Ethnography as Play

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The author argues that ethnography is a kindred of play. Based on her research of play in digital gaming environments, she draws several parallels between the practices of ethnography and the practices of play. She explores the complexities of play in games and expands our understanding of the work of ethnography as play. **Key words**: ethnography; fieldwork; games; play; research

Playing Ethnography

I began thinking about play as a lens for ethnographic practice years ago in conjunction with a workshop entitled "In the Game: Ethnographic Relationships, Mediation, and Knowledge" at the Association of Internet Researchers conference. In an intensive inquiry, the workshop participants investigated digital environments. We reflected on prior fieldwork each of us had done with a special eye on such topics as contiguity, accountability, affect, embodiment, and scholarly practices. As I revisited my field notes on massively multiplayer-online games and high-level raiding (i.e., coordinated group action in these spaces), I was struck by the moments my research process seemed similar to playing a game. I began to consider the features that the practices of play in these spaces and the practices of ethnography broadly shared.

I should point out that massively multiplayer-online gaming strongly influences my notion of play for the purposes of this article. Although I do see important connections to what we might call free-form play, my argument draws primarily on the experience of play within a semistructured digital environment rooted in a multiplayer frame with collective action and meaning making. There may be fruitful ways to consider broader gaming genres in relation to ethnography, but they lay outside my scope here.

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Navigating entry processes and learning to inhabit a space, puzzling out how the system works and its forms of discovery, intensely enjoying the experience despite its many frustrations and failures, moving through it all in embodied and affective ways, grappling with unknowns, and eventually setting the experience aside and moving onto something new are common moments in both ethnography and play. Stances of inquiry, engagement, and reflection speak to a resonance between the activities. I began to think about how they may be kindred spirits, how we move into and inhabit each in often similar ways. I thought about how my own research practices contoured alongside play, as well as about moments where that companionship broke down. And I wondered if one of the reasons ethnographic work has been so generative in online gaming spaces and virtual worlds broadly is its resonance with play.

I am certainly not alone in thinking about how ethnography might be fruitfully illuminated by comparison to other forms of expression and inquiry (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Throughout this article, I use the language of ethnography not simply to denote the writing up of fieldwork and the ensuing monograph but also the assemblage of research practices and techniques ethnographers undertake. My own training is in sociology, not anthropology, and the tradition of qualitative research I associate with ethnographic work is linked to that training. My notion of ethnography as play also leans on other explorations of fieldwork and researcher experience, approaches that offer another way of looking at the subjectivity of the researcher and how the work is undertaken, helping reframe the practice of ethnography.

Manning (1983), for example, asked what might happen if we understood the anthropologist not as priest ("guardian, interpreter, and evangelist") but instead as a clown. As he noted, "A good clown is like a good anthropologist. He or she observes the social world as a participant but is clumsily integrated into the surroundings and thus ironically detached." Even religious clowns, he notes, "exemplify liminality, license, creativity and potentiality, essential attributes of play" (12). Though in this article I speak to a more accountable form of participation with our field sites, the spirit Manning invokes resonates with my argument, one which hails an embodied playful subject.

In a different vein, Turner (1982) has proposed "the 'playing' of ethnography" through its performance as a way both to enliven the teaching of anthropology and to "catch up the readers and spectators fully into the culture's motivational web" (84). He asks, "How could we turn ethnography into script, *then* enact that script, *then* think about it, *then* go back to fuller ethnography,

then make a new script, *then* act it again? This interpretive circulation between data, praxis, theory, and more data—a kind of hermeneutical Catherine wheel, if you like—provides a merciless critique of ethnography" (94, emphasis his). I admit I find enacting fieldnotes as dramas risky in terms of producing false empathy and identity tourism (Nakamura 1995), but when I have had students in class read snippets of in-game dialogue from my own fieldnotes as a way making the material come alive, it has usually proved a powerful exercise. Thus, despite the "playing" in Turner's formulation being more linked to drama, I find his expression of process, particularly around exploration, trials, and iteration, resonant with some of the playful stances I detail.

It is also not unusual for those thinking about the threads weaving together ethnography and gaming to turn for inspiration to Geertz's classic on deep play and the Balinese cockfight. Geertz (1972) takes seriously the cultural work of the cockfight and argues that by focusing on such an event, a type so often set off to the side as "only a game," the anthropologist might find rich material for study. As he writes, "Quartets, still lifes, and cockfights are not merely reflections of a preexisting sensibility analogically represented; they are positive agents in the creation and maintenance of such a sensibility" (28). For scholars of games and play, this can feel like a lifeline, an argument for the value of looking at what is often set aside in traditional scholarship (see O'Donnell 2014 for more about deep play in games). Yet for my consideration here, I find a different aspect of Geertz's essay evocative and resonant—the opening vignette, where the author is running.

Early in the recounting, Geertz writes of struggling to connect with the Balinese villagers among whom he and his wife were living. He notes the difficulties, the distance, and the indifference with which they all grappled. "For them, and to a degree for ourselves, we were nonpersons, specters, invisible men" (1). One night when they both attended an illicit cockfight along with hundreds of others, the police descended on the crowd, and everyone, including Geertz and his wife, frantically sprinted from the scene. Following on the heels of another attendee they found themselves eventually "tumbling into [a] courtyard" where the wife of the man they were running with "whipped out a table, a tablecloth, three chairs, and three cups of tea, and we all, without any explicit communication whatsoever, sat down, commenced to sip tea, and sought to compose ourselves" as policemen shortly came looking for them (4). The scene is practically comedic with the image of their running away almost without thought, with the tumbling, and with their bluffing to the police that nothing was amiss.

