HEARTS, CLUBS, DIAMONDS, SPADES: PLAYERS WHO SUIT MUDS

Richard Bartle[1]
MUSE Ltd, Colchester, Essex.
United Kingdom.
richard@mud.co.uk

ABSTRACT
Four approaches to playing MUDs are identified and described. These approaches may arise from the inter-relationship of two dimensions of playing style: action versus interaction, and world-oriented versus player-oriented. An account of the dynamics of player populations is given in terms of these dimensions, with particular attention to how to promote balance or equilibrium. This analysis also offers an explanation for the labelling of MUDs as being either “social” or “gamelike”.

PREFACE
Most MUDs can trace their lineage directly back to Trubshaw’s 1978 game (Bartle, 1990b; Burka, 1995) and, perhaps because of this heritage, the vast majority are regarded as “games” by their “players”. For the convenience of its readers, this paper continues to view MUDs in this tradition; however, it should be noted that MUDs can be of considerable value in non-game (ie. ”serious”) applications (Bruckman, 1994a; Kort, 1991; Bruckman & Resnick, 1993; Curtis & Nichols, 1993; Evard, 1993; Fanderclai, 1995; Riner & Clodius, 1995; Moock, 1996). Indeed, the thrust of this paper emphasises those factors which should be borne in mind when attempting to create a stable MUD in general, whatever the application; it is only the terminology which is that of “fun” MUDs, not the subject matter. In any case, even those MUDs which are built, from the ground up, to be absolutely straight are still treated by users as if they were games in some respects, eg. by choosing whimsical names rather than using their real ones (Roush, 1993).

It is worthwhile considering for a moment whether MUDs (as they are generally played) really are games, or whether they’re something else. People have many recreational activities available to them, and perhaps MUDs fit some other category better? Looking up the word “game” in a dictionary of synonyms (Urdang
& Manser, 1980) elicits three related nouns: “pastime”, “sport” and “entertainment” (a fourth, “amusement”, is the general class of which the others are all examples). So it might be useful to ask:

Are MUDs

- games? Like chess, tennis, AD&D?
- pastimes? Like reading, gardening, cooking?
- sports? Like huntin’, shootin’, fishin’?
- entertainments? Like nightclubs, TV, concerts?

Or are they a combination of all four? Perhaps individual players even see the same MUD differently from each another?

These questions will be returned to at the end of this paper, along with some proposed answers.

A SIMPLE TAXONOMY

This work grew out of a long, heated discussion which ran from November 1989 to May 1990 between the wizzes (ie. highly experienced players, of rank wizard or witch) on one particular commercial MUD in the UK (Bartle, 1985). The debate was sparked by the question “What do people want out of a MUD?”, and comprised several hundred bulletin-board postings, some of considerable length, typically concerning what the players liked, what they didn’t like, why they played, and changes they would like to see to “improve” the game. Some 15 individuals took a major part, with perhaps another 15 adding their comments from time to time; this comprised almost the entire set of active wizzes during that period. Although at times the debate became quite intense, never did it lapse into the flaming which typically ends most open-ended, multi-speaker, online discussions.

The fact that the people contributing to this argument were the most advanced players in a MUD which allowed player-killing might, on the face of it, be taken as evidence that they would probably prefer more “gamelike” aspects over “social” ones. However, this was not the case: the MUD in question had players of all types in it, even at wiz level. (Later in this paper, an analysis is given as to how such a MUD can come to be).

When the participants had finally run out of new things to say, it became time for me (as senior administrator) to summarise. Abstracting the various points that had been raised, a pattern emerged; people habitually found the same kinds of thing about the game “fun”, but there were several (four, in fact) sub-groupings into
which opinion divided. Most players leaned at least a little to all four, but each tended to have some particular overall preference. The summary was generally well received by those who had participated in the debate.

Note that although this MUD was one in which player-killing was allowed, the taxonomy which is about to be described does (as will be explained later) apply equally to “social” MUDs. The advice concerning changes which can be made to affect the player make-up of a MUD is, however, less useful to social MUDs, or to ones with a heavy role-playing component. Also, the original discussion concerned only non-administrative aspects of MUDding; people who might play MUDs to learn object-oriented programming, for example, are therefore not addressed by this paper.

The four things that people typically enjoyed personally about MUDs were:

i) Achievement within the game context.

Players give themselves game-related goals, and vigorously set out to achieve them. This usually means accumulating and disposing of large quantities of high-value treasure, or cutting a swathe through hordes of mobiles (ie. monsters built in to the virtual world).

ii) Exploration of the game.

Players try to find out as much as they can about the virtual world. Although initially this means mapping its topology (ie. exploring the MUD’s breadth), later it advances to experimentation with its physics (ie. exploring the MUD's depth).

iii) Socialising with others.

Players use the game’s communicative facilities, and apply the role-playing that these engender, as a context in which to converse (and otherwise interact) with their fellow players.

iv) Imposition upon others.

Players use the tools provided by the game to cause distress to (or, in rare circumstances, to help) other players. Where permitted, this usually involves acquiring some weapon and applying it enthusiastically to the persona of another player in the game world.
So, labelling the four player types abstracted, we get: achievers, explorers, socialisers and killers. An easy way to remember these is to consider suits in a conventional pack of cards: achievers are Diamonds (they’re always seeking treasure); explorers are Spades (they dig around for information); socialisers are Hearts (they empathise with other players); killers are Clubs (they hit people with them).

Naturally, these areas cross over, and players will often drift between all four, depending on their mood or current playing style. However, my experience having observed players in the light of this research suggests that many (if not most) players do have a primary style, and will only switch to other styles as a (deliberate or subconscious) means to advance their main interest.

Looking at each player type in more detail, then:

i) Achievers regard points-gathering and rising in levels as their main goal, and all is ultimately subserviant to this. Exploration is necessary only to find new sources of treasure, or improved ways of wringing points from it. Socialising is a relaxing method of discovering what other players know about the business of accumulating points, that their knowledge can be applied to the task of gaining riches. Killing is only necessary to eliminate rivals or people who get in the way, or to gain vast amounts of points (if points are awarded for killing other players).

Achievers say things like:

"I'm busy."
"Sure, I'll help you. What do I get?"
"So how do YOU kill the dragon, then?"
"Only 4211 points to go!"

ii) Explorers delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them. They try progressively esoteric actions in wild, out-of-the-way places, looking for interesting features (ie. bugs) and figuring out how things work. Scoring points may be necessary to enter some next phase of exploration, but it’s tedious, and anyone with half a brain can do it. Killing is quicker, and might be a constructive exercise in its own right, but it causes too much hassle in the long run if the deceased return to seek retribution. Socialising can be informative as a source of new ideas to try out, but most of what people say is irrelevant or old hat. The real fun comes only from discovery, and making the most complete set of maps in existence.

Explorers say things like:
"Hi!"
"Yeah, well, I'm having trouble with my boyfriend."
"What happened? I missed it, I was talking."
"Really? Oh no! Gee, that's terrible! Are you sure? Awful, just awful!"

iii) Socialisers are interested in people, and what they have to say. The game is merely a backdrop, a common ground where things happen to players. Inter-player relationships are important: empathising with people, sympathising, joking, entertaining, listening; even merely observing people play can be rewarding - seeing them grow as individuals, maturing over time. Some exploration may be necessary so as to understand what everyone else is talking about, and points-scoring could be required to gain access to neat communicative spells available only to higher levels (as well as to obtain a certain status in the community). Killing, however, is something only ever to be excused if it’s a futile, impulsive act of revenge, perpetrated upon someone who has caused intolerable pain to a dear friend. The only ultimately fulfilling thing is not how to rise levels or kill hapless drags; it’s getting to know people, to understand them, and to form beautiful, lasting relationships.

Socialisers say things like:

iv) Killers get their kicks from imposing themselves on others. This may be “nice”, ie. busybody do-gooding, but few people practice such an approach because the rewards (a warm, cosy inner glow, apparently) aren’t very substantial. Much more commonly, people attack other players with a view to killing off their personae (hence the name for this style of play). The more massive the distress caused, the greater the killer’s joy at having caused it. Normal points-scoring is usually required so as to become powerful enough to begin causing havoc in earnest, and exploration of a kind is necessary to discover new and ingenious ways to kill people. Even socialising is sometimes worthwhile beyond taunting a recent victim, for example in finding out someone’s playing habits, or discussing tactics with
fellow killers. They’re all just means to an end, though; only in the knowledge that a real person, somewhere, is very upset by what you’ve just done, yet can themselves do nothing about it, is there any true adrenalin-shooting, juicy fun.

Killers says things like:

"Ha!"
"Coward!"
"Die!"
"Die! Die! Die!"

(Killers are people of few words).

How many players typically fall within each area depends on the MUD. If, however, too many gravitate to one particular style, the effect can be to cause players of other persuasions to leave, which in turn may feed back and reduce the numbers in the first category. For example, too many killers will drive away the achievers who form their main prey; this in turn will mean that killers will stop playing, as they’ll have no worthwhile victims (players considered by killers to be explorers generally don’t care about death, and players considered to be socialisers are too easy to pose much of a challenge). These direct relationships are discussed in more detail towards the end of this paper.

For the most part, though, the inter-relationships between the various playing styles are more subtle: a sharp reduction in the number of explorers for whatever reason could mean a gradual reduction in achievers, who get bored if they’re not occasionally told of different hoops they can jump through for points; this could affect the number of socialisers (the fewer players there are, the less there is to talk about), and it would certainly lower the killer population (due to a general lack of suitable victims).

Making sure that a game doesn’t veer off in the wrong direction and lose players can be difficult; administrators need to maintain a balanced relationship between the different types of player, so as to guarantee their MUD’s “feel”. Note that I am not advocating any particular form of equalibrium: it is up to the game administrators themseles to decide what atmosphere they want their MUD to have, and thus define the point at which it is “balanced” (although the effort required to maintain this desired state could be substantial). Later, this paper considers means by which a MUD can be pushed in different directions, either to restore an earlier balance between the player types, to define a new target set of relationships between the player types, or to cause the interplay between the player types to break down entirely. However, first a means is required of formally linking the four
principal playing styles into aspects of a unified whole; this helps account for
different degrees of adherence to particular styles, and aids visualisation of what
"altering the balance" of a MUD might actually mean.

**INTEREST GRAPH**

Consider the following abstract graph:

The axes of the graph represent the source of players’ interest in a MUD. The x-axis
goes from an emphasis on players (left) to an emphasis on the environment (right);
the y-axis goes from acting with (bottom) to acting on (top). The four extreme
corners of the graph show the four typical playing preferences associated with each
quadrant. To see how the graph works, it is appropriate to consider each of the four
styles in detail:

i) Achievers are interested in doing things to the game, ie. in ACTING on the
WORLD. It’s the fact that the game environment is a fully-fledged world in which
they can immerse themselves that they find compelling; its being shared with other
people merely adds a little authenticity, and perhaps a competitive element. The
point of playing is to master the game, and make it do what you want it to do; there’s
nothing intrinsically worthwhile in rooting out irrelevant details that will never be
of use, or in idling away your life with gossip.

Achievers are proud of their formal status in the game’s built-in level hierarchy,
and of how short a time they took to reach it.
ii) Explorers are interested in having the game surprise them, i.e. in INTERACTING with the WORLD. It’s the sense of wonder which the virtual world imbues that they crave for; other players add depth to the game, but they aren’t essential components of it, except perhaps as sources of new areas to visit. Scoring points all the time is a worthless occupation, because it defies the very open-endedness that makes a world live and breathe. Most accomplished explorers could easily rack up sufficient points to reach the top, but such one-dimensional behaviour is the sign of a limited intellect.

Explorers are proud of their knowledge of the game’s finer points, especially if new players treat them as founts of all knowledge.

iii) Socialisers are interested in INTERACTING with other PLAYERS. This usually means talking, but it can extend to more exotic behaviour. Finding out about people and getting to know them is far more worthy than treating them as fodder to be bossed around. The game world is just a setting; it’s the characters that make it so compelling.

