

VIRTUAL WORLDS, REAL ISSUES

ALL WORK AND NO PLAY?

6TH NOVEMBER 2006

CREATIVE CLUSTERS

PROFESSOR RICHARD A. **BARTLE**

UNIVERSITY OF **ESSEX**

INTRODUCTION

- OK, SO I'M NOT POLICY-MAKER
 - I'M A **COMPUTER GAMES** DESIGNER
 - I GUESS YOU COULD SAY I'M AN **ACADEMIC**, TOO...
- MY SPECIALIST FIELD IS **VIRTUAL WORLDS**
 - DON'T WORRY, AN EXPLANATION FOLLOWS SHORTLY!
- RIGHT NOW, VIRTUAL WORLDS ARE IN **CONFLICT** OVER **COMMODIFICATION**
 - PEOPLE ARE BUYING **NON-EXISTENT** STUFF FROM OTHER PEOPLE WHO **DON'T OWN** IT
 - OTHER PLAYERS **DISLIKE** THIS

DEFINITION

- VIRTUAL WORLDS ARE ONLINE COMPUTER GAMES
 - **MMORPGS** – MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES
- NOTE: ONLINE GAMES ARE **NOT** ONLINE GAMING
 - I'M NOT TALKING ABOUT **GAMBLING** HERE
- THEY SUPPORT **LARGE** NUMBERS OF PLAYERS **SIMULTANEOUSLY**
- THE PLAYERS USE **CLIENT** SOFTWARE TO CONTACT **SERVERS** OPERATED BY THE GAME'S **DEVELOPER**

HISTORY

- VIRTUAL WORLDS BEGAN WITH **MUD1** IN 1978

Narrow road between lands.

You are stood on a narrow road between The Land and whence you came. To the north and south are the small foothills of a pair of majestic mountains, with a large wall running round. To the west the road continues, where in the distance you can see a thatched cottage opposite an ancient cemetery. The way out is to the east, where a shroud of mist covers the secret pass by which you entered The Land. It is raining.

*w

Narrow road.

You are on a narrow east-west road with a forest to the north and Gorse scrub to the south. It is raining. A splendid necklace lies on the ground.

*

- TEXT-BASED, UP TO **36** PLAYERS SIMULTANEOUSLY
- CREATED BY TWO STUDENTS AT ESSEX UNIVERSITY
 - ROY TRUBSHAW AND RICHARD BARTLE (THAT'S ME)

ASCII GRAPHICS

- GAMES SOON APPEARED WITH primitive GRAPHICS

```
[ ][ ][ ][ ]- -[ ] orc sword shield chain
[ ] A      S [ ] A Jennie.c
/ >  ++++ [ ] A 2 skeletons
[ ]      ++++ [ ] B trolls
[ ] B      dn [ ]
[ ][ ][ ][ ][ ][ ][ ]

Swing hits with moderate damage
Skeleton is slain
Orc is blocked by your armour
Troll: kia ardata luuppatar ne

>throw bottle at troll
R mace Hits Hits On Stamina Exper. M. Pnts.
L bottle 35 5 10 6523 9
```

- *ISLAND OF KESMAI, 1981*

2D GRAPHICS

- 2D GRAPHICAL GAMES SHOWED UP IN THE EARLY 1990S



- *KINGDOM OF DRAKKAR, 1992*
- BUT IN 1994 (IMMEDIATELY PRE-WWW), **10% OF ALL** INTERNET TRAFFIC BELONGED TO **TEXT MUDS**

ULTIMA ONLINE

- THINGS CHANGED WITH *ULTIMA ONLINE*, 1997



- IT RACKED UP **100,000** PLAYERS WITHIN A YEAR

EVERQUEST

- *ULTIMA ONLINE* RULED UNTIL *EVERQUEST*, SPRING 1999



STATS

- PEOPLE PAY A MONTHLY FEE TO PLAY
 - ₩10 TO ₩15 A MONTH ON AVERAGE
- **9 YEARS** AFTER LAUNCH *UO* **STILL** HAS SOMETHING LIKE **140,000** SUBSCRIBERS
 - AFTER PEAKING AT 250,000 IN 2003
- *EVERQUEST* PEAKED AROUND **420,000** SUBSCRIBERS
 - THAT'S MORE PEOPLE THAN **ICELAND!**
- WE THOUGHT *EQ* WAS **BIG** UNTIL WE HEARD ABOUT *LINEAGE*



BUT ELSEWHERE...