The next day they found their situation had entirely changed: "Not only were we no longer invisible, we were suddenly the center of attention, the object of a great outpouring of warmth, interest, and, most especially, amusement" (4). The retelling and mimicry, the laughter, the shared experience and solidarity, offered an entrée for Geertz and his wife. The vignette also points to the embodiment, the affective qualities, and the improvisations we so often find in ethnographic work. It reveals qualities of ethnographic practice that are not easily distilled to work that looks serious, or planned, or controlled.

This experience is, I suspect, deeply resonant with those who have used ethnographic approaches in their study of play. For myself and a number of other researchers, it has been an incredible tool for studying game culture and online environments, allowing us to explore so many rich digital spaces (Boellstorff 2010; Chen 2011; Copier 2007; Kendall 2002; Nardi 2010; Pearce 2011; Steinkuehler 2006; Sunden and Sveningsson 2012; Taylor 2006). Ethnographers working in this branch of media have—by actively inhabiting and playing alongside participants—offered rich analysis of everything from online presence to forms of collective action. By engaging in tried-and-true ethnographic techniques (such as in-depth engagement over time with participants, conversation and learning, and building up a set of practices to inhabit the space), ethnographers of these worlds have offered important insights into life in digital spaces.

But these ethnographers have not only given us glimpses into emerging domains, they have also highlighted the conceptual turn I want to prompt—not simply thinking about how ethnography can be used in play spaces but how the work of ethnography can look like the work of play. I deploy Geertz's piece here not merely to advocate for the study of games (as valuable as I think that is) but also for what it shows us about the playful nature of ethnographic practice. Ethnography has been so generative in early game and virtual world studies because it is a kindred of play.

The concept of play can, of course, be tricky to pin down (Sutton-Smith 1997). For some it means a specific form of activity, for others it is a disposition (Barnett 1991), a process of unfolding contingency (Malaby 2007), a state of experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett 1971), or located within a play frame (Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974; Deterding 2009, 2018). Rather than reify a distinction between play and game (where play stands in for nonrule-based activity and gaming is bounded by rules), I will move back and forth between these terms.

When we talk about play and games the term "fun" commonly appears. The

notion is a powerful one, often meant to evoke a sense of unhindered pleasure. Yet as Malaby (2009) notes, the growth of research on games has increasingly shown that "it has also become more difficult to sustain claims that play is essentially about 'fun,' 'pleasure,' or other positively charged sentiments" (205). Disrupting a one-to-one correspondence between fun and play opens up the terrain to consider domains we do not traditionally think of as intersecting play.

Play, even the childhood play that is often the imagined referent point, is deeply linked to something more than any discrete gaming experience. By turns it can be serious, purposeful, contentious, and painful. Even in the faces of children at play, we can watch them move through joy, intensity and focus, frustration, struggle, spontaneity, and experimentation (Hughes 1983; Sutton-Smith 1997; Thorne 1993). We have also long understood the role play takes in both refracting and creating society, that play runs along and through circuits of power. Reducing play, at an analytic level, to a notion of fun causes us to lose the complexity of the activity and experience within it.

We might do a similar flip in our thinking about the "work" of ethnography. There is a conversation point to be had here between my pairing of play and ethnography with Goslinga and Frank's (2007) foreword to *In the Shadows* in which they ask, "Must we accept the dichotomy of 'life' and 'work' that constitutes, yet also confounds, the experience of fieldwork?" (xii). As a number of ethnographers of play have proposed, overly dichotomous models that pitch play on one side of our lives and work on the other miss the much more nuanced and complex entanglement present in everyday experience (Malaby 2009; Stevens 1978; Taylor 2006, 2012). How might testing that dichotomization also offer a new way of looking at the work of ethnography?

Certainly, our research process is serious; it calls to mind labor, exertion, and tough challenges (mental, social, and at times physical). It is, for most academics, laden with consequence—from professional standing or scientific advance to personal satisfactions. And yet ethnography is deeply linked to the pleasures of knowing and experience—to delight in others and discovery, to expanded horizons and joyful moments. Deep ethnographic moments are often experienced as embodied, meaningful, and resonant. As with play, reducing ethnography simply to a method of work may flatten it, hiding many of its important, even valuable, qualities.

In this article, I trace themes that cross both play and ethnography—entry, experimentation and discovery, pleasure, embodiment and affect, frustration and failure, transformation and transgression, analytic puzzling, myths and the

unknowable, boredom, and leaving. I explore how each operate in play and, in turn, reflect on their nature in ethnographic practice, looking at where they align and where they break down.

Beginning Play, Beginning Fieldwork

Our paths to a game come in a variety of ways. Perhaps we are fans of a genre or a developer and watch for new titles. Maybe we have read about a game, heard about it in a podcast, or seen it advertised. Sometimes friends encourage us to pick up a title or even suggest that we play with them. The ways we find games are as diverse as the people playing them. But somehow we begin. And once we start playing (well, if we stay with it), we embark on a complex course of discovery and negotiation, not only with the game but just as often with its location in a particular social and cultural milieu. The choices matter: Will we reside on a player versus player or role-play server? Will it be set in North America or Europe? Will we be in a guild with friends or not? All these small forks in the gaming road shape how our specific experience, our play, unfolds.