Socialisers are proud of their friendships, their contacts and their influence.

iv) Killers are interested in doing things to people, i.e. in ACTING on other PLAYERS. Normally, this is not with the consent of these “other players” (even if, objectively, the interference in their play might appear “helpful”), but killers don’t care; they wish only to demonstrate their superiority over fellow humans, preferably in a world which serves to legitimise actions that could mean imprisonment in real life. Accumulated knowledge is useless unless it can be applied; even when it is applied, there’s no fun unless it can affect a real person instead of an emotionless, computerised entity.

Killers are proud of their reputation and of their oft-practiced fighting skills.

The “interest graph” is a representational structure which can chart what players find of interest in a MUD. The axes can be assigned a relative scale reflecting the ratio of an individual’s interest between the two extremes that it admits. Thus, for example, someone who thinks that the people who are in the world are maybe twice as important as the the world itself would lie on a vertical line intersecting the x-axis at a point 1/6 of the distance from the origin to the left edge; if they had little interest in bending the game to their will, preferring their actions to have some give and take, then they would also lie on a horizontal line at the bottom of the y-axis. The intersection of the two lines would put them in the socialiser quadrant, with leanings to explorer.
It is, of course, possible to analyse the behaviour of individual players quantitatively by processing transcripts of their games. Unfortunately, this is very difficult to do except for very limited domains (eg. forms of communication (Cherny, 1995a; Cherny, 1995b)). An alternative approach might simply be to ask the players what they themselves like about a particular MUD: even a short questionnaire, completed anonymously, can give a fair indication of what players find enjoyable (Emert, 1993). Such information can then be used to determine the make-up of the MUD’s player base, so that in times of falling player numbers the current composition could be compared against some earlier ideal, and remedial action taken to redress the imbalance. This “ideal” configuration would, however, be specific to that particular MUD, and its precise form is therefore not addressed here. Instead, the more general issue of how to alter the balance between player types is considered, along with the gross effects that can be expected to follow from having done so.

**CHANGING THE PLAYER TYPE BALANCE**

A stable MUD is one in which the four principal styles of player are in equilibrium. This doesn’t imply that there are the same number of players exhibiting each style; rather, it means that over time the proportion of players for each style remains roughly constant, so that the balance between the the various types remains the same. Other factors are important, to do with the rate at which new players arrive and overall player numbers, but their consideration is not within the brief of this paper; the interaction between players of different types is within its brief, however, and is discussed in some detail later.

The actual point of balance (ie. whereabouts in the interest graph the centre of gravity of the individual players’ points lies) can vary quite enormously; it is up to individual administrators to determine where they want it to lie, and to make any programming or design changes necessary to ensure that this is where it actually does. What kind of strategies, though, can be employed to achieve this task?

In order to answer this question, consider the interest graph. If it is regarded as a plane in equilibrium, it can be tilted in a number of ways to favour different areas. Usually, this will be at the expense of some other (opposite) area, but not necessarily. Although tilting can in theory occur along any line in the plane, it makes sense (at least initially) to look at what happens when the tilt lines coincide with the x and y axes if the graph.

What follows, then, is a brief examination of means by which a MUD can be adjusted so as to favour the various extremes of the interest graph, and what would happen if each approach were taken to the limit:
PLAYERS
Putting the emphasis on players rather than the game is easy - you just provide the system with lots of communication commands and precious little else. The more the scales are tipped towards players, though, the less of a MUD you have and the more of a CB-style chatline. Beyond a certain point, the game can't provide a context for communication, and it ceases to be a viable virtual world: it's just a comms channel for the real world. At this stage, when all sense of elsewhere-presence is lost, you no longer have a MUD.

WORLD
Tilting the game towards the world rather than its inhabitants is also easy: you simply make it so big and awkward to traverse that no-one ever meets anyone in it; alternatively, you can ensure that if they do meet up, then there are very few ways in which they an interact. Although this can result in some nice simulations, there's a loss of motivation implicit within it: anyone can rack up points given time, but there's not the same sense of achievement as when it's done under pressure from competing players. And what use is creating beautifully-crafted areas anyway, if you can't show them to people? Perhaps if computer-run personae had more AI a MUD could go further in this direction (Mauldin, 1994), but it couldn't (yet) go all the way (as authors of single-player games have found (Caspian-Kaufman, 1995)). Sometimes, you just do want to tell people real-world things - you have a new baby, or a new job, or your cat has died. If there's no-one to tell, or no way to tell them, you don't have a MUD.

INTERACTING
Putting the emphasis on interaction rather than action can also go a long way. Restricting the freedom of players to choose different courses of action is the mechanism for implementing it, so they can only follow a narrow or predetermined development path. Essentially, it's MUD-as-theatre: you sit there being entertained, but not actually participating much. You may feel like you're in a world, but it's one in which you're paralysed. If the bias is only slight, it can make a MUD more "nannyish", which newcomers seem to enjoy, but pushing it all the way turns it into a radio set. Knowledge may be intrinsically interesting (ie. trivia), but it's meaningless unless it can be applied. If players can't play, it's not a MUD.

ACTING
If the graph is redrawn to favour doing-to over doing-with, the game quickly becomes boring. Tasks are executed repeatedly, by rote. There's always monotony, never anything new, or, if these is something new, it's of the "man versus random number generator" variety. People do need to be able to put into practice what
they’ve learned, but they also need to be able to learn it in the first place! Unless the one leads to the other, it’s only a matter of time before patience is exhausted and the players give up. Without depth, you have no MUD.

From the above list of ways to tilt the interest graph, a set of strategems can be composed to help MUD administrators shift the focus of their games in whatever particular direction they choose. Some of these strategems are simply a question of management: if you don’t tell people what communication commands there are, for example, people will be less likely to use them all. Although such approaches are good for small shifts in the way a MUD is played, the more powerful and absolute method is to consider *programming* changes (programming being the “nature” of a MUD, and administration being the “nurture”).

Here, then, are the programming changes which administrators might wish to consider in order to shape their MUD:

**Ways to emphasise PLAYERS over WORLD:**

- add more communication facilities
- add more player-on-player commands (eg. transitive ones like TICKLE or CONGRATULATE, or commands to form and maintain closed groups of personae)
- make communication facilities easy and intuitive
- decrease the size of the world
- increase the connectivity between rooms
- maximise the number of simultaneous players
- restrict building privileges to a select few
- cut down on the number of mobiles

**Ways to emphasise WORLD over PLAYERS:**

- have only basic communication facilities
- have few ways that players can do things to other players
- make building facilities easy and intuitive
- maximise the size of the world (ie. add breadth)
- use only “rational” room connections in most cases
- grant building privileges to many
- have lots of mobiles

**Ways to emphasise INTERACTING over ACTING:**
- make help facilities produce vague information
- produce cryptic hints when players appear stuck
- maximise the effects of commands (ie. add depth)
- lower the rewards for achievement
- have only a shallow level/class system
- produce amusing responses for amusing commands
- edit all room descriptions for consistent atmosphere
- limit the number of commands available in any one area
- have lots of small puzzles that can be solved easily
- allow builders to add completely new commands

Ways to emphasise ACTING over INTERACTING:

- provide a game manual
- include auto-map facilities
- include auto-log facilities
- raise the rewards for achievement
- have an extensive level/class system
- make commands be applicable wherever they might reasonably have meaning
- have large puzzles, that take over an hour to complete
- have many commands relating to fights
- only allow building by top-quality builders

These strategies can be combined to encourage or discourage different styles of play. To appeal to achievers, for example, one approach might be to introduce an extensive level/class system (so as to provide plenty of opportunity to reward investment of time) and to maximise the size of the world (so there is more for them to achieve). Note that the “feel” of a MUD is derived from the position on the interest graph of the MUD’s players, from which a “centre of gravity” can be approximated. It is therefore sometimes possible to make two changes simultaneously which have “opposite” effects, altering how some individuals experience the MUD but not changing how the MUD feels overall. For example, adding large puzzles (to emphasise ACTING) and adding small puzzles (to emphasise INTERACTING) would encourage both pro-ACTING and pro-INTERACTING players, thereby keeping the MUD’s centre of gravity in the same place while tending to increase total player numbers. In general, though, these strategems should not be used as a means to attract new players; strategems should only be selected from one set per axis.
The effects of the presence (or lack of it) of other types of player are also very important, and can be used as a different way to control relative population sizes. The easiest (but, sadly, most tedious) way to discuss the interactions which pertain between the various player types is to enumerate the possible combinations and consider them independently; this is the approach adopted by this paper.

First, however, it is pertinent to discuss the ways that players generally categorise MUDs today.

**THE SOCIAL VERSUS GAMELIKE DEBATE**

Following the introduction of TinyMUD (Aspnes, 1989), in which combat wasn’t even implemented, players now tend to categorise individual MUDs as either “social” or “gamelike” (Carton, 1995). In terms of the preceding discussion, “social” means that the games are heavily weighted to the area below the x-axis, but whether “gamelike” means the games are weighted heavily above the x-axis, or merely balanced on it, is a moot point. Players of social MUDs might suggest that “gamelike” means a definite bias on and above the x-axis, because from their perspective any explicit element of competitiveness is “too much”. Some (but not most) players of gamelike MUDs could disagree, pointing out that their MUDs enjoy rich social interactions between the players despite the fact that combat is allowed.

So strongly is this distinction felt, particularly among social MUDders, that many of their newer participants don’t regard themselves as playing “MUDs” at all, insisting that this term refers only to combat-oriented games, with which they don’t wish to be associated. The rule-of-thumb applied is server type, so, for example, LPMUD => gamelike, MOO => social; this is despite the fact that each of these systems is of sufficient power and flexibility that it could probably be used to implement an interpreter for the other one!

Consequently, there are general Internet-related books with chapter titles like “Interactive Multiuser Realities: MUDs, MOOs, MUCKs and MUSHes” (Poirier, 1994) and “MUDs, MUSHes, and Other Role-Playing Games” (Eddy, 1994). This fertile ground is where the term “MU**” (Norrish, 1995) originates - as an attempt to fill the void left by assigning the word “MUD” to gamelike (or "player-killing") MUDs; its deliberate use can therefore reasonably be described as a political act (Bruckman, 1992).

This attitude misses the point, however. Although social MUDs may be a major branch on the MUD family tree, they are, nevertheless, still on it, and are therefore still MUDs. If another overarching term is used, then it will only be a matter of time
before someone writes a combat-oriented server called "KillerMU*" or whatever, and cause the wound to reopen. Denial of history is not, in general, a wise thing to do.

Besides, social MUDs do have their killers (ie. people who fall into that area of the interest graph). Simply because explicit combat is prohibited, there is nevertheless plenty of opportunity to cause distress in other ways. To list a few: virtual rape (Dibbell, 1993; Reid, 1994); general sexual harrassment (Rosenberg, 1992); deliberate fracturing of the community (Whitlock, 1994a); vexatious litigancy (Whitlock, 1994b). Indeed, proper management of a MUD insists that contingency plans and procedures are already in place such that antisocial behaviour can be dealt with promptly when it occurs (Bruckman, 1994b).

Social MUDs do have their achievers, too: people who regard building as a competitive act, and can vie to have the "best" rooms in the MUD (Clodius, 1994), or who seek to acquire a large quota for creating ever-more objects (Farmer, Morningstar & Crockford, 1994). The fact that a MUD might not itself reward such behaviour should, of course, naturally foster a community of players who are primarily interested in talking and listening, but there nevertheless will still be killers and achievers around - in the same way that there will be socialisers and explorers in even the most bloodthirsty of MUDs.

