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Pushing the Borders: Player Participation and Game Culture

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Games are typically thought of as closed systems of play in which formal rules allow players to operate within a “magic circle” outside the cares of everyday life and the world (Huizinga, 1955). This rhetoric often evokes a sense that the player steps through a kind of looking glass and enters a pure game space. From *Monopoly* to *Final Fantasy*, commercial games in particular are often seen as structures conceived by a designer and then used by players in accordance with given rules and guidelines. Players, however, have a history of pushing against these boundaries, whether through feedback processes that change the game over time or, as Mizuko Ito (Chapter 6, this volume) suggests, via their engagement with games within an extended set of linked media practices and social identities—a subject that this chapter explores as well. However absorbing the game experience proves itself to be, player culture has never existed in a completely rarified space: We can see all kinds of players—multiuser, first-person shooter, console, simulation, classic—pushing back at and tweaking the structures of play they encounter.

As with critiques of the dichotomization of online and offline life, the line between game and “real” world often becomes blurred. As players blend game and nongame space, they simultaneously complicate preconceptions about authentic or legitimate play. Players do not simply adopt the rules of the game as given but regularly create their own achievement paths and make sense of the frames of play in ways not always prescribed by the designers. Indeed, in many massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) fundamental structures of the game rely on active player populations who participate in everything from testing for product bugs to creating new content after launch. MMOGs, in particular, seem to foster a climate in which the typical hierarchy of designer and user is problematized—where players do not simply adopt given game worlds but find themselves in positions to support, challenge, and extend the structures they encounter. New digital technologies clearly facilitate these roles, whether in terms of communications networks that support dispersed player communities and permit game updates and modifications to circulate; or in terms of the potential openness of game architectures to modification via available game source code or content editing.

This two-way interaction characterizes much of digital culture, from editable formats for digital music and video, to Internet distribution mechanisms, to the open source software movement, to cite a few examples. In this context, it is perhaps surprising that computer games are so routinely captured by arguments about (and fears of) mindlessness and passive

consumption (Dorman, 1997; McVeigh, 2001; Stallabras, 2003). Arguably, this is partly an effect of digital convergence, that is, of the increasing mediation of media experience through the screen, and of the resulting transfer of older arguments about screen culture to the new game spaces. Although computer games, like other screen media, can be vehicles for narrative and scripted action, they also by definition imply performance—the creation of spaces that call the player or players into action (and interaction). Despite corporate fantasies (and emerging technological possibilities) of a completely controlled media landscape—see Robert F. Nideffer (Chapter 12), Tarleton Gillespie (Chapter 15), and Joe Karaganis (Chapter 16) in this volume—there is ample evidence that electronic games can and do support forms of experience that extend this performative engagement. If we are to understand and, perhaps, value the creative dimensions of that experience, we need models of the complex, often messy scenes that emerge when users find themselves in the role of not simply active consumers but also key producers in the media they engage. We need theories that locate these practices as simultaneously creating vibrant, meaningful cultural forms and also situate them within a particular postindustrial moment infused with global media products.

This chapter explores the ways in which participatory practices by players extend game space beyond its literal confines, and how those moves are in turn either supported or contested by game companies and designers. Rather than just suggesting that players tangentially contribute to games, I argue that, in many cases, playing digital games and participating in their broader culture is possible only through the elaborate production of auxiliary tools, websites, social networks, structures, and practices that are created and maintained by the players. Playing computer games regularly puts users in the position of relying on vast networks of resources, including game hints, cheats, and walkthroughs, community newspapers and message boards, ancillary game applications, and information and knowledge repositories. To recognize the ways in which the structures of participation within game culture are built on player-created content typically seen as lying *outside* the bounds of the formal system is to refigure not only our understanding of play and games but also how we conceptualize the identities of players and designers. What we see when we look at this more complex picture of participation is a system in which the line between creator and consumer is blurred and in which the de facto ownership of game space can come to lie increasingly in the hands of productive players.

