

# **Periscopic Play: Re-positioning “the field” in MMO studies**

**Nick Taylor**

York University

Faculty of Education

[nicktaylor@edu.yorku.ca](mailto:nicktaylor@edu.yorku.ca)

## **Abstract**

Ethnographic research on Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) has begun to chart how these games impact ‘real world’ identities, practices and institutions. Far less attention has been paid in this emergent field, however, to the ways these games are always already situated in the everyday lives of those that play them – and how participants’ embodied subjectivities are therefore ‘in play’. This paper argues that recent MMO scholarship, in re-invoking a tired and unproductive dichotomy between the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’, not only neglects the material and discursive contexts in which games are played, but also renders invisible the play-based participant observation of researchers themselves. I look to cyber-feminist theory, as well as certain strands of feminist ethnography, to call attention to how this kind of ‘periscopic play’ might limit our understandings of MMOs.

## **Author Keywords**

Massively Multiplayer Online games; ethnography; methodology; research ethics

## **Background**

Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) – personal computer or console-based digital games in which thousands of players can simultaneously log in to the same online, ‘persistent’, virtual world to interact with each other via their in-game characters – are an increasingly global phenomenon. *World of Warcraft*, published by Blizzard Entertainment, is by far the most popular/populous MMO, boasting nine million subscribers as of January 22, 2008<sup>i</sup> with significant player populations in China, Europe, and North America. A host of other MMOs such as NCSoft’s *Guild Wars*, *Lineage*, and *Lineage 2*, and the free-to-play, web browser-based *Runescape*, all have over one million subscribers (with estimated numbers of total players even higher<sup>ii</sup>).

Recent ethnographic research has begun to chart the shared practices and protocols of the player communities that have formed around these games, looking to their digitally-mediated, networked spaces as sites where players collectively articulate new forms of sociality (Boudreau, 2005; Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003; Williams et al, 2006), participate in vibrant learning communities (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005; Galarneau, 2005; Steinkuehler, 2004, 2006), and negotiate new forms of trade and profit-making (Castronova, 2005; Dibbell, 2006; Taylor, Jenson, & de Castell, 2005; Thomas, 2005). These studies share a concern with the ways a perceived divide between online play and life offline is rendered increasingly obsolete: they suggest MMO play now impacts, in ways still under-articulated, understandings of real world

social, economic, political, and educational practices and institutions. Mia Consalvo writes about games “spilling over” into our everyday realities (Consalvo, 2005, p. 11). Constance Steinkuehler talks about the increasingly “porous” boundaries separating online and offline experiences (Steinkuehler, 2008, p. 621). Edward Castronova describes how patterns of behaviour generated online are never “completely contained” within the game (Castronova, 2005, p. 101). Seepage, porosity, permeation, spillage: these metaphors position MMOs as discrete spaces that are only now beginning to extend into our ‘real’ lives, as if these games are not *always already* situated in, and affected by, the contexts of their use, where very real inequities and privileges centred around gender, class, and ethnicity are continually put in play through the embodied work of those involved in their co-production and consumption.

This paper is part of a larger study in which I examined some of the problematic research tactics employed in MMOs and the ways they re-enact dichotomies between real/virtual, offline/online, player/avatar, and work/play. These tactics include, among others, using automated characters (“bots”) to collect data on players’ characters without them knowing (Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell, 2004; Ducheneaut et al, 2006; Williams et. al, 2006); inferring what players are like in “real life” based on their in-game choices (Ducheneaut et al, 2006); distributing anonymous self-selected surveys that are then used to sort players into “types” (Yee, 2006b); micro-analyzing players’ in-game linguistic achievements as discrete expressions of cognition and learning “within” a particular game (Steinkuehler, 2006, 2008); and, more generally, investigating interactions among characters without enquiring into the everyday identities of the players controlling them.

