but this merely papers over the cracks.

The best—and in the end, the *only*—solution is to make the MMO itself such an interesting and richly interactive place that the reason you'd want to repeat the consumption of a piece of content was that you liked it so much you want to try it again. Hey, I enjoy chocolate myself!

3 Acts

Screenwriter Robert McKee's summarized Aristotle's three-act structure as follows:

- Act 1. Get your hero up a tree.
- Act 2. Throw rocks at him.
- Act 3. Bring him down.

Okay, so as plans go this works but it's fairly simple.

What do you suppose: are there story structures with a bit more detail than this?

Non-MMO Immersion

If you read a good novel or watch a good movie, you can find yourself strongly identifying with the protagonist. If the feeling is strong enough, you can project yourself into the fictional world as if you were watching events unfold before your own eyes. You may, if you try hard, even imagine you *are* the protagonist for a short while.

However, it's only fleeting. The protagonist may be a cipher for you, but it's clearly *not* you: you have no control over what happens next, except insofar that if you don't turn the page, then it won't happen. If you do imagine yourself to be Cathy out of *Wuthering Heights*, then you're her only while the text is paused. When the text moves on, you can feel what she feels, but you can't *be* her.

In MMOs, the fully-immersed player *is* their character: your persona is both you and your character as one—*identity*, not identification.

Academics who have never played an MMO enough to experience full immersion, yet who nevertheless feel qualified to write on the subject, invariably seem to stop at character-level immersion. They don't understand that there's a level *beyond* this. As a result, we get all kinds of pontificating that's based on a false premise.

Immersion isn't about fooling the mind into believing the body is some place it's not: it's about the *mind* being somewhere it's not—somewhere it can be *itself*.

Another World

Imagine a pointillist MMO, in which all objects were made of equally-sized spheres that interacted with one another using gravity-like forces.

How long would you be able to play in such a world before you went back to an MMO with a more standard appearance?

Why?

Story as Narrative

Narrative is a predefined storyline that players follow—it's what most people mean when they say "story" in reference to games. It often comes with a backstory, and its primary use is as fictional cover to link (or separate) thematic parts of gameplay—providing new goals that follow the resolution of old ones. Its secondary use, which is the one that players notice more, is to keep them immersed and engaged.

Games don't have to have just one narrative; they can have multiple, overlapping narratives—plots and subplots, soap-opera style. There will nevertheless usually only be one main plot, though, which determines the overall pace.

Also, narratives don't have to be linear, they can *branch*—leading to multiple endings, depending on what the player does. That said, if they do branch, it can rapidly become very difficult for the designer to keep each branch under control as their number increases exponentially. For this reason, branches tend to collect towards the end of an "episode," as each loose end is tied up until only one (that of the main narrative thread) remains. These comings-together are known as *plot points*, and they can best be observed in quest-based RPGs. Typically, in between plot points players have a good deal of freedom to act as they see fit, but if they want to progress, then eventually they'll have to pass through the next plot point. This is sometimes marked with a formal change of "chapter" or a cut scene, as in the *Baldur's Gate* RPGs (which I mention often because I happen to adore them). Such an arrangement is sometimes described as a *string of pearls*, with the pearls representing areas of narrative freedom and the points where they touch representing the plot points on the (narrative) thread.

Branching narratives add to a game's *replay value* because, if you miss content in one playing, then you can encounter it on a subsequent occasion. They also allow multiple solutions to a problem, so if a player gets stuck with one approach, they can try another. Furthermore, players can individually choose to experience the particular kind of content that they themselves prefer—perhaps deciding to try a diplomatic approach to a crisis instead of a violent one. This means they'll have more fun because they choose what to do precisely for the reason that it *is* fun (for them).

Content is expensive to create, however, so designers don't like to over-produce it. Besides, even from a gameplay-only point of view, it can be a bad thing. If there is too much content, (or at least too much that the player sees at once), this can lead to a condition known as *quest fatigue* in which players go from branch to successive branch with no end in sight and manage to get both bored and frustrated at the same time (thereby demonstrating that a game can simultaneously be no fun at the level of individual quests and unfun at the level of the quest chain—and causing major problems for people who explain fun in terms of uniplanar flow).

Letter from the Future

With *60 seconds of gameplay*, you find out what the players are spending their time doing. With *letter from the future*, you find out whether it's fun.

Here's the conceit: you imagine that development of your MMO is complete and it's been running for six months; your future self sends your present self a letter explaining what you (as a player) did in the MMO last night. Your aim is to identify what you did that was memorable and fun, and why.

Letters from the future are pretty good for the way they can help a designer to think through their planned MMO's atmosphere. Their main purpose, though, is as a check that the MMO's gameplay is sufficient to sustain it. If you can't think of anything that you'd want to enthuse about, well, the chances are there *is* nothing. If you have to try persuade yourself that something not all that interesting is interesting, again, you're just clutching at straws.

What a letter from the future is asking is: what's the player's story? Or, to be more precise: what's their *history*? Histories are built of interesting events; if a history is sparse, what does that say about how much the player enjoyed playing?

NPCs with Personality

If you go back to text MUDs, players had much more emotional engagement with some NPCs (and even some non-humanoid mobiles). You don't need human controllers or well-designed quests to do it—we had it in *MUD1*, where certain mobiles (such as, yes, the goat) were able to cause apoplexy in even the calmest individuals by their behavior.

In *WoW*, the only NPC that came remotely close to this was Hogger, but of course *WoW* doesn't have permanent death, so the effects of being ganked are merely tedious rather than gut-wrenching.

Nevertheless, as I *may* have mentioned with great enthusiasm before, the first thing I did when I made the then level cap of 60 was to go back and kill Hogger.

Realistic Worlds

Earlier, I pointed at some of the things that *LotRO* does and declared that players of old text MUDs would have considered them a joke. The reason for this is that the things I listed (and I could have listed many more) would have been regarded as being *unrealistic*.

Text MUDs prided themselves on their *realisticness* (note: this isn't the same as *realism*—and yeah, I expect I will explain the difference later). MUDs that let you fight two opponents at once would mock ones in which you could only fight one-on-one; ones that allowed bags within bags within bags would mock ones that had no bags at all; ones that doused the flames of your torch when you swam across a river would mock ones that kept it burning brightly. Realisticness kept up an evolutionary pressure on design (or at the very least a reason to maintain standards). In comparison to yesterday's MUDs, today's MMO are not very realistic at all.

I chose *LotRO* as my example because in some aspects it goes out of its way to be realistic. Its landscapes are rendered to look like real landscapes, it doesn't have cartoon-style avatars, its geography is consistent, and it uses a covering fiction for concepts such as fast travel and death. Why does it not carry this through, though?

Socializers

Players who treat an MMO as a context for interaction with other players are called *socializers*. The virtual world's goings-on give them something to talk about.

Communication is very important to socializers. They say things such as:

- Have you heard? Nilrem's left the guild!
- Gratz!!!
- He's not mad at you, he just wants some time to himself.
- /dance

Socializers are the most obvious in-world expression of an MMO's *community*.

Cognitive Dissonance

The social psychologist Leon Festinger introduced the concept of *cognitive dissonance* in 1956[17].

Cognitive dissonance is what happens when individuals hold two or more contradictory views at the same time. Festinger formulated the notion when studying a group of individuals who profoundly believed that the world would end before dawn on December 21st, 1954. Come daybreak, the cultists couldn't reconcile their unshakeable faith that it *would* end with the undeniable evidence that it *hadn't* ended.

Most cognitive dissonance is not quite at this level of disparity. However, it happens all the time in real life. People who eat too much know that over-eating is bad for their health, but they keep on over-eating anyway; they try to reduce the dissonance either by underplaying the health risks or by underplaying the degree to which they over-eat—a process known as *rationalization*.

Killers

Players who enjoy imposing themselves on other players are called *killers*. This is because most of them get their kicks from griefing, but there are some (e.g., many guild leaders) who impose through kindness rather than unkindness.

Killers (of the griefer persuasion) say things such as:

- HA!
- Die!
- n00b
- pwned!!1!

They are often people of few words.

[17]Leon Festinger: *When Prophecy Fails*. University of Minnesota Press, 1956.

In Defense of Psychologists

It may seem that I'm giving psychologists a bad time here, griping about their lack of understanding about immersion in MMOs. They haven't done anything actually wrong, though.

Psychologists study many phenomena, not just MMOs. I know, I know, it's their loss, but that's how things are. Their tools are therefore adapted to handle a wide range of topics. Their concept of "immersion" has to work for many situations—books, cultures, work—as well as for (the relative latecomers) MMOs. They need a universal theory, not one that only applies to a particular kind of computer game.

If you look at it like this, a generic definition is a perfectly reasonable and rational idea.

What's not reasonable is when such a generic definition is conflated with the more particular definition that players use, and false assertions are made as a result. This does sometimes happen when a rogue, non-gamer psychologist sees the opportunity for a quick publication. It's unfair to slag off psychologists in general for this, though! They do tend to know their stuff.

Oh, except when it comes to games and violence. Most of the ones who study that are laboring under a monumental misapprehension.

Floyd, RIP

Yes, I know the above heading reveals what previously I only mentioned behind a spoiler alert, but is there really anyone who doesn't read on after a spoiler alert anyway?

One reason why Floyd was such a memorable character in *Planetfall* was that he was so well written.

Another reason is that he did something he knew would kill him, in order that the player might live.

What makes him *really* stick, though, is that the player was helpless to stop him. No matter what the player did, if they wanted to win, then Floyd had to die. Floyd's death was a plot point. It was a *narrative* conceit, not a *gameplay* decision.

Now it *could* have been a gameplay decision. The way the story was set up, the entire population of the planet was held in cryogenic suspension awaiting the day that their computers found a cure for the plague which would have killed them all if they hadn't taken this radical action. You *could* have been asked to decide between taking Floyd with you or sending him to his death in order to save the lives of the millions of people who would otherwise perish when the planet blew up (oh yeah, I should have said: the planet was close to blowing up).

However, you never got the choice. Floyd took it upon *himself* to end his life that others might live. It was the sheer inability of the player to act, at the one point (in a game that was otherwise all about action) where you *really wanted* to act, that gave Floyd's self-martyrdom the incredible power it had.

This isn't about what you can do with narrative, nor even about what you can do with game. This is about what you can do with *design*, and *that's* what makes *Planetfall*'s climax so breathtaking for designers.

Adaptive AI

One of the more popular ideas for the use of artificial intelligence in computer games concerns *adaptive AI*. This is the suggestion that the game adjusts its gameplay to ensure that it's always commensurate with players' abilities; I described one aspect of this, *dynamic difficulty adjustment*, earlier. I mentioned that I loathe it.

I hate it for single-player computer games, whether it's rubber-banding for racing cars or having itinerant bandits armored like dreadnaughts in RPGs. I particularly despise the idea for MMOs, though.

Here's why: basically, players get no real sense of progression if, no matter how skilled or unskilled they are, the bad guys *always feel the same*. A super-powerful character can't go killing low-level monsters for the sheer joy of watching them go down with a single hit because the AI will "learn" that they are having too easy a time of it and boost the monster's stats to make it more of a fight. The character didn't *want* a fight, though—they wanted to let off some steam. Similarly, a low-level character going up against a boss is basically training the AI to lower the boss's stats until the fight is at the right difficulty level.

What players need is for monsters to be reasonably *static* in their degree of difficulty. This doesn't mean mobs have to be stupid, or that they all have to have the same AI. What it does mean is that they should behave consistently. If they don't behave consistently, players can't tell whether they (the players) are improving or not. Being level X is meaningless if you only ever see opponents of level X +/- 2. *Mobs* can learn and adapt to how you're fighting them, sure—they can even level up from their victims' deaths—but only until they get killed; then, they should respawn reinitialized, and need to learn all over again. Adaptive AI isn't really about mobs, though: it's about the virtual world *itself* as an intelligent entity.

I don't care whether this is for individuals or for instances: such tinkering is equivalent to making the MMO adapt to the player, rather than the other way round. AI gets genuinely exciting when it's used for controlling discrete NPCs, but that's not what's happening here; it's like having an intelligent universe. "Oh dear, poor Johnny wandered into the swamp and can't move very fast, I'll just reduce the viscosity of the mire in his location so he can speed up a bit." It's the same kind of thing. Johnny shouldn't have wandered into the swamp in the first place, but by helping him out, he doesn't know that.

As for the effects when several players try to interact with the same object, dynamic difficulty is really going to make things look weird to some of them.

While doing some consultancy for a major MMO in about 2001, I was asked whether I thought this was a good idea. I said at the time that it was a very bad idea, and I stick by that. If your skill level doesn't count for anything, why bother learning?

For educational worlds, okay, adjusting the content to match ability could be a hit. For fun, though? I think *I* know what I'll find fun right now better than your AI does.

Innovate!

Humans are great at pattern-matching, in games as much as anything else. It can happen at any level:

- **System**. "This new, genre-based battle system for the Android is like *Top Trumps* all over again."
- **Gameplay**. "Hey, this combat system is basically the same as the one in *Top Trumps*."
- **Mechanics**. "This bartering system works the same way as *Top Trumps* except there are more properties and they have a linear distribution over a smaller number of values."
- **Skin**. "This *Twilight* edition of *Top Trumps* is just like the *Buffy* edition, except it sets feminism back two decades instead of forward one."

Believe it or not, this means that if you use the same ideas over and over again in games, people will grok them and grow tired of them.

Innovate!

Story as Backstory

Backstory is what is supposed to have happened before the start of a game. It's not absolutely essential, but most computer games do have one.

There's often confusion between backstory and history. Backstory is actually *prehistory*—it describes events that occurred prior to the start of play, giving the game its explanatory context.

There are two main reasons for backstory: the official reason and the unofficial reason (also known as the "real reason").

The official reason for backstory is that it adds richness and depth. It can establish the overall goal of the player and can aid in making a game (or game world) more *immersive*.

The unofficial reason is to make illogical features of the game seem logical:

> **Player**: Why can't I see any citizens or peasants?
>
> **Backstory**: Because the gods make them invisible.
>
> **Player**: So why can't I see their shadows?
>
> **Backstory**: Those are invisible, too.
>
> **Player**: Then why don't I hear or smell them?
>
> **Backstory**: Because they're inaudible and, er, inscentible.
>
> **Player**: Why don't I bump into them when I move?
>
> **Backstory**: They keep out of your way.
>
> **Player**: Why can't I see them pick stuff up?
>
> **Backstory**: Look, do you want to play this game or not?

Ideally, if you're going to have backstory, then that backstory should come first; it should not merely patch awkward programming or gameplay problems.

Not all backstory is about describing past events; some simply decrees how the world works. This kind is referred to as the *fiction*. Why can't I cast fireballs while wearing plate mail? Well the fiction is that iron interferes with arcane magic. The fact, however, is that if you could, then everyone would be a battlemage and all sense of class balance would be out the window…

Wood, Trees, Trees, Wood

There is a debate current among Game Study theorists concerning the difference between research undertaken by personally playing games compared to that undertaken by observing people playing games. In the former, the danger is that you can't see the wood for the trees; in the latter, the danger is that can't see the trees for the wood.

I personally have a foot in both camps: I criticize most of those who don't play for not having a full appreciation of the details, yet I also criticize most of those who do play for not having a full appreciation of the abstract. This is because, as a designer, I have to understand *both* the details *and* the abstract if I'm to create a coherent whole.

The way it goes, though, if you study games enough, then eventually you don't need to play them to make sense of them—you just need to have played enough of something similar that you can grok it.

The Charging Moose

In 2007, a 12-year-old Norwegian boy called Hans Jørgen Olsen was out walking in a forest with his 10-year-old sister when she was charged by a moose. Using what he had learned from *World of Warcraft*, he taunted the moose off her, and then, after it butted him in the backpack, he played dead. The moose wandered off, leaving both children unhurt.

Earlier, I mentioned two examples of things you can learn from *WoW*:

- The name of the real world's largest unbroken volcanic caldera is Ngorongoro.
- Sabre-toothed tigers don't like being fireballed.

The charging moose is one of those happy occasions where the game world experience was close enough to real life to be actually useful.

It's lucky that taunt and play dead don't share a cooldown, though.

Seal of Evil

I once bought a game called *Seal of Evil*. It's a *Baldur's Gate* lookalike, set in ancient China at the end of the Warring States period. It was on special offer at GAME, so I thought I'd give it a go.

I played it for two days, but no more.

I can stand bad voice acting. I can stand bad *Scooby Doo*-style ground-moves-at-different-speed-to-characters animation. I can stand having to download a walkthrough just so I can find the main character's bedroom in the tutorial. I can just about stand the absence from the quest log of most of the quests. What I can't stand, however—what I *really can't stand*—is making me *play* through cut scenes. Never, ever again.

I do mean playing through cuts scenes. It goes to "15 years ago," and you have to click a character to start the conversation. They tell you to go somewhere as fast as you can, and when you eventually find it, there's someone else there for you to click to make talk. Then you go to the combat, which it's impossible to lose because the bad guys don't do any damage to you.

All you can do is invoke a conversation, move about and fight unlosable battles. There's no other interaction, it's just one step to the next.

Games with a narrative have a game part and a narrative part. There's a reason for this: the game is the fun part, the narrative adds context to the game part. It is *not fun* to have to click your way through a flashback. A flashback is not a game, it's a narrative; if you treat it as a game, you get the most boring kind of game imaginable—one in which you have *no* ability to change the outcome *whatsoever*. When it takes maybe 15 minutes to "play" it, that's it, that's enough. I thought *Seal of Evil* referred to the story, not the product.

Never again.

Anniversary Killers

As I mentioned, one of the bosses for *The Secret World*'s anniversary event was in Fusang Projects, a PvP zone.

When the boss respawned (the wait between respawnings being several hours), most of the people in Fusang were there solely to kill it. They didn't care about PvP, they just wanted to down the boss and claim their fancy pet reward. Most of those who were there for PvP also participated; after all, there's no fun in attacking people who aren't geared for PvP and can't defend themselves.

Well, no fun for *most* people.

A handful of individuals ignored the boss and just slaughtered everyone they saw from the opposing factions, knowing that almost none of them were able to respond in kind because they were equipped to kill the boss, not player characters.

Others didn't ignore the boss, but used it for their own ends. They taunted it off whoever was tanking it and led it away from the bulk of players, sometimes into stupid places such as underground. Collision detection not being Funcom's strong point, this meant that you could see the boss's head and the occasional limb bob up through the concrete at ground level, but then it would disappear.

Another trick some players did was take over the bases of the opposing teams, so that when they were assassinated, they resurrected far away and had a lengthy run back to the action. Oh, I should also mention that the death of every character in the PvP zone during the fight *healed* the boss.

All this meant that a boss that should have taken 150 cooperating people 10 minutes to down took 140 cooperating people plus 10 uncooperating people 45 minutes.

Ah, killers.

The Meaning of *Realistic*

If a world has dragons and vampires, how can we ever say it's "realistic"? Well, we certainly can't say it has high *realism* if it contains dragons and vampires because realism concerns authenticity. Realisticness, however, concerns *believability*, not authenticity. We can, therefore, call a world that has dragons and vampires "realistic" if it's consistent with whatever fiction you have to buy into to play the world. So, "realistic" means "having realism, relative to the fiction."

Because people rarely notice when things are realistic but do notice when they're not, we usually talk about a world as being *unrealistic* rather than its being realistic. An unrealistic world has one or more features inconsistent with its fiction.

It's a little more subtle than that, actually. Fiction defers to *Reality*, in that if the fiction says nothing about how some aspect of the world works, people assume that it works the same as in real life; *Reality* therefore becomes the default fiction.

There are thus two ways a world can be unrealistic: it can be inconsistent with the stated fiction, or it can be inconsistent with that part of *Reality* to which the unstated fiction defers. The latter is a bit like realism, but it's not: it *is* part of the fiction, it's just a part that works the same way as *Reality*.

Cover as Code

Problem: if a player's character is full of arrows, then they really should be dead, but you don't want them to be dead because That Would Be Bad.

Solution: implement the laws of chivalry as physical laws. If an arrow would kill the character, then the archer is forbidden from firing it.

Fictional cover has turned into code, but it makes more sense than having people wandering around looking like porcupines (which itself makes more sense than having arrows in flight evaporate upon contact with a solid object).

Gaming AI

Games with adaptive AI to them don't ultimately work. Players just end up gaming the AI.

I was playing a trains/transportation game once and noticed that whenever I was looking somewhere and planning to build a route, my computer opponent would start building in the same place. If I looked elsewhere, it didn't build in the first place, but built in the elsewhere.

I therefore adopted a strategy of looking at locations for half-decent routes, tempting the AI into building there, then zooming off to the good location and building in that location myself before the AI could get enough money together to compete. It worked, but it was annoying: I wasn't playing a build-a-railway game anymore, I was playing a deceive-the-AI game.

So it is with all adaptive AI because the AI is contained within a game-world box that the player is outside. The player doesn't get into a flow state by competing against the AI, they get into one by tricking it.

It doesn't matter what the game is, players will always make their *own* fun.

Narrative Art

Many commentators see narrative as an example of *real art* in computer games—it's literature!

Okay, so narrative *is* part of the designer's art, but it's not the main part. This is probably just as well because narratives for computer games are universally weak—a result of the foreshortening that occurs when trying to fit a linear convention into a non-linear form.

Backstory is also weak because it has to paper over so many cracks. History is immensely strong, but only at the personal level—what's highly meaningful to you is just so much bad fan fiction to someone else.

For MMOs, large-scale narratives are utterly pointless, but don't even get me *started* on that…

Too Much Magic

Here's part of a screenshot from *World of Warcraft*:

Here's another from *The Secret World*:

What happened to physics? In the days of text, when MMOs only used imagination to render them, we could manage to make snow melt when it was put somewhere warm and water evaporate when put somewhere hot.

I guess this must be either "magic snow" or "magic fire" or both…

Ask Dr Psycho

From this week's *Practical Serial Killer*:

Dear Dr Psycho

Can you recommend a good computer game for me to play? I want to learn how to kill people better. I have heard World of Warcraft is good, but its subscription looks a little pricey.

—Abe

Dear Abe

Don't play WoW. I played for two years, and all I learned was that if you want to kill murlocs then frost magic is a safe method.

I recommend instead that you go to the library and rent out DVDs of old Columbo TV shows. Find one that has a method of killing people that you'd really like to try out, then simply repeat it yourself!

Important: at some point in the show, the hero will make a mistake that Columbo notices. In your reconstruction, don't make that same mistake.

—Dr Psycho

Feelings

MMOs engender feelings in their players. Stories can package up feelings and deliver them with pinpoint accuracy. Should MMO designers therefore add more story to their world, to give the players a more emotional experience?

Personally, I'd caution against it. I don't place a lot of emphasis on feelings *per se*, so long as there are few constraints on them. Offering up parcels of pre-packaged feelings for the players to choose between is too fettered; I want players to be able to find their *own* feelings, and therefore their own selves.

Undermining Achievement

MMO players tend to want to measure their performance relative to that of other players. "I'm level 40, you're level 30, therefore I am a better player than you." This is how achievers think.

However, such a view is completely undermined if anyone can spend a few dollars and raise themselves up. "Ha! Now I'm level 50 so I'M a better player than YOU!"

Suppose you're at college and you take a set of examinations at the end of your first year that will contribute to your final mark. It may be that you don't do as well as you hoped you would. Should you be able to buy some of the score of someone who did better? Well personally, I don't think you should: the whole point of the examination system is to rate individuals' expertise relative to one another, and buying marks that other students don't need corrupts that system.

Many gamers see progress in MMOs like that. They are proud of their achievements and furious when these are undermined by someone who has money rather than (what achievers see as) ability. They view the virtual world as a meritocracy and *don't* like being disabused of this idea. It's not as if higher-level characters are more fun to play than lower-level ones, given that an MMO's gameplay is pretty much the same whatever level your character is; to an achiever, the important thing is that they've got where they are, not what happens once they get there.

I'm not saying that selling achievement markers or the means to obtain them makes for an unfun MMO. All I'm saying is that it would be a different kind of fun, for a different kind of game, played by a different kind of player.

Jaina Proudmoore, Giantess

Here's a picture of my mage standing next to Lady Jaina Proudmoore, a lore character in *World of Warcraft*:

She's fairly tall, isn't she? I barely come up to her shoulder.

That was her in Theramore, where she's the ruler. Five minutes later, I took this second picture of her in the Halls of Reflection in Northrend:

Now, I barely come up to her waist.

Gawd knows what she ate in the five minutes it took to get from Theramore to the Halls of Reflection, but if she has any more of it she's going to start banging her head when she goes through doorways.

Other Story

The story that describes what a player did is that player's history. In virtual worlds, however, players are not alone: every player has their own history, and these histories overlap. A guild can have a history; a shard can have a history; an MMO as a whole can have a history, played out through the actions of many players in many guilds on many shards. These are collective histories that emerge from the interactions between the histories of individuals.

In movies, every major character has a story arc. Player characters of computer games also have story arcs of the player's own making within a narrative structure determined by the game's design. What about non-player characters, though? Can they have story arcs? If so, should they?

Yes, they can have story arcs. There are good reasons to give them such arcs, too, in certain kinds of games. It's not always the case, obviously: you don't care that the reason this kobold is trying to kill you is that it was mistreated as a cub by cruel miners and it blames all humanity for the recurring nightmares that plague its sleep; all you care is that if you don't kill it, it'll try to kill you. You don't especially want to get involved with that kind of NPC.

Some NPCs, you do want get involved with, though. Designers put in the mechanisms for such involvement because it gives you an emotional investment in the NPC's future. This allows the designer to add context and atmosphere, and the ability to *say* things to you as a player. You can reply through your choices; it's a form of prewritten but unpredictable, unfolding dialogue. It can be very powerful, if done right. Remember Floyd?

As part of a game's general context (i.e., that which, if you changed it, would be a reskinning), all major characters should have backstories wherever possible. Hey, even Mario is a plumber! Players don't always need to know any of this, but the more rounded a character in its design, the more able a designer is to give it rounded actions. The character's name, age, family background, plans, what happened immediately before the game started—all this is useful material.

Okay, so actually I *am* lying a little here, in that designers don't always have to think about this kind of thing explicitly—they've thought about character enough in the past that they can pluck fully-functioning, consistent, interesting personalities from thin air. However, they do write them down because that means they can explain them to other people who need to know such things (e.g., animators, voice artists, themselves 18 months later, …).

When player character narratives intertwine with those of non-player characters, the results can be very compelling. It can add tremendous emotional impact to a game.

Yet all this is *as nothing* compared to the impact another *player character* can have.

Way to go, MMO!

Always a Pawn

Every role-playing game plot is like this.

Act I:

Something happens that gives you a definite enemy. You track down the enemy and defeat it.

Act II:

Oh no! The enemy is merely a pawn! You have to spend ages collecting the necessary plot tokens to discover who and where the real enemy is.

Act III:

You track down and defeat the real enemy in a grand showdown. You may need to kill the enemy several times, but eventually one of the battles will be the "real" final one. The world is safe again.

Or is it? We might want a sequel.

The first boss is always a pawn.

Narrative Arcs

Maintaining a single story arc for an entire MMO is not usually a great idea.

Stories end, and unless you're prepared to end your MMO when this happens, you're cheating your players. Sometimes the MMO *does* end, as happens most notably with *A Tale in the Desert*, but it takes a brave developer to do that. Most arcs either peter out forgotten, or end and leave themselves in a narrative limbo, or never end unless the MMO is closed down.

Stories also begin. If you join a story-driven MMO after a couple of years, this means you've missed its beginning. Everyone else is into the story, but you're not. Okay, so just as you can watch a TV movie that you walked in on half-way through, you can pick up the story for an MMO. However, which would you prefer: watching the second half of a movie, or watching all of one?

Story arcs are also non-interactive. If you make your narrative arc a big selling point, as *Asheron's Call* did, then yes, you can attract players through that story. However, when they realize that they have no influence on it, they can and will cheerfully follow it on the Internet without having to pay to watch it unfold.

What's that? You can have interactive story arcs?

Well yes, you can. *A Tale in the Desert*'s is interactive. *ATITD* is a relatively small, bespoke MMO, though. It only has one shard. Large-scale worlds with multiple shards have problems if they try to make story arcs dependent on what players do because people on one shard might do different things to what they do on another, and then it's hard to add further patches to advance the arc.

This, in fact, happened with *Asheron's Call*. For a year, the narrative built up to the freeing by player characters of the entity Bael'Zharon from his crystalline prison. With the destruction of the sixth soul stone, he would be released to wreak death and devastation across the world. This indeed happened on every server—except one. On Thistledown, a group of players decided that it would be a bad thing to let loose this evil, so they defended the soul stone against all-comers on a round-the-clock watch.

They were successful, too. This meant that the next planned storyline update wouldn't work on Thistledown—but it *had* to work! Otherwise, Thistledown would have needed its own development team to support its branch of the storyline while the main team worked on updates for the rest of the servers.

Eventually, the developers (Turbine) took matters into their own hands and released Bael'Zharon anyway. At this point, the players realized that they were impotent when it came to changing the storyline—they may as well have just sat back and watched it unfold, they couldn't *do* anything about it.

Grand, narrative arcs may work as a fiction to introduce new content, but they're not interactive. Only very rarely does a player base get to change what's happening in them.

They're not the only kind of arc, though.

Place as Serendipity

If socializers like chatting to other players, why don't they simply use *Internet Relay Chat*? What does a sense of place give socializers that *IRC* doesn't?

Well, what it gives is the possibility of meeting people by accident—"bumping into" them. Crucially, these people might not be actively seeking interaction. With *IRC*, you can check different channels, but you never get to talk to someone who wasn't also planning on talking to someone. With MMOs, you do.

MMOs as Virtual Worlds

You don't have to treat a world as a game for it to be a world. Formally, MMOs only have a game component to give people a plausible *explanation* of why they want to play; the *reasons* people play MMOs are to do with the worlds and the players—the game just gives a context (or excuse).

You think that's not true? Ah, well you're an achiever, then (or a designer who noticed that achievers wouldn't see it that way).

Cognitive Dissonance in MMOs

The reason I mentioned cognitive dissonance is that it helps explain what happens in MMOs at the point where the virtual environment's persuasiveness fails and affects immersion.

So, your brain is used to dealing with the real world, and the more that the virtual world operates like the real world, the more your brain is predisposed to find it real (i.e., to be persuaded by it); however, if something happens that is clearly at odds with the prevailing evidence that the virtual world is real, there's cognitive dissonance. On the one hand, you think it's just like *Reality*; on the other, you think it's not like *Reality*. Something has to give.

Such dissonance is traditionally reduced by fictive explanation. Why are there dragons here? Well, it's a Fantasy world, so it has dragons. How come the dragons can fly when they're too big to do so? Well, dragons are magical entities so use magical help.

This is fine so long as it is consistent. If the fiction is *inconsistent*, it can make matters worse. Why can't dragons swim under water? Because water interferes with their magic. So … why can they fly when it's raining?

There has to be *some* dissonance in MMOs because otherwise they wouldn't be worth playing—they'd be just like real life. Typically, the differences between virtual world and real world exist for one of the following reasons:

- **Implementation**. It's too hard/expensive to let dragons swim under water.
- **Gameplay**. No-one would use a dolphin mount if dragons could swim under water.
- **Fiction**. If dragons could swim underwater, their fireballs would make no sense.

Such dissonance is fine *if* the fiction explains it. If it doesn't, players will have to ignore how things *should* be in order to work with how they *are*. This lessens the persuasiveness of the virtual environment.

Here's the thing, though: play an MMO enough and this constantly willed suspension of disbelief can *itself* become a learned activity. The MMO is not persuasive of *Reality*—but it *is* persuasive of being an MMO.

This explains how come so many modern MMOs have 24-hour shopkeepers and waveless seas, yet no-one bats an eyelid except for absolute newbies.

Verisimilitude

The word *verisimilitude* means the property of resembling *Reality*, of having likeness to the truth.

I want a word that means the property of resembling *a* reality, of having likeness to the *fiction*.

Suppose that when a dragon breathes fire it can set houses ablaze. I can't comment on the verisimilitude of this situation because in *Reality*, fire-breathing dragons don't exist (our primitive ancestors must have eaten them all). However, I can say that *if* dragons did exist, *then* the fact that their breath could set buildings ablaze would, in that context, make sense. You'd be disappointed if dragon breath *didn't* burn down houses and make their poor occupants homeless.

Okay, so there probably *is* an English word that means what I want, but I've no idea what it is. When I started reading the dictionary for it, I only got half way through the first chapter ("A") before boredom overcame me.

The word "verisimilitude" comes from the Latin *veri similitudo*. *Veri* is the genitive singular of *verus*, meaning "real"; *similitudo* means "likeness." Likeness to falsehood is therefore easy to construct: it would be "falsisimilitude" in English. I don't want likeness to falsehood, though; I want likeness to the fiction.