De jure ownership is usually a different story, however, and the evolving differences between the two have produced some notable conflicts among corporate owners and between corporations and players. As players have emerged as key participants in the creation of game culture, computer games have become full-fledged global media products, subject to the same forces of corporatization and consolidation that have transformed the broader media arena. On the production side, the results are dramatic. Independent developers continue to struggle to keep up with large studios while game publishing and distribution is now dominated by a handful of companies such as Electronic Arts, Microsoft, Sony Entertainment, Vivendi, and Ubisoft. In this climate, players find themselves negotiating an often thorny terrain in which spontaneous cultural participation intersects with complicated corporate and legal interests. Depending on where you look and who you listen to, these developments can be read as either signs of creative growth or as the steps toward a much more tightly controlled game future. What follows might be thought of as early indicators of these outcomes—fragile, still contested, and hinting at choices to be made.

content creation and technical interventions

One of the most interesting forms of player intervention in the computer gaming experience is the creation of software that enhances or modifies games. Sue Morris (2004) has suggested we think of such interventions as signaling the emergence of players as “co-creative” media producers. Such work situates games and player communities within a long history of user innovation in software development, from the production of free/shareware to the development of entire operating systems. The attention the open source movement has received in recent years highlights the importance (and long-standing tradition) of these unpaid developers in the creation of computer technologies. Such participation often constitutes a central—not peripheral—axis of innovation, not least because it is a driving force in the education, training, and socialization of new innovators (Burnham, 2003; Dyck, Pinelle, Brown, & Gutwin, 2003; Herz, 1997; King & Borland, 2003; Ratan, 2003). Despite the proliferation of systems that are either locked down or maintained under strict proprietary guidelines—such as the closed-box formats of game consoles like the PlayStation 2 or opaque engines that cannot easily be modified—a wide range of user communities continues to push at the boundaries of open and closed systems alike and actively insert

themselves into the production process. Indeed, the term “user” may not adequately describe the kind of agency at work in this configuration.

In game worlds, this activity takes many forms, reflecting the wide range of expertise and degrees of engagement that players bring to bear. Sometimes, new objects can be created for the game space, as in the case of *The Sims*, which allows players considerable latitude in creating and sharing the “material culture” of the game. These can range from the mundane (new furniture) to something like the “tiny.signs.of.hope” project that created antiwar images for importation into the game world (Poremba, 2003). “Modding” is a similar practice that describes the work of player communities in the production of new content, usually the creation of maps, weapons, and scenarios for various first-person shooters (FPS) like *Unreal Tournament*. Modding communities have long been a vibrant part of computer game culture, extending the lives of some games well beyond their expected shelf life. Hector Postigo (2003) has suggested that modders create a tremendous amount of labor value in their activities, doing the work of large numbers of developers. He notes that their activities fit into a broader economy in which social recognition creates powerful incentives, including financially convertible rewards in the form of entry into the game industry. This emergent symbolic economy, sometimes called a “gift” economy, is one of the most distinctive features of digital gaming culture and often creates a very close and fluid relationship between game companies and their customers. The catalogue of player-produced innovations reveals a startling amount of user investment in games. A handful of game developers, in turn, have altered their practices and game designs to take advantage of this relationship.

Some player production extends beyond content creation to the very structure of the game, involving changes to the game dynamics or user interface. The massively multiplayer online game *Asheron’s Call*, for example, benefited enormously from the enhancements its players made to the user interface and functionality of the game. Players produced coded modules that were circulated via the Internet. Once installed, they gave access to in-game maps and new trading mechanisms, and generally altered and enhanced how players interacted with a wide variety of game information. In the case of *Asheron’s Call*, these modules were built via a piece of noncommercial software, Decal, which allows third-party tools to be added to the game. Layered development of this kind is increasingly common: Tool-building applications support the further development of modularity. All are promoted through