Researchers have tended to use a more precise distinction than the players, in terms of a MUD's similarity to (single-user) adventure games. Amy Bruckman's observation that:

"there are two basic types [of MUD]: those which are like adventure games, and those which are not"

(Bruckman, 1992)

is the most succinct and unarguable expression of this dichotomy. However, in his influential paper on MUDs, Pavel Curtis states:

"Three major factors distinguish a MUD from an Adventure-style computer game, though:

- A MUD is not goal-oriented; it has no beginning or end, no 'score', and no notion of 'winning' or 'success'. In short, even though users of MUDs are commonly called players, a MUD isn't really a game at all.
- A MUD is extensible from within; a user can add new objects to the database such as rooms, exits, 'things', and notes. [...]"
This definition explicitly rules out MUDs as adventure games - indeed, it claims that they are not games at all. This is perhaps too tight a definition, since the very first MUD was most definitely programmed to be a game (I know, because I programmed it to be one!). The second point, which states that MUDs must involve building, is also untrue of many MUDs; in particular, commercial MUDs often aim for a high level of narrative consistency (which isn’t conducive to letting players add things unchecked), and, if they have a graphical front-end, it is also inconvenient if new objects appear that generate no images. However, the fact that Curtis comes down on the side of “social” MUDs to bear the name “MUD” at least recognises that these programs are MUDs, which is more than many “MU*” advocates are prepared to admit.

This issue of “social or gamelike” will be returned to presently, with an explanation of exactly why players of certain MUDs which are dubbed “gamelike” might find a binary distinction counter-intuitive.

**PLAYER INTERACTIONS**

What follows is a brief explanation of how players predominantly of one type view those other players whom they perceive to be predominantly of one type. Warning: these notes concern stereotypical players, and are not to be assumed to be true of any individual player who might otherwise exhibit the common traits of one or more of the player classes.

The effects of increasing and decreasing the various populations is also discussed, but this does not take into account physical limitations on the amount of players involved. Thus, for example, if the number of socialisers is stated to have “no effect” on the number of achievers, that disregards the fact that there may be an absolute maximum number of players that the MUD can comfortably hold, and the socialisers may be taking up slots which achievers could otherwise have filled. Also, the knock-on effects of other interactions are not discussed at this stage: a game with fewer socialisers means the killers will seek out more achievers, for example, so there is a secondary effect of having fewer achievers even though there is no primary effect. This propagation of influences is, however, examined in detail afterwards, when the first-level dynamics have been laid bare.
ACHIEVERS V. ACHIEVERS

Achievers regard other achievers as competition to be beaten (although this is typically friendly in nature, rather than cut-throat). Respect is given to those other achievers who obviously are extraordinarily good, but typically achievers will cite bad luck or lack of time as reasons for not being as far advanced in the game as their contemporaries.

That said, achievers do often co-operate with one another, usually to perform some difficult collective goal, and from these shared experiences can grow deep, enduring friendships which may surpass in intensity those commonly found among individuals other groups. This is perhaps analogous to the difference between the bond that soldiers under fire share and the bond that friends in a bar share.

Achievers do not need the presence of any other type of player in order to be encouraged to join a MUD: they would be quite happy if the game were empty but for them, assuming it remained a challenge (although some do feel a need to describe their exploits to anyone who will listen). Because of this, a MUD can’t have too many achievers, physical limitations excepted.

ACHIEVERS V. EXPLORERS

Achievers tend to regard explorers as losers: people who have had to resort to tinkering with the game mechanics because they can’t cut it as a player. Exceptionally good explorers may be elevated to the level of eccentric, in much the same way that certain individuals come to be regarded as gurus by users of large computer installations: what they do is pointless, but they’re useful to have around when you need to know something obscure, fast. They can be irritating, and they rarely tell the whole truth (perhaps because they don’t know it?), but they do have a place in the world.

The overall number of explorers has only a marginal effect on the population of achievers. In essence, more explorers will mean that fewer of the really powerful objects will be around around for the achievers to use, the explorers having used their arcane skills to obtain them first so as to use them in their diabolical experiments... This can cause achievers to become frustrated, and leave. More importantly, perhaps, the number of explorers affects the rate of advancement of achievers, because it determines whether or not they have to work out all those tiresome puzzles themselves. Thus, more explorers will lead to a quicker rise through the ranks for achievers, which will tend to encourage them (if not overdone).

ACHIEVERS V. SOCIALISERS
Achievers merely tolerate socialisers. Although they are good sources of general hearsay on the comings and goings of competitors, they’re nevertheless pretty much a waste of space as far as achievers are concerned. Typically, achievers will regard socialisers with a mixture of contempt, disdain, irritation and pity, and will speak to them in either a sharp or patronising manner. Occasionally, flame wars between different cliques of socialisers and achievers may break out, and these can be among the worst to stop: the achievers don’t want to lose the argument, and the socialisers don’t want to stop talking!

Changing the number of socialisers in a MUD has no effect on the number of achievers.

ACHIEVERS V. KILLERS

Achievers don’t particularly like killers. They realise that killers as a concept are necessary in order to make achievement meaningful and worthwhile (there being no way to “lose” the game if any fool can “win” just by plodding slowly unchallenged), however they don’t personally like being attacked unless it’s obvious from the outset that they’ll win. They also object to being interrupted in the middle of some grand scheme to accumulate points, and they don’t like having to arm themselves against surprise attacks every time they start to play. Achievers will, occasionally, resort to killing tactics themselves, in order to cause trouble for a rival or to reap whatever rewards the game itself offers for success, however the risks are usually too high for them to pursue such options very often.

Increasing the number of killers will reduce the number of achievers; reducing the killer population will increase the achiever population. Note, however, that those general MUDs which nevertheless allow player-killing tend to do so in the belief that in small measure it is good for the game: it promotes camaraderie, excitement and intensity of experience (and it’s the only method that players will accept to ensure that complete idiots don’t plod inexorably through the ranks to acquire a degree of power which they aren’t really qualified to wield). As a consequence, reducing the number of killers too much will be perceived as cheapening the game, making high achievement commonplace, and it will put off those achievers who are alarmed at the way any fool can “do well” just by playing poorly for long enough.

EXPLORERS V. ACHIEVERS

Explorers look on achievers as nascent explorers, who haven’t yet figured out that there’s more to life than pursuing meaningless goals. They are therefore willing to furnish them with information, although, like all experts, they will rarely tell the full story when they can legitimately give cryptic clues instead. Apart from the fact
that they sometimes get in the way, and won’t usually hand over objects that are needed for experiments, achievers can live alongside explorers without much friction.

Explorers’ numbers aren’t affected by the presence of achievers.

**EXPLORERS V. EXPLORERS**

Explorers hold good explorers in great respect, but are merciless to bad ones. One of the worst things a fellow explorer can do is to give out incorrect information, believing it to be true. Other than that, explorers thrive on telling one another their latest discoveries, and generally get along very well. Outwardly, they will usually claim to have the skill necessary to follow the achievement path to glory, but have other reasons for not doing so (eg. time, tedium, or having proven themselves already with a different persona). There are often suspicions, though, that explorers are too theoretical in most cases, and wouldn’t be able to put their ideas into practice on a day-to-day basis if they were to recast themselves in the achiever or killer mould.

Explorers enjoy the company of other explorers, and they will play more often if they have people around them to whom they can relate. Unfortunately, not many people have the type of personality which finds single-minded exploring a riveting subject, so numbers are notoriously difficult to increase. If you have explorers in a game, hold on to them!

**EXPLORERS V. SOCIALISERS**

Explorers consider socialisers to be people whom they can impress, but who are otherwise pretty well unimportant. Unless they can appreciate the explorer’s talents, they’re not really worth spending time with. There are some explorers who treat conversation as their specialist explorer subject, but these are very rare indeed; most will be polite and attentive, but they’ll find some diversion if the conversation isn’t MUD-related or if their fellow interlocutor is clearly way below them in the game-understanding stakes.

The explorer population is not directly affected by the size of the socialiser population.

**EXPLORERS V. KILLERS**

Explorers often have a grudging respect for killers, but they do find their behaviour wearisome. It’s just so annoying to be close to finishing setting up something when a killer comes along and attacks you. On the other hand, many killers do know their
trade well, and are quite prepared to discuss the finer details of it with explorers. Sometimes, an explorer may try attacking other players as an exercise, and they can be extremely effective at it. Explorers who are particularly riled by a killer may even decide to "do something about it" themselves. If they make such a decision, then it can be seriously bad news for the killer concerned: being jumped and trashed by a low-level (in terms of game rank) explorer can have a devastating effect on a killer's reputation, and turn them into a laughing stock overnight. Explorers do not, however, tend to have the venom or malice that true killers possess, nor will they continue the practice to the extent that they acquire a reputation of their own for killing.

The affect of killers on the explorer population is fairly muted, because most explorers don't particularly care if they get killed (or at least they profess not not). However, if it happens too often then they will become disgruntled, and play less frequently.

**SOCIALISERS V. ACHIEVERS**

Socialisers like achievers, because they provide the running soap opera about which the socialisers can converse. Without such a framework, there is no uniting cause to bring socialisers together (at least not initially). Note that socialisers don't particularly enjoy talking to achievers (not unless they can get them to open up, which is very difficult); they do, however, enjoy talking about them. A cynic might suggest that the relationship between socialisers and achievers is similar to that between women and men...

Increasing the achiever/socialiser ratio has only a subtle effect: socialisers may come to feel that the MUD is "all about" scoring points and killing mobiles, and some of them may therefore leave before matters "get worse". Decreasing it has little effect unless the number of active achievers drops to near zero, in which case new socialisers might find it difficult to break into established conversational groups, and thus decide to take their play elsewhere.

Note: although earlier it was stated that this paper does not address people who play MUDs for meta-reasons, eg. to learn how to program, I believe that their empirical behaviour with regard to the actions of other players is sufficiently similar to that of socialisers for the two groups to be safely bundled together when considering population dynamics.

**SOCIALISERS V. EXPLORERS**
Socialisers generally consider explorers to be sad characters who are desperately in need of a life. Both groups like to talk, but rarely about the same things, and if they do get together it’s usually because the explorer wants to sound erudite and the socialiser has nothing better to do at the time.

The number of explorers in a MUD has no effect on the number of socialisers.

**SOCIALISERS V. SOCIALISERS**

A case of positive feedback: socialisers can talk to one another on any subject for hours on end, and come back later for more. The key factor is whether there is an open topic of conversation: in a game-like environment, the MUD itself provides the context for discussion, whether it be the goings-on of other players or the feeble attempts of a socialiser to try playing it; in a non-game environment, some other subject is usually required to structure conversations, either within the software of the MUD itself (eg. building) or without it (eg. “This is a support MUD for the victims of cancer”). Note that this kind of subject-setting is only required as a form of ice-breaker: once socialisers have acquired friends, they’ll invariably find other things that they can talk about.

The more socialisers there are in a game, the more new ones will be attracted to it.

**SOCIALISERS V. KILLERS**

This is perhaps the most fractious relationship between player group types. The hatred that some socialisers bear for killers admits no bounds. Partly, this is the killers’ own fault: they go out of their way to rid MUDs of namby-pamby socialisers who wouldn’t know a weapon if one came up and hit them (an activity that killers are only too happy to demonstrate), and they will generally hassle socialisers at every opportunity simply because it’s so easy to get them annoyed. However, the main reason that socialisers tend to despise killers is that they have completely antisocial motives, whereas socialisers have (or like to think they have) a much more friendly and helpful attitude to life. The fact that many socialisers take attacks on their personae personally only compounds their distaste for killers.

It could be argued that killers do have a positive role to play from the point of view of socialisers. There are generally two defences made for their existence: 1) without killers, socialisers would have little to talk about; 2) without evil as a contrast, there is no good. The former is patently untrue, as socialisers will happily talk about anything and everything; it may be that it helps provide a catalyst for long conversations, but only if it isn’t an everyday occurrence. The second argument is more difficult to defend against (being roughly equivalent to the reason why God allows the devil to exist), however it presupposes that those who attack other
players are the only example of nasty people in a MUD. In fact, there is plenty of opportunity for players of all persuasions to behave obnoxiously to one another; killers merely do it more openly, and (if allowed) in the context of the game world.

