Pleasing the Teller

Independent MMO GDC
19th April, 2009
“What kind of time is 8:30 for a final day keynote?!"

Richard A. Bartle
• The title of this talk comes from a quotation from the 17th century English historian Thomas Fuller:
  – The tale runs as it pleases the teller

• No, me neither...

• I was going to call it Lost Worlds, but that sounded historical and we’ve already had a history keynote

• Thomas Fuller also said:
  – Bad excuses are worse than none
• THIS TASTEFUL PORNOGRAPHIC WORK IS ILLEGAL IN SEVERAL EUROPEAN COUNTRIES...
• So, the problem with today’s MMOS is that they’re so expensive to make

• You need herds of artists, programmers and designers
  – This is not itself the problem
  – The problem is that they want to be paid

• Fortunately, costs are coming down, now the pioneers have figured it all out

• A conservative believes nothing should be done for the first time
Falling costs

- Programming is getting less **expensive** because some code is **re-usable**
  - Middleware!
- Some artwork is also **re-usable**
  - Models! Textures!
- In both cases, there is a place for **outsourcing**
  - And that place is Asia
- What about **design**?
CONTENT CREATION

- **Tools** can help **speed up** the design process, but you **still** need designers.
- This is an area where costs are **rising**
  - Feel free to blame **WOW**
- If you regard players as **consumers**, what they consume is **content**
- It **used** to be ok to generate content **procedurally**
  - Chinese menu quests
- **Wow** has **7,650** **hand-crafted** quests!
• **FOR QUALITY**, HAND-CRAFTED QUESTS INVARIABLY **BEAT** PROCEDURELLY-GENERATED ONES
  - **THERE ARE SOME AI TECHNIQUES THAT COULD HELP**, BUT THEY’RE NOT UP TO HUMAN STANDARDS
• NARRATIVES ARE INDIVIDUALLY FORMED AS QUEST CHAINS THAT CAN **SAY SOMETHING**
  - **DESIGNERS CAN PUT DIFFERENT SPINS ON KILLING 10 RATS**
• **IF YOU WANT TO COMPETE WITH WOW, YOU NEED TO HAVE CONTENT AS GOOD AS THIS**
• **Hand-crafted quests are expensive because:**
  • Unlike **procedural quests**, they can’t be **mass-produced**
  • Once a player has done a particular quest **once**, it’s dead
    – They’re daily **quests**, not daily quest **chains**…
• **Quests are not the only kind of content, though…**
• *We have all forgot more than we remember*
• When Alice arrived in Wonderland, her first words were: “Curiouser and curiouser”

• (Why does American spelling knock the U out before R but not before S?)
User-Created Content

- A lot has been written in recent years regarding **user-created content**

- See, content has become **so expensive** that developers are **even prepared to countenance** letting **players** create it
  
  – A fool’s paradise is a wise-man’s hell

- **Professed reason:**
  
  – We are **empowering** our players

- **Actual reason:**
  
  – They will make stuff for us for **free**!
Furthermore

- Content created by users is unpolished, g bareld, inconsistent, contradictory, derivative, unimaginative, incompatible, ...
  - except for the <1% that isn't

- The players who make it like it, but few others do

- They're not designers
  - If an ass goes travelling he will not come back a horse

- Well ... that kind of UCC is like that...
WHEREAS DOROTHY, UPON ARRIVAL IN OZ, SAID: “WE WILL GO TO THE EMERALD CITY AND ASK THE GREAT OZ HOW TO GET BACK TO KANSAS AGAIN”
EVE ONLINE

• 4TH FEBRUARY, 2009:
• 5th February, 2009:
Although “user-created content” and “user-generated content” are often used interchangeably, there is a difference:

- User-created content is created explicitly by the actions of players.
- User-generated content is content created implicitly by the actions of players.

User-generated content is emergent.

Eve’s environment is so rich that interesting things just happen.
UNFORTUNATELY...

