

Newbie Induction: How Poor Design Triumphs in Virtual Worlds

ABSTRACT

Virtual worlds (also known as MMORPGs, MMOGs, MUDs *etc.*) contain some features that from a designer's perspective ought not to be there. They lack other features that make good design sense. This paper explains how this situation arises, and why dilution of gameplay over the long term is almost inevitable.

Author Keywords

Newbies, nerfing, PD, instancing

INTRODUCTION

Long-term designers of virtual worlds often despair that newer creations contain what look to be obviously poor ideas (Bartle 2003). Although in the past this was put down to inexperience or inappropriate experience on the part of new designers (Bartle 1997), surely nowadays this cannot still be the case? Yet time and time again, virtual worlds appear that not only repeat the mistakes of the past, but reinforce them (Koster 2003). What's going on here?

The purpose of this paper is to suggest how this happens. It is written from the perspective of large-scale, graphical, game-like worlds, although similar processes are also at work to a greater or lesser degree in other virtual world paradigms.

The argument proceeds by making four initial points, the combination of which allows a possible mechanism for poor idea propagation to be proposed.

THE NEWBIE STREAM

Virtual worlds live or die by their ability to attract new players (*newbies*). Even for the most compelling such worlds, established players

will always be leaving: they move on as individuals, and real-life commitments eventually take priority. If the number of newbies arriving exceeds the number of players leaving, the virtual world will increase in population; if it is roughly the same, then the population will remain relatively stable; if the number of leavers is the greater, the population will fall.

A virtual world with a declining population will often stabilize before calamity completely overwhelms it; this is because the first people it will lose from its newbie stream will be those who weren't ever really likely to stay long anyway. Eventually, a plateau is reached where the incoming, informed newbies balance in number the outgoing, experienced players.

This can still be too late, however. A virtual world needs a *critical mass* of players to be viable. There are actually two critical masses: one from the player's point of view ("is this world empty?") and one from the developer's ("is this product breaking even?"). While either of these conditions is not met, the virtual world risks failure.

From this perspective, it can be seen that the healthiest virtual worlds are those that have a steady, reliable newbie stream to replenish – and hopefully better – the number of players leaving.

Point #1: Virtual worlds need a stream of newbies to stay viable.

NEWBIE LIKES AND DISLIKES

Why might a virtual world that has critical mass nevertheless have difficulty in attracting newbies?

There are many possibilities: competition, poor advertising, lack of appeal. I'm going to concentrate on the last of these, as it's the most problematic.

There are some virtual worlds that have had development time lavished on them, day after day, for the past 10 or 15 years. They're exquisitely balanced, rich in depth, abundant in breadth, a joy to play, and full of wise, interesting, fun people who engender an atmosphere of mystique and marvel without compare. Newbies would love these virtual worlds, but they're not going to play them. Why not? Because they're text-based. Newbies don't play text-based games.

Newbies come to virtual worlds with a set of expectations. These derive from other virtual worlds they have played; failing that, from other computer games they've played; failing that, from gut feeling. They will not play virtual worlds that confront these expectations.

Thus, if a virtual world introduces (or already has) a feature that offends newbies, it will have to remove or alter that feature. Otherwise, it will not attract newbies. Note that the opinion of more experienced players is, for the purposes of this argument, irrelevant: they may adore some new feature, but if it puts off newbies then (under point #1) eventually there won't be any experienced players *to* adore it.

Point #2: Newbies won't play a virtual world that has a major feature they don't like.

NOT-SO-NEWBIES

Not all newbies for a particular virtual world are new to virtual worlds in general: a growing number will have played one or more others prior to arriving at this one. These players will usually spend significantly less time with it before they switch again: a study of 1,100 players by the Themis Group (Themis Group 2004) found that those for whom *EverQuest* was their second virtual left after only 80% of the period that its first-time players lasted (other figures: *Ultima Online* 70%, *Asheron's Call* 70%, *Dark Age of Camelot* 55%). Furthermore,

these second-time players will very often judge their current game by the standards of the first one they got into: *Meridian 59* took refugees from *NeverWinter Nights* when the latter closed down, and was immediately subject to requests for every *NWN* feature to be implemented in *M59* (Schubert 1999).

Players will do this even if their current virtual world is, by any objective judgment, manifestly better in all areas than their first one. They will ask for aspects of their first world to be added, even if those aspects were partly responsible for its demise. If their first virtual world had a *treadmill*, it doesn't matter how much they dislike treadmills, they'll gravitate towards virtual worlds with treadmills.