Increasing the number of killers will decrease the number of socialisers by a much greater degree. Decreasing the number of killers will likewise greatly encourage (or, rather, fail to discourage) socialisers to play the MUD.

**KILLERS V. ACHIEVERS**

Killers regard achievers as their natural prey. Achievers are good fighters (because they’ve learned the necessary skills against mobiles), but they’re not quite as good as killers, who are more specialised. This gives the “thrill of the chase” which many killers enjoy - an achiever may actually be able to escape, but will usually succumb at some stage, assuming they don’t see sense and quit first. Achievers also dislike being attacked, which makes the experience of attacking them all the more fun; furthermore, it is unlikely that they will stop playing after being set back by a killer, and thus they can be “fed upon” again, later. The main disadvantage of pursuing achievers, however, is that an achiever can get so incensed at being attacked that they decide to take revenge. A killer may thus innocently enter a game only to find a heavily-armed achiever lying in wait, which rather puts the boot on the other foot...

Note that there is a certain sub-class of killers, generally run by wiz-level players, who have a more ethical point to their actions. In particular, their aim is to “test” players for their “suitability” to advance to the higher levels themselves. In general, such personae should not be regarded as falling into the killer category, although in some instances the ethical aspect is merely an excuse to indulge in killing sprees without fear of sanction. Rather, these killers tend to be run by people in either the achievement category (protecting their own investment) or the explorer category (trying to teach their victims how to defend themselves against *real* killers).

Increasing the number of achievers will, over time, increase the number of killers in a typically Malthusian fashion.

**KILLERS V. EXPLORERS**

Killers tend to leave explorers alone. Not only can explorers be formidable fighters (with many obscure, unexpected tactics at their disposal), but they often don’t fret about being attacked - a fact which is very frustrating for killers. Sometimes, particularly annoying explorers will simply ignore a killer’s attack, and make no attempt whatsoever to defend against it; this is the ultimate in cruelty to killers. For more long-term effects, though, a killer’s being beaten by an explorer has more impact on the game: the killer will feel shame, their reputation will suffer, and the
explorer will pass on survival tactics to everyone else. In general, then, killers will steer well clear of even half-decent explorers, except when they have emptied a game of everyone else and are so desperate for a fix that even an explorer looks tempting...

Increasing the number of explorers will slightly decrease the number of killers.

**KILLERS V. SOCIALISERS**

Killers regard socialisers with undisguised glee. It’s not that socialisers are in any way a challenge, as usually they will be pushovers in combat; rather, socialisers feel a dreadful hurt when attacked (especially if it results in the loss of their persona), and it is this which killers enjoy about it. Besides, killers tend to like to have a bad reputation, and if there’s one way to get people to talk about you, it’s to attack a prominent socialiser...

Increasing the number of socialisers will increase the number of killers, although of course the number of socialisers wouldn’t remain increased for very long if that happened.

**KILLERS V. KILLERS**

Killers try not to cross the paths of other killers, except in pre-organised challenge matches. Part of the psychology of killers seems to be that they wish to be viewed as somehow superior to other players; being killed by a killer in open play would undermine their reputation, and therefore they avoid risking it (compare Killers v Explorers). This means that nascent or wannabe killers are often put off their chosen particular career path because they themselves are attacked by more experienced killers and soundly thrashed. For this reason, it can take a very long time to increase the killer population in a MUD, even if all the conditions are right for them to thrive; killer numbers rise grindingly slowly, unless competent killers are imported from another MUD to swell the numbers artificially.

Killers will occasionally work in teams, but only as a short-term exercise; they will usually revert to stalking their victims solo in the next session they play.

There are two cases where killers might be attacked by players who, superficially, look like other killers. One of these is the “killer killer”, usually run by wiz-level players, which has been discussed earlier. The other is in the true hack-and-slash type of MUD, where the whole aim of the game is to kill other personae, and no-one particularly minds being killed because they weren’t expecting to last very long.
anyway. This type of play does not appeal to “real” killers, because it doesn’t cause people emotional distress when their personae are deleted (indeed, socialisers prefer it more than killers do). However, it’s better than nothing.

The only effect that killers have on other killers is in reducing the number of potential victims available. This, in theory, should keep the number of killers down, however in practice killers will simply attack less attractive victims instead. It takes a very drastic reduction in the number of players before established killers will decide to stop playing a MUD and move elsewhere, by which time it is usually too late to save the MUD concerned.

**DYNAMICS**

From the discussion in the previous section, it is possible to summarise the interactions between player types as follows:

To increase the number of achievers:

- reduce the number of killers, but not by too much.
- if killer numbers are high, increase the number of explorers.

To decrease the number of achievers:

- increase the number of killers.
- if killer numbers are low, reduce the number of explorers.

To increase the number of explorers:

- increase the number of explorers.

To decrease the number of explorers:

- massively increase the number of killers.

To increase the number of socialisers:

- slightly decrease the number of killers.
- increase the number of socialisers.

To decrease the number of socialisers:
• slightly increase the number of killers.
• massively increase the number of achievers.
• massively decrease the number of achievers.
• decrease the number of socialisers.

To increase the number of killers:

• increase the number of achievers.
• massively decrease the number of explorers.
• increase the number of socialisers.

To decrease the number of killers

• decrease the number of achievers.
• massively increase the number of explorers.
• decrease the number of socialisers.

What are the dynamics of this model? In other words, if players of each type were to trickle into a system, how would it affect the overall make-up of the player population?

The following diagram illustrates the flow of influence. Each arrow shows a relationship, from the blunt end to the pointed end. Ends are marked with a plus or minus to show an increase or decrease respectively; the symbols are doubled up to indicate a massive increase or decrease. Example: the line

killers + ---------> - achievers

means that increasing the number of killers will decrease the number of achievers.
A graphical version of the figure appears at the end of the paper. [2]

From this, it can be seen that the numbers of killers and achievers is basically an equilibrium: increasing the number of achievers will increase the number of killers, which will in turn dampen down the increase in the number of achievers and thereby reduce the number of excess killers.

The explorer population is almost inert: only huge numbers of killers will reduce it. It should be noted, however, that massively increasing the number of explorers is the only way to reduce the number of killers without also reducing the player numbers in other groups. Because increasing the number of explorers in a MUD generally encourages others to join (and non-explorers to experiment with exploration), this gives a positive feedback which will eventually reduce the killer population (although recall the earlier point concerning how few people are, by nature, explorers).

The most volatile group of people is that of the socialisers. Not only is it highly sensitive to the number of killers, but it has both positive and negative feedback on itself, which amplifies any changes. An increase in the number of socialisers will lead to yet more socialisers, but it will also increase the number of killers; this, in turn, will reduce the number of socialisers drastically, which will feed back into a yet greater reduction. It is possible for new socialisers to arrive in large enough quantities for a downward spiral in numbers not to be inevitable, but it is unlikely that such a system could remain viable in over a long period of time.

This analysis of the dynamics of the relationships between players leads naturally to a consideration of what configurations could be considered stable. There are four:

1) Killers and achievers in equilibrium. If the number of killers gets too high, then the achievers will be driven off, which will cause the number of killers to fall also (through lack of victims). If there aren’t enough killers, then achievers feel the
MUD isn't a sufficient challenge (there being no way to “lose” in it), and they will gradually leave; new killers could appear, attracted by the glut of potential prey, however this happens so slowly that its impact is less than that of the disaffection among achievers. Socialisers who venture out of whatever safe rooms are available eventually fall prey to killers, and leave the game. Those who stay find that there aren’t many interesting (to them) people around with whom to talk, and they too drift off. Explorers potter around, but are not a sufficient presence to affect the number of killers.

2) A MUD dominated by socialisers. Software changes to the MUD are made which prevent (or at least seriously discourage) killers from practising their craft on socialisers; incoming socialisers are encouraged by those already there, and a chain reaction starts. There are still achievers and explorers, but they are swamped by the sheer volume of socialisers. The number of socialisers is limited only by external factors, or the presence of killers masquerading as socialisers. If the population of socialisers drops below a certain critical level, then the chain reaction reverses and almost all the players will leave, however only events outside the MUD would cause that to happen once the critical mass had been reached.

3) A MUD where all groups have a similar influence (although not necessarily similar numbers). By nurturing explorers using software means (ie. giving the game great depth or "mystique", or encouraging non-explorers to dabble for a while by regularly adding new areas and features), the overall population of explorers will gradually rise, and the killer population will be held in check by them. The killers who remain do exert an influence on the number of socialisers, sufficient to stop them from going into fast-breeder mode, but insufficient to initiate an exodus. Achievers are set upon by killers often enough to feel that their achievements in the game have meaning. This is perhaps the most balanced form of MUD, since players can change their position on the interest graph far more freely: achievers can become explorers, explorers can become socialisers, socialisers can become achievers - all without sacrificing stability. However, actually attaining that stability in the first place is very difficult indeed; it requires not only a level of game design beyond what most MUDs can draw on, but time and player management skills that aren’t usually available to MUD administrators. Furthermore, the administrators need to recognise that they are aiming for a player mix of this kind in advance, because the chances of its occurring accidentally are slim.

4) A MUD with no players. The killers have killed/frightened off everyone else, and left to find some other MUD in which to ply their trade. Alternatively, a MUD structured expressly for socialisers never managed to acquire a critical mass of them.
Other types could conceivably exist, but they are very rare if they do. The dynamics model is, however, imprecise: it takes no account of outside factors which may influence player types or the relationships between them. It is thus possible that some of the more regimented MUDs (eg. role-playing MUDs, educational MUDs, group therapy MUDs) have an external dynamic (eg. fandom interest in a subject, instructions from a teacher/trainer, tolerance of others as a means to advance the self) which adds to their cohesion, and that this could make an otherwise flaky configuration hold together. So other stable MUD forms may, therefore, still be out there.

It might be argued that “role-playing” MUDs form a separate category, on a par with “gamelike” and “social” MUDs. However, I personally favour the view that role-playing is merely a strong framework within which the four types of player still operate: some people will role-play to increase their power over the game (achievers); others will do so to explore the wonder of the game world (explorers); others will do so because they enjoy interacting and co-operating within the context that the role-playing environment offers (socialisers); others will do it because it gives them a legitimate excuse to hurt other players (killers). I have not, however, undertaken a study of role-playing MUDs, and it could well be that there is a configuration of player types peculiar to many of them which would be unstable were it not for the order imposed by enforcing role-play. It certainly seems likely that robust role-playing rules could make it easier for a MUD to achieve type 3) stability, whatever.

At this point, we return to the social/gamelike MUD debate.

Ignoring the fourth (null) case from the above, it is now much easier to see why there is a schism. Left to market forces, a MUD will either gravitate towards type 1) (“gamelike”) or type 2) (“social”), depending on its administrators’ line on player-killing (more precisely: how much being “killed” annoys socialisers). However, the existence of type 3) MUDs, albeit in smaller numbers because of the difficulty of reaching the steady state, does show that it is possible to have both socialisers and achievers co-existing in significant numbers in the same MUD.

It’s very easy to label a MUD as either “hack-and-slash” or “slack-and-hash”, depending on whether or not player-killing is allowed. However, using player-killing as the only defining factor in any distinction is an over-generalisation, as it groups together type 1) and type 3) MUDs. These two types of MUD should not be considered as identical forms: the socialising which occurs in a type 3) MUD simply isn’t possible in a type 1), and as a result the sense of community in type 3) is very strong. It is no accident that type 3) MUDs are the ones preferred commercially, because they can hold onto their players for far longer than the other two forms. A
type 1) MUD is only viable commercially if there is a sufficiently large well of potential players to draw upon, because of the much greater churn rate these games have. Type 2)S have a similarly high turnover; indeed, when TinyMUD first arrived on the scene it was almost slash-and-burn, with games lasting around six months on university computers before a combination of management breakdown (brought on by player boredom) and resource hogging would force them to close down - with no other MUDs permitted on the site for perhaps years afterwards.

