

What Vegas Can Teach MMO Designers

(and how to take a design lesson from almost anywhere)

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An Observation

Good designers
dissect games.

Designers going to the next
level dissect everything else.

Examples

Raph Koster



- Stanford Prison Experiment
- "The Tipping Point"
- Language Learning



Will Wright

- "A Pattern Language"
- Russian Space Program
- "Understanding Comics"

So....

Where should a designer of virtual world
look for inspiration?

Other social spaces.

All Social Spaces Are Designed

- Bars
 - 'Ladies night'
- Amusement Parks and Zoos
 - Locations of gift shops
- Supermarkets
 - Impulse purchases on endcaps.
 - Eye level item placement
 - Bakeries near entrances

Why Look At Casinos?

They are the original massively multiplayer gaming spaces – social spaces that contain minigames.

They, too, are a service-oriented business demanding customer satisfaction for repeat business.

Have you PLAYED a slot machine?
It's a grind.



Don't lose sight of differences: they want all your money now, whereas we focus on retention.

Some Observations On The Casino Experience

Basic Casino Layout

The MGM Grand is an exceedingly well-designed casino. The show theatres are all well inside the facility – you can't get to them without walking by gaming tables.

By comparison, MMO world designers frequently send people to the middle of nowhere, and offer nothing but a long dull walk back.

Think about flow, and if the journey is to be its own reward, ensure the journey is rewarding.

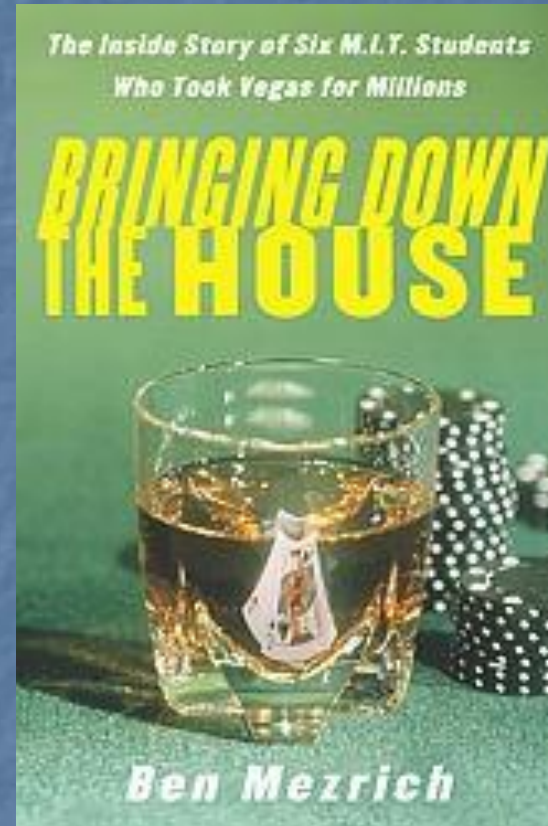


Addressing Cheaters

In *Bringing Down the House*, blackjack cheaters from MIT get caught and banned from casinos for life.

They are assaulted in a casino restroom in the Bahamas – a casino they've never visited before. Casinos freely share the data of suspected cheaters.

Tell that to your boss the next time he doesn't want to ban a known cheater.