By focusing almost exclusively on the actions and utterances of characters, as these strategies do, current MMO research largely forgoes any rigorous exploration of the lived realities of those involved with and/or implicated in MMO play, in favor of accounts of what life is like ‘inside’ these virtual game worlds. This dichotomous conception of the relationship between the “real” and the “virtual” has been thoroughly rebuked in not-so-recent works by cyber-feminists such as Anne Balsamo (2000), Donna Haraway (1991), Sadie Plant (1997), and Allucquère Roseanne Stone (1991), all of whom argue that our embodied identities, our physical senses, and our locations within real world power structures and discourses are always already *in play* in so-called ‘virtual’ environments. They suggest that it is, in fact, the interactions between our physical bodies and technological infrastructures that produce the ‘virtuality’ that renders these environments intelligible, as well as pleasurable and problematic, to begin with.

My focus in this paper is on play-based participant observation in particular, and the ways it has been mobilized in recent ethnographies of online gaming. I open with a brief comment on the recently observed trend to introduce research on MMOs by making claims to one’s own prowess and/or level of involvement with the game. I ask what, beyond affirming the need for researchers to play the games they study, these speech acts might accomplish. I then take a look at two stories of life ‘inside’ MMOs offered in recent studies and explore how in each of these narratives, the researchers themselves, as participant observers, are largely invisible – keeping hidden from view any agency they had in actively co-creating the particular interaction they describe. I use these narratives to illustrate the importance of taking play seriously as a tool for ethnographic research. This requires that researchers in this field begin to see, and account for, their own embodied experiences playing in particular discursive and material contexts as

fundamental to how they arrive at knowledge about a game. I then situate the emergent body of MMO ethnographic scholarship in a history and historicity of ethnography, and briefly sketch some ideas for how certain feminist ethnographic approaches can offer ways of looking at MMOs that move past the ethical and epistemological problems that arise when we frame MMOs as constituting a ‘space apart’ from everyday life.

### **Preambling Play**

Several recent academic conference presentations on MMOs have begun with scholars professing to their own prowess at the games they’ve researched, noting their experiences leading high-level dungeon raids (Steinkuehler, 2007), or how many level 70 characters they have in *World of Warcraft* (Steinkuehler, 2007; Thomas, 2007). To my understanding, these public speech acts trumpet what is now a commonly held assertion within games studies: if you want to study and talk about games, you ought to play them (see, for example, Gee, 2003; Williams et al, 2006) and furthermore, play them well. It may also be possible, given that these claims come at the outset of presentations on the social aspects of MMOs, to read them as pronouncements of a certain epistemic authority on the part of the researcher, implying an inherent connection between their own gaming competence and a privileged sociological or ethnographic understanding of an MMO culture. According to this reasoning, game play is more than a mere pre-condition for studying and making claims about particular games; it is a research tool that grows in power the more ‘hardcore’ the researcher gets.

It may be fair to say that reaching a certain level of mastery with a particular MMO does afford valuable insights into the kinds of practices and complex understandings that go along with, and are required for, elite play (Taylor 2006a), as well as the groups of players that engage in these practices. More often than not, however, these are the practices that get taken up and articulated in great detail in ethnographic accounts of MMOs. T. L. Taylor, for instance, devotes most of her ethnography of *EverQuest*, as well as her recent work on *World of Warcraft*, to describing and legitimating the activities of “power” gamers – those who play the game for over 20 hours a week, engage in complex communicational strategies, collectively play only the game’s most challenging and lucrative areas, and augment their gaming through expensive hardware configurations and player-authored software programs (Taylor, 2006a, 2006b). Constance Steinkuehler’s work on *Lineage* and *Lineage 2* is based on focused analyses of the highly-specialized discourse that more experienced players mobilize in even their most mundane in-game speech acts, and her more recent work involves similar linguistic micro-analyses of players’ often highly technical and “scientific” game-related posts on forums dedicated to *World of Warcraft* play (Steinkuehler 2004, 2008). Nick Yee’s (2006a) exploration of when and how players’ activities become like “work” focuses only on players who spend, on average, 25 hours a week at play (his study does not focus on one particular game). Finally, recent studies by Ducheneaut et al (2006) and Williams et al (2006) look at the “social metrics” in *World of Warcraft*, by focusing only on those players who are “active” members of guilds (the game’s main form of social aggregate) – excluding all who are not so intensely involved.

