

# What Do I Do Now?

by Richard "KaVir" Woolcock, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2014

*Virtual worlds live or die by their ability to attract newbies*  
-- Richard Bartle, 3rd November 2004

From time to time I'll try out new MUDs, yet after a short while I often find myself wondering "What do I do now?" – and that's usually the point at which I start feeling bored or frustrated, and quit. I've also had newbies on my own MUD ask that very same question, and when answers weren't forthcoming they'd frequently quit as well. Although the newbie can always use public channels to ask for help, that relies on other people being online, active, sufficiently knowledgeable, and willing to help.

## The Window of Opportunity

*I think people who have played a lot of muds know very quickly if a game will interest them. If you have something really different that you want to bring to people's attention it needs to be there right away.*  
-- Ide, 24th June 2010

As many MUD owners have observed over the years, there's only a very small window of opportunity in which to convince newbies to stay. If you don't capture their interest within the first few minutes, most of them will simply quit and try another MUD.

Of course this is where things like streamlined character creation come in – why it's advantageous to bring the new player into the MUD as fast as possible, before they start getting bored. But getting them to complete character creation is only the first step. Once they've landed in the game, one of the worst things you can do is force them to read page after page of dry text, on their own, without any interaction with other players.

You want to get the newbies interested and excited about your MUD, not force them to jump through a set of hoops! But you also need to make sure they know what they're supposed to be doing, otherwise that interest and excitement will rapidly turn into frustration.

## Newbie School, or Newbie Prison?

*I would rather put the player into a normal city and give them directions to various quest chains that teach them how to play in the actual real environment they'll be spending a lot of time running around, rather than some preschool style candyland that will bore them to death.*  
-- Quixadhal, 31st May 2014

A traditional staple of many MUDs is the newbie school – a learning area where new players first spawn (frequently in just their underwear!), and can learn how to play before entering the Big Bad World. The newbie school typically involves learning (and utilising) various basic commands, training certain skills or other abilities, defeating a few weak opponents, and collecting some crude newbie equipment.

However this approach also tends to isolate the newbie from the rest of the community – in extreme cases the newbie is *completely* blocked off from the rest of the MUD until they've "graduated" from the school.

Another major problem is that newbie schools are generally a "one size fits all" solution, while the actual newbies themselves have widely varying expectations and needs. A more experienced player might work their way through the school relatively quickly and find it a boring chore, while a complete beginner might get confused or stuck, and need to ask for additional help.

## **Newbie Tutorials**

*There are people who complete the tutorial, then face a quest-giver in the city, spam 100 kill attempts, and then quit...*

*-- Plamzi, 28th June 2013*

Another approach used by some MUDs is to offer a tutorial. Whereas the newbie school is a special location, the tutorial is more like a guide – in some cases *literally* an NPC guide. Although it's possible to combine both approaches (i.e., a tutorial within a newbie school), one of the advantage of a tutorial is that it doesn't *need* to confine the newbie to a specific corner of the MUD; it can lead them wherever they need to go, throughout the rest of the game world, instead of locking them away from the rest of the community.

However tutorials still tend to suffer from the cut-off issue, perhaps even more so than the newbie schools; if you've been guided step-by-step through the basics, it's not very nice to find yourself being suddenly dropped into the middle of town among the unwashed masses, with no idea what you're supposed to do next.

## **Kicking Out the Crutch**

*I have no idea what to do from here. Interest lost, it was great up until this point, but there is no obvious direction to continue.*

*-- Donky, 11th February 2010*

Even if you have an interesting and interactive newbie tutorial, for many players it can be quite a jarring experience when it ends, as they're suddenly moved from a linear guide into a sandbox environment. In effect, you're saying "now it's time to walk on your own", and then kicking the crutch out from under them, without bothering to ask if they've learned to walk without it.

This can be a risky time for player retention, because the newbie is jumping straight from one style of gameplay (linear and guided) to another (sandbox and freeform) without any warning. Even if you've given the player the skills they need, and they've managed to remember everything they've been told, there's still going to be a moment of panic and confusion when they take the plunge.

One obvious solution is to let the player *decide* when they want to discard the crutch, so that at least they're the one calling the shots. But even that isn't perfect, as the newbie may not know what they're getting into – and even if they're confident early on, they may later decide that they need help again.

## Passive Tutorial Mode

*It does make me wonder if you can make the whole game a tutorial. Perhaps have a tutorial mode. I wouldn't want to dump players out of an experience that is guided, to one that is completely freeform.*

*-- Donky, 11th February 2010*

Almost all MUDs have a “who” command, to show who is currently online. Some MUDs also have a “where” command, to show where people or things are. These commands are intuitive and very useful – so I thought to myself, why not add another? Why not have a “what” command, to provide suggestions for what to do next? In effect, a passive tutorial mode that players can fall back on whenever they’re feeling confused or are unsure what to do next, tailored specifically to the individual.

