Players, Games & Culture

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The scholarly study of digital games is a fairly recent phenomenon, a constellation of interdisciplines that has arisen primarily out of film and literary studies but has expanded to embrace aspects of behavioral psychology, learning and cognition, and sociology. Some might argue that the term “game culture” with reference to video games is an oxymoron. Digital games are viewed largely, like their cousin the comic book, as a form of low culture, indeed the lowest of low. Any content whatever is somehow viewed as more menacing and nefarious when re-inscribed in the form of a game.

Yet game culture is a rich terrain for investigation. On the one hand is the cultural production of game-making, on the other is the culture of game-playing, a form of production in and of itself. (Pearce 2006a) Due in large part to the roots of game studies in critical theory, a great deal of study has been devoted to the “game-as-object,” that is, the thing that is made by game-makers. Games are critiqued as a cultural artifact and their status as “art” hotly debated. The meaning and conventions of games are plumbed, and the various nuances of game production: character, production design, lighting, sound. The characteristics of the game itself thus become the focus of attention.

A smaller and growing group is complementing this game-centric approach (which, I wish to emphasize, is both relevant and valid) by devoting its attentions to the study of the players themselves: both individual players, and the social, as sociologists term it, “intersubjective” aspects of play. This player-centric approach views the game in the context of the agency it affords players, the experience they have while playing, and the social constructions that take place in the context of play communities. This becomes particularly relevant with the rise of massively multiplayer games, which are generating a host of new research questions about the social nature of play and networks, questions that instigate us to revisit pre-digital writings, scarce though they may be, on the subject.

Figure 1: Players at an early “New Games” event play the Lap game.
At Digital Arts and Culture 2005, Ludica, a women’s game collective I co-founded with Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, and Jacki Morie, presented a paper on the New Games Movement, a social activist initiative that took place in the United States in the 1970’s in direct response to the Viet Nam War, and which proposed new ways to play together that tried to break the conventions of highly competitive, militaristic sports that prevailed at the time. (Fluegelman 1976.) (Figure 1) New Games proponents such as Whole Earth Catalog creator Stewart Brand (1972) produced happenings in which players engaged in large-scale multiplayer gaming experiences (perhaps the precursor to today’s massively multiplayer game), and experimented with bending, breaking and reinventing game rules around a different, perhaps more Utopian world view. In this paper, we proposed revitalizing such a movement in the context of the contemporary game culture, suggesting that in the wake of a newly rekindled military industrial complex, these large-scale public gaming events might take on new relevance. (Ludica/Fron et al 2005.) Designers such as Katie Salen, Nick Fortuno, Frank Lanz of area/code, and Marina Zurkow have reconfigured this movement into the contemporary “Big Game,” a form of public art that takes gaming out of the digital sphere and into large-scale social contexts. (Figure 2) Just last week in New York, an entire festival, “Come out and Play,” was devoted to this emerging—or perhaps re-emerging—game genre.

Figure 2: Players in area/code’s “Big Urban Game” traverse the streets of Minneapolis/St. Paul compete to find the most efficient routes with help from players via the Internet. (Katie Salen & Nick Fortuno with area/code)
One of the attendants at the presentation of our DAC paper year applauded the sentiments of the paper, and noted in particular that it promoted a player-centric approach to game studies. Ludica was recently asked to expand and revise and update this paper for the journal Games & Culture. With this and other work, I find myself moving more and more towards this player-centric approach to game research and practice. In our technophilic culture it is easy to become enamored of our creations, to “fall in love with our prostheses,” as Sandy Stone has so aptly put it (1996), and equally easy to forget the entire point: games are first and foremost about play, the act of play, the process of play, the experience of play, and the intersubjective construction of shared play space. (Jenkins1998; Iacovoni 2004.) Technology is merely a means to an end, a way to amplify and reconstruct play and to create more diverse and nuanced agency in the context of a play experience. Yet, today, the mainstream game industry, especially in the U.S., but elsewhere as well, has become so in love with its own polygon count and lighting algorithms that it has lost sight of the player her, or more often, himself.

