IS THE VIRTUAL TOO UNREALISTIC?

CRYING OVER UNSPILLED MILK

LENNOX PUBLIC LECTURE

8TH APRIL, 2010

PROF. RICHARD A. BARTLE

UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX, UK

INTRODUCTION

- THIS EVENING, I'M GOING TO TALK ABOUT
 VIRTUAL WORLDS
 - SPECIFICALLY, GAME WORLDS, OR MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES
 - · MMORPGS FOR SHORT
 - · MMOS FOR EVEN SHORTER...
- BECAUSE WE HAVE A MIXED AUDIENCE, I'LL START BY BRIEFLY OUTLINING THEIR HISTORY
 - NON-PLAYERS: "SO THAT'S WHAT AN MMO IS..."
 - PLAYERS: "SO THAT'S WHERE THEY CAME FROM..."

THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE

• THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE, TURBINE, 2007:



WORLD OF WARCRAFT

· WORLD OF WARCRAFT, BLIZZARD, 2004:



EVERQUEST

• EVERQUEST, SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT, 1999



DIKUMUD

· DIKUMUD, COPENHAGEN UNIVERSITY, 1990

[x2] A barrel has been left here. An angry-looking statue of Hoturi is standing here. An angry-looking statue of Priapus is standing here. A statue of Odin is standing behind the altar. A Sign for Newbies is here. You are a guest here until you save yourself. If vou need to get to your guild, use the guild medallion in your inventory. If you lose it, pray to the statue of Odin for another. 105m/202e/38hlook You are inside the small and humble village temple in Udgaard. A simple stone altar, with strange stone carvings, is placed against the north wall. small humble donation room is to the east. The temple exit is south to the Village Square. [x2] A barrel has been left here. An angry-looking statue of Hoturi is standing here. An angry-looking statue of Priapus is standing here. A statue of Odin is standing behind the altar. A Sign for Newbies is here. 105m/202e/38h_

ABERMUD

• ABERMUD, ALAN COX, 1987

Your wimpy value is set to 15. See 'help change' to see what that means.

The Temple Of Paradise

You stand in the Temple of Paradise, a huge sandstone structure whose walls are decorated with ancient carvings and runes, some so old that even the priests no longer know their meanings.

A single set of steps lead south, descending the huge mound upon which the temple is built and ending in the forests below.

A roaring fire burns here. Its flames make the temple sparkle and glitter.

At your feet a huge sacrificial pit allows you to give valuables to the gods in the hope of being rewarded.

A furled umbrella lies here.

Obvious exits are:

North : Welcome Center South : Forest Track Down : Forest Track

MUD

. MUD, ROY TRUBSHAW & RICHARD BARTLE, 1978

Narrow road between lands.

You are stood on a narrow road between The Land and whence you came. To the north and south are the small foothills of a pair of majestic mountains, with a large wall running round. To the west the road continues, where in the distance you can see a thatched cottage opposite an ancient cemetery. The way out is to the east, where a shroud of mist covers the secret pass by which you entered The Land. It is raining.

₩ 7∧7

Narrow road.

You are on a narrow east-west road with a forest to the north and Gorse scrub to the south. It is raining. A splendid necklace lies on the ground.

*

- · MUD DIDN'T COME FROM ANYTHING
- · THIS IS WHY I GET TO GIVE THIS TALK AND YOU DON'T!

WHY PEOPLE PLAY

- PEOPLE TODAY PLAY MMOS FOR THE SAME REASON PEOPLE OF YORE PLAYED TEXT MUDS
 - THEY GET TO BE AND BECOME THEMSELVES
- IT'S A QUEST FOR SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND IDENTITY
- THEY VISIT A PLACE THAT'S LIKE THE MUNDANE WORLD BUT DIFFERENT IN STRANGE AND EXCITING WAYS
 - THEY UNDERTAKE A HERO'S JOURNEY
- · UNFORTUNATELY, IT WOULD TAKE ME ? HOURS TO EXPLAIN THE FULL THEORY...