- *LINEAGE* (1997) PEAKED AT OVER 4 **MILLION** PLAYERS



- **50%** OF THE POPULATION OF SOUTH KOREA HAVE TRIED *LINEAGE* AT LEAST **ONCE**
- AND YET *LINEAGE* IS THE **PIPSQUEAK** NOW...

WOW

- *WORLD OF WARCRAFT, 2004*



STATS

- *WORLD OF WARCRAFT HAS AROUND **7,000,000** PLAYERS WORLDWIDE*
 - MORE THAN LIVE IN DENMARK, ISRAEL, FINLAND, EIRE AND ABOUT 140 **OTHER** COUNTRIES...
- *PLAYERS PAY **€15** A **MONTH** TO PLAY*
- *IT COST SOMETHING LIKE **€30M** TO DEVELOP*
 - I'VE SEEN ESTIMATES BETWEEN €25M AND €70M
- *THERE WAS A **SOUTH PARK** EPISODE ABOUT IT LAST MONTH!*

RULES

- ALL GAMES, LIKE LEGAL SYSTEMS, OPERATE USING **RULES**
- WHILE **EVERYONE** OBEYS THE RULES, THE GAME WORKS – THE **MAGIC CIRCLE**
 - WHEN YOU **BREAK** THE RULES, THAT'S **CHEATING**
- BUT WHO HAS THE AUTHORITY TO **MAKE** THE RULES?
 - REAL LIFE: "WE, THE PEOPLE"
 - GAMES: "WE, THE PLAYERS"
- GAMES PLAYERS OBEY RULES FOR THE **SAME** REASON CITIZENS DO – BECAUSE THEY **SET** THE RULES
 - ONLY THEY **DON'T** HAVE AN **ARMY** TO ENFORCE THEM

PROPERTY

- SOME REAL/VIRTUAL ISSUES
- CHARACTERS IN VIRTUAL WORLDS **OWN** THINGS WITHIN THE **CONTEXT** OF THE VIRTUAL WORLD
 - SWORDS, HOUSES, **MAGIC WANDS**, ...
- DO THE **PLAYERS** OWN THESE THINGS?
- DO THEY EVEN OWN THE **CHARACTERS**?
- AT THE TIME OF WRITING, THERE'S A LEVEL 118 **ROYAL PALADIN** FROM THE **2D** GAME **TIBIA** FOR SALE ON EBAY FOR **\$3,050**
 - 9 BIDS SO FAR, CLOSES IN 2 HOURS

WIDESPREAD

- **ALSO ON EBAY:**
 - *WORLD OF WARCRAFT* LEVEL 60 EPIC HUNTER, 5 BIDS
\$2,650
 - *EVE ONLINE* 48M SKILL POINT PVP CHARACTER, 31 BIDS
\$2,150
 - *EVERQUEST* LEVEL 75 WARRIOR, 22 BIDS **\$1,200**
 - AND **HUNDREDS** MORE
- IN-GAME CURRENCY ALSO FOR SALE
 - *EVE ONLINE* 5 BILLION ISK, 9 BIDS **\$350**
- THOSE ARE **CURRENT** BIDS – THEY'LL ACTUALLY **SELL** FOR **MORE**

OTHER SALES

- THINK ABOUT THIS A MOMENT: PEOPLE ARE PAYING **REAL** MONEY TO BUY **IMAGINARY** MONEY
- ALSO IMAGINARY **PROPERTY**:
 - *KINGDOM OF LOATHING* 100M MEAT, BUY IT NOW **\$165**
 - *KNIGHT ONLINE* GLASS BELT, 3 BIDS **\$102.50**
- AND IMAGINARY **REAL ESTATE**:
 - *ULTIMA ONLINE* CASTLE, 1 BID **\$309**
- **MOST** SALES ARE FOR ACCOUNTS/CHARACTERS AND GOLD, THOUGH
 - CHARACTERS/ACCOUNTS TEND TO **BID** ON
 - GOLD TENDS TO BE BUY IT **NOW**