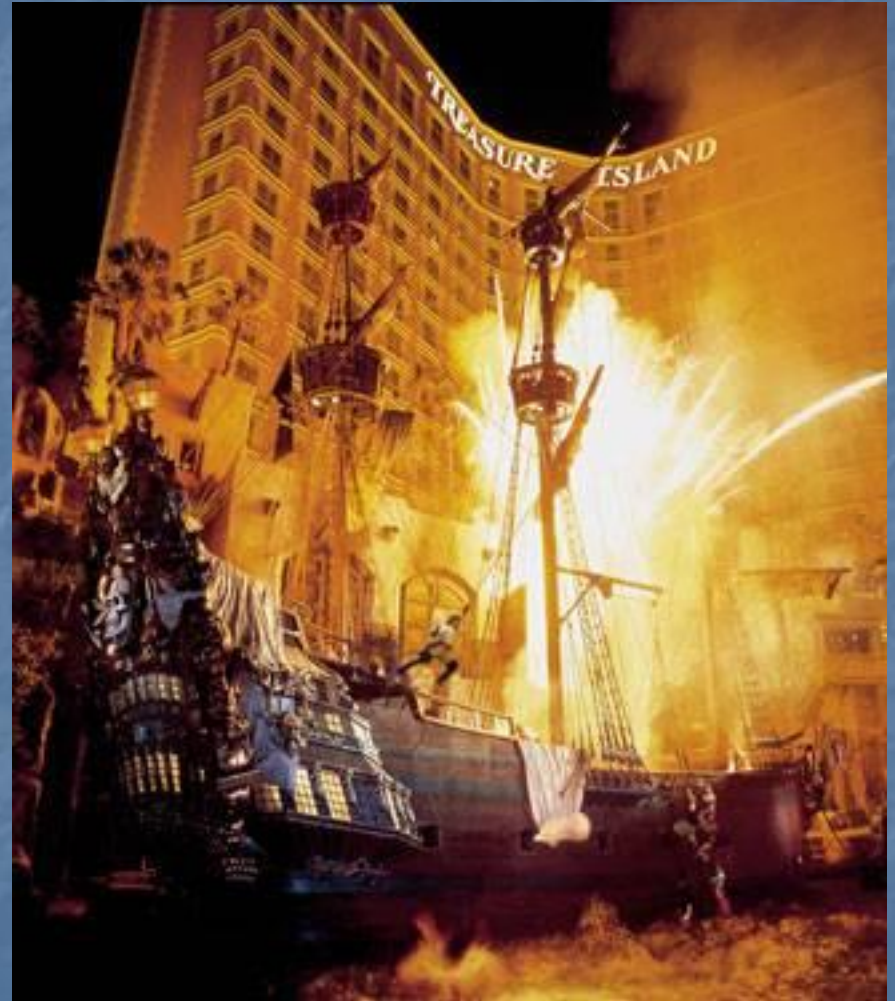
Automated Events

Treasure Island and Rio use automated events to draw customers to their casinos.

Treasure Island's also have the benefit of being visible from the street.

While lacking the star power of a hit concert, they are still must-see items for many, and can be seen 365 days of the year.

Apparently, loving events isn't limited to MMOs. Casinos have found out how to do them more cost efficiently.



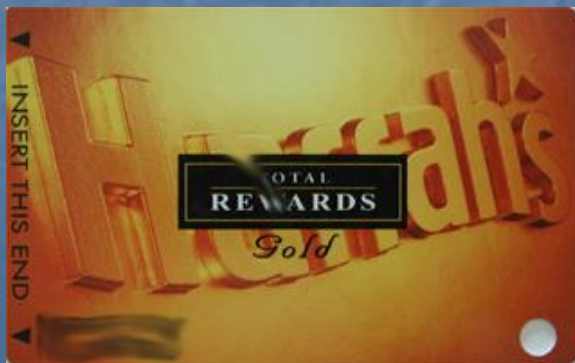
Metrics

Harrah's won the Insight Alignment award for their IT and data mining practices. More importantly, those practices turned the company into a major player.



They datamined 'Total Rewards' members to validate market assumptions, identify (and predict!) valued customers and even guide slot machine placement.

“[Our datamining program earned a] 50% annual return-on-investment... This is one of the best investments that we have ever made as a corporation.”
-- John Boushy, CIO of Harrah's



Don't just use metrics for failure detection – use it to guide your design and your marketing.

Freebies

Harrah's discovered that 26 percent of customers produced 82 percent of the revenues.

They started rewarding these customers with free hotel and show tickets, and reaped huge rewards.

Although our definition of 'best customers' may be different, the importance of coddling them isn't.





Maverick Design



Introducing Bill Friedman

Bill Friedman was a highly regarded casino manager in Las Vegas, and literally wrote the book on hotel management.



He quit to become an interior designer.

