NEWBIE INDUCTION
HOW POOR DESIGN TRIUMPHS
IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

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INTRODUCTION
• THIS TALK CONCERNS VIRTUAL WORLDS
  – WHAT I’M CALLING PRODUCTS LIKE EQ, UO, SL,
    LINEAGE, PUZZLE PIRATES, ACHAEA, AMOO, MUDI, ...
• PREMISE: VIRTUAL WORLDS COULD BE BETTER
• FROM A DESIGNER’S POINT OF VIEW:
  – THEY CONTAIN SOME FEATURES THAT OUGHT NOT 
    TO BE THERE
  – THEY DON’T CONTAIN SOME FEATURES THAT 
    OUGHT TO BE THERE
• WHY IS THIS?
THE ARGUMENT

• NEW VIRTUAL WORLDS CONTINUALLY APPEAR THAT NOT ONLY REPEAT PAST MISTAKES BUT REINFORCE THEM

• IN THIS TALK, I PROPOSE TO EXPLAIN:
  – HOW POOR FEATURES BECOME ENTRENCHED
  – WHY POOR FEATURES PROPAGATE READILY
  – WHY GOOD FEATURES PROPAGATE LESS READILY
  – WHY DOOM IS (ALMOST) INEVITABLE

• I’LL BEGIN BY MAKING FOUR SEPARATE POINTS
  – WHICH I’LL THEN TIE TOGETHER

1. THE NEWBIE STREAM

• VIRTUAL WORLDS THAT DON’T GET NEWBIES DIE

• OLDIES LEAVE AT A CONSTANT RATE
  – DIFFERENT FOR EACH VIRTUAL WORLD
  – RETENTION CAN BE IMPROVED THROUGH DESIGN
  – THIS JUST KEEPS THEM LONGER, THOUGH – IT DOESN’T STOP THEM LEAVING

• ALL VIRTUAL WORLDS WILL EVENTUALLY REACH A BALANCE
  – INCOMING NEWBIES = OUTGOING OLDIES
Critical Mass

- The number of active players at the balance point must exceed a **Critical Mass**
  - Oldbie retention can **increase** this number
  - But it still relies completely on newbies
- Actually **two** critical masses
  - Players: “Is it unempty?”
  - Developers: “Is it breaking even?”
- The **healthiest** virtual worlds are those with a steady, reliable **newbie stream**

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Point #1

- Virtual worlds need a stream of newbies to stay viable
2. NEWBIE LIKES AND DISLIKES

- **HAVING CRITICAL MASS IS NECESSARY TO ATTRACT NEWBIES, BUT NOT SUFFICIENT**
- **NEWBIES WON'T PLAY A VIRTUAL WORLD THAT DOESN'T MEET THEIR EXPECTATIONS**
- **EXPECTATIONS ARE DERIVED FROM:**
  - OTHER VIRTUAL WORLDS
  - OTHER COMPUTER GAMES (ESPECIALLY RPGS)
  - GUT FEELING
- **THEY WON'T TOUCH A VIRTUAL WORLD THAT CONFRONTS THESE EXPECTATIONS**

**EXAMPLE**

- **MANY NEWBIES WOULD ♥LOVE♥ SOME OF THE TEXT-BASED GAMES OUT THERE**
- **BUT “COMPUTER GAMES MUST HAVE SUPER GRAPHICS”**
  - NOTE THAT THE RELATIVE **MERITS** OF TEXT AND GRAPHICS DON'T EVEN ENTER THE **ARGUMENT**
  - “TEXT IS UNAPPEALING” IS TAKEN AS AN **AXIOM**
- **VIRTUAL WORLDS THAT DON'T MEET NEWBIES' EXPECTATIONS SIMPLY WON'T ATTRACT THEM**
  - ATTITUDE OF OLDIES IS **IRRELEVANT** HERE
Point #2

- Newbies won’t play a virtual world that has a major feature they don’t like.

3. Not-so-newbies

- Two types of newbie:
  - New to virtual worlds as a whole
  - New to this particular virtual world
- The latter have the more specific views of what a virtual world "should" have.
- Key point is that they judge all virtual worlds in terms of the one they first got into.
  - Even if by all objective measures this first world is manifestly inferior!
The Hero's Journey

- The reason for this is to do with their not having "won" their first world
  - or rather, that they have won it but their achievement wasn't recognised
- They become frustrated, and look for atonement elsewhere
- Ignore virtual worlds with usps that run counter to their first experience
- Upbeat about virtual worlds with new but compatible-looking features

Point #3

- Players judge all virtual worlds as a reflection of the first one they got into
4. SHORT-TERMISM

- Whenever a virtual world innovates, most players will judge it on its short-term merits only.
- Don’t care if things will be much better later if they’re slightly worse now.
- Two consequences:
  - Things that are short-term good but long-term bad will be regarded positively.
  - Things that are short-term bad but long-term good will be regarded negatively.