LOOKING FORWARD

- WHAT WOULD A PLAYER OF A 1980S TEXT MUD THINK OF TODAY'S MMOS?
- · WELL THEY'D STILL RECOGNISE LOTRO AND WOW AS BASICALLY MUDS
- THEY'D FIND THE QUALITY OF THE GRAPHICS UTTERLY BREATHTAKING
- THEY WOULD BE IMPRESSED BY THE SIZE OF TODAY'S VIRTUAL WORLDS
- HOWEVER, THEY'D REGARD ALMOST EVERYTHING
 ELSE AS A JOKE

EXAMPLES I

- HERE ARE JUST **SOME** OF THE THINGS THAT A TIME-TRAVELLING MUD PLAYER WOULD **RIDICULE** IN *LOTRO*
 - LOTRO, BECAUSE WOW PLAYERS ARE FAR MORE LIBERAL IN THEIR USE OF **DEATH THREATS**
- SO: IF I KILL SOME ORC AND IT WAS CARRYING A SWORD, WHY WAS IT HITTING ME WITH A STICK?
- WHY DOES EVERYONE WEAR THE SAME CLOTHES WHEN IT RAINS AS THEY DO WHEN IT'S SUNNY?
- THESE TROUBLESOME ANIMALS YOU WANT ME TO KILL DON'T ACTUALLY SEEM ALL THAT THREATENING...
- THE ONLY WAY TO BE A SCHOLAR IS IF I'M ALSO A FARMER AND A METALWORKER? UH?

EXAMPLES 2

- HOW COME | MERELY SUFFER MORALE DAMAGE WHEN | FALL OFF WEATHERTOP? DID | SOMEHOW "FLEE IN FEAR" BEFORE | HIT THE GROUND?
- · I CAN WALK THROUGH PEOPLE?
- DIDN'T I SEE YOU **DEPART** WITH THE FELLOWSHIP NOT **TEN** MINUTES AGO, LEGOLAS? WHY ARE YOU **HERE**?
- YOU CAN DYE METAL ARMOUR? BUT YOU CAN'T PAINT IT? BUT YOU CAN PAINT THE WALLS OF YOUR HOUSE? BUT NOT WALLS IN GENERAL?
- IN THE MIDDLE OF A FIGHT, TIME STOPPED AND THESE MID-AIR BUTTONS APPEARED. WHAT THE BLAZES?!
- · SO... ARRAGGORRNN IS AN ALLOWED NAME?

EXAMPLES 3

- FLOWERS APPEAR TO BE EVERY BIT AS OPEN AT NIGHT AS THEY ARE IN DAYLIGHT
- WHEN | SALUTE, IT SAYS | DO IT SMARTLY BUT | WANTED TO SALUTE SARCASTICALLY
- WHAT'S WITH THIS "MAKE IT LOOK LIKE I'M WEARING

 THESE CLOTHES WHEN I'M ACTUALLY WEARING

 THESE CLOTHES" SYSTEM? EITHER YOU'RE WEARING

 PLATE MAIL AND CARRYING A SHIELD OR YOU'RE NOT!
- HOW COME THOSE BAD GUYS | CAN SEE RIGHT THERE AREN'T RUNNING TO STOP ME KILLING THEIR BUDDIES? ARE THEY BOTH DEAF AND BLIND?

EXAMPLES 4



• THESE HALF-TIMBERED HOUSES IN BREE HAVE WINDOWS IN SUPPORTING BEAMS

WOW

· OH, AND JUST SO WOW PLAYERS DON'T FEEL

100 SMUG...



• DOES THAT PORTCULLIS WORK LIKE A ROLLER BLIND OR WHAT?

