

---

# A Wish List for Massively Multiplayer Games

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## Introduction

---

- Massively multiplayer games are the titans of online gaming.
  - Everquest
    - ◆ 400,000+ players.
  - Ultima Online
    - ◆ Still going strong on 270,000.
  - Asheron's Call
    - ◆ A "failure" that brings in \$800,000 a month.
- The second wave of games is starting to break.
  - At last...
  - How big is it going to be?

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## New Kids on the Block

---

- The Big Three are being challenged by:
  - Genre shifts
    - ◆ Anarchy Online – buggy but unbowed
    - ◆ SeduCity – did they use motion capture?
  - Licensed properties
    - ◆ Star Wars, Lord of the Rings (supposedly), others in secret.
  - Public domain “licensed” properties
    - ◆ Dark Age of Camelot
  - Follow-ups
    - ◆ Asheron’s Call 2, Ultima Online 2, EverQuest whatever...
  - The Rest.
    - ◆ Some good, some bad, but all with ugly finances

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## The Challenge

---

- How are the new games going to affect the status quo?
  - Spiffier graphics.
    - ◆ Goes without saying.
  - Better service.
    - ◆ We can hope...
  - Better gameplay?
    - ◆ This is the crucial issue.
- Design questions:
  - What new ideas are these games bringing with them?
  - What old ideas are they leaving behind?
  - What shouldn’t they have done that they have done?
  - What should they have done that they haven’t done?

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## What we have Now

---

- Today's online games are not without their problems.
- To succeed, games of this kind must:
  - Attract newbies.
  - Retain them.
  - Not break the bank doing either of the above.
- A lot of this is to do with operations:
  - Reliability.
  - Customer service.
- Big design issues are:
  - Repetitiveness.
  - Immersion.
  - The end-game issue.

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## Coming Real Soon

---

- Two flavours:
  - Games for gamers.
  - Games for non-gamers.
- MUDs (graphical or otherwise) have the widest appeal of any online games:
  - Women!
  - People over 30!
  - Parents! Grandparents!
  - People who don't *like* games!
- But most new games target existing gamers.
- This tends to colour what the new games are doing:
  - Pro-core, anti-casual.
  - NB: Many designers think their games aren't core when they are.

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## Out with the Old...

---

- Retention by expansion.
  - Keep game fresh by adding new modules/storylines.
  - Works for oldbies, but tough on newbies.
  - Costs \$\$\$.
- The game is separate from the real world.
  - People don't have real world lives.
  - Real-world actions must not affect the game
    - ◆ Buying/selling accounts, personae, property, items...
    - ◆ Cheats, hacks, walk-throughs.
  - The World Wide Web is out-of-game.
    - ◆ Can't do even limited things offline (eg. via mobile phone)
    - ◆ Can't link directly to players' web sites or other creations

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## ...In with the New

---

- New genres
  - Swing to Science Fiction.
  - Licensed products.
    - ◆ Long-term only. Can't do one-movie wonders.
  - Public domain "licences".
    - ◆ Eg. DAOC. First one to claim it gets it.
- Player-generated content.
  - Within certain controlled parameters.
    - ◆ Although see Neverwinter Nights.
  - Possible copyright issues.
  - Players are not game designers, artists or writers.
    - ◆ But they think they are.

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## What Players Want

---

(That they won't be getting).

- Variety.
  - Meaningful quests, and lots of them.
  - Vast opportunities for role-play.
- Atmosphere.
- Wit.
- To matter.
  - A tangible impact on the game.
  - A meaningful existence.
- Note: most players *don't know* what they want.
  - Or refuse to accept the consequences of their desires.
  - Good of the game versus good of the individual.

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## What Players Don't Want

---

(That they will be getting).

- Storylines.
  - Players want to change the world, not watch the inevitable unfold.
- Politics.
  - Works as an endgame, but:
    - ◆ People hate politics.
    - ◆ People hate politicians.
- Artificial group conflict.
  - No side can ever *really* win or *really* lose.
- Patronised.
  - "People will simply adore those pretty baskets you make..."
  - "Cooks are just as capable of heroism as half-elf paladins".

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## All Things to All Players

---

- The problem is that players have conflicting needs.
- Addressing one player type's needs affects the other types' needs.
- Old hat quick summary of player types:
  - Achievers – play the game as a game, to “win”.
  - Explorers – seek to understand the game world.
  - Socialisers – the game provides a context for socialising.
  - Killers – control freaks; feel the need to dominate other players.
- It's possible, but not easy, to get a stable balance between these.
  - Costs very little to maintain.
- Otherwise, balance has to be forced.
  - Newbie hose.
  - Continual updates.

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## Conflicting Needs

---

- Achievers need an end-game
  - but politics is for killers.
- Socialisers need meaning
  - but they don't accept persona death
  - and they don't accept a free market economy.
- Explorers want depth
  - but depth costs money.
- Killers want to dominate other players
  - (except for other killers)
  - but no-one wants to be dominated.
- Socialisers and explorers want story
  - but achievers and killers don't.

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## My Ideal Game

---

- These issues are not insoluble, though.
- Too many designers start from the wrong set of axioms.
  - Salad days...
  - So what are the backtrack points?
- Here's how some of the major problems can be resolved...
  - Described *very* briefly or it would take forever.
  - From point of view of design.
    - ◆ Operations and customer service are also very important.
- Note that many of these are anathema to people raised on EverQuest
  - But your players won't be coming from EverQuest...

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## My Wish List

---

- Persona death (PD).
  - Only if you take the risk.
  - Periodic risk is necessary at highest levels.
- Player versus player (PvP).
- Multiple player hierarchies.
- Intelligent quests.
  - Artificially intelligent, to be precise.
- Workable economics.
  - It doesn't have to be all faucet/drain.
- Persona advancement.
  - No character classes/races.
  - No skill caps.

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.

## Conclusion

---

- Massively multiplayer games do have problems.
  - But there are accessible solutions.
- Unfortunately, the designers of the second wave of games often:
  - Don't understand the problems.
  - Follow the wrong precedents.
  - Think they're infallible.
- So much applies to any game designer, of course, but they also:
  - Design for themselves, rather than for their players.
  - Don't think through the full consequences of their ideas.
  - Place too much emphasis on the opinions of gamers.
- Never forget people: these are *worlds*, not games.
  - They work *differently!*

Richard Bartle: MUSE Ltd.