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Unrealistic Expectations

Richard A. Bartle

Early virtual worlds – the text MUDs that dominated the first 20 years of the genre’s existence – prided themselves on the degree to which they were *realistic*. Ones in which bags could contain bags containing bags would disparage ones that didn’t even have bags; ones in which biscuits disintegrated when wet would look down on ones in which you could swim across a river and your crackers would be just as edible when you reached the other side as they were before you set off; ones in which icicles melted to water when exposed to above-zero temperatures would mock ones in which you could safely carry them across a bakingly hot desert in your coat pocket.

LOTRO also goes out of its way to be realistic. Its landscapes are rendered to look like real landscapes; its avatars don’t have cartoon features; it’s faithful to the books upon which it is based; it’s geographically consistent; it studiously adopts a covering fiction for useful but unrealistic MMO tropes such as death (Morale failure) and teleportation (fast horses). It’s a great deal more realistic than most MMOs out there.

Why is it, then, that a player of an early MUD who time-travelled to the present day¹ would nevertheless regard *LOTRO*’s realisticness as a joke?

Yes, yes, I can tell you’re not happy at the suggestion that time-travelling players of game worlds that are 20 or 30 years out of date would find great swathes of *LOTRO* to be less advanced than what they were used to, but they would. Here are just *some* of the things they’d find laughable:

- If I kill some Orc and it was carrying a sword, why was it hitting me with a stick?
- The only way to be a Scholar is if I’m also a Farmer and a Metalworker? Uh?
- Why do all the NPCs 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...
- How come I suffer Morale damage when I fall off Weathertop? Did I somehow “flee in fear” before I hit the ground?
- Some of those half-timbered houses in Bree appear to have windows placed smack in the middle of supporting beams.
- I can walk through people? And horses? But I don’t fall through my own horse when I sit on it?
- Didn’t I see you depart with the Fellowship from Rivendell not ten minutes ago, Legolas? Why are you back here issuing mundane quests?

- 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 combo buttons appeared – just the same as what happens in real life fights...
- Flowers appear to be every bit as open at night as they are in daylight.
- Why, when I salute, does it say I salute smartly? I wanted to salute sarcastically.
- Why do I merely suffer Morale failure but the *bad guys* suffer death?
- 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!
- If you want me to kill *X* monsters of a certain type, there really should be *X* monsters of that type for me to kill, not *X/2* monsters I have to kill twice over.
- How come those bad guys aren't running to stop me killing their buddies? I can see them – why can't they see me? And does this sword come with a silencer so they can't hear it striking armour?
- So... you let people wander around called Arraggorrnn?

Reading through this list, it's hard not to concede that the old-timers might perhaps have a point in at least a few cases. However, you, as a modern *LOTRO* player, don't really care about such discrepancies, do you? So why not?

What's happened here isn't that the standards of "realistic" have slipped; rather, it's that the importance of the concept itself has slipped. Being "realistic" just isn't such a big deal any more.

Except *LOTRO*, as I said, *does* actually try to be realistic in comparison to other MMOs. What's going on here?

The Meaning of "Realistic"

LOTRO is a virtual world set in an imaginary milieu populated by fantasy creatures. Surely the word "realistic" can't ever be applied to it, by definition?

Well, the word "real" certainly can't, which is why we have to talk about the "realisticness" of an MMO rather than its "realism". However, the adjective "realistic" isn't making a statement about the *authenticity* of a representation, it's making one about the *believability* of it. Although clearly related, the two are not the same. I can complain about the "realism" of an MMO that has Elves, because reality doesn't have Elves². However, if Elves are completely consistent with the MMO's fiction, I can't reasonably complain about their presence; indeed, I could legitimately claim that a version of *LOTRO* without Elves was *unrealistic*. This is because if I'm willing myself to suspend my disbelief so as to appreciate some fiction, then anything that falls outside of that fiction (or fails to fall inside it when it "should") is, *relative to that fiction*, unrealistic. Abstract games, which have little or no fiction, are

therefore largely immune to accusations of being unrealistic³; however, all other games are indeed open to such charges. As players tend not to notice when things *are* realistic, it's in the negative form – “unrealistic” – that the concept most often appears: basically, it means that the game has some feature inconsistent with its fiction⁴.

Simulation wargames were the first for which a distinction between “realistic” and “unrealistic” was important. These have no internal fiction except “what if?”: the fiction is “you are Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo”⁵ or whatever, but, beyond this single counterfactual, historical reality holds sway. The term “realistic” here simply means how well the game models that historical (or present) reality.

