Never Playing Alone: The Social Contextures of Digital Gaming

Bart Simon
Concordia University
simonb@alcor.concordia.c

Introduction: The Myth of the Digital Dandy

There was a time when talking and writing about all things cyber-spatial seemed relatively straightforward. With the help of cyberpunk fiction we could imagine the shared representational matrix of the Internet (chat rooms, MUDs, webpages) in spatial terms, as a parallel or alternate universe that computer users could occupy in mind if not body (via virtual reality interfaces). Digital game studies does not quite have the same legacy of metaphors as Internet studies does and to some extent we find ourselves borrowing the idea that there is the concrete material place of the user/player on the one hand and the more abstract representational space of the game on the other. If the game is online then that space (given its properties of shared visual verisimilitude, interactivity and immersion) seems in fact more cyber-spatial (in the terms described by Neal Stephenson or William Gibson) than most Internet researchers could ever imagine. It is in this sense, that massively multiplayer online games like *Everquest, Star Wars Galaxies* or even the *Sims Online*, more so than websites, MUDs or even spatially intensive games like *Myst*, are commonly described in terms similar to how one might describe travelling to another country. Indeed, it would seem that the more immersive the game the greater this sense of transportation becomes.

While travelling is a useful trope for making sense of some aspects of online gaming it is also misleading. The traveller through digital worlds is all too often cast as a kind of cyber-spatial *flaneur*. This figure is a digital dandy, often a geek, with the knowledge, skills and resources to uproot themselves from their workaday lives to travel the Infobahn in search of vicarious pleasures in foreign lands. As with the *flaneur* of Benjamin's *Paris*, the digital dandy is meant to be dis-embedded from social and familial responsibility so that they may remain mobile. By the same token, the *flaneur* owes nothing to the cultures that become the medium for their wanderings. The *flaneur* (as modernist mythology would have it) is meant to be the perpetual outsider, reflecting the world but not absorbing it, a rugged individual with the desire to stay forever on the cutting edge.

Perhaps this is a fair portrait of some types of digital gamers. We may have met this 'hardcore' persona who consumes new games and new gaming hardware at rates unmatchable by the most innovation-obsessed corporations. This gamer tries everything, often "disappearing" for

hours or days at a time just after pressing start on each new game. The media's general representation of digital gaming fuels this image and its attendant moral panic. This gamer abandons his social world in his thirst for vicarious pleasure at the moral limits of his culture. This gamer is seemingly just as libidinous as his Victorian counterpart. And what of these pleasures? It's just a game. Like a tourist's visit to Club Med, this gamer owes nothing to the source of the representations that satisfy his desire. Sex, violence and greed are spectacles to the gamer, not the real conditions of his existence. Such is the supposed malaise of modernity.

Enough… I think about one of the gamers I've interviewed. She is a mother of two and married to an avid gamer. Not without means, but hardly middle class. This gamer and her partner became embroiled with *Everquest* (EQ) for a good four years of their lives. Its hard not to be struck by the scene (as it is so entirely counter-intuitive) of two people sitting in a small apartment playing *Everquest* on two different computers in two different rooms as part of two different guilds. I considered her EQ biography as she related the story of joining a top guild early on as the "real life" spouse of a member, learning the game and coming to resent her second-class status as a spousal member. She changes servers and joins a new guild on her own. The core membership appears to be a group of university students living in the same apartment. The story moves on to talk about friendship, responsibility and commitment to these 'others' – hardly vicarious pleasures. At the same time, this gamer talks on about her relationship with her partner, her strategies for "multi-tasking" childcare, house work and gaming, and her career ambitions. The metaphor of the travelling digital dandy no longer seems appropriate.

If she is 'there', in a cyber-spatial place with the 'others' in her guild then she is living there, not visiting. She is not a tourist but an indigenous member with all the privileges and responsibilities that this implies. But it seems to me that she is also living 'here' in the concrete social-material space of her life that not only becomes a source of meaning for her understanding of the game, it is, in fact, the very source of the game itself. I realize I haven't reflected enough on the fact that she is playing a game and I have been treating *Everquest* as simply another form of digital communication like e-mail or like Usenet; wondering about the solidity of the social ties experienced there.