One notable exception is the Japanese, whose sense of play if far more highly evolved than in America or Europe. Nintendo continues to produce new and innovative products, such as the Nintendo DS, which is now unabashedly being marketed to female players (Figure 3), and the forthcoming Wii controller, a wand-like device that introduces a far more engaging and embodied interface paradigm in lieu of the “thumb candy” micro joystick/trigger controllers we have all come to know and...well...tolerate.
Nintendo clearly understands the value of this player-centric approach. Advertisements for its both the DS and the Wii console are decidedly player-centric. In typical Wii videos and ads, the players are featured front and center, with the game graphics shown as a small inset. These promotional materials emphasize the players, what they are doing, how they are feeling; in other words, the player experience is God…the screen graphics are secondary to the play itself. Not only that, but video game fun can be had by a diverse array of people, as exemplified by the sample promotional images shown below. (Figure 4) This player-centric sensibility is long-overdue, and I hope Nintendo, as it often does, will set the trend for the future.

I realize this may sound a little hokey: wow, all these new console machines are so cool, and the PC is getting more powerful with better graphics cards. Nonetheless, Pong (Atari 1972) is still as fun as it ever was, and perhaps more fun than many of today’s polygon-crunching masterpieces. And it’s certainly more inclusive. The Xbox, for instance, might better be called the XY box since it seems to cultivate an audience consisting of only half the population: it’s testosterone-induced, combat-based games merely push women further into the margins of play. Yet at the same time, women who have long been ignored by the game industry are now finding satisfaction in the growing casual game landscape. While these games are marginalized by many mainstream game designers, they have created a scenario in which women over forty now outnumber every other segment of the gaming population, and spend more time gaming than any other group. (Vance 2004.)

Part of what interests me is not merely the agency that a game affords, but the liberties players take with that agency. In particular, the past few years I have been looking at emergent social behavior in massively multiplayer games, particularly from a design perspective. The phenomenon of such behaviors is well known: from The Sims Online mafia to the buying and selling of Everquest currency on online auction sites, we all know that players will take liberties with their agency. But why, and how does the game design itself hinder, enable or promote such liberties?

My recent research into large-scale emergent behavior in online games lead me to the phenomenon of inter-game immigration. (Pearce 2006c.) I was already aware that it is common for players to migrate en masse, an entire guild for instance, from one game to
another. This type of emergent behavior precipitated a suite of research questions: why do players change games en masse, and how does the fact that they are immigrating as a group from another game, one which may have shaped their patterns of play and social interaction, impact their experience in the new game? How does their sudden introduction into the new environment impact the other players already there?

The group I studied to address these questions began in the game Myst: Uru, a game that closed after less than 9 months of operation, leaving some 10,000 players refugees. Traumatized by the closure of the game and the apparent termination of the friendships they had formed within it, players began to migrate in sub-groups in the hundreds into other games and into their own player-managed forums. The primary group in my study comprised about 300 players who immigrated into the virtual world There.com, where they were able to use limited building tools to recreate some of the artifacts of Uru, and eventually to build their own hybrid Uru/Thereian immigrant culture. Initially this group encountered friction with the Thereian natives who viewed their mass arrival as an intrusion, and resented their impact on the valuable resource of server processing: the new immigrant group caused lag with their constant need to be together. A second group of about 200 immigrated into Second Life, where a sub-set of about 6-8 at various times set about recreating the entire Uru game taking advantage of Second Life’s extensive modeling and texture tools. (Figure 5)

Figure 5: Uru players recreated the “Hood Fountain,” the focal point of their social lives in the game, in There.com (top right), Second Life (bottom right) and Adobe Atmosphere (bottom left).

These players developed a unique fictive ethnicity that arose out of their affinity to, but more importantly, through, the Myst series in general and Uru in particular. Here were
players who had immersed themselves for a decade in the elaborate Myst world first created by the Miller brothers in 1993, each on a solitary excursion, and each building a high level of expertise in particular play patterns and knowledge of the world and its mythology. Suddenly, they wandered into a shared iteration of the world inhabited by other members of their tribe. And it was not only their immersion in the Myst world that created their affinity, but their shared play sensibility.

When I first began to interview members of the Uru Diaspora, as I came to call them, and who called themselves Uru refugees, I found it intriguing that they self-identified in the plural by their play preferences. They would say, “We are explorers,” “we are puzzle-solvers.” For them this was not just a statement of personal play interest; it was also a statement of group identity (Pearce 2006d.)—Not only “we like to explore,” but also “we are explorers.” It should be noted that explorer was also the player’s official role in the Uru game. Many players in my study said they did not like violent or competitive play, and they enjoyed the collaborative puzzle solving of Uru, and the fact that it stimulated the mind. They gravitated to each other because of a common play ethos. In finding each other, they had discovered what Bernie DeKoven would call their “play community.” (DeKoven 1978.) DeKoven defines such a community as a group of people who wish to play together, who may change games, and who might even reinvent game rules in order to create a level playing field for its members. The play community has a special bond, and one that is different from what scholars of computer-mediated communications refer to as “communities of interest” or “communities of practice.” Play communities in fact form around shared play styles and preferences, and while the Uru group is only one example, many more abound.