ANALYSIS

- EBAY IS **NOT** THE MAIN MARKETPLACE
- **IGE** HAS **100** PEOPLE IN CUSTOMER SERVICE ALONE
- **ITEMBAY** MAKES MORE MONEY IN **COMMISSIONS** THAN ALL THE VIRTUAL WORLDS IT SERVICES DO IN **SUBSCRIPTIONS** – COMBINED!
- IF YOU ADD UP ALL THE WEALTH CREATED BY ALL VIRTUAL WORLDS TOGETHER, THEY MAKE FOR A COMBINED **GDP** GREATER THAN THAT OF **NAMIBIA**
- *GDP PER CAPITA* IS ON A PAR WITH THAT OF **RUSSIA**

BUT

- THE THING IS, MOST VIRTUAL WORLDS **BAN** VIRTUAL OBJECT SALES
- MAIN REASON: IT'S **CHEATING**
- SUPPOSE 4 OF US ARE PLAYING **MONOPOLY**
 - THE TOP HAT OFFERS **MAYFAIR** FOR SALE
 - I OFFER **£1,000** FOR IT
 - YOU OFFER **£100** FOR IT, PLUS **£5** IN **REAL** MONEY
 - THE TOP HAT ACCEPTS **YOUR** OFFER
- THE SCOTTIE DOG AND I ARE GOING TO BE **VERY** UNHAPPY
 - ESPECIALLY IF IT'S **HIS** SET!

EXCUSES

- “**I** WANT TO TRADE, **YOU** WANT TO TRADE, WE **BOTH** GAIN. WHAT’S NOT TO LOVE?”
- IT RUINS THE GAME FOR THE **90%** OF PLAYERS WHO **DON’T** TRADE IN VIRTUAL GOODS, **THAT’S** WHAT!
 - IT BREAKS THE **MAGIC CIRCLE**
- IF LETTING PEOPLE HAVE WHAT THEY WANT WERE **HARMLESS**, DEVELOPERS WOULD DO IT FOR **FREE**
 - YOU WANT A KICK-ASS SWORD? HERE, HAVE **10!**

BUT

- THIS IS WHY DEVELOPERS **BAN** THE SALE OF OBJECTS/CURRENCY/CHARACTERS/ACCOUNTS
 - EVEN THOUGH THESE OCCUR **OUTSIDE** THE GAME
 - IN-GAME TRADE USING GAME CURRENCY IS **FINE**
- BUT IS SUCH A BAN **LEGAL?**
 - EVERY PLAYER SIGNED AN **EULA** ACCEPTING THE BAN
 - THE PLAYERS **DON’T OWN** WHAT THEY’RE SELLING ANYWAY
- OR **DO** THEY?

COMMODIFICATION

- AS FAR AS SOME PEOPLE ARE CONCERNED, IF IT **LOOKS** LIKE A DUCK, **WALKS** LIKE A DUCK AND **QUACKS** LIKE A DUCK, IT'S A **DUCK**
- VIRTUAL GOODS **LOOK** LIKE REAL GOODS, ARE **TRADED** LIKE REAL GOODS, SO A JUDGE MIGHT DECIDE **REAL** PROPERTY LAWS SHOULD APPLY
 - AND REAL **TAX** LAWS?
- "THERE WASN'T A LEVEL 50 BATTLEMAGE IN THE BOX WHEN I BOUGHT IT. I MADE IT, SO IT'S **MINE**"
- UNFORTUNATELY, IF THIS WERE **TRUE** THEN VIRTUAL WORLDS WOULD **DIE**

IMPLICATIONS

- IF I BOUGHT A UNIQUE MAGIC SWORD FOR \$1,000 AND THE NEXT DAY THE DEVELOPER CREATED 20,000 **IDENTICAL** SWORDS, COULD I **SUE**?
- IF I HAVE **INVENTORY** I COULD SELL FOR \$250,000 AND THE DEVELOPER ANNOUNCES THEY'RE GOING TO **CLOSE** THE GAME, CAN I FORCE THEM TO **STOP**?
 - ON MARCH 15TH 2004, EBAY USER SHAKTI_122 BID **\$3,000** FOR AN ACCOUNT ON **EARTH AND BEYOND**
 - ON MARCH 16TH 2004, ELECTRONIC ARTS ANNOUNCED THEY WERE **CLOSING** *EARTH & BEYOND*
 - EA **ALSO** ANNOUNCED THEY WOULD **NOT** BE LICENSING THE SOFTWARE TO **ANYONE**

WHY WOULD THIS BE BAD?