In this paper, I want to refocus on the idea of *Everquest* as a digital game and while I am sympathetic to the exploration for "the heart of gameness" (Juul, 2003) I intend to take a much more traditional sociological route. Such a route must assume (and forgive the post-modern cliché) that games are always already social phenomena if only through their cultural designation as such. But there is more to it than this, I want to argue that in order to be meaningful, games must involve more than one participant. In a sense, the argument is that all games, even solo games, are multiplayer or at least multi-participant games. In what follows, I will provide a preliminary sketch of this idea drawing on some recent work in digital game studies, including an important paper by Erving Goffman, and preliminary research that is being conducted by myself and members of the Montreal GameCODE Project at Concordia University (http://www.gamecode.ca).

Socialization in *Everquest*

An insightful place to start an investigation of the "socialness" of digital games is with the work of TL Taylor and Mikael Jakobson. In their 2003 paper they draw attention to the way

in which player typifications and self-understandings are embedded in networks of social dependencies that in many ways mirror some popular conceptions of the American Mafia sub-society. Without developing a formal sociological theory, Taylor and Jakobson sketch out the ways in which player level classifications depend on kinds of social associations ranging from the temporary associations of hunting groups, the formal associations of guilds, and the out-of-game social ties of players (families, friends, Swedish speakers). Their discussion goes some way towards elucidating a model of EQ socialization where players take on certain characteristics (become certain types) in part through the social networks in which they become embedded.

This kind of argument is developed further in TL Taylor's subsequent 2003 paper on "power gamers." Part of Taylor's point, as I understand it, is that players don't approach the game predisposed as power gamers (or role-players, or causal gamers, etc…) but rather, may become power gamers through their particular trajectory of socialization in the game. Admittedly, this is not Taylor's central point. Her main focus is to illustrate the ways in which power gaming is a quintessentially social endeavour that most often occurs in the context of a highly formalized guild structure. From this argument, however, I am lead to conclude that players learn to be power gamers in much the same way as the sociologist Howard Becker (1953) once wrote of learning to become a Marijuana user. Such an approach has the immediate appeal of foregrounding the very aspect of MPORGs that designers and players believe make them appealing… namely that they are social games. Yet for all the importance being placed on the "social" aspect of gaming very little research has been done on just what this "social" aspect is.

It is with this in mind that I seek to expand on Taylor and Jakobson's work in attempting to describe the social contexts of gameplay that produce so much meaning and significance for players and designers alike. The route that Taylor and Jakobson have taken is already a fruitful one and I might suggest further systematization could be developed by further characterizing the variety of meaningful socializing relationships in the game. Some that have not been discussed as fully for example include mentoring relationships, temporary zone networks, inner-guild structures, inter-guild relationships and perhaps even player-NPC relations. Similarly, Taylor and Jakobson have also shown how social contexts offline can influence player experience and the range of such contexts extend as deep and as far as the availability of a computer and online connection; these may include a variety of family contexts, friendships and cliques, playing with strangers in an Internet café or with fellow enthusiasts at a Fan Faire. In addition, more macro-units such as gender, race, ethnicity, age group, language group and nationality may come into play (so to speak). In my view there is still much work to be done.

The Social Contextures of Digital Gaming

At this beginning stage of our research, our own foray into the social contextualizing of MPORG play will be more modest. Drawing on Erving Goffman's important essay "fun in games" I attempt to develop an analytic framework based on what I want to define as basic social contextures of digital gaming. The use of the term contexture (rather than context) here refers to a unit of social analysis that consists of the ordered arrangements of one or more actors embedded in a bounded social-material space. The idea of contexture is to capture all the elements of the ordering, social and otherwise, of that space. Indeed, the analysis of digital

culture in general necessitates the use of both materially and spatially sensitive concepts in part because there simply would be no digital culture without machines and networks and the spaces they occupy. With this in mind, I will propose the following social contextures based initially on some common sense distinctions I have observed across a wide array of forms of digital gaming:

1) Playing With Others (e.g. a multiplayer game)
contexture: Player <-> Player <-> Player <-> Machine <-> Game

2) Playing Next to Others
contexture: [Participant] Player [Participant] <-> Machine <-> Game

3) Playing with Others Online (e.g. an online multiplayer game)
contexture: Player <-> Machine <-> Game <-> Machine <-> Player

