

The Zen of Online Game Design

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Agenda

Experimental Mental Models to Aid
MMO Design

Stray Thoughts on MMO Design

Discuss Cupholders

(I'm totally serious)

Meridian 59

Ultima Online 2

Shadowbane

Bioware's totally top secret MMO
that I can't talk about



ZenOfDesign.com

(Yay, synergy)

Why Zen?

(other than it was the only
good domain that was
available)

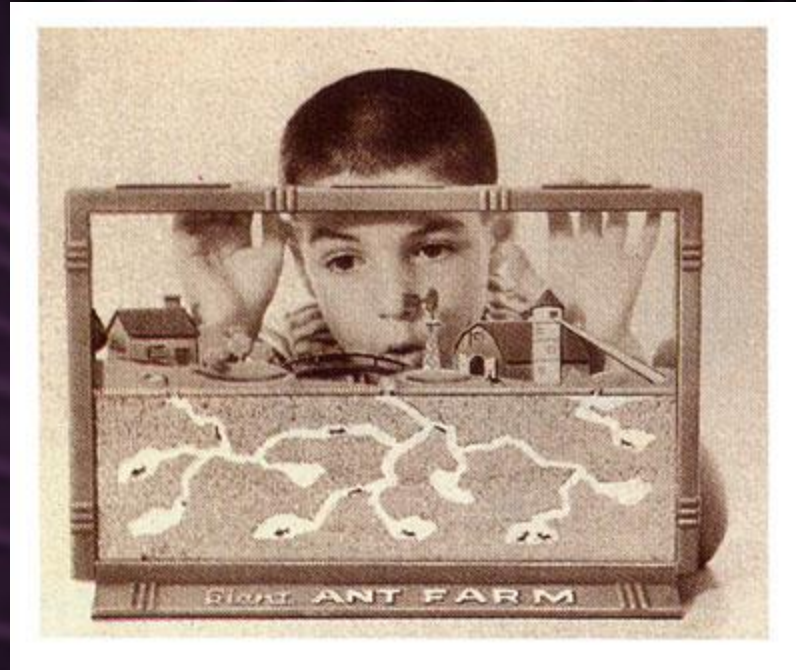
Zen Philosophy

(The Cliff Notes of the
Cliff Notes version)

Enlightenment can only come through
experience, meditation and understanding

Discussion about MMO design
tends to be gravitate in one of
three directions

Ant Farming



“Allowing people to set other people on fire will create some interesting social dynamics!”

Bean counting



“Let’s pick up and shake our customers
and see if they drop any loose change!”

Crime and Punishment



“My job became easier once I
discovered I hate my customers!”



We often lose the focus

Fun

Stray Thought #1:

Never lose sight of your customer's point of view.



Which brings us to the
Cupholders.





Some Crappy Cupholders I've seen:

- The bottom holder

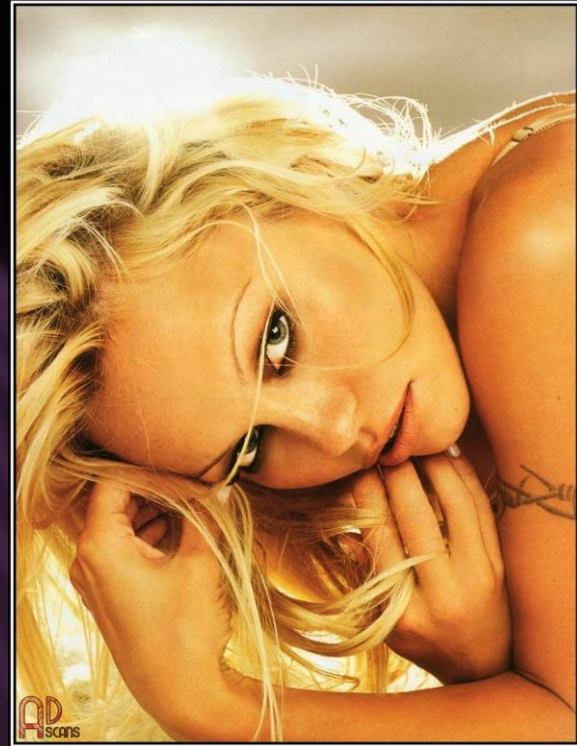
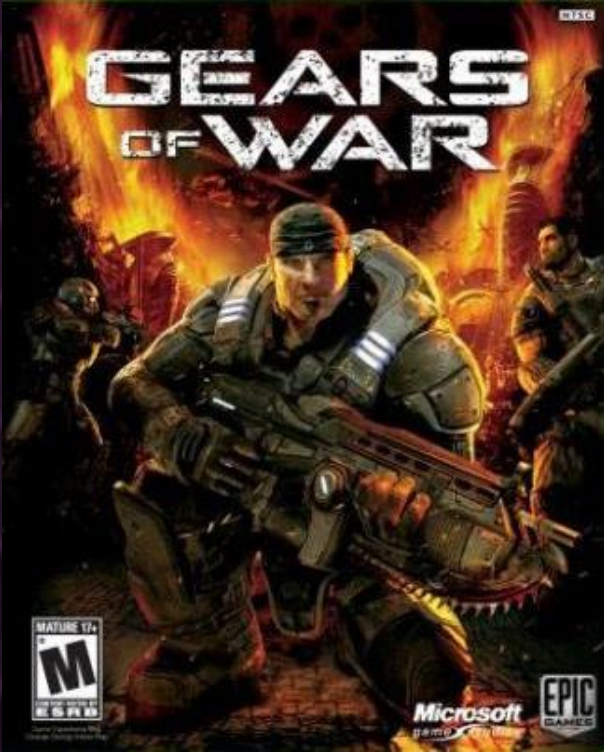
- The thin wire

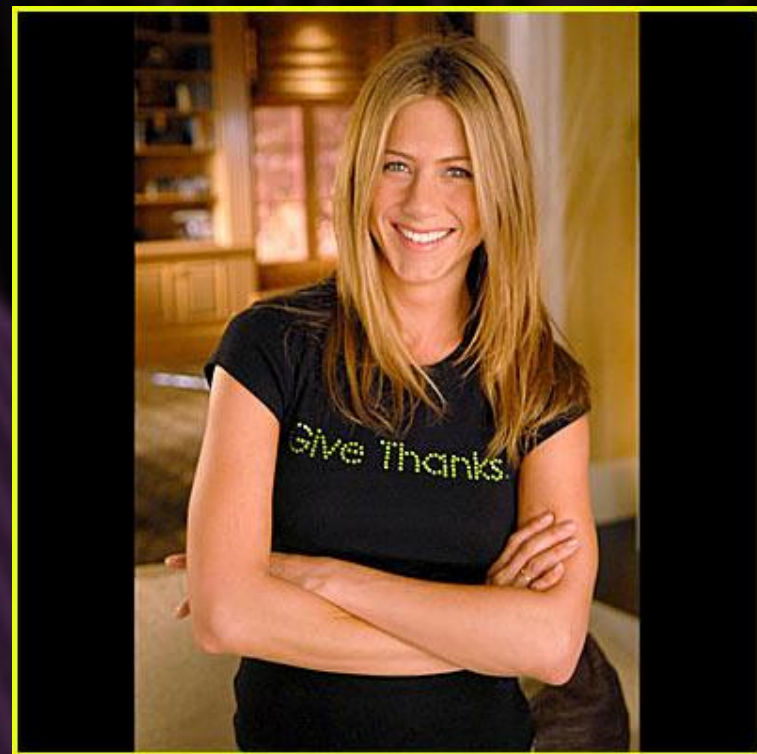
- The gearshift jostler

- The stereo blocker

customers are looking for a long-term relationship when looking for cars.