The word "fiction" itself has Latin roots, ultimately deriving from *fingere*, meaning "to make by shaping, to feign, to concoct a story." This isn't really helpful, then, as the English meaning of the word is too remote from the Latin.

The key is to note that, whereas realism is about authenticity, realisticness is about belief. The Latin for "belief" is *fides*, as in "fidelity," which has the genitive singular of *fidei*. This would make the English word meaning "likeness to that which is believed" *fideisimilitude*.

Hmm. I can't say it's likely to catch on.

Story Machines #1

Games are machines for generating stories.

Earlier, I mentioned E. M. Forster's take on the relationship between story and plot. In his celebrated book on the craft of storytelling, *Aspects of the Novel*, he defines a story as a "narrative of events arranged in their time sequence." In other words, events happen; some of these events are selected and described in the order that they will be read (if not necessarily the order they occurred); the way they are told is a narrative; the result is a story.

A plot is not the same as a story because it is predefined and includes causality. One event happens because another situation, event, or series of events preceded it. For example, consider the following story, which consists of two events: "I ate a bar of chocolate. I was sick." You don't know whether eating the bar of chocolate made me sick, or whether I ate the bar of chocolate because I was sick. You don't know that the story isn't going to continue: "I stroked an armadillo. That's three things off my bucket list."

Much of the enjoyment from reading a story comes from reconstructing the plot that underpins it: figuring out the causal links that connect key events. It doesn't have to be *all* about this, of course—I love Chekhov's short stories because of their characters, not because of any discernible plot. However, the reconstruction of the plot from the events presented in the story—recognizing what caused what or anticipating what will cause what—is at the heart of why stories are compelling.

A narrative is the telling of the story (although you could also regard it as the conveying of the plot through the device of the story). The term tends to be used to mean the telling of the story as a whole; if you mean it at the nuts-and-bolts, words-on-the-page level, it would be a *discourse* rather than a narrative.

Backstory is the retelling of events that preceded the events of the story. Although fragments of backstories can be directly present in a story, more often their effects are felt only indirectly. For example, in designing a character who is a charity worker, an author may have constructed for them a backstory in which they spent six months of their youth in prison for credit card fraud; this would be felt in the story by their need for atonement for their past indiscretion, but it would not necessarily have to be mentioned at any point.

A history is the retelling of a related series of events or episodes that have previously taken place. When the events are not presented as causally connected, what you have is merely a set of records; when they are, it's history. For real events (as opposed to fictional ones), there is no overall plot created by a god-like author; nevertheless, there could be plots authored by historical individuals or groups (as in the Gunpowder Plot). The job of the historian involves looking at the records and providing explanations and interpretations as to why certain things turned out the way they did. Although the resulting

set of causal connections may look like a plot, it isn't one unless those connections were authored. For example, the historian may realize that the crops failed because the smoke from a volcano in a distant land obscured the sun: this is a causal connection, but it's not a plot because it wasn't predefined—it was unauthored, as far as the resulting narrative is concerned. A chain of events doesn't have to be plotted to be causally connected.

So, what happens when we apply these terms to games?

Unpredictable Interactions

A player hits a door. The door opens.

Why is that? It's just as easy in programming terms to make hitting a door cause flowers to grow from the sails of a windmill.

Well, unless there were some heavy hints somewhere that this was No Ordinary Door and there was some connection to No Ordinary Windmill, such an unpredictable interaction would confuse players.

The default, therefore, is for things to work as players expect them to work. This means that they accord to real-world experience or to well-known fictional tropes such as magic.

Or, of course, to "that's just how it works in games."

Anatomy of a *Rift* Quest

Round 1

- NPC1: I want you to go kill a bunch of these bad guys.
- NPC2: While you're there, kill a bunch of these bad guys too!
- NPC3: And these particular bad guys there are only a few of!
- NPC4: I don't want you to kill bad guys. I want you to collect a bunch of these *things*. They're guarded by bad guys.

Round 2

- NPC1: I want you to go back there and kill a bunch of these other bad guys you could have killed while killing the first set of bad guys.
- NPC2: While you're there, kill a bunch of these other bad guys you could have killed before, too!

- NPC3: And these particular, *named* bad guys you could also have killed before!
- NPC4: I don't want you to kill bad guys. I want you to collect a bunch of these *things*. They're carried by bad guys you could have killed before.

Round 3

- NPC1: I want you to go *through* the previous bunch of bad guys and kill a bunch of these new bad guys.
- NPC2: While you're there, kill a bunch of these new bad guys too!
- NPC3: And N of these particular bad guys that there are only N-1 of!
- NPC4: I don't want you to kill bad guys. I want you to activate these machine *things*. They're guarded by two bad guys each.

Round 4

- NPC1: I want you to go through both sets of the previous bad guys I asked you to kill and kill this one *really* bad guy.
- NPC2: While you're there, kill a bunch of these slightly different but still bad guys nearby too!
- NPC3: Hey! Don't I do the named bad guys? What gives here?!
- NPC4: I don't want you to kill bad guys. I want you to collect a bunch of these *things*. They're parts of the bad guys' bodies.

Round 5

- NPC1: I want you to go down the road and speak to my replacement NPC1 there. Have fun!

Why Realistic?

For board games with a simulation component to them, "realistic" is in opposition to "playable"[18]. The more complexity you add, the more realistic the game is, but the harder it becomes to play. For computer games, in which the administrative burden of complexity is taken off the player's shoulders, it's much easier to make games which are both realistic *and* playable.

Text MUDs took advantage of this and increasingly strove to be realistic. They did this for two main reasons: *persuasiveness* and *emergence*.

Persuasiveness helps with immersion, as it gives the player less to have to ignore. If you can trust the world to behave as you'd expect, you don't constantly have to work out whether it will let you do something or not—you just *know*. Believing in it becomes easier, so believing that you yourself are in the virtual world becomes easier. Because players already have a decent understanding of how the real world works, any game world that behaves similarly creates less friction of belief. Thus, the more realistic a game world is, the more immersive it will be.

Emergence is the process by which interactions between a system's subcomponents create new systems. It's desirable for MMOs because it creates content. The more detailed an MMO's world, the greater the opportunity for interesting interactions between components, leading to more for the players to do. *EVE Online* is the primary example of an MMO which has almost entirely emergent content. When a world is unrealistic, players can't so easily reason about how subsystems "should" interact, which dampens down the amount of emergent behavior.

These two reasons—persuasiveness and immersion—apply as much to today's MMOs as they did to their forebears. That being so, the worlds of today should be just as keen to be realistic as were the worlds of the past. Why, then, are they more unrealistic?

[18]Steve Jackson: *Realism versus Playability in Simulation Game Design*. Proceedings of *Joks i Tecnojocs* Conference, Barcelona. June, 1991. http://textfiles.com/rpg/realplay.txt

False Choices

If you're presented with a choice and no matter what option you choose the eventual outcome of the game doesn't change, is that choice worth anything?

Games often have such false choices—especially in their narratives. You may side with the spoiled brat prince or with the pompous politician, but either way you'll still end up with their country's army on your side for the final showdown. If a choice doesn't affect the outcome of the game, why have it?

Well, games are about making choices (it's what makes them games), but they're not *just* about that. They can be about thrills, or nostalgia, or suspense—they can be about many things. If a false choice changes the meaning of a game's ending, then there may be no *material* gameplay difference resulting from it, but there could be an *emotional* one.

False choices annoy many gamers because gameplay is an exercise in decision-making; having a choice that is no such thing therefore means there's less game and your choice was meaningless. That may be unfortunate, but it's nevertheless often legitimate if the choice *is* meaningful, only at a non-gameplay level. If it changes the feel of the game, then the experience of the game can change even if the gameplay doesn't.

Why Unrealistic?

There are some valid reasons for deliberately making an MMO less realistic than it could be.

- To make an artistic point. If you're parodying the real world, you don't want to simulate it exactly.
- Realisticness can be opposed to fun. This is why your character never has to use the lavatory.
- Realisticness can be opposed to balance. This is why you can use a sword to kill a giant even though you can't reach above its ankle.
- It's expensive to implement realistic effects in a graphical world. Some animator has to model that wet hair.
- New players can mistake realisticness for complexity. This scares away all those casual players you want.

So there are logical reasons for wanting your MMO to be unrealistic to some degree. None are show-stoppers, though, and all can be mitigated. Parodies only need to mismatch in their one, key area; people don't use lavatories often enough in the real world to notice they never have to in a virtual world; swords can do systemic magical, electrical, or toxic damage; the effects of

wet hair can be implemented without having to be shown visually; new players don't have to experience the full glory of the world's level of detail until they've mastered the controls.

So why *are* so many modern MMOs unrealistic?

Here's the interesting part. Recall that there are two main components to a world's fiction: the stated fiction and the unstated fiction (which defers to *Reality*). This means there are two ways a world can be unrealistic: it can be at odds with the game's explicit fiction or with its implicit fiction. The thing is, modern MMOs tend to be every bit as realistic with the former as were the MMOs of yore, but comparatively unrealistic with the latter. They support the stated fiction very strongly, but may take a few liberties with the unstated fiction behind it.

Fantasy MMOs over the years have introduced increasingly baroque-looking swords. Nevertheless, *Star Wars: the Old Republic*'s lightsabers ten years from now will look pretty much the same as they do today. In *The Lord of the Rings Online*, Tom Bombadil isn't going to show up in Rivendell. You're never going to see jeeps in *Everquest* or bazookas in *The Elder Scrolls Online* or Queen Victoria in *WildStar*.

MMOs regard it as important to be tight to their fiction. *The Secret World* is consistent in its handling of the Filth because, if it weren't, then it would lose persuasiveness; its skill wheel is a brilliant exercise in priming emergence, giving its gameplay wonderful depth. Its designers do not, however, regard tightness to the non-lore part of their fiction as equally important. For example, the game has an "exsanguinate" spell that allows you to damage an opponent by sucking its blood out; this would be fine, but it works on crates, robots, plants, rocks, and even the occasional creature that actually has blood.

What's going on, here?

Story Machines #2

For games, the story is the linear sequence of events experienced by the player. It doesn't have to be the same for each player nor for the same player over each (re)playing of the game.

The plot of a game is a not-necessarily-linear series of events predetermined by the design team. It will account for some of the more significant events that occur to the player, but only a minority of the overall number of events. Most of the events that the player experiences will take place as a result of interactions between the player and the game system. Although these are also predefined by the design team in the sense that the game's design implicitly embodies the totality of all events that can possibly occur within the game, they are not predefined *as events*. They are predefined as a system for *generating* events.

When game designers talk of narrative, they usually mean the way that the explicitly predefined (that is, plotted) events unfold for the player. They don't usually mean the way that events contingent on the predefined game system unfold. Designers do have authorial control over that, but they call it gameplay, not narrative.

The events that took place prior to the player's beginning to play a game are its backstory. Often, the story will pick up as an ongoing continuation of the backstory; in this case, the backstory is authored, fixed, and will be the same for each playing of the game. However, this does not always have to be the case. For example, a new player joining *EVE Online* will discover a web of relationships between players and corporations built up over the several years of the game's existence. From the new player's perspective, this is backstory: it's a series of events that took place before they started to play that predicate and provide the contextual springboard for many of the future events that will affect the player. It's immaterial to the new player that these events weren't conceived by a designer, they're backstory either way.

From the perspective of a long-term player of *EVE Online*, the events of the past are not backstory, though: they're history. They're the part of that player's ongoing story that has already been read. Importantly, though, they only become part of the player's history in the retelling: as events, they merely constitute an ordered set of records. When players selectively choose which of all the events that have occurred to them to relate (either to themselves or to someone else), the resulting interpreted story is a history.

These stories—these histories—are the ones that matter for games. If you can't tell another, attentive player what interesting things happened to you, that means *no interesting things happened to you*. If no events worth speaking of occurred, why were you playing the game? You had no decisions to make, you had no unexpected situations to deal with, you had no obstacles to overcome, you had no heart-stopping moments: nothing of interest to you happened.

When you read a novel, you are presented through the narrative with a series of plotted events arranged as a story. When you play a game, you may also be presented through the narrative with a series of plotted events; however, you will also be presented by the gameplay with a series of unplotted events. In design terminology, games (particularly MMOs) that are heavy on plot-driven events are *theme parks*; ones heavy on gameplay-driven events are *sandboxes*.

It's clear, therefore, that games and stories are related, but what *is* that relationship?

The Hamzanama

> *Umar asked the Amir for permission to cut off the perpetrator's head, but the Amir wouldn't grant it. So Umar held the point of his dagger over his own heart, and said, "if you don't give me permission, I'll kill myself." The Amir gave in, and Umar left.*

When a storyteller was relating this tale, he (it probably would have been a he) could emphasize the Amir's reluctance to have the perpetrator hunted down, or he could dramatize Umar's resolve to commit suicide if his wish was not granted. The flat text allows for both these interpretations to be made, depending on the audience[19].

[19] *Sense in communication*. Douglas A. Galbi, 2003. http://www.galbithink.org/sense1.pdf

Personal Arcs

As I've mentioned, a narrative arc for the whole of an MMO is either an ultimately unsatisfactory device for providing the fiction for new content, or it means the MMO is going to end.

Overlapping arcs aren't *so* bad—smaller storylines that play out as others unfold, as in soap operas—but they lack the grandness of a full-blown arc. If you want a full arc, then, you're going to have problems, yes?

Actually, no. You can have *personal arcs*.

A personal arc is a storyline *just for you*. In practice, everyone gets their own copy of the same arc(s), but it's an arc in which they are they hero. Bioware—a developer renowned for its storytelling—has taken this furthest with individual personal story arcs created on a class-by-class basis for its MMO, *Star Wars: the Old Republic*. Its designers have honed *every quest* in it so that each character class gets a narrative entirely different to the narratives of the other classes. This is a ton of work, but it's awe-inspiring in its scope.

Another MMO that has personal storylines is *The Lord of the Rings Online*. This has ordinary quests, some of which are chained together in mini-narratives, plus "epic storyline" quests broken up into books and chapters. Some of these epic storyline chapters aren't themselves particularly epic—it's hard to believe that the fate of Middle Earth rests on your bringing Radagast the Brown moss from bog crawler nests—but the storyline itself is fairly strong and interweaves well with Tolkien's novel.

This would work fine, but in *LotRO* you can do the quests out of order. This can be a boon because it means you don't get stuck when one of the quests demands a group of six people and you can't find anyone to join you. However, it can introduce continuity errors if (as happened to me) you get to wave goodbye to the Fellowship of the Ring, with everyone from Frodo to Bill the Pony heading off into the distance; and then the *very next quest you pick up* has Legolas, who's still hanging around in Rivendell, coming with you and your group to kill a bunch of wood trolls.

Hmm, a little sequencing problem there, methinks…

Artemis & Actaeon

Boston Museum of Fine Arts contains a type of bowl[20] (a *bell krater*) from Ancient Greece, used for mixing wine and water. It was made in Athens about 470 BC and is ceramic with red figures. The figures were created by an artist known today as the Pan Painter.

One side of the vase shows Artemis shooting Actaeon.

Okay, so Actaeon was a famous hunter, and one day he was out hunting with his dogs. He saw a stag run into a small copse and raced ahead to shoot it with his bow. However, among the trees he stumbled across a pool, in which was bathing Artemis—goddess of the hunt. She was completely naked and stunningly beautiful.

What Actaeon *should* have done was say, "Excuse me, have you seen a stag come this way?" What he *did* do was gawp.

Somewhat annoyed by this, Artemis transformed Actaeon into a stag, whereupon his dogs arrived and tore him to pieces.

Strangely, the image on the mixing bowl shows Artemis fully clothed. I say "strangely" because Actaeon is naked but for a cloak over his left shoulder. Even more strangely, on the other side of the vase is the signature picture that gave the Pan Painter their (modern) name; this depicts a, hmm, let's say "highly aroused" Pan chasing a shepherd boy.

Maybe the Pan Painter didn't want to irk Artemis by showing her in her full glory?

Unrealistic Reality

It's important for an MMO to be tight to its fiction. This isn't just the case for ones that are based on a well-known intellectual property (*LotRO*, *SW:TOR*, or even *WoW*): if players are signing up to spend time in an imaginary world, they don't want that world to be inconsistent with either itself or with what they already know about it. In short, players want it to be *believable*. An MMO's fiction is one of its greatest selling points. If it's unrealistic—machine guns in Middle Earth, for example—then prospective players won't accept it.

So why, then, if it's so important for immersion for an MMO to be tight to its fiction, is it not important for it to be tight to the deferred-to reality that supports that fiction?

[20]Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Accession number 10.185 http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/mixing-bowl-bell-krater-153654

The answer is that MMOs *are* tight to that reality—it's just that this "reality" isn't *Reality*. Rather, it's the players' *expectation* of what physical reality is.

Players think that as soon as you take your finger off the W key, you stop moving. There's no deceleration, it's instantaneous, TWANG!, like in the Road Runner cartoons. They don't think this way when they drive their car to work in the morning, but they *do* think this way in games because they've played so many that this is how they expect it to be. If you were to correct it, then, perversely, the very disrupting-immersion effect you're trying to avoid would kick in. Therefore, you defer not to *Reality* but to the player's *expectation* of what "reality" means for this world. In the absence of fiction, MMOs today default not to how the real world works, but to how MMOs work.

So while the reasons that 1980s textual worlds strove to be realistic have not gone away, they have evolved. Nowadays, players have so many preconceptions (from having played so many games and MMOs before) that it's these that are the basis of what's "real" for an MMO. Immersion is better served by defaulting to "game physics" rather than to real-world physics.

Immersion is only half the story, though. The other half, emergence, suffers greatly from this. Game physics is simpler than real-world physics, primarily because when it was being developed it had to be—the computers couldn't handle anything too complicated. Unfortunately, simplicity does not give much opportunity for systems to interact in either seen or unforeseen ways and for new content to emerge. As a result, except for a few honorable exceptions (*EVE Online* springs to mind), today's MMOs are shallow. Content has to be created at great expense by designers, rather than arising from the interactions of conditions that designers have set up.

Eventually, the increasing weakness of the paradigm will become so apparent that MMOs will have to reboot. Someone will develop an MMO that defaults more to *Reality* than to a naïve approximation to it; after all, players can learn, and if they're learning something they already know, then it shouldn't take long. They merely have to get over the initial shock of finding that, if they make a noise, distant monsters will hear them, and that they won't be able to run away as fast wearing a full suit of armor as can someone wearing a calf-length robe.

It's another one of those, "I hope this happens while I'm still alive but I don't suppose it will" things.

Multiple Narratives

There is a difference between multiple narratives and one narrative with multiple threads through it.

MMOs, being games, are driven by player actions. Narrative removes meaning from action. Offering three, four, or five different endings *still* removes meaning. Your gameplay experience is running on rails that are all going in the same direction, and switching tracks doesn't change that.

MMOs should be richly-featured enough that they don't *need* imposed narrative; events can unfold as a result of player action and interaction, taking individual players' personal experiences into uncharted waters. Players shouldn't merely get the chance to *redirect* the narrative, they should get the chance to *define* it.

Story Machines #3

Games don't actually need to have plots. Abstract games have no plot by definition because they have no fiction to give foundation to their chains of causality. They nevertheless do create story because the causality is implicit in their rules and mechanics. If you've ever told anyone what an amazing game of *Minesweeper* you just had, how you couldn't believe your luck, how there was no way to know which of two squares was a bomb and you had this gut feeling it would the one on the left, and you were correct, and then the whole of the rest of the game just opened up before you in a glorious sequence of unfolding success, each click revealing which square to click next in a just-in-time fashion, putting you on a roll until you were looking at an empty field and a new personal best high score; if you've ever related that kind of experience, you've told a story—a history—of an abstract game. Yet *Minesweeper* has no plot whatsoever. All it has is gameplay and some fiction to explain that that some of the tokens will lose you the game if you click them.

If games don't need to have predefined plots, why is it that so many bother with them? Is plot simply a way of adding dressing to make a world more believable and so more immersive? I had a long conversation about this several years ago with screenwriter-now-game designer, Lee Sheldon, and one of the points he made struck home: some people are just *better* at creating stories than others. Left to their own devices, players will always do things that initiate events, but these events may not necessarily be the stuff of which great stories are made. If you encourage someone proficient in crafting stories to create a plot that directs events such that they are more emotionally loaded, more intellectually significant and lead to a more satisfactory and meaningful conclusion, then this will enhance the player's overall experience.

This is a view I do accept. However, following it through to its logical conclusion raises the question: why bother with games? Why play a game when you can watch a movie or read a novel, with a plot constructed by someone so much better at creating plots than you are?

The answer is that people are individuals. Some things are incredibly important to *them*, but not to anyone else (or at least not to many other people). In playing a game, a player can cause events to occur that might not even impinge on the consciousness of the majority, but which are a major experience to that one person. They don't even have to be a *major* experience, they can be a minor experience that the player is using as a building block to construct a more meaningful story in their mind. That story may well be garbage to anyone else, but it's not to the player concerned. They did what they did in the game because it generated (or is working towards precipitating) an event that is a continuation of the unique causal chain the player is assembling, extrapolating, appropriating, honing, and personalizing.

Games, as systems, allow players to experiment with events, picking from them the ones that make the best story *for them*, which will lead to the further stories that are best *for them*. An overall, plot-driven series of events can also do this, but by necessity it's offering a general rather than a specific story. Games allow people to weave these plots into their *own* story—the one that is arising from the gameplay they are manipulating.

Games can, of course, be played automatically by bots to create a random series of events that make causal sense; that doesn't make the results stories, however. When players play, the events they create *aren't* arbitrary—they're purposeful. Why that one series of events, out of all the possible series, rather than another? It can only be because of the choices the player made, which ultimately can only have been made because at some level they were somehow significant or important to that player. There may be some randomness involved, there may be some plot involved, but there will *always* be gameplay involved.

Games are machines for creating stories. Play them, and your imagination will construct ones that work for you.

Everyone likes stories, but they like their *own* stories most of all.

Don't Mix Them Up

People who have never played MMOs aren't going to be able to understand a new one merely by watching other people play it.

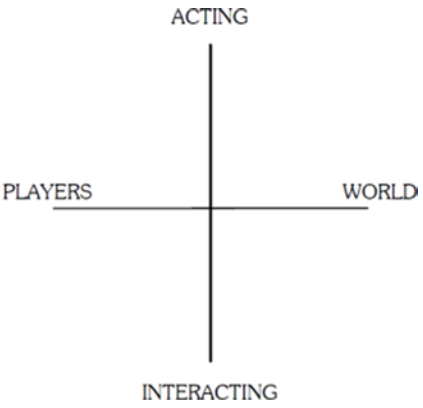
People who have played MMOs for thousands of hours are.

Don't mix them up.

Player Types

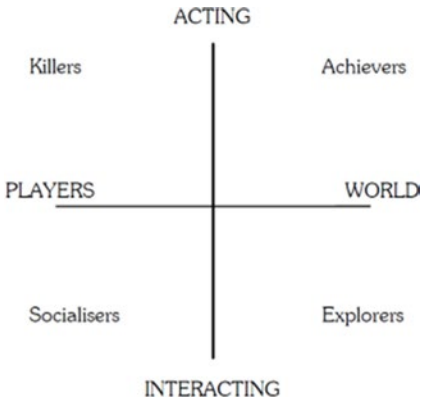
Achievers, explorers, socializers, and killers are collectively called *player types*. These types are not just some arbitrary list like the "10 different kinds of teenagers" enumerations found in newspapers—they're actually related.

Here's a graph:



The x-axis goes from an emphasis on the *players* of the virtual world to an emphasis on the *world* itself. The y-axis goes from *acting* on (the world or players) to *interacting* with (the world or players).

Each of the quadrants of the graph describes a player type. Achievers act on the world, explorers interact with it, socializers interact with players, and killers act on players:



This basic four-type model is used in most MMO design today.

Unrealistic Physics

At some level, all MMO physics is only approximate. Even so, any virtual world will have to consider how to deal with concepts such as object compositionality and the propagation of actions' effects through time, whether or not it tries to match real-world physics.

The real world has the whole of *Reality* as its hardware. It can do anything instantly, without computation—it just *works*. MMOs have to run on computers embedded within the real world, so can never hope to match its speed and accuracy. We might eventually be able to create worlds that are able to fool people into treating them as real most of the time, but we won't create worlds that model *Reality* at the speed *Reality* runs.

Thus, even if you want your MMOs to be realistic, at best they're only going to be so at some level of abstraction. They're inherently *unrealistic*.

However, "unrealistic" to players means "not working conformant to the fiction" (where the default "fiction" is "real life"). A Newtonian model of physics would probably be "realistic" enough not to jar for most people.

The key point in determining the persuasiveness of a virtual environment is not how well it models *Reality*, but how well it models players' *view* of *Reality*.

Story Summary

A game is a system for generating stories. The designer defines the domain of possible stories for the game; the player, through decisions made during play, generates events and experiences. To these events and experiences, the player attaches greater or lesser degrees of meaning; the retelling of these events and experiences are the player's story, which is therefore a history. The player's evolving decisions are based on both their story up to that point and the ways that the player wishes to see their story unfold.

Dextrus

One of *MUD2*'s players was called Dextrus.

Dextrus was among the most imaginative players I've ever seen—very innovative, very exciting to watch and very, *very* charming. However, she had something of a bad girl reputation: in *MUD2*, character death is permanent (if your character dies, it's obliterated from the database), and people got exceedingly cross when Dextrus appeared out of nowhere, beat them to a bloody pulp and took their stuff. It was made worse by the fact that she was invariably at a lower level than her victims when she did this.

One day, Dextrus decided to renounce her killing ways. Tired of being shunned, she announced that she would thenceforth fight no other player characters except in self-defense. Sure enough, that's precisely what she did. In the weeks that followed, she redeemed her previous indiscretions by helping out other people unstintingly; she rushed to their aid when monsters caught them unawares, she gave them her own equipment to use, and she led thrilling expeditions to the more far-flung and dangerous parts of The Land. Because she was so charismatic and kept true to her word, in a short space of time she became hugely popular.

So it was that some three months later she volunteered to accompany another player, a mage, on his "wiz run." In *MUD2*, once a character has sufficient experience points, they are promoted to the level of wizard/witch (*wiz* for short); this is the point at which the regular game is over for them—they achieve immortality as (basically) an administrator. A *wiz run* is when you're trying to get those final few points you need, with everyone else either cheering or chasing you. It's often a player's most exhilarating and enjoyable time, a climax long to be remembered and relived. Dextrus had generously offered to be the mage's bodyguard as he endeavored to rack up those last, remaining, immensely-important experience points.

The pair descended deep underground to the Dwarfen Realm. The risks were high—there were a *lot* of dwarfs—but the rewards were enticing. The mage and Dextrus fought their way side-by-side through several heavily guarded

rooms until they finally stood on the threshold of the treasure chamber. The contents of this trove would be enough to push the mage over the finishing line and into wizardhood.

Suddenly, disaster struck! Dextrus went off to the Royal Bedroom to deal with the dwarfen queen, but the king appeared before the mage could follow and immediately attacked him!

The fight went right to the wire. The mage was still injured from earlier fights, and despite trying every trick known to him, he seemed certain lose. Then, right in the nick of time, Dextrus, having finished off the queen, raced back and downed the king.

And before the mage could even say thanks, Dextrus downed him, too.

She'd been tracking the king, knew where he was, knew when he was about to appear, and had *deliberately* left to kill the much-easier queen *knowing* that the king would attack the mage a split-second later. Having dispatched the queen in a timely manner, Dextrus patiently waited until the mage was close to death before returning heroically to save the day.

Then, in one perfect, exquisite moment, she killed a mage who was 30 seconds short of making wizard. It was exactly 100 days since she'd last killed another player character, *right down to the hour*.

Seconds of stunned silence passed. Then, a zero-points novice bearing the same name as the deceased mage entered the game. He shouted a single, agonized word: "WHY?"

The reply was simple: "Because I'm Dextrus."

Are MMOs

Are MMOs:

- Games? Like *Chess*, *Soccer*, *D&D*?
- Pastimes? Like reading, gardening, cooking?
- Sports? Like huntin', shootin', fishin'?
- Entertainments? Like nightclubs, TV, concerts?

Rail Games

Why do people like stories?

Well, one of the reasons is that they can have experiences that would be dangerous or expensive or even impossible in the real world. "Experience" here is indirect, though. Stories only allow readers to have these experiences vicariously: they get them second-hand, from accounts of people who did have them (or, if fictional, can be believed to have had them). If I were to read a story about a Roman legionary, that wouldn't mean that I experience what the legionary experienced; rather, it means I can *imagine* what the legionary experienced. There's a difference between imagining an experience and experiencing it.

Games allow you to experience a story directly, though, because they're interactive. This explains why there is a market for games that have a strong story element. There's a balance that has to be struck, however, between the story that the designer wants to tell and the story that the player wants to experience. If the player can't alter the story in any substantial way, what results is a game that runs on rails—a *rail game*. MMO stories, particularly quests, tend to be mini-rail games.

Now you could argue that this is no bad thing. Rail games allow people to choose whether or not to experience optional sub-stories, so individuals are able to tailor their experience to their desires. However, they can only do this if they know what kind of experience the sub-story promises; in rail games, the only way to find that out is actually to embark on the sub-story. Then, if you don't like it, you backtrack. Unfortunately, this is usually counter-immersive—as is reading/watching someone else's account of it.

Playing through a story you can't affect is not generally fun. Playing through a game with a story fragment as a reward (a cut scene, say) is better. Establishing the context of a story (again, through a cut scene) can add meaning. Creating your own story through your own actions is best of all.

So why do we still see so many rail games in MMOs?

It's because one player's rail game is another player's sandbox. Imagination matters.

Level Design

Narrative is often broken down into self-contained chunks—"missions," "quests," and "levels," for example. Creating them is called *level design*.

Level design involves:

- Exploring different aspects of gameplay.
- Matching the degree of challenge to the player's experience.
- Resolving the previous narrative obstacle.
- Setting up an obstacle for the next level.
- Conveying a sense of progress along the narrative path.

The same thing applies for areas and zones in virtual worlds.

Even if designers deny that there is narrative in their MMOs, there is. The only point of interest is whether it's implicit in the challenge level or explicit as an arc.

(The answer should always be that it's implicit in the challenge level, by the way).

Achiever, Explorer, Socializer, Killer

I ought perhaps to mention that sometimes these player types are called *Bartle types*. That's because the theory that introduced them is my theory[21].

I'd feel embarrassed about foisting this on you if it weren't for the fact that this theory enjoys widespread use. Actually, that doesn't help: I still feel embarrassed. Oh well, given that I wrote this book, you were kinda expecting me to tell you my ideas, right?

Besides, I *have* to mention Player Types theory because ultimately it leads to an answer to the single most important question in MMO design: "Why do people play MMOs?"

That's *ultimately*.

[21]Richard A. Bartle: *Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players who Suit MUDs. Journal of MUD Research* 1(1), 1996. http://www.mud.uk/richard/hcds.htm

Elsinor

Elsinor is one of those esoteric games that has a mechanic (if you can call it that) which can act as a catalyst for discussing game-design theory—or it would, if only game-design theorists knew about it.

The rules for *Elsinor* were published in a British play-by-mail magazine (a *zine*) called *Son of Bellicus*, back in 1974. *Son of Bellicus* was a spin-off from *Bellicus* that merged back into the main zine a year later.

Here is a summary of the rules from *Bellicus* 19:

> *Elsinor is a fantasy game in which anyone can write as much as they please, provided it is consistent with what has gone before, and it makes interesting reading. Anyone may play, and for as long as they wish: all they need to do is submit sagas for their characters or nations when they feel like it. When players' sagas conflict with each other, the better written will generally prevail. The GM retains the right to alter factual and numerical information as he sees fit, though in practice he hopes such rights gain little exercise.*

There were some maps in *Bellicus* 19 to bring readers and potential new players up to speed.

Okay, so this is a game in which what players say becomes true by fiat. The role of the gamesmaster (the editor of *Bellicus*, Will Haven, hence the use of "he") is supposedly to stop random griefers from exploding the planet and destroying everything, but in practice it was merely to exist: the presence of such a role meant that no-one ever did send in such contributions, at least not as far as I know (*Bellicus* didn't have many 12-year-old readers).

Like *Mornington Crescent*, *Elsinor* is the Magic Circle incarnate. It's entirely free-form. Players can literally (and, since they're writing, I guess that's *literally* literally) make anything they want to happen, happen. That they don't is because they know that if they did, the game would end. They don't want the game to end, therefore they don't do it. They continue playing only because they enjoy the world they are collectively constructing, the story they are collectively writing, and the drama they are collectively enacting through their competitiveness.

