

The Assemblage of Play

T. L. Taylor¹

Abstract

This article explores the notion of assemblage for computer game studies. Drawing on this framework, the author proposes a multifaceted methodological approach to the study of games and the play experience. Drawing on user-created mods (modifications) in the game *World of Warcraft* and an analysis of a raid encounter there, a discussion is undertaken about the relationship between technological artifacts, game experience, and sociality. Primary to the consideration is an argument for the centralizing the *interrelation* of a variety of actors and nodes when analyzing lived play in computer games.

Keywords

massively multiplayer online game, mods, assemblage, actor network theory, methodology

The field of computer games research has undergone dramatic growth and expansion since some of those first explorations into the specificities of digital play early scholars tackled (Aarseth, 1997; Jenkins & Fuller, 1995; Murray, 1998; Turkle, 1984). There are certainly many ways to tell this early history. One familiar approach is to emphasize the ways games were taken seriously as systems and analyzed as artifacts in their own right. Rules, mechanics, and the deep structure of the game were finally given precise analytic attention. And of course, there is the oft-seen counterposing stance to try and understand games as narrative structures, story worlds to be inhabited and explored. This debate itself has been now unpacked, undone, and revisited (Copier, 2003; Frasca, 2003). Rather than tread into that thicket (it probably deserves a rest), I want to propose another branch of computer game studies history we would be remiss to forget, if for no other reason that it seems to so strongly inform the field at this moment. Running nearly parallel to the familiar track of the

¹ IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Corresponding author:

T. L. Taylor, ITU, Rued Langgaards Vej 7, Copenhagen 2300, Denmark. E-mail: tltaylor@itu.dk

classic narratology/ludology framing has been scholarship that sought to understand actual players and their everyday practices, as well as research that considered broader structural contexts and histories at work in the construction of play (to name only just a few see, e.g., Burke, 2002; Carr, 2005; Humphreys, 2003; Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003; Kennedy, 2006; Malaby, 2007; Mortensen, 2000; Postigo, 2003; Simon, 2005; Steinkuehler, 2006; Sun, Lin, & Ho, 2003; Williams, Caplan, & Xiong, 2007; Yee, 2002). Without dredging up a new fault line, or trying to crudely glue together system, narrative, and player, might we find a framework to not only include these parts but also makes way for others and their interrelations?

The notion of assemblage is one way to help us understand the range of actors (system, technologies, player, body, community, company, legal structures, etc.), concepts, practices, and relations that make up the play moment.¹ Games, and their play, are constituted by the interrelations between (to name just a few) technological systems and software (including the imagined player embedded in them), the material world (including our bodies at the keyboard), the online space of the game (if any), game genre, and its histories, the social worlds that infuse the game and situate us outside of it, the emergent practices of communities, our interior lives, personal histories, and aesthetic experience, institutional structures that shape the game and our activity as players, legal structures, and indeed the broader culture around us with its conceptual frames and tropes. While looking at a game as it is presented as a boxed product may tell us something about the given structure of the artifact or its imagined player, understanding it as a lived object—as a playful artifact—comes via an attention to the assemblage that constructs our actual games and play.

Certainly this is an ambitious framework as it calls the researcher to pay attention to a number of parts interwoven in complex ways at particular historical moments. Indeed as Rabinow (2003) notes regarding assemblages, “They are not yet an experimental system in which controlled variation can be produced, measured, and observed. They are comparatively effervescent, disappearing in years or decades rather than centuries” (p. 56). While in the field assemblages can seem as if they are always somewhat eluding us, giving us glimpses of the whole but often leaving us feeling like we never fully capture it, the conceptual orientation this turn provides is invaluable. Centrally important is the embedded notion of the *interrelation* of the agents and processes that emerge through them. As Seth Giddings (2006) argues in his very interesting work on the subject, “We are no longer looking at just a ‘technology’ and its ‘users’ but the event of their relationships, of their reciprocal configuration” (p. 160). In the space of interrelations lie the dynamic processes of play. Thinking about games as assemblage, wherein many varying actors and unfolding processes make up the site and action, allows us to get into the nooks where fascinating work occurs; the flows between system and player, between emergent play and developer revisions, between practices and player produced software modifications, between local (guild) communities and broader (server) cultures, between legal codes, designer intentions, and everyday use practices, between contested forms of play, between expectation and contextualization.

However, rather than force a cataloguing at the outset the constituents of an assemblage that should be then tracked down for any given analysis, we might fruitfully pull from the artistic instantiation of the technique and weave it with an ethnographic sensibility which seeks out “found objects” from everyday life. This notion of assemblage is then deeply interwoven with the contextual analysis of games and play, one which situates them within their specific interrelations and practices. While we may have hunches or gut feelings about lines to follow, we very often do not know in advance of our arrival in the field (however defined) what we might find, what actors are present, what practices we will encounter, what meaning systems will be in operation. One of the tasks of the games researcher interested in the contextual nature of play—in its assemblage—is in exploring the everyday, the mundane, the “found objects” that construct it.