There is some stretching, however. For example it didn't rain during the Battle of Waterloo but it rained heavily the night before; consequently, it *could* have rained during the battle – Napoleon didn't know whether it would or not. If you truly wish to put yourself in Napoleon's shoes, it's therefore “realistic” to include the possibility of rain even though we know that historically it didn't rain. However, given that the battle was fought in Belgium in June, it *would* remain “unrealistic” to allow for the possibility of snow. This use of “realistic” to extend “real” for the benefit of a simple fiction (“you are Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo”) opened the door for its application to more extensive fictions (“you are yourself, a general, in a battle that we hypothesise will be fought when this country invades the country next door”); this process of extension is how it acquired its present-day meaning in a games context.

Because fictions defer to reality (*ie.* if they don't imply that something works a different way to reality, by default it works the same way), this means that there are two ways a feature can be “unrealistic”: inconsistent with the game's internal fiction; not addressed by the game's internal fiction but inconsistent with reality. Games such as *LOTRO* that have a strong fiction can thus be deemed unrealistic if they exhibit inconsistency either with their fiction (*eg.* lore characters leave but remain) or with reality in the absence of fictional cover (*eg.* how to change the colour of metal).

Sometimes, when reality itself is at fault (from the players' point of view), fiction can be invented specifically to excuse its shortcomings (*eg.* Morale failure rather than death); occasionally, this fiction is itself inconsistent with the larger fiction (*eg.* when I lose combat I flee, but when *non-players* lose it they die) or even self-inconsistent (*eg.* morale explains away combat “death” but not why I don't splat when I fall from a great height⁶). All can be said to make a game unrealistic.

Most are nowhere near as important as they used to be.

Why “Realistic”?

The traditional dialectic for games with a simulation aspect to them was a tussle between “realistic” and “playable” (Jackson, 1991). It was regarded as a hallmark of good game design to be both.

In board games, there is a trade-off between the additional complexity required to make a game more realistic and the additional time and effort it takes to play under the increased burden this usually entails. For example, a shortlist of ideas for putting weather in a game recreating the Battle of Waterloo might be:

- Have the same weather throughout (which amounts to having no weather effects).
- Have two types of weather (sunny, cloudy) that affect visibility ranges and how quickly the initially-wet ground dries.
- Have three types of weather (sunny, cloudy, raining) which additionally affect troop movement speeds.
- Build up weather from interacting wind, temperature and precipitation charts, affecting many aspects of play.

In terms of being realistic, complexity wins; in terms of being playable⁷, simplicity wins. The compromise position is to abstract out the more boring⁸ sub-systems and focus on the more interesting and important components of play.

With computer games, though, this dialectic is all but redundant. We can make the behind-the-scenes simulation as hideously complicated as we choose without overwhelming the player and ruining playability, because “the computer handles all that stuff”. So long as the decisions the player has to make aren’t too onerous, the supporting systems that inform these decisions can be as sophisticated as the designer desires. Why would we have only have one weather type when, for comparatively little effort, we can have a range of types with subtle differences for local geography? It doesn’t make the game any less playable, nor increase the learning curve dramatically, but it does make it more realistic.

In theory, then, today’s MMOs should boast highly detailed worlds in which everything works just as you’d expect – either consistent with the fiction or, in fiction’s absence, with reality⁹. With faster computers and larger development teams behind them, the environments of today’s MMOs ought to be simulating in great detail fictional universes that overlay a simulation of the real universe; yet on the whole, even well-designed, big-budget modern worlds like *LOTRO* are *less* detailed than were their forebears. Why is that?

I realise I keep repeating the question, but before attempting an answer we should perhaps examine why early MMOs regarded being realistic as important in the first place. If the rationale behind the pro-“realistic” argument no longer applies, then that would explain the concept’s decline.

There were two main reasons why text MUDs strove to be realistic, to do with *persuasiveness* and *emergence*. A third reason – that adding more detail raises the barrier to entry for creating such games – was not a primary factor but it did feature in some developers’ minds.

Persuasiveness is the degree to which a virtual world’s environment lends credence to the conceit that the virtual world is real. The more real you make the world appear, the more confidently players can treat it as real. In *LOTRO*, for example, you look at a scene and your visual cortex – thanks to millions of years of evolution – instantly interprets it in your mind. You don’t have to *think* about how to make sense of it, you can just *do* it. If the scene were rendered differently (for example by having distant objects occlude closer ones, rather than the reverse), then you couldn’t “just do it” – you’d have to think about it. This would make the scene less persuasive, because you’re having more trouble believing what it’s telling you; however, in terms of the virtual world’s functionality it would make no appreciable difference at all.

Persuasiveness is important itself because it delivers familiarity and therefore reduces player apprehension. However, its primary strength lies in its being a factor for *immersion*. It *isn’t* immersion, which in MMOs is to do with identity (Bartle, 2003); however, it makes immersion easier by presenting the player with fewer obstacles. This is one reason why text was superseded by graphics: the time it takes to read a description of a scene is an obstacle, whereas the time it takes to see a picture of it is not. As immersion was and remains a very powerful motivation for playing MMOs (Yee, 2006), anything that oils its gears is therefore A Good Thing. The more persuasive a virtual world, the more easily its players are drawn in; hence, the better the opportunity they have to become immersed.