It's like a modern wiki story. However, it isn't one: it's a game. Players are trying to improve their character or country at the expense of other players (the maps suggest that there are limited resources over which to compete). Their goals are personal, not shared; they share the context as a precondition

to playing, but they have no reason to desire that *Elsinor* has, say, a beginning, middle, and end. Overall story structure is irrelevant. They decide what they want to achieve, then set out to achieve it. This is in the knowledge that they *could* achieve it in one sentence if they wanted to, but where's the fun in that?

The players of *Elsinor* dropped in and dropped out, but the world and its story-now-history lived on. I believe it was eventually removed from *Bellicus* because too many new subscribers hadn't been following it and objected to paying for 2 or 3 pages of partial story they didn't understand each issue. I don't know what became of the game after that.

A story-telling game that's held together only by the imaginations of the players, though: what a concept!

MMOs Are

Are MMOs:

- Games? Like *Chess*, *Soccer*, *D&D*?

  Yes—to achievers.
- Pastimes? Like reading, gardening, cooking?

  Yes—to explorers.
- Sports? Like huntin', shootin', fishin'?

  Yes—to killers.
- Entertainments? Like nightclubs, TV, concerts?

  Yes—to socializers.

Complete

The Player Types model is *complete*, in that there are no players who play MMOs for fun yet fit none of the types.

That doesn't mean they're necessarily a *good* fit, though.

Plot Creation

Suppose that you want your game to have a predetermined plot. This isn't an unreasonable suggestion: you may well be able to give players a better experience by explicitly directing their play than they would get simply by stumbling around in the dark.

So, what tried-and-trusted methods are there for creating plots that people will find appealing?

Ah. Well if there are any, they've yet to be discovered. Nevertheless, although we have no guaranteed formula for creating perfect plots, we *do* have formulae that describe the *shape* of such plots. What's more, these are eminently transportable into games.

The medium perhaps closest to computer games in its outlook is film, and it will perhaps come as no surprise to you to learn (if you didn't know already) that most movie scripts follow a fairly rigid blueprint. Around the time that Roy Trubshaw and I were programming *MUD1*, a book was written that has come to dominate how Hollywood movies are scripted. This is *Screenplay*[22] by Syd Field.

Syd Field's job was reading spec screenplays and recommending whether or not they should be made into movies. He read *thousands* of them, and noticed that the best ones all seemed to share the same pattern. He called this the *paradigm*.

Very briefly, Field noticed that the top screenplays all had a traditional, three-act structure with the parts broken down into roughly-similar page lengths (one page of screenplay converts to approximately one minute on the screen):

- Beginning. The first 15-25 pages establish the situation.
- Middle. The next 50-60 pages describe conflict leading to crisis.
- End. The final 10-20 pages resolve the conflict.

Furthermore, what happened *within* the acts also had a lot in common:

- Act one contains a *catalyst* within the first 10 pages, in which things are knocked out of whack**. Buzz Lightyear arrives**.
- Act one ends with a *big event*—a major change leading to a new, challenging situation. **Buzz falls out of the window**.

[22]Syd Field: Screenplay: the Foundations of Screenwriting. Dell Books: New York. 1979.

- Act two begins with the protagonist forced to address the issues of the big event. It's a series of *rising conflicts* with some successes but mainly failures.
- In the middle of act two comes the *pinch point*. Something awful happens, and the protagonist hits rock bottom. The only way out is for them to commit to their cause. **Buzz realizes he's a toy**.
- Following the pinch point, the conflict intensifies and the pace quickens as the protagonist fights back.
- Act two ends with the *crisis*. The worst thing possible happens, all seems lost, and the protagonist faces a crucial decision. **Buzz believes Andy doesn't want him back**.
- Act three begins with the *climax*. The protagonist defeats the antagonist and wins the day. This is what the whole movie has been building up to. **The toys gang up on Sid**.
- Act three ends with the final *resolution*. Loose ends are tied up, and the protagonist's life returns to some sort of balance. **Buzz and Woody are reunited with Andy**.

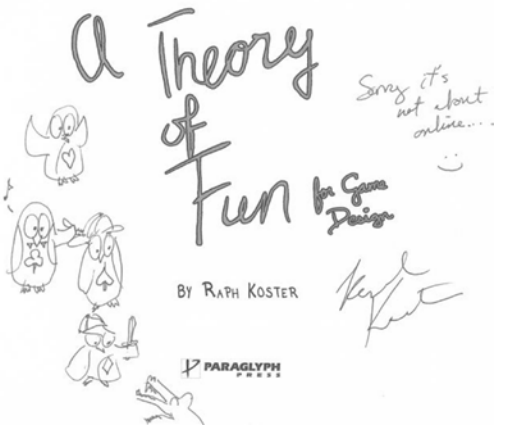
Next time you watch a regular modern movie, look out for a moment of total despair half-way through: this paradigm is used *very* extensively to structure screenplays… What's more, it can be and has been applied to games, most notably in Michael Bhatty's 2004 RPG, *Sacred*, in which he specifically and successfully retooled it for the games medium.

There are two points I'd like to make for those designers planning on using Syd Field's paradigm to structure their game's narrative.

First, remember that unlike the case with movies, you *aren't* creating the story—you're creating the *plot* that the players will *interpret* as the story (narrative).

Second, there *are* other paradigms.

Penguins



The above is a scan of the title page of my copy of Raph Koster's book, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. As you can see, someone has drawn on it.

I had a copy of the book anyway, but at a Game Developers' Conference party the publisher gave me another one. I was going to ask Raph to sign it, but weirdly it was *already signed*. As the book is 50% pictures, I asked Raph to draw a picture in it instead.

He did more than that: he drew four pictures. The pictures are of penguins illustrating the four player types, each bearing a suit motif. This was special for me, not just because I was up for the First Penguin award the next day (did I mention I won it?), but also because penguins are a running theme in Raph's book. I was very pleased with the result, and grateful to Raph for taking time out to do the drawing (he had to go to three other parties that night). That book was destined for pride of place on my bookshelf.

When I got home, there was a note in my luggage from Covenant Aviation Security, LLC, the company entrusted with inspecting every piece of luggage to leave San Francisco International airport. The note explained that they had opened my luggage. It did not explain that they had taken my First Penguin award to pieces then reassembled it so badly that it came apart in my suitcase and the metal base scrunched up the cover of the book, damaging it irreparably.

Kishōtenketsu Question

This is a question I asked my second-year students in an examination in 2013. It was worth 20% of a 2-hour paper.

Question 3

(a) [3%]

Briefly explain the relationship between *story* and *plot*.

(b) [3%]

Explain why it is important that players should be able to construct a story about what happened in a game they have just finished playing.

(c) [8%]

Write 60 Seconds of Gameplay for the game *Rogue*.

(d) [6%]

An oriental story-telling form called *Kishōtenketsu* does not use a three-act structure and contains no conflict. Instead, it has four acts. In the first act, something normal happens; in the second act, a twist is added; in the third act, something seemingly unrelated happens; in the fourth act, a contrast is drawn between the first two acts and the third act.

For example:

- Act 1: A girl goes to a drinks machine for a bottle of cola.
- Act 2: The bottle won't come out. She has to hit the machine to free it.
- Act 3: A boy sits alone on a park bench.
- Act 4: The girl arrives and surprises the boy by giving him the cola.

Assess the suitability of *Kishōtenketsu* for use in computer game plots.

Not Getting Player Types

In 2011, I did three MMO consultancy gigs in the space of two weeks. All three of the in-development MMOs I saw used the Player Types model as a character class system.

No no no!

Ask yourself this: if someone is an explorer, and they look at four character classes corresponding roughly to achiever, explorer, socializer, and killer, which character class will they choose? The answer is: all four of them. They'll try out each and every one of those character classes. They're explorers: they explore game systems. What did you *think* they explored?

What would achievers pick? Well, they'd look at the rewards on offer for each of the classes. They'd pick the one that gave them the best rewards. They wouldn't care which one it was, they'd take it. None of the other player types would even regard the "rewards" associated with classes as a factor. Why would they? They're not achievers!

What would killers pick? They'd pick the class that gave them the best opportunity to be annoying. It could be any of them. Consensual player-versus-player has its moments, but life as a killer is so much sweeter when people can't meaningfully fight back.

What would socializers pick? Actually, in all three of the cases I saw, they probably *would* pick the socializer-targeted class—but only because from their perspective it's the least bad. It's the only one in which you get to socialize properly, but in all likelihood only with other socializers.

The Player Types model applies to the *whole MMO*, not merely to some neatly defined system-within-the-world.

Breadth and Depth

Breadth and depth are two very old concepts of MMO design, dating back to the early MUD days.

Breadth means the size, number, and variety of things to see and do in an MMO.

Depth means the effects, complexity, and interactions of things to see and do in an MMO.

Breadth is about form, depth is about function; breadth is about player choice, depth is about player understanding; breadth is about scope, depth is about detail.

Breadth is range, depth is extent.

Despite what today's players might believe, most modern MMOs aren't actually all that deep. There are some exceptions—*EVE Online*, for example—but even something like *World of Warcraft* pales in depth alongside, say, *LegendMUD*.

Where modern MMOs leave MUDs for dead is in breadth. They have a lot of space, and they pack it with content goodies. There's always plenty to do in them. Newbies in particular love breadth.

Yet after a while, when they've done the same kill-10-rats quest *yet again*, players begin to sense the superficiality of it all. It's all just the same thing, being said in different words. Where is there some content you can actually get your teeth into?

Newbies may love breadth, but oldbies *love* depth.

Two Questions, One Answer

Why are MMOs so important to you that you'll spend many hours of your time playing them?

Why are MMOs so important to their designers that they'll spend their one and only life* making them?

* Mileage for your religion may vary.

Balance and Overbalance

If you take the standard four-type player graph for an established virtual world, the player types will be in equilibrium. This doesn't mean you have equal numbers of them, it means that you have them in balance. One killer might have the weight of 50 socializers, for example.

If you, as a designer, want to promote or demote players of particular types, you can do this by making changes that will encourage the balancing point to shift.

Most designers do this by tackling the types head-on. This can work, but it's often misunderstood as a technique. For example, suppose you want more explorers. The right way to do it is to present something mouth-watering and just leave it at that (the long-inaccessible airfield next to Ironforge in *WoW*, for example, tantalized explorers). The wrong way to do it is to give them experience points for entering a new zone: XP is an achiever reward, not an explorer reward.

Perhaps a better way to do it is not to think in terms of players but in terms of the axes of the player types graph. If you add more world, you will benefit both explorers and achievers; if you add more interaction (basically, more things to do), then that will benefit both explorers and socializers. In this approach, design is a bit like one of those ball-bearings-in-a-maze games, where you tilt the plane of the maze to move the balls so they end up in the right indentations. With MMOs, you tilt the plane of the player interest graph to try get more people into the segment you want them in (hopefully without making the ones already in the right place pop out).

This is how MMOs can be made to balance. However, it's possible to tilt too much and cause all the players to rush to one edge of the plane. This leads to overbalancing. When a virtual world overbalances, it ceases to be a virtual world:

- Too much emphasis on players at the expense of world leads to a mere communication channel, like a chatroom.
- Too much emphasis on world rather than players makes for an effectively single-player game.
- Too much emphasis on interaction rather than action makes the player reliant on the actions of others or of the game world—they may as well be watching TV.
- Too much emphasis on action makes play monotonous and grindy.

Virtual worlds (yes, this *is* a theory that applies to the likes of *Second Life*, as well as to MMOs) occupy a sweet spot in the middle, where everything comes together. It's what makes MMOs special.

Well, it's what *allows* MMOs to be special. What *makes* them special is something else…

In or On?

Do you log *in* to your MMO of choice, or log *on* to it?

Back in the olde days when we used to use mainframes, some people would "log on" and some would "log in." The former always felt more passive than the latter and was mainly the preserve of casual users; experts would usually "log in," but if they weren't busy they might say "log on." Thus, a conversation might go like this:

> A: Are you logged in?
>
> B: Not at the moment, why?
>
> A: Can you log on to CompSoc 1? I want to see if you show up in my snoop program.

There was a similar, but not identical, distinction for "log off" and "log out": the former would mean you hadn't really finished what you were doing, but the latter was more final. You'd usually say "I've got to log off" rather than "I've got to log out."

In the same way that on/in usage for mainframe sign-ups seem to indicate a depth of understanding of the machine as an environment, perhaps for MMOs it's a measure of your degree of immersion?

So do *you* log in or do you log on?

Mirror Neurons

Game designers draw on many aspects of Psychology and have done so for ages. Flow, presence, and common theories of fun all began life as theories from Psychology. Another theory that game designers use is that of *mirror neurons*.

It turns out that neurons in the brain aren't activated solely by doing things; they can also be acted by seeing things being done. This is fairly obvious (if neurons didn't activate when you saw something, your brain couldn't interpret your vision); what makes mirror neurons special is that they activate both when you're doing something *and* when you see someone else doing the same thing.

The way mirror neurons were discovered (in Italy in the 1980s) is rather gruesome, but it does show the system's basic principles at work. Essentially, monkeys that had been wired up with electrodes in their brains were being monitored to detect which individual neurons fired when a monkey reached for an object (a banana). The experimenters found that the very neurons that fired when a monkey went for a banana itself also fired when it saw someone else grasping a banana. The researchers called these "mirror neurons."

Neuroscientists are still debating the effect of mirror neurons on the brain's abilities, and it's not even entirely clear whether mirror neurons are different to regular brain cells or whether their behavior is due to their connectivity. Psychologists use the term as shorthand to mean the way in which people copy or model other people (or, in the case of characters in books and computer games, pretend-other-people). It's particularly popular for explaining emotional responses.

The way it seems to work is that you observe someone doing something, your mirror neurons recognize the pattern, and then they fire as if you'd done it yourself. This ripples out to the rest of your brain, which reacts as if you had indeed done the action yourself, as the stimulation received is the same. For example, seeing facial expressions that trigger emotions can (via mirror neurons) cause those emotions to trigger in you, too. Hence, empathy.

For MMO designers, this is most important in characterization. If the body language of an NPC or your avatar is carrying an emotional payload, mirror neurons help you feel for that character. Although primarily an animation thing (your lead animator is the real expert here), nevertheless the characters' behavior has to match. You don't want a character looking apprehensive in a situation in which there is no perceived threat, for example: that would work against identification with the character, and serve to detract from the persuasiveness of the virtual world rather than enhance it.

Categorization

Some people don't like categorization. They feel that everyone and everything is different, and to categorize is to treat distinct entities as if they were the same. It ensnares thinking, and obscures important subtleties that differentiate between cases.

What these people *particularly* don't like is when *they* are categorized, as it runs up against their sense of individuality.

Well, if you *are* against categorization as a concept, this means you can't in all conscience tell anyone about it. Words are categorizations for concepts, so applying them to argue against categorization is to argue against yourself.

What you *can* argue against is *bad* categorization or *useless* categorization. If a theory of player types were to split people into groups depending on what letters their real-life names began with, that would be a useless categorization (at least in game design terms; psychologists might make something of it). If a theory were to split people by the absolute level of their main character, that would be a bad categorization because different MMOs have different advancement structures (although it could be okay if it referred to a single virtual world).

Categorization enables us to talk about related concepts in a cogent and well understood way. Sure, some people without a great deal of intelligence might be unable to think outside these categories, but I feel that in general members of the human race are somewhat brighter than that.

Tank Types

I usually play MMOs as a healer because that way people like me and, if I don't like them, I can passive-aggressively kill them. This means I spend many playing hours watching tanks being pounded.

I've seen hundreds of tanks in my time, and as a result have noticed some similarities in behavior among them, standard across MMOs. Here are a few of my observations, for the benefit of those who may be thinking of becoming a healer or those who already are and wish to vent their frustration by recognizing their favorite stereotype. Note that this is an incomplete categorization, not a model:

- Tanks who position themselves in set-piece boss battles like no other tank *ever*, yet insist that "everyone does it this way."
- Tanks who have so much health that you just know they have no damage mitigation whatsoever and they're as likely to survive as a house of cards being hit by a bowling ball.
- Tanks who are alts of people who normally DPS, who know the fights backwards as DPS, but are utterly clueless as tanks.
- Tanks who are undergeared and over-apologetic. Yes, I know you're wearing armor made of tissue paper, you don't have to keep saying you're sorry every time I have to scrape you up off the floor.
- Tanks so single-minded that they are oblivious to the presence of the rest of the group. Was someone explaining the fight in chat? Too bad.
- Tanks who are last to be ready for every fight, then start it without warning and complain that no-one else was ready.
- Tanks with less health than me. These are usually among the testiest when they get smashed to pieces, as clearly it's the healer's fault they can be one-shotted.
- Tanks who wear pumpkins or other comedy head furniture. We can tell you're in your early teens by your vocabulary, you don't have to wear the uniform, too.
- Tanks who say they're going in, then don't. They will, of course, complain heartily if anyone took them at their word and stepped into aggro range because "pulling is the tank's job."

- Tanks who tell the healer how to heal. This is like being rescued following a road traffic accident and telling the paramedics that you want blue bandages. No, not that way up, the other way up. Oh, and put them on using a paint roller.
- Tanks who never say anything, ever, for any reason.
- Tanks who complain that everything is bugged. "It's that bug where the boss resets aggro." No, it's that moment where the boss always resets aggro, and you were all out of taunts.
- Tanks who stand in the fire, then complain that you can't heal them through it. "I thought you were better geared!" Yes, and I thought you were better-brained. *Don't stand in the fire!*
- Tanks who are brittle and unforgiving. The slightest mistake by anyone (tank excepted) and they're screeching about how they hate PUGs and why don't people learn the fights. They threaten bitterly to quit the group if people don't shape up. Everyone is immensely relieved when they make good on this promise.
- Tanks who use weapons meant for DPS, which they justify by appealing to some obscure, under-reported feature that they claim helps tanking, even though you know the real reason is that they don't *have* any other weapons.
- Tanks who are certain of falsehoods. No amount of argument will persuade them that there is a simple way to beat this boss that doesn't involve the healer's having to stand in the fire.
- Tanks who are easily confused. If the fight goes how it went in the YouTube video they watched, they're fine. Any slight deviation, though, and they spam every one of their abilities not on cooldown. If they survive, they'll usually compliment your healing, which is sweet of them, given how much they just made you panic.

Ah, I feel much better for having written that!

Effect and Affect

Immersion is often regarded as a key reason why people play MMOs (by people who don't play them all that much—or by people who have played them a very great deal).

Actually, it's a key *expression* of why people play MMOs.

Where Have All the Hackers Gone?

So where have all the hackers gone today?

Well, they haven't turned into crazed computer vandals—that's a misappropriation of the term "hacker." Yet can they really have simply disappeared?

The answer is that they've not so much disappeared as *migrated*.

Let's see: is there anywhere today that an idealistic, maverick, creative genius with a love of playing with systems can go?

Yes, that's right—they go into MMO development.

Hmm, I sense raised eyebrows.

Okay, so they *do* go elsewhere, where there are frontiers. Academia has a fair few of them and so does regular computer-game development. There's a *very* high concentration in MMO development, though. It's not a coincidence, either.

I'm going to talk about designers here, but a similar argument applies to programmers, too. So: how did most designers get into the industry? In the main, it's because they *played the games*. By playing the games, they absorbed the systems—systems put there by hackers and only really fully appreciated by hackers.

MUD1 was written to embody hacker ethics. Some got in by mere osmosis, but some were placed there on purpose. For example, Roy and I put freedom of identity at the core *deliberately*. This is something that MMOs still value highly.

Why? Because their *designers* still value it highly.

Designers have played one or more MMOs all the way through. They've grokked them. In so grokking them, they've had to absorb the hacker ethics embodied in them, and therefore to have had hacker ethics themselves for it all to make sense.

By the time they've reached the elder game, they know what virtues MMOs deliver—freedom, tolerance, individuality, imagination, art, rebellion, understanding—and they want *others* to experience these, too. They want to be *designers*. So they design.

The basic ideals that they instill in their MMOs through their designs will affect their players—for some, their *millions* of players. Many of these players will themselves become designers and pass those same ideals on to *their* players, and so on, *ad infinitum*. You thought my casual early reference to our "grand scheme for world domination" was a joke? Eventually, *everyone* will be able to create MMOs, their ideas shaped by those creating them now—by those who have art-and-beauty, life-changing, freedom-loving hacker ethics.

Designers create MMOs because they can put a piece of their *soul* into them. Their MMOs are an expression of themselves—of their beliefs, hopes, fears, demons… Through developing MMOs, they develop *themselves*. This puts them in a rare and privileged position: that of *artist*.

Designers create MMOs because that's the latter-day hacker's medium for self-expression, and they *are* such latter-day hackers.

And the reason they're such latter-day hackers? It's because MMO design *selects* for hackers.

Killer or Achiever?

Many people confuse killers and achievers. For example, Players who attack other players in a consensual PvP environment are usually achievers, rather than killers: they want to achieve within the context of PvP. Killers may also engage in PvP, but they'll be the ones camping the spawn points to catch lone players running back to their groups.

Killers measure themselves against other people. Achievers measure themselves against absolute standards. A killer wouldn't particularly care that they had 1,000 kills to their name, except that it shows the game supports their actions; likewise, an achiever doesn't care how other players are doing, except insofar as it validates their own status.

Elitism

Many achievers not only like to achieve, they like others to know they've achieved. It helps them affirm their belief that their achievements matter.

One of the outcomes of this is a tendency towards elitism. If you think you're good, then you want to play with the big kids; you don't want to play with the little kids. That way, you feel more like a big kid yourself because the big kids accept you.

This has led to situations in which players who want a pick-up member for a group they're in will openly and publicly ask for players who have a high gear score or possess some item you can only get from having completed content they deem sufficiently exclusive. As a result, players who don't meet the criteria rarely get a chance *to* meet it: if the only way to get the gear is to run the instances and the only way to get into an instance group is to have the gear, well, you can see the problem.

There is, surprisingly, a solution to this: start your own pick-up groups. If you demand that would-be members of the group "be geared and experienced," applicants will tend to assume that you yourself are both. They very rarely check. So long as you know what to do, you stand a good chance of getting away with it. You can increase your odds even more by playing as a tank or healer, so your embarrassingly low damage-per-second doesn't ring any alarm bells.

It's simple and it usually works. It rarely occurs to people who want to be accepted as elite that the person who is asking them to prove they're elite isn't in turn elite.

Of course, the smart designer has less competitive ways of allowing players to authenticate their elite status, so that players can still feel good about themselves without having to make others feel bad about themselves as a consequence.

Tank Types (Better)

Not all tanks are vainglorious psychopaths. Here are some of the more positive types you see:

- Tanks who never give up. The DPS is clearly incompetent and there's no way we'll defeat the boss before the server is taken down for maintenance next week, but the tank just gets up without complaint, goes straight back in and gets beaten into goo time and time again. You have to admire their perseverance. Maybe one of the DPSs is a relative or something.
- Tanks who are an order of magnitude better than everyone else. Did the rest of the group get killed by that earthquake? No problem! The tank will just solo the boss.
- Helpful tanks. Ones who actually teach people useful stuff without mocking them for not having boned up for the fight as if it were an exam.
- Good, adaptive tanks. Ones who go where they're supposed to go, are hit by what they're supposed to be hit by, interrupt what killer moves they're supposed to interrupt, who self-heal when they spot the DPSs are standing in fire and the healer has to fix them. These are a joy to heal.

Fortunately all tanks think they're one of those listed above, so no-one is going to take my earlier remarks personally. This is just as well: tanks are good at taunting.

Hmm, I really should think about categorizing these; there's probably a Master's dissertation in it at the very least.

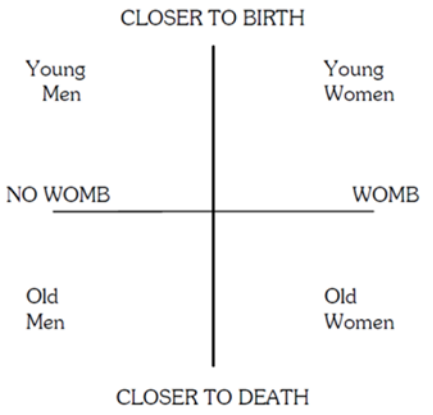
Player—that's *Player*—Types

Player Types theory only applies to people who play virtual worlds for fun. It doesn't apply to people who play but not for fun, such as journalists, researchers, or designers.

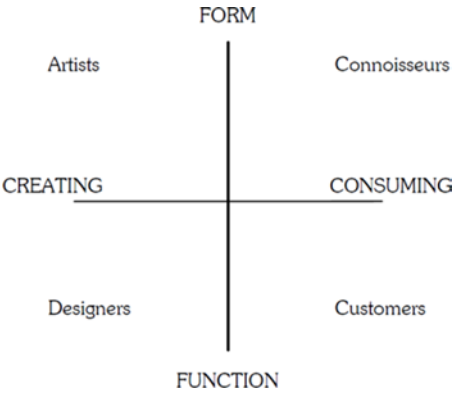
If you want to break the theory, "it doesn't account for gold farmers!" is not going to do the trick. It's not *intended* to account for them.

Partitions

The Player Types theory way of partitioning players isn't the only one possible, of course. Here's another (let's call it New Partition #1):



Here's yet another (New Partition #2):



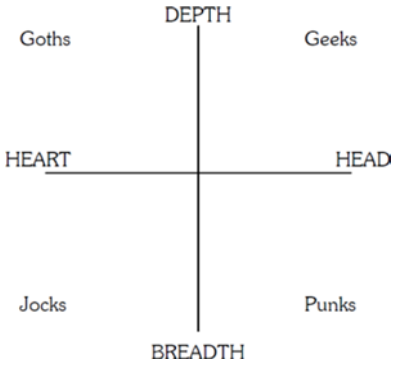
Both of these are complete (they have no gaps between their types) and reasonably correct.

New Partition #1 tells you nothing you didn't already know. It's not useful for MMO design, unless your MMO has physical implications involving wombs (or lack thereof) and age. New Partition #2 has more interesting things to say. You could vaguely use it to identify who plays what games (*Minecraft* for artists, *Mass Effect* for connoisseurs, *Angry Birds* for customers, *The Sims* for designers)—or maybe not.

These graphs are easy to construct:

You were deciding which one you are, admit it. As it happens, this one is actually useful for MMOs: solo *versus* group play; sandbox *versus* theme park.

There are plenty of existing psychometric profiling systems that you can use to make these graphs. It's not hard to take one, give it cool labels and describe it as "player types." This one is a slice of Myers-Briggs[23]:



That's thinking *versus* feeling, extraversion *versus* introversion.

Given this, why use the Player Types model?

Well, other typologies look at personalities or activity or world view. Player Types theory looks at *fun*.

[23]Myers & Briggs Foundation: *My MBTI Personality Type*. http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/

Player Type Dynamics

Players of different types don't exist in isolation from one another in MMOs—their paths continually cross. How they deal with this depends on the types of the players involved.

For example, achievers tend to regard most explorers as nerds and losers, although highly-skilled ones will be accepted as eccentrics. Nevertheless, achievers depend to some extent on explorers for puzzle-solving. Those web sites where you go to look up quest solutions, raid fight tactics, and how best to level your long-neglected cooking skills don't get written on their own. As a result, the number of explorers in an MMO has a slightly amplifying effect on the number of achievers. The reverse is not true, though: a rise in the number of achievers will have almost no effect on the number of explorers.

If we examine all permutations of player type pairings, we find:

- The number of achievers amplifies the number of killers and slightly dampens the number of socializers.
- The number of explorers slightly amplifies the number of explorers and achievers, and slightly dampens the number of killers.
- The number of socializers amplifies the number of socializers and killers.
- The number of killers dampens the number of achievers, slightly dampens the number of explorers and greatly dampens the number of socializers.

Looking at this list, it seems apparent that if you want more players overall, then you should get rid of as many killers as you can. The number of socializers will shoot up as a result, and as this has no effect on explorers or achievers, it must be a good thing—right?

Well, *almost*. The thing is, the list applies to the general case, but if you push things too far, then it fails. Decreasing the number of killers will indeed greatly increase the number of socializers, *so long as you don't decrease it too much*. Socializers need something to talk about, and killers provide a vast amount of drama (and hence material) for them. If you eliminate too many killers, then the number of socializers will *also* start to drop; furthermore, because the number of socializers has a feedback effect on socializers themselves, this could lead to a mass exodus.

If we take these edge conditions into account and run the dynamics as a system, we find there are only four stable states that a virtual world can have:

1. A balance, with all four types having a parity of influence.
2. Killers and achievers in equilibrium, with socializers few and far between, but a healthy dash of explorers.
3. Socializers heavily dominant, with killers all but disappeared and explorers and achievers not staying for long.
4. An empty world. The killers drove everyone away, then left themselves.

The first case, where the player types are in balance, is the hardest to set up, and it doesn't scale well. However, it is the most stable—you need fewer incoming newbies to keep it going. It was the default approach for the first decade or so of virtual worlds' existence, until the Great Schism that separated game and social worlds. Game worlds (case two) and social worlds (case three) are also stable configurations, which is why this separation remains the *status quo*.

It doesn't *have* to be this way, of course…

Programmers' Self-Image

Games programmers see themselves as different to programmers working in the wider software industry. They [warning: wild generalization incoming!] see themselves as:

- Individualistic.
- Creative.
- Talented.
- Better than their peers.

This means they dislike working in teams, doing so only perhaps with grudging acceptance if they're the leader of such a team.

The thing is, on the whole their self-image is actually *right*…

VoIP

VoIP means "voice over IP," where the IP in turn means "Internet Protocol" rather than "intellectual property."

VoIP covers a number of technologies for communicating over the Internet using voice. Sometimes, MMOs have a built-in VoIP facility, so they can tie speech to the names and pictures of the avatars engaging in it, but most don't bother. Instead, players use third-party solutions such as TeamSpeak, Ventrilo, Mumble, and even Skype.

Not everyone uses VoIP in MMOs, although it's usually a requirement for end-game activities such as raids and team-based PvP. Note that *speaking* isn't always a requirement, but being able to hear some leader's instructions is. This is just as well because many players don't actually like the idea of speaking to other players. Sometimes it's because they don't want to give away some detail about their real-world self (age, gender, nationality, stammer); sometimes it's because they share a house and speaking annoys everyone else there; sometimes it's because they know that if they do speak, they'll end up being roped into running raids themselves.

The universally-accepted excuse for not participating in VoIP as a speaker is "I don't have a mic." Sometimes, it's actually true, too.

Beyond MMOs

Player Types theory doesn't apply to people who play things that aren't virtual worlds for fun. As great as it is to see its being used successfully for web site design, the theory itself makes no claims in that area.

Because of this, if you try to use it for railway-passenger management and it fails, that doesn't invalidate the theory.

What Determines a Player's Type?

It's easy to look at what a player does and decide that player's type on the basis of this—"She kills a lot of player characters, she must be a killer," or, "She talks a lot, she must be a socializer."

It's easy, but it's a mistake.

Sure, there's a correlation between actions and words, but the important thing in determining a player's type is not to know *what* they did, but to know *why* they did what they did.

Sometimes, critics of the theory will say something like, "I like crafting, but you don't have a category for crafting! Your theory sucks!" They're right in that the theory doesn't have a category for crafting, but they're wrong in that this doesn't mean the theory sucks. They should ask *why* they like crafting:

- Is it because they want to upgrade their gear? Then they're an achiever.
- Is it because they want to give the stuff they make to their friends? Then they're a socializer.
- Is it because they want to find out what kind of advanced things can be made? Then they're an explorer.
- Is it because they want to undercut someone else's prices for the pleasure of bankrupting them? Then they're a killer.

Yes, I know there are other reasons ("I want to sell what I make at a profit"), but they all map onto a player type ("well you're an achiever then"). It's the *why* that's important, not the *what*.

Despite having spent 100 days passing every field test for being a socializer, Dextrus was a killer.

It's the *why*.

The Proteus Effect

What is symbolized by the color black? Yes, so actually it's a shade, not a color, but as I'll be talking colors here, it's too finicky to say "color or shade" the whole time.

Okay, so although black is often used in a context of formality, elegance, and sophistication, it's mainly associated with death, evil, and depression (at least in the Western world). That's just symbolism, though: no-one would treat you as if you were malevolent if you dressed in black.

Well, yes they would. A 1988 study of American football and hockey teams[24] found that the ones playing in black had more penalties awarded against them than teams playing in other colors. The experimenters also staged choreographed plays with 50/50 decisions in them, with one team wearing red and the other wearing black or white: when they showed these to referees, the referees penalized the team wearing black more often than the team wearing white, even though the events were pretty well identical.

What this means is that people treat you based on how you look, whether you like it or not. That's bad enough, but it actually gets worse. The same study found that not only did teams playing in black get more fouls awarded against them, but they committed more fouls in the first place when wearing black kit. In other words, players' *self-perception* also changed depending on the color of their strip (well, uniform, as this was in America).

