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MASSIVELY MULTIHERO: WHY PEOPLE PLAY VIRTUAL WORLDS

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ABSTRACT

Designers of virtual worlds have known for some time that different people want different things from these creations. Modern designs are therefore broadened to account for playing styles beyond those that the designers themselves prefer. The results are patchy, however: although designers know intellectually what players want, they don't always know emotionally why they want them, and have over- and under-emphasised features as a result. More dangerously, they have deliberately denied some critical player needs in the false belief that to allow them would cause their virtual world to fail.

This paper examines why players play virtual worlds, and identifies a key area where designers are getting it wrong.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual worlds (a catch-all term encompassing MMORPGs, MMOGs, MUDs and a dozen or more other acronyms) are persistent, computer-mediated environments through and with which a number of players may interact simultaneously.

It is widely accepted among players and designers that different players exhibit different behaviours in virtual worlds – that they find different things "fun" (Bartle 1996). Further investigation (Bartle 2003) has demonstrated that:

- Players exhibit dissimilar, but related and enumerable, playing styles.

- Players follow predictable paths through these playing styles over time as they play.

- Progression along these paths amounts to a quest for self-actualisation.

- This is what makes virtual worlds fun to an extent beyond that which can be derived from (other) computer games.

This later work also showed how following a development path through the playing styles was equivalent to the "hero's journey" of myth.

MYTH

In a famous analysis of myths ancient and modern from cultures across the world, Joseph Campbell identified a single template to which they all conformed: the monomyth, or *hero's journey* (Campbell 1949). In this, a would-be hero undertakes a journey to an "other world" of danger and adventure, where normal rules don't apply. Irrespective of the originating culture, the hero's journey follows the same, set pattern through a series of key events that results in the positive transformation of the individual undertaking it.

A hero's journey can thus be regarded as a prescription for self-discovery. If you complete the journey, you're a hero: you have self-actualised the "real" you. Unfortunately, you have to go to an *unreal* place to do so. Thus, rarely can an individual embark on their own hero's journey; they can only reflect on what it may be like, by (through story) identifying with those who have completed it. The movie *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977) follows Campbell's monomyth very rigorously, but the viewer doesn't get to be a hero – Luke Skywalker does.

Virtual worlds are almost unique in their ability to deliver a hero's journey to ordinary, everyday people. They do not do this by putting a character through the hero's journey formula, however: the journey is for the *player*. The journey is real; the virtual world is merely the adventure-filled "other world" in which most of the important events take place.

When a player signs up for a virtual world, what follows goes something like this. They create a character of a different disposition to their own, and role-play it. As they play, they come increasingly to identify with their character, changing their own disposition and that of the character in response to the various challenges that are presented to them. Through a continual process of adjustment and reflection, they are able to make incremental changes to their sense of identity – their feeling of who they are. The end result of this increasing *immersion* is that they and their character align and become one: no longer does the player feel that they are playing a character in a virtual world; instead, they feel that they, personally, are *in* that world.

Note that this is a psychological point of view, not one of narrative theory. What players consciously see as their main goal is actually driven by subconscious goals of which few individuals are fully aware: it's rare that players consider themselves to be on some grand journey of the self – they simply want to have fun. What "having fun" means to each player, however, changes as they progress; the way it changes is precisely in tune with the monomyth. Within a virtual world, the challenges presented are arranged such that each player can always find whatever is right for them at their current stage of development; this leads them naturally to the next stage.

It is important that virtual world designers understand this process, because otherwise they may inadvertently (or otherwise) derail it. As we shall shortly see, this can lead to problems in the long term.

The hero's journey comes in three phases: departure, initiation and return. Departure takes place in the "mundane world" (*i.e.* the real world). Initiation is exclusively in the "other world" (*i.e.*

the virtual world). Return concerns the homecoming to the mundane world from the other world, but takes place in both; for the hero, the other world loses its mythical significance and becomes just another part of the real world. Again as we shall shortly see, this has critical but usually ignored consequences for virtual world design.

