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# Step 4: Understanding the Limits of Theory

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## Abstract

Bartle's<sup>1</sup> player types model is the best-known and most widely-used theory of virtual world design. However, it is frequently misunderstood and misapplied. This article examines the basic theory and describes how it tends to be used in practice. Then, it explains how it *should* be used...

## Anecdote

One of *MUD2*'s players was called Dextrus.

Dextrus was among the most imaginative players<sup>2</sup> we ever had – very innovative, very exciting and *very* charming. She had something of a bad girl reputation, though: in a game where character death was permanent<sup>3</sup>, people tended to be more than a little upset when Dextrus appeared out of nowhere, beat them up and took their stuff. It was made all the more embarrassing because she was invariably at a lower level than her victims when she did this.

One day, Dextrus decided to abandon her killing ways. Tired of being treated as a pariah, she announced that she would thenceforth fight no other player characters except in self defence. Sure enough, that's what she did. In the weeks that followed, she redeemed her previous indiscretions by helping out other people unstintingly; she rushed to their defence when monsters caught them unawares, she gave them her own equipment to use, and she led thrilling expeditions to the more far-flung and dangerous parts of The Land. Because she was so charismatic and kept true to her word, in a short space of time she became hugely popular.

So it was that some three months later she volunteered to accompany another player, a mage, on his "wiz run". The way *MUD2* works, once a character has sufficient experience points they are promoted to the level of wizard/witch (or *wiz* for short); this means the regular game is over and they achieve immortality – it's effectively ascension to an administrator position. A *wiz run* is when you're trying to get those final few points you need, with everyone else in the game either cheering you on or hoping to stop you. It's often a player's most heart-thumping, exhilarating time in the virtual world, long to be remembered afterwards. Dextrus had generously offered to be the mage's bodyguard as he endeavoured to rack up those last, remaining, precious points.

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<sup>1</sup> Which is to say, my.

<sup>2</sup> Actually, she was a *character*, rather than a player. Her player was male – he's now a senior lecturer in computer games at the University of Portsmouth – but Dextrus was female.

<sup>3</sup> Yes, permanent: if your character died in combat, it was obliterated from the database

The pair descended deep underground, to the realm of the dwarfs. The risks were high – there were a lot of dwarfs – but the rewards commensurate. The mage and Dextrus fought their way side-by-side through several heavily-guarded rooms until they finally stood on the threshold of the treasure chamber. The contents of this trove would be enough to push the mage over the finishing line and into wizardhood.

Suddenly, disaster struck! Dextrus went off to the Royal Bedroom to deal with the queen dwarf, but the king dwarf appeared before the mage could follow and immediately attacked! The fight went right to the wire, and it looked as if the mage – still injured from earlier fights – was about to lose. Then, in the nick of time, Dextrus finished off the queen, raced back, and took down the king.

Then, before the mage could even say thanks, Dextrus took him down, too.

She'd been tracking the king, knew where he was, knew when he was about to appear, and had deliberately left to kill the much easier queen knowing that the king would instantly assault the mage. Next, having despatched the queen in a timely manner, she waited until the mage was close to death and valiantly returned to save the day.

Then, in one exquisite moment, she killed a mage who was 30 seconds short of making wizard. It was exactly 100 days since she'd last killed another player character.

Moments passed, and a zero-points novice entered the game, bearing the same name as the deceased mage. He shouted a single, agonised word: "WHY?".

The reply was simple: "Because I'm Dextrus".

## Introduction

Everyone who plays virtual worlds thinks they're a designer.

If you play virtual worlds, you, too, think you're a designer. You have opinions on why some things are just plain wrong, how other things could be improved with just a few minor tweaks, what's fun and what's not, and how the virtual world *should* be. If *you* were in charge, things would be like *this!*

However, unless you actually *are* a designer, you're deluding yourself. What you *actually* want is a virtual world that you, personally, would wish to play. Designers don't create virtual worlds that they, personally, wish to play; they create virtual worlds that *people* wish to play.