It is also the case that, though our play can be complex and often fraught, it has some connection with our identities. Multiuser spaces often prompt the conversation to turn to notions of "identity play" where we perhaps take on different persona in a gaming space (Turkle 1995), and while that is certainly worth considering, I mean something quite different. When we play, we confront evaluators—both deeply personal and internal but also external and social—that weigh in on whether an activity fits our sense of ourselves, on who we can be in our leisure time, and on what is socially acceptable for someone "like us" to engage in (Taylor 2008; Wearing 1998).

Our choices, and the possibilities for enacting them, are tied to our identities, constituted not only in private and personal ways but also refracted through our social contexts. We do not encounter play spaces with unbounded freedom. They come with a context that strongly informs—and at times limits or circumscribes—our play. And our sense of ourselves as embodied players can shape what we choose to engage with. Do we want to take on a physical game using a motion controller, perhaps play in a public setting, or would that feel awkward? Do we know a range of game genres and can pick one that suits our tastes? Do we have the financial resources to purchase and play a game? Do we have the right technology we need to play the game we want (or do we even have access

to it)? Do we have the technological or game literacy to play?

Of course, at times we either push ourselves out of our comfort zone, or we are afforded an opportunity to explore without penalty. We pick up a game we might not otherwise play. We challenge ourselves to wander about in a game aisle in which we do not usually spend time, peeking at other platforms and offerings. We experiment with a new genre or brave entering a new game community. But no matter, these choices are refracted through a complex mix of factors that includes everything from gender to economics.

Ethnography at its beginning moment is not so different. Our interests, dispositions, and questions lead us into research projects. Sometimes structural, social, or institutional pressures take us there. Looking back at my own fieldwork sites, I find it hard always to trace a clear path in. It is often filled with advice, happenstance, some intentionality, but, as often as not, serendipity, even luck.

Just as we are aware that play enlists our identities, bodies, and specific lived contexts—and, in turn, shapes our possibilities and experiences—ethnographers are all too aware of how we are never blank slates that simply encounter the field. We similarly confront issues of entry and participation. Can we get access to the site we want to visit and to the people with whom we want to engage? Do we know a gatekeeper or valued confidant—or can we persuade one—to assist us? Is the field site out of reach or something we can work our way into?

We also deal with issues of identity, body, and power, usually less articulated access moments but nonetheless deeply felt and important for the possibilities of our work. Are we able to inhabit, as an embodied researcher, a stance that feels comfortable enough for us to proceed with our inquiry and also one that works for the field? Does our embodied subjectivity afford or restrict our fieldwork? Certainly, one of the more important aspects of ethnographic research involves the negotiation of identity in field sites. This often takes several forms, from issues about self-presentation to how our very immersion in a space prompts us to think about our own sense of self, values, and ways of being.

There is a second component to beginnings worth our consideration—how we understand the bounds of the site we are entering. When you take up a game, you embark on a new experience and enter a domain, whether an abstract system or a rich virtual environment. The language I have deployed of a "path in" seems to suggest a "there" you step into, and this language often applies to fieldwork as well.

Without a doubt, there is some experiential truth here. The very moment

you start a game or enter a field site seems infused with a sense that you are shifting into something else, something new, though perhaps not always entirely unfamiliar. In the classic formulation of fieldwork, ethnographers leave their everyday world and move, literally, to a new one. Making a jump to thinking about the "magic circle" we so often hear about in game studies—that space with its own special rules, a space "consequence free," one that does not touch our nonplay lives—is all too easy (Huizinga 1955; Salen and Zimmerman 2003).

While it may be tempting to slip into this conceptual frame, we should resist doing so. It is a frame that has been critiqued in both game studies and anthropology. Models of bounded objects and sites at a remove are actually ill suited to describing how play and ethnography actually unfold in daily life. Whether we recognize that structural factors regularly impinge on romanticized models of travel to a field site or reflect more deeply the mythos evoked by that kind of imagined boundary crossing, thinking about ethnographic spaces as magic circles holds up neither empirically nor conceptually. We might also interrogate the ethical frame that would allow a notion of consequence-free engagement to be entertained by the ethnographer. Such a position is never afforded to our participants.

Rather than thinking about clearly bounded spaces, we might instead consider bricolage and co-constituting flows. I have argued elsewhere that gaming is best understood as assemblage (Taylor 2009). Though it is easy to focus on the game artifact as an imagined center, in practice the actual instantiation of any play moment results from a complex mix of actors and sites knit together in deeply contextual ways. These include material artifacts (computers, monitors, desks, chairs), sites (forums, webpages, communication platforms, in-person gaming groups), networks (of technology, of people, of organizations), policies, governance, and law. Actors, human and non, abound, and they are woven together to produce particular instances of play. The configuration of this assemblage is local, contingent, emerging, and contested. Porousness dominates. Understanding the flows that make up this network—and how it cannot ever hold a singular bounded form for its entirety—proves key to understanding digital play. Although the notion of a magic circle may enjoy evocative power, it falls short as an analytic tool for the sociological understanding of actual play.