- IF PLAYERS COULD SUE UPON LOSING SOME OF THEIR INVESTMENT, VIRTUAL WORLDS COULD NEVER **EVOLVE**
 - **EVERY** CHANGE AFFECTS **SOMEONE** ADVERSELY
 - "NERFING"
- WOULD **ROB** DESIGNERS OF ARTISTIC FREEDOM
 - J. K. ROWLING COULD **LEGALLY** DISTRESS **MILLIONS** BY KILLING OFF MISERABLE WHINER **HARRY POTTER**
 - WHY CAN'T VIRTUAL WORLD DESIGNERS UPSET A **FEW** PLAYERS WHO BUILT THEIR VIRTUAL HOUSES ON THE SLOPES OF A **VOLCANO**?
- WOULD BE **IMPOSSIBLE** TO DEVELOP A GAME WITH A THEME SUCH AS "ESCAPE FROM COLDITZ"

COTTAGE INDUSTRY

- FOR SALE IN 2004 ON EBAY: ONE *UO* GOLD FARM!



AND YET...

- A **FEW** VIRTUAL WORLD DEVELOPERS **EMBRACE** COMMODIFICATION
- *SECOND LIFE* IS AT THE **FOREFRONT** HERE
 - 360K PLAYERS AND RISING
- IT'S PUSHING AT **LOTS** OF BOUNDARIES AND MAY SET LEGAL **PRECEDENTS** THAT APPLY TO **ALL** VIRTUAL WORLDS
- BUT IT'S NOT A **GAME!** IT HAS NO MAGIC CIRCLE
 - THAT DOESN'T MEAN IT'S NOT **FUN** THOUGH!

RIGHTS OF THE AVATAR I

- RAPH KOSTER'S **THOUGHT EXPERIMENT:**
 - WHAT IF AVATARS (CHARACTERS) HAD **RIGHTS?**
- REDRAFTED U.S. **BILL OF RIGHTS** AND FRANCE'S **DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN** IN TERMS OF **AVATARS**
 - WWW.LEGENDMUD.ORG/RAPH/PLAYERRIGHTS.HTML
- ACTUALLY, AVATARS HAVE **NO** RIGHTS
 - KOSTER WAS USING THE THOUGHT EXPERIMENT TO SEE WHAT RIGHTS **PLAYERS** HAD
 - THIS IS THEREFORE AN OFT-MISUNDERSTOOD PAPER!

RIGHTS OF THE AVATAR 2

- WHAT IT BOILED DOWN TO:
 - PLAYERS HAVE RIGHTS IN THE **REAL** WORLD, OF WHICH THE VW IS A PART
 - IN CONSIDERING RIGHTS, VWS SHOULD **ONLY** BE THOUGHT OF IN TERMS OF BEING PART OF THE REAL WORLD (SO **IN-GAME** STEALING ETC. CAN BE OK)
 - DEVELOPERS CAN **TAKE THEIR BALL HOME** IF THEY LIKE
 - PLAYERS DON'T **HAVE** TO PLAY BALL IF THEY **DON'T WANT TO**

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

- PLAYER RIGHTS CAN THUS BE SUMMARISED AS "IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, **LEAVE**"
- BUT WHAT IF THEY **CAN'T** LEAVE?
 - "HEY, **YOU** ADDICTED ME, YOU HAVE TO ACCEPT YOUR **RESPONSIBILITIES**"
 - ALSO, WHAT ABOUT YOUR **SOCIAL CAPITAL**?
- WELL **TOUGH LUCK!** FREEDOM OF SPEECH LAWS **PROTECT** DEVELOPERS HERE
 - BUT ONLY IN COUNTRIES THAT **HAVE** THEM
- AND WHAT ABOUT **REAL-WORLD** HARM?
 - "A RAPE IN CYBERSPACE"

SUMMARY

- THERE IS A **VIBRANT** TRADE IN VIRTUAL OBJECTS
 - WELL OVER \$1,000M WORLDWIDE NOW
- MOST PLAYERS ARE **AGAINST** THIS TRADE
 - BECAUSE IT SPOILS THEIR FUN
- MOST **DEVELOPERS** ARE AGAINST IT TOO
 - AND **NOT** JUST BECAUSE THEIR PLAYERS ARE
- THERE'S NO PROBLEM IF DEVELOPERS **WANT** TO EMBRACE COMMODIFICATION
- THE PROBLEM IS WHEN THEY **DON'T** WANT IT BUT **GET IT ANYWAY**
- AS ALWAYS, IT'S A **GOOD** TIME TO BE A **LAWYER...**