Designers read up on every subject that they can conceivably find of relevance to creating virtual worlds. They'll spend six hours absorbed in details of the inner workings of the Palestine Liberation Organisation in the 1970s because somehow they sense it will help their understanding of guilds, or orcs, or griefing, or terrain, or who knows what<sup>4</sup>. They build up an implicit

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<sup>4</sup> One of my students did this once, at a critical period when he should have been working on his final-year project. He felt very frustrated and angry, because how was he ever going to become a designer if he allowed himself to be distracted in this way? I told him that, on the contrary, it meant he was *destined* to be a designer, and related the occasion I spent two days reading up on pagodas when I should have been revising for a programming examination. Designers just do that kind of thing.

understanding of how and why things fit together, and draw on it when they construct worlds.

It's not, therefore, unsurprising that designers will read every piece of academic work on virtual worlds that they can get their hands on<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, they're not averse to creating their own theories for use by other designers. Furthermore, other designers will sometimes use those theories if they think they're useful tools. After all, designers speak the same language, and know what the theories are saying.

Except ... everyone thinks they're a designer. Players, journalists, academics and game developers all think they're designers. If you ask them, well no, of *course* they won't *say* they're designers; in their very next breath, though, they'll be telling you why PvP is unfair, or how the crafting system is broken, or what can be done about real-money trading, or that warlocks need to be nerfed *right now*. They profess not to be designers, but then proceed to act as if they believe they are.

Now when these people read theories of virtual world design, a number of things can happen. Sometimes, they actually are nascent designers, and they understand the theories fully – this is not as uncommon as one might think<sup>6</sup>. Often, they're no kind of designer, but they still “get” what a theory is saying. The problems only arise with people who a) don't properly understand the theory; b) misapply the theory as a consequence of this; and c) take it upon themselves to trash the theory in public because it clearly doesn't work. Sadly, this is not as uncommon as one might think, either.

In this article, I'm going to look at one of the most enduring theories of virtual world design, and describe the ways in which it has been misunderstood and misapplied. I shall then explain how it should be understood and should be applied. I get to do this because it's my theory<sup>7</sup>.

Before I begin, though, I should perhaps say something that may surprise the non-designers among you: I *want* my theory to be superseded. I want it, because that means we'll get a better theory in its place, which in turn means we'll get better virtual worlds.

I really, *really* want better virtual worlds.

## Player Types

In 1996, I published a paper called *Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players who Suit MUDs* [Bartle 96]. In it, I examined the reasons why people play MUDs (as virtual worlds were known back then), and showed how the different playing styles were inter-dependent.

The paper was far more successful than I had expected it to be – I thought it was pretty obscure stuff that most designers knew intuitively anyway. I was probably correct in this view, too, but because I'd actually written it down, that meant designers could make *non*-designers read it. In doing so, they could at last explain why, for example, it was not a waste of time to implement features that none of the programmers liked: other people

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<sup>5</sup> They won't necessarily agree with its premise or conclusions, but they'll read it.

<sup>6</sup> The ability to design virtual worlds is not some rare gift handed out to the chosen few by the gods of creativity – like storytelling, many, many people have it within themselves.

<sup>7</sup> This makes it very painful for me – not because it hurts to say bad things about my theory, but because it hurts to say good things about it. It's just too close to self-aggrandisement.

would like them – people who were just as important to the health of the virtual world as win-at-any-cost gamers. Although it may seem natural today to muse about how socialisers want one thing and how achievers want another, back in the mid-1990s this wasn't the case at all until *HCDS* appeared. Game worlds were essentially designed for developers, not for players.

Since then, the player types theory has been used to inform the design of many virtual worlds, including most of the large-scale game worlds from *Ultima Online* onwards. Designers always “got” it; all it really meant to them was that they could say things such as “the explorers will like that, OK, let's put it in” to one another when they couldn't before. Of course, given that I was only telling them what they already knew, it should come as no surprise that they took the ideas of the paper on board fairly swiftly.

What was more of a revelation, though, was the extent to which players embraced the model. They could see themselves in it, they could see their friends in it, and it made sense. There was even a survey created, so people could find out what their “Bartle Quotient” was; it's still on-going, and over 500,000 people have completed it to date – making it the largest and longest-running gamer survey on the Internet [Andreasen & Downey 99]. Countless blog and forum threads have appeared directly as a result.