It should be noted that although the hero's journey takes a male point of view, it works for women too. There is proposed a related heroine's journey (Murdoch 1990), but this primarily concerns how women (and possibly some men) develop as individuals in the real world; it doesn't involve a journey to an "other world".

THE WORLD OF ADVENTURE

For virtual world designers, the only part of the player's quest for self-understanding that they can influence is that which takes place in the virtual world itself. For the purposes of this paper, we don't have to examine all 17 steps of the hero's journey; rather, we need only examine the sequence of six that are under the virtual world designer's control up to the point where the problems start. These begin with the final step of the departure phase.

The Belly of the Whale

To enter the world of adventure is, for the (would-be) hero, akin to an act of rebirth. This is often symbolised in myth by the hero's disappearance into a womb-like object (a cave, a temple, a belly of a whale) from which they are expelled into the world of adventure.

In virtual world terms, this is character creation. The player gets the chance to annihilate the self and create a new self as whom they will journey into the unknown. If players don't create a character – if they play as themselves – then there can be no hero's journey for them.

The Road of Trials

New-born into the world of adventure, the hero is faced with a series of trials – obstacles that must be overcome if they are to progress. These are

usually not too difficult at first (we've all killed the rats), and some can even be failed.

The purpose of the challenges is to teach the hero the rules of the special world in which they now find themselves. Later challenges don't have this function: they get progressively harder, forcing the hero to change to overcome them.

At the end of the road of trials, the player has demonstrated sufficient skill, confidence and maturity to be prepared for what is to come.

In virtual world development terms (Bartle 2003), this matches almost exactly the griefer/opportunist stage. The player needs to find out what the limits of action are. Those who test the physical limits (opportunists) act on the world to see what it allows – the natural laws. Those who test the social limits (griefers) act on the players to see what they allow – the social norms.

The Meeting with the Goddess

In the monomyth, the hero next experiences an unconditional love, of the same power and nature as that which young children have for their mothers. The goddess to whom they give this devotion represents the totality of knowledge: the perfection that once was, that awaits rediscovery. If the hero is not consumed by the knowledge, they are liberated by it.

This step is also known as the *marriage of opposites*. The hero is imperfect, and needs to learn to stop regarding their self in a dualistic way. The goddess is life, but also death; in marriage, the hero is shown to be capable of enduring both.

Although this sounds like just so much psychological flannel, stripped of its symbolism it makes eminent sense: in the light of the new knowledge that the hero is gathering, their self-image begins to coalesce about new points.

In virtual world progression terms, this maps onto the scientist/networker phase. The player has a good enough model of the world and/or its society to be able to interact, rather than merely act. The player actively seeks further knowledge, in order to realise their potential (*i.e.* become complete).

Players with a physical bent (scientists) will interact with the world to discover what it reveals – they'll explore. Players with a social bent (networkers) will interact with other players to discover what they reveal – they'll enquire.

Woman as the Temptress

"Woman" here is a metaphor for the temptations of the hero's mundane life. It can be lust, fear, uncertainty – anything that might distract the hero from the journey. The hero must resist the temptation to return to their old ways; they must decide whether they are pure enough to continue.

This is a point of change. Knowing what lies ahead, the hero rejects (or is repulsed by) their old self, and commits to becoming their new self. In virtual world terms, it marks the difference between gaining knowledge and putting it into practice. Do they want to apply what they have learned, or were things better before they started playing?

Atonement with the Father

This is the most important step of the hero's journey. All previous steps lead to this; all subsequent steps lead away from it. In virtual worlds, it's the "game" period – it's what the virtual world is ostensibly about.

The "father" is the most powerful entity in the hero's existence, personified in virtual worlds as the (lead) designer. The hero wants the father's acknowledgement that they are worthy, but the father only accepts those who have passed all the tests. Because the father's ogre aspect cannot be defeated by those who have not passed the tests, the approaching hero must have faith that the father is merciful, then rely on that mercy.