What has this to do with MMOs? Well, if something as simple as the color of the clothes you're wearing can affect how you behave, what about the appearance of your avatar?

Experimenters at Stanford University[25] had women using female avatars interact with male avatars for a while. The women's avatars were dressed in a range of outfits from gender-neutral (jacket, jumper, jeans) to rather more suggestive (crop top, miniskirt, fishnets, knee-high boots). The researchers found that the women who were given the less conservatively-dressed avatars were afterwards more likely than the other women to agree with statements such as "In the majority of rapes, the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation." In other words, their real-world opinions had been influenced by their avatar's clothing.

This means the traffic between player and avatar is two-way. Not only do players affect how avatars behave, but avatars also affect how players behave. This is called the *Proteus Effect*, after the shape-changing Greek sea god of that name.

In the same way that through mirror neurons we can observe other people, we can observe our own internal selves. If you regard your avatar as yourself, you get to do both: observe yourself externally and internally at the same time. You can change your self-perception as a result—or not change it, if you don't like what you see.

On average, tall people earn more salary than short people.

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[24]Mark G. Frank and Thomas Gilovich: *The Dark Side of Self- and Social Perception: Black Uniforms and Aggression in Professional Sports. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54(1), 74-85, 1988.

[25]Jesse Fox, Jeremy N. Bailenson and Liz Tricase: *The Embodiment of Sexualized Virtual Selves: The Proteus Effect and Experiences of Self-Objectification via Avatars. Computers in Human Behavior* 29, 930-938, 2013.

What Programmers Want

Games programmers want the following from their employers:

- Free pinball tables, pool tables, and bar football on site.
- The ultra-latest hardware.
- Free games, toys, T-shirts, and trips to major overseas conferences.
- A pizza delivery firm within a five-minute radius of the building.
- Top-quality coffee and a fridge full of fizzy, sugary drinks. Oh, and Mars Bars.

As these wishes are shared by everyone on the development side of the game industry, plus a sizeable chunk of the production side, it perhaps comes as no surprise to learn that the programmers often actually *get* what they want.

Kishōtenketsu Answer

This is the mark scheme for the examination question I showed you earlier.

Question 3

(a) [3%]

Briefly explain the relationship between *story* and *plot*.

```
Stories consist of an ordered series of
events.                          [1]
Plots are ordered series of causally-
related events.                  [1]
Fiction involves reassembling the plot
by reading the story.            [1]
[For extended ramblings about story/
history/backstory, award up to 2. They
need to cover plots to get all 3.]
```

(b) [3%]

Explain why it is important that players should be able to construct a story about what happened in a game they have just finished playing.

```
Such stories are constructed from the
retelling of significant events.  [1]
If there are no significant events,
that means the game had no interesting
choices.                          [1]
Therefore it lacked gameplay (i.e., a
series of interesting choices).   [1]
```

(c) [8%]

Write 60 Seconds of Gameplay for the game *Rogue*.

```
[Note to examiners: the candidates have played Rogue for a class
discussion.]

For describing about a minute's worth
of play.                         [1]
For mentioning key features of Rogue
(your character, movement, combat,
treasure, darkness, levels, etc.) [2]
For conveying a sense of the gameplay.
                                 [2]
```

```
For describing the player's available
choices.                          [1]
For describing the player's reasons for
making particular decisions.      [2]
```

(d) [6%]

An oriental story-telling form called *Kishōtenketsu* does not use a three-act structure and contains no conflict. Instead, it has four acts. In the first act, something normal happens; in the second act, a twist is added; in the third act, something seemingly unrelated happens; in the fourth act, a contrast is drawn between the first two acts and the third act.

For example:

- Act 1: A girl goes to a drinks machine for a bottle of cola.
- Act 2: The bottle won't come out. She has to hit the machine to free it.
- Act 3: A boy sits alone on a park bench.
- Act 4: The girl arrives and surprises the boy by giving him the cola.

Assess the suitability of *Kishōtenketsu* for use in computer game plots.

```
[This is open-ended, so marks can be awarded for other approaches. However,
it is expected that candidates will propose that Kishōtenketsu is suitable
for computer games because it allows for interesting choices to be presented
from which a personal narrative for the player can be constructed. Economic
arguments as to the sales potential of such games should be afforded fewer
marks. Note that if the candidate points out that this exam question follows
the Kishōtenketsu structure, they'll get full marks—they have a definite
future in game design.]
```

None of the 25 or so students who took the exam got the 20 marks for spotting that the question followed the *Kishōtenketsu* structure. However, some did go on to get jobs in game design.

As tests for potential game designers go, I'd therefore rate it sufficient but not necessary.

Fishing

One of the common ways to attack Player Types theory is by using the counter-example-that-isn't. People will say: "I like fishing, but that isn't one of the types!"

Well, that's right, it isn't one of the types. It would be some crazy-detailed theory that had a category to explain why people like fishing. However, remember what I wrote earlier: the rationale with player types is not *what* people do but *why* they do it.

Why do you like fishing?

- You like increasing your fishing skill? You're an achiever.
- You want to share health-giving meals made from fish with your friends? You're a socializer.
- You want to see what kinds of fish you can catch with what probabilities? You're an explorer.
- You hope to lure someone else into joining you so you can suddenly assault them while they're armed only with a fishing rod? You're a killer.

It might alternatively be that you just like the fishing mini-game, in which case the theory doesn't even apply to you: you're not playing the MMO because it's fun in and of itself, you're playing it simply so you can play the fishing mini-game for fun.

If you want to break Player Types theory, a fishing (or building or crafting) example isn't going to do it.

The Soul of a Game

In the same way that you can look at people as either sets of behavioral traits or as some central core of being that manifests itself through behavioral traits, you can regard "game structure" as either sets of reactions to actions or a central core of design that manifests itself through reactions to actions.

In people, we call that central core of being a "soul."

We do the same in games, too.

The Uncanny Valley

Mirror neurons have a better chance of firing if what they're exposed to is close to what they're usually exposed to. Yes, you can read the emotion of a cartoon face, and yes, you can tell how someone in a book feels by how they are described. However, neither works as well as a real face, thanks to millions of years of evolution designed to optimize the task. Or, if you're a creationist, thanks to the millions of years of evolution that gave your deity universe-creating powers.

I'm guessing that you've heard *of the uncanny valley* already, as it's fairly well-known. It was discovered in Japan in 1970, in the context of human-looking robots. People warmed more to robots as they became more human-looking, until suddenly they were repulsed by them. The robots did look more human than before, but in a way that creeped people out. They were nearly-but-not-quite human-looking. This switch from positive to negative opinions is followed by a switch back to positive opinions when the robot starts looking and behaving so human that it's hard to tell the difference.

In computer games, the uncanny valley began to make its appearance as graphics became more photorealistic. You'd be looking at a character that seemed human and behaved human, then it smiled and AIII! What the hell is THAT?! However, the reason I mention it isn't so that you can dredge up your own chucklesome memory of unsettling characters; rather, it's to point something out that's nothing really to do with animation at all.

See, you can experience the uncanny valley not only through watching odd-looking, disturbing movements. You can also experience it from watching not-quite-right behaviors. Animators rule animations, but designers rule behaviors. If you see a character eating a chicken, then whether or not it creeps you out depends only on your level of vegetarianism. If you see a character eating a chicken with the feathers on, that's something different. Likewise, adult characters being overly-friendly to child characters could also feel creepy. You'd draw negative conclusions about such characters, even if the only reason they were acting that way was because of emergence in their AI.

Any human-like behavior of characters can lead to the uncanny valley. Just be aware…

The King's Opinion

Imagine an MMO in which a powerful NPC, a king, will only help you if he holds you in high esteem. Players would have to work to get him to respect them. Then, they'd have to maintain his respect or his opinion would change.

Wouldn't that be something special?

Well no, not really.

The King's opinion is just a number. All I have to do to ingratiate myself with the king is find out what particular buttons I need to press and then press them. You want me to kill 2,000 orcs? Okay, I'll kill them. You want me to kill a particular boss? Okay, that boss is going down. You want me to collect dragon eggs that spawn infrequently in odd places? It's boring, but hey, I'll do it. Want me to visit a bunch of obscure locations, or make some particular robe, or provoke some noble? They're just quests like any other.

Where it could get interesting is if the king's opinion of you is not independent of his opinion of other people. However, for that to work you'd need an MMO with far fewer players per shard than we have at present.

The other way to do it would be to have the king's opinion be a structure, not a number.

Kings with artificial intelligence: now that *would* be something special.

Design by Referendum

Why try figure out what the players want when you can just ask them to vote on ideas? It introduces democracy to design. Democracy is good!

Who decides what players get to vote on? What happens when votes are passed to implement incompatible things? What happens when organized groups of griefers manage to pass a vote that mandates a change to the vote-counting code?

Where's the artistic *vision* that imbues the MMO with a soul?

Why Achiever-Only MMOs Don't Work

I'm sick of telling people this, so I thought I'd write it down. Next time, I can innocently ask whether they've read this book and sell them a copy if they haven't.

So: achievers like to achieve. They like to think they are a cut above other players. Their collection of rewards is their yardstick. They look at their own rewards, look at the rewards of others, and feel like they've achieved something if their own are better. It doesn't matter how these rewards are manifest—levels, points, gear, money, army size, achievements, special items of clothing—so long as an achiever can use them to tell that they're better than someone else.

This means you need a "someone else" for the achiever to be better than. Socializers have miserable sets of rewards. In an MMO that has a reasonable contingent of socializers, almost all achievers can therefore feel superior to almost all of them. The socializers, not being achievers, have no incentive to achieve anything; they plod along entirely happily, mainly to be with their friends. Progress-indicator achiever rewards mean nothing to them.

Now what if there are no socializers? What if your MMO is pitched so strongly at achievers that the socializers stay away?

Most of the achievers will look down and see someone below them. However, some achievers will be near the bottom where the socializers were. They don't like being near the bottom. They want to be better than other players, but they get no sense of that because everyone else is better than they are. After struggling and failing to improve their status (because they really *aren't* as good as everyone else), they quit.

Now, someone *else* is at the bottom. They weren't at the bottom before, but they are now. The same reasoning applies, so they fall away, too. The process continues, until eventually you end up with a game full of either equally expert, high-skill players or masochists. You lost all the other achievers as they gradually fell away from the bottom.

If you have socializers, they act like a hem that stops the cloth above them from fraying. Therefore, if you want to maintain a lot of achievers, you need to keep a viable number of socializers around.

Point of View

First-person shooters offer, as you may suspect, a first-person viewpoint. You see the game world through the eyes of your avatar. Indeed, at least while you're engaged in combat, this is the only point of view you're likely to get.

At first, 3D graphical MMOs also offered the first-person perspective as default. Then, they began to allow other camera positions, such as over-the-shoulder. Nowadays, you can choose from a range of settings for your default.

In theory, how you choose to view your character—first-person, second-person, or third-person—*should* say something about how immersed you are in an MMO. A first-person point of view (PoV) should be more persuasive than a third-person PoV. Failing that, at the very least it ought to say something about how much you identify with your character.

I say "in theory" there, but unfortunately there *isn't* actually any formal theory that links point of view to sense of immersion in MMOs. There is some work that says women prefer first-person and men prefer third-person (by a ratio of around 2:1 in both cases)[26], which is interesting but, again, doesn't come with an explanation.

What perspective do you use? Have you tried others? Is it for purely practical purposes, or does it just "feel" right?

Non-ebook readers: scribble your answer in the box below.

Good, that should make people buying this book second-hand wish they had a new one. More royalties for me!

[26]Nick Yee: *It's a Matter of Perspective*. *The Daedalus Project*, July 2004. http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000816.php

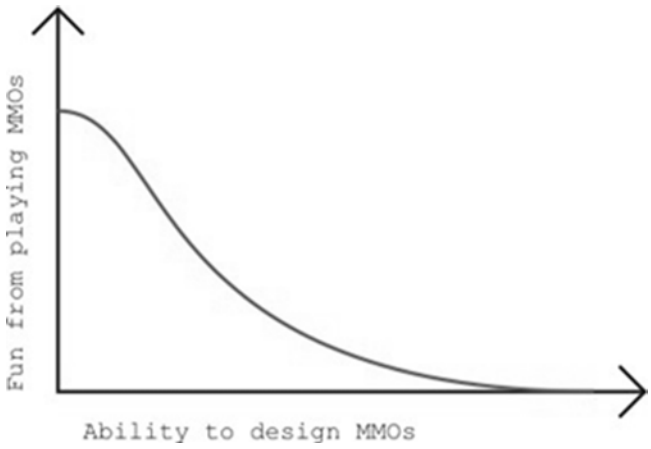
Feedback Loop

If an MMO designer designs for four player types, then when we analyze who actually plays their MMO it shouldn't come as a surprise if we discover it's packed with examples of those four player types. If the model is complete and correct, then this is a good thing; if it's overlooking some players or mischaracterizing them, then it's less useful.

When I first described player types, back in Internet prehistory, we were seeing MMOs created for only *one* type—that of the designer. Vast swathes of potential players were being put off because they didn't share the designer's idea of what fun was. We were getting into a feedback loop: design for an achiever, attract achievers; then, when some of those achievers themselves become designers, they'll also design for achievers, only even more so.

My aim with player types was to raise the possibility in designers' minds that there were other types of player *at all*; if that's the only enduring legacy of the theory, I'll therefore consider it a job done.

The Designer's Lot



Parasocial Relationships

A *parasocial relationship* is one that a person has with someone who doesn't know them.

This may seem strange, but it happens all the time. It was first studied in the 1950s with regards to actors, TV show hosts, news anchors, and other people whom their audiences felt they "met" regularly. People are very good at building models of other people in their heads—it's how they can tell how other people will act. They can form opinions of these people, which is fair enough; they can also form one-way relationships with them, though, which is rather more interesting.

It was discovered that people who do develop parasocial relationships with TV personalities are more likely to engage with their shows. TV producers therefore set about trying to engender such relationships. The methods they used included:

- Addressing the viewer directly. "See you next week!"
- Using nonverbal communication such as eye contact. Teleprompters help here.
- Using good-looking people.
- For characters, making them *relatable* so that the viewer can see things more easily from the character's point of view.

Why is this of interest to game designers? Well it also turns out that the people with whom individuals develop parasocial relationships *don't have to exist!* "I don't care if he *is* a fictional character, I still want to marry him."

This technique, which like many other psychological tricks can be mildly exploitative, is nevertheless handy in computer games. If you wanted a player to become sympathetic to a character, you would have that character interact with the player's proxy in the game world (their avatar) in the ways outlined above. This should encourage the player to form a parasocial relationship with the character, which you can then use to carry meaning.

This wouldn't really be worth mentioning in an MMO context but for one further point: in MMOs, people can develop parasocial relationships *with their own avatars*, which is to say with themselves. This takes the whole concept into uncharted territory. Nevertheless, it does happen: people will treat some of their characters differently to others, as if they were separate and distinct individuals in their own right.

I'd be moderately upbeat about this if I hadn't seen one-too-many movies in which the ventriloquist's complex bond with their dummy takes a slightly murderous turn.

More Why

Suppose you want to identify your MMO's socializers. How would you do that?

Well, socializers communicate. Therefore, if you check through your log files and find out who talks the most, those people will be your socializers, right?

No.

Some socializers are enthusiastic listeners but unenthusiastic speakers—"socializer" does not mean "extrovert." Yes, some socializers *do* like to talk a lot, but two explorers could hold a three-hour long conversation exchanging notes. Sustained banter in guild chat could easily be driven by friendly and open socializers, but it could also occur because achievers are getting bored grinding; and if you don't give them something fun to do *real soon*, they're going to be so fed up they'll leave.

Besides, socializers could be chatting on a VoIP channel or playing alongside friends in the same room.

As I keep saying: it's not what people *do* in an MMO that defines their player type, it's *why they do it*.

I should mention that testing a theory when you can only observe what people do and not why they do it is very difficult. Perhaps this explains some of Player Types theory's resilience to attacks.

Faults in the Player Types model

The Player Types model—achievers, explorers, socializers, killers—has been used successfully in MMO design almost since the day the theory was published (*Ultima Online*, which was launched one year later, used it). It's still relied on in MMO design today (*WildStar* used it). As theories go, it remains the best one out there—in part because it's pretty well the *only* one out there…

This doesn't mean it's perfect, though. It has been rightly criticized for falling short in a number of areas, primarily:

- It doesn't explain how or why players move between types, which is known to happen.
- It has two very different subtypes of killer for no apparent reason.
- It doesn't account for the concept of *immersion*.
- The theory doesn't connect to any established theories outside of MMO design, so isn't fully grounded.

Thus, although the theory has practical uses, it's incomplete and therefore troubling to theorists.

It's also troubling to MMO designers: given that the theory works, it would be constructive to know *why* it works.

Different Views

How would you like the ability to present your avatar so it looked different to different people? You might want to look old and fat to one set of characters but young and slim to another. You might want to be female to some players and male to others. You might want to look like your real self to your real friends, but not to others. How would you like that ability?

How would you like it if you could change the way that others looked to you? So all gnomes were human-sized, or you didn't see their clothes, or they had huge noses?

How would you like it if people could change the way *you* appeared to *them*, without your knowing?

Losing

The problem with losing in MMOs is that (except in very few examples) ultimately *everyone* loses; or at least, they don't win. How do you "win" *Guild Wars 2* or *WoW* or *LotRO*? You don't. You win battles, but you can never win the war.

How about if MMOs *did* let you win?

Let's say that there are 50 levels, and when you get to level 51 you are given the option of retiring or going back down to level 50. If you retire, congratulations, you've won, your character sails off into the sunset and disappears from the database except as a proud entry in the Hall of Fame and maybe a 3D-printed figurine. If you don't retire, you'll be asked again next time you reach level 51.

What would happen?

What would happen if you didn't get asked at level 51 whether you wanted to retire—you just retired automatically?

What if retiring were the *aim* of the game? If stopping playing was *how* you won?

Don't think of it in terms of the MMO you currently play, think of it in terms of an MMO designed for this kind of play. If it were the escape-from-a-prisoner-of-war-camp idea I mentioned earlier, you'd know from the start that when you escaped, it would be game over. Would *that* make a difference?

You're thinking, right?

Drift

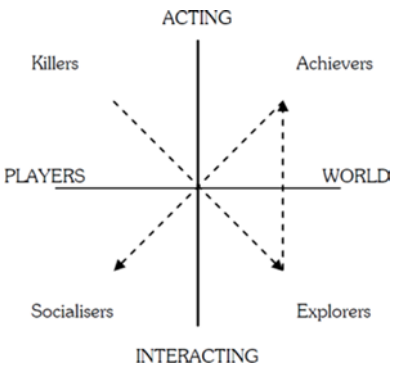
It's long been known that players change their playing style over time—indeed, the observation *precedes* that of player types by over a decade! The term we always used to describe it back then was *drift*.

Here's what we (well, I) noticed happening when a room full of newbies was introduced to *MUD1*:

- They started by killing each other.
- After losing one-too-many times, they abandoned killing and went exploring.
- In the course of exploring, they would gain points and go up levels, and would slowly switch to this as their primary playing style.
- Finally, those who kept playing for weeks and months would become grizzled old-timers who spent all their time talking to each other.

Some of this, in particular the switch away from killing, was intentionally designed-in. I didn't really consider the rest explicitly—I just knew that I had enough checks and balances that it would all work out.

Anyway, using the Player Types model now available to us, we can lay out the track that players follow as they drift: killer to explorer to achiever to socializer. Because most players by far progress this way, it's called the *main sequence* of player development. Here's what it looks like on the player types graph:



Although this is the main sequence, that doesn't mean it's the *only* sequence. There are other sequences, too, which seem to oscillate. Some players, for example did this:

- Dived right in and tried to score points.

- After realizing that the game was more sophisticated, they decided to be more scientific about their approach and began exploring.
- After gaining enough knowledge to continue, they went back to racking up points.
- They ended their playing days months later as experts who knew the inner workings of the game implicitly.

This goes achiever to explorer to achiever to explorer—the *achiever sequence* (if you can call it a sequence).

Here's another thing some people did:

- Begin by killing each other or shouting abuse.
- Give up on the antisocial behavior and start making friends and asking for help.
- When they had many contacts, they would begin leading groups of players.
- Finally, they'd pass the baton on to someone else and wind up as grizzled old-timers.

This goes killer to socializer to (a different kind of) killer to socializer—the *socializer sequence*.

There were other strange progressions, too. All this shows that, although the Player Types model allows us to label the various stages of the main sequence of player development, it's fairly obvious that it isn't up to describing the other sequences. In other words, it's limited.

Well, in its *present* state it is, yes.

Mechanical

Games have mechanics, but games are not their mechanics. You don't get gameplay from a set of do-this, do-that components. You need the components, yes, but they're a means to an end.

Game design also has mechanics, but game design is not its mechanics. You don't get art from a set of do-this, do-that components. You need the components, yes, but they're a means to an end.

Designers and players alike can recognize mechanistic games when they see them.

Designers and players alike can recognize mechanistic game design when they see it.

Noble Content

In the old days of CompuServe, there was the concept of "noble content." This was the feature set that subscribers used to justify paying for their CompuServe account: "to follow stock prices"; "to educate my children"; "to read book reviews"; "to send electronic mails." Good, wholesome, acceptable-to-society stuff.

However, people *actually* used CompuServe mainly for other things: chat rooms and games. With no noble content, people wouldn't have signed up; with no ignoble content, they wouldn't have stayed.

The world has changed since the 1980s. With MMOs, "this is a game" is now the noble content. People sign up because they want to Play A Game. Once they're there, they come across the ignoble content—the socializing, the exploring, the killing—and it's *that* which keeps them. Well, many of them.

If the ignoble content weren't there, they wouldn't stay; if the noble content weren't there, they wouldn't come.

"This is a game" is the noble content for MMOs, at least at present. "This is not a game" may be true for non-achievers, but it won't be noble content until it can be used as a gateway to ignoble content of its own.

SkySaga

These are 3D printouts of characters from *SkySaga*:

They're eight inches tall, full color, and cost several hundred pounds each; but if they were two inches tall, they'd be much less expensive. Remember them when you read the word "boon" later in this book.

Texts

A text is a (normally sequentially-ordered) collection of symbols from which meaning can be extracted. Yes, normally that means writing, but that's not all it means. If someone can convey meaning through a dance, then that dance is a text.

Texts are either fixed or fluid.

Stories are primarily fixed texts. In reading a story, you do have some freedom to interpret the words as they best suit you, but your ability to affect the plot is zero. The same applies to all fixed texts, whether movies, TV shows, or photography.

Not all texts are fixed, however. Stage actors have some room to change their performance in response to the audience's reaction. If someone tells you a story, then they can alter that story on-the-fly to suit how you're engaging with it. The tale of Umar from the Hamzanama can be told multiple ways. Stories can be adapted by the storyteller in the telling, for the benefit of those listening.

With non-fixed texts, you can gain wider insights. However, you are dependent on the storyteller to hone the telling so it's right for you. If the storyteller is not up to it, you'll miss out.

The best stories are flexible, but you have to be told them by a good storyteller—who even then is not as good as you yourself would be, because you understand yourself better than anyone else does. The best storyteller for you is therefore, well, you! However, it's hard for you to tell yourself anything other than fixed stories—you don't get much chance to change them.

If you could tell yourself unbounded stories, in which you have control over both the way the story is told and the way it is interpreted, then how wondrous that would be! There would be no need for any level of metaphor: you'd be saying what you needed to hear, how you needed to hear it.

This is life, or at least it would be if life were fiction.

The best stories aren't told; the best stories are *lived*.

Alter Ego

Back in 2004, I visited an exhibition of photographs in London called *Alter Ego*. It was by photojournalist Robbie Cooper, and it consisted of more than 100 large panels (20 inches by 24 inches) showing pairs of pictures. On the left of each pair was a real person; on the right was their virtual world avatar. Some were from game worlds (MMOs), some were from social worlds; all were striking.

See? Striking.

Some of the people featured looked just like their avatar. Others resembled them in more of a "have you noticed how dogs often look like their owners?" kind of way. Some looked radically different.

Robbie spent considerable time seeking out more people to photograph in this manner and eventually put together a collection in book form[27]. I was one of those he photographed, which is why I get to call him Robbie and you don't.

For historical reasons, my image comes first in the book. The photograph alongside that of me is a screen shot of my "avatar" from *MUD2*:

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Richard the arch-wizard is here.
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The book has short interviews with the people pictured, telling their stories. Some of these are themselves utterly compelling.

Why do you suppose that the real images are on the left and the corresponding avatars are on the right?

[27]Robbie Cooper: *Alter Ego: Avatars and their Creators*. Chris Boot, 2007.

Right Rewards

When I first went to school, any written work we did that was particularly good was given a star. A similar system exists to this day in most schools, so I expect you know what I mean.

We had three levels of stars: gold were the best, then silver, then stars in block colors (red, yellow, blue, green). The latter were much more common than the golds and the silvers, which I suspect was mainly to do with the fact that every packet of stars had one sheet of each of the six possibilities, so there were always going to be four block-color stars for every gold and silver star.

Many children aspired to win the coveted gold stars, but interestingly there were others who only wanted them if their friends got them. They complained if they got a gold or silver and their friend got a green. As a general rule, they wanted their own stars to be the same colors as those of their friends. They appreciated that you had to do something special to get any kind of star at all, but thought gold stars were often "the wrong color."

Okay, so gold stars are achiever rewards. You give them to achievers. People who want them are achievers, so that's good, it gives them an incentive (at least until a few years later when they realize that such stars are actually worthless). Those who want stars the same color as their friends' are socializers. If you give them stars of any kind, you're giving them achiever rewards. Why would they be interested in those? They're socializers! Give them socializer rewards!

The solution to the above is to give people *either* a gold star *or* three block-color stars. Silvers are two block-color stars. You can even give a silver and a block-color to make a gold if you want to teach the beginnings of arithmetic. This way, children who are smart socializers can be flagged as smart to the achievers, but can also have the same color as their Best Friend Forever. It uses up a few more stars overall, but you're probably going to have a lot of spares anyway with a 4/1/1 distribution.

Schoolwork isn't an MMO, but the same principle applies: make the reward fit the type!

In the Bag

I gave a talk at the Gamification Summit in San Francisco in June, 2012. Such events usually give attendees goody bags with initial stuff in them plus room for any more stuff they might pick up during the course of the day. The Gamification Summit was no different in this regard, except it printed four versions of its goody bags:

Clockwise from top left: killer, achiever, explorer, and socializer.

I was rather chuffed.

Baby Learns to Walk

Baby thrashes around, finding how to move arms, legs, fingers.

Baby combines sequences of actions to kick, to balance, to sit.

Baby uses these sequences to achieve goals, thinking about what to do, toddling.

Baby repeats until the sequence is automatic and can be used as a single, compound action: walking.

Evil Characters

Have you ever played an evil character in a modern MMO?

The chance that you have is exceptionally remote. You may have played characters that are *labeled* as evil, but you almost certainly won't have played any that actually *are* evil.

An orc in *LotRO?* An undead warlock in *WoW?* A dark elf, arasai, iksar, ogre, sarnak, ratonga, or troll in *EQ2*? The worst they are is "naughty."

(They're all "races", too, but that's a different rant).

Evil people are as likely to attack each other as anyone else: it's rule by fear. In an evil world, you do what your guild leader says not because you agree with it or because you don't want guild drama, but because if you *don't* obey orders, they'll **halve your score**.

If evil characters really *were* evil, only evil, stupid, or curious people would actually play them. Everyone else would play good—or play some other game. "Evil" is just a role-play sticker. How can you be evil if you can't actually *do* anything to anyone?

Likewise, "good" is only a label. Self-sacrifice is so cheap in today's MMOs (a couple of minutes of corpse running plus a few further tiresome seconds reacquiring your buffs) that even evil people will do it. You may be hailed as being good for saving your buddies, but "nice" would usually be the more accurate word.

People who play "good" characters and think they're play-acting good would be horribly shamed if exposed to *actual* goodness. People who play "evil" characters and think they're play-acting evil would have an even worse time of it if exposed to *actual* evilness. Today's MMOs rarely have the interactions necessary to support either concept in any depth. If they did, how many people would play them?

Good and evil in MMOs are labels. As with all labels, choosing one (when you create your character) says something about you, but *believing* what it says is a completely different matter.

In-World IP

An idea that crops up from time to time is that of having secret recipes in MMOs. The idea is to reward explorers who are more interested in crafting than killing.

Leaving aside the fact that explorers are interested in neither (they're interested in exploring), this nevertheless sounds reasonably attractive on the face of it. If you find the secret recipe, then your swords will be better than those of other people, so you can charge more money for them.

You can take this further, by giving the first person to discover the recipe code-supported intellectual property rights in it. This means that if other people discover it later, they have to pay the first person a royalty to use it. The real world works like this, so why not do it in virtual worlds?

Well, let's see what would happen.

People who start playing six months after the MMO launched would find themselves having to pay royalties for something they were quite capable of "discovering" themselves. They would not like this. They would complain. They would look for some other MMO to play, where this kind of reward-the-early-birds system was not in operation.

It's a shame we can't do that for real-world patent-the-obvious ideas, too.

Still, backtracking away from the suggestion of enforcing in-world IP, this discovery idea can *almost* work. Blacksmith Bill adds a ton of stuff to his magic sword mix and creates swords that last longer or do more damage than the swords made by Blacksmith Brenda. If Bill told Brenda his secret, or if she experimented and found out herself, she could produce the same swords and not have to pay Blacksmith Bill anything. Blacksmith Bob, without the requisite knowledge, would be stuffed, though.

I say "almost work" because those explorers who were first to find a recipe would simply put it on a web site. Groups of them may even cooperate to find the best combinations. Every other player would know them if they had access to, oh, let's say a **search engine**.

The usual response to this is to say that recipes should be randomized for individuals, so that your recipe for the perfect sword is different to mine. This would mean that only people who spent a lot of time doing trial-and-error experiments or were incredibly lucky would find "their" recipe.

Sadly, this approach is so much at odds with how things work in real life that it bears no relation to how players feel crafting "should" function. It means that recipes can't be sold or traded, and spells hours of frustration for anyone who hopes to have a playing career in crafting.

Gameplay doesn't *have* to have any fiction to cover it, but it makes an MMO less persuasive if it doesn't.

Oh, and if you think I'm making this idea up only so I can knock it down, *Asheron's Call* did something very like it for spell research. Just because an idea is bad, that doesn't mean it won't be implemented. Indeed, in some cases you may not know it's bad *until* it's implemented.

Rocks

Suppose you are standing on a rocky hillside. You pick up a rock and throw it as far as you can. What will the rock do?

Well, it might bounce down the hillside as far as it can: in that case, it's an *achiever* rock. Or it could skitter off some other rocks and bounce away in some unexpected, wild direction: this would make it an *explorer* rock. Perhaps it will land among a group of other rocks and nestle there, meaning it's a *socializer* rock. Or maybe it will strike another, weaker rock and shatter it to bits—clearly a *killer* rock, if ever there was one.

But … we're talking about rocks here. Rocks have no motivation whatsoever. You can't figure out anything about their intentions when they're thrown down a hill because they *have* no intentions.

Over-eager people can sometimes over-extend a theory. For the Player Types model, I make no claims beyond the domain of people who play virtual worlds for fun. If the theory does apply elsewhere, to rocks or anything smarter, well that's great; personally, though, I've no idea why it should.

Alternate Character Models

EverQuest 2 has three character models. There's the original, then there's a set created by a company called SOGA to bring *EQ2* to the Far Eastern market, and then there's the bobbleheads you get in /cutemode.

So, *you* may see yourself as a gaunt stranger, your face half-hidden by hair, but the people you're playing with may see you as a fresh-faced, slightly concerned individual—or as a bobblehead.

There's nothing in the technology that would prevent an MMO from allowing players to use the character-creation system to build models of *other people's characters* to be displayed locally instead of the official version. I could decide to see you as a bat-faced crone when everyone else sees you as a suave movie star.

It's not hard to implement this, so why *don't* MMO developers implement it?

In a word: *identity*.

Inappropriate Armor

From my *Dungeons & Dragons* first edition *Men & Magic*, fourth printing, November 1975:

D&D didn't even *have* Amazons.

Deathtraps and Giveaways

With user-created content, if the content the users create has any effect on the game as a whole, you only ever get two kinds created: deathtraps and giveaways.

Deathtraps are designed to maim, kill, frustrate, taunt, and otherwise cause grief to those experiencing it.

Giveaways are trivially easy. You walk through the portal and there's the treasure, or there's the glass-jaw boss, or there's the mass of critters you need to raise your reputation all standing in the fireball-friendly pit.

Why is this?