Nowhere can the power of play as a social engine be seen in more regalia than at the annual Dragon*Con fan convention that takes place in Atlanta, Georgia, each year. As a recent resident of Atlanta, I had my first exposure to this event in the summer of 2006. Dragon*Con is a cornucopia of fantasy. Every fictional world you can imagine is represented, each by its own unique fan community. People participate at various immersion levels, from a Led Zeppelin T-shirt to full Jedi Knight garb. Fairies intermingle with Storm Troopers and the Phantom Menace gives a passing nod to a World War II soldier; women in authentic renaissance attire cross paths with Indiana Jones; Trekkies meet knights in chain mail; students of Hogwarts have drinks with Sailor Moon clones; superheroes stop and chat in the hallways. One live-action role-playing game (aka LARP) even involved Ancient Greece, complete with togas. It is literally a cornucopia of the imagination. And thousands of people attend every year. (Figure 6)
Fig. 6: Superheroes congregate at the annual Dragon*Con fan convention in Atlanta.

What brings these people together? The desire to immerse themselves in alternative worlds and universes, not as a replacement for real life, but as a means to explore their own identities through play. To the uninitiated, such a display of indulgence in unbridled fantasy role-playing might inspire cries of: “Get a life!” But to the sociologist of game cultures, it is clear that such individuals are getting a life. In fact they are inventing an alternative life that has its own merits and should be respected and investigated on its own terms. The sheer quantities of people who are now engaging in a variety of fantastical worlds and alternative identities through games and social playscapes of various kinds suggests that there is indeed a high level of social relevance to these play forms.

In contemporary Western culture, play is often marginalized as a trivial activity that has no place in adult life. A small handful of scholars over the past Century have begged to differ. Richard Schechner, an anthropologist famed for his study of performance, play and ritual, pointed out in 1988 that “In the West, play is a rotten category tainted by unreality, inauthenticity, duplicity, make-believe, looseness, fooling around, and inconsequentiality.” (Schechner 1988.) Baudrillard, in his Simulacra and Simulation, succeeded in reinforcing the marginalization of play by equating synthetic worlds with low culture, fakery and an unhealthy desire to escape from reality, again, the ultimate in “low” culture. (1994.) Yet Schechner’s contemporary Victor Turner argued that such forms of apparent escape have long held a fundamental role in human culture and experience. He identified what he called “liminal” and “liminoid” spaces as fulfilling this need in various ways. The former he saw a space of transition between one phase of “real life” and another, a bridge between seasons, childhood and adulthood, life and death; the latter was a space of respite and recreation (read: re-creation) between “real life” activities, characterized by leisure pursuits in post-industrial Western culture. (Turner 1982.) Johan Huizinga perhaps overstated the case when he argued in Homo Ludens that
virtually all forms of culture arise from the play instinct, and the highly anthro-centric viewpoint typical of anthropologists of his generation (Europe between and during the World Wars) forces us to acknowledge that though his work remains relevant, it is dated in its perspective. (Huizinga (1938) 1950.) Gregory Bateson, husband of Margaret Mead, and a highly influential though controversial anthropologist in his own right, observed in his “Theory of Play and Culture” that even animals have the ability to distinguish between make-believe and real fighting. (Bateson 1972.) Even trailblazing early 20th Century researchers concerned with cognitive and educational development, such as Jean Piaget and Maria Montessori, observed the relationship between play and learning, the role of play in exploring new ideas, experimenting with new discoveries, and integrating new knowledge into one’s sphere of understanding. What all of these have in common is that they recognize as fundamental to human culture the need to step outside of the everyday into a realm of conjecture, experimentation, discovery and fantasy, to move into an alternative set of cultural agreements within which new forms of being, living and interacting with others can be explored.