- **YOU** **PAY** FOR A RICHLY INTERACTIVE WORLD:
• **The more complicated the world, the harsher the newbie experience**
  – All things are difficult before they are easy

• **MMOs built around non-emergent content have the opposite problem**
  – Great for **newbies**, lacking for **oldbies**

• **They currently use a two-game system**
  – The **levelling game**
  – The **raiding game**
  • Optionally with the **PVP/RvR game**

• **But this only delays the inevitable**
AS FOR WENDY...

• "I wish I had a pretty house, the littlest ever seen, with funny little red walls and roof of mossy green"

• **WENDY MADE UP NEVERLAND HERSELF, SO CAN'T EVER BELIEVE IT'S MORE THAN JUST A FANTASY**

  – HERS...
THE ELDER GAME

• WHY DO WE NEED TWO GAMES?
• IF THE RAIDING GAME IS SO GOOD, WHY EVEN BOTHER WITH THE LEVELLING GAME?
  – YOU COULD MAKE THE RAIDING GAME BE THE GAME
• WELL, THE RAIDING GAME ISN’T THAT GOOD...
• LIKE QUESTS, RAIDING CONTENT IS FIXED
  – THERE’S ONLY SO MANY TIMES YOU CAN RUN NAXX BEFORE IT’S SAMEY
  • ONCE, IN FACT
• A tale twice told is a _ cabbage twice sold
OTHER ELDER GAMES

- Other attempts at the elder game also flop
- RVR is never resolved
  - and therefore POINTLESS
- PvP IS BETTER - IF YOU'RE GOOD AT PVP
  - but the results are ALSO POINTLESS
- They provide BURST fun, but no FUN OVER TIME
- This dead-endedness is due to the narrative PHILOSOPHY of these MMOS
• There are **three** kinds of story in MMOS
  – Indeed, in **all** games

• **Backstory** describes what happened before the MMO went live
  – How the elves came to Middle Earth

• **Narrative** is what the designers arrange to happen
  – Quests to help the Fellowship of the Ring

• **History** is what actually happened
  – Cool! I fell off Weathertop!
• Of these, **HISTORY** is the most important

• History is the player’s **retelling** of interesting **events**

• This means there must have **been** some interesting **events**

• **No** history means nothing interesting **happened**
  
  – Where’s the **fun** in that?

• Problem: “**Interesting**” **changes** over time
ANALOGY

• **WHEN YOU START OFF IN A NEW MMO IT’S LIKE ARRIVING IN A FOREIGN RAILWAY STATION ON A BACKPACKING TRIP**

• **WITH CLASSES AND RACES, THE DESIGNERS HAVE PROVIDED TRAINS THAT ARE GUARANTEED TO GO TO INTERESTING PLACES**
  – YOU WANT TO SHOOT FIREBALLS? BOARD THE MAGE TRAIN!

• **QUESTS ARE THE ENGINES THAT PULL THE CARRIAGES ALONG**
• HOWEVER, TRAINS RUN ON **RAILS**
• IF YOU WANT TO DISEMBARK AND GO ELSEWHERE, WELL, YOU **CAN’T**!
• THE DESIGN PHILOSOPHY IS ALL ABOUT **CONTROLLING** THE PLAYER EXPERIENCE
• THE **SAME** PHILOSOPHY IS APPLIED FOR NEWBIES AND OLDIES ALIKE
• **IT’S** CONSISTENT – BUT PLAYERS **AREN’T**!

   – *Travel makes a wise man better and a fool worse*—
CONVERSELY

- **EVE** IS ALL ABOUT **FREEING** THE PLAYERS TO FIND THEIR **OWN** FUN

- THIS ALLOWS FOR A MUCH MORE **NUANCED**, FINE-GRANDED EXPERIENCE

- YOU CAN FIND **EXACTLY** WHAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU, INSTEAD OF A MERE **APPROXIMATION** – EVENTUALLY...