word of mouth and distributed through networks of websites and message boards. The development of these enhancements has even led the second version of the game, *Asheron's Call II*, to include third-party plug-in support for modding via a manager in the engine itself (Rhody, 2003). *World of Warcraft* has most recently picked up on this technological thread by allowing players to produce add-ons for the game that can radically alter not only the interface but user experience of the space (Taylor, 2006c). The number of add-ons produced for the game over the last several years totals well over a thousand. Notably, a number of player-introduced features in these add-ons have found their way back into official Blizzard updates to the game. This kind of full-circle development process, driven by player initiative, is now a common feature of multiuser game design. Although the hard work of the original designers should not be underestimated, either in terms of the raw investment of time (Ahearn, 2001; International Game Developers Association, 2004; Kline, Dyer-Witheyford, & De Peuter, 2003; Postigo, 2003) or the continued importance of auteur-driven game design, this kind of participatory activity should make us reconsider our notions of what constitutes the actual game, the "real" designer, and what it means to be a player in this space.

Several companies have met the challenge of active player communities by working to enfranchise them as lay designers. By including tools to modify the game, by organizing competitions for new levels and maps, by hosting centralized distribution channels for modding activity (as in Valve Software's *Steam* application), and even by involving players in the production of game content (the *Neverwinter Nights* website, for example, boasts an impressive catalogue of downloadable player-created textures, creatures, and objects), companies foster and draw on a creative user base that is invested in keeping the game fresh and interesting. Indeed, some spaces are built upon the premise of player production. Games like *A Tail in the Desert* not only directly involve players in creating the storyline of the game, but allow them to mandate that the designers implement certain kinds of changes to the game itself. And using language that resonates with the ethic of many old-school text-based MUDs (multiuser dungeons), *Second Life's* Cory Ondrejka (2003) states that,

creating a defensibly real, online world is now possible if its users are given the power to collaboratively create the content within it, if those users receive broad rights to their creations and if they can convert those creations into real world capital and wealth. (p. 4)

Extended to include the real-world hours players spend beta-testing games, a pattern emerges of a vast volunteer labor force of lay game designers, quality assurance checkers, and bug testers. Although some pursue these activities in the hopes of landing an actual job within the industry, many do it simply for the love of the game, the pleasure of creating and distributing their work, and the social recognition that follows.

Some very successful games have been driven by player development, including the enormously popular *Counter-Strike* (a modification of the game *Half-Life* by college-student player Minh Le). The field of networked gaming, especially, owes many of its innovations to channels outside commercial game development. Networked FPS games like *Counter-Strike* and *Quake* create unique social challenges that are often addressed (at least initially) within the game community. There is pressure, for example, to ensure that all players are operating within shared technical guidelines. Cheating is one of the major worries: Player communities generally try to ensure sure no one is benefiting from special programming hacks or tricks that can unbalance the game. This concern led to the creation of PunkBuster, an application created by a group of player-programmers to run alongside *Counter-Strike*, *America's Army*, and other games, which can verify to other systems that the player is abiding by approved guidelines (and not using ancillary hacks and cheats). PunkBuster and similar programs have become so successful within the community that many servers (hubs where players meet up and initiate games) refuse entry without its use. PunkBuster has even been included in various official game distributions.

Constraints are also—and, arguably, increasingly—at work, however. Although modders and content producers exemplify the new player-programmer roles, the kinds of creative practice associated with these activities can be regulated. Andrew Mactavish (2003), for example, has described the ways that modding communities are both supported and kept in check via software and end user license agreements (EULAs). Bundled tools or authorized development kits, for example, provide the ability to easily integrate new content with the game system, but they also have the power to enforce particular standards and aesthetics. As Robert F. Nideffer notes, “The game engine becomes not simply a piece of software, but something that reflects and embodies the cultural conditions indexical to both the developers of the system, as well as the end users of that system” (Nideffer, Chapter 12, this volume, p. 200). Although such software serves the interests of the players

and the game, it also imposes a form of low-level regulation (Taylor, 2003). Centralized distribution systems that provide access to larger player bases and allow players to share their creations also serve as mechanisms for vetting or rating player-created content. Simple inclusion in (or exclusion from) the distribution system can work to signal authorization and legitimacy of particular production interventions. As player-produced content gets funneled into “authorized” distribution mechanisms, previously informal systems of community governance (whereby players rate each others’ creations) become more subject to institutional regulation.