Our ethnographic field sites (especially for those doing work online) have similarly porous borders. Many of us recognize multi-sited ethnography as simply a constant component to our research (Marcus 1995). We regularly follow our participants to spaces (online or off) that we do not originally see as at the

heart of our field site. The research space is also an assemblage in which we intersect with and observe everything from people to materials to structures and organizations. We pay attention to bodies, practices, artifacts, and varying actors. Like gamers, we use—and often wrestle with—technologies (our recorders, our databases, our cameras, our notebooks). We piece together a provisional, contingent whole—both in our fieldwork and our publications—from a collection of moments, experiences, and data points.

As for the portability of the magic circle, rarely have I experienced fieldwork as anything approaching the magical. Although, like play, fieldwork can have enchanted moments, it is more deeply rooted in the everyday and mundane—and in the ongoing work of engagement. In both domains, there exists a flow to our experience and activity, one that inhabits seemingly bounded space . . . until it does not. We may make ludic or analytic boundaries for the purposes of sustaining our engagement (be it play or ethnography), but our practical experience often proves much messier.

Discovery and Experimentation

These beginning paths lead us deeper into the game or field site. As players we are constantly learning about the system, both its inherent formal structures and those the community has generated. We learn how to play our character and how to act in the world. While sometimes official game manuals are helpful (though more and more frequently they are not even included in releases), we often find ourselves stumbling upon techniques, skills, and tactics that surprise us in delightful ways when they work. As Malaby (2009) notes, "The disposition of play is marked by a readiness to improvise" (211). We not only play the game but play *with* the game, testing and developing our knowledge about how it works. We discover the contours of the system, the mechanics of its space, its structures.

At the same time we learn how to be a player of the game in the general sense, we are also acculturated into what it means to be a player on a specific server, in a specific guild, in a specific culture. To riff on Simone de Beauvoir, we are not born a player, but become one, and this is a core principle of gaming (Taylor 2006). While we learn the general mechanics of game play, we are simultaneously embedded in a context that always informs our actions. People give advice, scold, offer corrections, and generally socialize us to act in particular

ways on a particular server. Our actions (as both player and game community member), our speech, our ways of understanding, are all subject to deep socialization processes.

We constantly move between axes of control from the game, ourselves, other players, group structures, and true spontaneity. Most of the time, our gaming lives are filled with controlled risk. Constant movement occurs between discovery, replication, and repetition. As players, we work hard to figure out the system, the rules, the norms, the habits, the shape of the thing. Sometimes we lean on what the game teaches us, sometimes on what we learn from others (either directly via players or via online resources), sometimes we fumble and experiment. All of this experimentation and discovery gets transformed into habit. We learn tactics then endlessly repeat and refine them. Over time we systematize what we know about how our character works, how it interacts with the world, how it functions in a group.

As ethnographers, our time in the field also becomes filled with learning, surprise, and discovery. Indeed, the entire process involves taking in so much that you can adequately interpret it—that is, understand the site and those who have been living there. We are always being educated about how the culture works, discovering new patterns or meanings. We are attentive to socialization processes and seek to uncover the specificities of a particular culture and set of practices. Like gamers, we learn specialized, insider language. Making sense of language, symbols, and meanings is key to our work. We come to understand the internal logics and workings of the domain; we strive to get at the emic. Although the closest analogue to a game manual—prior literature—can provide way points to guide us, we are just as often trying to track something not yet documented or framed.

In the same way that gamers query each other on tips and tricks or test hypotheses about how something works, ethnographers often try out ideas with trusted informants and colleagues. Sometimes we are lucky and can even run our analyses by those in the field, asking them to reflect critically on our interpretation or theory. We risk the dumb—or in gaming parlance, "newbie"—question.

But what about the issue of experimentation? Trying out different strategies, pushing at the bounds of the game world, tweaking instrumental action, and replaying a different way for a different experience, are all common in gaming. An experimental approach is not unusual in play. Is there an equivalent in ethnography? There are a couple of ways to slice this question. From the moment we enter the field, we explore various stances to negotiate it. We comport ourselves

in ways that secure our entry into the space. We constantly manage our self-presentation (smiling, laughing, being silent, being inquisitive). We experiment, leverage, and contend with the ways the categories we inhabit around gender, race, ethnicity, age, class, and sexuality all shape our field time and our interactions with the people there. We certainly adopt a kind of investigative stance as we try on what it means to really live in that domain alongside our informants. Over the course of a project, we refine, we hone in, but it always originates with a kind of flexibility, a stance of "experimental engagement" (Boellstorff et al. 2012).

A second angle to the question of experimentation, however, seems to be one of the more risky propositions in this comparison between play and ethnography because it skirts uncomfortably close to ethical violations or corrupting the data. What about intentionally experimenting with the conditions of the world or the people within it? There is certainly a long history in the social sciences of researchers setting up "breech experiments" to prompt inquiry into norms (Garfinkel 1967). Some even see experimentation as the most productive way to reveal the true nature of complex processes.

The experimental stance has become particularly worrisome as researchers turn toward games and virtual worlds. Experimentation is central to play, but when we port it over to the social sciences for imagined online laboratories, it becomes fraught. This dream tends to be one of creating artificial societies with variables that can be manipulated by the researcher. Although this formulation of experimentation clearly falls outside ethnographic practice, weaker versions are regularly considered. Approaches in which the researcher simply fades into the background, something Nick Taylor (2008) has dubbed "periscopic play," have been pursued. Gender swapping for the purposes of testing individual reactions or "griefing" to provoke experimental disruptions have tempted some (Myers 2008). Especially attractive to inexperienced researchers, the idea of intervening experimentally and tweaking the conditions of the space—and in turn the experience of the world and that of the participants—often appears in online spaces.