The paper completed its passage into canon when it was reprinted in textbooks aimed at both the games industry [Mulligan & Patrovsky 03] and academia [Salen & Zimmerman 05].

And with that, final hint at respectability, I can finally end the torture of singing my own theory's praises...

So what does the theory say?

Well, my having just extolled at length the theory's ubiquity, it would be rather contradictory to continue as if you had never come across it before<sup>8</sup>. I'll therefore only give a brief overview of it here – you can consult the original paper if you want to “refresh your memory” concerning its details.

The theory posits that people who play virtual worlds for fun don't all find the same things fun, but that their different ideas of what is or isn't fun can be captured using two parameters. The first of these is the degree to which they prefer to deal with the players of the virtual world as opposed to the virtual world itself (or *vice versa*). The second is the degree to which they prefer to act upon or interact with the first parameter.

The result can be expressed in the form of a graph<sup>9</sup>, as shown in **figure 1**.

As you can see, the graph describes four *player types*:

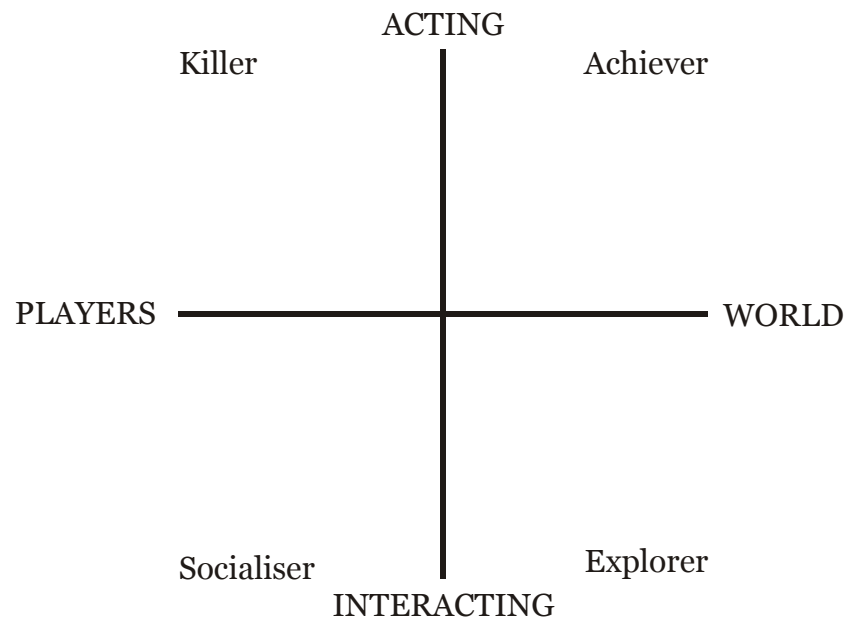
- *Achievers* like acting on the virtual world. Their aim is usually to succeed in the context of the virtual world – to reach the highest level, for example.

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<sup>8</sup> Altogether possible, but nonetheless contradictory...

<sup>9</sup> Back in 1999, I was designing on one of the earlier versions of *The Lord of the Rings Online* (one that never made it into production) and had cause to attend a meeting with the publishers and licence holders. I was pleasantly entertained when one of the publishers drew this graph on a whiteboard and asked us how our design addressed each of the quadrants.

- *Explorers* like interacting with the virtual world. They act in order to find things out about the virtual world and how it works.
- *Socialisers* like interacting with other players. They like talking, being part of a group, and helping others.
- *Killers* like acting on other players. Sometimes, this is to gain a big, bad reputation (whence the name), but other times it's to gain a big, good reputation (in guild politics, for example).



**Figure 1:** *Player Interest Graph.*

The theory goes further, in that it explains the relationship between each player type. Socialisers, for example, like each other's company, regard explorers as mostly harmless, have a mutually uneasy tolerance of achievers, and utterly loathe killers. Lowering the number of killers in a virtual world would therefore make it more attractive to socialisers – but only up to a point. Even though they don't like killers, socialisers do like having something to talk about, and killers perform that role for them.