At times, such auxiliary applications take on particularly contested meaning, as in the case of the program ShowEQ, an application designed to give *EverQuest* users special hidden game information. Seen by Sony Online Entertainment as an illegitimate game addition (players can be banned from the game service for using it) and by many players as simply a device for cheating, ShowEQ is nonetheless a fairly innovative piece of software that extends the boundaries of the game outside its authorized confines: The program allows the user to have detailed map information about monsters and items they would otherwise be unable to see. More extreme are server emulator programs, which completely bypass the formal paid subscription servers typically required to play the game and give users an opportunity to play the game outside the administration of corporate owners. Both ShowEQ and server emulators point to ways in which player interventions can push against not only design intentions but also, sometimes more significantly, the business models of the companies who keep them running. The stakes of defining what constitutes *legitimate* player production can become quite high: Game companies have already shown their willingness to take legal action against player-producers who are perceived as threatening the commercial value or design of the game. In a contest of vastly unequal financial resources, often the simple threat of legal action—regardless of the merits—is enough to police these boundaries (Taylor, 2006a).

networks and knowledge

Beyond software additions and in-game content production, there are many ways in which players extend, enhance, and augment games through the creation of social networks and knowledge databases. These social networks are constituted in part through a form of community problem solving. As James Paul Gee (2003) has argued, they describe processes of thinking and

reasoning that are not only social but also distributed and enduring. Frequently such structures become instrumental to successful game play. Although game designers sometimes think their game is a complete and total entity that the player can interact with unhindered by “external” factors, in fact many computer games produced today are virtually unplayable without “nongame” elements.

One of the most widespread forms of participatory activity in game culture is the production of elaborate knowledge databases and information about the game. Large persistent world games like *EverQuest* and *Star Wars Galaxies* are excellent examples of game spaces that cannot be mastered by single players. The design of the games themselves reward—and often require—sociality and reliance on others. Players often transfer this reliance outside the strict boundaries of the game (Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003). Detailed mapping sites, databases cataloguing the minutiae of the world, and walk-through or quest guides are some of the most common interventions. Websites, message boards, and wikis dedicated to all aspects of the game spring up and give players an opportunity to share and catalogue game elements far beyond what introductory game manuals provide. Such activity is not limited to only the obviously social games. Tip books, guides, and walkthroughs have become standard—and often required—gaming paraphernalia. Unofficial player-produced help guides are sources of status and community among players. Officially sanctioned guides are part of the extended product lines associated with games. These networks of official and unofficial support are intentionally fostered by high levels of difficulty, complexity, and numerous discoverable secrets in the game. Other forms of community support involve extending the game into other less-served communities—“porting” from one operating system or machine to another (e.g., from Windows to Linux), or into other languages (e.g., English into Chinese; Sun, Lin, & Ho, 2003).

For the most part, these endeavors operate with tacit support from game companies. They constitute free labor and affective engagement, and generally only enhance the attractiveness and playability of the game. Edward Castronova (2002) goes further by showing the ways in which actual economic value is created by the activity of the players, not only within the game space but offline through the buying and selling of in-game items. Because game worlds generally have reward structures that operate as de facto economies (sometimes complete with systems of labor and trade), and because objects and characters in the game world are often (albeit illegally)

transferable to other owners (e.g., the password for a character account can be sold), an exchange rate between dollars and in-game rewards can emerge—as in fact happened regularly when players began selling their laboriously developed characters or items and currency on any number of auction sites.