In arguing for such an approach, we can see then that computer games are not simply the packaged products that come off the shelf (or tucked neatly into the downloaded executable) but artifacts that traverse multiple communities of practice and can hold multiple, often contested, meanings. Bowker and Star (1999) have written about boundary objects, suggesting that they “are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties emptying them, but robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (p. 297). I find this a useful starting hook in thinking about what a computer game is. They (and here I mean both their underlying mechanics and often their technology) are extended and altered by a range of actors, from designers, marketing departments, publishers, legal teams, and players and indeed traverse a variety of communities of practice. What makes the notion of boundary objects so useful for game studies is that we are then able to look at a particular object (be it an MMOG or console game) and analyze then the ways provisional agreements, or at the minimum imagined communities, form around specific artifacts simultaneous to the varying understandings and practices with the object (sometimes ones that are quite contested, for example, in the case of MMOG account sharers and legal teams of game publishers). This approach evokes something along the lines of what Bowker and Star (1999) call an “ecological understanding” of phenomena which I would argue resonates with assemblage.

There are many ways to think about entering into this conceptual framework and I will only focus on one in particular here. An angle that might prompt us to resist a simple system-user/game-player notion and adopt such an approach is a consideration of how we are interwoven with our technologies and how they may at times come to act as a kind of independent agent we play alongside (Giddings, 2007; Kennedy & Giddings, 2008). I was struck by this most directly through my time raiding in Blizzard’s massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) *World of Warcraft* and watching the ways player-produced modifications (mods) were deployed. One in particular, CTRaidAssist (CTRA) enacted a wide range of functionality in managing raid and boss monster encounters.² WoW’s user interface (UI) mods do not simply add polish to the interface but can radically reconfigure play (for more on this see Taylor, 2006). They can stand in and do work for us, monitoring our play,



Figure 1. Screenshot of the Baron Geddon event with modded UI.

automating actions, providing key information, and in general facilitating a range of both mundane and complex action. Sometimes, however, they also seem to escape our grasp and I would argue that it is in this experience with such mods and that we can find a node that not only tells us something about how a particular game works but highlights a larger conceptual intervention around how play is constituted in computer games.

One powerful example of this is watching how CTRA works in the Baron Geddon encounter in Molten Core.³ During the event, a player is, in essence, turned into a bomb which will detonate, injuring them and anyone around. When this happens, the person needs to move away from others so as to minimize the impact on the group. Normally the player will see a single text message in their chat window when they are transformed but CTRA develops this in a fascinating way. It broadcasts to everyone using the mod (which is often a mandatory requirement for participation⁴) an urgent warning in the center of the game screen [see Figure 1].

On one hand, the mod is simply translating information buried in a player's own UI and representing it. However experientially, this is a moment in which the mod comes to stand as a kind of autonomous agent, the 41st member of the raid. The

collective use of the mod seems to evoke a new member to the group. CTRA calls out to the party valuable information—indeed if you are the bomb, it shouts (textually) to you directly, “You are the bomb!”⁵ Certainly, the first time you see it in action it can be thrilling and a bit of a surprise—indeed you may not have even known what this technology you are using was going to do in advance.⁶ Without the mod, it is common for a member of the raid to do the work of typing out the information in a chat channel or speaking it over a voice server, but here the mod takes over, it stands alongside the players—sometimes simply facilitating their actions, sometimes acting as a kind of additional member to the group. A “distribution of competences between humans and nonhumans” (Latour, 1992, p. 233) is at work here, not only between an individual member and their mods but among the competencies of the group as a whole and their collective use of various software.

This software actor is a somewhat ambiguous member, of course. If one looks at the chat window it is a designated player (typically the raid leader) that calls out the information, though they are actually typing nothing themselves. Their machine, channeling the mod, has taken over that action. If one looks at the rest of the screen, however, the words appear almost out of thin air. There is an always present double nature to the mod’s autonomy. Indeed all raid commands in CTRA are like this, anchored to a human actor in the chat channel but in the other part of the screen spoken as if from this 41st member. And there is no necessary privilege to the “voice” of the “real” player in the chat channel. Indeed in heavy action intensive moments, it is not uncommon for players to totally miss what is happening in that part of the screen, which is at least part of the reason mods like CTRA pipe information to other places in the visual field, typically making them more prominent (and sometimes accompanied by sound). In those moments, the raid leader’s commands in the chat channel may go unheeded until “spoken” by the mod.

The setup for the system is, however, not perfect, not necessarily totalizing. Someone might participate without the mod and to them,⁷ in their experience of the game world, there is no extra nonhuman member tagging along, assisting play, and issuing commands to them in the center of their screen. Experientially the player without CTRA will be not only outside of the technological system at work for the other players, they will also be outside of a *social system* in operation. This has profound implications not only for our analysis of a game and a play moment, but how we more generally understand the objects of our inquiry.