Yet, precisely here the values of play and experimentation most directly counter the ethical values ethnographers strive to uphold. We may take an experimental stance in our negotiation of field sites or try out hypothesis or explanations in conversation with our participants, but as ethnographers we do not consider field sites to be labs with variables and levers for our scientific bidding. I am not calling for a naïve approach that imagines we have no impact, but one that recognizes the strengths of our work lay in understanding sites on

their own terms. One of the deep values of ethnographic work is that, while not pure in any sense, it nonetheless values attending to the emergent practices of people in their everyday lives. We watch the negotiation, over time, of people, processes, and structures in specific historical moments. And while we acknowledge the constructed nature of the stories we then tell, we nonetheless find value in chronicling, if even for that moment, life as lived in situ.

Analytic Puzzling

In-field discovery is crucial to ethnography, but so too is puzzle solving. This approach methodically pieces together data to form a total picture, to break down and solve a problem, to master a conundrum. It speaks to the ways we do not simply record or collect information but work extensively with the material we encounter.

In games analytic players may consult a myriad of sources to tackle the space: making notes, testing hypotheses, maybe even running some hard numbers or simulations ("theorycrafting" in gaming parlance) (Choontanom and Nardi 2012; Paul 2011; Taylor 2006). Players interrogate underlying game mechanics and structures, comparing these to advice and actual practices of play (Steinkhueler and Duncan 2008).

Ethnographic work is strongly rooted in this tendency as well. In the field, we try to keep an eye on structure and processes even as we pay keen attention to everyday practice and culture. We puzzle explanations as we go, watching for counterexamples, testing and talking through ideas. Sometimes we draw on key informants to help us untangle a thorny issue. Certainly, at the stage where we sit with stacks of notes and hours upon hours of interviews and transcripts, puzzling through the pieces, shuffling data around, cutting and pasting thematic bits, reviewing images and snippets of conversation, we are assuming a stance very similar to the players who bring all of their experience, as well as a broad range of collective knowledge, to bear on their game.

Probably one of the more interesting tensions in both play and ethnography involves the way each moves between moments of discovery and difficult analytic challenges. In each we are deeply present, but we always enjoy a secondary consciousness that does the heavier cognitive processing, teasing out the complexities of the system and its relations. Both gaming and ethnography then share a fascinating and complex relationship to our experience of time and

process. We play or research in the moment, but flow between that immediacy and our analytic experience and reflection. In the same way, we can be between worlds in online games, we can experience this flow in our ethnographic practice.

Transgression and Transformation

Boundary work is a constant modality in both play and ethnography. As we explore games, we often find ourselves bumping against their edges or limitations, sometimes discovering a tactic that seems almost too good to be true. We encounter things like "pathing" bugs (or software errors) that force monsters to take longer routes to reach us, thereby giving us extra time to cast spells on them or to find a sweet spot to stand in that allows us extra protection. We may consult guides that lead us through exact explanations of how to carry out a quest, thereby bypassing all the exploration, discovery, and learning opportunities the designers intended. In some games, we can install additional software that helps with our play. At times user-interface modifications (mods) provide additional information, facilitate routine action, or offer crucial help to an otherwise complex task. Third-party programs even exist that completely automate our play or give us information the designers do not want us to possess. When we add in software bits or innovative forms of engagement, our play can often be radically transformed. We can find ourselves experiencing the game world quite differently from others who do not share our socio-technical configurations (Taylor 2009).

Ultimately, we make decisions about what we think constitutes an ethical boundary of fair play and cheating, for ourselves and for others. Gamers have complex value systems that guide their assessments (Consalvo 2007). Specific game communities also draw their own lines of acceptable behavior for their members. Particular guilds may have firm rules about what they disallow and may kick out those who do not comply. For example, some groups do not allow their members to use buggy parts of a game to kill a monster or install particular add-ons that they feel disrupt the preferred mode of game play. Game designers and companies also have their own ideas about the actions they consider legitimate. Breaking particular terms of use can cause a player to be banned from the game entirely. Playing a game inevitably leads to moments of transgression or, at the minimum, decision points about whether a player will violate norms.

The choices we make in how we proceed, as well as the ways we intervene

directly in the game itself can powerfully alter the play experience for us. Player communities, through the norms and emergent practices they generate, transform the game software from a designed product to a lived play experience. They fill in gaps, patch over bumpy spots, or mutate game activities in the service of their own notions of fair, beautiful, or pleasurable play. Often they generate pieces of software, the mods, that change the game space or the user interface. As players and communities work on the games in which they are invested, they transform them. Increasingly, these interventions get looped back into formal development processes, altering later official releases that are themselves then modified. Gaming, in practice, is a cyclic process between formal developers and players.

So, the issue becomes: As ethnographers are we similarly engaged in transgression? In transformation? At a very basic level, the activity we undertake is deeply informed by living constantly on the edge of boundaries or limits. We can seem odd or curious to our informants. Even when they are supportive of our work, they may find it strange that we are so interested in mundane details or things to which they never give a second thought. In many ways, our stance is quite unnatural. Who would subject themselves to this outsider experience (and repeatedly so over the course of a scholarly life)? We push everyday experience to a level of analysis and critique it might not otherwise undergo. We can unwittingly break rules or norms and then, rather than simply doing a quick repair, spend time with our participants to understand and unpack the meaning of this transgression.