Well consider why anyone would want to create content, then think about what content they would create:

- Killers would create deathtraps because these press two of their buttons: death and traps.
- Explorers would create complex, esoteric, elaborate experiments that are perceived by everyone else to be deathtraps.
- Achievers either wouldn't create anything or they'd create giveaways as a cheaper alternative to pay-to-win.
- Socializers would create giveaways so people will like them.

Everything, therefore, is either a deathtrap or a giveaway.

Exception: if you have a player who is transitioning to becoming a designer, they *might* create something else.

Features from Mechanics

There's a trend in MMOs to have hard-to-reach objects dotted around for players to find. The idea originated in *Meridian 59*, which had puzzle-guarded objects that permanently increased a character's mana pool. The idea was imported into *Star Wars: the Old Republic* as "datacrons" (by Damion Schubert, who designed *M59*'s system), but they crop up as "vistas" in *Guild Wars 2*, "datacubes" in *WildStar*, "lore objects" in *The Secret World,* and so on.

The purpose of these objects is to encourage and reward exploration. Getting to one will usually net a minor prize (a few points, a stat increase, a cinematic, some backstory), which justifies their existence to achievers; they're mainly *aimed* at explorers, though.

In general, they work, too: explorers like thinking, "I wonder if that ship container floating out there in the ether might have some lore in it?"— and then going to find out. They might even like thinking, "I can see the lore in that ship container floating out there in the ether, and I'm going to figure out how to get to it."

What explorers don't like, however, is this: "I can see the lore in that ship container floating out there in the ether, and I know how to get to it, but I can't make the stupid platformer-style sequence of jumps I'm required to make in order to get to it." Why on earth *would* they like that? I remember a particularly awkward datacron in *SW:TOR* that it took a team of people to get.

I'm actually pretty good at MMO character control, so I managed to get to the ship container floating out there in the ether (which was in *TSW*) on my first attempt. Then again, it took me about 20 attempts before I managed to jump from a car onto a narrow wall in Seoul, so I'm not *that* great.

If you're designing a feature for a particular type of player, design the mechanics that support that feature for that particular type of player, too. Otherwise, you lose what you were hoping to gain.

Go, GoPets!

GoPets was an MMO for children, with a revenue model based on selling virtual objects for (ultimately) real money—the default approach in Korea, where it was based.

GoPets was designed as a social world and (in the words of the designer, Erik Bethke) it "carpet bombed" the socializer segment of the player types graph. It integrated all manner of socializer-friendly things into its environment, including powerful yet very usable social networking tools. It did reasonably well.

One day, when Erik was looking at the results of a data-mining exercise to find out what virtual goods were selling best, he discovered something peculiar. A fruit tree which produced one fruit every hour (if you stood next to it for that entire hour) was being bought by players who were, once the numbers were run, some *44 times* more likely to be profitable than the average *GoPets* player. This fruit tree was one of the very few achiever-friendly elements in the otherwise heavily socializer-oriented world.

Looking at the statistics for the "content-creator" feature—one of the only explorer-friendly features provided—yielded even more dramatic results. Explorers were *64 times* more likely to be profitable than the average (i.e., socializer) player.

As a result of this, Erik added some more very simple achiever and explorer elements. Seven days later, *GoPets*' revenue had *doubled. GoPets* was still heavily socializer-oriented, but now much more profitable than it was.

Virtual worlds—whether social or game in orientation—need players of *all* types. If you only design for one, you may come to rue your decision.

Historical note: Zynga bought *GoPets* in 2009. It was swiftly closed, coinciding with Zynga's launch of *Petville*.

Really Evil Characters

In early MMOs such as *MUD1*, players *could* perform major acts of substance to other players' characters. These were days when permadeath was the norm, after all. There weren't other MMOs you could flee to if you didn't like it, so people *could* bully and harass and impose themselves on others. There *were* evil characters.

However, the way that these early worlds were designed, playing an evil character was not a viable strategy: good players could easily gang up on you, and you would be attacked on sight.

Wouldn't other evil characters help you out, though? Well no, they wouldn't: evil is a state of mind, not a philosophy. Other evil characters would *also* attack you (and if they didn't, well ha!—some evil *they* were…).

You can still just about get "good" in today's MMOs, but they don't make kindness and self-sacrifice easy. You can't really get evil except in a social context, where players do still have the chance to land a blow that hurts.

In MMO terms, evil=naughty, good=nice.

Let's just hope people don't take those impressions back with them when they return to the real world.

Adult Learns to Drive

Adult presses pedals, moves wheel, shifts gear, adjusts mirror, finding out what does what.

Adult combines sequences of actions to move forward, in reverse, to turn.

Adult uses these sequences to achieve goals, thinking about what to do. Stay wide of the parked cars, then pull over in front of them, put on handbrake, put into neutral, switch off engine.

Adult repeats until the sequence is automatic and can be used as a single, compound action: driving.

A New Dimension

Two of the problems with the Player Types model are related:

- There are two subtypes of killer in the player types graph.
- The socializer and explorer sequences of player development oscillate between only two types.

Both of these seem to suggest the same solution: the theory is missing a dimension. In other words, instead of being a 2D graph, it's a 3D graph.

So, what dimension is missing?

Well the differences between politician-style killers and griefer-style killers suggest several possibilities:

- Politicians believe they're helping people, whereas griefers know they're hindering them;
- Politicians feel superior to other players, whereas griefers feel inferior;
- Politicians work through subtle influences, whereas griefers are very in-your-face.

Of these, it's the latter that is the biggest clue to what's going on (and in the end explains the other two, as well). Basically, politicians tend to act on other players in a calculating way, whereas griefers behave in a more impromptu fashion. This doesn't mean that politicians can't grief (Dextrus was a kind of "criminal mastermind" politician), nor that griefers have to cause pain and anguish (Robin Hood players steal from pompous players to give to random strangers). It's a good, general distinction though.

Formally, then: some people think about what they're doing and others don't. The technical terms for this situation are *explicit* (able to explain your actions openly) and *implicit* (unable to do so—you just do what you do). Politicians act on other players explicitly; griefers act on other players implicitly.

What about the other three types? How do they split up?

Splitting Killers

Adding a new dimension splits the killer type, giving us two new types:

Griefers—implicit killers

- Attack, attack, attack!
- Very in-your-face and attention-seeking.
- Unable to explain why they act as they do.
- Vague aim is to get a big, bad reputation.

Politicians—explicit killers

- Act with foresight and forethought.
- Manipulate people subtly.
- Explain themselves in terms of the benefits they bring the MMO.
- Secret aim is to get a big, good reputation.

Splitting Socializers

Adding a new dimension splits the socializer type, giving us two new types:

Networkers—explicit socializers

- Find people with whom to interact.
- Get to know their fellow players.
- Learn who and what these people know.
- Find out who's worth hanging out with.

Friends—implicit socializers

- Interact with people they already know well.
- Have deep, intuitive understanding of them.
- Enjoy their company.
- Accept their little foibles…

Splitting Achievers

Adding a new dimension splits the achiever type, giving us two new types:

Opportunists—implicit achievers

- See a chance and take it.
- Look around for things to do.
- If there's an obstacle, do something else.
- Flit about from place to place, from objective to objective.

Planners—explicit achievers

- Set a goal and aim to achieve it.
- Perform actions as part of a larger scheme.
- If there's an obstacle, overcome it or work round it.
- Pursue the same objective doggedly.

Splitting Explorers

Adding a new dimension splits the explorer type, giving us two new types:

Scientists—explicit explorers

- Experiment to form a theory.
- Use theories predictively to test them.
- Acquire knowledge methodically.
- Seek to explain phenomena.

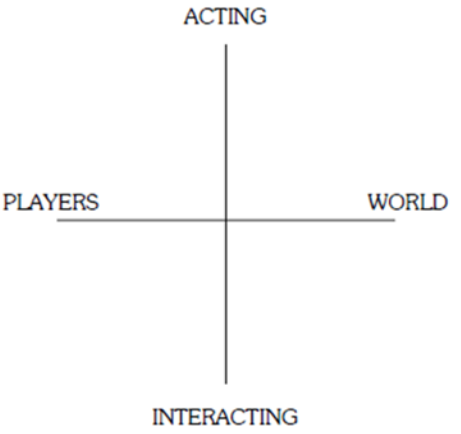
Hackers—implicit explorers

- Experiment to reveal meaning.
- Have a tacit understanding of the virtual world—they have no need to test.
- Go where fancy takes them.
- Seek to discover new phenomena.

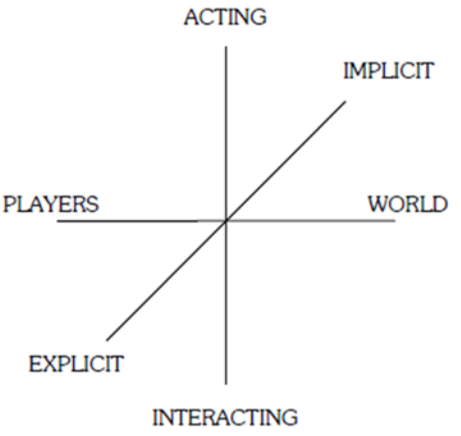
The term "hacker" here is in the traditional sense of "computer guru," rather than the "some bastard who breaks into your computer" sense that arose from the media's complete inability to understand jargon.

Player Types Revisited

By adding an extra dimension to the player types graph, we go from this:



to this:



Instead of four squares, we now have eight cubes, each corresponding to a player type. Because of this, the new model is referred to as the *8-type model*, as opposed to the original *4-type model*.

This 8-type model explains why we have two kinds of killer, also bringing attention to other dichotomies that were bubbling under the surface. For example, we can see why some explorers prefer looking at the breadth of the world and others prefer looking at the depth: the former are scientists, the latter hackers.

What? You want me to *draw* the 8-type's cubes?!

Not Seeing Yourself as Others See You

As I mentioned earlier, *EverQuest 2* has special character models that differ in style to the original but are included in its client so that anyone can use them. Some people do use them. You can't tell that they are using them, which means you could think your character looks like *this*, but to someone else it looks like *that*.

This could easily be extended to any cosmetic difference between characters. Your character could consistently look a different age, race, or gender to the one you chose, but you wouldn't *know* unless someone pointed it out. You'd think everyone saw you as a gorgeous, blue-skinned elf babe, but everyone else could be seeing you as a hideous, bearded barbarian.

When players play characters different to themselves, this can influence both their real self and their character. Much of playing an MMO involves making tiny adjustments to your perception of yourself and to your perception of your character until eventually the two align. It's as if there's a dialogue between them, the resolving of which affirms (or reaffirms) the player's sense of identity.

The main worry I have about having people look different depending on who's doing the looking is that it means players are operating under a false premise. I don't particularly care that, say, overall attitudes to men and women could gradually be affected by the build-up of impressions gained from untrue presentations because that could actually go some way to stamping out stereotypes. However, I do care if an individual is screwed up by such an accumulation.

For example, a player might think they're being treated nicely because "it's my great sense of humor" whereas actually it's because "you look hot!" When they find out, it could have a deleterious effect on them: the edifice of the personality they were building would have been constructed on bad foundations.

A person's gender (or lack thereof) is often an important part of their identity. How would *you* feel if you discovered that everyone else saw *your* character oppositely-gendered to how you saw it?

8 Player Types

Rather than spend four hours in a CAD program creating a fancy cube-based rendition of the 8-type version of the Player Types model, I spent half an hour digging out the old Duplo™ box:

So, as with the 4-type model, the left/right axis is player/world and the up/down axis is acting/interacting. We add a front/back axis for explicit/implicit. This gives us a cube, represented by the 8 figures in the photo. I'll describe them in a clockwise fashion, nearest-plane first:

- **Dog = planner** (acting, world, explicit)

  Planners are classic achievers. They pursue their goals doggedly.

- **Pig = scientist** (interacting, world, explicit)

  Scientists are explorers, trying to make sense of the world. The pig is the Chinese zodiac sign for such hard-working, thoughtful, intelligent people.

- **Panda = networker** (interacting, players, explicit)

  Pandas are socializers who are actively looking for friends, as opposed to those who already have them. Hey, everyone loves a panda!

- **Hen = politician** (acting, players, explicit)

  Hens are those killers for whom the word didn't really work. They're often guild leaders, acting like mother hens for their brood.

- **Bear = opportunist** (acting, world, implicit)

  Bears are early-stage achievers who do whatever is easiest, about which they don't have to think too much.

- **Cat = hacker** (interacting, world, implicit)

  Cats are explorers who own the world. Nothing bothers them, and they can't be made to do anything they don't want to. They go where they will.

- **Old Man = friend** (interacting, players, implicit)

  Old men (and old women—I chose which figure to use at the toss of a coin) are socializers who stay with their close-knit friends whom they've known forever (at least in MMO terms).

- **Tiger = griefer** (acting, players, implicit)

  Tigers are the killers that gave the 4-type version its name. They eat people.

The figures I chose here were kinda forced on me by what was in the Duplo™ box; but believe me, it's better than the mass of lines that would have been the illustration…

Oh, and yes, my Chinese sign of the zodiac is indeed pig, since you ask.

Automatic Justice Systems

If you want to make the MMO itself punish players who misbehave, you have an *automatic justice system*.

Automatic justice systems usually fail and do so for one of two reasons:

- Because the justice system itself is griefable. 40 griefers acting in concert can wreck a system used by 1,000 non-griefers acting independently.
- Because the game can't know whether an act it detects as being "evil" is actually being committed with evil *intent*.

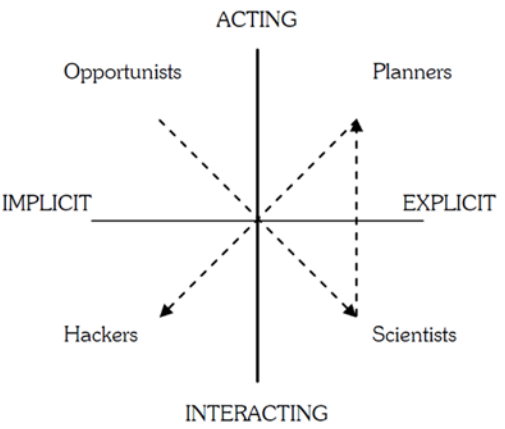
Sort those out and you're on to something.

Drift Revealed

Our shiny, new, 8-type model obviously fixes one of the problems we had with the 4-type model— "two very different subtypes of killer for no apparent reason." Less obviously, though, it can help with "how or why players move between types."

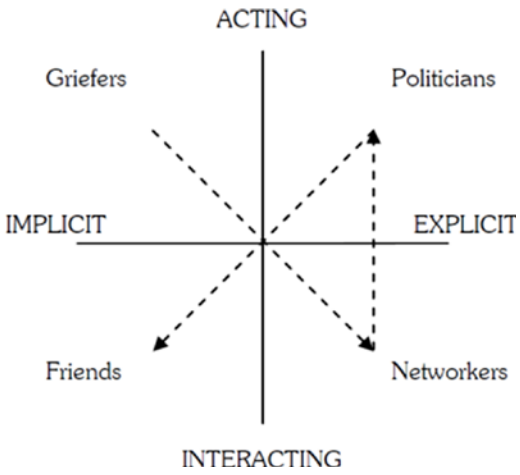
The main sequence for player development, translated into the 8-type model, goes griefer to scientist to planner to friend. We could see this in the 4-type model because it has one representative of each of the original four types in it. The main explorer sequence, though, goes opportunist to scientist to planner to hacker: we couldn't see that because it only involved explorers and achievers.

This kind of progression is obscured if we look at the 8-type cube from the front. However, if we remove the player/world axis instead of the implicit/explicit one, then looking at it from the side we'd see this:



It's the same, reverse-alpha shape (that would have been an alpha if I'd thought of all this when I was writing the original Player Types paper… sigh…).

Likewise, we couldn't fully see the main socializer sequence because we were looking at that end-on, too. Whereas the main explorer sequence occupies the four subcubes to the right of the 3D model (bear, pig, dog, cat), the main socializer sequence occupies the four to the left (tiger, panda, hen, old person). Removing the player/world axis again (to make it easier to draw), we get the following:



This has helped clear things up a little, in that at least we can see what's going on, now. In 3D, we can also follow other development paths, in particular the minor sequence (which is seen quite a lot in today's MMOs): opportunist to networker to planner to friend.

As it stands, we do have some new information from this exercise that's useful to designers. We can see, for example, that someone who is drifting from scientist to planner has no use for opportunist content, so in zones where such transformations are intended to occur it's going to be better to emphasize quest chains over one-off, take-it-or-leave-it quests. Most designers will know to this anyway, though—it's not a new observation.

So although knowing *where* people drift can be useful, what designers *really* want to know is *how* and *why* people drift. So far, this new-fangled 8-type model doesn't really help in that regard.

So far.

How Myth Works

When you read a story that resonates with your personal feelings and experience, you gain an insight—perhaps ever so slight—into your own condition. You experience it vicariously, through the eyes of the protagonist, but you experience it nonetheless.

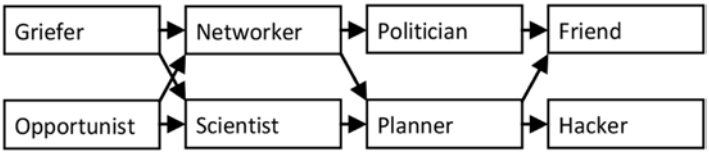
Thus, slowly, you learn if not who you are, then how to *find out* who you are.

Development Tracks

If we look at what we got from analyzing player-drift behavior through the 8-type model, we can see a pattern: all the sequences start off in an implicit subcube, then move to an explicit one, then move to another explicit one, and then return to an implicit one.

Having been aware of drift for (mutter) more than 30 years, I have to note at this point that some players change their development paths from what you'd expect. Most won't, but some will. However, if they do change, it's usually at the intersections. If someone went opportunist to scientist to planner, then ordinarily you'd expect them to go to hacker at the end, and ordinarily you'd be right; occasionally, though, you will see someone wind up at the friend subcube instead.

If we combine all these possible paths together, we get the following *development tracks*:



What this means is that if you're a planner, say, then you were either a networker or scientist before, and you'll become a friend or a hacker next.

The case for politicians is unusual, in that politicians were only ever networkers immediately before and will only ever become friends next—their path is relatively fixed. I've no idea why this is, it's just that I've never seen those other transitions take place. However, rather than lying about it so as to make the development tracks diagram look complete, I thought it best to fess up. ~~That way, I can lie about other things and you'll think I'm being sincere~~.

Looking at the development tracks diagram, it's now possible to describe the general nature of the changes in type that players undergo as they play:

- They start by determining the boundaries of the world into which they have arrived. For some, this means primarily social boundaries ("can I swear?" "can I steal your kills?") and for others it means primarily physical boundaries ("can I pick up rocks?" "can I swim?").
- Having found the limits on the actions available to them, they begin stringing together sequences of such actions in meaningful ways. They'll do this either through experimentation or by asking people who already know what to do.
- Once they have established a repertoire of actions or a circle of friends, they use these to advance their goals. They may become guild officers or try race through levels, getting the best loot.
- Finally, having been there, done that, they retire in the company of their closest friends or potter around trying out weird and wonderful things for their own, private amusement.

Put succinctly, this sequence is: locate, discover, apply, internalize. Find out what your limits are, find what you can do within those limits, apply yourself to achieve success, and then it'll all become second nature.

It's how babies learn to walk, how adults learn to drive.

So now we have a model of *how* players progress through types, if not *why*. However, it's a bit, "So what?" So what if we *do* know this, what actual *use* is it?

Well, it's the key we need to unlock the secrets of why people play MMOs.

Using a Player Types Model

What use is positioning players into types defined by two, three, or however many axes?

Well, it depends on who you are and what the labels on the axes say. To a social scientist, it may be more useful to have axes labeled old/young and male/female; to a player, it may be more useful to go with pirate/ninja and elf/dwarf[28]. To a journalist or teacher, it may not be useful to make any of these kinds of distinctions at all.

Just because a model exists and is useful to *someone*, that doesn't mean it's useful to *you*.

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[28]Tom Coates: *From Pirate Dwarves to Ninja Elves…* . March 2004. http://www.plasticbag.org/archives/2004/03/from_pirate_dwarves_to_ninja_elves/

Myth

All human cultures have myths. That's *all* human cultures.

Early myths were stories that developed in preliterate civilizations, the outward purpose of which was to explain important aspects of the world—natural, supernatural, and societal. Because these stories were not written down (you saw that word *preliterate*, there?), each generation of storytellers was free to interpret the story in their own way. Old parts that didn't work would be discarded or replaced; parts that did work would be embellished—sometimes so much so that a previously minor character gained sufficient importance that they merited their own spin-off series (as with TV today).

Because the stories were oral, the storyteller could adapt them for each audience. Telling a group of young men about the arrival of Odysseus back at his home in Ithaca after 20 years away might focus on how he killed the 100-plus rowdy youths he found living it up in his house and attempting to seduce his wife, Penelope. The same event to an older audience might emphasize Penelope's loyalty and fidelity, and gently chide Odysseus for ever doubting her. *He* may have changed while he was away, but *she* didn't.

These stories were told and retold time and time again. Each retelling allowed storytellers to make changes, honing the tale over—well, over *centuries*.

In the same way that a rough stone worn down in a running stream will become a smooth pebble, so a rough story worn down through countless retellings will become a smooth story; and in the same way that all pebbles in a stream, though each is individual, eventually attain the same basic shape, so all stories, continually retold, also come to have the same basic shape.

These stories have the same shape because people have the same needs. They want to know what their place is in the world—the physical world, the spiritual world, and the society in which they live. They want to know *who they are*.

I'm going to use a theory of myth to explain, at last, *why* people play MMOs.

Griefers *versus* Grievers

In March, 2006, a funeral was taking place in *World of Warcraft*. One of the game's players had died of a stroke in real life and her in-game friends decided to hold a ceremony to mark her passing. They advertised it on message boards, including (as this was on a PvP server) a request not to mess things up because they were making a video to show her family.

Needless to say, things were well and truly messed up. Slaughter and mayhem ensued when a guild attacked the assembled, largely unarmored throng.

Virtual worlds are virtual places. If you take any of the real world into them, then you are inevitably going to get a clash between those who want their fantasy to remain a fantasy and those who want their fantasy to extend to their reality.

In the case of the raid on the virtual funeral, it was all about *Reality*. The mourners were acting out-of-context (characters in *WoW* don't suffer permanent death; players in real life do), so an in-context attack on them could be excused (because on a PvP server, gameplay centers on opposing sides attacking each other). However, in this particular case, the attack was *also* out-of-context because the attackers knew the mourners were holding an in-game commemoration of a real-world death, which meant that they were fully aware of the real-world consequences of attacking them. On a role-play server, neither side should have done what it did; but as this wasn't a role-play server, both sides acted within the bounds of what is permitted.

It's also permitted to point to this event as an illustration of what happens when 50 assholes get organized.

Sound and Vision

When you speak in MMOs using your VoIP system of choice, people hear your real voice.

Communication isn't *just* about voice, though. People who study computer-mediated communication often lament the lack of visual cues in online communications. Where's the body language? Where's the twinkle in the speaker's eye?

So: what if someone were to produce a piece of software that could superimpose a live, webcam image of your face over that of your MMO character? I don't mean that it would motion-capture your facial movements and map them onto your character's face; I mean that your in-game character would have your real-world face streamed through it. Now when you say something, we can see you rolling your eyes, or smiling, or wrinkling your nose; we can tell you look intense, or frightened, or cautious. Adding an extra channel helps refines meaning further. If voice is a good thing, surely voice+face must be a better thing?

Would *you* play an MMO in which your avatar's face was your own?

If you play an MMO in which your avatar's *voice* is your own, why not?

Nondescript

Most textual worlds allow players to give their characters descriptions. Other players can therefore tell that you're a mysterious but unmistakably powerful green-eyed redhead who moves with the grace of a dancer.

MUD1's characters didn't have descriptions. We could easily have given them descriptions, but I didn't want them.

With no descriptions, characters can change. As soon as you have a description, you can't change, you're locked into it. I wanted characters to change as their players changed.

Besides, as I mentioned a while back, in *MUD1* there was a sex-change spell. That would have messed up character descriptions no end.

Will I Go to Hell for playing an Orc?

No, you won't.

Okay, so I'm the wrong person to ask here as I'm an atheist, and therefore don't believe there's a Hell, Heaven, Nirvana, or Elysian Fields, anyway. However, for those of you with a religious disposition, the question is a serious one: if I play a supposedly evil character in an MMO, will I increase my chances of being condemned to an eternity of damnation as a result?

The answer is still no, you won't.

There are many reasons why people might want to play an "evil" character. Very few such people actually *do* do evil things while playing them, though; it's as if they're exploring the boundaries of their own behavior, but pulling back from going as far as they *could* because they find that they don't *want* to go that far—even though it's permitted within the MMO's magic circle. Through playing, they have thus discovered something worthwhile about themselves that they didn't know before; what's more, they've done it in a game context, which meant they didn't have to hurt real people in any significant way to be able to draw their conclusions.

Now why would a real-life deity be unhappy with that? Surely any self-respecting omnipotent being would easily recognize what you were doing. This being would know that sometimes you have to go down from the top a hillock to climb up a mountain, and that because it's all couched in terms of a protected "just a game" framework, you specifically *meant* for it all to be make-believe the whole time. You were playing "evil" to gain a better sense of what it means to be *good*.

Hmm, come to think of it, a more accurate answer to the question "will I go to Hell for playing an orc?" is that it depends.

See, if the god(s) you worship are *themselves* evil, they may send you to Hades on a whim anyway. Let's hope they're not. Still, if it's any consolation, I'm probably up for an even worse fate than that, as at least you haven't had the temerity to deny their very existence in print, unlike me.

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

All narratives of a mythical nature, worn smooth by retelling after retelling, adhere to a common template known as *the hero's journey*, or *monomyth*. Both terms were introduced in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*[29], a famous book written by the American academic, Joseph Campbell.

Campbell was a scholar of myths, and he looked at a *lot* of them, from the ancient civilizations of Nigeria, North America, Australia, Phrygia, China, Iceland, Bali, Persia, Mexico, Finland, Cambodia, Peru, and many others. He also looked at specific myth cycles, such as the epics of Gilgamesh, Arthur, Vishnu, Osiris, Moses, Cuchulainn, Buddha, Jason, and Mohammed.

Oh, yes, I should mention: many stories involving major religious figures follow this same pattern. Please filter out and ignore from the above any that you happen to consider are true accounts rather than myth—it's not my intention here to give you grief over your beliefs. Just because a history follows the pattern of a myth, that doesn't mean it *is* a myth.

Campbell's monomyth also works for many classic novels and fairy stories, such as Dante's *Inferno*, *the Sleeping Beauty*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, *Faust*, and *the Frog Prince*. It even applies to more modern works, created after Campbell wrote his book. Sometimes this is done intentionally (the original *Star Wars* movie follows the hero's journey because George Lucas had studied Campbell's ideas) and sometimes it's not (as with the first *Harry Potter* book, for example). The reason its pattern is so often repeated and reinvented is because it is in tune with a deep need: it shows the way for an individual to understand *who they are*.

So, the hero's journey consists of three phases, each composed of a number of steps that are taken in the same order (although there is some leeway for reversals and omissions). There are 17 steps in all, which I shall delve into later. Should a person follow those steps, then they will emerge a hero.

Indeed, that's what the term "hero" originally meant. When you say "that guy who dived into the freezing lake to save that little boy is a hero," what you're *really* saying is that he was acting heroically—as in, how a hero would act. It's a metaphor which today has largely shed its metaphorical connotations. In the past, the only heroes were those in the myths, and they became heroes only because they had completed their hero's journey. Today, we use "hero" more generally to refer to people who show exceptional courage or meet certain predefined criteria (e.g., winning an Olympic medal). The term's origins remain important, though.

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[29]Joseph Campbell: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Bollingen Series 17*, Princeton University Press, 1949.

Now some people really *are* heroes even under the old understanding of the word, having undergone an actual, personal hero's journey. This isn't something most people would wish to attempt, though, because it generally involves something like being shot at in a war. For ordinary individuals, a hero's journey can't be experienced directly, only vicariously. When you listen to a tale of myth and identify with the hero, some small resonance between you and he (yes, it's always a *he*; I'll explain why later) will speak to your own experiences—or at least that's the hope. It's not a *great* hope, but unless you want to leave your home and go somewhere strange and dangerous for 18 months, it's the *only* hope most people have of coming to understand who they truly are.

Well, the only hope until now.

I once blogged that the prospective students I interview should, when asked if they've any questions of their own, have a response ready. I remarked that when *I* was in their position, I would ask the interviewer: "What's the most important book your shelves?"

Sure enough, my having mentioned this, next day a student in a lecture asked me to name the most important book on *my* shelves. Also sure enough, I had anticipated this and had my reply to hand.

It's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Despite the fact that in terms of "I know every word in this sentence but I don't know what the sentence means," it's only beaten by the feminist literature I read when that field's attention temporarily turned to MUDs, I nevertheless have no hesitation in rating *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* the most important book on my shelves. The second half is eminently skippable, but as for the first: if you are at all interested in MMO design and haven't read it, do so. Order it right now. It's something you *need* to know.

Hero's Journey Phases

The way the hero's journey works, there are three *phases*.

The first phase is set in the mundane world where the hero-to-be lives: this is the *Departure* phase. It's where Odysseus' ship is blown off course, where Eliza Doolittle encounters Professor Henry Higgins, where Arthur pulls the sword from the stone.

In the second phase, the hero arrives in a new world of excitement and adventure, which is similar to—but in important ways very different from—the mundane world. This *Initiation* phase is where the bulk of the action takes place. It's where Perseus slays Medusa, where John McClane runs over broken glass, where Neo meets Trinity.

The final, *Return* phase, describes the hero's return to the mundane world. It's where Indiana Jones brings back the Ark of the Covenant, where Thumbelina escapes on the back of a swallow, where Jesus resurrects.

The three phases always appear in this order, but they don't always all appear. Crocodile Dundee leaves Australia and goes to America, but he doesn't go back to Australia again (well, not until the second movie, anyway). Stories will often focus on a particular phase—or even an individual step—of the hero's journey, and they will sometimes show what happens when a would-be hero fails to make the grade (Lot's wife being a classic example). There's great scope for storytelling here: the hero's journey is not a narrow, prescriptive formula.

That said, the general premise is something like this: the hero has the goal of retrieving some object that is needed to benefit his community—a golden fleece, a holy grail, Private Ryan. To get it, he has to venture to a strange but exhilarating new world, where old certainties are no longer true, and where his every move is challenged by a far more powerful opponent. He finally wins over the opponent and returns back to his original world with the object he originally went to get. However, in the process of undertaking this journey, he has become transformed: he is no longer the unsure, self-doubting person he once was. He is a hero.

Voice = Bad

I'm not a fan of having players speaking to one another using voice in MMOs. There are two reasons for this, one practical and one theoretical.

The practical reason is one I mentioned earlier: speech makes a noise. If you're in a house with other people and you're shouting into a microphone while they're trying to watch TV, they get upset. Anyone in such a situation is effectively rendered dumb by this inability to participate in conversations. Sure, you can type something and hope it gets noticed, but it's hard to win an argument when the other person has a microphone and you don't.

The theoretical reason is to do with immersion. MMOs are *virtual* worlds: people play them to get away from *Reality*. In an MMO, you can be someone else; by being someone else, you can become a better you. Why do people play the same game for hour after hour, night after night, week after week, month after month? It's not because they like the *game*; it's because they like *being who they are*.

If you introduce too much of the real world into an MMO, it's no longer a virtual world: it's just an adjunct to *Reality*. It ceases to be a place, and reverts to being a medium. Immersion is enhanced by closeness to *Reality*, but thwarted by isomorphism with it: the act of will required to suspend disbelief is what sustains a player's efforts to *be*, but it disappears when there is no disbelief required.

Bringing *Reality* into a virtual world robs it of what makes it compelling. It takes away the most important distinction between virtual worlds and the real world: the fact that they are *not* the real world. Yet voice *is* the real world.

Ah, but what if it's not *your* voice? What if it's transformed through the miracles of modern technology? Well then instead of sounding like I do in real life, I can sound like what someone in real life does after they've had their voice put through a processor. Besides, even if the pitch and modulation changes were good enough to make men sound like women and *vice versa*, it wouldn't alter accents. "Hey, this elf babe is from England!" Hello *Reality*.

Voice in MMOs is not good. Except…

Voice = Good

Voice isn't in itself any more disruptive of the MMO experience than are photo-realistic graphics. It's fine to fool the senses, to make MMOs appear to be real, so long as that final step—their actually *being* real—is not taken.

Suppose you had a piece of software that converted speech to text, and another piece that converted text to speech. In theory, I could say something in my male, English voice, it could be converted into text, transmitted as text over the ol' Internet, and then replayed to listeners in a female, New English voice. It would be real-time voice communication, but no more "me" than my graphical avatar: just clothing for an alternative identity.