It is also the case that our fellow nonhuman actors can be unreliable at times, breaking down at inopportune moments. It is not uncommon for a mod to not broadcast what it is supposed to, for it to be improperly synched to an event (thereby giving misleading information), for some players to be using an older version that no longer “talks” to either the game or newer versions of itself (and thus by extension other players). In such moments, players often have to sort out the glitches in the various instantiations of game experience that may be happening simultaneously. Decisions are made if the gaps are so important that action needs to be taken (sometimes everyone has to log off and get an update of the mod) or if human players can

simply step in and, in a poignant full-circle move, take over the now-failed action of the nonhuman (mod) actor (as when a raid leader will start calling out instructions for running, removing a curse, switching targets).

Frameworks that divide up the gaming moment into structure (or narrative) and player seem to me incapable of fully dealing with the kind of delegation or translation work (Latour, 1992) we see in these simple examples. It is not simply a technological issue (or failure). We can see a complex set of relationships between not only the player and their software, but the *collective* use of software and the production of *group practices*. And though I will not delve into it here in detail, there is a corresponding reverse move in the ways we at times act as translation devices, as delegates, for our computer games (Giddings, 2007; Kennedy & Giddings, 2008). We do not simply play but are played. We do not simply configure but are configured (Akrich, 1995; Woolgar, 1991). In the long run, this is not meant to be a one way descriptive street but instead an approach that suggests a circuit of relations that runs across a number of actors, human and non, conceptual and material. Here, we begin to get at another useful notion, that of the ways nonhuman actors—and I am not simply talking about nonplayer characters (NPC) which is where we might normally begin, and end, with such a notion—help constitute the “missing mass” that orders the play experience (Latour, 1992). I would argue that contextual, assemblage-based, approaches that take into account this range of agents (human, nonhuman, social, institutional) and their interrelations will better equip us for our analyses of computer games.

Finally, while the notion of assemblage may open up productive terrain for understanding our various field sites, we might also reflect on how it can fold back upon us in complex ways. In the same moments the players and games we study are situated in a complex matrix of actors, as a researcher-player we also become configured by these technologies and practices. They shape our experience of the space and our data. As we embody ourselves digitally, participate in modding our own UIs, inhabit specific server communities—all the grainy specificity of our work—we are ourselves embedded in a particular assemblage of play. We do not stand outside of it. This is not to call for trying to methodologically construct some “pure” space for us to occupy, but more clear-eyed acknowledgement and discussion about our location within this matrix and the ways game players, mechanics, and technologies are our co-conspirators—or resistant interlocutors—in the field.

Notes

1. I am very loosely using the term assemblage—sometimes anchored in the work of science technology scholars, sometimes tied to the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), sometimes grounded in a particular form of artistic practice—to prompt an alternate heuristic for analysis. For an excellent broader discussion of this approach and a more general application of Actor Network Theory to game studies, see Giddings, 2006.
2. CTRA is actually much less used now than when I first undertook this research. There are a growing number of mods regularly used now that do very similar (and additional) work including oRA, BigWigs, X-Perl, and Omen Threat Meter.

3. At the time of my research on this subject, it was a 40-person raid event so I will speak of it here as such. For an excellent description of a guild's experience with raiding Molten Core, see Mark Chen's article "Cooperation, Coordination, and Camaraderie in *World of Warcraft*" in *Games and Culture* (Chen, in press).
4. As Latour (1992) notes of cars and their mandatory seatbelts, "It has become logically—no, it has become sociologically—impossible to drive without wearing a belt. I cannot be bad anymore. I, plus the car, plus the dozens of patented engineers, plus the police are making me be moral" (p. 226). Indeed it is regularly through mods that not only is an idealized player (and set of practices) is constructed but that not using them is nearly unthinkable to many raiders.
5. One cannot help but be reminded of Latour's car commanding him to buckle his seatbelt.
6. What is striking is how often players install things that they may not fully anticipate the ramifications of. In this regard, I have written elsewhere (Taylor, 2006) about this mod and its surveillant qualities.
7. You can generally tell who has the mod installed and who does not (that ability is built in and is part and parcel of its surveillant character). Aside the instances in which the mod triggers something in a general common channel, the nonmodded player would have no direct experience of the additional layer at work.

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Bios

T.L. Taylor is an associate professor in the Center for Computer Games Research at the IT University of Copenhagen where she also heads the Multimedia Technology and Games graduate program. As a sociologist, she has been working in the field of internet and multiuser studies for over 15 years and has published on topics such as values in design, avatars and online embodiment, play and experience in online worlds, gender and gaming, and intellectual property in MMOGs. Her book *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (MIT Press, 2006) uses her multiyear ethnography of *EverQuest* to explore issues related to play and game culture. She is currently researching the professional computer gaming scene.