Collectively, these studies create the impression that what matters most to our emergent understandings of the social, educational, and economic significance of MMOs are the actions, utterances, and collective practices of only their more successful and socially-networked players.

What is perhaps lost in these accounts, however, is a sensitivity to the limitations, partialities, and ethics tied to the research methods that are currently used to gather data and make claims about MMOs and those that play them, and to the knowledges, subjectivities and *players* that are left ‘invisible’ by these methods. This includes, crucially, researchers’ own play.

### Stories from the Field

Ironically enough, Julian Dibbell’s journalistic and *non*-ethnographic account of his time playing *Ultima Online* comes closer than most ethnographic works on MMOs to the kind of reflexive understanding of play that I argue for here, where the researcher’s own (embodied, situated) play is taken into consideration in their attempts to make sense of a particular gaming community. *Play Money* (2006) describes the journalist’s single-minded grinding and trading as he tries to make a buck in *Ultima Online*, and shows how his own mundane routines and everyday realities colour and shape his attempts to make sense of the particular sub-culture of game-based entrepreneurs he engages with. But this attention to the embodied realities of the author’s play is largely at odds with the bulk of sociological and ethnographic work on MMOs to date. I turn now to two ‘stories from the field’ offered in recent MMO studies to show how the researchers’ own role in these stories, whatever work they did to facilitate or participate in the ethnographic moments they present, remains hidden, even as the stories themselves are put forward as illustrations of ‘how things work’ in MMOs.

In several articles, Steinkuehler’s explorations of *Lineage* and *Lineage 2* portray a richly educational space where players “enculturate” each other “through scaffolded and supported interactions” in the shared space of the game (Steinkuehler, 2004, p. 525). Learning the ins and outs of the game world and the normative rules of player communities is a social accomplishment, one realized through “naturally occurring” systems: the apprenticeship of new(b) players by more experienced ones (Steinkuehler 2004, p. 522). According to Steinkuehler, this makes the learning practices of *Lineage* and *Lineage 2* player communities markedly different from the “culture of schooling” which, she claims, adheres to “skill and drill”, transmission-based pedagogical practices that are increasingly irrelevant to today’s networked, tech-savvy youth (Steinkuehler, 2004, p. 522; 2008, p. 612).<sup>iii</sup>

To explore the shared meaning-making practices of MMO players, Steinkuehler employs “cognitive ethnography”, a methodology designed to chart “distributed cognition” (Gee, 1992; Hutchins, 1995): the ways cognitive processes are shared and distributed across members of a community (particularly, digitally-mediated communities: see Hollan, Hutchins, and Kirsch, 2000). Cognitive ethnography, Steinkuehler states, involves traditional forms of ethnographic data collection (participant observation, field notes, and interviews), as well as analyses of subjects’ linguistic micro-interactions, which Steinkuehler sees as crucial to understanding how participants “construe the world in particular ways and not others” (Steinkuehler, 2008, p. 626). This approach therefore reads even the most banal textual utterances between participants as instantiations of big “D” discourse (Gee, 1999), the “social and material practices of a given group of people associated around a set of shared interests goals, and/or activities” (Steinkuehler, 2008, p. 623). This type of linguistic micro-analysis, which Steinkuehler demonstrates in her article “Massively Multiplayer Online Video Gaming as Participation in a Discourse” (2006), involves unpacking elements of subjects’ language use, such as word choice, syntax, and

“thematic organization” (p. 42) – linguistic cues which she explains can only be read by those who already have “considerable background knowledge” of the game “acquired only through having actually played” (p. 44). For Steinkuehler, then, cognitive ethnography is less a means for generating an understanding of a particular gaming community’s practices and values, than it is for theorizing *how* players accomplish and perform participation through linguistic communication. Her approach has produced largely positivistic accounts of online play in which micro-analyses of players’ textual utterances, de-contextualized from any sustained exploration into players’ ‘real life’ identities (including her own) or their experiences within the “culture of schooling” she critiques, become vehicles for her claims about the educative value of online play.