Put another way, if you take away all the killers, you take away the seasoning that brings out the main flavours of the dish that socialisers want to eat, leaving it bland and tasteless. However, too many killers makes the dish too spicy to be palatable, and stops socialisers from tasting anything else.

So, this, in a nutshell, is the player types model. Some points to note:

- It only applies to people who play virtual worlds for fun. It doesn't apply to people who play virtual worlds but not for fun. This may be the case for groups such as journalists, academics and designers, for example, who are playing for meta-reasons.
- Likewise, the model does not apply to people who play things other than virtual worlds for fun. More appropriate theories exist that should be used even for related game formats, such as face-to-face role-playing [Kim 98], or for games in general [Koster 05]. Some of these approaches do bear a passing resemblance to the player types model [Lazzaro 04],

but their subject matter is nevertheless formally beyond its scope. Furthermore, although the precepts of the model have been found to be valuable in some non-game areas such as web site design [Kim 00], I make no claims as to its competence in those areas myself.

- It is intended to be used by game designers. If you want a theory for other purposes (such as studying player psychology), then you may be better served by a straight taxonomy that comes with data sets (such as Nick Yee's *motivations* [Yee 07]).
- The player types described may resonate with groupings from other, earlier systems<sup>10</sup>, but this wasn't done with any foreknowledge on my part. Any similarities are there either through coincidence or because I was inadvertently reinventing the wheel.
- It's a *model*, not simply a categorisation system: you can "run" it to build a picture of how a virtual world will turn out with different balances of player types. This means it can be used predictively, and its predictions tested.

The model has continuing utility. This is important to mention, because unlike general scientific theories (which, the longer they last, the more they are trusted), there is among gamers a belief that what was true for textual worlds in 1996 can't possibly be true of today's vast graphical extravaganzas; the theory's mere longevity alone must therefore discredit it<sup>11</sup>.

Unluckily, demonstrating that the theory is still both used and useful is not altogether easy in a formal academic context, because so few designers ever discuss their designs in a public forum. Thus, although it might be possible to discern from the questionnaire given to beta testers of *Pirates of the Burning Sea* that the developers wanted to know your player type, the actuality is not recorded anywhere that can be cited (and therefore the supposition could well be wrong). Likewise, the observation that *World of Warcraft* awards experience points every time a character enters a new area seems strongly to suggest a desire to reward explorers, but this doesn't mean the player types theory was ever invoked; *WoW*'s designers have not gone on record as to what informed (or didn't inform) such decisions.

Occasionally, however, designers do mention their use of the model. For example, Paul Barnett, Creative Director for *Warhammer: Age of Reckoning*, explained in an interview with the BBC how *WAR* specifically targeted player types that other game worlds<sup>12</sup> had neglected [BBC 08].

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<sup>10</sup> For example, there was a Medieval theory of "four temperaments" (choleric, melancholic, phlegmatic, sanguine), based on a Greco-Roman medical theory of "four humours", which can profitably be used in theories of game design [Bateman 08 - this volume!]. It's very tempting to suppose that these temperaments must correspond loosely to player types, although the details of such a mapping are non-obvious (I've seen several different versions). This is unsurprising, because the only thing they *actually* have in common is a division of individuals into four types. Incidentally, the four temperaments theory fed into philosopher Carl Jung's work on psychological types, which in turn spawned other theories of personality type and led to psychometric tests such as Myers-Briggs; these later developments can also be used in game design, but again bear no relationship to the player types model [Bateman & Boon 05].

<sup>11</sup> This is not a view limited to my theory, either: large tracts of work done on textual worlds in the 1990s are routinely and deliberately ignored by new researchers, who don't seem to want to accept that the virtual world experience behind the interface is much the same for both textual and graphical worlds.

<sup>12</sup> Well, *WoW*...

One particularly stand-out example of how the model had shown to be effective concerns *GoPets*, a virtual world primarily for children that involves looking after interactive, virtual pets and kitting them out with “cool clothing and accessories”; it’s subscription-free, but players buy things in-world for (ultimately) real money. Initially designed to be entirely a social world, it (in the designer’s words) “carpet bombed” the social quadrant of the player types grid [Bethke 07]. It did reasonably well.