REALISTIC

- WHAT THE MUD-PLAYERS OF YESTERYEAR WOULD BE COMPLAINING ABOUT IS THAT TODAY'S MMOS ARE NOT REALISTIC
- HOLD ON! ISN'T A VIRTUAL WORLD SET IN AN IMAGINARY MILIEU POPULATED BY FANTASY CREATURES "NOT REALISTIC" BY DEFINITION?
- · NO! REALISM ISN'T REALISTICNESS!
 - LOTRO WITH ELVES LACKS REALISM
 - LOTRO WITHOUT ELVES LACKS REALISTICNESS

UNREALISTIC

- BECAUSE PEOPLE COMPLAIN MORE THAN THEY PRAISE, THE USUAL FORM IS "UNREALISTIC"
 - IT MEANS "NOT CONSISTENT WITH HOW I BELIEVE THINGS SHOULD BE"
- AS TO HOW PEOPLE DO BELIEVE THINGS SHOULD BE, THERE ARE TWO COMPONENTS:
 - THE FICTION. THERE ARE ELVES AND MAGIC AND DEATH IS NOT A PERMANENT CONDITION AND ...
 - THE **NON-FICTION**. YOU CAN'T WALK THROUGH WALLS, AND THINGS FALL WHEN YOU DROP THEM AND THE SKY ON A SUMMER'S DAY IS BLUE AND ...

DEFERMENT

- THE WAY THESE TWO COMPONENTS WORK IS THAT THE FICTION TAKES PRECEDENCE
 - ANYTHING THE FICTION HAS SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT, THE FICTION CONTROLS
 - ANYTHING THE FICTION DOESN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY ABOUT, IT DEFERS TO THE NON-FICTION
- ACTUALLY, MODERN MMOS ARE PRETTY GOOD AT BEING FAITHFUL TO THEIR FICTION
- IT'S WHAT THEIR FICTION **DEFERS** TO THAT IS THE PROBLEM...

THE OLDE WAY

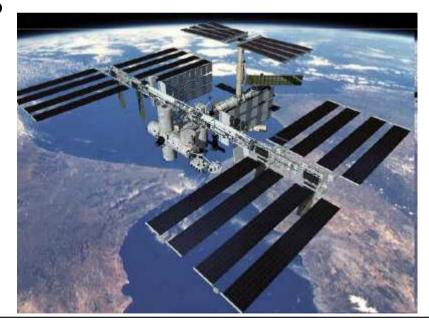
- TEXT MUDS DEFERRED TO REALITY
 - ONES IN WHICH BAGS COULD CONTAIN BAGS
 CONTAINING BAGS **DISPARAGED** ONES THAT
 DIDN'T EVEN **HAVE** BAGS
 - ONES IN WHICH BISCUITS TURNED TO MUSH WHEN WET WOULD DISDAIN ONES WHEREIN YOU COULD SWIM ACROSS A RIVER AND YOUR CRACKERS WOULD REMAIN EDIBLE
 - ONES IN WHICH ICICLES GRADUALLY MELTED ABOVE FREEZING POINT WOULD MOCK ONES IN WHICH THEY COULD SAFELY BE CARRIED ACROSS A DESERT
 - · IN YOUR COAT POCKET

WHY REALITY

• THEY DEFERRED TO REALITY FOR TWO REASONS:
PERSUASIVENESS AND EMERGENCE

• HMM, I HAVE SOME FREE **SPACE** ON THIS SLIDE, SO HOW ABOUT A PICTURE OF A SPACE

STATION?



PERSUASIVENESS

- PERSUASIVENESS MEANS THE DEGREE TO WHICH THE VIRTUAL WORLD'S CONCEIT THAT IT'S REAL IS CONVINCING
- YOUR BRAIN IS HARD-WIRED TO MAKE SENSE OF THE REAL WORLD ALMOST INSTANTLY
 - IF SOMETHING DOESN'T FIT, YOU NOTICE
- IF IT'S PART OF THE FICTION, YOU HAVE TO WILL YOURSELF TO BELIEVE IT
- YOU WANT TO MINIMISE THESE OCCASIONS WHERE MISMATCHES ARE NOTICED, BECAUSE THEY ARE OBSTACLES TO IMMERSION

IMMERSION

- IMMERSION IS THE SENSE THAT YOU ARE THERE, IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD
 - A VERY HIGHLY DESIRED STATE
 - ACCORDING TO THE THEORY I DIDN'T EXPLAIN TO YOU, THE VERY ALM OF PLAYING MMOS
- THEREFORE, IF THE FICTION DOESN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY ABOUT SOMETHING, AN MMO SHOULD DEFER TO REALITY SO AS TO PROMOTE IMMERSION
 - IF MOST THINGS WORK AS THEY SHOULD, THE REST IS MORE EASILY BELIEVABLE

BATON & BOW

- · WHO'S REALLY IN CHARGE OF AN ORCHESTRA, THE CONDUCTOR OR THE FIRST VIOLIN?
 - IS IT THE BATON OR THE BOW?