It would work because it *sounds* real, but we know it *isn't* real (hence we have disbelief to suspend). It would work because it permits us to role-play—to help us become the someone that we want to become. It would just *work*.

At the moment, though, this is mere whimsy. Current speech-from-text generation software is actually pretty good, but it doesn't convey emotion very well. Text-from-speech is also pretty good (or they wouldn't install it on phones), but not if you have a strong accent or are screaming for help because a dragon is eating you.

Give it a few years, though, and who knows? This could add a whole new dimension to virtual worlds! Not only do you *look* like a marsh troll, but you *sound* like one, too. How groovy is that?

It's very groovy! Unfortunately, what we have now is ungroovy: a few people dominating the voice chat that today's learn-the-dance raiding systems apparently require, with the rest just having to listen.

Real-time voice communication in virtual worlds does promise great things—it's just that we haven't got them quite yet.

MMOs and Religion

Religions are not virtual worlds because religions are not places. However, there is a lot of overlap between the two because at some level they address the same needs.

The formulator of the hero's journey, Joseph Campbell, used many examples from religions in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. As we shall see, the link between MMOs and the hero's journey is very strong, so it's not surprising to find that there's a connection.

This isn't to say that MMOs need share the same basic philosophies as religions; it's merely to point out that they are sometimes driven by similar forces. This shouldn't be too surprising because religions don't always share the same basic philosophies as each other.

For example, most religions have a "golden rule" about how to treat your fellow human beings. In some, such as Confucianism, it can be paraphrased as "Do not do unto others what you do not want done unto yourself"; in others, such as Christianity, it's "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." These are not the same thing: in the former, if I don't want pity, I shouldn't pity others (even if they do want it); in the latter, if I want pity I should pity others (even if they don't want it).

In MMOs, the equivalent is more like, "Do unto others what will get you XP."

Departure

The first phase of the hero's journey is *Departure*. It has the fewest number of steps of the three phases, but usually takes longer to tell than the third phase.

Here's what goes on. For those of you who are interested in psychological mumbo-jumbo, some explanation of what the steps signify is given; for the rest of you, don't worry, I give a complete, step-by-step example of the hero's journey in action a little later. Then, you can worry.

So, the five steps of the Departure phase are:

- **The Call to Adventure**

  The protagonist—the would-be hero—receives an indication of things to come. This is symbolic and tells the protagonist that his destiny is awakening.

- **Refusal of the Call**

  Although the protagonist is required to act, he doesn't. He has failed to recognize what the Call to Adventure symbolizes.

- **Supernatural Aid**

  A guide appears to help the protagonist. By having his strengths pointed out to him, the protagonist realizes that he (the protagonist) is more than the person he first thought he was. The protagonist gains the formal goal to obtain some mystical object (the *boon*—symbolizing his transformed self) that's in a hard-to-get-to world of danger and adventure.

- **The Crossing of the First Threshold**

  The protagonist leaves the world he has always known and enters the unknown world of adventure. Although the way seems blocked, the protagonist's faith in his destiny allows him to pass through. You didn't think I mentioned the Hogwarts Express for no good reason, did you? Platform 9¾.

- **The Belly of the Whale**

  This is the protagonist's final separation from his old self: he's now a new person in a new world. This step got its name because so many myths involve the protagonist's being swallowed by a large creature. There are definite womb-like connotations in this step—the protagonist is metaphorically (and sometimes literally) being born anew. Caves and wells are also popular venues for the same, like-a-womb reason.

The next step is in the next phase, *Initiation*.

Heaven and Hell

Religions aren't virtual worlds because they're not places, but what about the places they talk about? Are Heaven and Hell virtual worlds? This is a question which does occasionally get asked, so it's worth considering what the answer might be.

Well if they are virtual worlds, that would mean they must be imaginary, right? They're not real because otherwise you wouldn't need that "virtual" adjective. Now although I personally have no problem with characterizing religions as imaginary constructs used by people to ask their imaginary friends to alter *Reality* for them, that's because I'm an atheist. People who are not atheists may not be so keen on having their faith presented in this light. They may indeed be offended by it (especially when disparaging, jokey language is used, as above). To them, Heaven and Hell are very real places, but they're *separate from Reality*.

So, the answer is that Heaven and Hell are *not* virtual worlds. If you believe in them, they're not virtual; if you don't believe in them, they're not worlds.

So Female

Ask a female player of male characters why she does it, and she'll tell you something along the lines of, "I get hassled so much for being female, I have to play as male to escape the attention." In other words, *I'm so female that I have to play male characters!*

So Male

Ask a male player of female characters why he does it, and he'll tell you something along the lines of, "I'd rather spend my playing time looking at a female character's butt than a male character's butt." In other words, *I'm so male that I have to play female characters!*

Reputation Systems

Some people are prats. Some of these prats play MMOs. Non-prats would prefer not to play with prats, but have no way of identifying them; this is because whenever systems are implemented to identify the prats, the prats use them to make non-prats seem like *they're* the prats.

In other words, there isn't a reputation system yet invented that griefers can't use as an instrument of griefing.

So, indulge me here.

Assumption: your MMO has a reasonably good pseudonymity regime. This means that you can't just change your character's name or server to escape being identified as a prat, and that you're unwilling to abandon a character (because, say, it took you weeks to get it to its current level).

Okay, so the simplest way to tell who is and who isn't a prat is to keep notes. You play with someone for a couple of hours, you draw a conclusion, you write it down. When two weeks later you see them again, you look at your list, see "prat," "angel," "judgment reserved," or whatever, and then either group with them or politely decline. You build up a usable personal-reputation system this way, but you have to play with everyone at least once in order to rate them. But what about people you *haven't* met before? How do you know whether *they're* worth playing with or not?

Here's the idea.

First, instead of taking notes on a notepad, take notes in-world. Click the character, click the "rate this character" option, check whatever checkbox is most appropriate, and there you are. Next time you see the character, your opinion of them will be visible to you (name in a different color/size/font, heart/skull-and-crossbones over their head—however it's done).

Now suppose every player is doing this. Wouldn't it be great if you could look at the list of a like-minded person and see what *they* thought of someone you hadn't yet met? You wouldn't want to see the opinions of prats, just those of people who happen to share your opinion.

Insight: *you can find those like-minded people by comparing lists*.

The server can record every list of player opinions and intersect yours with those of everyone else. When it finds one with which you're in broad (or even total) agreement, it can use this to augment your list. It doesn't matter who made this list (that would be kept secret); what's important is that their opinions are in line with yours. You like A, they like A; you dislike B, they dislike B; you haven't met C, they like C, so C is probably someone you'd like. The greater the intersection between your list and mine, the greater the chance that we'll have similar views.

The fatal flaw in most reputation systems is that they can be gamed, especially by griefers. What can griefers do here, though? They can call you a prat when you're not one, but what do you care? All it means is that other griefers will think you're a prat, which is fine because you don't want to play with them anyway. Sounds a good deal!

Lists would have to be kept separate, to avoid error propagation: the server can't allow people to initialize or update their list from someone else's, as a single slip of the mouse could mean everyone in a guild thinks you're a prat when you're not. The date-stamping or status-stamping of opinions could help (you may have been hell to play with at level 10, but have grown up by level 40). It might also be advisable to have second opinions, so that you don't just get the views of the nearest match to yours, you get two or three others, too ("Hmm, the person I have a 93% match with reserves judgment on this guy, but the ones at 92% and 90% like him; okay, I'll give him the benefit of the doubt").

The main drawback of this is that it requires a lot of computational oomph. 10,000 players with 10,000 opinions might be tiresome to cross-index even using a strictly binary like/dislike system. It depends to some extent how much information is involved (I suspect that the opinion array will be fairly sparse), but it looks as if the algorithm would have to do rather a lot of work.

Still, if it means I can avoid prats, it gets *my* vote.

Initiation

The second phase of the hero's journey is *Initiation*. It's where the most fun-filled, dramatic, and exciting events take place.

Careful, there's a lot of symbolism here:

- **The Road of Trials**

  The protagonist is presented with a series of obstacles, usually three. The protagonist may suffer setbacks, but his failure is not fatal. It's during this step that the protagonist discovers the nature of the world of adventure and his place within it.

- **The Meeting with the Goddess**

  The goddess here is a mother-figure; the protagonist regards her uncritically as the embodiment of perfection. As such, she represents the totality of knowledge; it is here that, for the first time, the protagonist fully understands what lies ahead of him. If he can cope with this knowledge, he continues armed with a new sense of purpose. If he can't cope, well, that's why I mentioned Artemis and Actaeon.

- **Woman as Temptress**

  Having full knowledge of his destiny, the protagonist may believe that this is enough. Why bother to go through with the rest of the journey when he's not going to learn anything from it? The mundane world, often symbolized by a love interest, needs him back *right now*, not after some self-indulgent further prolongation. Basically, this step asks whether he's in it for the long term or not.

- **Atonement with the Father**

  All the time, the protagonist has been aware that a supreme, unknowable power—often a father-figure—has been exerting control to thwart him. If he is to succeed, the protagonist must defeat this father. However, the father is defined to be unbeatable: the protagonist can only defeat him if the father *consents* to being defeated. The father will only do *that* if he believes in the protagonist. So, does he? Well the protagonist doesn't know—as I said, the father is unknowable. The protagonist can only go by the belief he has in *himself*. This is, in fact, the whole point: the father represents the protagonist as he *was* in

the mundane world; here, this old self finally accepts that it has become the new, reborn self. The protagonist's old and new identities are aligned, and revealed to be the same. The protagonist *is* the father, and the father *is* the protagonist; he has become the person he *always was*.

- **Apotheosis**

  "Apotheosis" means "to have attained godlike stature." Having been accepted rather than obliterated, the protagonist enjoys a period of bliss, peace, and rest, fêted and celebrated by the people of the world of adventure in which he has made his mark.

- **The Ultimate Boon**

  In this step, the protagonist formally receives the object he went to the world of adventure to acquire, which betokens his renewed sense of self.

Of all the steps in the hero's journey, the keystone is that of Atonement with the Father. All the steps before it are leading up to it; all the steps after it are leading back down.

The next step is in the final phase, *Return*.

Split Screen

I was watching a film on TV with my dad once when I was a young lad, and suddenly the screen split in two. One piece of action occurred on the left side and another piece occurred on the right side. I asked my dad which one I should watch.

Split screens are part of the language of film. The first time I saw the "word" of the split screen, I didn't know what it meant. I *guessed* that the movie had split in two, with two different plots, one in each half; I wanted my dad to tell me which one he thought I'd enjoy watching the most. I was annoyed, though, because I wanted to watch both.

My dad told me that a split screen meant that the two events were going on at the same time. I should try to follow both, but not to worry as it wouldn't last long. Sure enough, 20 seconds or so later the split screen disappeared in a cut to show a single screen where some other character on the phone turned to a colleague and said, "They've done it."

This didn't bother me at all. I already knew what cuts meant.

Return

The third and final phase of the hero's journey is *Return*. It's the shortest (in terms of duration) and can contain some light-hearted moments.

These are its steps:

- **Refusal of the Return**

  The protagonist has respect, honor, power, peace—why would he want to leave the world of adventure? Well, the thing is, he has the boon. Other people in the world of adventure also want it. He can't both stay *and* have the boon.

- **The Magic flight**

  Hotly pursued by people who want the boon, the protagonist makes a run for it. This is often played for laughs, although it can also be thrilling (as it is in *The Italian Job*).

- **Rescue from Without**

  The protagonist receives help from people in the mundane world, enabling him to make good his escape. The old world needs him back, but he also needs to be back in the old world.

- **Crossing the Return Threshold**

  The protagonist returns to the world of the mundane. He must now reconcile the old with the new.

- **Master of the Two Worlds**

  The protagonist uses the boon to fix the real-world problem he went to get the boon to for in the first place. As a result, he has a sense of balance. The world of adventure has lost its mystical significance; it is a place, just as the mundane world is a place.

- **Freedom to Live**

  The protagonist has the freedom to be the person he has discovered he always was—himself. He is a *hero*.

I guess you want a concrete example of all 17 steps of the hero's journey in action, huh?

All the same if you don't, you're going to get one.

Back End of a Horse

The "so male I play female" and "so female I play male" responses given by players to explain why they play characters of the opposite gender are now used so routinely that they've become accepted as the truth.

Unfortunately, they're both false.

We know they're false because, if you look at the figures, you find that roughly 40% of male players will be playing a female character at any moment and 10% of female players will be playing a male character[30]. These percentages are *unchanged* from the days of text MUDs[31].

In textual worlds, you can't claim you're directing your gaze at your character's gorgeous butt the whole time, because your character's butt isn't being displayed. You can't complain that people are hitting on you because you're so desirable because your desirability is not visually apparent.

We used to get a wide variety of superficial explanations as to why people played cross-gender in text worlds, none of which were very persuasive. The one that least impugned the masculine self-image was, "I play as a female character so losers will give me stuff and help me." Amusingly, the one that least impugned the feminine self-image was the same but inverted: "I play as a male character, so losers won't give me stuff and help me."

Next time someone asks you why you play characters of the opposite gender, assuming that you do, try not to come up with the usual stock answer. Instead, see if you can figure out the *real* reason you do it.

Oh, and when I tried that "I prefer to look at a female character's butt" line on one of my daughters, she made a simple observation that completely undermined it: "But Daddy, you spend most of your time looking at the back end of a horse."

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[30] Nick Yee: *The Norathian Scrolls: A Study of* EverQuest. 2001. http://www.nickyee.com/report.pdf

[31] Lynne D. Roberts and Malcolm R. Parks: *The Social Geography of Gender-Switching in Virtual Environments on the Internet*. In Eileen Green and Alison Adam: *Virtual Gender: Terminology, Consumption and Identity*. New York, Routledge, 2001.

Abstracting Evil

As I mentioned earlier, many MMO players seem to enjoy playing "evil" characters. They like the idea of being able to torment non-player characters or, better yet, player characters; they like being able to take things that belong to other characters and claim them as their own; they *especially* like being able to kill other player characters.

Now this is fair enough. If you're playing a role-playing game, then the whole rationale is predicated on trying on other personalities in order to understand your real self better. Modulo the designer's morals, there's nothing intrinsically problematic in allowing players to play as evil characters.

Well, except they don't. As I explained earlier, players generally don't play evil characters: they play naughty characters. Evil works through fear: people do what you say because they're afraid of what you'll do to them if they don't. It's not that they obey you simply because they agree with what you're doing—that would merely mean they have a warped philosophy. Warped philosophies can (and often do) go hand in hand with evil, but not necessarily: the Nazi party attracted many evil people, but the Flat Earth Society didn't.

Back in the early days of text MUDs, when player-killing and permadeath were standard, we had player characters who were (from the point of view of other players) *bona fide* evil. They ruled by fear. If one was around, then you played far more cautiously, always watching your back, always trying to track where they were so they wouldn't catch you unawares. This meant that if they did attack, you were prepared, and the combat was exciting even if you lost. You were frightened of them, but they added something to the game.

In small-scale virtual worlds—those with player numbers measured in the hundreds—this sort of set-up is possible without being game-breaking. This is because it's self-correcting to some degree: what happens is that when the evil characters start to assert themselves, the other players gang up on them—or at least call in help when they're attacked. The evil characters can bully *some* players into doing what they want (such as handing over their stuff—i.e., being mugged) but they're outnumbered. It transpires that numerically there are many more good people than there are either evil ones or good ones role-playing evil ones.

With larger-population worlds, though, this doesn't scale. What happens is that once there's a critical mass of players who want to hurt other players, they'll group together themselves. With strength in numbers, they can then proceed to gank the spirit out of innocents with complete impunity. They defend themselves from complaints by saying that they're only *role-playing* being evil, and point out that the game mechanics do allow them to behave that way.

Except, as we know, they're not entirely role-playing being evil. If they were, then they would rapidly turn on each other. One person in the group would be ruling by fear and the rest would be obeying either because they hoped to usurp the leader or because they were afraid of what would happen to them or their loved ones if they didn't comply with the leader's orders. Evil people use fear and manipulation to get other people to do unpalatable things; these other people go along with it only because they're scared of what would happen if they didn't.

Roaming gangs of bandits in MMOs are made up of players who know that what they're doing is transgressive and annoys others (it's why they're doing it), but having a mob mentality doesn't make them evil. Evilness is a property of individuals, not of actions or groups: the collective effect of a lot of naughtiness may be to imbue in the players who are being abused a sense that the *group* is evil, but it's a phenomenon that emerges from the actions of 40 *individuals* being naughty together. The members of the group most likely *aren't* evil—they're just naughty.

Allowing players to "act evil" individually can add some zip to an MMO, but allowing them to do so collectively can empty a game. Is it possible to code a solution in an open PvP world that discourages the latter without discouraging the former?

There *is* a way. See if you can think of it.

Frodo's Journey

As an example of the hero's journey in action, I'm going to go through how it works for *The Fellowship of the Ring*. There's no spoiler warning because, if you haven't read *The Lord of the Rings*, you must stop RIGHT NOW and go read it. Yes, RIGHT NOW. I warned you about your messed-up priorities earlier.

Things to note before I do this:

- *The Fellowship of the Ring* is only the first book (well, strictly speaking, two books) of *The Lord of the Rings*.
- It's not unusual for minor steps to be missed out, swapped around or repeated.
- The above two points work in concert. If a narrative is part of a larger arc, this can lead to repetitions and step swaps and omissions in places where the local and global arcs touch.

So, here goes:

- **The Call to Adventure**

  Elven writing appears on the ring.

- **Refusal of the Call**

  Frodo offers Gandalf the ring *and* (later) Frodo offers the Council of Elrond the ring.

- **Supernatural Aid**

  Gandalf tells Frodo to leave the Shire *and* (later) Bilbo gives Frodo his dagger and armor.

- **The Crossing of the First Threshold**

  Frodo leave the Shire *and* (later) Frodo leaves Rivendell.

- **The Belly of the Whale**

  The group is attacked on Weathertop. Frodo puts on the ring and is stabbed; the experience deeply changes him.

- **The Road of Trials**

  There are several of these, of which the most severe is the Balrog encounter.

- **The Meeting with the Goddess**

  Galadriel explains all to Frodo—including what the ring will ultimately do to him.

- **Woman as Temptress**

  The mirror of Galadriel shows atrocities going on in the Shire, which Frodo could prevent if he went back now and used the ring.

- **Atonement with the Father**

  Boromir attempts to take the ring. All this time, Frodo has been dominated by the powers of good—the elves, dwarves, and men. Following this incident, he answers only to himself; he *is* the destiny of the free world.

- **Apotheosis**

  Frodo understands that the ring will destroy him, and so gains a kind of peace.

- **The Ultimate Boon**

  Frodo takes the ring with him, now fully knowing what it will do to him.

- **Refusal of the Return**

  This step is missing!

- **The Magic flight**

  Frodo flees from the orcs.

- **Rescue from Without**

  The rest of the fellowship arrives and takes down the orcs.

- **Crossing the Return Threshold**

  Frodo crosses the Anduin.

- **Master of the Two Worlds**

  Sam is the old world, Gollum the new.

- **Freedom to Live**

  This step is missing, because the book segues into the greater story arc. However, as Gandalf says: "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us."

Tolkien knew nothing of Campbell's work when he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. However, he did know a great deal about myth; therefore, it should not be altogether surprising that Frodo follows the hero's journey.

So what has any of this to do with virtual worlds in general and MMOs in particular?

Well, it finally allows us to explain *why* people play them.

One Question

At the Games Developers' Conference in 2005, I attended the talk at which Will Wright described his (then) new game, *Spore*. It was the first occasion he'd gone into any detail about it, and he's a highly entertaining speaker, so the room was packed. I arrived 15 minutes early myself and still had to stand—there must have been 800 people there, all computer-game professionals.

Will began his description of *Spore* with the words, "You start off at the microscopic level."

I had only one design question after I heard him say that. Any idea what it was?

Evil as Evil

Earlier, I asked how you might stop people role-playing as being "evil" from banding together and slaughtering innocents in an open PvP world.

This didn't happen in small-scale worlds, so it caught designers on the hop when MMOs scaled up. When they first observed roving groups of people whose aim was to attack other players, the immediate response (in *Ultima Online*) was to flag them as evil then have town guards attack them. Unfortunately, this meant that, when confronted by a group of charging enemies, offense-is-the-best-defense often led to the evil-flagging of non-evil characters. Eventually, designers were forced to retreat, abandoning first the concept of looting and then non-consensual PvP itself. The best we have nowadays is "evil" as an alignment in MMOs such as *Star Wars: the Old Republic*; it's a nice idea, but gives very little sense of what being evil actually *means*. Clicking the option that increases your dark side rating without even bothering to read it is an act borne of impatience, not profound immorality.

Overall, this soft-play padding has led to a diminishment of the experience of playing MMOs. There's an edge that has gone. It makes sense, though: people who are playing solo can't really be expected to stay for long if they're being attacked by gangs the whole time in combat so one-sided that they stand no chance. Okay, so there are plenty of individuals who don't want to be attacked by other players *ever* for *any* reason, but they're unlikely to be playing on a PvP server, anyway. I'm more concerned here with the fate of players who are hankering after an anarchic, old style of play, but can't get it because they're eaten alive by packs of griefers. The people who liked that early-*UO* frisson in their worlds have nowhere to go any more (well, except some ancient text MUDs, but they're never going to try those).

It's actually not all that hard to give them this experience in a large-scale world, as it happens.

First, you have a threshold-based flagging system. If you attack a non-evil opponent, your evilness rating increases. If they attack you, your evilness rating isn't affected. NPCs will treat you according to your evilness rating, which will decay over time if you don't attack non-evil people. Once it rises above the threshold, you're flagged as being formally evil. That's harder to shake off than merely playing on an alt for a few days while it wears off: perhaps you have to kill evil player characters to remove it.

Now as it stands, this system won't work. Evil-flagged players will wear their flag as a badge of honor and continue to gang up in order to beat the life out of unflagged players, just as they did in *UO*. We can, however, stop them—and fairly easily, as it happens.

So: instead of calling them evil when they're naughty, we abstract the *quality* of evil and apply to them the effects that someone who really *was* evil would attract. Basically, we debuff them if they're within shooting distance of another evil character. The explanation is that they're so busy watching their backs that they can't direct as much attention towards other targets. Furthermore, we make it cumulative.

If 40 evil-flagged characters only perform with the same collective effectiveness as four equivalent non-evil characters, suddenly it's not so much fun wandering around in groups attacking innocents who could very easily survive and leave you XPless and lootless. A pair of over-strength NPC caravan guards could massacre a party of ten bandits. Also, if you managed to trick a victim into attacking a "good" character secreted in your midst, it would be counter-productive: your effectiveness would reduce further as there'd be an additional evil person in range. The good-flagged-as-evil character will still be able to play with their buddies later, as they'd be the only evil character in the group so wouldn't be debuffed—except when an evil character attacks, which would also debuff this attacker. There are actual gameplay possibilities here.

In summary: the main problem with PvP in a PvE world is roaming gangs of PKers. The main problem with a flagging solution is that you still get roaming gangs of PKers. The answer is therefore to stop them from ganging up by debuffing them punitively when they do. You'll still get PKers, but they'll be lone wolves—enough to add spice, but not enough to overpower the recipe.

Needless to say, given the ever-more casual way that today's MMOs are heading, I don't expect we'll see this any time soon. Maybe come the MMO reboot…

The Hero's Journey in MMOs

MMO designers have known about the hero's journey for, well, longer than the term "MMO" has been around. Back in the heyday of textual worlds, when experimentation was so much quicker and easier to do, several designers looked at different narrative structures with a view to improving their quest lines. That's how I first came across the concept myself.

As a result, some virtual worlds were indeed designed with monomyth-formula quest chains. However, this didn't seem to make a lot of difference to their appeal. Why would that be?

Well, the hero in these particular journeys is the *character*, not the player—the player is still one level of indirection away from the actuality of a hero's journey. *You* don't get to be a hero watching *Star Wars*—Luke Skywalker does. *You* don't get to be a hero playing an MMO—Jimbo the orc does. You're one step away from the experience.

Except, you *do* get to be a hero. Playing an MMO is *itself* a hero's journey—starring *you*.

New Arrivals

Here's why MMOs have been going down the pan in design terms for the past decade or more.

Even for the most compelling of MMOs, players *will* eventually leave. For the MMO not to decline, new players have to arrive at the same rate or better than old players leave.

- **Point 1:** MMOs live or die by their attractiveness to newbies.

  New players come to MMOs with a set of preconceptions that they got from other MMOs, or from regular computer games, or from what the world around them has told them. They won't play MMOs that confront these expectations when there are other MMOs around that don't. If you want your MMO to attract new players, you therefore shouldn't include features that will offend them. This includes features that long-standing players love.

- **Point 2:** Newbies won't play an MMO that has a major feature they don't like the idea of.

  Players spend much less time playing their second and subsequent MMOs than they do their first. The first MMO you get into is a magical, enchanting, awesome, never-to-be-repeated experience; later ones are pale reflections. It's to do with the fact that they don't have an *Atonement with the Father* step, if you must know.

- **Point 3:** Players judge all MMOs against the first one they got into.

  When MMOs change (as they must), players only ever judge the merits of the change based on its short-term effects. A long-term benefit will not impress them if there's a short-term loss. This means developers can't add something that's long-term good but short-term bad, nor remove something short-term good but long-term bad.

- **Point 4:** Short-term good, long-term bad design choices cause players to leave.

From these four points, we can construct an induction.

Point 4 says that players leave any MMO built on the results of their own short-term views. **Point 3** means they won't recognize that what caused them to leave was indeed the cause. **Point 2** says they won't play an MMO that lacks that feature (the very one that drove them to leave). **Point 1** says that those that do lack the feature—that is, *those with the better design*—will fail from lack of newbies. Any absolute newbie for whom this is their first MMO will be educated to think that this is how things should be. The whole process thereupon repeats itself.

Normally, the way game evolution works is that each generation takes the good design genes from the previous generation and propagates them. We do see that with MMOs, but they propagate poor design genes more readily. The best MMOs don't pass their genes around because they have high retention (why quit for another MMO when this one suits your needs just fine?). Poor design makes players leave sooner, so the features they like (which ultimately led to their leaving) are the ones that become must-haves in the next generation.

In other words, for a new MMO to succeed, it has to have all the features that caused its ancestors to fail.

The MMO Player's Journey

The hero's journey involves:

- Leaving the world of the mundane.
- Becoming reborn in an "other world" of adventure and the unknown.
- Returning to the world of the mundane with a renewed sense of self.

So: *Reality* is the "mundane world." The virtual world you play is the "other world":

- **The Call to Adventure**

  The player hears about MMOs, perhaps through an advertisement, an article on a web page, or a display in a shop.

- **Refusal of the Call**

  Fears of inadequacy, the existence of a healthy real-world social life, the expense, or the time requirements.

- **Supernatural Aid**

  A friend who already plays, an endorsement from a celebrity, your favorite IP.

- **The Crossing of the First Threshold**

  Installing the client software.

- **The Belly of the Whale**

  The character creation system.

- **The Road of Trials**

  The player finds their feet. What can they do in this world?

- **The Meeting with the Goddess**

  The player seeks knowledge. What are their goals, and what tools are available to accomplish them?

- **Woman as Temptress**

  The transition from learning to doing. The player now knows what to do to get to the level cap—but are they prepared to do it?

- **Atonement with the Father**

  The player tries to succeed on the MMO's own terms—to "win" it. The MMO's lead designer is the "father" here.

- **Apotheosis**

  The player understands the virtual world and its people. They bask in their new-found status.

- **The Ultimate Boon**

  Oh-oh! Virtual worlds are virtual; how can you take anything out of them?

- **Refusal of the Return**

  The player has power, respect, and friends—why leave?

- **Rescue from Without**

  All the time you've been playing, your parents, significant other, and real-world friends have been saying, "Why do you spend so much time playing that computer game?" Now, you actually pay attention to them.

- **The Magic flight**

  Oh, those expansion sets—just when you're about to quit, they bring out another one!

- **Crossing the Return Threshold**

  You stop playing because you don't *need* to play anymore.

- **Master of the Two Worlds**

  Your virtual self and your real self are one. The virtual world is a place just like any other—it's lost its mystical significance. Okay, so it's a fun place to visit, and you have lots of friends there whom you like to hook up with, but it's not *special* any more.

- **Freedom to Live**

  Having *become* themselves, players can finally *be* themselves.

Note: the order of Rescue from Without and The Magic Flight has been reversed here. This is because the magic flight isn't so much breaking out as declining to break back in. Recall that missing, reversed, and repeated minor steps are not uncommon in the hero's journey.

Ah, yes, missing steps: what's with The Ultimate Boon? How can you take *anything* from a virtual world? To do so, wouldn't it have to be real—and therefore not virtual? Well, yes, it would—and it is: it's *you*. The boon is symbolic of your sense of self anyway; taking yourself out of the virtual world merely collapses a redundant metaphor.

So, we can now see how the hero's journey can be applied to virtual worlds. There's a difference between "can be applied" and "applies," though. After all, you *can* apply the hero's journey to all manner of transformative journeys, some of which have no basis whatsoever (try composing "my breakfast's journey"—it hits almost every step, with "rescue from without" being particularly entertaining if you're aged 12).

This is not just some happy match between a player's MMO experience and the hero's journey, though. If it were, it would be a curiosity but little else. There's something about it that gives it *substance*.

Look back at the player types stuff I described a while ago.

Master of the Two Worlds

Some of *MUD*2's players have been playing it since the 1980s.

Sure, they "won" long ago.

Violent Changes

By default, people who play MMOs for fun will follow whichever development track best suits them. However, very, *very* infrequently someone will flip their lid and effectively derail. Where they'll finally end up is anyone's guess, but most often they just stick where they are, unable to make progress and becoming increasingly frustrated. In such a case, they're called *broken*, as in *broken planner* or *broken networker*[32].

It usually takes great psychological trauma or an external, real-life event to cause such a violent change of direction to happen, so you won't see it very often. This is probably just as well, given that the results aren't usually desirable. The most alarming case I've experienced is that of a hacker who became a griefer after getting his carefully-constructed research disrupted by a regular griefer once too often. This turned him into maniacal super-griefer, leading to much hilarity for him and much weeping and wailing for his victims.

[32]This term originated with one of my *MUD*2 players, who called herself Lexley Vaughan but *no way* was that her real name: Lexley Vaughan: *Player Killers Exposed. Imaginary Realities* Vol. 2 (10), October 1999. http://www.paxlair.com/library_files/1_in_progress/player_killers_exposed/player_killers_exposed.htm

Speak Like an Academic

> *The way I see it, the diegetic evil enables a player to resolve a dialectic between the extra-diegetic "good" of their real-life existence (as imposed by society) and the extra-diegetic "evil" that is their potential future if they were to rebel.*

Become an academic, and you, too, can speak like this.

What I'm saying is that the "evil" that exists within the context of the MMO world is useful as a tool to help people work through issues of conformity with social norms in the real world.

Here's another way of putting it.

> *Day 1: "What makes me think I'm not evil?"*
>
> *Day 60: "Even when I role-play evil, I still wind up acting good. Evil isn't as cool as it's made out to be."*
>
> *The temptation to be evil hasn't been overcome here, it's been rejected. Evil is for losers.*

Become an academic, and you can speak like this, too.

In the first example, I was in research mode; in the second example, I was in teaching mode.

Most of this book is written in teaching mode. It has very few references and no non-reference footnotes. Criticisms are often "straw man" in nature because, although I can name names when I begin with "some people think… "—I really don't want the grief and lawsuits that would follow if I did so.

I tell you this so that if you're enthused or outraged enough by what I've been saying to delve deeper into any of the topics I've raised, expect walls of text like the "diegetic evil" one to greet you.

I now return you to your regularly scheduled program.

The World of Adventure

Here's how we know that the fit between a player's experience of an MMO and the hero's journey is not merely coincidence.

Look at the steps of the hero's journey that take place within the world of adventure, and compare them to the development tracks for player types (in order):

- **The Road of Trials**

  This corresponds to the opportunist/griefer step of player development. The player is trying to find out what the limits are of the MMO's physics and cultural norms.

- **The Meeting with the Goddess**

  This corresponds to the networker/scientist step. The player is trying to find out what the task ahead will involve.

- **Woman as Temptress**

  This corresponds to the transition from networker/ scientist to planner/politician. The player is level 20, say, and can see that the next (cap-20) levels will be pretty much more of the same. Will they play those levels through, or restart, or stop playing?

- **Atonement with the Father**

  This corresponds to the planner/politician step. The player attempts to satisfy the goals that the MMO itself states through its design. This is where most MMO players spend the bulk of their time, typically leveling up or collecting endgame gear sets.

- **Apotheosis**

  This corresponds with the Friend/Hacker step. The player understands the world, its people, and their place within it.