This imaginative space of possibilities is the space of play. In Western culture, as has been noted earlier, play has been pushed to the margins of adult life, an activity that must be abandoned with childhood. We would do well to learn from the Japanese, who in spite of, or perhaps because of their intense work-ethic, embrace a wide array of role-playing activities from Geisha culture, to the more contemporary practice of “cosplay,” or “costume play,” to the cartoony game characters that are just as appealing to adults in Japan as they are to children. (Figure 7) We might also do well to look at other traditions that are very close to home: the Catholic celebration of Mardi Gras, which also integrates pagan rituals, is an example; the Ancient Greek practice of Bacchanalia and participatory drama that allowed adults to play by different or expanded rules than were allowed in the rest of their everyday lives is another. Henry Jenkins has chronicled the fan culture of so-called Trekkies (Jenkins 1992), fans of the television program Star Trek, who have not only embraced but extended the mythology of the classic science fiction world, creating alien dictionaries and their own homegrown narratives. While often considered the pinnacle of nerd-dom in the U.S., Trekkies foreshadow the growing participatory culture of play, one in which players themselves take the central stage in the playground. They demonstrate that play is not, as both Huizinga and his disciple Roger Caillois assert, by definition unproductive. (Caillois 1961.) Economist Edward Castronova has even asserted that it is possible to calculate the “gross domestic product” of a fictional world by measuring the value of its currency against real-world currency and the time spent playing against time spent working in real-world nations. (2001) This suggests that an economic value may even be applied to play, a conclusion with which the mega-publishers in the video game industry would concur. The Trekkie culture, Dragon*Con, player content creation in games like The Sims, There.com and Second Life, and other movements cited here demonstrate the play and creativity are closely tied. (Pearce 2006a) Indeed, the boundaries between play and art, a domain well-explored by experimental artists of the mid-to-late twentieth century. (Fron and Sandor 2001; Pearce 2006b.)
The player-centric movement I am arguing for is, I believe, already underway. Analog “game philosophers” such as Bernie DeKoven and Roger Caillois, mentioned earlier, Bernard Suits (1978), and sociologists and anthropologists of play such as Iona and Peter Opie (1969) and Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), provide us with insight into the nature of the play experience, both as an individual player and as a co-conspirator in an intersubjective social construction process. A foundation for much of the current work in digital game studies can be found in the work of a prior generation of thinkers engaged in the construction and study of early virtual worlds in the mid 1990s, many of whom are at risk of falling into obscurity for lack of adequate publishing opportunities in this formative period: Steve DiPaola (1998-2003), Bruce Damer (1997), and Amy Jo Kim (1997) have written extensively about proto virtual worlds, and Jennifer Mnookin (1996), Pavel Curtis (1992), Julian Dibbell (1998), and Richard Bartle (1996) are among those who cut a path in investigating the lives of denizens of the textual imaginary worlds known as MUDs and MOOs. Today, we have a discipline called “game studies.” T.L. Taylor (1999) and others named above have provided a bridge from these prior movements to the new cybersociology of play; Bob Moore, Nicolas Duchenaut, Eric Nickell, and Nicolas Yee of PARC’s Play On group (2005-2006) have conducted some of the most rigorous studies to date on the lifestyles of online gamers. Edward Castronova (2001) has virtually invented the field of game economics, studying the flow of resources, goods and services in

Fig. 7: “Cosplay” is a popular pastime among Japanese adults.
fictional synthetic worlds. Leo Sang-Min Whang and his various collaborators (2005) have brought us new insight into the culture of online gaming in Korea. James Gee (2003), Constance Steinkeuhler and Kurt Squire (2006) have provided new insight into the cognitive, educational and linguistic processes that players undergo as they engage with fantasy worlds. And artists working on the edge of research and practice, such as Anne-Marie Schleiner, Eddo Stern and Brody Condon have explored the nuance of online game cultures through their fine art works. Jacki Morie and her colleagues at ICT have brought pioneering work in VR and presence to bear with in-depth studies on the relationship between games, virtual reality, cognition, memory and the senses. Both separately and along with our collaborators at Ludica, Janine Fron and Tracy Fullerton (2006), we have also been engaged in helping to define a feminist direction for game studies, a more gender-inclusive approach to both game research and game-creation, building on work by Maia Engeli and Mary Flanagan among others. The forthcoming volume Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat (Kafai et al 2007) provides unique insight from a range of perspectives on the special characteristics of both the female player and the female designer, both long-neglected within both industry and academia.

What I am calling for, along with other members of this growing movement, is a shift of focus, or more accurately, a balance of attention, away from the digital object of the game, and towards the player as central to the gaming experience. Let us thus refocus our attention away from the screen to look instead at the source of agency, of interaction, the true kinetic energy behind games; let us investigate the intersubjective construction of play space an inherently social act, whether it takes place between a game design team and its fans in a single-player game, or among the millions of people who are distributed throughout cyberspace, throughout the globe battling Orcs and dragons in hundreds of parallel universes of play at this very moment.

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