(Just like they are for MMOs)





People looking long-term Are
looking for:

Sizzle

Potential

Flaws

Stray Thought #2:

Don't lose sight of how your game looks to a new user evaluating its long-term potential.

The background features a complex, abstract pattern of overlapping, translucent geometric shapes in shades of purple and blue. A prominent vertical line runs down the left side of the image. The overall aesthetic is modern and digital.

Now for a visual model!

Bartle's Four



(Seriously, you all should know this one by now)

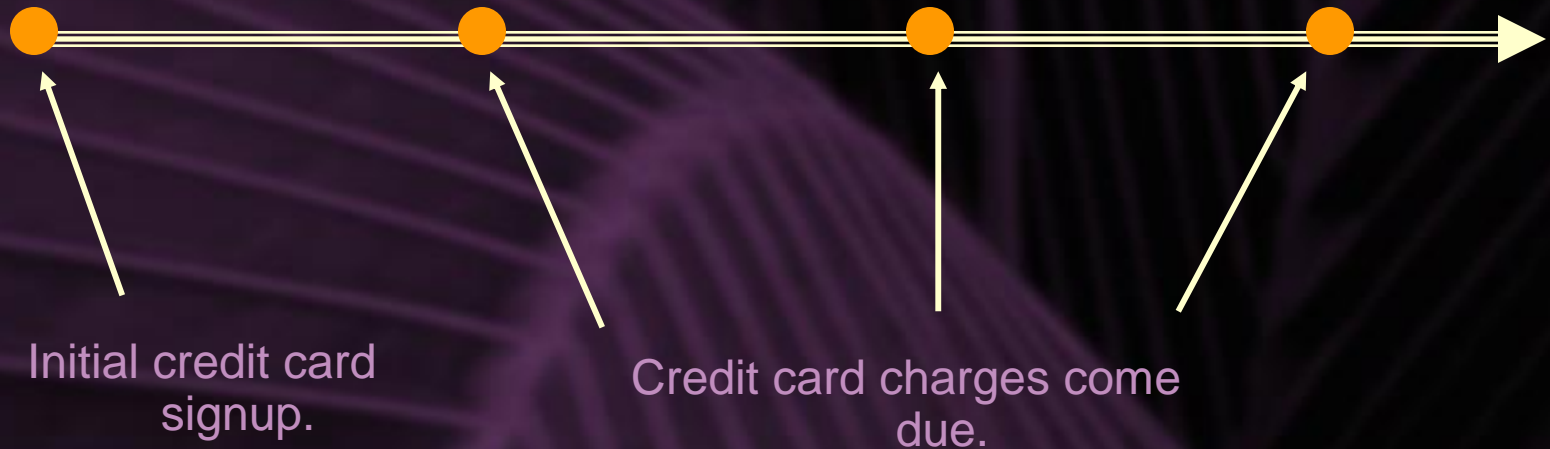
The Player Lifeline



A player will keep playing until he quits. This model attempts to predict those moments.