Of course the first step was to make sure newbies knew that a “what” command was available, as it’s only intuitive once you know about it! I therefore decided to borrow an idea from Realms of Despair, and include the information in the prompt:

```
Type 'what' to see what to do next>
what
-----[ WHAT SHOULD YOU DO NOW? ]-----
Whenever you find yourself wondering what to do next, just type 'what'.

Why not introduce yourself to the other players? Type 'newbie hello all'.

God Wars II is a combat-oriented mud, therefore it's essential that you learn
how to fight. A good place to try out fighting moves is the practice grounds,
where you can hit an inanimate training dummy (you don't need to kill it, the
idea is just to see what it's like to hit something with your combat moves).

Type 'goto practice grounds'.
-----
```

Some might consider it slightly intrusive, but it’s a compromise that pretty much guarantees newbies will type “what” (or click it – the underlined text is clickable, another technique which is intuitive for many newbies). After typing “what” for the first time, the prompt reverts to normal, and the newbie hopefully knows how to access the tutorial mode in future.

```
what
-----[ WHAT SHOULD YOU DO NOW? ]-----
Whenever you find yourself wondering what to do next, just type 'what'.

God Wars II is a combat-oriented mud, therefore it's essential that you learn
how to fight. A good place to try out fighting moves is the practice grounds,
where you can hit an inanimate training dummy (you don't need to kill it, the
idea is just to see what it's like to hit something with your combat moves).

Try performing some fighting moves on the dummy. For example try typing 'ls'
(left strike), then 'rs' (right strike). Then try a jab combo by typing 'rf'
(right fist) followed by 'rs' (right strike). Also try 'hh' (head headbutt)
and 'fk' (feet kick).

Have a read over 'help tutorial' to learn more. Once you feel ready for a live
opponent, type 'leave' and 'target prison'.

Don't forget to use the 'setup' command for some hints on your setup.
-----
```

The early phase of the game proved fairly easy to cover, as it was already relatively linear and broken up into clear objectives. All I really needed to do was push the player towards their next objective and give them some suggestions for how to overcome it. I threw in a few other words of wisdom along the way, but tried to provide a single clear goal for each step.

```
-----[ WHAT SHOULD YOU DO NOW? ]-----
Whenever you find yourself wondering what to do next, just type 'what'.

The dojo is where you master and refine your fighting skills. Your character
will improve as well, but the main purpose of the dojo is for you, the player,
to learn the skills you need to handle yourself in combat. You will need to
earn a black sash in the dojo before you can class.

Type 'draw all' to draw your falchion and target shield.

Type 'challenge' to challenge a white-sash martial artist. He is the first and
least skilled of the nine martial artists, and fights unarmed. He shouldn't
give you too much trouble, even if you're fighting with your fists.
-----
```

Although the early part of the tutorial was still fairly linear, it was also the most important, as it had to provide accurate information and tailored suggestions for players who weren't yet familiar with the MUD.

```
-----[ WHAT SHOULD YOU DO NOW? ]-----
Whenever you find yourself wondering what to do next, just type 'what'.

The dojo is where you master and refine your fighting skills. Your character
will improve as well, but the main purpose of the dojo is for you, the player,
to learn the skills you need to handle yourself in combat. You will need to
earn a black sash in the dojo before you can class.

Type 'challenge' to challenge a green-sash martial artist. He is both tough
and fast, wielding a quarterstaff with considerable skill. When fighting him
you should consider starting out with a strong defence, then once he's worn
himself out you should hit back with a fast flurry of attacks - as he only uses
a single weapon, he'll have trouble defending against multiple attacks.
-----
```

But I didn't want the tutorial to have a cut-off point, I wanted to provide a tool that would continue to be useful to players even after they'd completed the newbie phase of the game, and had moved on to exploring the main world and completing major quests. I didn't want them to *wonder* what they could do next – I wanted them to type “what” and find out!

```
-----[ WHAT SHOULD YOU DO NOW? ]-----
Whenever you find yourself wondering what to do next, just type 'what'.

You have explored 35.7% of the world so far. Each new area you explore gives
you 100 Safe Primal (primal that isn't lost or stolen if you're killed), and
exploration will also unlock new tasks (see 'help tasks'). Don't forget you
can type 'area list' to view the areas you've already explored, and 'find' to
locate those areas by name.

You've still got 18 unfinished tasks of your own age or lower, and another 6
unfinished tasks that you might be able to complete using skill and cunning.
Type 'tasks' to view your full list of available tasks.

You can type 'config damage info' or 'config damage value' to see how much
damage you inflict and receive. The former adds the damage to the end of the
combat messages, the latter displays it with the damage type on another line.
-----
```

Even powerful PCs who had completed most of the content might wonder what else they could do, particularly if they'd been away from the MUD for a while.

```
-----[ WHAT SHOULD YOU DO NOW? ]-----
Whenever you find yourself wondering what to do next, just type 'what'.

You have 2 free power trains. You should really spend these before doing
anything else - there is no advantage in waiting.

You should keep an eye out for events, as these give double primal and a better
chance of an uncommon or rare item drop. Type 'events' to list them - this
will display the age, name and location of each event mob.
-----
```

Because the “what” command is useful for everyone, people rarely forget it – but just in case, I decided to tie it in with the auto-help feature as well.

```
You newbie, 'So what should I do now?'

Let's try 'help so what should I do now?':

-----[ SO WHAT SHOULD I DO NOW? ]-----
You can type 'what' at any time for advice on what to do next.

Note: To switch off the automatic newbie help, type 'config autohelp'.
-----
```

Newbies are the lifeblood of an active MUD, but if you want them to stay you have to make sure their experience is positive – and that means the *entire* experience, not just the introduction. You need to make a good impression as early as possible, but that doesn't mean you should stop putting in any effort once they've completed the basics.

KaVir (Richard Woolcock) is the owner of God Wars II.