This explains why some MUDs perceived by socialisers to be “gamelike” can actually be warm, friendly places, while others are nasty and vicious: the former are type 3), and the latter are type 1). Players who enter the type 3)s, expecting them to be type 1)s, may be pleasantly surprised (Bruckman, 1993). However, it should be noted that this initial warm behaviour is sometimes the approach used by administrators to ensure a new player’s further participation in their particular MUD, and that, once hooked, a player may find that attitudes undergo a subtle change (Epperson, 1995).

As mentioned earlier, this paper is not intended to promote any one particular style of MUD. Whether administrators aim for type 1), 2) or 3) is up to them - they’re all MUDs, and they address different needs. However, the fact that they are all MUDs, and not “MU*s” (or any other abbreviation-of-the-day), really should be emphasised.

To summarise: “gamelike” MUDs are the ones in which the killer-achiever equilibrium has been reached, ie. type 1); “social” MUDs are the ones in which the pure-social stability point has been reached, ie. type 2), and this is the basis upon which they differ. There is a type 3) “all round” (my term) MUD, which exhibits both social and gamelike traits, however such MUDs are scarce because the conditions necessary to reach the stable point are difficult or time-consuming to arrange.

**OVERBALANCING A MUD**

Earlier, the effect of taking each axis on the interest graph to its extremes was used to give an indication of what would happen if a MUD was pushed so far that it lost its MUDness. It was noted, though, that along the axes was not the only way a MUD could be tilted.

What would happen if, in an effort to appeal to certain types of player, a MUD was overcompensated in their favour?
Tilting a MUD towards achievers would make it obsessed with gameplay. Players would spend their time looking for tactics to improve their position, and the presence of other players would become unnecessary. The result would be effectively a single-player adventure game (SUD?).

Tilting towards explorers would add depth and interest, but remove much of the activity. Spectacle would dominate over action, and again there would be no need for other players. The result of this is basically an online book.

Tilting towards socialisers removes all gameplay, and centres on communication. Eventually, all sense of the virtual world is lost, and a chatline or IRC-style CB program results.

Tilting towards killers is more difficult, because this type of player is parasitic on the other three types. The emphasis on causing grief has to be sacrificed in favour of the thrill of the chase, and bolstered by the use of quick-thinking and skill to overcome adversity in clever (but violent) ways. In other words, this becomes an arcade ("shoot 'em up") type of game.

It’s a question of balance: if something is added to a MUD to tilt the graph one way, other mechanisms will need to be in place to counterbalance it (preferably automatically). Otherwise, what results is a SUD, book, chatline or arcade game. It’s the combination that makes MUDs unique - and special. It is legitimate to say that anything which goes too far in any direction is not a MUD; it is not legitimate to say that something which doesn’t go far enough in any direction is not a MUD. So long as a system is a (text-based) multi-user virtual world, that’s enough.

**SUMMARY**
To answer the questions posed in the preface:

Are MUDs

- games? Like chess, tennis, D&D?
  Yes - to achievers.
- pastimes? Like reading, gardening, cooking?
  Yes - to explorers.
- sports? Like huntin’, shooting’, fishin’?
  Yes - to killers.
- entertainments? Like nightclubs, TV, concerts?
  Yes - to socialisers.
This paper is an April 1996 extension of an earlier article, ”Who Plays MUAs” (Bartle, 1990). As a result of this, and of the fact that I am not a trained psychologist, do not expect a conventionally rigorous approach to the subject matter.

Permission to redistribute freely for academic purposes is granted provided that no material changes are made to the text. In the figure below, green indicates increasing numbers and red indicates decreasing numbers. A red line with a green arrowhead means that decreasing numbers of the box pointed from lead to increasing numbers of the box pointed to; a red line with a red arrowhead would mean that a decrease in one leads to a decrease in the other, and so on. The thickness of the line shows the strength of the effect: thin lines mean there’s only a small effect; medium lines mean there’s an effect involving roughly equal numbers of players from both boxes; thick lines means there’s a great effect, magnifying the influence of the origin box.
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7 Superstructure

A great deal of what matters in a game takes place outside of or alongside the gameplay proper. There may be preparation before the game, crowds of people watching it, stories told about it, modifications made to it, or behavior that goes against the official or accepted practices of the game. In this chapter, we discuss various phenomena that might be thought of as somehow “outside” the game. This is in no way meant to be a value judgment, but merely a way of grouping content—many of these phenomena are just as important, if not more so, than the ones “internal” to the game.

We begin with a general discussion of the metagame: all those activities relating to the game that aren’t part of the play of the game itself, such as preparation for the game. We then talk about game conceits: themes that give the game cohesion and identity, even if they aren’t included in the rules directly. Sometimes these themes are story-based, especially in computer games, but very often they are not. We follow with a discussion of ways players can customize games, and then we look at ways players may violate expectations: whether by actually breaking the rules, or by breaking norms of “acceptable” behavior. Finally, we examine some factors that influence how long a player wants to keep playing the same game—does the game seem infinitely replayable, or does it at some point “run out” of content?

7.1 Characteristic: Metagame

The metagame is the “game outside the game.” It includes all the activities connected with the game that aren’t part of playing the game itself, such as tournament programs, online forums, magazines about the game, training and preparation players might do before the game, or even daydreaming about the game or staring lovingly at game equipment. If the game is the skeleton, the metagame is the “soft” structure outside the game, linking the game with other life goals such as status, self-expression, gaining mastery, money, socialization, or collecting. Many of the rewards for gaming come in whole or in part from the metagame, not the game itself.
The term *metagame* isn’t that common outside of hardcore gaming circles and is almost never used, for example, when discussing sports. So typically people will use the term *game* to discuss both the game proper and the metagame. But we will generally try to distinguish the two: if you are on the field trying to score a goal during a game, you’re taking part in the game of soccer; if you are practicing penalty kicks, or you are buying cleats, you are taking part in the metagame of soccer.

Hardcore gamers often use the word *metagame* in a narrower sense. If a game allows very specific preparation before the match, like building a deck in a trading card game, the “metagame” is the current environment resulting from all these preparations (e.g., perhaps people are playing a lot of fast red decks at the moment, and not many people are playing slow blue ones). With this usage, “metagaming” is game preparation done to prepare for the current environment (perhaps you’ll choose to put anti-red cards in your deck, or cards that will slow down a fast deck).\(^1\) We won’t use the word *metagame* in this more narrow sense.

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1. Note that special preparations because of a specific game environment, although especially common in games such as trading card games, exist in many other games as well. One might study specific chess openings to prepare for a certain opponent, or field a slightly different starting football team when the weather is very bad.
Some Metagame Activities

- Preparation
  - Drills
  - Reading strategy books
  - Preparing equipment (building a Magic deck, waxing your skis)
  - Discussing strategy with others
  - Formal instruction (classes, coaching)
- Hanging out with other players
  - Chatting while playing the game (happens during the game, but we group it with metagame activities because it's not a necessary part of playing the game)
  - Reading or posting in online forums
  - Reading, watching, or hearing stories of famous players
  - Watching live games or replays
  - Arguing about how you would have done something differently
  - Entering a tournament (everything involved other than the actual play during the tournament)

Some Metagame Rewards

- Status
- Socialization
- Self-expression
- Gaining mastery
- Explicit player rewards
  - Money
  - Prizes (including items usable in-game)
  - Trophies

The (broader) metagame is an extremely complicated subject, but an important one for a game designer or game critic. A great deal of the enjoyment of a game, and thus of its success or failure, comes from factors outside the game. For example, one can take a crowd of adults who would not normally enjoy rock-paper-scissors, put a tournament structure around it, and turn it into an entertaining experience. Given all the possible structures that can be added to a metagame, knowing where to put one's effort—which structures are worth adding and which give little or no benefit—is extremely important.

2. One of the authors actually did this experiment at the annual Game Developers Conference several years ago.
Player Communities
Different players will have different preferred styles of play. The most obvious distinction is casual versus serious, but communities may have preferences around rule variants, formats, times and places to play, and so on. Unless a player is playing a single-player game in complete isolation,\(^3\) she'll be influenced by some sort of community. One can think of these different communities as forming different game environments or player microclimates—environments that may vary enough as to be almost different games. A player may very well be happy in one microclimate but not enjoy another microclimate at all, for reasons that may be social or convenience-related, or that may stem from the style of play the group prefers. Sometimes a player is unaware that her enjoyment or lack thereof is coming from the microclimate, and may say “chess is great” or “chess is boring” when really it is the microclimate that is great or boring, and a different environment might lead to the opposite reaction.

So for a player to enjoy a game, finding the right player community is very important. At the most basic level, it's finding the right opponents: ones who aren't too much stronger or weaker, and whose approach to the game is similar enough to be congenial. If you play Ultimate Frisbee, say, you will probably want to be with people who are not too much more or less dextrous than you are. If you don't care to dive into the mud to catch the Frisbee, you will not want to be with people who will berate you for that choice—if you do go all-out, though, you may not want to play with people who “aren't trying.”

For games that take place in the physical world, communities are dependent on physical location. You may not have a wide choice of different Ultimate Frisbee leagues where you live (indeed, you may not have any). But for popular sports, there are often multiple leagues, often in a fairly organized way: A leagues and B leagues, leagues separated by age or gender, leagues where the teams are formed around the workplace, and so on. For boardgames and card games, the choices aren't as wide, and often not as formalized. But enter any game store and look at the postings for role-playing groups and you will see players trying to sort themselves into the right microclimates.

Online, there are bulletin boards, guild websites, wikis, and other player communities. But when it comes time to play the game itself, since geography is not a limitation, players are often thrown into one big hopper, and then some kind of player matching occurs. Perhaps players deliberately select people they already know to play with; perhaps they look at a list of games and choose to join one. More and more, though, some sort of algorithm is used to match people, although these algorithms currently use far fewer kinds of information than players use in offline matching.

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3. Note that many single-player games have communities, such as online bulletin boards that trade strategy tips, or a group of people at the office who are obsessed with *Tetris.*
When looking at a metagame, one thing to watch out for is how much it fragments player communities. Many games have deliberately built in choices about how you play them: different player settings (e.g., game speed, or starting money) when spawning a game in an RTS, different PvP battles available in an MMO, different formats to play Magic. Each new format choice is appealing, because it lets players customize their experience that much more, and there is always someone who wishes you could tweak this or that setting, or play on some new map. But too much of that, and there is the risk that none of the different formats will succeed: players will not be able to find the choice they want, or the minimum number of people required to join the game won’t be available. Smaller game communities—often physical ones—are especially vulnerable. If twelve players show up at your store to play Magic, you can run a tournament. But if half of them want to play sealed Magic, and half want to play constructed, and you need at least eight people to start a tournament, you may have nothing. And then next week they won’t come back. So it is important that there be a balance between having enough options for players to find something they like and having few enough options that players can make a choice and expect to find someone else to play with. Newer games, games that take place in the physical world, and less popular games have to be most careful about having too many formats; established games, online games, and very popular games have more leeway.

Metagame Support for Player Goals
Features of a game and its metagame can support different player goals in a variety of ways. For example, in an MMO socialization is supported in-game with chat and guild systems. Apparently simple features like the ability to create a custom chat channel (and how the channel is moderated, and whether it is persistent through logoff, and so on) can make a real difference in how well players can socialize. The basic gameplay structure of an MMO supports socialization as well: there is a lot of downtime, such as while waiting for a raid to form, and not much to do during it. That downtime has a real negative side, as lengthy downtime generally does, but the socialization benefits are large (whether it is a net win is hard to say for certain—it’s almost certainly agen-

4. Keep in mind that most players will prefer to have their second choice actually happen than have their first choice on offer but fail to take place. And for some minor format tweaks, players won’t miss them if they aren’t there—the choice to build all possible variants into a game under the theory that “it can’t hurt to have it available” and “someone might like it” is generally misguided. If your RTS has a dozen binary settings, letting your formats be all of the $2^{12}$ possible ways of playing is not a good choice. Better to carefully pick three or four choices from the $2^{12}$ possibilities and have those be your formats. Now your players can figure out which of those three or four choices they prefer, and they can hope to find a game that matches their preference.
tial). Out-of-game, there are forums, informational websites (both official and fan-created), guild websites, and so on.

