

May 17, 2006

[‘Designing Virtual Worlds’ by Richard Bartle](#)

By Ivan Milles

Without a doubt, *Designing Virtual Worlds* by Richard Bartle has been the hardest book to review that I have ever come across. It was difficult not because of the book’s quality, and not because of the book’s subject, but because of its sheer massiveness of it. It is so jam-packed with information, knowledge, wisdom, experience, and examples that it is hard to do the book justice in a single review such as this one.

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*Designing Virtual Worlds* has to be the definitive work on the phenomenon that is today lazily dubbed MMORPG, or Massively Multi-player On-line Role-playing Game (but you already knew that). While this book goes over MMORPGs in great detail, it quickly points out that Virtual Worlds (VWs) can be so very much more than EverQuest. In the same way, this book is so very much more than a book on VWs—parts of the book definitely applies to all sorts of games and on-line experiences, and to some extents, to all sorts of real-world activities.

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The book is divided into eight chapters, with the first five chapters explaining and analyzing the practical aspects of designing a Virtual World. This section establishes a definition, for VWs and tells the history behind them.

The first chapter also explains how to categorize VWs by way of, it clarifies and solidifies their different aspects of them. Some of those aspects, or rather facets, include genre, age, player base, and mutability.

The second chapter, alluringly named “How to make Virtual Worlds,” analyzes the development cycle, the architecture of the VW (this is by far the most technical part of the book, including both server architecture and load balancing), and the vital exercise of part about how to translate theory into practice. This eAlthough the second chapter is the shortest in the book, but it packs a punch not to be messed with. Describing the development cycle has been done a hundred times before, but Bartle succeeds in explaining everything vital, with adjustments made for online games, in under fewer than twelve pages.

The following chapters, this, the next chapters cover “Players” (a chapter which is extremely interesting, regardless of what kind of game you are designing!), “World Design” (useful for anyone designing a game with a world more complex than a boxing ring), and “Life In The Virtual World.”

The “Player” chapter is a chapter on different player types. It talks about, what makes players tick and the ways in which players are attracted to, are retained within, and drop out of a world, as well as how to satisfy the different player types. This notion of

“player type” is especially interesting ~~and is the subject of a paper written by~~ Bartle. ~~Basically he wrote a paper on them, basically dividing player types them~~ into four groups: Killers, Achievers, Socializers, and Explorers. This result is based on their position in an interest graph. Players are represented along the Acting-Interacting axis and the Players-World axis. (For the interested, Bartle’s entire paper “Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs” is available at <http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/hcds.htm>, with an accompanying “Bartle Test” at <http://www.andreasen.org/bartle/>.) The ~~Playeris~~ chapter also has a very insightful explanation ~~as~~ to why less sympathetic human ~~behaviours~~behaviors should be avoided, even in ~~games~~: xenophobia, prejudice, and oppression are not only ~~despisabledespicable~~ in the real world—the~~ere~~ are also design reasons to demote them.

The “World Design” chapter ~~on World Design~~ handles both abstract matters ~~as well as~~ ~~and~~ ~~very~~ hands-on questions. Abstract ~~matters-matters discussed include such as~~ deciding on an ethical ~~world~~ model ~~for a world~~ (Bartle provides quotes from Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Confucianism in a footnote ~~—mdash~~; with book, chapter, and verse references!) ~~and/or~~ whether to let the live team affect the players ~~a lot~~, or let the players run themselves. (The “live team” ~~isare~~ the ~~peoplegroup~~ who runs the VW after it is rolled out.) Technical questions ~~discussed include such as~~ how to handle the edge of the world; and whether to base geography on polygons or tiles.

The chapter on “Life in a Virtual World” is an insightful chapter on character generation and development, handling combat and skills, dealing with player death (a problem that is far more complicated than it might seem!) as well as combat types. This is a chapter of “No Definite Answers”—no one can claim to tell right from wrong here. Yet; Bartle manages to sort out and separate seemingly complex systems from each other, ~~perfoming~~performing a gargantuan task. Of course, some issues lend themselves to simple answers~~:-~~: “[Player versus Player] is ‘me against you’; [Player versus Computer] is ‘me against random number generator’. Which is the more thrilling?”