We also do strange things that may be quite foreign to our field site—including collecting, logging, documenting, photographing, archiving, and scribbling notes. Often our observations lead us to explore boundary spaces, the lines between normal practice and misbehavior that the group draws. Understanding the nature of transgression in a space can be incredibly productive in making sense of the social world. But generally, any transgression we provoke is a soft form, a by-product of the practice of ethnography. As I have discussed, quite rarely do we consciously do something to shake things up. Though we may find instances, especially in online spaces, where the playfulness of the environment allows us to push more at this boundary (and deal with the ethical dilemmas that may come), in general our commitments lay in understanding people, practices, and spaces as they are.

And as for transformation, it is almost too clear. An ethnographer's presence undoubtedly alters what happens in the space, and it certainly shapes the

data as it filters back. We are, of course, subjects ourselves who cocreate interactions with participants. As we write things up, we shape and create stories, trying to tease out themes. We write histories and accounts that might not have existed otherwise, and sometimes those in the community we have studied may find themselves wrestling with our interpretations and accounts. Indeed, there is often no single homogeneous community to which we can orient, and our accounts may travel in diverse ways across different pockets of our field site. Our stories also shape future researchers as they enter into similar spaces, influencing what they look for, see, investigate. Ultimately our work presents to a larger culture an interpretation of our field site and thus becomes part of a broader conversation and form of understanding.

But there is another side to the transformation question—how we are changed by our work. Perhaps we find our values clarified or strongly challenged, or we find a new side of life we enjoy. Maybe we learn about some personal strength we did not realize we had or—just as often—confront our own flaws and weaknesses. We rarely come away from a field site unchanged, and indeed if we did, it might say something about the quality of the work. Transformation is an inherent part of ethnography.

Pleasure

Discovery, experimentation, and learning are core parts of gaming. Rather than thinking of fun, the notion of pleasure lends itself more dynamically to the range of experience. Playful pleasure can be woven through with joy, delight, satisfaction, and affect. Players find pleasure in mastering aspects of the game having worked strenuously to improve skills or tackle a challenge, often repeatedly till they succeed. Play is not antithetical to hard work, pain, or even suffering. At times they are wound closely together. The pleasures of play operate emotionally and as an embodied experience. In the best of moments, eyes, hands, brain, hearing, and reflexes all function in synch with the game as a kind of dance. If we are playing with others, that special quality of social delight can kick in, powerfully connecting us. Gamers regularly talk about the communal pleasures of creating shared experiences, histories, stories, and myths.

For ethnographers, our time in the field can certainly have these qualities. We delight in finally understanding some aspect of the site we are exploring. There are the enjoyable conversations, interactions, and observations that fill

up our field books. We have moments in which we smile at someone offering a poignant quotable quote (clear, sharp articulations from our participants) or delight in being present for a compelling incident. These pleasures are both of the moment and, often, laden with future promise where we catch a glimpse of their place in the written work. At other times, we seem to break across the barrier and find ourselves in a group, in a situation, where we are quasi members, participating and responsible to the others with whom moments of mutuality arise. We find satisfaction and joy in interpretive, breakthrough flashes. We struggle with hurdles and challenges, often experiencing the pleasurable headiness that comes with success. We can become happy at mastering some aspect of everyday life that allows us to inhabit a space more easily, whether learning how to use a technology in the field or becoming naturalized to a language use or practice of the community. Ethnography is filled with complex pleasures.

Embodied and Affective

As I have suggested, no matter how much the computer mediates our experience, our bodies remain a powerful part of the circuit of play. This expresses itself in several ways. Gaming skills and tactics operate at a very base level via hands, eyes, ears, and reflexes. We also develop a kind of ludic instinct, and with more experience come responses and actions that seem nearly intuitive. Knowledge of how to play takes hold in our bodies, and—without consciously thinking—we fall into routine patterns of action. Keystroke timings and mouse movements, visual acuity, the subconscious awareness of the sound of the digital world all powerfully shape action in this space. Materiality occupies a crucial role in our play as we deal with machines, screens, even tables and chairs. Lag, a kind of ephemeral actor, looms large in online play. Sometimes we manage a rhythm with it to keep playing; other times it brings the whole moment crashing down. Play, even in the digital realm, is a profoundly material and embodied act (Bayliss 2007; Dovey and Kennedy 2006; Lahti 2003; Simon 2007; Taylor 2012; Witkowski 2012).

And play is simultaneously affective. As Seigworth and Gregg (2010) so helpfully note, affect has been defined in numerous ways over the years, from the psychoanalytic to postphenomenological. I find Sara Ahmed's (2010) reflections on the weavings between affect, embodiment, and relationality particularly powerful when thinking about ethnography. She writes, problematizing any notion

of the autonomy of affect: "Instead, I would begin with the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near" (30). To introduce the notion of affect is not only to try to reinsert emotion, embodied experience, the unarticulatable feeling, or passing of energy, but their often relational nature. For my purposes, I highlight how affect operates across a range of modalities and bodies, from adrenaline rushes to feelings of elation and defeat to sublime aesthetic experience or powerful moments of collective action.