**Exercise 7.1:** For various sports, give some examples of game features and metagame features that support socialization.

**Exercise 7.2:** Pick a game you know with a lot of downtime that players use to socialize. Is the downtime a net benefit or a net loss? Why? Would more downtime be better? Would less?

Human beings certainly like accumulating stuff, and again there are both in-game and out-of-game ways to support that. Some games have collecting as part of the gameplay itself (e.g., the Pokémon handheld games), which is not a metagame feature per se. Some games (Magic, golf, bicycle racing) have a great variety of equipment available for players to collect—the equipment is useful in-game, but collecting it is a metagame activity and, for some people, can become an end in itself.\(^5\)

Games can have monetary benefits as well: playing for money (poker, backgammon), tournament prizes (many games), professional play. Even the dream of such rewards can be enticing for many players—certainly far more players are inspired by the idea of making a living playing basketball than can actually do so. If professional play is out of reach, players can still make money in the metagame: repairing bikes for other people, or trading for Magic cards and then selling them on the secondary market.

Besides money, other prizes may include goods useful in ordinary life, items useful to play the game, and of course trophies. Although trophies are strictly speaking a physical good, they are really more about status than wealth. Any prize, though, can help fulfill a player’s desire for status. Wealth is powerful in this way, since saying you have won a large sum of money is more convincing to most people as a sign of achievement than almost any other prize (especially people outside of the game’s community—many a game player has finally gotten some sort of understanding and respect from his nonplaying relatives by winning a tournament with a large cash prize). Ratings, rankings, and titles are another way for players to gain respect, although of course such achievements are better understood inside the game community than outside of it. If the game has any kind of media coverage, that will increase status as well.

S. If that is all those people care about in regard to your game, and they stop playing the game itself, then you have the odd situation that they are players in your metagame but not players in your game. One might think of retailers as being in this category, but kids who collect Pokémon cards but do not play are probably a better example. These people are not necessarily bad for the game—thinking about ways to convert them into players is probably a good idea, but trying to chase them off entirely is usually a mistake.
If a player can develop signature moves, a unique play style, or even a notable personality, that can enhance his status. Poker players and sports figures do this a great deal, but it is part of almost any gaming community. These sorts of reputational benefits also provide self-expression, and sometimes gameplay benefits (e.g., intimidation) as well. Distinct player styles can arise out of the richness of the game itself if there are enough different ways to play (basketball does well here, but sprinting, say, does not). Sometimes features can be put into the game deliberately to support player expression and style, as with special titles or visible armor in an MMO.

We can graphically represent various player life goals, and how metagame features connect their achievement to the underlying game, by drawing circles for the goals and connecting lines for the supporting features (thicker lines represent stronger support for those features) (figure 7.2).

Note that depending on the limitations of the game, it can be hard to support some of these things. There is not much call in a game like roulette, say, for rating systems, professional leagues, or strategy guides. On the other hand, a richer game like soccer has enormous scope for supporting almost any goal a player might have (figure 7.3). Or, directly comparing the metagame strengths and weaknesses of the Pokémon trading card game and the Pokémon GameBoy cartridge, see figure 7.4.

6. Which is not to say they don’t nevertheless exist—but most roulette players don’t give them much thought.
Figure 7.3
Metagame diagram for soccer

Figure 7.4
Comparing the Pokémon Trading Card Game to the Pokémon Cartridge Game
Status and money are better supported by a card collection than by a cartridge collection or even the collection of Pokémon creatures in-game. On the other hand, during gameplay, the fantasy of owning and caring for creatures exhibited in the cartridge game is stronger than the one presented in the card game. Socialization is best supported by the face-to-face play of the card game; achievement and knowledge are well supported in both games.

It can be useful to detail as completely as possible the metagame potential of a game. Along with the thickness of the arrows, one can consider how expensive the various metagame aspects are to produce for the game's publisher. For instance, a player's desire to achieve money or its equivalent might be efficiently satisfied in a trading card game by making sure price guides are published and well distributed. Perhaps the underlying skeleton of the trading card game can be changed, for example by increasing the relative rarity of certain cards, in order to facilitate this. Caution must be exercised because changing the basic skeleton of the game might alter the metagame in many ways. The above change to card rarity could potentially make the game less amenable to the goal of personal achievement if it nudges the game away from one of skill for the average player and toward one of initial monetary commitment.

Of course, none of these diagrams comes close to listing all the features that support the various goals (and many features support multiple goals, so a perfectly accurate diagram would be an impenetrable thicket of arrows). Any value the diagrams have comes more from the process of making them and thinking consciously about which features support which goals and how, rather than in the end result.

**Exercise 7.3:** Choose two different games and draw the metagame diagrams for them.

**Exercise 7.4:** How might you increase the reward of money in Little League soccer (assuming direct monetary awards are forbidden)?

**Exercise 7.5:** How might you increase the reward of money in a children's trading card game (assuming direct monetary awards are forbidden)?

**Exercise 7.6:** Discuss from a metagame perspective what you would expect to happen to sales/play of Dungeons & Dragons with the release of the Lord of the Rings movies.

**Exercise 7.7:** In 1968, the U.S. Open tennis championship had a total prize purse of $100,000. What might the effect have been on the general (not just professional) tennis metagame if the purse were upped by $1,000,000? What if that money were spent on local tournaments instead?

**Exercise 7.8:** Discuss how Tiger Woods changed the golf metagame for the average local player.
Exercise 7.9: What are the advantages for the golf metagame of the golf rating system (golf handicaps)? What are the advantages for the chess metagame of the chess rating system (Elo ratings)?

7.2 Characteristic: Conceit/Motif

When we speak of a game's conceit, we take conceit in the sense of an extended metaphor. Some games are purely abstract, such as go, Tetris, or poker, but most nonsports games are at least metaphorically "about" something. Games with a conceit might
have a very light one, in the sense that chess is vaguely about medieval warfare, or they might have a more elaborate conceit, in the way that Starcraft is about science fiction warfare or Tomb Raider is about swashbuckling archeology. If the game also tries to model its (possibly imaginary) conceit, it is to some degree a simulation: PanzerBlitz surely qualifies, Tomb Raider probably doesn’t, but Counter-Strike probably does. In any case, a game’s conceit can provide a great deal of motivation and explanation for the action: imagine, for example, how much less compelling Clue would be as a purely abstract boardgame.

Many games (e.g., almost all computer role-playing games) have stories, which are a special kind of conceit. We don’t use the word story to refer to conceits in general, though, because chess and Monopoly don’t have stories, but they do have conceits. Conceit for us carries a similar meaning to what is often called “motif” or “theme.”

Sometimes people talk about the “intellectual property” of a game, meaning something similar to what we mean by conceit. We’ll only use the term intellectual property when the conceit is something licensed or licensable—that is, something ownable. So a Star Wars RTS has Star Wars as its IP, but chess does not have an IP—its conceit, medieval warfare, is in the public domain.7 Note that even a game not in the public domain can have a conceit that is public, and thus not “IP” in the sense that we use the term. For example, the game Squad Leader is not in the public domain, but we consider it a game whose conceit is not intellectual property, because World War II (which is Squad Leader’s conceit) is in the public domain—you can’t own World War II or license it out (although you could license the Squad Leader name itself).

Sports, and many older boardgames and card games, have no real conceits. But from around 1900 on, most deliberately designed games have had conceits. There have been a few exceptions, such as Scrabble, Pente, many party games, Othello, Sorry, and Uno (note, however, that many of these are repackagings of classic games). But there are far more games that do have conceits. Some examples, just to name a few at random, include Clue, Doom, Risk, Battleship, Starcraft, and the various Final Fantasy games. One of the early examples of a conceit that was added on top of an existing game mechanic (in this case, the race boardgame) was the Royal Game of Goose, which dates back to the sixteenth century.8 Today most games have conceits added to them—

7. Note that from a legal point of view, intellectual property includes things like trademarks and copyrights, and (controversially) even the code itself in a computer game. We don’t use the term in this way (or in any legally sound way—we aren’t lawyers), and when we say IP we just mean “the ownable part of a game’s conceit.” Our apologies to those with legal knowledge; our use of the term IP, while doubtless quite odd to a lawyer, is very common in the game design community.
8. See Murray’s A History of Board-Games Other Than Chess, 142.
sometimes in a manner that is tightly integrated with the game mechanics, but sometimes simply to give the game more flavor.

The same game can come in different versions, one with a conceit and one without. For example, *Uno* has no conceit, but *Doctor Who Uno* does.

In some cases, particularly with sports, an abstract game almost becomes its own conceit or even its own IP. Think of baseball, say: the rules are public domain, and the game has no conceit in that it is not a specific representation of something else in the way chess is a representation of medieval battle. But there is a whole world around professional baseball: history, legends, heroes, customs, and so on. And in fact Major League Baseball itself is owned, and people can and do license it. Similar comments apply to most popular sports, and to a few other games like poker as well (to some extent, they apply to almost any game that’s played professionally, such as chess, *Magic*, or *Starcraft*). Perhaps the right way to think of this phenomenon is as an IP for the metagame more than for the game itself.

Note that very generic conceits, ones that are in the public domain or at least are well known to the players, provide to the players a lot of information about how to play the game. For example, in *Magic*, you know to expect that a dragon is more powerful than an ogre, which in turn is more powerful than a goblin; you have a rough idea what to expect from a card named Fireball or Lightning Bolt; if a card is named “Sword of X” or “Shield of Y” you’ll know it somehow helps attack or defense respectively. Similarly for chess: you know that the king is the most important piece, followed by the queen, and that the pawns are least important (the middle pieces are vague, though, and you may be surprised by the weakness of the king). If you create a unique, nonstandard IP for your game, you have the advantage of something that’s easier to own from a legal standpoint, but it will be harder for people to understand how to play your game, even if the mechanics are no more difficult: this is what makes *Sid Meier’s Alpha Centauri*, for example, harder to wrap your head around than *Civilization II*. In particular, abstract games (those with no conceit at all, such as tic-tac-toe) need to have very simple rules—playing a purely abstract game with the complexity of *Civilization II* or *World of Warcraft* would be all but impossible. One way to view all this is as an example of standards—concepts provide standards that help players know what to expect, but the information is coming from the real world (or well-known fantasy worlds) rather than from the world of game rules.

9. Examples of conceits that are not in the public domain, but that have fairly general cores and thus are very familiar to the players, are the generic fantasy conceits of *Dungeons & Dragons* and of *Magic*. Although these worlds are rich in detail, the basics—goblins, dragons, ogres, knights, and so on—are known to everyone.

10. Note that although it must have simple rules, the game itself need not be simple—go is perhaps the ultimate example.
At an extreme, there are simulations: games that have a conceit and attempt to model it very closely. The more rules that are in the game not for pure gameplay reasons but because “that’s how it works in real life,” the more the game is a simulation. In *Uno*, there are no rules that model “real life”; in *Civilization* or *World of Warcraft* there are quite a few; in *Squad Leader* there are an enormous number. Full simulations tend to be very complex, and thus tend to have fairly small audiences. But games that are partially simulations are much more common. For games that are not in any way a simulation, worries about realism are not an issue—no one complains that *Uno* is “not realistic,” because it is not trying to be. But once a game begins to simulate reality, the issue of how far to go in that direction rears its head. Partial simulations often have issues revolving around the compromises between “realism” (modeling the world they simulate) and optimizing the fun of the gameplay. Different players will have different ideas of where the game should fall. For example, different editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* have been more or less focused on simulation, and versions that have made *D&D* more like an abstract game have sometimes been met with dismay by those who want the game to be more of a simulation of a fantasy world.