So that’s one reason why being realistic is good: being unrealistic makes it harder for players to become immersed.

Emergence is the process by which the interactions between sub-components of a system create new systems of their own. Sometimes, this is expected by the designer; sometimes, it’s unexpected. For example, consider these four sub-components (of the physics and combat systems):

- Some surfaces can’t be reached by climbing.

- If you fall from a height, you land on the next surface below.
- Ranged weapons can hit targets at a distance.
- Monsters without ranged combat abilities will engage aggressors in *melée* combat.

All these components are programmed-in, and are not emergent. However, together they mean that if a Hunter can jump from a height onto a surface that can't be reached by climbing, and is within arrow range of opponents that have only a *melée* combat capability, then those opponents are going to die to an answerable hail of arrows. That tactic is *not* directly programmed-in, and *is* emergent; in this particular example, from *LOTRO's* Grand Stair instance, it was also unexpected, leading its designer to label it an exploit (Maki, 2009).

The reason that emergence was and is regarded as desirable is that it generates content. Yes, some of this content is negative and has to be treated as an exploit, but most of it is very positive. The more detailed and richer the virtual world, the greater the prospect that interactions between objects and systems will give the players unanticipated goals that they yet have the means to achieve; this empowers the players and reduces development costs (because creating content is expensive). The MMO *EVE Online* generates all its content this way – it doesn't have *LOTRO*-style quests, just a highly detailed universe in which players find things they want to do and then seek ways to do them. The real world works this way, too: everything that happens is as a result of the interaction between people and other bodies operating under the laws of physics¹⁰.

So that's another reason why being realistic is good: being unrealistic makes it difficult for players to reason about how second-order sub-systems operate, which strangles the appearance of emergent behaviour.

So, the more realistic a game world is, the more persuasive it will be and the more emergent behaviour it will engender. You *can* promote emergence in an unrealistic system, but not persuasiveness. If you want both (and you *do* want both), then you should aim to make your virtual world more realistic.

Alas, this means that the reasons of yore for wanting a virtual world to be realistic still apply: persuasiveness and emergence. That being the case, we should perhaps turn our attention to the opposite possibility: why would you *not* want your virtual world to be realistic?

Well, there are several reasons, none altogether compelling.

Firstly, it might be to make an artistic point. You made your fantasy world's political system outrageously corrupt so as to parody some real-world political system. For this to work, though, the default has to be that virtual worlds *are* realistic; otherwise,

you can't signal by breaking this convention that what you're doing actually *is* a parody.

Secondly, it could be that "realistic" gets in the way of "fun". For example, it's realistic to insist that characters visit the lavatory after having stuffed their faces with food and drink; however, the experience of being caught short in the middle of a fight is something even text MUDs didn't promote¹¹. Yet this, too, isn't something that affects the general degree to which an MMO is realistic; it only affects very particular parts where there is a potential problem. On the whole, being realistic *doesn't* compromise being fun – in fact its support for immersion means it can enhance it.

Thirdly, being realistic might break gameplay balance. Strictly speaking, it shouldn't matter how accomplished with a broadsword you are, you are not going to deal a lethal blow to a giant when you can't even reach its knees; however, implementing this would mean that only characters able to deal ranged damage could combat giants – a player/gameplay balance issue. There are also gameplay/gameplay balance issues, with *LOTRO's* wacky vocations system falling into this category: no-one actually *believes* that successful Historians need to be Weaponsmiths and Farmers, but that's how the pieces had to fall. Again, though, this is a local problem, not a global one: text MUDs also had balance issues that meant they were unrealistic in places, but they still maintained their quality everywhere else.

Fourthly, it's expensive to reflect realistic effects visually. A text MUD can make your hair wet simply by adding the line "<whoever> has wet hair" to your description; in a graphical world, someone has to draw that wet hair, for different lengths and styles and quite possibly colours. This is indeed a problem (albeit one that can be mitigated by embracing the concept of detail, for example using rag doll physics), but there are plenty of cases where things can be made more realistic without requiring any work beyond MUD-level programming. For example, if I carry a glass of milk in my bag, then after I've been running a while I'm only going to have an empty glass. If I carry my milk in a bottle, that won't happen; however, after a week it's no longer a bottle of milk, it's a bottle of sour milk. If I keep it up, eventually it's a bottle of cheese. Graphical worlds could easily do this without requiring legions of artists and programmers to implement it – but they don't.