This is such a strong match with what we *know* happens as players develop in virtual worlds that it *can't* be a coincidence. People who play virtual worlds for fun *must* be engaged in their own, personal, hero's journey.

If you think about it, why *else* would they invest two to four hours every night for 18 month playing the same computer game? They're doing it because *they get to be themselves*.

That's all that people anywhere throughout history have ever wanted to be.

One Answer

The one design question I had after I heard Will Wright say, "You start off at the microscopic level" was this: "Does the universe turn out to be microscopic to another universe?"

It was obvious to me from that first line that he was going to start small, then get gradually bigger until eventually he had an entire universe. I wanted to know whether this universe would be the starting spore of a new, start-again universe, or whether universes didn't wrap around like that.

I therefore watched in growing amazement as the crowd whooped with delight each time Will pulled out the viewpoint. Microscopic to naked eye—whoop!—to local—whoop!—to global—whoop!—to stellar—whoop!—to universal—whoop! whoop!

These people *hadn't seen it coming*. I was in a room with the cream of the computer game development community, and 90 percent of them didn't seem to know what Will was going to tell them next. Couldn't they see? It was *obvious!*

Well, obvious to *me*: I'm a designer. It was also obvious to those other designers present that I spoke with afterwards. Most members of the audience, however, were not designers. You may have design ideas, and those ideas may be good ones, but that doesn't make you a designer.

You're a designer because… you're a designer.

Oh, and the answer is no: the universe doesn't wrap around. Probably a good call: it would have been aesthetically more pleasing as a design if it had wrapped round, but players would have had less of a sense of having *built* something.

Why People Play MMOs

We can at last say why people play MMOs.

It's a quest for identity.

By being someone virtual, people find out who they are for real.

Whatever they are doing at any one moment to pursue that aim, they regard as fun.

That's why they play so much.

That's why virtual worlds are here to stay.

HiPiHi—Words and Meaning

At a conference in 2007, I went to a talk given by the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore. I got there early, mainly because my alarm had failed to go off the day before, and I'd missed a keynote, so I was feeling guilty. While waiting, I spoke with some of the other attendees. One of them was Hui Xu, founder and CEO of *HiPiHi*, who was present with his translator, Zafka Zhang. I knew that *HiPiHi* was starting out as a well-funded Chinese virtual world along the lines of *Second Life*, so there were many interesting and penetrative questions I could have asked.

Of these many interesting and penetrative questions I could have asked, I nevertheless chose to go with the one that anyone who had read about *HiPiHi* really wanted to know: how do you pronounce its name?

Zafka was visibly excited that I'd asked this, because there had been some serious thought involved in choosing the name. He explained that the fact that there are three *I*s in *HiPiHi* is auspicious in China because three is a "good number" (the word for "three", *sān*, sounds vaguely like the word for "living, growing," *shēng*). Taken as three parallel lines, they are associated with creation; I guess that would be because three unbroken parallel lines in the *I Ching* have that meaning. He also said that the three Is looked like the Chinese character for "society," but I don't know where that comes from—it looks more like the one for river to me (川).

As for the letters in between, they're tied to the *I*s. The pair *pihi* has connotations of an innocent or perfect child (sadly, too informal for my Anglo-Chinese dictionary). The *hipi* pair sounds a bit like the English word "happy" to Chinese ears.

Okay, so that's all very interesting, but #1 on the FAQ is not, "What does the name mean?" It's, "How do you pronounce it?"

Zafka's reply was, "Oh, some people say *hypie-high*, some people say *hippy-high*, some say *high-pie-high*. Say it how you like."

Sure enough, over the course of the conference, both he and Hui Xu pronounced it all three ways with merry abandon, as did everyone else. *High-pee-high* was another popular rendition.

I thought it a bit strange that they'd go into so much depth regarding the symbolism of the word, but not at all care how it's pronounced. I suppose if you're aiming for world domination, the key point is that it's pronounceable at all in other languages, not so much the exact way the locals choose to say it.

I myself decided to go with *hippy-high*, because hippies get high. That way, Chinese and American cultural values could fight over its connotations and leave me in peace.

HiPiHi ceased to exist in 2012. The name must not have been quite as auspicious as it was believed to be.

Atonement with the Father

Today's MMOs don't do the Atonement with the Father step very well *at all*.

The step requires the MMO to accept that a player has "won" and effectively say, GAME OVER. Marketing people don't like this idea because, well, if you tell players that they've won, surely they'll stop playing?

Bad news, marketing people: *all* players will stop playing eventually. The best you get to do is delay the inevitable.

If you don't tell players they have won, then they don't complete the Atonement with the Father step of their journey. Either they'll grow increasingly frustrated and irritated ("what do I have to *do*?!") or they'll self-actualize anyway without you ("you know, I've nothing left to prove here"). Either way, you're building up resentment. If you were just to *tell* them when they've finished the game aspect of play, they could move on.

We did this in the early days. You reached the level cap—congratulations! You're now a wizard/witch (delete as appropriate). It would be a brave MMO developer who let a designer try this in a $50 million title, though.

Still, with the right scenario.

Remember: that's the *1980s* for some *MUD2* players.

Designeritis

Suppose you go to see a movie and find yourself sitting next to Stephen Spielberg (unless you are Stephen Spielberg, in which case this whole conceit breaks down). Two hours later, when the movie has finished, what could you possibly say to him about it? His knowledge of movie-making is so much deeper than yours that he'll have seen things you haven't seen, picked up on nuances that passed you by, understood symbols you didn't even know *were* symbols: it's almost as if you've watched two different movies.

Yet *you* may have had the better experience. For you, the magic of the movies is still real.

As with movie directors, designers of MMOs know so much about their subject that they don't see them in quite the same way as players. When they enjoy an MMO, they enjoy it for the beauty of its design, not of its artwork; for the imagination of its gameplay, not of its guilds; for its expression of ideas, not of its action.

I can't play an MMO as a regular player for fun. I *do* have fun, but not the same *kind* of fun that non-designer players have. I've seen and experienced that kind of fun every which way for well over 30 years, and its enchantment has long since worn off—if it was ever there to begin with. *My* fun comes from creating and from experiencing the creations of other people (although some of this can be painful—not all design is beautiful).

In other words, I've grokked games, but not game design.

I'm not alone in not being able to play as a player. Although the condition doesn't affect all designers, it's nevertheless so common that it has a name, "designeritis" (coined by Raph Koster).

Players are deeply wary of this. It's not only a pompous attitude to take ("my understanding is far in advance of yours"), it sounds like a bad thing. After all, if *you* don't have fun playing your own MMO, how can you expect your *players* to have fun doing so?

Pomposity aside (because okay, it *is* pompous), this would be a valid criticism were it not for the fact that players *don't all have the same idea of what's fun in an MMO*. If I were, say, an achiever, I'd certainly create an MMO that achievers would find fun, but what about explorers? What about socializers? Given, then, that I *have* to design for playing styles not my own, wouldn't it therefore be better if I was agnostic about them, rather than believing in just one? That way, I'm not going to be biased in favor of my own style over the others.

You don't have to experience something at an emotional level to understand those who do; indeed, if you *do* experience it, it can get in the way.

This is known as the "most gynecologists are men" defense.

Gome and Gomen

One Monday in 2012, when I was supposed to be doing some miserable, pointless administration that I just wanted to GET OUT OF THE WAY, I instead spent several hours reading up on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Don't you loathe it when you're watching a TV detective series and the detective looks at a scene, "knowing something is wrong" without being able to put their finger on it? It's basically an invitation for the viewer to see if they can spot the clue. Real detectives never get that kind of I-can-see-something-is-out-of-place-but-I-don't-know-what moments. That kind of consciously inaccessible observation just doesn't make sense.

Okay, so I was looking for a short tale that follows the formula of the hero's journey in order to get my students to analyze it. The previous year's cohort had done *The First Voyage of Sindbad the Sailor*, but that was a little short and we'd finished early, so this time I thought I'd try find something longer. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is too long in its original form, but I could probably use an abridged version as it was the plot that I wanted, not so much the alliterative poetry. The reason I was keen to use it was because it has a "beheading game" in it, and I was teaching it as part of a games module. Ultimately, Gawain breaks the rules of the game and feels shame because of this, which is rather interesting.

Then, I had a TV detective moment. There was something I knew about games and something I knew about Middle English that suddenly connected them. But what?

Fortunately, my ability to query my own insights far exceeds that of TV detectives and I knew the answer less than a second later. The word *bridegroom* used to be *bridegome*, with *gome* being a Middle English word for *man* (the Spanish surname *Gomez* has the same root). The Middle English for game is (er, I guess that's was) *gomen*. That's a pretty cool similarity: I wondered if the Middle English version of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* uses those words?

Well, yes it does.

It uses *gomen* several times in several ways (some of which are more akin to meaning "play" than "game") and it uses *gome* even more often in even more ways. It turns out that there's a school of thought which asserts that this is no coincidence and that one of the central themes of the poem is that men treat life as a game. There's even an argument that the poem is *itself* a game to be played by the teller with the audience.

So this is why I spent an afternoon reading papers about a classic of medieval literature when I should have been reading a wad of project reports I was meant to be externally examining. Damn!

Oh well, that's game designers for you.

;shrugs

People typically play MMOs for two to four hours most nights. If they don't quit within six months, they'll continue for between 18 months and two years before easing off.

Even the most dedicated player of a Facebook game is not going to be able to do that while remaining sane. The only reason they can do it in an MMO is because they're undertaking a hero's journey.

The hero's journey underpins Player Types theory. Why then, would you use Player Types theory for Facebook games? Or for mobile phone games? Or for any other kind of game except MMOs?

Yet some people do.

;shrugs.

Oeuvres

Game designers have *oeuvres*. If you're told a game is by Will Wright, you know what to expect.

The same applies to (among others) Sid Meier, Peter Molyneux, Raph Koster, Reiner Knizia, and Mark Jacobs.

Game design is an *art*.

Azax

The point at which I knew for certain that Campbell's monomyth applied to MMOs was when I read about the Atonement with the Father step.

I'd seen it happen, before my (virtual) eyes.

It was in *MUD1*. One of our players, Averazix, was a classic explorer type. He tried out anything and everything. Some of these things were legitimate; some were borderline; some were illegitimate. I busted him down to 0 points several times, but he just bounced back. He had a major line in whinging to try to get to see things that people didn't normally get to see, and he really annoyed some of the players in authority—the wizzes.

As I explained earlier, in *MUD1* when you obtained enough points, you became a wiz (wizard for male characters, witch for female characters). Wizzes had tremendous powers—they could do anything from eradicating other characters to raising them to wiz level, too.

After being reduced back to 0 points yet again (for exploiting the `kiss` command—no, really!), Averazix decided to play it straight. He changed his name to Azax and determined to play *MUD1* as intended so as to reach wiz in such a squeaky-clean manner that he was beyond reproach. Then, the instant he had access to his wizly powers, he would use them to kill anyone and everyone, thereby wrecking the game and punishing the wizzes for having punished him.

What he didn't know was that I, as an arch-wizard, had seen him discussing his plans with a friend while I was invisible, so was waiting, ready, when he began his final wiz run. If he *did* run amok, I would have been able to stop him. Wizzes were powerful, but not as powerful as arch-wizzes.

Sure enough, he steadily accumulated the final points he needed, cautiously and scrupulously, the moment of his revenge drawing ever closer, until finally he crossed the line and—

—and in the space of about four seconds, he was hit by the realization that what he wanted to become so he could defeat it, *he already was*. He suddenly *understood* what being a wiz *meant*. It was amazing to behold. He *transformed*.

From being a whinging, whiny, yet smart kid, Azax became *MUD1*'s 44th wiz, a position he held until I made him an arch-wiz a couple of years later.

I talked to Azax afterwards about this, and he confirmed it as accurate. He had intended to wreak death right up until the moment the message appeared, "Your level of experience is now wizard." Then, when he saw it, he knew he had never needed to do so.

I often mentioned this in conversation about *MUD1*'s wizzes, but it wasn't until some 18 years later that I read *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and saw it described in words.

There are plenty of skeptics who doubt that the hero's journey applies to MMOs, but for me it answered a question that had been bugging me since 1984: what *happened*, there?

Real Life API—SelfActualize

CPlayer::SelfActualize

void SelfActualize()

Remarks

Causes the player to be and become who he or she really is. Depending on properties defined within **CPlayer**, effects can include:

- A willingness to embrace truth rather than deny or ignore it.
- An interest in solving problems.
- Spontaneity.
- Self-acceptance and an acceptance of others.
- A lack of prejudice.

It is recommended that this method only be employed on players with a **plPlayed** value in excess of 1,600 hours (game worlds) or 3,200 hours (social worlds).

Failure of Atonement

Although their lack of Atonement with the Father is a problem for MMOs, there are other ways to screw up this step that MMO designers (or those who pay their salaries) are all too eager to attempt.

Undeserved Atonement. For Atonement with the Father to mean anything, it must *only* be available to those who have passed the tests. If the Father can be fooled into granting atonement to those who haven't passed the tests, this makes it worthless.

This explains why so many players dislike anything that undermines their own sense of achievement. They regard any way to side-step the MMO's progression system as cheating. The buying of any in-world advantage using real-world money is anathema to them. It eats at the trust that is necessary for this part of the journey to work.

Premature Atonement. An MMO that is too easy can enable Atonement with the Father to be obtained before the player is ready for it. First-time players normally take 18-24 months at normal rates of play to reach the necessary level of immersion. If Atonement comes too soon (in the scientist/networker phase, for example), then it will feel all wrong.

This implies that MMOs need a critical mass of content if they are to be valid as the "other world" of a hero's journey. With insufficient content, or content of an insufficient level, Atonement will be granted before the player can draw any benefit from it.

It also implies that there is such a thing as too much content, which players will interpret as grind. Nevertheless, too much is better than too little: so long as *some* end is realistically attainable after the player has passed the scientist/networker step but before they've reached the hacker/friend one, Atonement will feel acceptable and merited.

Lack of Journey. Social worlds have a major problem in that they offer no metric by which players can measure their relative success. Game worlds also suffer to some extent, albeit almost exclusively to those players who follow the main socializer sequence. Often in such situations, players will come up with their own pecking order instead of a game-prescribed one (for example, "leading a guild").

In other words, if a virtual world is sufficiently separated from real life to qualify in players' minds as an "other world," they will make up their own "game" to drive their activities. Unfortunately, because the virtual world itself doesn't recognize the terms of this "game," it will rarely be implemented as an Atonement mechanism.

Meaningless Atonement. This is perhaps the most challenging problem facing those designers who wish to give their players the complete hero's journey experience. For Atonement with the Father to mean anything, it must only be given to those who have passed through the previous stages of the journey. The sad fact is, however, that not every player is *able* to do so: not everyone can be a hero.

Sooner or later, it occurs to players even of MMOs boasting a winning condition that failure was never an option. All it takes to keep going is time. Tests and trials may get harder, but they're never so hard that you can't pass them. Anyone with half a brain can plod, plod, plod to "the end," wherever that is. What, then, is the point of trying? The only way you're not going to finish the journey is if it becomes so boring that you lose interest. Atonement with the Father is guaranteed for all, it's just a matter of stamina.

There are two known solutions to this, neither of which is ideal.

The first is permadeath. Players who fail a step must create a new character, start again, and attempt to recover their lost self (creating in the process a stronger, new self).

The second is a failure penalty. Players don't lose their character when they mess up, but they do lose something that materially puts them back—experience points, for example. In the process of recovering what they lost, they could well lose again, until they reach an equilibrium in which their gains are balanced with their losses. They run but stay in the same place, so don't ever reach the winning post.

My advice to MMO designers is this: give players a meaningful, deserved "win" condition that arrives at the right time, is triggered by a valid measure of mastery and is plod-proof; in return, they'll give you your virtual world.

It's okay, don't feel bad: I know you're not going to act on it.

So Little Time

Interested observers always make a big thing of the amount of time that players spend in an MMO. Server logs for *EverQuest 2* show[33][34] that the average is around 29 hours per week for women and 25 for men. It's clear that people can spend a lot of time in virtual worlds.

Is there, however, a minimum amount of time they can spend, below which they simply don't get the full benefit of an MMO? Might it be, for example, that if you can only play a random 5-10 hours a week you aren't going to form enough of a social relationship with other players to get that virtual world "feel"? Or perhaps you won't get that growing sense that you and your character are one and the same, which so marks out MMOs from regular computer games?

If this is indeed the case, and there is a minimum time commitment to get the best out of an MMO, then any game designed to appeal to "casual" players faces a dilemma. It may have the form of a virtual world, but if the players don't inhabit it as traditional players do, then it won't have the effect of one. Therefore, should it even have the form of one? It might be a better casual game if it didn't.

Yeah, yeah, you don't really care, just so long as the non-casual MMOs don't go the same way.

Þe Gome of þe Grene

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight follows the hero's journey. Gawain fails the last step on the Road of Trials by accepting a gift that he doesn't mention to his host, thereby breaking the rules of the game they are playing. He pays for it with a nick to the neck during his Atonement with the Father.

All stories, continually retold, come to have the same shape. All existence is a game.

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[33]Dmitri Williams, Nick Yee and Scott E. Caplan: *Who Plays, How Much, and Why? Debunking the Stereotypical Gamer Profile. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* v 13 pp 993-1018, 2008. http://dmitriwilliams.com/Whoplaysfinal.pdf

[34]Erwin S. Andreasen and Brandon A. Downey: *Measuring Bartle-Quotient*, 1996-present.

Evidence

So, people who play MMOs for fun are undergoing a hero's journey—a narrative path to self-understanding. As they progress, what they find fun in the MMO changes, reflecting their current position on the path. This is immensely compelling because, for the first time in human history, ordinary individuals can go on their own hero's journey instead of having to identify with those of the characters in other people's stories.

Yes, this all hangs together very nicely. However, is there any *evidence* for it? Just because it *looks* neat, that doesn't mean it's *right*. It's conceivable that even *I* could be, be, be, be *wrong*!

Anecdotal evidence suggests that players buy into the player types, if not the theory itself (players of RPGs are notorious for not liking the idea that theories of any kind apply to them). The *Bartle Test of Gamer Psychology*, which is based on my work (no, I didn't give it that name) has had more than 850,000 respondents since it started in 1996. Surely this would not be the case if there weren't at least *something* in it.

Does it stand up to *academic* scrutiny, though?

Over to Nick Yee.

Newbie Induction Examples

Here are two examples of short-term/long-term good/bad ideas in MMOs. I chose these particular ones because, well, you'll see why.

Permanent death is short-term bad, long-term good. It's *really* bad, when it happens to you. However, properly done, it doesn't happen all that often, and it has huge benefits.

- It prevents early-adopters filling all the positions of power.
- It reuses content efficiently because you can see the same content from different angles.
- It's the default fiction for real life.
- It promotes identity exploration because you're not stuck as one character.
- It validates achievement because a high-level character implies a high-level player.

Many designers and experienced players would like to see a form of permadeath in their MMO, but it's not going to happen. Newbies wouldn't play such a game; therefore, eventually neither would anyone else.

Permadeath is short-term bad, long-term good: rejected.

Instancing is short-term good, long-term bad. Groups of friends (or, increasingly, groups of random strangers you'll never meet again) can play together in their own walled garden of peace and tranquility.

Where's the player impact, though? How can you have any effect on the world if all you're doing is repeating a story capsule inside a pocket universe that disappears as soon as you leave it? Where's the sense of *being* somebody?

Players don't see it that way, though. It's familiar and fun, so they like it. Only in the long term do they discover the downside—it's grindy, repetitive, predictable, and creatively moribund. So what do they do? They wait for new instances to appear or go play some other MMO that has instances. What they *don't* do is go play an MMO that doesn't have instances—they still only see the short-term good, not the long-term bad.

Instancing is short-term good, long-term bad: accepted.

I chose two examples because the chances are that most of the readers of this book will make my point for me. You probably would not play an MMO with permadeath on principle. You probably would not play an MMO without instancing on principle. That's why we have the latter and don't have the former, even though in pure design terms it would be better to have the former and not have the latter.

It's not just permadeath and instancing. There are many things now in the paradigm that could make for better MMOs if they weren't there, including teleporting, banks, soulbound objects, and weightless money. Players have come to these expect things:

> **Player**: Why won't this shopkeeper buy my broken wand?
>
> **Designer**: It's a cheese shop. You need a magic shop.
>
> **Player**: So I have to spend 45 seconds walking to the magic shop to sell my broken wand? That sucks!
>
> **Designer**: On the way, you might see other shops, pick up quests, bump into friends—
>
> **Player**: Are you NUTS? I have a raid in like 20 minutes! I want to sell this crap RIGHT NOW!
>
> **Designer**: But how will you ever discover anything new if you don't explore?
>
> **Player**: Are you listening? RIGHT NOW!
>
> **Designer**: *Mutter. Grumble.*

It's not as if *any* shop, let alone a cheese shop, would ever buy a broken wand anyway. Try selling a broken clock to the proprietor of an actual clock shop in real life and see how far you get.

MMOs build a pressure on designers to create worlds that, while not outright bad, are long-term bad. Each succeeding generation adds more not-quite-good-enough features to the paradigm, which leads to a downward spiral. It's not so much evolution as erosion.

There are some wonderfully original, joyous MMOs out there. They're gracefully balanced, rich in depth, astonishing in breadth, alive with subtleties, and packed with fun, interesting people in an atmosphere of mystique and marvel without compare. You would love these worlds, but you're not going to play them. You're not going to play them because they're text.

Text is an example of short-term bad, decades of long-term good: rejected.

Nick Yee's "Motivations"

The first person to do a major study looking at the Player Types model was Nick Yee of Stanford University[35]. He surveyed 6,700 players of *EverQuest* (82%), *Dark Age of Camelot* (15%), and a smattering of other MMOs, asking a number of questions designed to find out what motivated players to play.

From the data, Nick found five such motivations. Here they are, each paired with the player type that matches it:

Grief	Killer (griefer)
Leadership	Killer (politician)
Achievement	Achiever
Relationship	Socializers
Immersion	Er..?

As you can see, Nick found no evidence for explorers, but did find evidence for something entirely absent from the Player Types model—immersion.

More recently, Nick analyzed[36] a massive dataset for *EverQuest 2* (massive as in 60 terabytes of data cataloguing the activities of 400,000 players—*that* kind of massive). He was able to go into much more depth with this and tease out more subtle relationships; in all, he discovered ten motivations which factored neatly into three groups:

- **Achievement**

  Advancement, analyzing mechanics, competition.

- **Social**

  Chatting, developing relationships, teamwork.

- **Immersion**

  Geographical exploration, role-playing, avatar customization, escapism.

[35]Nicholas Yee: *Facets: Five Motivation Factors for Why People Play MMORPGs*, 2002. http://www.nickyee.com/facets/home.html

[36]Nicholas Yee: *Motivations of Play in Online Games. CyberPsychology and Behaviour* 9, pp 772-775, 2006. http://www.nickyee.com/pubs/Yee%20-%20Motivations%20(2007).pdf

Compare these motivations with the 8-types model:

Advancement	Achiever (planner)
Analyzing Mechanics	Explorer (hacker)
Competition	Killer (griefer)
Chatting	Socializer (networker)
Developing Relationships	Socializer (friend)
Teamwork	Killer (politician)
Discovery	Explorer (scientist)
Role-Playing	Er..?
Avatar Customization	Er..?
Escapism	Er..?

This doesn't look *too* shoehorned a fit. There's nothing that matches achiever (opportunist) directly, but that could be because it's superficially close enough to explorer (scientist) to be caught in the same net.

The interesting parts are the extra three motivations that Nick identified, which do not correspond with anything in the 8-types model. They're all examples of what Nick classifies as "immersion."

So, from both the early and later work that Nick has done here, we can see that a notable proportion of players consistently rate immersion as a reason why they play. This poses something of a problem for the Player Types model because it doesn't have a fit for it. Furthermore, because the Player Types model is supposed to be exhaustive, it *can't* have a fit for it without major reconstructive surgery.

A hint at the solution comes from the observation that immersion isn't orthogonal to the other factors. You can't be both exploring and griefing at the same time, but you *can* be both exploring and immersed at the same time. This suggests that immersion could be emergent (don't you love it when the English language clashes like that?).

As a hint as to what's going on here, I'll perhaps point out that it's no coincidence Nick Yee called his 2014 book *The Proteus Paradox*[37].

[37]Nicholas Yee: *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change us – and how they don't.* Yale University Press, 2014.

The Player Life-Cycle

Aside from the work on player types, how does the rest of my grand MMO theory stand up to close investigation?

Well, there hasn't actually been a lot of work in this area, although what there has been has come from—you guessed, yet again—Nick Yee[38]. He tracked the stages that players went through as they played, and discovered that over their entire playing career they followed a pattern:

- Entry
- Practice
- Mastery
- Burnout
- Recovery

Because you're so observant, you will have noticed that this is an abstraction of the hero's journey. Entry is the Road of Trials; practice is The Meeting with the Goddess; mastery is Atonement with the Father; burnout is Apotheosis; recovery is Master of the Two Worlds.

The burnout stage is slightly problematical, in that the name suggests that it's a negative experience. This is generally supported by the data, too: players tire of grinding, raiding, and starting new characters, and feel there is nothing left for them to do. Apotheosis is not supposed to be like this, though: the hero's journey expects them to feel relaxed and at ease. So what's gone wrong?

Well, it's a consequence of the botched Atonement with the Father step. If the players had been told at the peak of their mastery that they had beaten the game, then that would indeed have led them to a positive Apotheosis. However, because they weren't told this, they had to figure it out for themselves.

Thus, players grow weary of doing the same old things for no discernible gain, and eventually begin to question the point of it all. Sometimes they'll set themselves another futile goal, but eventually they'll either leave in frustration or come to realize that there's no pressure on them any more—they've *won*. They move into the stage Nick calls "recovery" and are free to have fun again.

[38]Nicholas Yee: *Player Life-Cycle*, 2009. http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001588.php

Immersion and Identity

If you think about it, it's fairly obvious what immersion is in MMO terms. If immersion means the feeling that *you* are *in* a virtual world, and there exists an entity in that virtual world which you control, then it follows that *you* must *be* that entity.

It's an identity thing. The more you feel that your character is you, the more immersed you are. When the two finally become one, the result is a persona—*you*, *in* the MMO.

That's immersion.

Induction in Action

When the AOL MMO *NeverWinter Nights* shut down in 1997, the players flooded to *Meridian 59*[39]. There, they demanded the inclusion of every single feature of *NWN* that *M59* didn't already have. This included those very features that had caused *NWN*'s decline.

Players judge all subsequent MMOs against their idealized view of the one they first got into. If you're an MMO player, that *includes* you.

Not Actually Famous

None of the players in any of the MMO guilds I've been in have recognized my name when I've told them. Even if they've done the "Bartle Test," they don't remember my name. Among MMO players, I'm not actually famous. I'm not even relatively famous.

This is probably how it should be.

Beyond the "Hero" Label

With MMOs, for the first time pretty well ever ordinary people can *themselves* experience a hero's journey. You can never be Neo from *The Matrix*, but you don't *want* to be Neo—you want to be *you*.

Instead of having to gain occasional glimpses of facets of your self through a patchy, second-person alignment with a fictional character, with MMOs you can experience it *directly*. You *can* become a hero. What you *can't* become is a stereotype, which is the vision of what it is to be "a hero" that many players (and yes, sadly, designers) have today.

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[39]Damion Schubert: *The Single Most Fun Thing you can do with Hundreds of Other People without Wearing Anything Made of Latex*. 31st December, 1999. http://www.gilcon.net/meridian/faqs-get.asp?ID=89

On Missing Types

"Where is the player type for people who just want to help others?"

Often, people ask me where some player type they feel exists or wish to believe exists would fit into the Player Types model. As I've explained several times already, the answer is always the same: look at what they find fun. It may be that no fun is involved, in which case Player Types theory wouldn't even apply.

People who help others are doing it for their own reasons, whether those are moral, religious, genetic, or ulterior. If I go out and help people because it gives me a warm fuzzy glow to do so, sure, people will benefit, but I'm basically doing it for myself. If I hate helping people but nevertheless go out of my way to help them, it'll also be for some personal reason—maybe to assuage some guilt, or because I've decided it's the "right thing" to do and don't want to contradict myself by acting otherwise.

Only if people help other people out for fun (i.e., the warm, fuzzy glow) would the Player Types model apply, though. So, that's probably friends-style socializers or politician-style killers, then.

Of course, if you're helping someone because in so doing it will lead to a different kind of fun, then the player type associated with that different kind of fun would cover it.

Attunement

It's rare that MMO designers consider themselves to be artists, even though they are. It's even rarer that players see MMOs as works of art.

Some players do, though. This presents them with a potential difficulty. The thing is, if players are attuned to the "art" of an MMO's design, they must as a consequence be aware of their own place in that art, which means that they can no longer act as regular players. Instead of living the virtual world, they are now one step removed—they see it objectively, not subjectively. This should take a lot of the fun out of the game for them.

Well, yes, this does happen. However, a growing critical awareness by players that they are participants in the art they are critiquing doesn't actually hurt them as much fun-wise as you might think. After all, all players *know* that virtual worlds are not real, they *know* that everything they see is a construction, they *know* that they are only pretending to be mages or warriors or priests.

However, they really, *really* want all these falsehoods to be true, to the extent that they put all the truths to the back of their mind: in the traditional way, they *will* themselves to believe that what they *want* to be true *is* true. Thus, if knowing that they are components contributing to what makes an MMO art gets in the way of their play, then they will simply ignore it while playing. They may well think about it at other times, but not really while they're playing.

The difference between designers and players is that players get their fun from playing, which is why they are prepared and able to switch off troublesome critical faculties for a while if they cause them not to have fun. Designers get their fun from designing, not from playing, so they are not going to have that same powerful desire to throw themselves into the role to the exclusion of all else that players have. There are some designers who say they can do this, but I'm not one of them.

This is why designers get designeritis, but even highly critically attuned players don't.

Perverse Evolution

With regular computer games (and board games, for that matter), the market is driven by hard core players. They buy more games than casual players and they consume them faster. They understand game design implications better, and they won't buy games that they can tell at a glance have poor design. Good games are rewarded with higher sales, so the evolutionary pressure is to create better games.

Go, Darwin, go!

In MMOs, the hard core either wanders from one MMO to the next, trying to get the Atonement with the Father they were denied in their first MMO; either that, or they have yet to leave that first MMO. They spend no more money than casual players; indeed, in a free-to-play revenue model, they may even pay less. MMO developers are therefore not rewarded by appealing to the players who can distinguish between good and bad design, and could well be punished for it instead. The evolutionary pressure is directed at attracting newbies, who by definition have a simpler idea of what makes an MMO experience attractive than do oldbies.

No, Darwin, no!

Temporary Visitors

The Atonement with the Father step of the hero's journey basically says that players want to "win" an MMO. If it doesn't acknowledge they've won, though, they'll leave in frustration and try to win elsewhere. At some point, this elsewhere either fails to match the experience of the original MMO, or it matches it all too well. In either case, the player will either return to the original MMO to seek atonement there once more or move on to the next ersatz version of it, looking for an end that is never going to come.

Either way, any game that lures them away from their first love has a big problem in keeping them.

Say What You See

The UK magazine *games™* has an occasional feature in which it ridicules people in the game industry for the things they say. Here's something it picked up from the mouth of Shigeru Miyamoto, designer of everything Nintendo:

> *The only time I play is maybe the 20 minutes I spend testing rivals' new machines. I don't play videogames in my free time.*

This is what it said in response:

> *No… say it isn't so. Please. When the last bastion of innovation in gaming can't be bothered to play games, what hope is left? Maybe he's just losing his skills.*

Sorry, *games™*, it *is* so. The reason that Shigeru Miyamoto doesn't play games is precisely because he *isn't* losing his skills.

Everyone thinks they're a game designer, and journalists for *games™* are no exception.

Dead Mages

One day, I came across this while visiting Stormwind in *World of Warcraft*:

That URL for a gold-selling site is spelled out in the bodies of dead level 1 mages.

Love them or loathe them, you have to admire the inventiveness of these companies.

The Future of Old Ideas

MMO designers are usually forward-thinking people. However, they also have to be backward-thinking if they're to have a full handle on what they're doing.

Designers need to be aware of old ideas.

Now I don't mind people disregarding old ideas if they know about them and have reasons for dumping them; I *do* mind when people are looking for solutions to problems that only exist because someone in the past threw out something they didn't like without realizing it would lead to said problem.