EMERGENCE

- EMERGENCE IS THE PROCESS BY WHICH INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SUB-SYSTEMS

 CREATE NEW SYSTEMS OF THEIR OWN
 - CAN BE PLANNED-FOR OR UNPLANNED-FOR
 - CAN BE FEATURES OR EXPLOITS
- · VERY DESIRABLE BECAUSE IT GENERATES
 CONTENT
 - CONTENT IS OTHERWISE EXPENSIVE TO CREATE
- EMERGENT CONTENT ALSO TENDS TO BE MORE MEANINGFUL FOR INDIVIDUAL PLAYERS

EXAMPLE

- EXAMPLE
 - SOME SURFACES CAN'T BE REACHED BY CLIMBING
 - IF YOU JUMP, YOU LAND ON THE NEXT SURFACE BELOW YOU
 - RANGED WEAPONS CAN HIT AT A DISTANCE
 - MONSTERS WITHOUT RANGED ATTACKS MUST FIGHT HAND-TO-HAND INSTEAD
- RESULT: JUMP FROM A HEIGHT ONTO A ROCK AND USE A BOW TO KILL THE MONSTERS BELOW YOU IN AN UNANSWERABLE HALL OF ARROWS
 - AN UNPLANNED-FOR EXPLOIT

DEPTH

- YOU GET EMERGENCE ALMOST FOR FREE IF YOU ADD DEPTH
- THE MORE DETAILED THE SUB-SYSTEMS, THE GREATER THE CHANCE THERE WILL BE INTERESTING INTERACTIONS
- REALITY IS MORE DETAILED THAN ANYTHING WE CAN IMPLEMENT VIRTUALLY
 - BECAUSE VIRTUAL WORLDS ARE PART OF REALITY
- THEREFORE YOU GET MORE EMERGENCE IF YOU DEFER TO REALITY

WHY NOT?

- THE REASONS THAT TEXT MUDS DEFERRED TO REALITY ARE STILL VALID
- SO WHY DO TODAY'S MMOS HAVE SUCH A CAVALIER ATTITUDE TO IT?
- IN WOW, IF I PUT A GLASS OF MILK IN MY BACKPACK THEN FIGHT STUFF FOR 30 MINUTES, IT'S STILL A GLASS OF MILK
 - IT SHOULD BE JUST AN EMPTY GLASS
 - IF IT'S A BOTTLE OF MILK, THEN AFTER A WEEK IT SHOULD BE A BOTTLE OF SOUR MILK
 - AFTER A YEAR, IT SHOULD BE A BOTTLE OF CHEESE...

REASONS

- SOME REASONS **NOT** TO BE REALISTIC:
 - TO MAKE AN ARTISTIC POINT
 - EG. A PARODY
 - REALISTIC (AN GET IN THE WAY OF FUN
 - · EG. BATHROOM TRIPS
 - TO BALANCE THE GAMEPLAY
 - EG. KILLING GIANTS WITH SWORDS OR ARROWS
 - IT CAN BE EXPENSIVE TO DO GRAPHICALLY
 - EG. WET HAIR
 - IT COULD SCARE OFF NEWBIES
 - · IT SOUNDS COMPLICATED

NO ANSWER

- · NONE OF THESE ARE SHOW-STOPPERS
 - THEY'RE JUST SPECIAL CASES
- · SO WHY DO MMOS SIMULATE REALITY SO LAZILY?
- THEY DON'T MESS WITH THE FICTION ("LORE") UNLESS THEY REALLY HAVE TO
- . THE LORE DEFERS TO REALITY
- SO WHY WOULD THEY RISK UNDERMINING THE LORE BY DEFERRING TO SOMETHING ELSE?!