4) Playing Alone
contexture: Player <-> Machine <-> Game

There are four immediate points to make about the assumptions inherent in this schema before we can begin teasing out the distinctions and why they may be analytically important. First, these contextures are ordered according to the presumed intensity of social engagement. The most socially involved contexture is playing with physically co-present others (*Counter Strike* at a LAN party) while the least socially involved contexture is playing alone (a solo game like *Splinter Cell*). Second, there is no reason to view these contextures as mutually exclusive. For instance, at LAN parties one may play with others (on the same team sitting beside each other) at the same time as playing with others online (an opposing team on the other side of the room). Despite this, our contention is that (in the above case) one is observing multiple or overlapping contextures rather than something altogether different. Third, the basic elements of gaming contextures (indeed all digital contextures) consist of human actors (players), hardware (machines) and software (game) and it is the stable arrangements of these elements that provide more complex sub-categories of contexture (such as families who play EQ together on multiple computers in their living room while playing separately with others online). Fourth and finally, my goal is to make these social contextures applicable to digital culture more generally and not just digital games (we use games as a means to understand digital culture). Thus, the units of analysis should ideally apply to other forms of digital interaction and mediated leisure (chat communities, mobile phones, file sharing), as well as workplace contexts (home offices, stock markets, call centers) and even kinds of social mobilization (social software, e-democracy).

With these assumptions in mind, we can begin to explore the significance of the distinctions we have proposed. One starting point for this is to consider reversing both the common sense and historical denominator in the analysis of digital games. For many analysts, the starting point for understanding digital games are simple solo games like *Pac Man* or *Breakout* and/or else simple two person games such as *Space War* or *Chess*. Understanding the play dynamics of these games functions as model for making sense of more technically and socially complex games such as *Everquest* (well, maybe not *Everquest* :-). But arguably, these simple games (technically and socially speaking) are not the best models for making sense of gaming as a quintessentially social phenomenon. Indeed, it makes more sense to develop our models around more socially complex games and then see if they can be applied to the case of

playing alone against a computer. For a sociologist then, multiplayer games are simpler to understand (being obviously social) and solo games become the hard cases to explain, so irrespective of the technical and design complexity involved, we might tend (perhaps mistakenly) to treat solo games as watered down multiplayer games rather than multiplayer games as souped-up solo games.

The Gaming Encounter

One sociological framework that provides a useful and as of yet fully unexplored starting point for this would be the work of Erving Goffman. While many researchers have cited Goffman's 1961 paper "Fun in Games" in relation to the explicit socialness of games little has been said by digital games researchers about Goffman's use of gaming examples in the overall context of his particular interactionist approach. While I do not have the space to go into detail on this I should note that the object of Goffman's analysis in this paper is not games as such but rather games as exemplars of what he called "encounters" or "focused gatherings." It is worth quoting Goffman's definition of encounters at length:

> For the participants, this involves: a single visual and cognitive focus of attention; a mutual and preferential openness to verbal communication; a heightened mutual relevance of acts; an eye-to-eye ecological huddle that maximizes each participants opportunity to perceive the other participants' monitoring of him. Given these communications arrangements, their presence tends to be acknowledged or ratified through expressive signs, and a "we rationale" is likely to emerge, that is, a sense of the single thing that we are doing together at the time. Ceremonies of entrance and departure are also likely to be employed, as are signs acknowledging the initiation and termination of the encounter or focused gathering as a unit. Whether bracketed by ritual or not, encounters provide the communication base for a circular flow of feeling among participants as well as corrective compensation for deviant acts." (Goffman, 1961, p. 18)

Games or gaming, for Goffman, constitute a special class of encounters that nevertheless tell us much about the ordered interaction (or situated order) or other kinds of encounters. The key to games here is that they structure social engagement in such a way as to make them an ordered activity unto itself. This is a kind of demarcated social world whose boundaries are sustained by the encounter itself (i.e. the game does not pre-exist the gaming encounter). What is important about gaming is that it is binding on players. It is, for example, very difficult to cheat or even play a game half heartedly without being noticed. The encounter in this sense demands total participation or else risks having the encounter break down.

One important distinction Goffman makes is between a play in the game and the gaming encounter through which "plays" become meaningful. Goffman writes, "A play of a game has players; a gaming encounter has participants. A play is special abstraction from the more concrete unit, gaming encounter, just as the concept of player is an abstraction from that of participant" (p. 36). The point of this distinction is that the gaming encounter forms the context in which participants become players (as they are interpreted as acting in accordance with the rules) or something else like cheaters, griefers, twinks, power gamers and the like. But what then constitutes the gaming encounter? For Goffman, the gaming encounter is fundamentally

premised on the physical co-presence of an "eye-to-eye ecological huddle" that makes it possible for players to keep themselves in "game."