In one of her field stories, for instance, she describes how a fellow *Lineage* player comes to her aid and helps her character, JellyBean, search for ‘mithril’, a valuable ore, in a specific dungeon in the *Lineage* game world. Framing the story as a “thick description” of in-game practices, Steinkuehler tells of how Myrondonia, the more knowledgeable elf, instructs her character in how and why to avoid both undesirable enemies as well as other players pursuing the same resources. Steinkuehler describes how Myrondonia’s mentorship not only involves modeling successful play, but also instructing the newer player in the community-shared “values” around farming for particular resources: in this case, when another farming character approaches, give them a wide berth so that neither poaches the other’s spoils (p. 526). Steinkuehler contends there are two lessons here: instruction in the social practice around farming mithril, as well as in “the kind of person/elf” Myrondonia wants her to be (p. 527). Echoing James Gee’s broader look at the educative potentials of games, Steinkuehler contends that the emergent cultures within MMOs offer forms of socially-distributed, apprenticeship-oriented learning that leave traditional formal education far behind.

Missing here, however, is an exploration of the significance of this interaction for the *players* involved, including Steinkuehler herself. As Clifford Geertz’s initial formulation of “thick descriptions” suggests, part of “doing” ethnography involves working outward from observed phenomena to the “webs of significance” in which both researcher and participant are implicated – including the ethnographer’s own research and writing practices (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). For instance, I am left to wonder what happened to JellyBean and Myrondonia after their meeting: did Myrondonia ever ask for help in return? Was this exchange part of a more sustained mentor/student relationship between the two players? Or did they never talk again? Similarly, there is little discussion of Steinkuehler’s agency in generating this story, which is so illustrative of the kinds of informal learning systems she claims are widespread within MMO communities – as if her dual positioning as both player and educational researcher is *merely incidental* to this story in which a more experienced character patiently schools a less experienced one.

Nicolas Ducheneaut and Robert Moore (2005) are similarly invisible in reporting on their study of *EverQuest: Online Adventures*, the Playstation 2 spin-off of the more popular PC-based MMO *Everquest*. Like Steinkuehler, the authors mobilize their game-based participant observation to portray MMOs as rich sources for “social learning”. This includes both “instrumental” skills (how to use others to scaffold one’s game play) as well as “social” skills (when and where to chat and employ humour, and how to build rapport with other players) (pp. 94-97). The authors conclude that MMOs represent a relatively “safe” space – anonymous and

without risk of physical violence – to learn competencies around the cultivation of social capital, which may “carry over into real life” (p. 98). They are not very specific with regards to how and where these skills might be put to use, however, only citing one participant who apparently became “more outgoing socially in real life” after several years playing MMOs (p. 98).

As with Steinkuehler’s story of JellyBean and Myrondonia, the authors stop short of situating the interactions they describe in any broader description of their progression through the game, the relationships they formed with particular participants, or how their status as researchers shaped, and to some degree perhaps coordinated, the kinds of “social” experiences they report on. This is particularly problematic in the authors’ depictions of what they identify as a “successful” bonding amongst players through humor. Here, three male players (one or more of whom are most likely the researchers themselves, and one of whom, “E”, is playing a female character) share the following interaction:

A tells the group: my wife is jealous that I am playing with another woman  
wearing a sexy robe  
E tells the group: did u tell her about me?  
E tells the group: us?  
C tells the group: lol  
A tells the group: yes, she saw the picture of u I have in my wallet  
E tells the group: LOL

(Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005, p. 96)

Beyond noting that the players involved here are all male, the authors pay little attention to the ways gender and sexuality are invoked; whether, for instance, the interaction is “funny” to the extent that “E” is subverting a hetero-normative masculinity by playing with his character’s female identity, or whether the jokes find their humor in playing off of gender stereotypes about women’s attitudes to their male partners’ gaming habits.<sup>iv</sup> Regardless, it is clear from this exchange that, for these players at least, the capacity to generate group cohesion in-game might really be tied to their capacity to deploy a certain kind of “hegemonic” masculinity (Connell, 2005; Wajcman, 1991).