POOR DESIGN

- Most features are both long-term and short-term good.
- The issue is those that are short-term good but long-term bad.
  - I’m calling these design features poor.
  - (Lack of atonement is a special example of it.)
- Poor design features cause people to become dissatisfied in the long term.
  - They don’t always understand why though.
  - Oldbies leave for pastures new.
POINT #4

• MANY PLAYERS WILL THINK SOME POOR DESIGN CHOICES ARE GOOD

THE FOUR POINTS

• I NOW HAVE THE FOUR POINTS I NEED TO CONSTRUCT THE INDUCTION:
  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 FIRST ONE THEY GOT INTO
  4. MANY PLAYERS WILL THINK SOME POOR DESIGN CHOICES ARE GOOD
THE NEWBIE INDUCTION

• THESE FOUR POINTS GIVE US A FEEDBACK LOOP:
  – PLAYERS EVENTUALLY **QUIT** A VIRTUAL WORLD THAT HAS POOR FEATURES (**#4**)  
  – HOWEVER, THEY WON’T PLAY VIRTUAL WORLDS THAT **LACK** THESE FEATURES (**#2**)  
  – ABSOLUTE NEWBIES WILL FEEL THAT VIRTUAL WORLDS ARE MEANT TO HAVE THESE FEATURES (**#3**)  
  – THEREFORE VIRTUAL WORLDS THAT DON’T OFFER THESE POOR FEATURES WILL GET **INSUFFICIENT NEWBIES** AND WILL **FAIL** (**#1**)  

WHAT THIS MEANS

• NEW VIRTUAL WORLDS MUST OFFER WHATEVER FEATURES ARE DEMANDED BY **NEWBIES**  
  – EVEN IF THESE WERE WHAT CAUSED THE NEWBIES TO LEAVE THEIR PREVIOUS VIRTUAL WORLD!  
• THE **BEST**-DESIGNED VIRTUAL WORLDS DON’T EXPORT THEIR PLAYERS  
  – PEOPLE ONLY LEAVE WHEN THEY STOP PLAYING ENTIRELY  
• VIRTUAL WORLDS WITH **POOR DESIGNS** DO  
  – SO THEIR EX-PLAYERS DEMAND THEIR POOR FEATURES
**EXAMPLE #1**

- **PERMANENT DEATH**
  - Yeah, I **did** choose this to divert people...
  - It's just an **example**!
  - I won't be answering questions on it
- **LOTS OF LONG-TERM GOOD REASONS FOR PD**
  - Efficient re-use of content
  - Stops earliest players dominating everything
  - Default fiction for real life
  - Encourages role-playing/immersion
  - Validates hero's journey

**HOWEVER...**

- Although a virtual world with just the **right** amount of PD could be very successful, we **won't get one**
- **ABSOLUTE** newbies won't play it because:
  - Unlike regular RPGs, it doesn't have **saved games** you can back up to if you die (#2)
  - It **sounds** bad (#4)
- **RELATIVE** newbies won't play it because:
  - Their first virtual world had its opposite (#3)
- No newbies, no virtual world (#1)
**Example #2**

- **Instancing**
  - I mentioned this because there's still time to avoid it
  - But I won't answer questions about it
  - It's just an example! It's not my point!

- **Looks Good**
  - Friends can have fun without interference

- **But is Bad Long-Term**
  - No impact, interaction, achievement, ...
  - Turns a virtual world into a FPS

**The Induction in Action**

- Absolute newbies will **like** instancing
  - It's fantasy counterstrike! (#2)
  - No concept of what it means long-term (#4)

- But when they're **no longer** newbies, its effects will bite
  - They'll quit, then look for another virtual world that **also** has instancing (#3)

- Relative newbies will be more **reticent** because their first game didn't have it
  - But maybe it'll deliver the closure they seek?
OTHER EXAMPLES

• **IT’S NOT JUST PD AND INSTANCING**
  - IT’S BANKS
  - IT’S TELEPORTATION
  - IT’S NON-DROP OBJECTS
  - IT’S **EVERYTHING** THAT MAKES SENSE IN **SOME** CONTEXTS BUT IS DEMANDED IN **ALL**

• **IF NEWBIES WANT IT, YOU HAVE TO GIVE IT**
  - OTHERWISE, YOU DON’T GET NEWBIES
• **NEWBIES ARE DESIGNING OUR VIRTUAL WORLDS!**
  - **AUGH!**

COMPARISON

• **WHY DOESN’T THIS HAPPEN WITH REGULAR COMPUTER GAMES?**

• **WITH REGULAR GAMES, HARD-CORE PLAYERS BUY MANY MORE GAMES**
  - THESE ARE THE PEOPLE WHO KNOW THEIR STUFF
  - VIRTUAL WORLDS HAVE THEM TOO

• **GAMES THAT HARD-CORE PLAYERS LIKE ARE REWARDED – ENCOURAGED TO PROPAGATE**
  - THESE ARE THE **BEST** GAMES, BECAUSE HARD-CORE PLAYERS KNOW THEIR STUFF (SEE ABOVE)
But with virtual worlds, the most experienced and thoughtful players have no more of a say economically than anyone else.

- These are the people who have broken free of points #3 and #4.

- There’s little reward for appealing to the hard core.
  - It won’t sell you any more subscriptions.

- Note that this wasn’t the case in the days of hourly charging, but it is now.

Solutions

- Here’s a list of possible ways to change this depressing state of affairs:
  - Innovation
  - Marketing
  - Cross-fertilisation
  - The rise of the auteur
  - Growing maturity of players
  - Niche markets
  - Time

- Don’t hold your breath, though...
CONCLUSION

- Virtual worlds are under evolutionary pressure to promote features that, while not bad, are nevertheless poor.
- Each generation absorbs these poor features into the paradigm and introduces new poor features of its own.
- The end result will virtual worlds that have forgotten what it means to be a virtual world.
- But there remain ways to escape this fate!