The reason for this seemingly perplexing behaviour is that they are seeking *atonement* – recognition by the “game” that they have “won” it (Bartle 2003). Most virtual worlds offer their players a *hero's journey* (Campbell 1949), but few provide this key atonement step: you can't usually “win” a virtual world (Kosak 2003). Yet with no formal end-point that recognizes their achievement, long-term players inevitably become increasingly frustrated. They will leave, then wander from virtual world to virtual world seeking closure that is never forthcoming (Yee 2003). In so doing, they will ignore those virtual worlds with major features or unique selling points that run counter to what they experienced in that first virtual world. They will, however, be positive about virtual worlds with new but compatible features, as they believe these may fill the void they feel (although in practice they almost certainly won't).

Point #3: Players judge all virtual worlds as a reflection of the one they first got into.

SHORT-TERMISM

Whenever a virtual world innovates, all but its most experienced players will tend to judge it on its short-term merits only. They will only consider long-term consequences if doing so helps them argue in favour of their preferred short-term solution. They don't care that

things will be much better for them later if they're slightly worse for them now.

There are two outcomes from these short-termist views. Firstly, a feature that is short-term good but long-term bad will be difficult for developers to remove because most of the player base will be for it. Secondly, a feature that is short-term bad but long-term good will be difficult to keep because most of the player base will be against it.

As it happens, most additions and alterations to a virtual world are both short-term and long-term good, or at least long-term neutral. Only a few are short-term good but long-term bad. These, however, are the ones that cause the problems, because when the long term finally comes, the players pay for it in fun. This (in combination with lack of atonement) will ultimately cause them to leave in disenchantment.

I've called these short-term good, long-term bad features *poor*. Features that are both short-term and long-term bad are just plain *bad*, and will be rejected by almost everyone.

Point #4: Many players will think some poor design choices are good.

THE NEWBIE INDUCTION

We now have four points that can be brought together to discover what's going on here:

1. Virtual worlds need a stream of newbies to stay viable.
2. Newbies won't play a virtual world that has a major feature they don't like.
3. Players judge all virtual worlds as a reflection of the one they first got into.
4. Many players will think some poor design choices are good.

We can now construct a line of reasoning that explains why virtual worlds repeat the mistakes of the past.

Under point #4, players will eventually quit a virtual world that has poor features. Under point #3, however, they won't necessarily recognize that the feature which caused them

to leave was indeed poor. Under point #2, they won't play those virtual worlds that lack this feature. Under point #1, those virtual worlds that do lack the feature – that is, *those with the better design* – will be avoided. Any absolute newbies, for whom this is their first virtual world, will be educated to believe that this is how things are meant to be, thus starting the whole cycle again.

Under the normal evolutionary rules by which computer games operate, good design genes are propagated from one generation of games to the next. In virtual worlds, outright bad design genes are still eliminated (because they're universally seen as such), but poor design genes are propagated more readily than good ones. This is because itinerant players act as carriers for them. The best virtual worlds don't spread their design genes around so much, because they have much better player retention. Why would I want to look for a different virtual world if the one I'm playing does everything right?

Thus, it would appear that for a new virtual world to succeed it should repeat the mistakes that caused its predecessors to fail..!

Before examining ways to break this cycle, let's look at a couple of examples to illustrate this process in action. One is old, and one is new.

OLD: PERMANENT DEATH

The permanent death (*PD*) of player characters opens many very convenient doors for virtual world design:

- It prevents all positions of power from remaining in the hands of the same early-adopter players.
- It causes a much more efficient use of content, because a player will view same-level content from different angles using different characters.
- It's the default fiction for real life.
- It promotes immersion, because players can explore their own personalities more easily if they're not stuck playing the same character the whole time.

- It validates players' hero's journey progress. A high-level character means a high-level player is behind it.

Many designers and experienced players appreciate that a virtual world with just the right amount of PD in it would ultimately be more fun. We're not going to get such a virtual world, however, because absolutely no-one would play it.

Complete newbies wouldn't play because they'd think short-term (point #4). "Why should I play this virtual world where I could get killed and lose everything, when I could play this one where nothing bad much happens?". Players of other virtual worlds wouldn't play it, because the first virtual world they played had the opposite of it (point #3).