This is the most transformative of steps, indicating the correction of whatever imbalance of the self drove the hero to the world of adventure in the first place. External validation by the father is symbolic of internal validation by the hero. You make *yourself* the father, by finally abandoning who you *were* and becoming who you *are*. You have the ability to control your destiny: all you need is the recognition that your faith in yourself is justified.

In player development terms, this corresponds to the politician/planner step. Players attempt to meet the criteria that the designer has set down as the "aim" of the "game". Players taking the physical approach (planners) act on the world to shape it so as to achieve their goal – they effect change. Players taking the social approach (politicians) act on other players to shape them so as to achieve their goal – they affect change.

There is a huge problem here, however, in that most virtual worlds don't have a recognised end (which is what an atonement with the designer amounts to). This is especially true of the large-scale commercial worlds. Players progress to the next step only reluctantly, having kept their part of the bargain but feeling frustrated because their achievement has not been formally recognised.

Apotheosis

"Apotheosis" means to become (as) a god. The hero feels peace and fulfilment, their life in harmony with the "other world" and its people. They have an implicit understanding of it; old challenges no longer seem important.

This corresponds to the hacker/friend stage of player development. The player no longer feels the need to compete, control and achieve; they no longer play a game – they play to be who they are. Hackers interact with the world for the sheer joy of knowing it; friends interact with players for the sheer joy of knowing them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN

Most game-like virtual worlds facilitate the hero's journey reasonably well until they reach the end of the atonement step. It's possible that by paying attention to the symbolism some of the earlier steps could be made more effective (*e.g.* by siting character creation in some dark, cavernous setting), but on the whole they work just fine.

With the atonement step, however, things fall apart all too easily. This is not through any fault of the players; rather, it's the designers' lack of appreciation of what they are designing that is to blame. There are a number of common difficulties, the most significant of which merit explanation.

Lack of Atonement

Players can rarely "win" virtual worlds. This is not because there's no obvious end-point – it's usually almost trivially easy to define one, in fact. The problem is that virtual world designers (or those who pay their salaries) are afraid to tell players that they have won for fear that this will cause them to stop playing.

This is ultimately self-defeating. Players are profoundly frustrated by a lack of atonement – they need closure. They go from virtual world to virtual world seeking it but never finding it. They judge all virtual worlds by the standards of the first, even when by all impartial measures the later worlds they visit are superior. The "father" rejects them every time, therefore they reject the father every time, and their disenchantment deepens.

Ironically, the basic design stance that leads to this disenchantment is flawed. It's *OK to give players atonement* – to let them "win" the "game" – because:

- People actually keep on playing after they've "won". All the evidence from long-term textual virtual worlds points to this. Some people have played the same virtual world for 15 years or more. They don't leave the virtual world when they win atonement: they take it into their reality.
- People who want to leave a virtual world will stay with it if they can sense a definite point at which it ends for them. If they can't, they'll just quit there and then. Seeing light at the end of the tunnel gives them the endurance to carry on until they reach it. They'll still quit, but they'll play longer before doing so.
- Even if you don't buy any of this monomyth argument, is it better for players to leave with positive feelings of success or with negative feelings of frustration? Which kind of ex-player is going to tell their friends to try out your virtual world?

People play virtual worlds to become heroes. However, they can only be heroes in the real world. To complete their hero's journey, they must

be allowed to leave the virtual world. Only this way will they ever wish to stay.

Undeserved Atonement

> *Praises of the unworthy are felt by ardent minds as robberies of the deserving.* (Coleridge 1817)

For atonement to mean anything, it must only be available to those who have passed the tests. If the father can be fooled into granting atonement to those who haven't passed the tests, this makes atonement worthless.

Put another way, players don't like cheating. They don't like anything that undermines their own sense of achievement – and that includes the buying of atonement (or the means to obtain it) using real-world money. Purchasing a high-level character has the same effect on high-level players as purchasing a qualification would have on people who earnt their qualification legitimately – it eats at the trust that is necessary for the system to work.

It's not impossible for virtual worlds with commodification to offer their players a hero's journey, but it's rather more difficult.