The final¹² reason for not wanting your MMO to be realistic is because new players can perceive this as a sign of complexity. Casual players are notorious for doing this, and as the player base of MMOs expands away from the hard core, so it follows that the mean tolerance for complexity lowers. Unlike the case for boardgames, "complexity" here does not imply poor playability; rather, it implies that the game will be "too hard" for casual players' tastes. However, on the whole newbies are far more likely to be alarmed by breaches of physics (such as the way other characters can walk *right through them*) than they are by things behaving "properly", because this means that what they implicitly believed they could rely on it turns out they couldn't. Also, it's only an issue when players are just starting out; take them through a controlled training instance, as *LOTRO* does, and it subsides.

All in all, then, the reasons for not wanting a virtual world to be realistic relate to specific cases that are containable as exceptions. There appears to be no overwhelming reason why a designer would prefer their modern MMO to be less realistic than a text MUD, and two very good reasons why they should prefer it to be more so.

And yet, and yet...

Where *LOTRO* is Realistic

If we look at where *LOTRO* makes an effort to be realistic, we see something interesting.

As outlined earlier, there are two points at which “realistic” can be applied to MMOs: where the fiction has something to say, and where it doesn’t. For *LOTRO*, great effort is made to be true to its fiction – so much so that when, for implementation reasons, there are forced inconsistencies (such as lore characters ignorant of their main storyline duties) players do actually notice them. It’s so relentlessly ingrained that someone new to the game but familiar with the books would, after only half an hour’s play, sense that Elrond and Tom Bombadil aren’t ever going to meet – even though at that point they’ve encountered neither. However, when it comes to those areas that the fiction doesn’t have anything to say about, *LOTRO* is just as cavalier as most other modern MMOs: when you’re charging on your horse and take your finger off the W key, you stop instantly; when you shoot an arrow, you never miss and hit someone else instead; you can’t put objects you’re carrying down on the ground; you can sell any random junk in any random quantity to any random shopkeeper; and so on, for pages and pages. None of these misalignments with the way the real world works are impossibly difficult to program¹³, they’re just not part of *LOTRO*’s design.

In part, *LOTRO* strove to be faithful to its fiction for commercial and contractual reasons: Turbine Inc. licensed the intellectual property from Tolkien Enterprises, so had a strong motivation to make use of all that it paid for; and the extent to which it could depart from the fiction was constrained, in order to protect Tolkien’s work from any potential bowdlerisation that might damage the property as a whole¹⁴. However, the chances are that even if Turbine had been allowed to do whatever it wanted with Tolkien’s work, for free, it would still have endeavoured to remain as close to the fiction as it could. If players are signing up because they want to visit Middle-earth, then the developer is somewhat obliged to provide them with a world as akin to Middle-earth as is reasonably practicable. The closer the match, the more persuasive will be the sense players have that this is “really” Middle-earth, and therefore the more readily they will become immersed.

Although the use of a well-known intellectual property with “worldly” attributes can

be a boon to immersion, unfortunately it can be a problem for emergence. There was never any possibility that the Third Age in *LOTRO* would end with Sauron's destruction of the free peoples, for example, because the very canon that gives *LOTRO* its appeal proscribes this. To compensate, Turbine's designers had to focus strongly on *LOTRO*'s potential for promoting immersion, and this they did: when it launched, *LOTRO* had a more persuasive and consistent environment than any of its peers. However, almost all the effort in this push for immersion relates to the part of the virtual world addressed directly by the fiction; there are only token gestures (such as relabelling hit points as Morale points) in the direction of the unstated, underlying physics of Middle-earth¹⁵.

So why, if it's important for the purposes of immersion to be tight to the fiction, is it not equally important to be tight to the deferred-to reality that supports the fiction? The fiction itself (in the books) assumes absolute tightness for anything that it doesn't itself imply¹⁶, so surely being similarly tight to it in an MMO would help sustain the fiction? Why jeopardise all that's being done to draw people into *LOTRO*'s fictional world by being lax with its version of the mundane?

Well, the answer is that *LOTRO* is tight to the reality – once you understand what “reality” means here.

Astronauts: you see them on TV, floating around in space, doing things to satellites with strange tools. They're weightless, right? Otherwise they'd fall. Everyone knows they're weightless!

Except, astronauts *aren't* weightless. The International Space Station is in a Low Earth Orbit around 350km above the Earth's surface (NASA, 2010). If you were to climb a tower 350km tall then you could watch the ISS zoom past you every so often, but you wouldn't feel a great deal lighter than you did on the Earth's surface – in fact your weight would be just under 95% of what it would be 350km beneath you. If you dropped a spanner it wouldn't just hang there, it would fall. That's what's happening to the ISS: it's falling – but it's also travelling horizontally, so it falls in a curve rather than straight down. Its speed is set so the curve tracks the surface of the Earth. As a result, it doesn't crash and burn, and the people travelling inside it seem, relative to the ISS, to be weightless.