It would be a brave developer indeed who in the current climate was willing to spend several million dollars creating a virtual world featuring PD.

NEW: INSTANCING

A relatively new fashion in virtual worlds is *instancing*, whereby small groups of players can set up their own, private sub-world for a session, cut off from the virtual world proper. This means that friends can have fun together without tiresome interference from anyone else. It sounds a good idea.

Unfortunately, it's not what virtual worlds are about. How can you have any impact on a virtual world if you're only using it as a portal to a first-person shooter? How do you interact with people if they're battened down in an inaccessible pocket universe? Where's the sense of achievement, of making a difference, of *being* someone?

It's short-term good, long-term bad.

Yet newbies will come to virtual worlds that have instancing and think, "hey, that's cool, it's like fantasy *CounterStrike*". It matches their expectations of what a computer game should be (point #2). They don't know what instancing means for their long-term enjoyment, though (point #4). After a few

months, they'll become disenchanted, and look for something with more meaning. They'll choose a virtual world that has instancing over one that doesn't (point #3).

Thus, instancing gets locked into the paradigm. New virtual worlds that don't have instancing will get fewer players than those that do have it, even though instancing is bad for the long-term health of a virtual world (if it's to remain a virtual world). Absolute newbies from a first-person shooter background will naturally prefer virtual worlds that feature it; players of other virtual worlds who are of the generation when it was introduced (or later) won't play anything that doesn't have it. Players from before then will perhaps initially avoid virtual worlds with instancing (because their first virtual world didn't have it), but they'll try it eventually because (point #4) hey, maybe it's that missing piece that will give them the sense of closure they crave?

ANALYSIS

It's not just permanent death, it's not just instancing: it's teleportation, it's banks, it's non-drop objects – it's everything that makes sense in some contexts but not in all (or even most) contexts.

A player asks, "How can I rejoin my group if I miss a session? Without teleporting, it will take me an hour to find them."

A designer replies, "Well gee, maybe I'm trying to tell you that you can have a meaningful experience without having to group with people of the same level and run a treadmill?"

The designer knows, however, that the player won't be listening.

Virtual worlds are becoming diluted with poor design decisions that can't be undone, purely because of their reliance on a newbie stream. We're getting de-evolution, driven by newbie power; it's survival of the not-quite-fittest.

So why doesn't something similar happen with regular computer games?

The market for regular computer games is driven by the hard core. The hard core finishes product faster than newbies and therefore buys new product faster than newbies. The hard core understands design implications better than newbies. They won't buy a game with features they can see are poor; they select games with good design genes.

In virtual worlds, the hard core either wanders aimlessly, trying to recapture their first virtual world experience, or they never left that virtual world in the first place. Furthermore, the hard core spends the same amount of money on subscriptions as anyone else. Unlike with regular computer games, a virtual world developer won't be rewarded for making product that appeals to the hard core. In the days of hourly charging it would have done, but from a flat-rate monthly subscription it doesn't.

SOLUTIONS

How can this depressing cycle be broken? Some suggestions:

Innovation

If evolution is not the answer, perhaps revolution is? Innovation could be the saviour we're awaiting. If a virtual world appears with a unique selling point that doesn't map onto any player's experiences, then perhaps newbies and oldbies alike might chance it?

Although this is indeed a solution, unfortunately innovation on the kind of scale necessary here is a rare occurrence. Also, in the past it has tended to favour second-wave innovators rather than first-wave (*EverQuest* rather than *Meridian 59*), so there's an element of self-sacrifice about it.

Also, there's no guarantee that a paradigm-shifting innovation is not itself a poor idea in the long-term.

Marketing

First-time players of virtual worlds can be persuaded to overcome their expectations under certain circumstances. It is conceivable, for example, that even a text-based virtual world could attract large numbers of players if

it had the right licence and advertised to the right group of people. There's nothing intrinsically problematic with text; its problems lie mainly with the preconceptions of potential newbies.

The problem with this approach is that it costs money. Furthermore, it's money that can only be spent once the virtual world is close to being launched. One misjudgment about the target audience, and it would be too late to do anything to correct it. So although marketing can indeed break the mould, it's not without its risks.

Cross-Fertilisation

The world is not only the West, and virtual worlds are not only a Western phenomenon. They are arguably more popular in the Far East than in Europe and North America. Time zones and language differences being what they are, few players from either bloc spend much game time with those of the other. This has led to different virtual world design traditions.