Premature Atonement

A virtual world that is too easy enables atonement to be obtained before the player is ready for it. Players normally take several months at normal rates of play (which can be quite intense – 2 to 4 hours a night) to reach the necessary level of immersion. If atonement comes too soon (in the scientist/networker phase, for example), then it will feel all wrong.

This implies that virtual worlds need a critical mass of content if they are to be valid. Breadth of content is important to begin with, but it cedes to depth as players progress. With insufficient content, or content of an insufficient level, atonement will be reached before the player can draw any benefit from it.

This also implies that there is such a thing as too much content. Indeed there is, as treadmills

demonstrate, but too much is better than too little. So long as some end is realistically attainable after the player has passed the scientist/networker step but before they've reached the hacker/friend one, atonement will feel acceptable to them.

Lack of Journey

Some virtual worlds have no hero's journey, offering as they do no metric by which to measure success. For many of these, this is entirely appropriate and expected: educational virtual worlds are rarely created to teach the realization of the self, for example. Yet for other non-game worlds, the hero's journey can still apply.

It's an observed phenomenon that if players feel they are progressing along some dimension that the virtual world itself doesn't recognize, they'll come up with their own pecking order for it (Raybourn 1998). This is true even of virtual worlds that are formally social- rather than adventure-oriented.

In other words, if a virtual world is sufficiently separated from real life to qualify in players' minds as an "other world", they will make up their own "game" to drive their activities. Unfortunately, these "games" don't always have an atonement mechanism (although some do, for example in awarding unrestricted build privileges to suitably skilled individuals).

Designers of officially non-game virtual worlds should be aware that some if not all their players may thus nevertheless embark on a hero's journey. To that end, they should have the apparatus in place to grant atonement when necessary – to allow players to feel they've "won" something that was never officially intended to be a "game".

Meaningless Atonement

This is perhaps the trickiest problem facing designers wishing to give their players the complete hero's journey experience. For atonement to mean anything, it must only be given to those who have passed the tests. The sad fact is, however, that not every player is able to pass the tests – not everyone can be a hero.

Sooner or later, it occurs to players even of virtual worlds boasting a winning condition that failure was never an option. All it takes to keep going is time. Tests may get harder, but they're never so hard that you can't pass them. Anyone with half a brain can plod, plod, plod to "the end", whatever

that is. What, then, is the point of trying? The only way you're not going to finish the journey is if it becomes so boring that you lose interest. Atonement is guaranteed for all, it's just a matter of time.

There is a solution to this, but it's controversial: it makes the price of atonement too high for most people to bear. This is the introduction of *permanent death* – the possibility that a character can be obliterated forever as a result of failing a test. Players must create a new character, start again, and attempt to recover their lost self (creating in the process a stronger, new self).

Permanent death as a concept offers many design advantages even without consideration of its monomythical elements. Unfortunately, it offers one disadvantage that completely trumps all these: players *hate* it when it happens to them. They hate it so much that newbies won't even contemplate *playing* a virtual world where they could "lose two months' play" in a single moment (even if by losing it they would then gain twice as much play of a kind more suitable to who they are).

Players say they want to be heroes. What they often mean is that they want to be treated how a hero would be treated. It is only with experience that they realize that the only way this can happen is for them to become actual heroes themselves. If newbies were more up for it, the mere possibility of the permanent death of characters would not be regarded by so many as a barrier to fun.

CONCLUSION

Players play virtual worlds as a means for self-discovery. They do this by subconsciously following a predetermined path – the hero's journey – that the architecture of virtual worlds opens up for them. Unfortunately, this path is often blocked by understandable but ultimately misguided design decisions. A fuller appreciation by designers of the meaning and purpose of the path's various steps would ultimately benefit both parties: players would be able to finish their journey, and virtual world developers would yet keep their custom.

My advice to virtual world designers is this: give players a meaningful, deserved "win" condition that arrives at the right time, is triggered by a valid measure of mastery and is plod-proof; in return, they'll give you your virtual world.

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