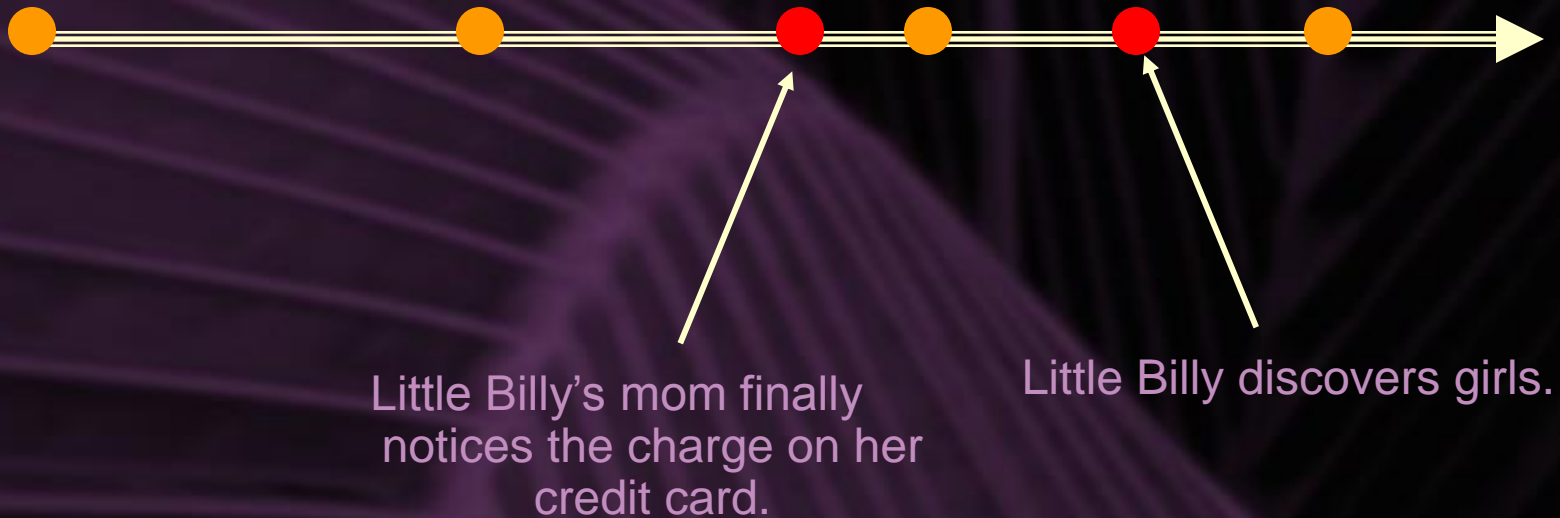
Exit Points

Some exit points
are inherent.



Exit Points

Some exit points are outside
of our control.



Exit Points

Even when within the game.



Billy is kicked from his guild
for not contributing
enough to the guild bank.

Billy finally hears the voice of
the hot Elf he's been
crushing on.

Stray Thought #3:

Never underestimate how much
guild drama scares the hell out of
people.

Exit Points

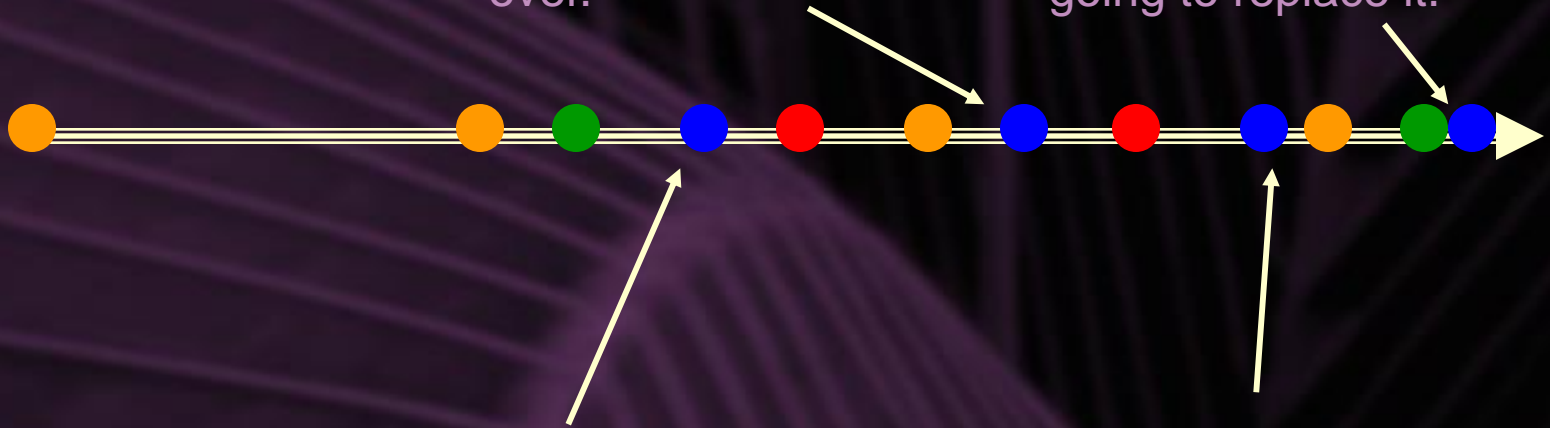
However, plenty are within our control.