Of course—and it almost seems too obvious to say—when we play we are active. We engage in the space. Certainly there are varying forms and degrees. Sometimes play takes over our entire attention, and the rest of the world gets blocked out. Sometimes play is meditative, more repetitive action than conscious thought. Sometimes it is absentminded, and the player is simply passing time and can even hold conversations during it. Yet in all versions players perform, take on the part of players, and act through their bodies and in relation to others and the artifacts of play.

And in ethnography? Certainly. Fieldwork is a deeply material practice, with all this entails. We are the research instruments. We not only engage in the world, but our experience of it becomes woven through with our embodiment and sensory lives (Pink 2009; Wacquant 2004). In the field, we regularly flow between being a fly on the wall and deeply present. We participate (eat the food, go to the event, talk to people). We struggle with being exhausted but also energized by our encounters. Sometimes we are put in physically challenging situations. We sense the world, sometimes following our hunches or just as often ignoring instinct and diving into areas we might not otherwise. Our engaged, embodied presence is a core tool in the ethnographic method. It is a strength.

People we encounter in the field also deal with us as embodied researchers, ones who by our very physicality are encoded, are read, in a myriad of ways. In the moments of reflection about our subjectivity and embodied self, we can spot both the possibilities and limitations that come with ourselves as research instruments. Throughout my own work, I have written about the varying ways my gender, age, race, class, and sexuality have shaped my fieldwork, sometimes opening up possibilities, sometimes closing them down. Nick Taylor (2018) has also discussed on "researching while straight, white, and male" in gaming, and Witkowski's (2018) consideration of "sensuous proximity" in both gaming and research speaks to the complexity of embodied subjectivity in the field. Our own materiality shapes not only personal experience but the very nature of our

data. As such, we always contend with the ways embodiment intervenes and coconstructs our research, for good, bad, or otherwise.

The embodied, affective character of our work and our emplacement in the field typically leads us to reflect carefully on the ethics of our research, something all ethnographers reconcile in their own ways for each project. The intensely participatory component of observation has long led ethnographers to consider forms of accountability, responsibility, reciprocity, and "giving back" to the communities they study (Lather 1986; Weems 2006). Maybe we are asked to lend a hand with something or be present at an important event. Sometimes we are requested to explain a field site to a curious public or to lend expertise. The position of accountable participant researcher is a complex one, but it can be deeply generative.

For me, the experience of being simultaneously an ethnographer and a team member in a game brought this into sharp relief. In many game activities, there is no outside position to assume. If you are on the team you are counted, ethnographer or not. Not unlike playing a group sport, as a member of the team you are regularly expected to carry your own weight, look out for the good of the group, and understand your actions through a collective framing. You not only engage but are responsible in a meaningful way. You come to embody a part of the collective. There is no safety net, and holding yourself apart from the group in terms of action rarely succeeds. For those of us who have done ethnographic work in games, we may as researchers at times feel a lurking sense of distance, but at the level of the game, the system makes no such distinction. As a result, I have found myself more regularly asking if and how we are responsible and accountable to participants in the field (Chen 2011). Such a position—that of what I would call radical reciprocity—is a provocation (in the best sense) for ethnography.

Frustration and Failure

And yet. . . . Amidst the discovery, the pleasure, the mastery, both play and ethnography are often hard work and are filled with failure. As a player, time in a game is spent just as often scratching your head at what went wrong and trying to sort it out. Sometimes players wander the game world defeated. Sometimes we cannot find the help needed to finish something. Sometimes we realize a goal is actually out of reach, either due to a lack of skills or access. I have heard

people wonder if computer games will ever reach the level of sophistication to make a player cry, as movies can. They question a game's ability to draw us in emotionally. In my experience, if you still wonder about that, you have likely never talked to an actual player. While I have not cried (yet) at the dire state of something in the game, I—and many players—have felt anger, frustration, a racing heart, helplessness, and failure. Of course, in games failure is a crucial component of learning and perfecting play. Frustration, at either our own skills or at the game, can often push us to mastery like nothing else. But play can be painful, and quite a few players log off in frustration and anger (so-called "rage quit") at a space they otherwise love.

Ethnography likewise can be riddled with failures, frustrations, and missteps, and we do not talk about this enough. Over time we, as researchers, become adept at turning these moments around or making them part of the story. And, indeed, they are productive, just as in games. They can highlight for us the gaps between what we know and what we do not, what we aspire to have insight into and what we are seemingly utterly locked out of. Our failures and the moments in which we do not understand something or are frustrated can push us into areas we might not have explored otherwise (Nairn, Munro, and Smith 2005).

Such instances are a powerful counterbalance to the joy we experience in the field. Sometimes we misspeak with informants, we miss an opportunity we later kick ourselves over, our recorder runs out of power. At times we misread events or practices. Perhaps we even make someone angry. We can struggle with our own insecurities and desire to know but not be exposed ourselves. We may feel conflicted in our enthusiasm for a field site and struggle with our distaste for (or even anger at) attitudes we encounter there. Especially in the early stages of ethnographic work, we live in a double state, one of constant discovery, but one often shaded by the struggle to catch a break, to find a good confidant, to gain access, to get some crucial interpretive handles through which to make sense of something. Failure, in both games and ethnography, is normal and productive.