When activity is not manifestly aligned with game company interests—especially when player-producers compete with official services or leverage economic value created in-game—the contested nature of these borders comes into sharp relief. Whether it concerns player ownership over the in-game experiences (and the right, for example, to retell those experiences in another medium, as in the case of fan fiction) or user protests about the quality of the service, game space is often disputed terrain (Brown, 1998; Lastowka & Hunter, forthcoming; Taylor, 2006a). *The Sims Online* (TSO), for example, had a growing community of players who contributed information about the game through websites and discussions. When an article was published by an online community newspaper, *The Alphaville Herald*, suggesting that underage avatar prostitution was occurring in the game, the editors of the web-based paper found themselves involved in a complicated battle over how “real-world” notions of publicness and freedom of speech mapped onto the game space. Sensitive to bad publicity and potential liability issues, Electronic Arts (EA) asserted tighter control of the boundary between in-game and out-game. In particular, it accused the editor of the paper, Peter Ludlow, of linking from his in-game TSO player profile to the out-game online newspaper, which in turn linked to cheat sites. This awkward chain of affiliations resulted in a terms-of-service violation and Ludlow being banned from the game (Harmon, 2004). This incident generated considerable debate within the community (with players taking both pro- and anti-EA positions). Ultimately, it served as notice that the company retained “sovereignty” over the game world, with the right to dictate flows of information and restrict the complex moral encounters it set into play. Similar incidents have occurred in other games as well (Taylor, 2006a) and serve as a reminder that the rights of player-producers are defined through contracts—EULAs—and not by real-world assumptions about citizenship.

The policing of game boundaries, of what constitutes legitimate play and cheating, and more generally who controls knowledge about the game, is common and comes with an increasingly well-developed repertoire of enforcement strategies, many of which raise controversial free-speech and intellectual property issues that remain untested in the courts. It is a

particularly poignant strategy, given the reliance of game companies on their players to develop active (and by extension, promotional) grassroots communities for the game. As in-game experience becomes central to the lives of many individuals, and as the games foster an increasingly broad range of associated activities, these contractual arrangements bleed into other areas of life, following individuals and challenging what they can do with their online lives.

user-designers: the future of participatory practices in computer gaming

What does it mean, then, to seriously account for player-producers? At one turn we see active users, engaged in meaningful ways with the artifacts they encounter, pushing back against simplistic notions of gaming as a form of passive media consumption. At another we see strategies of containment and control, articulated through company-defined determinations of copyright infringement, contractual violations for cheating, and general monitoring for behavior deemed “unruly.” Players create specific interventions in game spaces through their practices, both technical (via tools, applications, and distribution systems) and social (via networks, systems of reputation, norms, and patterns of interaction with actual game producers). The boundary work undertaken by both parties is complicated and rife with political challenges, especially when game companies remain invested in a narrow model of whose game it really is. As games become more popular, these political challenges are likely to grow, introducing a new dimension into the current struggle over the definition of cultural participation and publicness in the digital era. More modestly, my challenge is to understand the significance of these activities in three arenas: within the emerging field of game studies; with respect to game design and production; and, more broadly, in terms of player identity and culture.

critical game studies

Scholarly work on computer game theory has, especially in its early years, tended to emphasize designer- or system-centric views of what constitutes the game. It is not that players are ignored, but that the essence of the game is often seen as consisting of formalized structures and rules (and the larger system or game engine that enacts them). Emergent player behavior, while certainly seen as interesting, is often absent from core definitional questions

(the “what is a game” issue). Such questions are usually resolved from a perspective that subtly privileges the system over the user.