The pimpslap penalty:

You've just spent 6 hours failing a quest, and now must do the whole thing over.

The sudden realization:

You've killed 2500 water elementals to enchant this hammer. And you're just going to replace it.



The Brick wall:

You realize it takes 4 times as long to get level 30 as it did 29.

The end of fun:

You've completed every quest in the game, and now are forced to raid or PvP.

Stray Thought #4:

Identify and eradicate potential exit points.

The Three 'R's:

Recruitment

Retention

Reduction of costs of services

Let's Talk Hardcore



Hardcore is a relative measurement

To an idea

To a genre

To a game

And it's specific from game to game



Hardcore is a measure of
personal investment

And investment is good.



Stray Thought #5:

Hardcore and casual is not binary,
it's a sliding scale.

You want players to go through it.

Another mental model!

Level of Investment	Sample Activities	Reward Cycle
Casual	Character Creation, Newbie Quests and Areas	Seconds
Interested	Adventuring Levels 5-25, Low Level Battlegrounds, Chatting	Minutes
Committed	Adventuring Levels 25-50, Crafting, Grouping	Hours
Devoted	Running Instances, 10-man Raids, Guilds	Days
Hardcore	25-man Raids, Rep Grinding, Competitive PvP, UI Modding	Weeks

Investment Continuum!

Level of Investment	Sample Activities	Reward Cycle
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Do it for your game

Level of Investment	Sample Activities	Reward Cycle
Casual		
Interested		
Committed		
Devoted		
Hardcore		

Stray Thought #6:

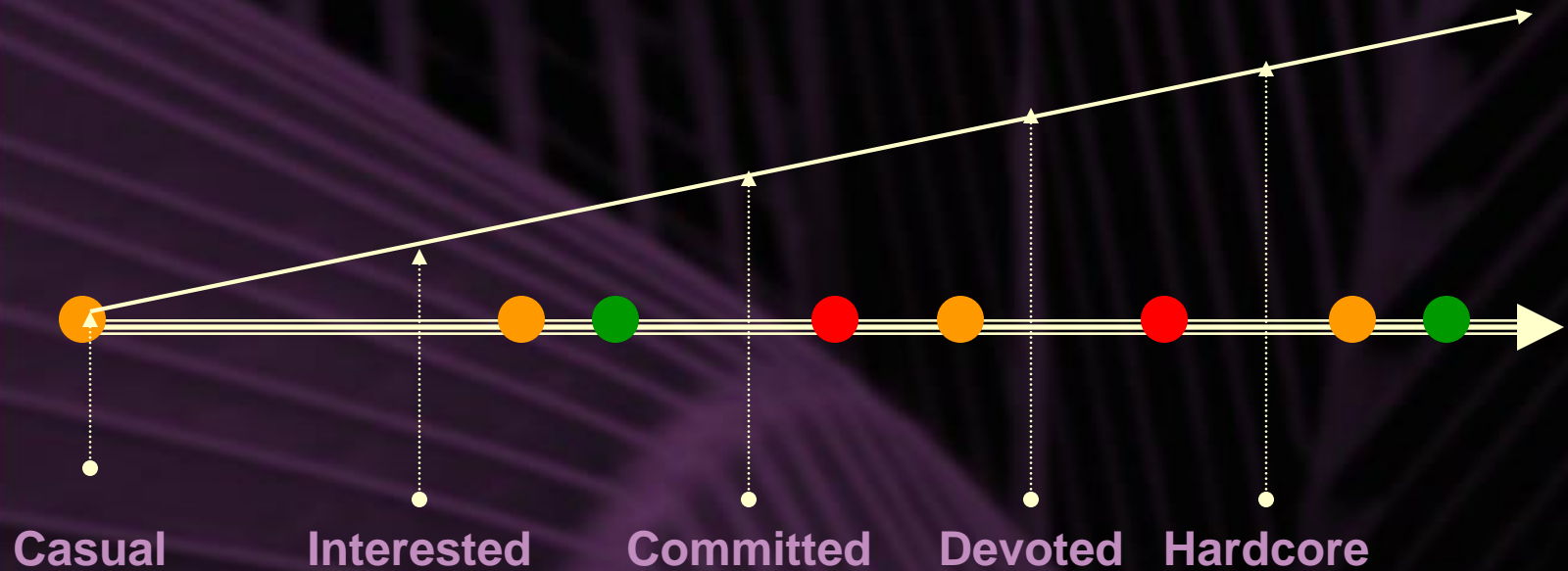
You want to create investment by moving the player up the investment continuum. Make this transition as smooth and seamless as is humanly possible.