Most people don't have this knowledge of physics, though, and in their minds astronauts *are* weightless. If they were playing an MMO and their character got into a space elevator and ascended into Low Earth Orbit, then they would *expect that character to be weightless*. When it turned out that instead of a 100% loss in weight it was only a 5% loss, they would notice and it would break their immersion – even though that's how reality works! There are many other examples of beliefs shared by many people about the way the physical world works that are wrong¹⁷. Individuals, it transpires, do not use actual physics but a “common sense” working version. If you

want to model how they *think* about the real world, you should use this *naïve physics* (Hayes, 1978) rather than reality's version.

For the purposes of making a fictional world seem real, anything unstated as being different to the fiction should defer to actual physics. If people don't think that's how reality works, then they will be alerted by the supposed discrepancy, yes; they will then either think about it and realise it's correct, or look it up, or let it slide. In all cases, the fiction is strengthened by this – either by the addition of supporting detail or by an increased willingness to accept it anyway.

For MMOs, though, this isn't what we want. The point of the fiction is to aid persuasiveness and thus immersion. Encountering weight where you thought there would be weightlessness may well serve to strengthen the fiction, but it also breaks immersion. The strengthening of the fiction is good in the long term, but in the short term – which is all that players care about (Bartle, 2004) – it's bad because it disrupts the very concept it is supposed to be supporting – immersion.

In other words, for MMOs we don't want the fictional world to delegate its unstated components to real physics: we want it to delegate them to naïve physics. This may be scientifically wrong, but it's not game-breakingly wrong. Action movies are like this, too: you *want* to hear that invading UFO explode when the nuclear missile hits it in outer space, admit it...

Although I've been discussing this real/naïve distinction in terms of physics, it does cover a wider range of material than that. Movie action heroes routinely shrug off bullet wounds that would stop a rhino – that's when they're hit at all. If James Bond were to walk around a corner and take a single sniper shot to the shoulder, upon which he collapsed in a faint, it would come as a genuine shock. You'd suspect that the bullet was made of uranium or something.

So it is for MMOs. Players come with an expectation not of how the real world works, but of how MMOs work. *That's* what designers make the absence of fiction default to – not reality.

Dumbing Down to Smarten Up

Numbers spoil immersion. If you hit some monster and a number appears above its head to indicate how much damage you did, well, that's serving to remind you that you're in a game world, not in the real world. It's much better to show the cumulative effect of damage by changing the appearance of the monster so it looks increasingly beat up, with special effects (*eg.* it staggers back) for when you do a really big or critical hit. This has the added advantage of making it harder for players to game the system, and makes it more exciting because they can't always be sure who's closer to winning – they or their opponent.

The desirability of hiding numbers has been accepted by MMO designers for many years. The arguments for and against have been looked at from all angles, and the consensus is that from a design perspective its best to hide them (MUD-DEV, 1996). Nevertheless, no MMO does – and few text MUDs did even when the discussions were raging. MMOs will usually provide an option to turn the numbers off (to appease role-players¹⁸), but they don't tend to keep the numbers secret.

Ultimately, the reason for this is that experienced players are already accomplished at immersing themselves in their MMOs, and for them the presence of such unrealistic detail is *not* immersion-busting; indeed, to see its machinery revealed in this way can *add* to their feeling that the MMO is a living world.

More and more players *are* more experienced, too. By the time they come across a game like *LOTRO*, the chances are they've played plenty of more casual virtual worlds – *Club Penguin*, *Habbo*, *Runescape*, ... They are used to certain ways of doing things, and come to expect them. Even hard-core MMO players often think this way: if in their previous MMO they gained access to some time-saving short-cut after a long and arduous quest, they will become accustomed to having it available and miss it in their next MMO if it's not present from the beginning. Ultimately, that's why *LOTRO* has Map Home for everyone after the first (introductory) instance.

The value of “realistic” for immersion is that you don't have to think about the data you're being presented with: you have pre-compiled ways of handling it. When those ways are shared by many players, a paradigm is born. In an effort not to put off prospective players, new MMOs will defer fiction-neutral material to the paradigm rather than to reality.

Text worlds had paradigms too, of course, but built mainly around command conventions (for example that *i*, short for *inventory*, is what you type when you want a list of the objects you're carrying). They did have a “rooms” metaphor for representing geographical spaces that also amounted to a paradigm (Bartle, 2007),

but they didn't have one for abstracting out bothersome aspects of reality; on the contrary, they delighted in conforming to reality as best they could.

The reason for this is that text isn't instantly persuasive. Graphical worlds can rely on their graphics to give players a sense that the virtual world is real; text worlds have no graphics, so have to demonstrate their reality pretension through detail and functionality. Due to the emergence that arises from having such depth, this approach does bear fruit in the long term¹⁹; however, it's of little consequence if people never get to the long term because they find superficial but vastly more accessible graphical worlds more obviously attractive.