Myth and the Unknowable

For all this exploration, discovery, and analysis, gaming is still filled with stories handed down, unverified but widely believed, or lore about how something works. Players sometimes create elaborate hypotheses about how the game

works, and—though never verified—the folklore passes on from player to player to researcher. Gamers often theorize causal relations in imaginative and unverifiable ways and—whether we believe them or not—we sometimes find ourselves adopting practices that embody these myths. The stories and theories handed down are, though unverifiable, productive. They become another place in which the game community constructs itself through folklore. Being socialized into the mythos of a world can be a powerful part of becoming a player.

There may also be significant parts of a game world (for example, a high-level dungeon) that one never sees, never gets access to, never even understands in terms of mechanics or system. Players sometimes miss out on parts of a game due to a lack of skill or conditions of play. Though the starting point for many games fosters a dream of completion and success, as often as not, parts of the game elude us. A game can be left unfinished. The game experience is made up of constantly adding to a compendium of knowledge, but it is (in most cases), always incomplete.

This is certainly also the case with ethnography. The lore and myths of our field sites are often as important to know as any facts. The stories told, the staged performances, are productive (Monahan and Fisher 2010). Myths are also moments where the field site constructs, presents, and refines itself. Despite all our hard work of discovery, analysis, and interpretation, there will also always remain the nooks that are out of our reach. We sometimes are left with questions that we are unable to answer or to which we find hazy lines of causation. During our research, we may know that there are places to which we simply will never gain access or places we will never even glimpse (Gusterson 1998). Our field sites may hold secrets and absences, or perhaps we even create them in the process of writing (Rappert 2010). Just as often, we see in retrospect an angle that we kick ourselves for not capturing. While a guiding ethic of trying to pay due, to triangulate, to give a holistic picture of a world informs much of our work, at the end we are always left with a degree of incompleteness. This is unavoidable. The social world is never fully capturable. It often resists the systemization we seek to impose on it. We are, as we know, only ever left with partial truths (Clifford 1986).

Leaving

At some point, players find themselves drifting away from a game—or at least

wanting to. Social ties often keep people playing long after the attraction to the space has faded. They no longer have moments of discovery or learning, the pleasures of mastery have faded, things just seem to get old and perhaps a bit boring or routine. Sometimes people set aside a game but pop back to play it once in a while, sort of checking in. They may stop playing but still occasionally read favorite forums and websites, eventually trailing off in how frequently they do so. If they have really invested in a game, they may archive the experience somehow through a saved play file, screenshots, notes, or perhaps even maintaining an account so as not to lose a character. At some point though, the game is finally set aside.

In ethnography, if there are no outside constraints (finances requiring us to return home, work obligations, and things like these), we can also stage our departure gradually. We may begin to see the patterns repeat, we know and anticipate practices and meanings, we may have a feeling of saturation. Our sense of discovery becomes replaced with deep familiarity. We may find ourselves become bored or restless with a field site. We begin to sense that our leaving is around the corner and to tie up loose ends. Once gone, we may still check in with our participants, following them when and how we can (often online). Perhaps we have collected artifacts and objects from our time in the field that anchor our memories. But, ultimately, we leave. Eventually like the player moving on to the next game, we go through the process of writing it all up (a kind of "save file"). We find our next project and begin the cycle again.

Conclusion

For me the comparison of the two domains of game play and ethnography yields some interesting overlaps and a few divergences, ones which return us to long-standing conversations, as in the case of transgression or reciprocity. There are a couple final points worth making about what the two domains seem to share. Games and ethnography both rely substantially on a web of diverse actors (human and nonhuman), practices, and sometimes contentious meanings. Each is constituted by assemblage. There is no easy whole that we capture, but instead we insert ourselves into a complex circuit of actions, agents, and structures. In gaming players are not only engaged with the actual software of the game itself, but such experiences are coconstructed in relation to everything from the technology involved to the arrangement of play space to personal histories and

contexts around leisure. As ethnographers we track not only material practices but meaning making, language use, norms, institutional actors, even policy and law. Any given game, and any given field site, will enlist a specific configuration of actors, materials, and practices to which we have to become attuned. Play and ethnography are both assemblages and deeply situated ones at that.

In both play and ethnography we must also accept that there are always unanticipated consequences. Sometimes these turn out to be delightful moments and possibilities for discovery; other times they carry heavier ramifications and consequences. At their heart, games are spaces in which our actions carry import and, in concert with the system, experience unfolds. They are not simply environments for success or failure but processes with divergent paths. As Malaby (2007) notes, they are fundamentally spaces of contingency. While some offer more open-ended possibilities, because they are sites of cultural work and assemblage, none is ever entirely predetermined.

Ethnography is similar. Our worlds are a complex mix of patterns and norms alongside change and emergent transformations. We make choices, personal and methodological, that move us through the field in a variety of ways. The communities, institutions, structures, and people we encounter profoundly shape our experience often unexpectedly. Our time flows across varying trajectories, and as ethnographers we traverse paths and forks constantly, often with unpredictable outcomes. Just as importantly, once we write up the work, it comes to have a life of its own—well beyond our control. In both games and ethnography, we are never on a static field of play but in a dynamic and emergent space of possibility.

The qualities of play and ethnography speak to their relationship as kindreds. In the same spirit, many of us have been exploring the complexity and richness of play. Here I have sought to use some of those rubrics to reflect back on methods, hopefully illuminating some aspects not typically discussed. My aim is not only to push at the simplistic dichotomies of play and work or the flattening of play to fun, but to offer ethnographers an opportunity to think about their own practices in potentially new ways, ones informed by the growing area of game studies.

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