Game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004), for example, while providing important critical interventions by suggesting designers take seriously and tap into the power of “open culture,” still situate player-producer activities in a very particular way, writing, “When players become producers, their activities as players fall outside the magic circle and largely take place in spaces external to the game. These activities are a form of metagaming” (p. 540). This is not unlike Jesper Juul’s (2003) model, in which the strict definition of what constitutes the game rests in part on a model in which the “valorization of outcomes” primarily resides in the system’s formalization of goals (versus those of the player): “Open-ended simulations like *Sim City* fall outside [the inner circle of ‘games’ and into ‘borderline cases’] because they have no explicit goals” (p. 40). When many of the most popular games prove difficult to fit within this logic, we should perhaps reconsider our notions of center and periphery.

Games like *Sim City* and *EverQuest* too often end up in liminal categories because it is the player, not the system, producing central goals. Although much of the move to understand the structural features that constitute games comes from a reasonable attempt to disentangle the form from simple recapitulation into filmic and narrative structures, I want to caution against creating theoretical models that do not take into account, at a definitional level, player agency, meaning systems, and activity—models that produce a world of “borderline cases.” Salen and Zimmerman note elsewhere in their work the dangers of looking solely at the formal rules of a game system and “the hypnotic allure of elegant mathematics and embedded logic” (ibid., p. 302). And their call to consider the nature of play and culture can take us one step closer to a more inclusive model. Ultimately we need a formulation of engagement with computer games that interweaves the technological with the social, the structure and technology of the game (as agents) with the complex position of players. We also need ways of talking about productive activity that are not simply bound to what looks designerly or fits easily in a box of content production, but includes the always already transformative power of action and ludic performance. This is certainly difficult theoretical ground as it challenges us to not bracket off system from user, or to assign actual players and their activities as outside of the formal structures they are, indeed, constituting and embedded in.

I want to propose that before we call the narratology–ludology debate—one that seeks to understand games as primarily narratives or games as ludic structures in and of themselves—an intervention that settles in any way our understanding of what games are, we make sure that we have theoretical and methodological tools that reckon with player-producers and lived player experience. Such an orientation matters because it allows us to pay serious attention to structures of participation, to critically examine the relationships between systems and culture, and to understand the ways that meaning and activity intersect with formalized conventions. To include players and the kind of activity I describe in this chapter as *definitionally and functionally central* is to enrich our notion of what constitutes a game and to understand the role games are increasingly playing in the redefinition of public and private space, knowledge, lives, and identity. Rather than seeing *actual* players and their activity as a kind of sidebar (or metaconstruct) to an investigation of games, I would suggest that critical games studies need to take into serious account the intersection of structure *and* player culture. This is not a call for a shift to a kind of simple player-centered rubric but instead a proposal for work on the messy relationships between systems, producers, and users—to understand the assemblage that is games and play.

the design and management challenge

It should come as no surprise that game designers also confront these issues and would arguably benefit from more careful consideration of the extended gaming and social spaces they are creating. Among designers, there is certainly some acknowledgement, especially within the MMOG community, that the production of vibrant player culture is crucial to the success of a game. This recognition operates in tension, however, with the kinds of controls designers often feel obliged to enact. These can range from technical infrastructures (in which the fear of hacks and cheats leads to stringent clamp-downs on data streams and client programs) to efforts at social control (when concerns over a game's image or brand is seen as potentially threatened by players). Companies like Linden Lab (makers of *Second Life*) are attempting to give their players a stake in ownership of the space by granting them intellectual property rights over their content production. John Banks (2003) similarly marks out the innovative ways model train and simulation enthusiasts were enlisted in the *Trainz* community for both the creation and maintenance of the product. Likewise, the MMOG *Star Wars Galaxies* was notable for its

solicitation of player input during the design and prelaunch phase, clearly recognizing that enfranchising existing *Star Wars* devotees could help the game achieve both initial critical mass and long-term fan support. Of course, when designers take user engagement seriously, users sometimes come to feel they have a real stake in the product—even a proprietary stake established through use. The consumers—and sometimes large groups of consumers—can become de facto, if still largely disenfranchised, stakeholders in the game space, setting up dynamics of the kind we have discussed above.