When a game is highly realistic, those who don’t like realism tend not to complain, but simply go elsewhere. As an extreme example of realism over gameplay, there are hex wargames that model one-sided historical battles in such a way that the forces that won historically are essentially guaranteed to destroy the opposing forces during the course of the game (the player controlling the losing side “wins” by staving off defeat for a longer time than would normally be expected). Such a game, with its

### Scale of Intensity for Conceits

Conceits in a game can range from none at all, or a light conceit, all the way to full-blown simulation.

1. Purely abstract: tic-tac-toe, *Scrabble*, *Othello*, most sports, most classic card games
2. Theme only: *Bejeweled*, *Candyland*
3. Very light conceit: chess, fox & geese
4. Slight modeling of conceit: *Battleship*, *Asteroids*
5. Some modeling of conceit: *Clue*, *Donkey Kong*
6. Just barely a simulation: *Monopoly*, *Diablo*
7. Very light simulation: *Starcraft*, *Quake*
8. Simulation, but many sacrifices to gameplay: *World of Warcraft*
9. Simulation, minimal “unrealistic” elements: *Counterstrike*, *Civilization*
10. Full-on simulation (attempt to maximize modeling): *Squad Leader*
built-in loss for one side, would be unsatisfying to many, but those who desire accurate simulation will accept the odd gameplay logic.

**Licensed Games**

Many boardgames and computer games have for their conceit an intellectual property that they have licensed from someone else. This is a modern phenomenon and thus is not found in classic games (in their original forms) or sports. A game that uses a license has the advantage that it can get started more quickly—it comes with a built-in potential audience. However, when the licensed property dies, so does the game. Also, the game is unlikely to be successful with people who do not care for the IP; people rarely buy a Babylon 5 boardgame if they don’t like Babylon 5 (although they might buy a generic merchant trading game or an Egyptian-themed boardgame just because they like boardgames, even though they don’t care for mercantilism or Egyptology).

As an example, in 1965 Milton Bradley released a card game based on the TV show and movie *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*. It was based on Crazy Eights. It’s long since forgotten. Six years later, another game based on Crazy Eights was released, but it did not have a license, or indeed any conceit at all. It was called simply *Uno*. The two games were not identical, and it would be wrong to assume that the difference in licensing was the only cause of the differences in the two games’ fortunes. But although being nonlicensed is by no means a sufficient cause for achieving classic status, it is close to a necessary one.

So using an existing license usually means gaining some initial success at the cost of breadth of appeal and potential for longevity. If you’re the first to market with a new and exciting kind of game (e.g., you’ve invented the first-person shooter or the trading card game), you might want to avoid licensing and have a fairly generic conceit (which might evolve into a real IP over time, as with Warcraft). If the market is already crowded with games like yours, you might want to license a popular IP to help you stand out. However, even in a crowded market one can sometimes be successful with a nonlicensed game and perhaps have a long-run hit; licensed games will almost never be long-run hits.¹¹

Note that if a conceit gives a great deal of added value to the consumer, to the point of being one of the main reasons for buying the game, that conceit is almost always a licensed IP. Being able to interact with that IP is one of the rewards for playing the game. You buy a Battlestar Galactica game because it’s about Battlestar Galactica. You don’t buy *Fallout* because of the *Fallout* IP; even with a very powerful property

¹¹. Computer games are rarely long-run hits anyway, due to technology (although there are exceptions like *Tetris* and *Starcraft*), which might be a factor pushing more computer games toward licensing.
like Warcraft, not many people are buying it for the Warcraft IP (they might be buying it because of the Warcraft name, which they feel represents quality, but that's a different matter).  

In general, games are not the best format in which to get people to like a new IP—something else had to get you to like Battlestar Galactica before you bought the boardgame. Books, movies, and television are all much better, probably because they are better at telling stories, and stories are what make people love IPs.  

Licensed games are often not very high-quality,13 perhaps because goodness is not why people buy those games, so why spend money making them that good? There are of course exceptions—for example, there are several good Star Wars computer games. Perhaps the reason is that the Star Wars license is worth so much money, and costs so much money, that you can afford to spend some cash making the game good as well; perhaps it's because there are enough other Star Wars games out there that you have to compete; or perhaps it's because the Star Wars license is long-lasting enough that you can hope to have your game last longer, so that making it a good game is a better investment.  

Sometimes an IP is deliberately designed to fit together with a game. This is fairly common for (nonlicensed) computer games, but less so for paper games. One notable group of exceptions includes a number of Japanese trading card games: Pokémon, Yu-gi-oh, and Duelmasters, for example.14 These games are also notable in that there is a game inside the IP itself, with the game the player plays being a mirror of the game the characters in the IP play. Done right, the presentation of the IP in various ways—books, comics, TV, various toys, and perhaps multiple games—can become powerfully reinforcing. Oddly enough, the dynamic here is not that different from the dynamic of sports, where a person who likes a sport might play, watch, and follow the “backstory” (personal lives of players, personalities of coaches, and so on), with all of these activities potentially supporting one another.  

One tension between many licensed IPs and the games that use them is the so-called Batman problem:15 if you have a game that uses the Batman IP, who gets to be Batman? Many strong IPs have just one or two main characters, and most have a rela-

12. Also, while not many people may have bought existing Warcraft games for the IP, it's imaginable that significant numbers of people might buy the next Warcraft game for the IP, because of the power of World of Warcraft. It's possible that MMORPGs (or RPGs generally) do a better job of getting people to fall in love with an IP than other kinds of games.  
13. Granted, as Sturgeon's law says, 90 percent of everything is trash. But licensed games seem to do even worse than average.  
14. People think of the Pokémon IP as being designed for the original Pokémon GameBoy game, but in fact it was designed with both the handheld game and the trading card game in mind.  
tively small number (which is what makes for good stories). Games, however, often call for more characters, and they may need more flexibility with those characters than the story allows. So making such a game involves some tough choices. If, in your Batman game, the user is not allowed to be Batman, it probably will not feel much like a Batman game. You might have Batman appear in cameos throughout the game, but then the player will not feel very important or heroic in comparison. On the other hand, if the player is Batman, you are pretty much locked into a single-player game (unless you want multiple Batmen running around), and if the game has its own storyline, it will be constrained to some degree (both by the licensor and by player expectations). These restrictions can all be fine for a platformer or a single-person FPS, but become very problematic for a paper RPG or an MMO. This is yet another example where a single-player game’s requirement to satisfy only one person at a time is a powerful advantage.

**Story/Narrative**

Story or narrative is often part of a game’s conceit, but it does not have to be. Chess, for example, has a conceit but no story. Story in games is a fairly new phenomenon, and almost exclusive to the computer world. Traditional boardgames and card games never have explicit stories, and newer ones very rarely do. Even computer games rarely if ever had stories in the early days (e.g., Space Wars, NetHack). Now almost all computer games have significant story elements, and the exceptions tend to be confined to certain genres, such as rhythm games, simulations (including sports), and puzzle games.

Although many computer games have stories, those games may take the story more or less seriously. At one extreme, *Doom* and *Quake* lead programmer John Carmack has said that “story in a game is like a story in a porn movie; it’s expected to be there, but it’s not that important.” And in *Doom*, this statement is arguably true—but the many fans of the *Final Fantasy* games, well known for their stories, would probably not agree with Carmack’s viewpoint. Some players who enjoy games like *Doom* gnash their teeth in frustration at the many cut scenes that games like *Final Fantasy* use to tell their stories, and yet there are players who enjoy both types of games. Even games like *Doom* or *Diablo* that have fairly minimal stories can get good value out of them, in terms of setting player expectations, helping to make mechanics more understandable, and providing some extra motivation for gameplay goals. Such basic stories, however, are a far cry from the ones that the best of the story-rich games create, stories that create truly memorable characters that players care about.

There are a few examples of story in noncomputer games, such as paper role-playing games, choose your own adventure books, and murder mystery games like *How to Host* 16. Kushner, *Masters of Doom*, 128.
a Murder. However, these are exceptions rather than the rule, and they are all fairly modern.

Why are detailed stories so rare in precomputer games? Part of the reason is that a simple conceit can provide much of the help a game needs, in terms of adding interest and flavor to a game and helping the player understand more complex rules. So story is not absolutely necessary. And before the computer, options for presenting story in a game were very limited: mostly pure text, which many players might not want to stop and read during the play of a game. Reading chapters of Le Morte d'Arthur between turns of chess, for example, would not make a very satisfactory game experience. Another factor is that story is hard to present in multiplayer games—whatever method is used to present it will require time, and some players will be more inclined to spend that time and others less so, leading to problems with downtime. Since single-player games were less common before the computer era, that may have left less scope for story. Lastly, there is some difficulty in combining story and game generally.

There is a certain tension between some of the elements that make for a good game and those that make for a good story. Playing a game involves choices, and those choices can go in different directions; repeated plays of the game will be different. These different outcomes are all equally valid (or at least many of them are). But with a good story, the outcome will feel in some way inevitable—other alternative outcomes will not represent as good a story. And a good story can be read again and again, even though it is the same every time. If a game plays the same way every time that is usually not a good thing—games rely on uncertainty in outcome in order to work. When a strong story is included in a game, it can sometimes make the game less replayable—a game like Final Fantasy VII, with strong story elements, may be less appealing to play again (you know how the story will come out) than a game like Diablo that has a weaker story. All that said, the powerful visual and audio presentations possible in a computer game make presenting story very enticing. Many highly successful computer games rely heavily on story, and much academic work examining the role of story in computer games has been done.

17. As Chris Crawford puts it in The Art of Computer Game Design, “The difference between [stories and games] is that a story presents the facts in an immutable sequence, while a game presents a branching tree of sequences and allows the player to create his own story by making choices at each branch point” (p. 10). This book is available online at http://pdf.textfiles.com/books/cgd-crawford.pdf.

18. Adventure games, such as The Longest Journey, are inherently less replayable due to their puzzle-solving nature. Thus they make a natural home for a strong story, since any lessening of replayability due to story does little harm.

19. The interested reader might wish to look, for example, at some of the essays in Salen and Zimmerman's The Game Design Reader as well as at their Rules of Play, chap. 26; Wolf and Perron's The Video Game Theory Reader; and Crawford's On Interactive Storytelling.
Postcolonial Catan

Last August, at the Gen Con, I held a half-joke seminar named « Postcolonial Catan ». I had great fun improvising from a half page of notes but, when flying back, I regretted this had not been recorded. So, I’ve tried to write down most of what I said, removing the most stupid jokes and adding a few remarks I’ve made since. Please don’t ask me what is serious and what isn’t – I don’t even know, and the best stuff is probably both fun and interesting.
Settlers and natives

It all started twenty years ago, when I first played Settlers of Catan. One of the first remarks made by a fellow player when going through the rules was the ironic « where are the natives? ». This might have been more a striking issue for French players than for German or English speaking ones because the French language has only one word, Colon, where English has two with very different meanings, Settler and Colonist. So, the game is known in France as « Les Colons de Catan », which can mean both « Settlers of Catan » or « Colonists of Catan ». 
Les Colons de Catane, recently renamed Catane, a more politically correct title.
And, indeed, natives are nowhere to be seen in Catan, except may be as the lone black robber bandit who is not really resisting invasion, since he is hired on turn by the different players. I remember my first idea for a Catan expansion was a new resource, magic mushrooms used to cast spells – this was also the time when I was discovering Magic the Gathering. The second one was to add a native resistance player. I didn’t finalize either one.

Edward Saïd’s Culture and Imperialism was published in 1993, more or less at the same time as Catan and Magic the Gathering, but I read it only twenty years later. I was struck by the similarity between our initial reactions to Catan and what Saïd says of XIXth century European novels, and specifically of Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park, where he thought slaves, though nowhere to be seen, are always in the background. Of course, Saïd’s analysis of XIXth century novels cannot be simply pasted on contemporary boardgames. Times have changed, European countries have no colonies any more – and by the way Germany, from where modern boardgames originate, never had that many. But this striking similarity must mean something.