Exploring how and to whom these jokes are funny, and what kinds of humor count as “successful”, might say much about what kinds of social capital are afforded by such exchanges and the (straight, male) players that might stand to benefit. For this reason, while the authors present this exchange as an illustration of what counts as “funny” for a group of players, I might be more inclined to read it as a clear example of the ways in which our bodily identities are never not ‘in play’ when we interact with others online. Given that one or both authors are present and possibly participating in this interaction, I might further read it as an opportunity to reflect on the ways ethnographers are *always* complicit not only in analyzing and representing ethnographic meaning, but in actively co-producing it. Here, though, the authors sidestep this epistemological consideration by claiming that theirs is a “virtual” ethnography, deliberately focusing on the actions and utterances of characters, not the players operating them – despite the insistence by cyber-feminists that the two are never so easily separated.

## Historicizing “Periscopic Play”

In both of these field stories, the researchers lay claim to ethnographic methods of participant observation, only to then disappear from the interactions that they hold up as most illustrative of the social and educative benefits of MMOs. In what might be called “periscopic play”, their own involvement in producing those moments – and more generally, the means through which they come to generate and lay claim to an ethnographic understanding of MMO communities – is rendered invisible.

Haraway speaks of the “god trick” in positivist traditions of science (both natural and social), in which the researcher assumes a view “of everything” but “from nowhere” (1988, p. 581). Proposing an alternative to this totalizing science, Haraway argues for a way of conducting scientific inquiry that starts from a commitment to a particular community or group; one that recognizes and works within the contingent and particular relations of power and privilege binding the researcher and her research participants. The aim, as Haraway argues, is not to produce generalizable truths but accounts that are verifiable and legitimate insofar as they are grounded within, and pertain to, the experiences of localized communities. Articulating the researcher’s positionality within institutional and social relations of power, as well as whatever motivations and intentions might be guiding her work, becomes central to this project. “Accountable positioning” (p. 590) therefore demands that researchers see themselves, and the research tools they use, as constitutive elements in the research context. It asks that they make their relation to their participants and the technologies that mediate these relationships intelligible and visible. If, as I argue here, the “god trick” Haraway describes is at work in the “periscopic play” of MMO researchers, insofar as they largely disappear from their own accounts of participant observation-driven play, then it might be useful to contextualize these recent works on MMOs within a history of ethnography as a discipline which is, as Haraway reminds us, centrally concerned with making “claims on people’s lives” (p. 589). In doing so, I want to suggest that these recent ethnographic works may have much in common with a legacy of traditional anthropology and ethnography that has been thoroughly problematized by feminist, indigenous, and queer scholars.

In the introduction to their *Handbook of Qualitative Studies*, Norman Denzin and Yvona Lincoln offer a history of ethnography that begins with the “classical” anthropology of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This era, they claim, lionized the figure of the “Lone Ethnographer”, the intellectual-turned-explorer who ventures out into new frontiers and reports on exotic cultures in the “glorified language of science, with laws and generalizations fashioned out of his selfsame experience” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 7). The successive ruptures and transitions that Denzin and Lincoln go on to chart – postpositivism, the blurring of ethnography with humanities and then later with documentary filmmaking, the “crisis of representation” in the late 1980s – all turn away, in varying degrees, from this notion of ethnographer as omniscient or even privileged viewer who has the power to make generalizable claims based on what they’ve seen.

In “Would the Real Body Please Stand Up”, an article that pre-dates the first graphical MMO by several years, Allucquère Roseanne Stone offers up grounds for a playful and productive comparison between the “classical” anthropology described by Denzin and Lincoln and the MMO ethnographies I examine here. Stone says:

It is interesting that at just about the time the last of the untouched “real-world” anthropological field sites are disappearing, a new and unexpected kind of “field” is opening up – incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both “meet” and “face.”

(Stone, 1991, n.p.)

As Stone’s comment alludes to, the “virtual worlds” of MMOs offer up new kinds of “fields” which have been so far documented by old and outdated forms of *fieldwork*: like the “Lone Ethnographer”, MMO researchers seem primarily concerned with producing more or less generalized claims about how these cultures operate. Both enjoy the privilege of both being part of, and stepping back from, their research sites, and both proceed by a mode of reporting that removes them from the research context and makes them largely unanswerable and unaccountable to their research ‘subjects’. Both operate, in other words, as if the research site – whether an unspoiled wilderness or a 3D virtual world – constitutes a ‘space apart’.