For the sake of brevity, I want to confine my discussion of what is means to be in "game" to another paper. I will just note quickly that Goffman is concerned here with the source of fun in games; the sense of "spontaneous involvement" that results in a singular and exclusive focus which is often described in terms of pleasure. Goffman draws on the socio-psychological concept of engrossment to make sense of this, and I would argue that this term could be usefully subsumed under digital game analysts preoccupation with the concept of immersion. My concern here, however, is not with what it means to be in "game" but rather how it is that one arrives there. My argument following Goffman is that it is impossible to get there alone.

Playing With Others

With Goffman in mind, our base model for understanding digital game-based encounters is a multiplayer game in which participants are co-present, engaged with, and accountable to one another. I refer to this contexture as "playing with others." This is actually not the most common digital gaming situation since, arguably, the very thing that digital games allow (playing across time and space and playing alone) are the very things that make the encounter as such problematic. Yet there are some exemplars we can work with that easily fit Goffman's definition. The most obvious are multiplayer console games of which the most ubiquitous are EA sports games such as the *FIFA* football franchise. In these sorts of games, two or more participants play together and manage the encounter by monitoring both the screen and each other as play proceeds. While such games are designed to be multiplayer games, other console games (and fewer computer games) are designed to be played alone but are made into multiplayer games by participants building an encounter. Indeed, this proves to be an increasingly interesting site for research since the properties of the encounter are not necessarily clear to all the players so they may become the focus of intense negotiation creating contextures that oscillate in and out of the game.

A final example of a multiplayer contexture is a LAN party or other kinds of organized gaming events. The proximity of players in LANs arguably allows for gaming encounters of a Goffmanian kind although there is an added layer of online play that complicates matters. Further complications arise in observing that LAN parties constitute social spaces in which sub-contextures of gaming are formed and deformed as participants move from concentrated team play to solo play and practice to conversations about play to non-play related socializing and back again. At formal events, this movement is often structured through a tournament in which official matches mark the boundaries of a serious gaming encounter with activity between matches tending to more fluid.

Playing Next to Others

Let us consider more closely Goffman's distinction between the players of a game and participants of a gaming encounter. To the causal observer more often than not it would appear that participants in a gaming encounter are generally players of the game or if not players (in the common sense meaning) then at least they have some direct bearing on play such that without their involvement the game could not proceed (examples here may include referees and score-

keepers). Yet, Goffman's focus on the gaming encounter points in part to the importance of non-playing participation in constituting the fun in games. Goffman considers the act of kibitzing during a game of cards (poker or bridge) which while having no significant effect on the outcome of play can nevertheless be an important aspect of the gaming encounter and the fun derived from it.

This discussion on non-player participants suggests the arrangement of a contexture of digital gaming distinct from just playing with others. I shall describe this as "playing next to others." Consider these three situations; 1) At a LAN party where a group of spectators hovers over a team engaged in a match, 2) Players sitting side by side or in close proximity (at home, a LAN party, an Internet Café) playing in different games, and 3) A person playing in the presence of others who are neither gaming nor spectating. In none of these cases, can we easily say that people are playing with each other according to the model of the multiplayer game. Yet these non-players are participants in the gaming encounter and are important in constituting its fun (or the absence of fun).

In the case of spectators, of course, there is a breadth of scholarship that attests to the positive reinforcement of the player's engagement with the game (especially in the case of sports). In this way we can understand spectators as a source of external pressure on players to stay "in game", to keep with it, and to succeed. Spectators reinforce the value of good moves in a game and they may modulate the flow of a game or even terminate the game with a strong negative reaction. There is also another class of spectator in digital gaming that acts as a negative pressure attempting to pull the player out of the game. Such a spectator may be waiting for their turn at the game (a player in waiting), or perhaps they simply wish the player to stop and do something else (a non-player; often a spouse or parent). The most common scenario in the latter case usually concerns solo play or online multiplayer play where as far as the spectator is concerned the player is alone with the game.

Let us focus on this latter scenario. Drawing on Goffman's basic insights, we might hypothesize that being "in game" for a player is in some sense a product of the distribution of social forces acting on the player. On one side, the players in a gaming encounter work to pull the player in (or to expel him if his actions do not conform to mutually sanctioned rules of play) and on the other side, spectators and others may push the player in game or else pull him out. A simple example may provide some grist for this mill. In the case of a boy playing a solo console game, we observe that is easier for the boy's mother to pull him away from the game for dinner than if he is engaged in a multiplayer game with friends. The implication here has some interesting analytical repercussions. The more "social" the gaming encounter is, the more difficult it is to be pulled away from it. In Goffmanian terms, this is because the participants depend on each other's presence in order to understand themselves as playing a game at all. If too many players are pulled away the game falls apart so there is an incentive on the part of players to keep each other in the game. Now any mother who has tried to pull their child away from group play understands this, a much more problematic scenario occurs in the case of online multiplayer gaming.

