

Review: Play between worlds: exploring online game culture

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Review

T.L. Taylor, *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*.
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. 264 pp. ISBN-10: 0262201631 (hbk)
£19.95; ISBN-13: 9780262201636 (hbk) £19.95

For those of us who have been around since the institutionalization of internet and games research in the academy in the early years of this decade, and who struggle to impress upon our students the relative novelty of email, 3D worlds and Bebo, this book is a useful pedagogical tool. It opens up taken-for-granted terminology such as: what is real and what is virtual? What is play and what is a game? It turns our attention to hidden corners of the game world where non-stereotypical gamers 'hang out'; it starts to map the richness of game culture in a particular online context, and it offers a sustained critique of industry design, marketing and community management practices. This book focuses on *EverQuest*, launched by Sony Computer Entertainment in 1999. *EverQuest* is interesting in that, while it was once the main Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) on the market, it has been totally overshadowed in terms of market share and academic attention by *World of Warcraft*. As such, Taylor's book is almost historical and highlights the transient and dynamic nature of these games, how they evolve, grow and eventually are replaced by other MMOGs.

We must welcome a broadening of the games literature to issues beyond the practicalities of game design and the intricacies of game theory. There are few books in the growing games literature which offer this type of sociological perspective on the games world. This book focuses on game play in a particular context, and as such grounds and challenges some of the generalizations made in both the practical and more theoretical literature. The focus here is on what people experience and how they negotiate and, in some cases, circumvent the core text. Here the focus is on gameplay, what this means to game players themselves and the researcher as gamer. The focus is on linkages between the online and offline, and how people engage with the presentation of self via a variously predetermined avatar and games space. From the structure of rules and graphical spaces game players generate a multitude of cultures and norms of practice.

The opening chapter in this book describes how Taylor entered *EverQuest*, her choice of avatar and how this impacted upon her game

playing experience. It is a highly personal account, one which details her motion sickness and the perils she faced online as a newbie. It also discusses a real world *EverQuest* 'faire' held in Boston, MA where she met for the first time people she had known only previously online. She explores how online games can leak into the offline world and vice versa, but how these activities and practices remain ultimately under the control of a major corporation which decides on the rules.

Chapter 2 traces the historical lineage of MMOGs to *Dungeons and Dragons*, table-top role-playing games and early text-based virtual worlds. It also maps the *EverQuest* gameworld and patterns of play. Even if one has never played an MMOG, Taylor explains the main elements, language and layout of *EverQuest* in great detail, accompanied by black and white images. She traces the emergent and informal social norms and practices, whereby people will usually respond to calls for help, even if technically an opponent in the game. She argues that players are acculturated or socialized into the game, both in terms of the formal game playing rules and the more informal rules of behaviour. As in the real world, there are 'outlaws' and bad news spreads fast, and such players are quickly labelled as troublemakers, finding it more difficult to progress in the world.

The following two chapters explore what Taylor describes as fringe players: power gamers, i.e. those who play the game in a particularly instrumental style, and female game players. Both these types of players are often seen as 'deviant' or non-ideal by the industry itself and by some game players. Yet perhaps, Taylor argues, this says more about our stereotypes of the ideal gamer than about the actual practice of gameplay. These chapters highlight that gamers may play in very different ways, enjoy different things in a game and that play involves both pleasure and displeasure. Taylor repeatedly notes how structural and real-world pressures can intervene in and shape one's game playing experiences. Of particular note in these chapters is the attention paid to 'race' as well as the nature and practice of 'play'. Taylor is also careful to reject the more biological and essentialist attempts to justify design choices and player pleasures.

In Chapters 3 and 4 Taylor offers a sustained critique of industry practices in relation to avatar design and the marketing and advertising of games. Chapter 5 maps the move from open-source multi-user virtual worlds to privately-owned commercial game spaces. This has led to many cases of conflict between private, profit-driven corporations and player practices, particularly in relation to content creation and ownership. As more and more players are invited to help in beta testing, feedback, community support and content creation, the boundary between user and producer is increasingly blurred. Often this blurring is not taken into account by intellectual property laws and End User License Agreements (EULAs) which are used to protect corporate ownership and profit. Certain areas are even more contentious and ambiguous. The use of hacks, auctioning and helper sites must be questioned: are they evidence of player creativity



or violations of the boundaries and property rights of the games owners? Here we see examples of the continuous renegotiation of both gamer culture and corporate culture which, Taylor argues, reflects discussions around the collective production of culture more generally.

This book adopts a grounded theory approach and in that vein the data speak first, then are used to challenge and open up accepted definitions and conceptualizations. The work is clearly informed by the sociology of science and technology, and it sees *EverQuest* as a sociotechnical artefact open to multiple interpretations and actively resisting closure. There are multiple stakeholders in this story and not all have the same goals, contributing to an ongoing struggle to control and 'own' the content. This struggle resonates with those in other areas of cultural content.

The focus here is on players and player experiences and one does not get to see into the company behind the game or hear from the designers, although their views are reported secondhand in places. It is unclear how well this game did in different markets, particularly the Asian market, and where references to place are made they are usually US-specific. I would have liked to see some exploration of server-specific cultures or intercultural negotiations. Perhaps that is for the next book.

This book is accessible, honest and personal. There is an unhealthy sense sometimes in games studies that one is born a game player rather than learning to become one. This book shows that even veterans of game studies were newbies once, and that one learns a lot about a game world when one is a newbie. This book should encourage students in related cultural fields to explore MMOGs as just another online realm, rather than 'black boxing' it.

This book is not terribly long and, including notes and references, comes in at under 200 pages. I would suggest that it would work well with undergraduate fieldwork or qualitative research methodology students as well as students of online or games courses, or more general media studies and popular culture courses. Some of the book draws upon previously published work, but this publication should bring this valuable work to a new cohort of students and help to contextualize the current focus in game studies on *World of Warcraft*.

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