- AGAIN, THIS IS BECAUSE OF **EVE**'S "OPEN-ENDED" PHILOSOPHY

- PLAYERS **DO** WANT AN OPEN-ENDED MMO, BUT NOT ONE THAT IS OPEN AT **BOTH ENDS**
MUD HISTORY

• FOR THE FIRST 10 YEARS OF THEIR EXISTENCE, MUDS WERE ALL ABOUT FREEDOM
  - NO CLASSES, NO RACES, NO FORMAL QUESTS

• THERE WAS A BALANCE BETWEEN SOCIALISERS AND ACHIEVERS

• IN 1989, TINYMUD APPEARED
  - SOCIALISERS LEFT FOR MOOS, MUCKS, MUSHES

• WITH THE SOCIALISER BRAKES OFF, ACHIEVERS WENT ALL OUT FOR HARD-CORE GAMING FUN
  - THUS, THE DIKUMUD PARADIGM
• **Game** worlds and **social** worlds were each defined by **not** being the other

• This **locked in** their philosophies of "game" and "not a game"

• They were also defined by not being what went before them

• In balanced worlds, the world was **constrained** but the players **free**
  - In social worlds, the world is also **free**
  - In game worlds, the players are also **constrained**
• We’re living with the legacy of this even today

• Designers in the dikumud paradigm are still trying not to make social or balanced worlds
  – from some subconscious, collective memory...

• Likewise the few balanced commercial mmos out there are trying not to split
  – Band of Brothers – game
  – Goonswarm – (anti)social
The solution

- The solution is fairly **obvious** here
- Any suggestions?
- 'Tis not every question that deserves an answer
- Correct: We let Alice and Dorothy play together
- Alice finds merely **being** in another world interesting
- She’ll go wherever **fortune** and **fancy** may take her
- She represents the old, **balanced** worlds like **Mudi**
DOROTHY

- DOROTHY IS **WARY** OF THE NEW WORLD SHE HAS ARRIVED IN
- SHE WANTS A **PATH** SHE CAN FOLLOW TO GET **THROUGH** IT
- SHE REPRESENTS THE **MODERN, GAME WORLDS LIKE WOW**
WENDY

• WENDY WANTS TO LIVE IN THE WORLD THAT SHE CREATED

• IT’S HER OWN, PERSONAL FANTASY

• WENDY REPRESENTS THE MODERN, SOCIAL WORLDS LIKE SL
Playing Together

- Alice worlds are newbie-unfriendly but provide the depth and freedom that oldbies crave.
- Dorothy worlds are very newbie-friendly but oldbies, who don't want their hands held, feel disenchanted.
- So: Start off as a Dorothy world and switch to Alice for the elder game.
- These 20-year-old philosophical differences no longer need to persist.
HOW IT WOULD WORK

• You start off by selecting a character pack optimised for one style of play – you can diverge from it any time you like

• The first quests are hand-crafted, but later on they emerge from player interactions – like putting want ads on an auction house, but potentially much more complex

• Eventually you segue into a freeform game – a man among children will be long a child, a child among men will be soon a man
As for Wendy?

- Alice and Dorothy are both in worlds **not** of their **own** making.
- They allow a “game conceit”
  - A **magic circle**
- Wendy can build Alice and Dorothy Wendy houses to play **in**, but she can’t play **with** them.
- That doesn’t mean they have to be **enemies**, though...
  - There is a scarcity of friendship, but not of friends.
CONCLUSION

• TODAY'S VIRTUAL WORLDS ARE VICTIMS OF THEIR OWN ORTHODOXIES

• THEY OPERATE WITHIN ARTIFICIAL BOUNDARIES FOR OBSCURE HISTORICAL REASONS

• PLAYERS AND DESIGNERS SENSE THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG, BUT NOT QUITE WHAT

• FORTUNATELY, BY UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSE, THE EFFECT IS EASILY REMOVED
ONE LAST THING

• How things WERE doesn’t mean that’s how things SHOULD be

• History should INFORM the present, not DICTATE it

• TIMES CHANGE:

• A woman, a dog and a walnut tree—, the more you beat them, the better they be—

• Go out there and MAKE SOMETHING NEW!