Playing with Others Online

Again, to the casual observer it is very difficult to tell the difference between watching someone play a solo computer game and an online multiplayer game (if there is no one else around). Consider a hypothetical Friday night poker game played at home with a group of friends (other examples might be a pen and paper role playing game, or a game of Magic). Your spouse is not playing but is present in the home. Having gone through the ritual of planning and organizing the game, and with the game having started the odds are stacked against the spouse being able to modulate the flow of the game. In this sense, you are lost to your spouse for the duration of the game. Yet from the perspective of your spouse this is fairly simple to discern; the social weight of the game is immediately evident. Now consider a game of *Everquest*. From the perspective of the serious player there is significant social weight to the game but from the perspective of the observer, the outsider, there appears to be no weight at all. You are just sitting alone at your computer. It is arguably this condition that helps make sense of the numerous stories of tension in the relationships of avid EQ players (see http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/*Everquest*-Widows/).

Is it the case, however, that the EQ player sitting alone at home is engaged in a gaming encounter with the social properties Goffman describes? Goffman himself is suspect:

> Multi-situated games and game-like activities can define the situation for their participants and create a world for them. But this is a loose world for the individual, allowing for periods of lack of interest and for wide variation in attitude and feelings… The world of the multi-situated game can be lightly invested in, so that while the game defines the situation it does not bring the situation into lively existence… Face-toface games, on the other hand, bear differently on one's sense of reality. That activity is going on before one's eyes ensures that a mere definition of the situation is experienced as having the thickness of reality. That other persons are involved ensures that engrossment must be steadily sustained in spite of the flickering of one's actual interest. (41)

As I have already suggested, for Goffman, physical co-presence is a crucial feature of the gaming encounter. I want to stress that this is not just a Goffmanian side-note that can be easily transposed to the study of online interaction. For Goffman, situated order is just that because participants can depend on each other to maintain consistent and coherent lines of action. It is very difficult to do this through speech or text alone (on the phone or via email) and it is not clear that the use of avatars or even video make for the kinds of encounters Goffman was in the habit of describing. Crucially, the difference here has less to do with the importance of body language than it does with the possibility of a shared spatial and temporal location where meaning can be mutually generated by a shared perception of behavior in a specific context(ure). There is a reason why it matters for Goffman that situated orders are spatially located in institutions, on streets, in dancehalls, stores, homes, etc… these spaces become repositories of shared meaning that help direct the flow of action just as much as a shoulder shrug or a wink. The point is that participants in online interaction do not share the same space (no matter what they themselves might think) and that makes online encounters somewhat more tenuous and less like games than Goffman describes.

Of course, so much of current research on virtual communities and online gaming disputes Goffman on this point and we cannot deny the powerful social experience that players often report about a game like *Everquest*. The question is how is this the case if participants do not share the same space? Again, I will only offer some cursory thoughts on this issue. We can retain some consistency with Goffman's framework if we work to understand online environments as shared spaces in the same way traditional physical environments are. Further to this, I would argue that game spaces function more capably as shared spaces for enabling encounters than other kinds of text-based online environments. To make a long story short this largely has to do with the capacity of actors to do things in games rather than just talking or writing about doing things; a discussion that bears on much of the current thinking about properties of interactivity and immersion in digital games.

Yet, despite the work we may do in understanding online gamespaces as shared spaces in the Goffmanian sense it is still important to understand online gaming as an overlapping of contextures. No matter how prominent the shared gamespace becomes, the gamer still occupies another space in which they are susceptible to others who may not share an interest in the game. While clever game design and dynamics may prompt a player to forget this (the idea that a game may transport the player "elsewhere"), the important sociological point is that such a state is a social and material condition of online play. Those in proximity as physically co-present non-player participants in the online gaming encounter have an important effect on the experience of fun (as any EQ player who has someone tugging at them to get off the computer would know).