In recent decades, feminist and indigenous scholars have offered particularly compelling rejections of this kind of approach, reading its attempts at objectivity as complicit in the marginalization and brutalization of groups, cultures, and individuals under colonial and patriarchal regimes. As a result of these upheavals, there are now ways of doing ethnography that fulfill Haraway’s requirements for “accountable positioning” – that embrace rather than hide the researchers’ own localization and partiality, that recognize and work to deconstruct inequitable power dynamics between researcher and “subject”, and that see “the process of positioning itself as an epistemological act” (Visweswaran, 1995, p. 48). These approaches include, among others, “deconstructive” ethnography (Visweswaran, 1995), which reads participants’ silences and refusals, normally seen as “failures” in conventional participant observation, as rich sources for learning and meaning-making; decolonizing ethnography (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), which works with marginalized communities in activist and interventionist projects; institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005), which explores how participants’ everyday lives are organized by extra-local “relations of ruling”; and auto-ethnography, which turns the researchers’ own subjectivity into a research site (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

Each of these methodologies have their own tactics for avoiding what Dorothy Smith calls “ideological reasoning”, where subjects are treated in ethnographic texts as instances of sociological theory, not as active agents, such that subjects only become relevant insofar as their lived experiences align with the researchers’ own theoretical constructs<sup>v</sup> (Smith, 2005, p. 31). Furthermore, deconstructive, decolonizing, institutional, and auto- ethnographies have all historically shared a commitment to working with marginalized, oppressed, or otherwise silenced groups and individuals. This commitment works against the tendency in MMO research – and in traditional sociology more generally, according to Barrie Thorne (1997) – to document only the more dominant, vocal, ‘visible’ members of a particular community.

Looking at the range of stories that are readily available from reading about and playing MMOs – stories about Chinese gold farmers, real or imagined, being punished by other players in-game (Jin, 2008), or about how GLBT or female players are silenced and marginalized when they try to out themselves individually or take collective action (Butts, 2005; Krotoski, 2006) – it seems there are rich opportunities to apply these cyber-feminist methodologies to studies of

online gaming. In doing so, MMO researchers might begin to produce more careful explorations of MMO play and the ways it is situated in players' (and researchers') everyday lives: the social inequities it leverages and perpetrates, the marginalization surrounding players' presumed gender, sexual orientation, age, and ethnicity, and the ways its intensive commitments in terms of time and attention are accommodated for in the "social contextures" of play (Simon, 2007). Such accounts might not only continue and extend the work, started by T. L. Taylor (2006), of attending to groups and individuals who are largely invisible from mainstream academic and journalistic depictions of online gaming; it would also decisively move past the limiting dichotomy between the 'real' and 'virtual'.

### **Reality Check**

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer one reason why this dichotomy between virtual game worlds and the everyday realities of players might still hold sway in the majority of MMO studies, including the ones I discuss here. What MMOs do so well is to present the prolonged sensation of worlds 'out there', worlds that are brought alive by global technological infrastructures of 3D gaming engines, broadband networks, server farms, and robust personal computers. These worlds were only beginning to power up in the late 1980s and early 1990s when Haraway, Stone, Balsamo, and other cyber-feminists first began writing about new digitally-mediated experiences.

When I look at studies of MMOs by Steinkuehler, Ducheneaut and Moore, but also recent sociological and ethnographic works by Nick Yee (2006), Williams et al (2006), Mia Consalvo (2007), and others, and examine the various tools they employ to look at what characters are doing and saying on-screen, I see them tracing rather than interrogating what the medium itself makes visible and possible: the actions and utterances of characters, and occasionally players' posts online. The lesson here seems to be that what counts ethnographically is what the technology shows us. One particular way around this might be to turn to Kamala Visweswaran's unpacking of what "doing" deconstructive ethnography entails. Critiquing normative ethnography for the inequitable relationship it enacts between the researcher and her subjects (the researcher is able to return to her institution where she presumably profits from her work while her subjects remain unchanged), Visweswaran calls for ethnographers to do less "fieldwork" and more "homework" (1995, pp. 101-102). I understand her notion of "homework" to mean a critical interrogation of the power structures that the researcher brings to bear on her participants: a way of disassembling, or at least chipping away at, the divide between researcher and participant, academy and the field.

