

Preface

The aim of this book is to make people think about virtual world design. Whether you agree with any of it is not an issue, as long as you advance your own thoughts on the subject.

Too much virtual world design is derivative. Designers take one or more existing systems as foundations on which to build, sparing little thought as to why these earlier worlds were constructed the way they were. This is troubling, not because it leads to artistic sterility—designers are always imaginative enough to make their creations special—but because the resulting virtual worlds might not work as well as they could. If designers don't know the reasoning behind earlier decisions, how can they be sure that the conditions that sustained those decisions still apply when they act on them?

Are designers even aware that there are decisions they can unmake?

Although a good deal of design is evolutionary, that does not mean designers can't be revolutionary too. Virtual worlds are all about freedom—for their inhabitants, yes, but also for their designers. Just because every virtual world you can think of classifies characters using some variation of a basic four-profession model, that doesn't mean your virtual world has to classify them that way; more to the point, it doesn't even mean that your virtual world has to classify characters at all.

Virtual worlds are unlike anything else. You can't approach them from a background in some other area—game design, literature, media studies, architecture, or whatever—and expect all the normal rules to apply. Unfortunately, it doesn't look that way from the outside. "How hard can it be?" is a question often asked by people entering the field from some related area that is considered to be Pretty Damned Tough.

Then they find out.

If they're lucky, they find out quickly. If they're unlucky, they only find out after 18 months and half their budget. Designing virtual worlds is very difficult, unless you know what you're doing; then, it's no harder than any other complex design activity.

The key is in recognizing the fact that what seems eminently logical to you from your usual perspective might turn out to be disastrous when viewed from another angle—and then realizing that the worlds you're drawing inspiration from almost certainly contain elements designed by people who didn't recognize that fact until it was too late.

To design a virtual world is perhaps the greatest act of creative imagination there can be. The possibilities are absolutely limitless—you can make and do anything in them. Anything! Today's virtual worlds are mere children's scribbles compared to the masterpieces to come.

We see these scribbles, but have no concept of how the masterpieces will appear; the virtual worlds of the future will not be like the virtual worlds of today, in ways we cannot yet know. Thus, much of what you read in this book is doomed, eventually, to be proven wrong. However,

it might well point the way to discovering what is right. All it takes is for people to think about what they're designing; if reading this book helps in that respect, then it has done its job.

I don't care what you think, so long as you think.