Then, the developers did some data-mining to see what virtual objects sold to heavy users (so they could make other objects along similar lines). They discovered that one particular object, a fruit tree available for only three weeks, attracted players who were 11 times more likely to be active than average users. Not only that, but when compared to other active users, these people were 4 times more likely to be heavy (*i.e.* profitable) users. Put another way, fruit tree buyers were 44 times more likely to be profitable than regular *GoPets* players [Schubert 07].

The fruit tree was just about the only element in *GoPets* that had a goal-oriented behaviour associated with it: if you looked at it for an hour, it produced a fruit (but the timer reset if you went away) [Woodard 08]. The *GoPets* team realised that the people buying it were, according to the player types model, achievers; they therefore decided to add more game-like elements, in order to make play more attractive to the achiever mind-set. They began by putting in some simple cooking and farming activities.

Seven days later, this had *doubled* their revenue.

So yes, the player types model does still work and is still relevant (at least for *GoPets*).

## Interpretation

I’m now going to spend some time describing common ways in which the player types model is assailed, and explaining why these are (or are not) misreadings of what the paper says.

To some extent, what follows will come across as a classic “straw man” argument, in that I will give unsupported, generalised statements of criticisms for the sole purpose of demolishing them. Now actually, I could name names and provide references – turning straw into flesh in the process – but I’d rather not do this because I don’t want to give the appearance of being vindictive<sup>13</sup>. However, for the sole purpose of demonstrating that the arguments I am about to outline are not *entirely* the product of my wild imaginings, I will reluctantly point the finger at one paper [Karlsen 04], which I have selected for such treatment purely because it is the one most often cited by other papers (including some heavyweights [Yoon 05] [McGonigal 06])<sup>14</sup>.

So, the first thing to point out is that my paper does have some genuine flaws, and many of the criticisms levelled at it are not due to misreadings at all but to actual shortcomings [Bartle 08]. Its main problems are:

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<sup>13</sup> You bastards know who you are...

<sup>14</sup> Sorry, Faltin!



- There seem to be two distinct groups of player in the killer quadrant. One type wants to act on players for bad reasons (the eponymous *killers*) and the other for more laudable reasons of group organisation (what might be called *politicians*).
- Players are known to move between types over time, but there is no mechanism offered to suppose how or why this happens.
- The model doesn't account for the concept of *immersion*.
- The theory doesn't link to any established theories from beyond the games industry.

All these issues were addressed by a modification to the basic theory that adds a third dimension to the 2D graph [Bartle 03] [Bartle 05], thereby turning the 4-type model into an 8-type model. It is important to note, however, that this does not mean that the theory is validated – just that these particular holes in it have been fixed. Eventually, new holes *will* be identified which can't be patched, an understanding of which will hopefully form the basis of an entirely new theory.

Most of the mundane attacks on the theory, of the kind perpetuated in guild fora and other message boards, are relatively easy to dismiss. For example, “Where do gold farmers fit in? They don't!” is easily explained by pointing out that gold farmers<sup>15</sup> aren't playing for fun – they fall into the meta-player category – and that the player types model explicitly excludes such people from its categorisation.

Another common tactic is the counter-example that isn't: “I like building/crafting/fishing, but that isn't one of the types!”. Well yes, it isn't – but have you asked *why* you like building/crafting/fishing? Because you want to get your fishing skill up? You're an achiever. Because you want to give fish to your friends? You're probably a socialiser. Because you want to see what kinds of fish you can catch? You'll be an explorer, then. Because you hope to lure someone else into joining you so you can suddenly attack them while they're armed only with a fishing rod? Well, that would make you a killer. It's wholly possible, too, that you simply like the fishing mini-game, in which case you'd fall into the meta-player category: you're not playing the MMO because it's fun itself, you're playing it so you can play the fishing mini-game for fun.