In much the same way, I'd like to suggest that one means of getting over the unproductive real/virtual divide that still persists in MMO studies is to do more homework. This means making visible what the games themselves render invisible: the networks of technologies and people that design, market, administer, and populate 'virtual worlds'. In a more literal sense, it also might mean more explorations of the physical, localized contexts (domestic or otherwise) in which gameplay happens, as well as, crucially, the networks of support that enable players and researchers to sit at a computer for upwards of 30 hours a week playing a game. Finally, calling for more "homework" asks researchers to contextualize their own play, to assess their own

agency in co-creating ethnographic meaning. If we are to take online play seriously, we have to play – seriously.

## References

- Balsamo, A. (2000). Reading cyborgs writing feminism. In Kirkup, G., Janes, L., Woodward, K., & Hovenden, F. (Eds.), *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader* (pp. 148-158). London: Routledge.
- Boudreau, K. (2005). *Role theory: The line between roles as design and socialization in Everquest*. Paper presented at the Digital Games Research Association conference, Vancouver.
- Butts, W. (2005). OMG girlz don't exist on teh intarweb!!!!1. *The Escapist*, 17. Available online at: <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/issue/17>
- Castronova, E. (2005). *Synthetic worlds: The business and culture of online games*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Consalvo, M. (2005). Rule sets, cheating, and magic circles: Studying games and ethics, in *International Review of Information Ethics*, 3, pp. 7-11.
- Consalvo, M. (2007). *Cheating: Gaining advantage in videogames*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2005). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Dibbell, J. (2006). *Play money: Or, how I quit my day job and made millions trading virtual loot*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ducheneaut, N., Moore, R., & Nickell, E. (2004) *Designing for sociability in massively multiplayer games: an examination of the "third places" of SWG*. Paper presented at the Conference on Multiplayer Phenomena, Copenhagen.
- Ducheneaut, N., & Moore, R. (2005). More than just 'XP': Learning social skills in multiplayer online games, in *Interactive Technology and Smart Education*, 2 (2), pp. 89-100.
- Ducheneaut, N., et al. (2006). Building an MMO with mass appeal: A look at gameplay in *World of Warcraft*, in *Games and Culture*, 1 (4), pp. 281-317.
- Galarneau, L. (2005). *Spontaneous communities of learning: Learning ecosystems in massively multiplayer online gaming environments*. Paper presented at the Digital Games Research Association conference, Vancouver.
- Gee, J. P. (1992). *The social mind: Language, ideology, and social practice*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.

- Gee, J. P. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. New York: Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2003). *What videogames have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective, in *Feminist Studies*, 14 (3), pp. 575-599.
- Haraway, D. (1991). A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. In Haraway, D, *Simians, cyborgs and women: the reinvention of nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Hollan, J., Hutchins, E., & Kirsch, D. (2000). Distributed cognition: Toward a new foundation for human-computer interaction research, in *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)*, 7 (2), pp. 174-196.
- Hutchins, E. (1995). *Cognition in the wild*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Jakobsson, M., & Taylor, T. L. (2003). *The Sopranos meets Everquest: Social networking in massively multiplayer online games*. Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Digital Arts and Culture conference, Melbourne.
- Jin, G. (2008). Gold farmers. Available online at <http://www.chinesegoldfarmers.com/Index.html>
- Krotoski, A. (2006). How queer: WoW and their unfortunate LGB policy. *Guardian Unlimited: Games*. Available online at: [http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/games/archives/2006/01/30/how\\_queer\\_wow\\_and\\_their\\_unfortunate\\_lgb\\_policy.html](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/games/archives/2006/01/30/how_queer_wow_and_their_unfortunate_lgb_policy.html)
- Plant, S. (1997). *Zeros and ones*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Reed-Danahay, D. (1997). *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social*. Oxford: Berg.
- Simon, B. (2007). Never playing alone: The social contextures of digital gaming, in *Loading..., 1* (1). Available online at: <http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/issue/view1>
- Smith, D. E. (2005). *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for people*. Toronto: Altamira Press.
- Steinkuehler, C. A. (2004). Learning in massively multiplayer online games, in *Proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Learning Sciences* (pp. 521-528), Santa Monica.