I am thankful that Bartle is easy on the jargon. This subject lends itself to great amounts of in-speak and internal terms, but the jargon terms are strictly confined to their paragraphs. This means that the explanation for any given term is close at hand. ~~For~~ ~~jargon~~ ~~Terms that are required~~used throughout the text; ~~they~~ are regularly expanded ~~upon~~ and explained; so that one never has to look far for a specific term. That said, I would have enjoyed a glossary for reference, but you can’t have everything.

From chapter six ~~onwardand forward~~, Bartle delves into the more abstract. In my opinion, this is where the book truly excels. While the ~~practical~~ hands-on chapters are extremely useful and insightful, the ~~latter following chapterspart is~~ ~~are~~ of great interest even to non-designers and ~~personople~~ people from outside the industry. Should a journalist or reporter ask me for an explanation and discourse of online gaming, I’d refer them to pages 475-705 in Dr. Richard Bartle’s book. The last three pages of the ~~entire~~book (from the chapter on ~~ethics~~) ~~provide a~~highlight ~~on~~ the difficult and controversial questions that may ~~have to~~ be ~~put forth~~, questions ~~osed~~, ~~but that~~—I certainly wouldn’t have ~~even~~ given the slightest thought; had I not read this book. (A 35-page chapter on ethics should be enough of a hint

that there are indeed problems that need to be ~~adressed~~addressed—censorship and the realization that players are real people, being the main ones). Even here, Bartle assumes a healthy position: “Don’t let my idealism do your thinking for you. Consider the issues, reflect them on yourself, draw your own conclusions.”

Chapter ~~S~~seven analyzes an issue that is dear to me—regarding games as art. “Towards a ~~e~~Critical aAesthetic” is a short chapter, but it is insightful enough to deserve a book of its own. It might simply be the most intelligent and clear-sighted treatment on computer games as art I’ve ever read, and is also the text to which I’d refer anyone saying ~~any~~something else. I’ll leave it at that, but if you are the least bit interested in examining this field, chapter seven is reason enough to buy the book.

So, I guess that my view ~~point is~~are clear: this is a phenomenal book. But who wrote it? Who can be so bold as to make these statements? If you read my review on Chris Crawford On Game Design ~~review~~—you know that I am too young to know any names in the industry besides Carmack’s. For those around my age, let me introduce you to Dr. Richard Bartle—together with Roy Trubshaw, he created MUD, the first of it’s kind. This was 1978, and Bartle has been around since then—ergo, he knows what he is talking about.

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Textually, this masterpiece doesn’t lag behind. While academic in places, Bartle makes sure to link any content that might be difficult to grasp to a real-world analogy.

Therefore, he doesn’t bring academics to the reader, but rather brings the reader to academics. (~~W~~hich made ~~me~~ME feel smart, somehow!) Bartle~~He~~ relies heavily on footnotes to provide the kind of remarks that could break concentration, a smart move that allows for witty elaborations, humorous comments and anecdotes, as well as cross-references for further reading. When he cites a paper that is available online, you can be sure to rely on ~~finding~~ the URL at the bottom of the page, a feature that makes the book grow content-wise. Bartle is very thorough when referring to other works, but also often comments on the works themselves—whipping authors where whipping is due. In fact, these footnotes are often so witty that I find myself stray-reading them until I find something interesting, and then I dive into the real text. (For the interested, all online papers are linked from: <http://www.mud.co.uk/dvw/bibliography.html>.)

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As for the text itself, it is extremely well-written, easy to read, filled with real-world examples. Spotted with a Terry Pratchett-ian sense of humor and a Monty Python-ic eye, this book is a lot easier to read than it could have been, judging by the heavy content. The text is a bit low on the images—in fact, a few diagrams are the only things to punctuate the lines. Then again, I can’t say I miss the spray of unnecessary screen shots present in many computer books. Besides, the fact that the text is easy on the eyes despite the lack of images just goes to show that the New Riders books have a killer layout.

I usually end these reviews with a short summary, a sort of conclusion, but it seems completely impossible to sum up this behemoth work in less than the three pages I already used. However, Bartle himself does a pretty good job in his preface, when

| explaining who should read this book: “Virtual worlds are the future. If you want to create or understand that future, this is the book for you.”

Heavily recommended.