A more interesting misunderstanding is one that accepts the theory but misapplies it. For example, a developer might read the dynamics section of the paper and conclude that if they want more socialisers (say) then they should add more socialising tools or create more common spaces where serendipitous social encounters can occur. Now while it is true that this will indeed make your virtual world more attractive to socialisers, that's not *all* it will do. It's a question of balance: if you attract more socialisers, you could also attract more killers (who love to wind up socialisers) and put off some achievers (who may conclude that the virtual world is “about” chatting, rather than “about” killing things to get stuff so you can kill bigger things to get better stuff). It's the overall package that is attractive or not, not just the individual components. Changing the components will alter the balance, but that doesn't mean it will

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<sup>15</sup> These are people who play virtual worlds in order to acquire in-world currency that they can sell for real-world currency – usually against the wishes of the developer and the majority of the players.

increase the absolute number of players overall – it could even lead to a numbers-decreasing overbalance.

You have to grow your virtual world in an integrated way, or you risk shutting people out – with attendant problems for the players who remain<sup>16</sup>.

We now come to the most important way that the player types model is misunderstood – most important because it has prompted surveys, data-mining endeavours and (occasionally) bad design decisions.

Suppose you want to find out who the main socialisers in your virtual world are. You may wish to know this so that you can ask how you might improve your virtual world's provision for them, for example. So, what is it that sets socialisers apart from other player types? Well, they communicate. Therefore, if you check through your log files and find out who talks the most, those people will be your socialisers, right?

No, not right. Some socialisers are wonderful listeners but not enthusiastic speakers – socialiser does not mean extrovert. Yes, some socialisers do like to talk a lot, but a three-hour long conversation between two people could mean they're explorers exchanging notes, not socialisers gossiping. Sustained banter in guild chat could easily be driven by friendly and open socialisers, but it could also occur because achievers are getting bored grinding and if you don't give them something to do real soon they're going to get bored and leave.

The key point is that it's not what people *do* in a virtual world that defines their player type, it's *why they do it*.

Remember Dextrus? For over three months, Dextrus would have passed every field test for being a socialiser. She didn't try to rack up experience points, she didn't try to find out how esoteric parts of the game world worked, and she most certainly didn't try to kill people; no, she just helped them, because she liked being with them. Except, that wasn't why she was helping them at all. She was, the whole time, still a killer; everything she did was motivated by the desire to take down some extremely high-level character in spectacular fashion. Dextrus was, as she said, Dextrus. How could people ever have thought she was someone else?

There's a difference between "I chat" and "I like to chat"; between "I spoil people's play" and "I like to spoil people's play"; between "I find out how things work" and "I like to find out how things work"; between "I go up levels" and "I like to go up levels".

This is what is so often missed about the player types theory that I finally felt compelled to write about it here.

## What the Model Actually Says

People play virtual worlds for different reasons. Watching what people do can help identify those reasons, but you can't map directly from observed behaviour to the motivation that led to that behaviour. To do so would be to mistake effect for cause. It's not *what* people do that's important, it's *why* they do it.

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<sup>16</sup> Recall that because the player types are inter-dependent, the loss of one type will adversely affect the experience of another even for types that loathe each other.

Sadly, it's very difficult to find out *why* people are doing things when your primary tool merely captures *what* they are doing. Only the players themselves can *truly* know why they're doing what they're doing, but rarely are they able to articulate their motivations beyond "because it's fun". This looks problematical: if you can't tell what type a random player is, how can you ever use the player type model *as* a model?

Fortunately, to apply the player type model's dynamics, you don't need to know what player type an individual might be – you just need to know roughly how many players there are in each group<sup>17</sup>. It may be possible to do this using profiling techniques. How this works is that you identify the types of a few players independently, and then watch what they do in-world. You see how people identified to be the same type behave in ways that are measurably different to how other players behave. So long as you keep calibrating your system (because virtual worlds change over time, both in code and in culture) you should be able to get an estimate of player type numbers accurate enough to use. You will not be able to guarantee that any *individual* matching a particular profile will be of the type that the profile predicts, though; for that degree of detail, you need some other mechanism.

At this point, I should perhaps point out that that as far as I know, the approach I've just outlined is not actually used by anyone. Here's why.

To calibrate your profiling system, you need some non-automated way of finding out a player's type. An example of how you might do this is simple observation. Suppose you were in a group instance in a game world such as *World of Warcraft*. The group consists of you (a researcher) plus four other people<sup>18</sup>. All of you are working towards the same game goal – to defeat the final boss and complete the instance – but what each of you is getting out of it could be completely different. Nevertheless, after a while the seasoned researcher should be able to form a reasonably good impression regarding which player is what type.