- Steinkuehler, C. A. (2006). Massively multiplayer online videogames as participation in a discourse, in *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 3 (1), pp. 38-52.
- Steinkuehler, C. A. (2007). *Keynote address*. Presented at the FuturePlay 2007 conference, Toronto.
- Steinkuehler, C. A. (2008). Cognition and literacy in massively multiplayer online games. In Leu, D., Coiro, J., Lankshear, C., & Knobel, K. (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on New Literacies*. Mahwah: Erlbaum.
- Stone, A. R. (1991). Will the real body please stand up?: Boundary stories about virtual cultures. In Benedikt, M. (Ed.), *Cyberspace: First Steps* (p. 81-118). Cambridge: The MIT Press. Available online at: [http://molodiez.org/net/real\\_body2.html](http://molodiez.org/net/real_body2.html)
- Taylor, N., Jenson, J., & de Castell, S. (2005). Pimps, players and foes: Playing *Diablo II* 'outside the box'. In Garrelts, N. (ed.), *Digital Gameplay: Essays on the Nexus of Digital Game and Gamer* (pp. 130-145). Jefferson: McFarland.
- Taylor, T. L. (2006a). *Play between worlds: Exploring online game culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Taylor, T. L. (2006b). Does WoW change everything? How a PvP server, multinational player base, and surveillance mod scene caused me pause, in *Games and Culture*, 1 (4), pp. 318-337.
- Thomas, D. (2005). 2, 443 *Quenkers and counting, or what in us really wants to grind? Examining the grind in Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided*. Paper presented at the Digital Games Research Association conference, Vancouver.
- Thomas, D. (2007). *Blurring the boundaries between worlds: Conceptual blending in virtual worlds*. Paper presented at the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) conference, Montreal.
- Thorne, B. (1997). *Gender play: Girls and boys in school*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Tuhiwai Smith, L. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. New York: Zed Books.
- Visweswaran, K. (1995). *Fictions of feminist ethnography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wajcman, J. (1991). *Feminism confronts technology*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University.
- Williams, D., et al. (2006). From tree house to barracks: the social life of guilds in *World of*

*Warcraft*, in *Games and Culture*, 1 (4), pp. 338-361.

Yee, N. (2006a). The labor of fun: How video games blur the boundaries of work and play, in *Games and Culture*, 1 (1), pp. 68-71.

Yee, N. (2006b). The demographics, motivations and derived experiences of users of massively-multiuser online graphical environments, in *PRESENCE: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, 15, pp. 309-329.

---

<sup>i</sup> See <http://www.blizzard.com/us/press/080122.html>

<sup>ii</sup> See <http://gigaom.com/2007/06/13/top-ten-most-popular-mmorpgs/>

<sup>iii</sup> It should be noted that Steinkuehler's critique of classroom-based learning occurs at the level of federal education policy (Steinkuehler, 2004, p. 527; 2008, p. 2), rather than any ground-level exploration of classroom practices – as if emergent cultures do not also arise in classrooms as they do in MMOs. To the extent that it is (im)possible to understand the localized practices and knowledges of a particular learning community by only examining its central set of documents, this might be likened to offering a critique of social play in *World of Warcraft* based on the game's instruction manual.

<sup>iv</sup> See, for instance, an article on "Game widows" at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20397322/>

<sup>v</sup> Steinkuehler's (2007) keynote at the FuturePlay conference in Toronto, where she described her study of *World of Warcraft*-related forums, illustrates "ideological reasoning". In talking about the educative potentials of MMOs versus formal schooling, Steinkuehler selectively appropriated certain forum contributions as examples of the kinds of "scientific habits of mind" that she claims MMOs can cultivate. At the same time, she offered no sustained analysis of *who* is actually contributing to these forums.