Introducing Bill Friedman

“In Las Vegas, where 87 percent of tourists gamble an average of four hours a day, not one of the megaresorts on the famous Las Vegas Strip has managed to lure even 10 percent of its visitors to gamble in its casino areas, and some megaresorts proportion of players to visitors is even worse, as low as 2 to 3 percent.” -- Friedman



Friedman sought to find out why.

Bill Friedman

Friedman proceeded to compare the interior designs of crowded casinos with the less crowded megacasinos.

Friedman's research found that players chose not to play in casinos that were too sparse – that felt empty or where players were too far apart.

This flies in the face of 50 years of megacasinno design.



The Aladdin

Friedman cites the Aladdin in Vegas as one example. The casino cost \$1.4 billion to build and frequently sits empty.

The Aladdin boasts the highest ceilings on the strip and has poorly defined sight lines.

Friedman calls it the 'barn effect', and claims his metrics prove that players reject these grandiose spaces for casinos with a 'less is more' interior.



Bill Friedman

Players like to gawk at megacasinos, but Friedman stresses it's important to differentiate between getting onlookers and capturing gamblers.

When gambling, players prefer smaller alcoves, lower ceilings and an overall cozier experience.

One observer said, "If Friedman's arguments are right, then modern conventional casino design standards are akin to what 18th century doctors prescribed for many of their patients: bleeding for the purpose of ridding the body of 'bad blood.'"



Cozy Casinos

Friedman feels that casinos need to be cozier, so that they can reach a social critical mass.

Slot machines are boring.
Being around other people makes them interesting.



Designing Cozy Worlds

That applies to MMOs as well.

And finally offers a compelling explanation why some players love MMOs but hate grouping with others.

We want our online spaces to hit critical mass. Constant human contact and patten.

We want 'cozy worlds'.

Desolation is our enemy.



But We Don't Get It

“[The game] consists of a large 3,800 square kilometers of land. Considering the size of the land they have built in a portal system for faster travel from one area of the map to another.”

- Preview for an upcoming MMO



“A medieval world of 15 000-square-mile of land (not including seas) [with a] strong emphasis on immersion thanks to a horizon view up to a distance of 30 miles away.”