Sometimes it can be done with a fair degree of confidence quite quickly. The mage making imaginative use of arcane magic when every other mage you ever saw specialises in fire or frost magic is very probably going to be an explorer, for example. It's rarely that easy, though. Perhaps the tank would rather be elsewhere but came along to help a guildmate: that would be either socialiser or killer/politician behaviour, and you could probably tell which by how they interacted with (socialiser) or bossed around (politician) the others in the group. However, if you didn't *know* they'd come along to help a friend, it would take you considerably longer to figure out why they were doing what they were doing.

It can take me up to an hour to get full measure of the players with whom I am grouped in a virtual world, and even then I could be wrong. Without knowledge of her history, I'd probably have thought Dextrus was a socialiser just like everyone else did, for example. Nevertheless, it doesn't take long to make a reasonably accurate appraisal as to why someone is playing – certainly good enough to be able to inform use of the player types model.

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<sup>17</sup> You may also find it useful to relate their player type to their situation in the virtual world. If all the socialisers hang out in cities and all the achievers hang out in the wilderness, there isn't going to be as much interaction between them as you want, for example.

<sup>18</sup> Because you yourself are in the group, this would make it (using a term from anthropology) *participant observation*.

You can do this multiple times, and soon get a good idea as to what types a cross-section of the player base conform. This isn't all you have by then, though: you also have personal relationships with the individuals concerned. This means that using them to calibrate a profiling mechanism is no longer necessary – you can simply ask them.

It's this, in fact, that is designers' preferred tactic for ascertaining how different player types are reacting to a virtual world: if you want to know what the generic socialiser thinks, you ask the particular socialisers with whom you are acquainted. Profiling is still the best tool for tracking overall balance, but the quality of feedback resulting from interviewing individuals gives that approach the edge for most other uses.

## What This Means for Designers

This is an integrated system: everything is in balance. You can't simply provide compelling content of a certain type to satisfy your players, because players need other players around them who will not be satisfied by that content.

Put another way, if you saturate a virtual world with content aimed at one type of player, as *GoPets* originally did, not only will it fail to attract players of other types (which you might have expected), but also it won't completely satisfy the type you did aim at. Player types don't exist in isolation; there's a balance to be maintained.

When designers create content, they need to consider *why* it's attractive, not merely *that* it's attractive. "Killing bosses satisfies achievers" may well be true, but it's not all that satisfies achievers, and achievers aren't the only people who are satisfied by it. Furthermore, there may be other player types who are dissatisfied by it – it might make a poor end to a narrative that was engaging an explorer or socialiser, for example.

Content is not made out of construction bricks that are labelled with those player types that find it attractive, yet believing it is makes for a common beginners' error. You can't say "we'll put in a PvP battleground system for the killers", because people can find player-versus-player combat fun for all kinds of reasons; the ganking of other players is only one of those reasons. However, if you read the forums for large-scale commercial game worlds, time and time again you will see people relating PvP directly to the killer player type as if the connection were a given. It isn't.

Likewise, it's often assumed that people who do crafting don't do combat, and must therefore be carebear socialisers who spend all their time gossiping when not baking virtual pies. Although this may well be true in some cases, nevertheless players can also find crafting rewarding for other reasons (as anyone who has grinded reputation in *World of Warcraft* just so they can brag about being the first in their guild to have the recipe for some über item will tell you).

Whenever you look at a gameplay mechanic in a virtual world, always remember that different player types will have different reasons for engaging with it. True, some features might indeed constitute "flagship" methods for particular types (such as chatting for socialisers), but this only makes them

necessary, not sufficient. Sure, many socialisers will tend to chat a lot, but other types will chat to various degrees too, and the socialisers will themselves use content that is flagship for other types. If there is no such content, they'll feel they're missing something, and their enthusiasm will be damped until they get it (which is what *GoPets* discovered).

Remember, too, that individuals progress through different types over time<sup>19</sup>. If you don't cover all the types, then you could well lose players sooner than you might otherwise.