Stray Thought #7:

Beware of gaps in your casual-hardcore continuum.

Interesting Side Note:

The more invested a player is,
The less threatening an exit point is



Stray Thought #8:

People aren't as hardcore as they think.

No one is hardcore on their first log in.

Why are the Hardcore important?

Serve as cultural touchstones.

Provide aspiration for less
committed players.

They evangelize. (Hopefully)

Stray Thought #9:

Blockbusters happen when the hardcore evangelize the game to their more casual friends.

Your game is too hardcore if:

Your hardcore customers are
ashamed that they play.

Your hardcore customers are being
exclusionary.



Stray Thought #10:

You control your culture.

Stray Thought #10:

You **must** control your culture.

Stray Thought #11:

Beware of charismatic idiots.

People easily take social cues for
behavior:

Stanford Prison Experiment

Burning Man

Stray Thought #12:

Matchmake.

I Has a Bucket



**Noooo they be
stealin' my Bucket**



The Great Game-World Debate

And how to make it relevant.

World

Realism

Simulation

Immersion

Freedom

Game

Balance

Limitations

Powerups

Fun

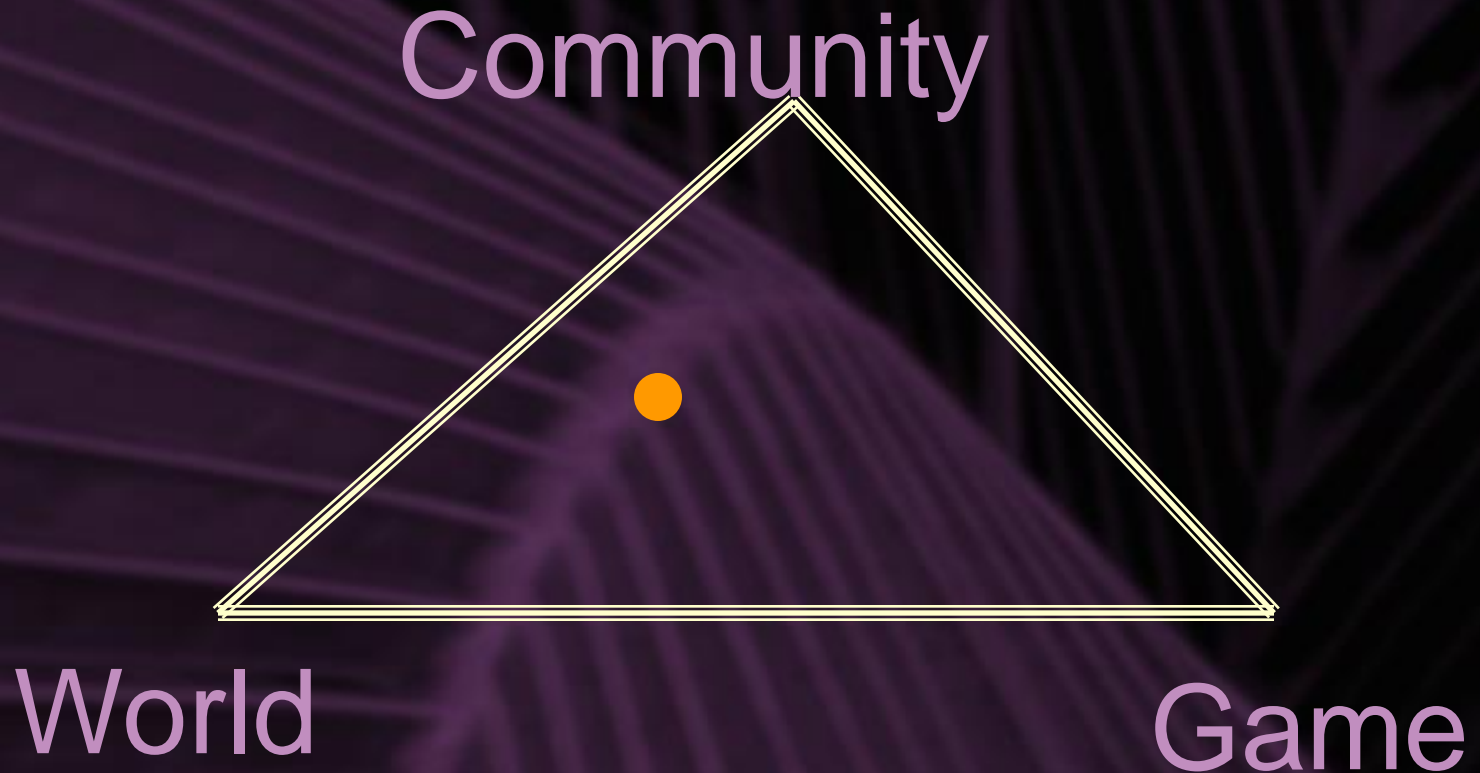
Observation #1:

It's not binary either. It's a sliding scale.



Observation #2:

There's a third leg on the stool.



World

Realism

Simulation

Immersion

Freedom

Game

Balance

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Powerups

Fun

Community

Socialization

Cooperation

Competition

Interdependence

World

Realism

Simulation

Immersion

Freedom

Intrinsic

Rewards

Game

Balance

Limitations

Powerups

Fun

Explicit

Rewards

Community

Socialization

Cooperation

Competition

Interdependence

Social

Rewards

Activity Landscape

Based on design, your game is somewhere on this landscape.