WEIGHTLESSNESS

- · ASTRONAUTS: YOU SEE THEM ON TV, FLOATING AROUND IN SPACE, DOING THINGS TO SATELLITES WITH EXOTIC TOOLS
- · THEY'RE WEIGHTLESS, RIGHT?
 - OTHERWISE THEY'D FALL!
 - EVERYONE KNOWS THEY'RE WEIGHTLESS!
- · EXCEPT THEY'RE NOT
 - THE ISS IS 350KM ABOVE THE EARTH'S SURFACE
 - IF YOU CLIMBED A 350KM-HIGH TOWER, YOU WOULD WEIGH 95% OF WHAT YOU DO ON EARTH
 - THOSE ASTRONAUTS ARE FALLING!

NAÏVE PHYSICS

- PEOPLE EXPECT WEIGHTLESSNESS IN SPACE
- IF THEY PLAYED AN MMO IN WHICH THEY CLIMBED TO THE TOP OF A **350KM TOWER** AND **WEREN'T** WEIGHTLESS, THEY WOULD **COMPLAIN**
 - IT WOULD INTERRUPT THEIR SENSE OF IMMERSION
- · NOT JUST A PROBLEM FOR MMOS
 - EXPLOSIONS IN SPACE IN MOVIES
 - WORKING CLASS VICTORIAN EDUCATION IN BOOKS
- IT'S MUCH WORSE IN MMOS, THOUGH

IN MMOS

- THE VALUE OF "REALISTIC" TO IMMERSION IS THAT YOU DON'T HAVE TO THINK ABOUT IT
- THEREFORE, IF BEING REALISTIC MAKES YOU THINK ABOUT IT, IT UNDOES ITS OWN PURPOSE
- THIS MEANS MMOS WANT TO DEFER NOT TO WHAT IS TRUE, BUT WHAT PLAYERS EXPECT TO BE TRUE
- IF IN THEIR PREVIOUS MMO THEY COULD TELEPORT FROM ANYWHERE TO THEIR HOME, THEY EXPECT THAT IN THEIR CURRENT MMO

"REALITY"

- PLAYERS DO NOT COME TO AN MMO WITH EXPECTATIONS THAT IT WILL WORK LIKE THE REAL WORLD
- THEY COME WITH EXPECTATIONS THAT IT WILL WORK LIKE MMOS
- · MMOS SUCH AS WOW AND LOTRO DEFER NOT TO REALITY BUT TO AN MMO PARADIGM
 - A PARADIGM IN WHICH WALK-THROUGH PEOPLE, DRY RAIN, FLOATING STEEL ARMOUR AND SHOPKEEPERS WHO BUY YOUR JUNK IS THE NORM

WHENCE THE PARADIGM?

- HERE'S WHAT HAPPENS:
 - PLAYERS ONLY LOOK AT THE SHORT TERM, SO WILL PLAY MMOS THAT MAKE BIG PROMISES
 - SHORT-TERM GOOD IS OFTEN LONG-TERM BAD
 - EVENTUALLY THEY QUIT BECAUSE THE GAME SUCKS
 - THEY DON'T REALISE THAT THE FEATURES THAT ATTRACTED THEM ARE THE VERY ONES THAT CAUSED THEM TO LEAVE
 - . THEY SEEK THOSE FEATURES IN THEIR NEXT MMO
 - MMOS WITHOUT THOSE FEATURES DON'T GET THE NEWBIES, SO THEY WITHER AND DIE
 - EVEN THOUGH THEY HAVE THE BETTER DESIGN!

DANGER SIGNS

- THE PARADIGM IS CONSEQUENTLY GETTING SHALLOWER AND SHALLOWER
- GRAPHICS QUALITY IS HIDING THIS, BUT CAN ONLY GO SO FAR
- 2002: ASHERON'S CALL 2 FLOPPED BECAUSE THE DESIGNER TOOK OUT ALL THE BORING PARTS
 - SADLY, THIS MADE THE EXCITING PARTS BORING
- MANY OF ACZ'S EASE-OF-USE FEATURES ARE

 NOW BEING GRADUALLY ADOPTED BY WOW...