Playing Alone

Everquest has been designed to be a social game. That is, it has been designed with social interaction in mind. While there is nothing to stop a player from logging on and wandering around avoiding all contact with other players, the rules and structure of the game, the marketing of the game and the culture of the game all support player interaction most typically as small to medium group (groups and guilds) cooperation or competition. All this makes *Everquest* a less than ideal game for investigating the social character of solo play.

I will define solo play or playing alone as a form of gaming that occurs in the absence of other human players. The card game Solitaire is an ideal example perhaps but it is in the realm of computer games that solo play takes on its most complex forms. While solo games were not the first kinds of digital games, the computer chips computational power is what facilitates gaming against artificial opponent(s). In this sense, it is fair to describe many digital games as simulations of multiplayer games. A simple example would be computer chess, but more complicated examples included simulations of multiplayer interactions that have no prior traditional game referents such as the *Resident Evil* adventure game series where the computer-controlled characters one meets are meant to "act" like real people. The point here is that in many games, solo play is meant to simulate or approximate the idea of playing with others such that one test of a good solo game is its ability to make players "believe" they are really playing with others.

While there are more interesting nuances of artificial intelligence in games to explore, my goal here will be very modest in part because I have yet develop my own research on solo gaming. If all games are social by definition then how can we understand the social contexture of

playing alone? By way of hypothesis (rather than empirical observation) I might suggest a number of potential routes. Following a theorist such as Sherry Turkle we might begin to argue that solo computer games are psychically social as they lead to encounters with multiple aspects of the self expressed and interpreted through the actions of avatars (perhaps along the lines of a conversation between the multiple personalities of a schizophrenic). Another route would be to interpret solo play in terms of an interaction between a player and a designer through the intermediary of the game perhaps as one might interpret reading a book as a relation between a reader and an author. A more intriguing twist on this perspective is that solo play constitutes an interaction between a player and a genuine if flawed artificial intelligence (i.e. the game or the characters in the game are actors in their own right). This is a line of investigation that makes more sense perhaps in cases where human designers or players cannot predict the behaviour of computer-controlled elements of the game. Finally, and this is the more common perspective, solo play represents an interaction of the player to the game as culture. That is, the player is interacting with sets of cultural representations, expectations, norms, etc… embedded in the rules, process and narrative of the game and the context of play.

While there is much more to say about the social character of solo play from all of these perspectives what I find interesting for the purposes of this paper is the way in which the analysis of solo play encourages psychological or cultural analysis while the analysis of multiplayer play tends to make these features transparent. That is, in solo play the game is fore-grounded as a social interlocutor, while in multiplayer play the game becomes a background (or background resource) for the interaction of players. In many respects this shift in emphasis seems to follow the biographies of *Everquest* players we have interviewed who engage the game through a contexture of solo play at the beginning and move to playing with others online as they advance. We should note that this is not interesting to us as a design feature (the idea that players start alone and must learn when and how to group) but as an aspect of the social experience of the game that shifts over time.

The Social Complexity of the Digital Gamescape

There is much in this schema of contextural analysis that awaits elaboration. The purpose of this paper was to sketch the frame for further investigation. A cursory look at the contemporary gamescape reveals numerous interesting questions. In arcades, Internet cafes, game-bangs and even in private homes one often finds people playing solo games in the physical presence of others… are these players playing alone? How do these others modulate their experience of the game? A more ubiquitous situation perhaps occurs when a player sitting alone plays a game online with other players doing the same… are these players really playing together? Is so, how does this form of togetherness differ from playing in physical co-presence?

Of course there is nothing to prevent the hybridization of these forms of play. Many players like to play online multiplayer games like *Everquest* solo and are even conscious of trying to minimize the impact of their actions on others (like causing spawn delays). Are these players playing alone? Or are they playing next to others online? Kids playing a solo console game together will often turn game designed for solo play into a multiplayer game through the innovation of group specific rules for turn taking, advising, demonstrating etc… How does game design affect the contexture of play? At LAN parties, some players play solo games by themselves, some play alone against others, while others work in physically co-present teams

playing against opposing teams in the same room. How do these contextures interact with one another?

What these examples suggest is that these forms of play can take a meaningful shape for participant players and non-players, as well as analysts. It matters, both to the player and to the analyst, whether the player experiences herself as playing solo in a game populated by so many others. Similarly, it matters whether a player sitting at home in the presence of family members experiences their presence in the course of an online game. Note that the ultimate concern here is not whether the player has become alienated from the presence of her family but rather what is the intrinsically social character of these different contextures of play.

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