## What Use is a Theory?

The player types theory explains why people play virtual worlds, but *not* what they do (in terms of identifiable actions) while playing. This may be alarming to people who plan on using it – especially designers, who actually have to write the “what they do while playing” part! Also rather scarily, it's not simply a check-box system that says “there are these categories of player and you need content for them all” – if that's what you want<sup>20</sup>, go with a taxonomy such as [Yee 07] instead. Rather, what the player types theory delivers is a full, working model, not a static categorisation system.

So ... what use is it?

Even if we ignore the mechanics of the model, the theory says something that had not been said until it said it: designers of virtual worlds must *understand their players*. People play virtual worlds for many reasons, and designers need to address them all – even the ones towards which they are antipathetic. The important thing is not that you *yourself* will enjoy playing the virtual world, but that you recognise the requirements of those who *will* be playing it. You have to give players the content they need, and this means you must know *why* they need it, not simply that it is needed.

If we do look at the mechanics, then the theory helps give an understanding of the overall shape of a given virtual world in terms of the balance between the different player types (and therefore the content they consume). As a designer, you can add or remove content to widen or lessen its appeal to different types, but you must always remember that no virtual world is entirely for one kind of player – otherwise, it wouldn't be a virtual world. Even individual players aren't always one type all the time, because they transition through types as they grow in experience (the 8-types model explains why this is so). The dynamics part of the model can be used to figure out things such as why a virtual world which was well balanced before has suddenly lurched towards being over-dominated by achievers, say, or socialisers. This is something that developers need to know.

The theory also has meta-uses. For example, players will often complain that virtual world designers don't play virtual worlds with the same dedication that they, the players, do, and therefore it follows that they don't understand them to the same degree<sup>21</sup>. This can be a valid criticism, too, if the

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<sup>19</sup> I don't discuss type drifting much in the original 4-types paper, but it gets a full explanation in the 8-types extension [Bartle 05].

<sup>20</sup> This might be the case if you were more interested in causes than effects, for example.

<sup>21</sup> This is a sign of an immature industry. In more established creative fields, it's not a problem: how many people have criticised Karl Lagerfeld for creating clothes for women by arguing that, as he himself won't be wearing any of them, he's disqualified as an expert?

designer is inexperienced. After all, if a journalist is ridiculed for having written a scathing article about some MMO after only having played it for half an hour, why not slam a designer who does the same thing? Well, the answer is that accomplished designers have internalised virtual world design so much that they can pick up a great deal more intuitively from half an hour's play than can pretty well anyone else<sup>22</sup>. They're not playing the MMO for "player fun", they're playing for "designer fun" – enjoying the nuances of the design, not the play itself. They don't have to enjoy play *per se*, and in fact the player types theory suggests they *shouldn't* enjoy it: if they did, they'd be too blinded by their own experience to deliver on the needs of player types other than their own. Thus, what players regard as a weakness is revealed to be a strength<sup>23</sup>.

## Conclusion

My player types theory of virtual worlds says that players can be grouped together according to what they find is fun; it also explains how each of these groups needs the others. Its main thrust is that designers need to understand all such reasons if they are to create successful virtual worlds. Key to this is appreciating that what people do isn't as important as why they do it.

Yet even though this theory is well over a decade old, some people still seem to miss this point.

I've explained the issues here in terms of my own theory, but actually what I want to say applies to all of them: whatever theory you decide to use, you should make sure you *understand* that theory, not just the bullet-point takeaway. If you find holes in the theory but haven't made the effort to understand it, you can't be sure that they are indeed holes. If you do understand the theory and find it lacking, though, that puts you in a good position to propose changes to it, or to create a new theory entirely.

Designing virtual worlds is an art, but understanding them in order that you *can* design them is a science. Treat their design as a science, and then the art will follow.

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<sup>22</sup> Actually, they'd probably need more than half an hour to get the main points straight in their minds, but things are usually pretty clear after 2 or 3 hours.

<sup>23</sup> Although some designers claim to be able to switch off their designer sensibilities, the condition of not being able to play for "player fun" remains a common one. It even has a name: *designeritis* [Koster 05].

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