Playing styles have also changed, largely as a result of the Internet. In the old days, when players came across something they hadn't come across before they either asked their friends for help or they tried to figure it out themselves. If they came across a fire elemental, they might perhaps reason that it "should" be vulnerable to water, so use water-based spells against it. Likewise, they would equip bludgeoning weapons rather than cutting weapons when fighting against animated skeletons, because those "should" do more damage against bone. Today, though, they'll simply look up what to do on the Internet (or simply not bother, given that few modern MMOs seem to implement different damage extents for different attack types on opponents with different characteristics²⁰).

So while the reasons that the text MUDs of 20 years ago tried to be realistic have not gone away, they have evolved. When MUDs were new, their players were new too: they hadn't experienced virtual worlds before, so did not come with any preconceptions regarding what they should be like. Nowadays, players do come with those preconceptions, and it is these – not reality – that MMOs such as *LOTRO* use as their non-fiction foundations. They can get away with this (when text MUDs couldn't) because their graphics are sufficient to persuade the hardware of the brain that it's dealing with a "real" world; this acts as a powerful counterbalance to what would otherwise, given a moment's thought, seem ridiculous.

Our original question is therefore (finally!) answered: early MUD players would not find *LOTRO*'s faithfulness to its fiction a joke, but they would find its faithfulness to the reality that supports that fiction a joke; they would regard *LOTRO* being unnecessarily inconsistent with the real world that Middle-earth overlays. Today's players do not see the supporting reality as a joke, because it conforms to their idea of what is "real" for an MMO²¹. When you're expecting something to be unrealistic and it is, you have a realistic expectation²².

This isn't totally the end of the matter, though, because although we have an explanation as to why today's MMOs are unrealistic (with respect to reality, if not the MMO paradigm), and some idea of how they got that way (players arriving with experience of labour-saving gameplay devices that they want immediate access

to²³), we don't have any assurance that the current way of doing things *is* actually any better than the old way.

Could it be that this change in what it means to be “realistic” in an MMO has lost players more than they have gained?

In Defence of “Realistic”

It's my belief that although slackening the level to which MMOs like *LOTRO* are realistic to their non-fiction component has short-to-medium term benefits, ultimately it diminishes the capability of MMOs to deliver all that they promise.

In 1999, Turbine (the developer of *LOTRO*) released its first MMO, *Asheron's Call*, published by Microsoft; this virtual world is still in operation. In 2002, they released *Asheron's Call 2*; this virtual world closed down in 2005. The main selling point of *AC2* (apart from its fancier graphics) was that it removed all the irritations that players of *AC* had complained about so they could spend more time doing what they said they liked. For example you could access all your goods via your backpack rather than going to the bank²⁴. It was felt that this would allow players to concentrate on playing the game itself, and indeed it did; unfortunately, it had devastating side-effects (for example, with no compelling reason to visit them any more, most settlements were ghost towns and the place felt empty). The added convenience came at the expense of fun.

Yet today, many of the expediencies that *AC2* pioneered and was criticized for are reappearing as standard. Even in the same MMO, there can be huge differences between how it was originally and how it is at present – *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, for example, is a much gentler experience now than it was when it launched in 2004. If it had started out then as diluted as it is today, it would not have garnered anywhere near the vast player base it has done; yet over time, it has been able to change markedly. The long-term players have stayed with it through its softening, in part because it has been gradual and in part because they no longer had any need for the “make it feel like you've really achieved something” harder kind of content that first attracted them; new players also came in, because whereas such content may have put them off in the past, it no longer did so.

LOTRO is also changing, with new concepts being introduced to make it easier (the elf stone inspiration buff that means people can now solo volume 1 fellowship quests, for example). The pressure to do so is coming from the likes of *WoW*; the pressure not to do so is coming from Turbine's experience with *AC2*. Ultimately, though, it's clear what's going to happen: the early parts of the game will be a breeze, so that newbies don't feel that they will never be able to reach the endgame; the endgame will settle into a raiding rut for players to spend gearing up ready for

the next content-adding patch; expansions will appear every two years or so that will advance the storyline but render much hard-won earlier gear worthless; the players will strive to re-reach the rut stage again; and so on. At each step, the default “reality” will become more and more abstract as more and more effects of depth are removed so as to avoid obstructing players’ goals.

So it is with pretty well all MMOs today.

Ultimately, though, if you do this then all you have left is a shell. There’s nothing inside it – no substance to support it. You have something that is fun, but little of the context that makes it fun. The fiction alone can’t sustain such a world forever. Eventually, the shell will crack and players will think, “why am I doing this?”.