Designers of virtual worlds in the West can therefore examine the virtual worlds of the Far East and cherry-pick their best tried-and-trusted features – the ones that are both short-term and long-term good. Designers of virtual worlds in the Far East can do likewise by looking at Western virtual worlds. In this way, “new” features can be added that will restore otherwise degraded gameplay (assuming that these features don't interact with any existing must-have features in an unfortunate way).

There is a danger that with too much cross-fertilisation designs will become homogenous. This is perhaps unlikely, though, because the underlying real-world cultures of the two blocs are sufficiently distinct that there will always be differences. That *EverQuest* and *Lineage* did not meet with the same success in each other's territory as they did in their home territory was as much to do with newbie gut-feeling (point #2) as to their dissimilarity to the virtual worlds that had gone before them.

Works of Art

The construction of virtual worlds involves much craft, but ultimately their designs are art. Some designer has sat down and made decisions that, at root, can only be explained by their belief that *this is how things should be*.

Over time, designers of successful virtual worlds will become identified for their outlook and style. Players will come to know what a “Raph Koster” virtual world is like, in the same way that they know what a “Stephen Spielberg” movie is like. If players enjoy what they see, they may be prepared as an act of faith to try out some new virtual world with seemingly negative features, *just because* it was designed by their favourite designer.

An added advantage of having *auteur* designers is that they can grant atonement to players of their earlier worlds. Formally, the step in the hero’s journey that matches a “win” condition is *atonement with the father*. The designer is “the father”. If the designer creates a new virtual world, players who want resolution will be willing to try it even if it contains features at odds with those in their first virtual world; this is extremely powerful, as it’s the one occasion when point #3 can be overridden.

We’re not yet at the stage where a major developer is likely to indulge a big name designer’s flights of fancy, although there is movement in that direction (Richard Garriott and Brad McQuaid have greater artistic freedom than first-time designers, for example). When we are fully there, we could well see the welcome re-establishment of creativity at the heart of virtual world design.

Time May Heal

It may be that the solution is just to wait.

Fashions change. As memories fade of what was rejected in the past, opportunities arise for old ideas to be given a second chance.

Most adventure-style virtual worlds have a character class system (fighter, healer, mage, rogue, and variants thereof). Few players of such virtual worlds will have experienced anything else. If an adventure-style world were

launched commercially with no character classes, that would seem like a novel idea. Actually, however, it would be a very old idea that had been reinvented.

It is therefore possible to argue that good design features will always get a second chance, and so will eventually make their way into the paradigm where they rightly belong. This may well be true, but it implies a rather long period between iterations. Your favourite lost feature will ultimately be accepted, but you may have to wait 30 years for it to happen.

Growing Maturity

Not so much a solution as a consequence of the evolution of attitudes, perhaps the best hope for the long-term future of virtual world design is the growing maturity of the player base. First-time newbies will still swear by the supremacy of the first world they get hooked on, but there will also be old-timers will have been round the virtual world block often enough to recognize that some of the features they’ve been taking for granted are actually counter-productive.

If these people are around in sufficient numbers, they could be able to support a virtual world built to sounder design principles. “Sufficient numbers” need not be great, either, if development tools become available to make it easier to create these low-sugar, high-protein worlds.

It could be argued that we already have these worlds, of course, in the form of social-oriented virtual worlds such as *Second Life*. Players who have (despite all the obstacles) completed their personal hero’s journey may find these places more conducive to their needs than a wild, adventure-style world.

The evidence of history does not seem to support this view, however. When textual worlds ruled, few players switched to a social-style world having “finished” an adventure-style one – most who crossed over went much sooner than that. Nevertheless, if the designers of social-style virtual worlds were to target jaded long-term players of adventure-style

virtual worlds, it may be that they could meet with some success.

CONCLUSION

Virtual worlds are under evolutionary pressure to promote design features that, while not exactly bad, are nevertheless poor. Each succeeding generation absorbs these into the virtual world paradigm, and introduces new poor features for the next generation to take on board. The result is that virtual world design follows a downward path of not-quite-good-enough, leading ultimately to an erosion of what virtual worlds *are*.

Fortunately, there are a number of processes at work that have the potential to arrest this descent. Thus, although the future of virtual worlds may look disappointing, it's not completely bleak.

Besides, for the purist there will always be text MUDs.

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