The issue, then, is not just how to encourage player-produced content. It is also to fundamentally think about, fully acknowledge, and integrate into the game structure the engagement and strong commitment of player-producers and the sense of investment that often follows (see also Taylor, 2006b). Raph Koster, chief creative officer for Sony Online Entertainment, has written an imaginative exercise entitled “Declaring the Rights of Players” (Koster, 2000). It is striking in the ways it envisions virtual world users as citizens of that space, with due attendant rights. As a thought experiment, it is a great example of the kinds of things we might have to consider when we reformulate passive consumption into active engagement. In Article 2 of the document, for example, Koster proposes that,

The aim of virtual communities is the common good of its citizenry, from which arise the rights of avatars. Foremost among these rights is the right to be treated as people and not as disembodied, meaningless, soulless puppets. Inherent in this right are therefore the natural and inalienable rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.

Such a formulation would have radical implications—for avatar ownership, freedom of speech, intellectual property, game world governance—if taken seriously. Koster knows this and does a good job pushing the debate forward by getting people to wrestle with some of these basic questions. Even within these debates though there is often too little attention to the formal structure of the “code of conduct,” the social contract the users agree to each time they enter the game. And yet this is central to player-producer concerns. Who determines the rules? Who decides what the real boundaries and structures are? Who creates the meaningful culture of the game space? Although it is not uncommon to hear the reply, “Whoever owns it!,” as we can see from the previous discussion, this is an insufficient formulation. Designers who take active participation seriously run into deeper and potentially troubling

questions about the openness and boundaries of the game. We currently have a range of ways—some progressive, some reactionary—in which these issues are being addressed by the designers and administrators of game spaces. How they negotiate this territory, and how their approaches are reconciled with corporate legal and marketing departments, is sure to be a central factor in the future of digital cultural participation.

locating player communities and the status of cultural production

The kinds of activities we see in computer game culture follow a much longer history of active media engagement. Henry Jenkins (2000) maps out the ways in which the “interactive audience” resides somewhere between the status of a powerful marketing concept and that of a “semiotic democracy.” Sal Humphreys (2003) similarly suggests that *EverQuest* players, “in their passionate, voluntary and willing participation hold particular kinds of power as well. The reliance of Sony and other game developers on player communities for content creation . . . means they are subject to the goodwill of these player communities” (p. 15). As we begin to understand gamers as not simply operating under the thumb of media owners but also engaged in a much more nuanced relationship, we must ask whether older models of resistance-co-optation or consumer-producer still hold. Mizuko Ito’s research on *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards (Chapter 6, this volume) points to the complex nature of contemporary media engagement. She notes, “Hypersocial exchange is about active, differentiated, and entrepreneurial consumer positions and a high degree of media and technical literacy, rather than the one-way street connoted by the term mass media or mass culture” (p. 97).

Some note that this potential newfound power has a distinct location in a broader postindustrial economy, one that relies on “free labor” and flexibility (Kline, Dyer-Witthof, & DePeuter, 2003; Postigo, 2003; Terranova, 2000). Although such cautions against polarized approaches to production and consumption are warranted, we are still probably well served, in this era of class action lawsuits by AOL and Ultima Online volunteers, to consider how free labor and the gift economy embedded in game culture intersect with new forms of capital. Central to this inquiry is a consideration of how game structures recognize, legitimate, facilitate, ignore, surveil, and control player activity. It is one thing to tap into the power of the distributed flexible volunteer ethic, but corresponding systems of recognition and accountability

must be in place. While *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft*, and other games bear witness to an emergent system of meaningful user engagement, these activities continue to operate under legal and ownership rules that rarely give due regard to this form of creativity (Boyle, 1996; Coombe, 1998; Lessig, 2001). As gamers continue to make their way through these spaces not simply as players, but as nascent stakeholders, their productive activity will need to be creatively and progressively supported—by designers and researchers alike.

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