ULTIMATELY

- THE MORE THAT **DETAIL** IS REPLACED BY **ABSTRACTIONS**, THE LESS OF ITS POTENTIAL AN MMO IS ABLE TO **DELIVER**
- EVENTUALLY, THEY'LL BECOME SO SUPERFICIAL
 THAT PEOPLE WILL WONDER WHY THEY WERE
 EVER CONSIDERED FUN AND COMPELLING
- · AT THAT POINT, THERE'LL BE A REALIGNMENT
 - THE SIMPLE ONES WILL CARRY ON SUCCESSFULLY AS CASUAL GAMES
 - NEW MMOS WILL REBOOT THE PARADIGM

NEW LOOK

- · WHAT WILL THESE NEW MMOS LOOK LIKE?
- · THEY'LL HAVE TO GO BACK TO THEIR ROOTS
- MMOS LET YOU BE AND BECOME WHO YOU REALLY ARE
- · WHAT MMOS OFFER, NOTHING ELSE OFFERS
 - WELL, UNLESS YOU'RE RICH OR GET SHOT AT
- NOT EVERYONE WANTS OR NEEDS WHAT THEY OFFER, BUT IF THEY DO THEY WON'T GET IT FROM A FURTHER WATERED-DOWN PARADIGM

AN ANECDOTE I

- · MY 1985 WORLD, MUDZ, HAS A BATON AND A BOW
 - IF YOU WAVE ONE, IT TELEPORTS YOU TO THE OTHER
- · THESE FLOAT IN RIVERS, WHICH FLOW
- ONE PLAYER DROPPED THE BOW DOWN A WELL, WHEREUPON IT WAS CARRIED DOWNSTREAM AND STUCK ON A GRATE IN A SECRET ROOM
- HE WAVED THE BATON, PICKED UP THE BOW, AND REALISED HE WAS SAFE FROM ATTACK

AN ANECDOTE 2

- · MUDZ ALSO HAS A KEG OF GUNPOWDER
 - FOR SHOOTING A CANNON AT A TREASURE ROOM DOOR
- ONE PLAYER PUT IT IN A CORACLE ALONG WITH A BURNING BRAND AND DROPPED IT IN THE WELL
- THE CORACLE CAUGHT FIRE FROM THE BRAND AS IT FLOATED DOWN THE RIVER TO THE GRATE
- BEFORE THE CORACLE SANK, THE FIRE SPREAD TO THE GUNPOWDER, WHICH EXPLODED
 - KILLING THE GUY WITH THE BATON SLEEPING "SAFELY" NEARBY

EMERGENCE

- WHAT TODAY'S MMO PARADIGM IS MISSING IS EMERGENCE
 - THEY'VE CONCENTRATED ON IMMERSION SO MUCH THAT THEY'VE FORGOTTEN WHAT IT'S FOR
- THE POWER OF MMOS COMES FROM PEOPLE CONSPIRING TO BELIEVE THAT THE VIRTUAL WORLD IS REAL
- IF THEY CONSPIRE TO BELIEVE THAT IT'S AN MMO, THEY MISS HALF THE POINT
- EMERGENCE ALSO AIDS IMMERSION

CONCLUSION

- IN THE PAST DECADE, VIRTUAL WORLDS HAVE BECOME DECREASINGLY DETAILED
 - THEY HAVE BREADTH, BUT NOT DEPTH
- THE AIM IS TO MAKE THEM MORE IMMERSIVE, BUT ULTIMATELY THIS IS SELF-DEFEATING
 - EVENTUALLY THEY WILL DEPART SO FAR FROM THEIR ORIGINS THAT THE CONNECTION WILL SNAP
- NEW VIRTUAL WORLDS WILL APPEAR THAT ONCE AGAIN DELIVER ON THEIR PROMISE
 - A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN BE YOU

QUESTIONS?

• THIS IS WHERE I PAY FOR HAVING SPENT TOO LONG TALKING...