Here's an example. If you have a world with levels and experience points and stuff, and your character loses a fight, should that character also lose some experience points? The designer who asks the question will weigh up notions of speed of advancement, class balance, sense of achievement, player expectations, consequences for the elder game, and so on. They will basically have to decide whether they want players to value the leveling game or the elder (usually raiding) game most, and whether it will put players off playing in the first place. That's their call. Blizzard thought about this with *World of Warcraft*, and went with the no-XP penalty approach. Anyone with enough time to reach the highest level will indeed reach that level. If they'd penalized character death with XP loss in addition to a corpse-run time penalty and repair costs, then it would have been possible for players to reach a plateau, in which they gained XP at roughly the same rate that they lost it—something that occasionally happened in *EverQuest* (*WoW*'s inspiration).

Now suppose that years later some new designer comes along who grew up playing *WoW*, but who dislikes its double-gameplay model and wishes to remove the raiding game for their new, purer *WoW++*. What's going to happen is that, after a few months, the characters will be bunched up at the highest level. What's the new designer going to do? Well if they knew why the characters were bunching up in the first place (no XP penalty for fight losses), then they'd know reinstating it was a possible solution; they might not want to run with it, but they'd know it was *available*. If they knew of even earlier solutions, such as remorting from the old text MUD days, they'd have more weapons in their armory to solve the problem.

If they went so far as to look at the underlying theories as to why people play virtual worlds, they may even decide that it's not a problem, so much as an inevitable and desirable consequence, and celebrate the end of every player's time in the game rather than attempt to extend it indefinitely—or maybe they wouldn't.

The point is, the more the designer understands why it is their MMO is in the position is it in now, the better able they are to decide how to address any issues. They can disregard all the accumulated wisdom if they like (how else is new wisdom ever arrived at?), but the more they know about what they're designing, the better their decisions are going to be.

If you know there's a wheel, at least you have the choice as to whether to use it or to reinvent it.

Text and Voice

Suppose that voice had all the major features of text—storability, searchability, scanability and so on—except that it still didn't have editability. When I type something, I can backspace and retype it before anyone gets to hear it; when I say something, I can't do that.

So, let's further suppose that an MMO forum switched from text to voice, so that all the posts had to be spoken rather than typed. Would that be a great boon to communication, or would it be a hindrance? Would you be more encouraged to post there or less encouraged to post there?

Does the fact that people can edit what they say in an MMO before they say it add to or detract from play?

It depends on the MMO.

Theory of Immersion

This all fits together.

The aim of the hero's journey is for the would-be hero to become their true self—the hero. They accomplish this by shedding their old self and being reborn in a world of adventure and excitement. Eventually, with the Atonement with the Father step, the new self and the old self are aligned and reconciled.

This is what's happening with immersion. When you start an MMO, your character is like a new you. As you play, though, you gradually identify more and more with your character, until eventually you *become* your character (or, if the thought of that spooks you, your character becomes *you*—the you who you really are).

In MMO terms, the practical result of the hero's journey is for the player and their character to become one persona. Immersion can thus be seen as the outward manifestation of this: **the further along the hero's journey you are, the more immersed you will be**.

This can be bad news if it's not done right. MMOs with insufficient content (such as *Mist*, which used the *MUD1* engine) will have players finishing without having become immersed; these players will achieve Atonement with the Father prematurely and will consequently feel unfulfilled.

Similarly, MMOs with too much content (such as *EverQuest* and most of the AAA MMOs that followed it) will have players becoming immersed without finishing; these players will have yet to reach the Atonement with the Father step, and will consequently feel frustrated.

Designers should strive to make the two events—Atonement with the Father and a sense of full immersion—coincide.

Yeah, like *that's* ever going to happen.

The Touchstone

MUD1 had no character classes. You got to use more magic as your character went up levels, but there was no obligation to do so. Even the most spell-happy player would still use a non-magic solution most of the time.

MUD2 also had (well, has, but it's so old I'll talk about it in the past tense for now) no character classes. However, it did have a distinction between those characters who could use magic and those who could not. Everyone started off unable to use magic; to gain access to it, you had to touch a mystical object called the *touchstone*. If you did so, then either your character gained the ability to use magic or it died (and that's "died" as in "permadeath"). The higher your level was, the greater was your chance of success. Even at the highest level, though, there was still a meaningful chance of failure. As you had to have magic to become a wiz, at some point you *would* have to touch it to be able to "finish" the game.

I put the touchstone in as a rite of passage. There's a blurring as to when people decide to subject themselves to it, which means that we got level 7 champions/championnes (with no magic) alongside level 7 sorcerers/sorceresses (with magic), but those weren't separate character classes; magic-users were the same as fighters in almost every way except that they could cast magic whereas fighters couldn't. There was really only *one* character class, in the same way that a caterpillar and a butterfly are only one insect.

The touchstone marked a conscious acceptance by a player that they were no longer a newbie. It forced them to think about who they were in the virtual world and bound them to their chosen character. In Hero's Journey terms, it equates with the "Meeting with the Goddess" stage. This is actually fairly interesting from my own perspective because I created the touchstone many years before I read *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. I'm particularly impressed that my reasons for putting the touchstone in a "cave of stars" make very good sense in this (at the time unknown to me) context.

I wonder how many designers today could put in an object which characters had to interact with at some point in their career that would obliterate roughly 30 percent of them?

Immersion and Player Types

Nick Yee's identification of immersion as one of the reasons people find MMOs fun is troublesome for Player Types theory as it has nowhere to put the concept. Immersion as an important driver is clearly present—Nick's research is *very* solid—and therefore if Player Types theory can't account for it, the model is pretty well holed below the waterline.

Having looked at immersion in detail, though, we can now see that the theory *can* account for it—not as a player type, but as a measure of progression *through* player types. An increasing depth of immersion is a symptom of how far along the player development tracks you are.

This explains why you can be immersed and a socializer at the same time, whereas you can't be a socializer and an achiever at the same time: it's a separate concept.

That said, degrees of immersion *are* linked loosely to player types because types occupy fixed places along the development tracks. If you're a fully immersed explorer, that means you're going to be the hacker subtype; if you're less immersed, you'll be the scientist subtype.

People who say that they enjoy MMOs because they like the immersion are perceptive of the reason why ultimately everyone who plays MMOs for fun enjoys them. If you're fully immersed, then you're *you*.

The Clue is in the Title

Everyone playing an MMO for fun is a role-player, except those who have played their character for sufficiently long that it has become them and they have become it.

MMO is just an abbreviation of the acronym MMORPG. That RPG part is *important*.

On Heroes

A hero is someone who has completed their hero's journey. As I explained earlier, when we talk of people being "heroes" or acting "heroically," what we mean is that they are acting in the way that a hero *would* act; we don't mean that they themselves *are* heroes. Acting like a hero doesn't make you a hero, any more than acting like an elf makes you an elf.

Acts such as self-sacrifice, bravery, the defending of the weak, and so on are frequent characteristics exhibited by heroes, and examples of such deeds may often play a large part in an individual's personal journey. On the other hand, for a different person, they may play no part at all.

Not only *can* heroism occur in MMOs, it's the *very reason people play*. The undertaking of a hero's journey is driven by a completely intrinsic motivation. You do it because you *want* to do it; you want to do it because you *need* to know who you are.

Everyone can indeed be a hero. However, they're not heroes until they've finished playing (and started living). Giving them gameplay choices that make them *feel* as if they're heroes does not *make* them heroes, though; *they* decide when they're heroes, all by themselves.

Missing Types

The thing about the Player Types model is that it's a *model*. It's not a list—you can't just add a new type when you think of one—it's a *system*. There are eight types (or four types in the earlier version) for a reason: the structure of the model requires it because of the number of axes the graph has.

If you identify a new type, then this either means the model is wrong, or that it's too abstract, or that the type is orthogonal to the model, or that the model doesn't apply to the type.

One of the types people most frequently notice is "missing" from Player Types theory is that of *builders*: people who explicitly create content. They're most obviously present in social worlds, but you could probably count MMO crafters as builders too if you wanted.

So, where do builders fit in?

Well, if they do indeed fit in, it would depend on why they're building. If they're building in order to make money (if that's how the MMO measures success) or to complete their model of King's Landing and get kudos, that might be an achiever-like motivation; if they're doing it to see what kinds of things can be built and to push the building system to its limits, they are probably explorers; if they're doing it to enhance their world and make it more attractive or

salubrious for others, they could be doing it for socializer reasons; if they just want to crash the server or spread a plague, that's killer/griefer behavior.

This sort of analysis covers most builders, *but not all*. Some people build because they want to design. They still get some fun from playing, but they're transitioning from wanting to play to wanting to design.

Okay, well this couldn't be an additional type in the Player Types model as it simply doesn't fit. It's not part of a splitting of an existing type (as griefers/politicians from killers is); it's not emergent from movement through types (as immersion is). However, it's enough about fun and play that it *ought* to link in somewhere. Some players really *do* like creating for reasons that are entirely to do with creating and not to do with playing for regular fun. This makes them *designers*, rather than (just) players.

We can posit that there are designer types as well as player types, and that designers follow their own hero's journey; they use their designs to articulate aspects of themselves that they couldn't communicate in any other manner. In the same way that there's a "main sequence" of player progression, there's one for designer progression: they start off as players (experiencing content), then become level designers (implementing form), then progress to being fully fledged designers (implementing experience), and then graduate to creative director (experiencing form). At this last stage, they can read the designs of other designers very well; this is why many top designers don't play games all the way through, or even play them at all: they can get all they need from them by playing only part-way through—or sometimes by simply reading the manual, if it's good enough.

More pretentiously, this doesn't just apply to MMO design—it can apply to any art form. I remember being struck by how similar Scott McCloud's description of the various stages of comic artist development fit in with this, for example[40].

From this perspective, the builder "type" concerns the point where the player begins the switch from being a player to being a designer. I'd expect it to happen primarily to high-end explorers (*hackers* in the 8-type model) and socializers (*friends*), but it could happen to anyone sufficiently inspired. They start to move away from playing for regular fun and towards playing for designer-fun. The more they move in that direction, the less they'll need to play and the more they'll need to design—which for some may be giving up too much, but for others may be opening up parts of their self that have been bursting to break free for ages.

I genuinely love it when that happens.

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[40]Scott McCloud: *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*. Tundra Publishing, Northampton MA, 1993.

Unsung

You'll have come across them: players who long ago stopped playing your MMO as a *game*, but who still log in and hang out with their guildies.

They do this as a result of their having finished their hero's journey. Those players are heroes. They're not what people might think of as *stereotypical* heroes, but heroes are what they are, each and every one of them.

Did they save the world? Did they defeat the big bad? Did they risk self-sacrifice to save others? Probably not, but they didn't *have* to: those are just examples that second-person retellings of the hero's journey use in their larger-than-life ways to illustrate the fact that heroes face obstacles, but in overcoming them learn more about themselves.

It's not a very great selling point to newbies, "Become a hero! Chat with your friends on the porch!" Yet that's what, in the end, heroes tend to do.

Wanting Immersion

Players *want* to be immersed. They want to be immersed *so much* that they'll ignore all kinds of inconsistencies, distractions, and suspect gameplay to *become* immersed. Like Louis IX and the *Morgan Bible*, they'll *will* themselves into immersion, if that's what it takes.

A non-gamer watching a character swim across a lake and not get wet will wonder why the player doesn't notice. Well, the player *does* notice. In some MMOs, the character may indeed get wet and the cake they had in their bag will be all turned to sludge; that would mean the physics of the world was more persuasive, so the player will have one less thing to worry about. However, if the conflict with how things "should" work isn't too annoying, the player will just blank the discrepancy and get on with playing.

Players really, *really* want to be immersed.

Hard and Soft Role-Play

The role-playing advocated for RP servers is "hard" role-play: you learn from the character, but the character doesn't learn from you. On non-RP servers, it's "soft" role-play: you and your character both learn from each other. Eventually, over time, you and your character become the same person—the "real you."

Soft role-playing isn't even recognized as role-playing by most of its exponents in MMOs, but it is. They don't throw themselves into their character and try to "be" elves or whatever. Rather, what's happening is that their choice of (in this example) which humanoid race to use implicitly sets some parameters on their behavior within which they will act. The same person playing a dwarf behaves at least marginally differently when playing an elf or a gnome. The same person playing a character of their own gender behaves at least marginally differently when playing the opposite gender. Other players see the characters as flags indicative of personality and adjust their behavior towards one another accordingly. Even if you resolutely play your pink-haired female gnome mage with exactly the same personality you play your butt-ugly male tauren warrior, other people *will* treat you differently. You can't help but play a different role for each one, whether you like it or not, because all roles have a socially-determined component to them.

This is what I mean when I say everyone role-plays. The only people who don't role-play are those who have already been there, done that, or those who have no sense of immersion at all.

Signifying and Signified

A novelist can write a novel about heroism, but the reader never gets to be a hero. An artist can paint a picture of heroism, but the viewer doesn't get to be a hero. A composer can compose a symphony about heroism, but the listener doesn't get to be a hero.

MMOs are different. An MMO designer can create an MMO about heroism, and the player *does* get to be a hero.

A picture of an apple doesn't make the apple real. An MMO does make its heroes real.

Hard to Mean Soft

Back in *MUD1*, we looked at people who pretended to be alack-a-day elves as kinda weird. This kind of explicit role-playing of the kind that actors do wasn't something that happened a lot.

What we did have was the ability to be *not-you*, which paradoxically enabled you actually to *become* you. The freedom to be someone else is the gift to become yourself.

That's the *soft* kind of role-playing that goes on in MMOs; the "my parents were killed by murderous orcs and now, emotionally scarred, I'm out to avenge them" *hard* kind is much rarer.

Because hard role-playing is the variety that most people associate with the term "role-playing," it's difficult to talk about soft role-playing as a phenomenon unless you explain it all patiently beforehand.

Yes, I know, that's why I just did it, except without the "beforehand" bit.

If Dolphins…

If dolphins could pass stories from one generation to the next, perhaps they, too, would have a monomyth—but one which need not necessarily bear much relationship to ours.

About Face

If voice is good for communication, then face must also be good for communication because face adds more to communication than does voice alone.

People who use VoIP in MMOs tend to argue that they don't care about its real-life intrusiveness. That being so, why should they care if other players see their real face instead of some computer-generated face? If they don't consider that they're role-playing, they won't worry that their face is not the face of a troll shaman any more than they worry that their voice is not the voice of a troll shaman.

Yet people *aren't* as happy to let their faces be seen as they are to let their voices be heard. Do their reasons for not liking it equally well apply to voice? If so, why don't they apply them? If not, why can't they apply them?

Voice is only used in MMOs when it's necessary for organizational purposes or when the people communicating know each other in real life anyway. Face doesn't help in either of these situations. Both voice and face get in the way of soft role-playing, but in one case the benefits of using it occasionally outweigh the inherent disadvantages (in the players' eyes, anyway); in the other, the disadvantages are emphasized.

CRASH

MUD1 had a CRASH command available to its wizzes (admin-level players).

The thing was, wizzes could do so many things that would cause the virtual world to crash that I pre-empted their experimentation by providing a command that would immediately crash it. Thus, when someone told me that if they picked up the rain and dropped it in a room that already contained it, they could cause a crash, the answer was: big deal, you can do that anyway with the CRASH command.

People did occasionally use the command, too, which was a nice incentive to mortals ("Blimey, wizzes have powers to crash the game! Gimme!"). It's not something that necessarily scales well, though…

Immersion Strategies

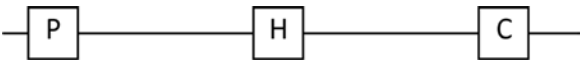
There are two main approaches to creating characters in MMOs, which each result in a separate strategy for becoming immersed.

The first approach is to create a character diametrically opposite to how you see yourself (overweight male trucker plays svelte female elf). The second approach is to create a character that is an aspirational version of how you see yourself (mother-of-three plays svelte female elf). Most people will be somewhere in between—comparable in some areas, different in others.

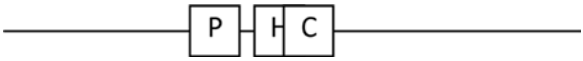
Now although players will create characters with a range of similarity/dissimilarity to their current self-image, they nevertheless tend to fall into two distinct camps insofar as immersion strategies go. Basically, if you want to become your true self you can either create a character more extreme than you are and come at it from both directions, or you can create a character a little closer to who you are and follow along just behind it as it moves towards the sweet spot.

Imagine a line showing a spectrum of identity. Yes, I realize this is a tall order, but bear with me. Put a box on the left of this marked P, which shows the player's sense of self when they start. Put another box on the right marked C, which shows the character the player has created. A third box in between, marked H, indicates the hero—the renewed sense of self the player gets from having played the MMO and completed their hero's journey.

Oh wow, this is something so easy to draw that even I can do it!



Here, the player has created an exaggerated character, so their ideal self is between their current self-image and the character they created. Through play, the player gradually changes their self-image and the image of the character, inching them together until they collide and lock (at the box marked H). Here's the same player, approaching immersion:



This is a *bidirectional* search strategy. The other way of doing it is a *unidirectional* search. In this case, the player creates a character just ahead of their perceived self-image, and then moves the character towards their true self with the current self following and gradually catching up. Pictorially, it starts off something like this:

The current self finally catches the character self up at the hero point, whereupon they lock, as in the bidirectional example.

As a *very* general rule, players following the main socializers sequence tend towards the unidirectional strategy, with the others following the bi-directional strategy. I've no explanation for why this is the case, however. It's just something I've observed.

Oh, I should point out that all this talk of "players becoming their characters" is purely in terms of sense of self. The trucker never *actually* gets to be a female elf (which is probably just as well); the elf is a complex set of symbols and metaphors that means something at an intuitive or emotional level to the trucker. Through play, the trucker adjusts his understanding of what those symbols mean, and how facets of his own personality reflect them in ways previously obscure to him. Gradually, he becomes more aware of his own identity (the P box moves right) and of how the package of identity signifiers embodied by the elf apply to him (the C box moves left) until the two coincide (at the H box). At this point, he has Atonement with the Father, full immersion, and a bunch of guildmates in awe of his l33t healz skillz.

Incidentally, by tradition the truckers in examples such as these are always from Milwaukee. I've no idea why.

Factor Analysis

The Player Types model is based on observations made concerning players of text MUDs. It wasn't done all that scientifically, but nevertheless it's what social scientists call "grounded"—it comes from direct experience. There are many ways to obtain data of a higher quality, though.

One of these is *factor analysis*. What happens here is that you ask a set of wide-ranging questions and run the answers through a sophisticated statistical program to find patterns. This is the technique used by MMO researcher Nick Yee to obtain the *motivations* I mentioned earlier. In general, it produces excellent results.

Obtaining clusters is not, however, an entirely simple matter. For example, there are several different techniques you can use for analyzing factors from a data set, and they don't always find the same factors. Nick's original work, if you recall, found five factors; when he changed his approach and reanalyzed his data, he uncovered a sixth (equating to explorers). Here's his modified list:

- Relationship: make friends; offer and give support.
- Grief: scam; taunt; annoy; dominate.
- Immersion: story-telling; role-play.
- Escapism: escape; vent; forget real-life problems.
- Achievement: achieve; accumulate power.
- Analyze: rules; mechanics; mapping

Now as Nick was quick to point out, a factor analysis is only as good as the questions it asks. If you don't ask about immersion, it won't be picked up in the answers. This means that the factors detected are not *exhaustive*—there may be other ones that it would take more subtle questioning to reveal (indeed, as I mentioned earlier, Nick found another four factors himself when he did his very polished analysis of the enormous *EverQuest 2* data set).

Another problem with factor analysis is that the factors get to be labeled by the analyst. These labels are not always good ones (my own use of "killers" is a case in point). Nick identified "immersion" as a factor, but someone with a Narratology axe to grind could have called it "story" instead.

A third issue is that of categories. Suppose you were to ask people what kind of things-that-grow-on-trees they like to eat: you might get back answers such as "apple," "orange," and "fruit." These would be picked up in the factor analysis. The fact that apples and oranges are themselves fruit would not be picked up unless the analyst made the effort (which, given that apples aren't technically fruit, could present its own problems).

This means, for example, that it could be possible for every MMO player to be a role-player at heart, only some are more aware of it than others. These people might well say that they like MMOs because of the role-playing. Pressing them further as to *why* they role-played, however, might give an answer related to achievement or relationship, say, which wouldn't show up in the original data.

Now a good researcher (Nick Yee in this example) *does* tell you all this. If you want to make use of Nick's results, you should read his caveats first. Unfortunately, though, many people who just want a quick-fix solution will look at summaries of results without bothering to understand what they *mean*. Then, they'll blame the researcher for being wrong, in a "you should have told me sunscreen isn't good for plants!" kind of way.

Factor analysis is a very useful research tool. It can point out potential problems with a theory ("where are the explorers?") and potential blind spots ("where is immersion covered?"). It can be used to inform the construction of a new theory; however, it isn't *itself* a theory any more than statistics about church-goers are a religion.

The Player Types model *is* a theory. The player types are situated in a graph that asserts they are separate and orthogonal, and therefore exhaustive; you can't add more types except by refining the existing ones through the addition of a new axis. The types are related in ways that can be used predictively: *if* you are a networker, *then* you will become either a planner or a politician.

This leads to an important point: although both a theory and a data analysis can be *improved*, only the theory can be *disproved*—and data analysis can be the weapon of its destruction. However, in destroying it, the means for constructing a new, *better* theory can often be determined.

Such is science.

Mood Systems

Players shouldn't have emotional control over their characters. They shouldn't be able to issue a command that says, "I'm angry now."

Players *are* their characters. If they're angry, then they want to *express* their anger, not merely flip their character's "angry" switch. They want to be able to glare, snarl, stomp, turn up their nose, and froth at the mouth.

That said, some textual worlds had a *mood* system, which would alter your character's body language appropriate to your stated mood. For example, if you set your mood to "happy," it would modify your description so it said you were smiling. I don't know of any MUDs that read your mood directly from the emotes you issued, but I don't doubt some may have existed.

I'm ambivalent about mood systems (at least the explicit, `/mood` variety), but I prefer them to systems that set emotional states. Mood systems are like long-term pre-packaged emotes. With a mood, you're saying "this is how I feel"; with an emotion-state system, you're saying "this is how my character feels." The latter may be preferable in hard role-playing situations, but the former works best for soft role-playing—the kind where you don't really think you're role-playing.

It's all about *immersion*.

The Intangibility of Role-Play

Role-playing is part of the *fun* in a role-playing game, but it's rarely part of the *game*. You won't see many games that tie role-playing into their mechanics. Role-playing doesn't make me hit harder or resist magic better or sell my horse for a higher price. It takes *people* to recognize role-playing, not rule-based systems.

If you do try to integrate role-playing into a game's mechanics, people start to view the role-playing not as role-playing but as something to be gamed. The meaning is diminished—it's just a number to be lowered or raised.

Mechanics can be conducive to role-play, but role-play is like a quantum wave: the moment the mechanics touch it is the moment its space of possibilities collapses.

Non-Hero Heroes

The hero's journey is a journey to self-understanding. It's called a hero's journey because, having completed it, you become a hero. That's the definition of "hero" in this context: someone who has completed their hero's journey. If you talk about "hero" in the modern sense, as in "he saved the little boy from the mad dog—he's a hero!"— you're using the term in what was originally a metaphorical way. The person who saved the little boy is not a hero (he hasn't completed his hero's journey), but he's exhibiting the qualities of someone who *has* done so.

Words change meanings. If someone brings you a coffee you wanted but didn't have time to go get it yourself, you might say "what a hero!" as thanks. You don't mean they *are* a hero, just that they've done something selfless for you. It's like that with the "hero" who rescues the little boy, but a step up; he's taken a risk, doing something selfless for someone else, just as a hero might.

He's not a hero in the traditional sense, though.

No matter how many times I repeat this, I have the feeling that it's making no difference at all.

Fazed by Phases

At this point in the history of MMOs, many players have been playing for years. It's a maturing market: attracting newbies is hard, so instead new MMOs have to attract oldbies who are looking for more intelligent content.

Having played for years, a large proportion of these established players have friends they like to play with; this is only to be expected, as it's one of the two end states of the 8-type player model. When a new MMO comes out that a group likes the sound of, it decamps to it so its members can level up and have fun together.

Phasing! Don't you love it? Well, I don't, but plenty of people do. It's when the server creates a special instance integrated into the world that's particular to you. You go to a place where the big bad is causing havoc, you have a mighty battle, as a result of which the big bad is defeated and the world changes. Thenceforth, when you subsequently visit that location, the big bad is no longer there, a bunch of new NPCs are ready to dole out quests, and reconstruction work is ongoing to repair the damage the big bad did (or that you did in defeating the big bad).

The aim of phases is to give players the illusion that their actions actually have world-changing effects. Before you complete the quest, the server routes you to one phase; once you've completed it, it routes you to a different phase. Your actions haven't *actually* changed the world, of course; all that's changed is which subcopy you go to. Nonetheless, it's better than nothing, and it helps with quest storylines.

Back to friends. When you're leveling up with people you know, you want your quests to be in step. If there are two of us in a group and we both have the same quest, then the quest should work at the group level. If I kill four rats and you kill six, that's the kill-10-rats quest done for both of us—we shouldn't have to kill ten rats each. Likewise, only one of us should need to interact with the quest object to advance the quest for both of us; otherwise, we'd need to press the button that summons the boss twice in succession. That would be rather annoying.

Some MMOs *are* rather annoying, though. We both have to press the boss-summoning button if we both want to advance our (shared) quest. Now imagine how much worse this already irritating situation is with phases. We go into an area and there's a boss to kill. I go first, and press the button to summon the boss.

Okay, so together we beat the boss. Great! My quest advances and I'm now in the post-boss phase: the world has changed as a result of my actions. Well, it's changed for *me*: you're still in the pre-boss phase. I can't see you, you can't see me. We're effectively in different bubbles of space. When you summon the boss to advance your own quest, I won't even be able to see the boss, let alone help you.

If your players are mainly playing solo, none of this matters. However, as I said at the start, increasing numbers of players want to play in groups with the people they've played with for years. They really wouldn't like it if you didn't lock group quests together and gave them a deluge of phases.

Would they, *The Elder Scrolls Online*?

Missing What's Missing

What I dislike about using your real voice in an MMO is that it detracts from the soft role-playing that makes MMOs special.

Old-timers see nothing wrong with voice because they've already established their MMO identity as being one and the same as their real-world identity, so they're comfortable with it. New-timers don't know what they're missing, so won't complain that they don't have it.

Both will miss what having it destroys, but neither will know why.

The Heroine's Journey

The hero's journey concerns just that—a hero. This isn't some modern-day "when I say *actor* I also mean *actresses*" attempt to dignify the contribution of women: the hero's journey really *is* about men, not women. So, where do women stand, then?

Joseph Campbell's position was this:

> *In the whole mythological tradition the woman is there. All she has to do is to realize that she's the place that people are trying to get to.* [1]

Thus, for a woman, myth serves to enlighten her as to how wonderful her nature is; she doesn't have to pretend to be male to do this.

Campbell was talking about myth, however, and while his view may (or may not) apply to that particular domain, it doesn't mean there isn't some kind of "heroine's journey" that myth doesn't pick up.

This was the opinion of Maureen Murdock, who, ignited by Campbell's remarks (which didn't seem to match her experience at all), worked out her own, female-focused version[41]. Unsurprisingly, it has little to do with myth and much to do with women's view of themselves in western culture.

Personally, I find Murdock's analysis a little too subjective, with some over-enthusiastic interpretations of the evidence and occasional selective ignorance of context. Nevertheless, what she produced does seem to resonate with many women. That being the case, it makes sense to consider whether it could be used as an alternative to the hero's journey to create a female-friendly framework for story arcs in games (and, perhaps, player-development tracks in MMOs).

Well, it *could* be used, yes, but the chances are that the result would not be a success. The reason is simple, but devastating: *it's not fun*. It involves diving into the depths of despair and having a thoroughly bad time of things before emerging content (if not exactly happy) at the end. Here's a brief overview of how it goes:

- **Separation from the feminine.**

  In order to succeed, the woman feels she has to act like a man.

[41]Maureen Murdock: *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*. Shambhala Publications, 1990.

- **Identification with the masculine and gathering of allies.**

  The woman begins the traditional hero's journey and looks for role models who can help her on the way.

- **Road of trials: meeting ogres and dragons.**

  The woman determines her strengths.

- **Finding the illusory boon of success.**

  The woman achieves the success she sought, but realizes that it's not what she actually wanted. This is where things start to go downhill.

- **Awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity: death.**

  The woman feels as if she's somehow betrayed some of her potential by playing the man's game. There's a lot of resentment here.

- **Initiation and descent to the goddess.**

  This is a major period of depression. Murdock says it's "filled with confusion and grief, alienation and disillusion, rage and despair." Not something you would necessarily look forward to experiencing when you log in to your MMO every evening, then.

- **Urgent yearning to reconnect with the feminine.**

  The woman realizes that she has separated her mind from her body: what she *wants* to be from what she *is*.

- **Healing the mother/daughter split.**

  This is the recognition in a woman that she must trust her emotions and intuition rather than rely entirely on the logical skills she picked up earlier. Murdock herself found this the most painful part of the journey.

- **Healing the wounded masculine.**

  Only when the woman understands why she is conflicted can she reconcile her remaining turmoil.

- **Integration of masculine and feminine.**

  The woman rejects the male/female dualism that caused her to set off on the hero's journey in the first place. She is who she is.

As you can see, this isn't a whole bundle of laughs.

The *hero's* journey sends you off to an other world of danger and excitement where you learn that you are the hero you've always been. The *heroine's* journey sends you off to the same place, but it suddenly turns into a pitiless hell, out from which you can only drag your flayed soul if you have formidable strength of character, whereupon you realize (exactly as Campbell stated) that you didn't have to go in the first place.

Famous Last Words

In July, 2007, round about the same time that Blizzard announced *World of Warcraft* had reached nine million subscribers, I received a bunch of questions by email from *The Guardian* for their games blog. There were ten questions in all, although some were multiple and I split them up into pieces. The last one was: "If you could take over control of one major MMORPG—which would you choose and what would you do with it?"

Okay, so it was basically a throwaway question at the end of a lengthy interview just to make up a round 10, but hey, it was asked. Given that there is zero (0) chance of my actually taking over control of a major MMORPG I could have answered, "I'd cure disease, eliminate war, and give all the world's children a teddy bear" for all it mattered. I decided, though, that in the spirit of the interview, I should perhaps keep my answer on-topic.

The problem is, I wouldn't actually *want* to take control of anyone else's MMO, major or minor: I'm a designer, I want to *design* worlds, not tinker with the designs of other people. I considered repeating my view that an MMO should give players an honorable end, to allow them to feel they've "won" (maybe print off a 3D model of their character as a token/boon), but that would have entailed a long, boring diversion explaining why I believed this.

The question used the word "major." So, what major MMOs were there? Well, there was *WoW*, and, er, some in Korea? Whereas five years earlier we'd had several major MMOs *(UO*, *EQ*, *AC*, *DAOC*, and *AO*), now they were all minor compared to *WoW*. *WoW* did a fantastic job of engaging with players, giving them a great experience, and educating them in the ways of MMOs. Indeed, if it weren't for *WoW*…

Hmm. Actually, given that *WoW* has done all that, if it were to disappear overnight, then it would be a huge boost to the rest of the industry. Okay, so that gave me an easy answer: if I were given control of a major MMORPG of my choice, I'd choose *WoW*, and I'd close it down. It wouldn't take long before the majority of its players agreed on some next-new-shiny place to nest, but enough would stick in the smaller, up-coming worlds to give those a chance to shine, too.

Of course, actually doing this *would* be guaranteed to make nine million people very upset (including my at-the-time level 30 druid daughter), so it would be stupid actually to *do* it. It's not as if I'm ever going to be *given* control of *WoW*, though.

The headline of the blog was:

> ***"I'd close World of Warcraft!" MUD creator Richard Bartle on the state of virtual worlds.***

;sighs

Voice Fonts

I've got no objections in principle to using voice in MMOs. My objections are when that voice has to be your own voice.

I would have no problems if your real-world voice went through an intermediate representation that matched your character before being transmitted to the other players. You say "good morning"; the client converts this to a sequence of abstract symbols (*phonemes*) corresponding to the sounds (*phones*) you used; the clients entitled to hear your words are told these phonemes, plus the fact you're a male night elf; from this, these clients generate the appropriate phones to match those words; the other players hear "good morning" spoken by a male night elf.

Okay, so there are tweaks that can be done here. Emphasis and tonal changes from the speaker can be picked up and passed on in the encoding:

- "GOOD morning!"
- "good MORNING!"
- "good MORNING?"

A character-specific base tone and timber can be mixed in, so that although you sound like a male night elf, you don't sound like every other male night elf. Input can be accepted in text but replayed as speech, for people who can't talk while they play because it will wake up their sleeping children.

It's by no means perfect, of course. You're still going to know I'm English because I resolutely refuse to split infinitives. You won't be able to tell I'm a man with an East Yorkshire accent, though.