This goes farther than the naïve politically-correct euphemization of historical issues that can be found in some games. The problem in Puerto Rico is not that there are slave tokens, it is that they are called colonists. The problem with Saint Petersburg is that one of the worst episodes of forced labour in modern European history is treated as a good spirited competition between hardworking craftsmen.

**Starting from scratch**

The Catan issue is different. The game action doesn’t take place in a specific time or place, and the name Catan might even have been chosen specifically to sound bland and not too exotic – Catania is in Sicily, meaning south, but not too far south. The graphic implementation is very european, with no exotic resource – sheep, no lamas, bisons or antelopes. Settlers of Catan is colonization as we dream it, or as we would have liked it to be, colonization of a new world which looks just like the old one and is void of alien presence. We all know it was very different and at least sparsely populated everywhere.
The new world looks insistently like the old one.

This can be explained without resorting to some western fantasy or complex, only with simple game system necessities. In most development games, players start from scratch – two settlements and roads on Catan – and slowly build their production engine, competing with each other. The appeal of these games, and the original appeal of Settlers of Catan because it was something relatively new in 1993, is that they are not about war but about peaceful competition in designing this engine.

The colonial setting can however be an issue, especially when it’s plain and obvious. I remember a gamer friend recently telling me that he felt a bit uneasy playing Endeavor (but he never had any problem playing a war game, which is not surprising but raises some interesting questions). That’s why Catan’s name doesn’t sound exotic, and that’s why other «start from scratch» games have less problematic settings, such as prehistoric times or deep space colonization expansion. Nevertheless, in space development games, players are usually alien rivals in a mostly empty space. In Ad Astra, a game partly inspired by Catan which I designed with Serge Laget, there are alien artifacts but they have been left by long forgotten civilizations.
Colonising space

As an interesting aside, there are also lots of game about industrial revolution. A designer like Martin Wallace has published dozens with rails or industry barons. Industry and railroad development games are all about riches getting richer, and there are not much more workers or navigators in them than natives in colonial development games. The Steampunk genre, which is an industrial revolution fantasy, is also becoming very popular with boardgames – more about it later. Once more, it’s possible to find sound practical reasons explaining why game designers are so often using XIXth century economic growth, and its two main engines, industrialization and colonization, as a setting for games that are all about developing effective production engines. I should nevertheless set Said aside and reread Eric Hobsbawm’s Industry and Empire.

Good old games

There might be technical reasons, but I think there’s also something if not reactionary, at least romantic or backward looking in board games themes – much more than in video games themes.

The novel form has now been assimilated and transformed in the formerly colonized world, by postcolonial authors such as Salman Rushdie – but we’re still waiting for a postcolonial board or card game designer. Boardgame and card game design is not necessarily adverse to critics and subversion. The authors of cards against humanity might be the William Burroughs of game design – but there’s no Salman Rushdie, and boardgames are probably still one of the most typically western cultural forms – more about how Japanese card games fit into this later.

There is something old-fashioned, charming and romantic, not only in the themes and settings of boardgames, but also in their graphic style. See the covers of Ticket to Ride and Settlers of Catan, probably the two most influential typical board game designs of these last twenty years. Playing games has become a powerful anxiolytic in a western society which probably feels less secure than it did a few decades ago. This might explain why board game sales are countercyclical, why game designers are mostly old white males (I’m one), and why game themes and looks sound so old-fashioned.
Let’s go back to Steampunk, a new romantic, retro and exotic setting. Steampunk is interesting because it’s mostly a gaming (and sartorial) universe. There’s no steampunk music, there are few steampunk movies, there’s little steampunk literature (even though everyone should read Thomas Pynchon’s Against the Day), but there are lots of steampunk boardgames (and rpgs, and larps). Steampunk is not only victorian esthetic with shiny bronze and iron, it’s also a reassuring world, in which good old european powers are still vying for control of the solar system – and natives on Mars, if any, can be ignored as Bruno Cathala and I did in Mission Red Planet. Well, I just added a « Native Resistance » discovery card, but it’s an afterthought I had while writing this article.
Isla Dorada and Onward to Venus, two steampunk colonial games

Minimalism

So what when “orientals” start designing card and boardgames?
A few months ago, I wrote an article about the many Japanese card games designed and published in Japan these last five years, the best known probably being Seiji Kanai’s Love Letter.

My article was titled « Japanese Minimalism ». I suggested that some Japanese cultural atavism might be responsible for the specificities of these designs, mostly their simple rules and few components. I made some comparisons with literature – Soseki and Kawabata – then added unwisely references to Japanese food and zen gardens, stuff I don’t really know much about. I stopped just short of haikus and bonsais.

My Japanese readers were shocked. I was answered that Japanese Minimalism doesn’t really exist, or at least is not an indigenous characteristic of Japanese culture but a western invention aimed at objectifying it – exactly what Saïd calls orientalism in his eponymous book, even when he never tells anything about Japan (for interesting reasons, but that’s another story). Of course, this critic was spot on, as a quick experiment can show: type « Japanese Minimalism » in Google, and you get mostly links to Californian architect studios and furniture stores. Well, it looks like the question is at least debated, and I’ve just ordered the reference book of the few who think that Japanese minimalism really exists and is really Japanese – this book is called Compact Culture, by O-Young Lee – a Korean, just to make this a bit more intricate.
Orientalist climax – A japanese game transposed into a japanese-like fantasy setting for the american market.

Anyway, I was told the reasons for the minimalistic components of Japanese games were more trivial, due mostly to high printing costs and small markets, or may be even purely contingent, due to the personality of the first popular Japanese game designers. These designers claim to have the same references as mine – Settlers of Catan (again), Magic the Gathering, etc – and not to make anything specifically Japanese. Actually, Seiji Kanai once told me that my Dragon’s Gold was one of the games that lured him into game design, and I’m quite proud of this. On the back of the box of the most minimalistic of these games, Jun’Ichi Sato’s Eat me if you Can, is even clearly written that it’s a “Eurogame”.

So much for the Japanese minimalist school of board game design. Of course, the fact all these designers are not making Japanese card games but just small card games doesn’t subtract anything from their talent.

**Oriental Dream**

In Orientalism, Edward Said showed how the orientalist discourse, which he studied mostly in XIXth century novels but can be found in other cultural domains, created its own object, how a fantasy Orient became a part of the real Orient, and how this was embedded in the colonization ideology and process.

As I said earlier, world literature has largely become postcolonial, and the same could probably be said of music (rap is something like postcolonial rock) and movies. There’s nothing like this in games, and the image they show of the Orient is plain orientalist exoticism.
Bania and Five Tribes, two new games published in late 2014. Notice the fonts and frames.

Charles Chevalier presents Sultaniya at Paris Est Ludique, last June.

Have a look at the boxes of the hundreds of « oriental themed » games published every year. They usually look directly out either of a Guéricaut painting, either of a popular geographic encyclopedia from the fifties. The Arab world has camels, sand dunes, silk or spice merchants, sometimes a djinn. Timeless India just has elephants instead of camels and the occasional tiger.
Racing camels in Egypt, racing elephants in India...

The far east can be very vaguely historicized, with seven or three kingdoms in China, with Daimyos and Samurais in Japan. Since most players – meaning western players, which are still the large majority – have no idea what this really means and cannot place the game’s setting in a clear historical timeline, this is akin to fantasy worlds.
Antoine Bauza’s games look more “Japanese” than Seiji Kanai’s ones.

The most striking is probably Egypt – there are basically two narratives in games about Egypt, building pyramids and exploring pyramids (by the way, Kheops, by Serge Laget and me, will be republished next year). As for modern Egypt, or even modern orient for what matters, it is totally absent from games.

An interesting aside here is the impressive number of games about Venice, either the historical one or a fantasy one like Cadwallon or Tempest. There are probably more games about Venice than about all other Italian cities together. Once more, there may be some trivial and technical reasons, mostly that the canals allow for a simple and clear division in districts, for nice rules about bridges, for different movement rules on land and water, etc. But there’s something more – the fantasy Serenissima, if not the real one, has long been half oriental, the place where ships left for Constantinople, the city of Shylock and Othello, and the venetian dream is, in the literary tradition, an euphemized version of the oriental dream.
Colonizing the past

There’s an obvious and apparently valid point against most of what I’ve said so far – there are many games about the timeless Orient, but there are even more about some specific periods of western history, like ancient Rome or the Middle Ages.

The fantasy idea we have of some historical periods is not very different from the fantasy idea we have, or had, of other parts of the world. Far away times are like far away places – naïve, simple, vaguely perverse and, of course, backwards. Orientalism and history, or at least history as it was invented in the XIXth century, were very similar fields of study, inspired by romanticism, and characterized both by a fascination for the alien and a necessity to objectivize it in order to construct it as a field of study, and to assert western, or modern, superiority. In France, as in many European countries, history and geography are still taught together in school, by the same teachers, as if past and foreign were interchangeable.
Carcassonne, Florence – the place tells the time.

While plain orientalism as described by Said is probably receding, or at least is dissected and discussed in universities, historical exoticism is still strong, mostly because there can be no «post-medievalist» or «post antiquist» backlash like there was a postcolonial one. Ancient greeks and romans were objectified, simplified, caricatured and analyzed, all for our pleasure and comfort, but they haven’t been actually colonized, and cannot strike back at our present. I sometimes wish they could, it could be fun.
Two of the most expected games at the next Essen fair – Black Fleet, with Pirates, and Colt Express, with cow-boys.

And King’s Pouch with Knights. This Korean game is probably not occidentalist, but just trying really hard – and quite successfully it seems – to look German. Things are becoming more complex (and fun)!

As a historian, I’m always wary of the easy explanation for everything past and strange – « in these times, people didn’t think like we do ». May be « in these times » sounds a bit too much like « East of Suez » in Rudyard Kipling’s famous formula – « East of Suez, best is worst and worst is best ».

So the real issue is not orientalism, but exoticism as a whole, and why it is so prevalent in boardgames, much more than in books or movies, and so insistently unsubtle. The setting of a novel is a complex world that has to be built or, more often, studied by the author. It can be false, it can be a caricature, but it needs some depth. For the game designer, India or Chine, Middle Ages or Antiquity, are not geographical places or historical times, they are just topoi, sets of standard references, which must not be more sophisticated than those mastered by the player. The game designer, like the
painter, cannot enliven his work by complex and subtle storytelling, and must do it only by winks and nods – a camel here, a helmet there. As a result, he makes heavy use of orientalist, « medievalist » or « antiquist » clichés.
This can be conscious, even deliberate, as it was for me when I designed Valley of the Mammoths, or Mystery of the Abbey. Valley of the Mammoths is just a collection of bad clichés about prehistoric times. It’s assumed, it’s second degree, but what is interesting is that I probably could not have designed a « serious » game about prehistory. I didn’t have the necessary historical knowledge, and if I had had it (had had ? sounds strange? Is it correct ?), the game would have had much more complex rules, would have been less fun to play, and this might have made it in the end more racist against neanderthaliens. Anyway, luckily for me, racial prejudice against Neanderthaliens is not a pressing political issue.
The cover of the first edition of Valley of the Mammoths was plain exoticism

Simplifying and objectifying the past has obviously fewer social and historical consequences than simplifying, objectifying and even colonizing the rest of the world, but it’s part of the same frame of mind. Orientalism and historical exoticism belong to the same intellectual discourse, and I find the prevalence of this discourse in games – even when it’s more and more often in a distanced and more or less ironic way – impressive, and a bit unsettling.

If I were someday to write the scenario for a TV series, it would probably be about inventing time-travel and colonizing the past, about sending British governors, German hippies and American missionaries in Ancient Egypt or in prehistoric times. Well, I don’t know any one in the TV series business, but may be I can make a game about it. Of course, a game full of clichés about British, German and Americans, because that’s what make games fun.

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