Community

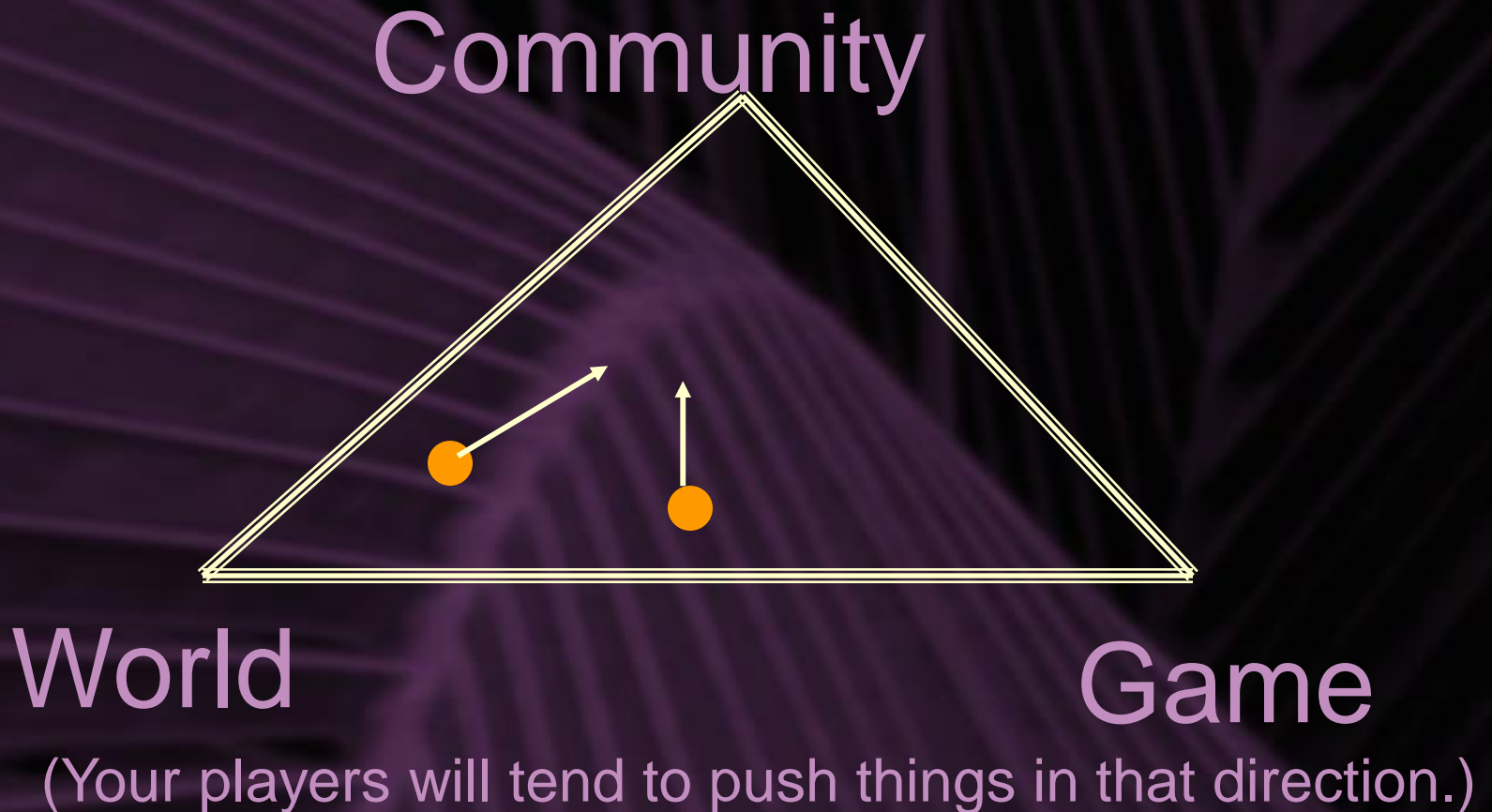


World

Game

Activity Landscape

The sweet spot is in the middle.



Stray Thought #13:

Build a well-centered game.

The Rule of Three:

Systems should always strive to be good for at least 2 of the three activity aspects.

Example:

“We should have permadeath!”

World: It’s realistic! Ship it!

Yes.

Game: That doesn’t sound like fun. **No.**

Community: Disappearing identities make it harder for me to track my friends. **No.**

Example:

“Voice Chat!”

World: Hearing the voice of that hot Elf chick will break my immersion. **No.**

Game: Allows for more tactical, more interesting group combat. **Yes.**

Community: It makes it easier to communicate and coordinate. **Yes.**

Example:

“Long travel times!”

World: It will make our worlds feel larger and more immersive. **Yes.**

Game: Must it take a long time to get to the fun? **No.**

Community: I want to play with my friends faster. **No.**

“Well, what if we add a player teleporter profession?”

World: My worlds will still feel large and immersive. **Yes.**

Game: I still don't like it. **No.**

Community: Now you've added a social interdependency factor and created a new player profession.
Yes.

“Crafting”

World: Creates a rich and interesting player economy. **Yes.**

Game: Gives me more powerful goodies as well as tangible rewards, as long as I’m willing to talk to filthy roleplayers. **Yes**

Community: Creates highly social network hubs. **Yes.**

Questions?