

# NEWBIE INDUCTION

HOW POOR DESIGN TRIUMPHS  
IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

DR RICHARD A. BARTLE

VISITING PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX, UK

6<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER, 2004

## INTRODUCTION

- THIS TALK CONCERNS **VIRTUAL WORLDS**
  - WHAT I'M CALLING PRODUCTS LIKE EQ, UO, SL, LINEAGE, PUZZLE PIRATES, ACHAEA, λMOO, 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

## I. THE NEWBIE STREAM

- VIRTUAL WORLDS THAT DON'T GET NEWBIES **DIE**
- OLDBIES 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 OLDBIES

#### 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**

#### 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 OLDBIES 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

- 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!