- FAQ for a different upcoming MMO

Neither Do The Fans



**Everquest Zone
World Model**

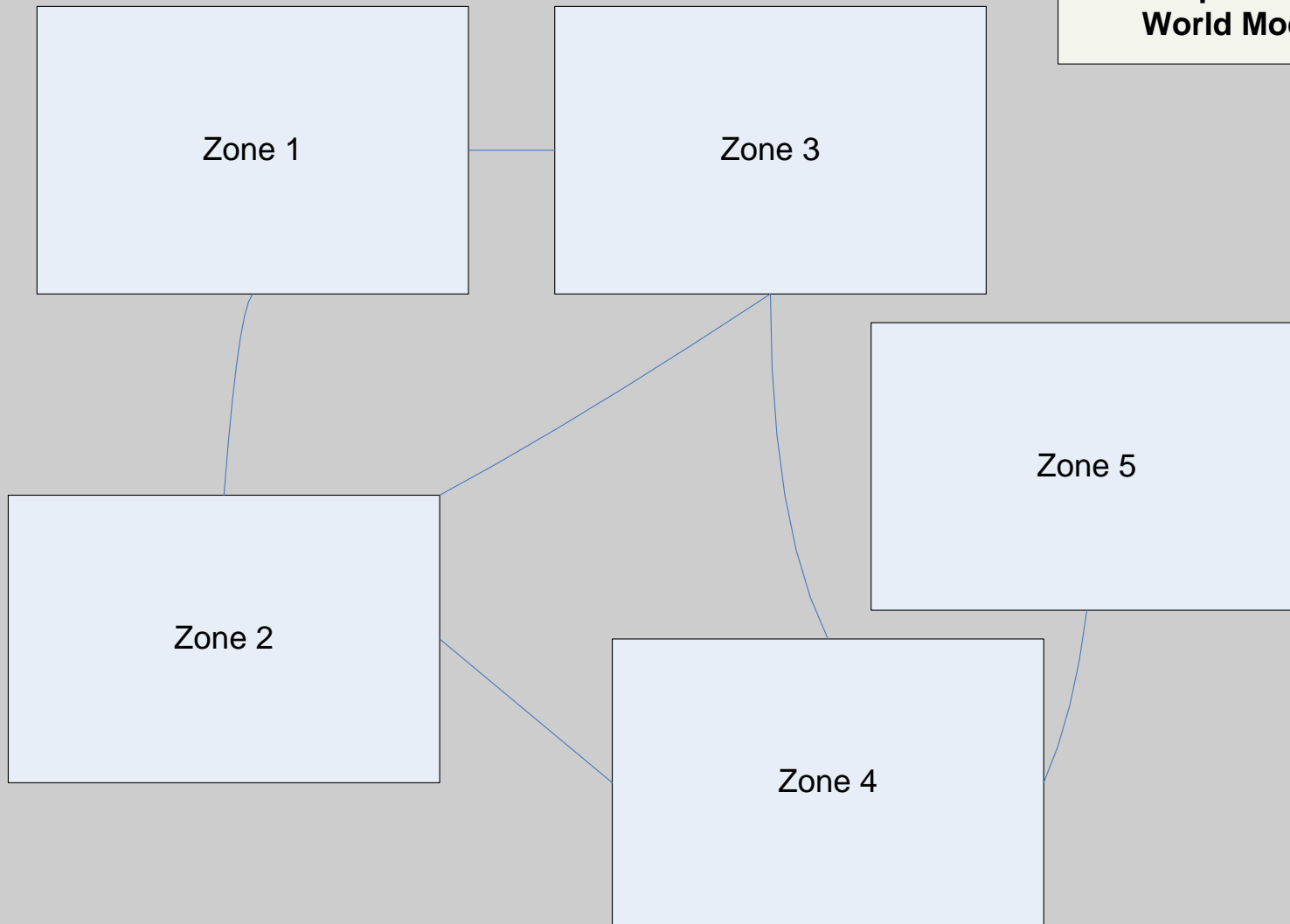
Zone 1

Zone 3

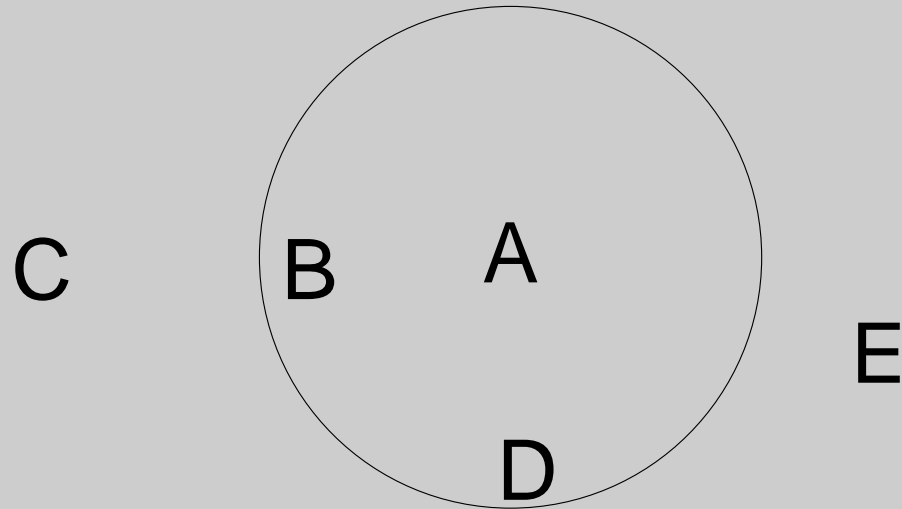
Zone 5

Zone 2

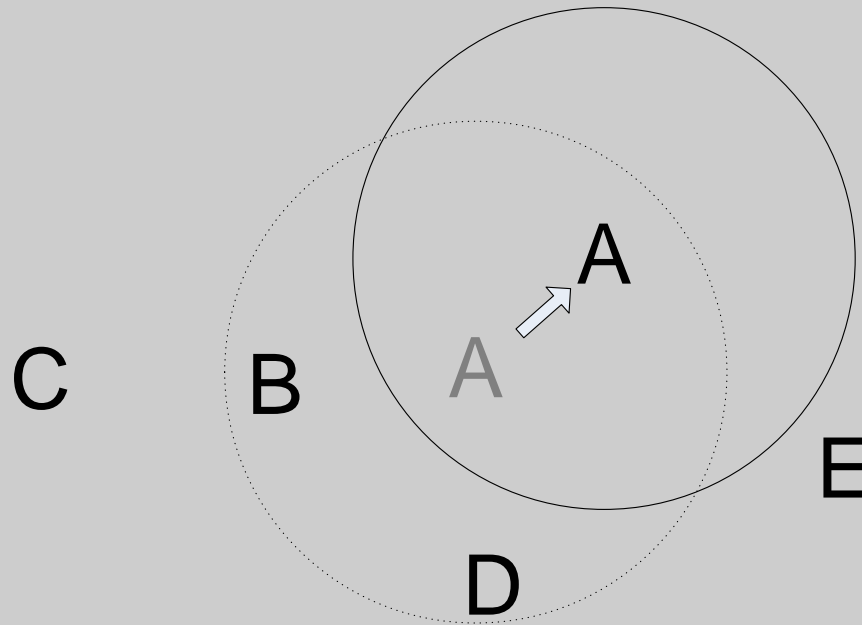
Zone 4



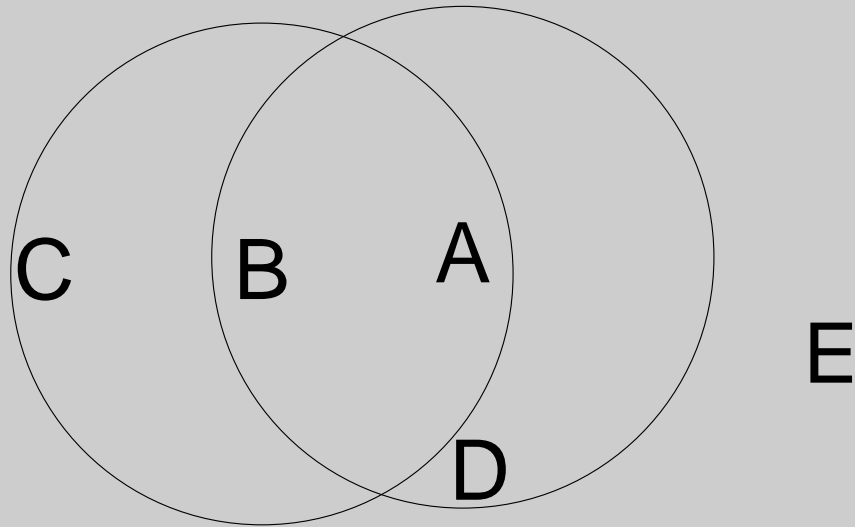
**Radial Chat in a
Continuous World**



**Radial Chat in a
Continuous World**



**Radial Chat in a
Continuous World**



**Zones in a
Continual World**

Zone A

Zone B

Zone I

Zone C

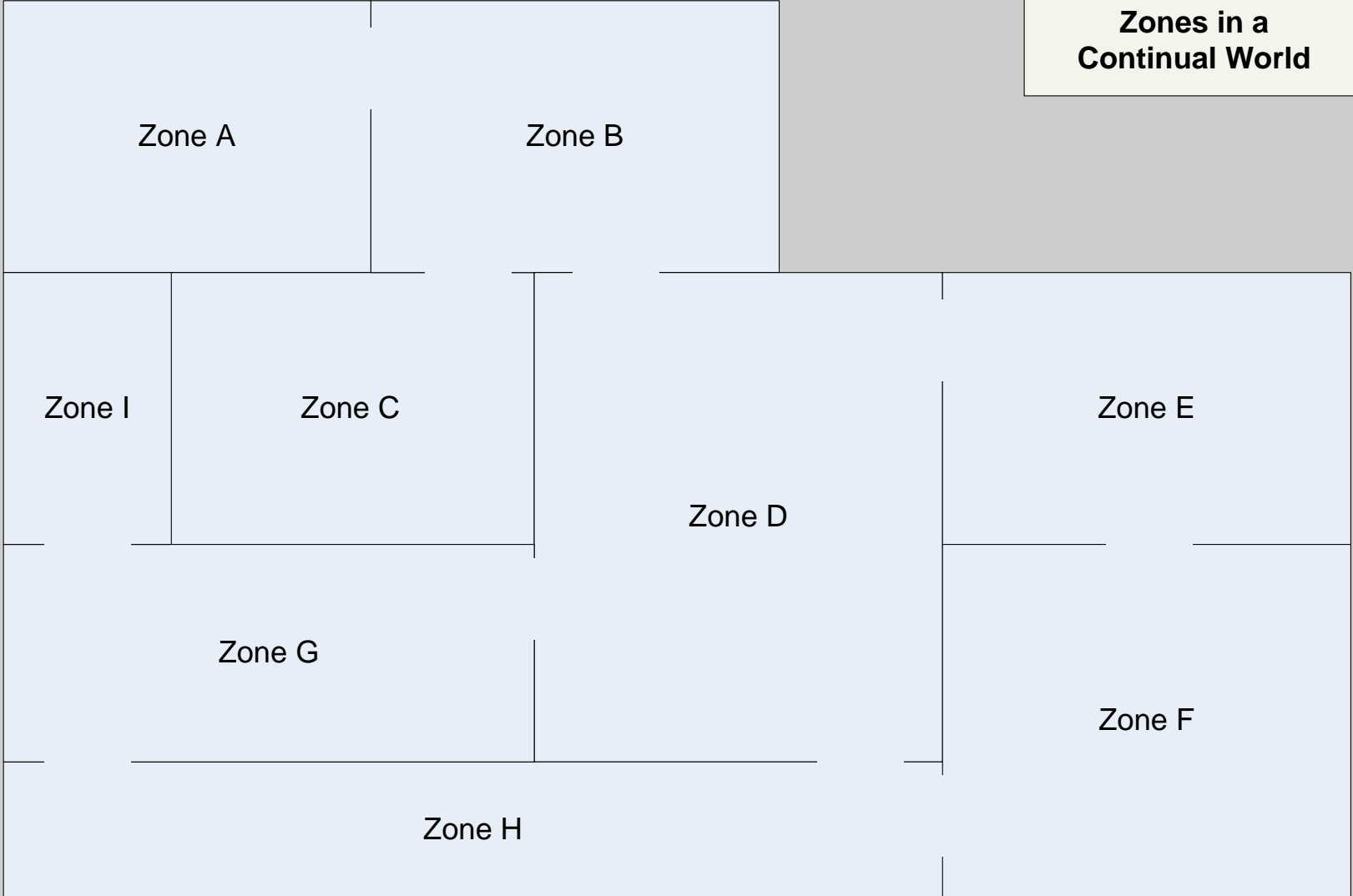
Zone D

Zone E

Zone G

Zone F

Zone H



Cozy Worlds and Instancing

Instancing isn't necessarily bad, but misused, it can destroy your cozy world.



Patter is crucial to maintaining interest in an online space. Need for patter means that instancing can be overdone.

If your instancing solution still ensures there is patter and the world feels cozy, instancing will work fine.

Best at high levels (when guild chat offers patter) or large raid situations.

Build cozy worlds.

Embrace the notion that the interesting part of your virtual world is the people playing it.

Reward your most valued players.

Consider automated events.

Think about your player's flow through your game space.

Use metrics to guide design, not just fix problems.

Understand the value of quick expellation of cheaters.

Conclusions

There are design inspirations everywhere – MMO designers should look first to social spaces.

Maverick designers can sometimes often be the greatest inspiration.

Questions?