Gameplay treads a delicate balance, occupying a sweet spot between “no fun” (it’s too easy to win) and “unfun” (it’s too hard to win). “Too hard” and “too easy” are relative terms – what you consider too easy, I may consider too hard – but for an MMO this is rarely a problem because there is a range of content. Players can choose the level of challenge that suits them best: if you like things easier, you do lower-level quests (fewer points, more success); if you like things harder, you do higher-level quests (more points, more failure). Overall, the rate of progress will be roughly the same whichever style you adopt.

However, it does become a problem even for MMOs if the game as a whole shifts too much in one direction. If, across the board, more obstacles are added, this means that the players who like an easy life will quit from the frustration of being unable to achieve their goals; players who prefer more testing play will migrate to the content previously used by the easy-life players. Likewise, if play as a whole becomes easier then those who like easy play will just consume what they previously regarded as harder content, but those who like life more difficult will quit through boredom.

This latter situation is what is happening in MMOs today. The further the distance from reality the notion of “realistic” becomes, the more abstract it gets, and therefore the fewer obstacles it presents. The fewer obstacles it presents, the less challenging it becomes, and the more outrageous the designers have to be in presenting new variations on an ever-narrowing front of possible experiences.

What ultimately results is MMOs as a portal to instance-based casual games dressed up as epic fantasy. Although there’s nothing wrong with this in itself – I have nothing against it *per se* – it’s not playing to MMOs’ strengths. There are lots of things casual games can do, but some things *only* MMOs can do. Rewarding achievement too much drives away non-achievers and ultimately, as a result, achievers too (Bartle, 1996). There may be more people playing them overall, but at a price: MMOs will have lost their soul, and people will wonder why it was that anyone ever thought they were special. They’ll be just another kind of casual game.

Yes, as things stand this fate does await *LOTRO*.

The textual world *MUD2* has a pair of pointers (a baton and a bow); if you wave one, it teleports you to the other, so long as that other is not in someone's possession. *MUD2* also has rivers that flow; if you drop something in a river and it floats, it will be carried downstream. A small such river lies at the bottom of a well. One player dropped the baton down the well to see what would happen. It floated away and caught on a grille; when he waved the bow, he found himself in a secret room. The river was too fast-flowing to swim in, so the only way to get there was the baton/bow teleport trick. As the baton was in his possession, that meant he was in a room inaccessible to anyone else. He was completely safe from attack there.

MUD2 also has a keg of gunpowder. If it catches fire, it explodes; if it's wet, however, it won't explode. It's meant to be used for shooting a cannon at a treasure room door at the end of a long quest; this is what it was designed to do, but the fact that it has explosive properties means it was always open for players to find other uses for it. One player, in possession of the keg, did indeed decide to do something else with it instead. He put it in a coracle, along with a burning brand, and dropped it down the well. The coracle floated down the river to the secret room. Along the way, it caught fire from the brand. Before it could sink, the fire spread to the keg, which shortly after blew up – killing the person with the baton who was resting there.

So, not quite as safe as he thought, was it?

What's lacking in today's MMOs is emergence.

In theory, so long as a set of sub-systems is sufficiently rich in potential interactions, none of them have to be rooted in reality at all: a fictional world could drive emergence through its fiction, if it were sufficiently deep and varied. However, in practice the more abstract the virtual world, the fewer sub-systems there are to interact, and therefore the lower the opportunity for emergence. Short-cuts and other labour-saving conveniences are abstractions: they have their place, but each one that is added reduces the emergent potential of the virtual world. Take away too much without replacing it in the fiction, and an MMO ceases to *live*. It merely exists.

Deferring to the real instead of to the convenient would allow for spontaneity, invention, new gameplay, new social interactions – everything that makes MMOs MMOs. The more detail there is, the more that can happen which is not directly coded for, therefore the more occasion there is for players to play in whatever way is *right for them*.

Players will, of course, not necessarily be fond of a virtual world which is more

realistic than they are used to; they like their mini-maps and their telepathic communication and their ability to swim in full armour²⁵. However, the relentless, progressive stylisation of MMO worlds is unsustainable: eventually, even diehards will realise that something has to give; that over-evolution must reboot through revolution. The point at which it reboots to is as yet undetermined, but it *will* happen.

Ideally, a virtual world should operate fine at a naïve level, for those not concerned about such matters, but yield further depth to those who seek more. It doesn't have to be one or the other; it can be a range. MMOs are wondrous at addressing great swathes of human needs and desires simultaneously; they should be allowed to do so, rather than be constrained as pale reflections of their true selves.

Conclusion

When MMOs are described as “realistic”, two things are being rated: their consistency with their fiction; their consistency with their non-fiction. In the past, the non-fiction part meant reality, however this view has changed over time and now refers to a consensus, paradigmatic view of what an MMO “should” be. Sadly, this is not maintainable in the long term without losing some of the features that make MMOs different and special. This is not to denigrate what MMOs are becoming, which are as valid a form of game as any other; however, it is to warn of the realignment that must eventually come when people once again seek what MMOs once offered (but do so no longer).

LOTRO benefits from a particularly strong fiction which it adheres to beyond the call of duty. This means it is able to uphold its immersiveness despite the drip, drip, drip that is gradually diluting its non-fiction. Ultimately, though, it faces a choice: does it draw a line, and stop bowing to changes in the paradigm even though players may complain; or does it go with the flow and replace its MMO aesthetic with a more casual one?

Or does it reboot with *LOTRO 2*? That also works!

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¹ Assuming they survived exposure to what for them would be *LOTRO*'s impossibly detailed graphics, in addition to any unpleasant side-effects resulting from rending the space-time continuum.

² Not even if you close your eyes and wish *really hard*.

³ Few in number are the players who have stormed out of a game of *Chess* complaining that it in no way represented how a battle between opposing medieval armies would *really* proceed.

⁴ Compare these two definitions from *The MUDspeke Dictionary*, circa 1992:

<http://www.mud.co.uk/muse/unrealistic.htm>

<http://www.mud.co.uk/muse/inconsistent.htm> (sense 2).

⁵ If you believe you *are* Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo, I'm sorry, you're mistaken.

⁶ Sometimes, the mechanism even exists. *LOTRO* has a "broken leg" animation (the same one used for undead movement) for when people fall from a low height. When they fall from a great height out of an instance, though, it's Morale failure. Yes, I do speak from bitter, personal experience...

⁷ And historically accurate...

⁸ For definitions of "boring" agreed upon between designers and players; *eg.* moving armies is fun but moving supplies to armies is not fun.

⁹ If there is an obvious discrepancy – snow in a desert, say – then the assumption should be that it’s been put there deliberately by the designer as a clue that All Is Not What It Seems, rather than because the designer didn’t think the combination was odd.

¹⁰ Religious people may wish to add one or more deities into the mix, too.

¹¹ Some did allow for lavatorial activities under other circumstances, though. For example, suppose you wanted to put out a fire but you didn’t have any water: if you had drunk enough earlier, then you could use the store in your bladder to do it. Score extra points for being realistic if the option is only practical for male characters, and even more if you can urinate into a container and empty that on the fire instead.

¹² Well, there is another reason – someone may have obtained a patent on the obvious – but this isn’t something that has concerned designers to date.

¹³ The first three are handled in a realistic fashion by the single-player game *Mount & Blade*, for example.

¹⁴ I haven’t seen this contract, however I did work on the second attempt to make *LOTR* into an MMO (*LOTRO* is the fourth) so do know what is typically present in such contracts.

¹⁵ This isn’t to say that the fact the token gestures were made isn’t significant; most MMOs don’t even go this far with their nods in the direction of reality. At least *LOTRO* tries to be there in spirit.

¹⁶ This is something in which Tolkien himself placed great store, regarding it as an essential part of the process of what he called *mythopoeia* – the creation of constructed worlds and their associated mythology.

¹⁷ For a selection, see William J. Beaty: “Science Myths in K-6 Textbooks and Popular Culture”. 1996. <http://amasci.com/miscon/miscon.html>

¹⁸ Most of whom probably don’t turn them off, but it’s the *principle* of the thing...

¹⁹ It’s helped by the fact that in the later stages of play, text overtakes graphics in its immersive qualities.

²⁰ *LOTRO* did have more of this kind of thing initially, but has been subject to a gradual streamlining over time. For example, with the *Siege of Mirkwood* expansion, weapon speeds were normalised by type of weapon, whereas before each weapon had its own individual speed.

²¹ Post-modernists could consider this as an example of *hyperrealism*, however I’m making no such claims myself because if I did then it wouldn’t be.

²² In the language of Cognitive Psychology, the MMO paradigm is acting as an *interpretive schema* for the player.

²³ It’s actually more complex than this, because of pressure on designers to give players what is short-term good but long-term bad – see (Bartle 2004) for the ghastly details.

²⁴ Note that keeping things like foodstuffs and plants in a bank isn’t exactly realistic either, but teleporting things from your backpack to your safety deposit box is definitely worse.

²⁵ This isn’t to say that you couldn’t have these in an MMO, so long as the fiction sustained them. However, it would have to be strong fiction – “this is magic, super-light armour” works fine until a mage asks why they can’t wear it. Interestingly, the first virtual world, *MUD1*, was criticised for having telepathy (its tell command, of which *LOTRO*’s /tell is a direct descendent); one of its immediate successors, a Science Fiction world called *Federation II*, had communicators as a covering fiction, much to *MUD1*’s chagrin.