The Rise of Massive Multiplayer Online Games, Esports, and Game Live Streaming

An Interview with T. L.Taylor

T. L.Taylor is Professor of Comparative Media Studies at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and cofounder and Director of Research for AnyKey, an organization dedicated to supporting and developing fair and inclusive esports. She is a qualitative sociologist who has focused on internet and game studies for over two decades, and her research explores the relations between culture and technology in online leisure environments. Her *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (2018), which chronicled the emerging media space of online game broadcasting, won the 2019 American Sociological Association's Communication, Information Technologies, and Media Sociology book award. She is also the author of *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (2012) and *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (2006), and coauthor of *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (2012).
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American Journal of Play: Tell us how you played as a child?

T. L.Taylor: My play was standard fare and fairly traditionally gendered, rooted in storytelling and imagination but also influenced by watching television. With stuffed animals and Barbie dolls, or just various outdoor spaces, I had a lot of material both for solo and social play. A lot of it was tied to favorite television characters we'd act out. I was also a huge fan of Viewmaster and enjoyed spending time "in" that stereographic space. While our family tended to code sports for my dad and brother, roller skating played a huge role in my life. This was a really interesting one for me because it wasn't funneled through a sporting frame, but it was a place of imagination. It's hilarious to think about now, but I loved pretending to be a player on the famous L. A. Thunderbirds derby team we watched on TV. For me skat-

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ing was embodied experience and joy, then later it became a social outlet when I became a young teenager. Skating has actually remained one of my favorite things to do now as an adult. Roller rinks are fantastic places!

AJP: Did your own early play experiences affect your scholarly interests and research?

Taylor: Not particularly. While our family certainly had its share of board games, they weren't the center of my play life, and I didn't grow up in a home with computers or even early game consoles. Aside from arcades when I was younger, it wasn't until grad school—when I got my own personal computer—that I really got to play digital games. And even then those didn't animate my research interests at first. It was only when I found *EverQuest*, an early massive multiplayer online game (MMOG), that my intellectual curiosity got peaked. I will say, though, I've always felt that things like Viewmaster and Disneyland (where I spent a fair amount of time growing up in Southern California) primed me for that genre of gaming.

AJP: What was it about Viewmaster and Disney that did it?

Taylor: I think both tapped into some experience of being elsewhere, in another world. In my mind's eye, with the Viewmaster I was somehow always "in" that 3-D photographic space. And Disney, well Disney is just so tied for me to a sensory and embodied experience that evokes a kind of worldness.

AJP: How did you first come to study the relationships among culture, technology, play, and games?

Taylor: When I first got to graduate school, I assumed I'd probably continue to study something along the lines of what I'd done for my undergraduate thesis, which was work on consumption practices in refugee communities. At the time, I was interested in how people navigated consumer culture when they may not have the resources to fully participate. When I got to grad school, I wanted to find a way to keep in touch with folks back home, and the internet was really just starting to take off (this was the early 1990s). Pretty quickly, I found all the strange outposts, and early synchronous multiplayer text-based worlds (MUDs) were one of the most captivating. I got sucked in and quickly veered off in that direction for my research. My dissertation was on embodiment in virtual environments. The hop from MUDs to things like *EverQuest* wasn't huge.

AJP: What are massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), and what kinds of play do they offer?

Taylor: These spaces are networked online virtual game worlds with real-time

synchronous engagement and communication with other players. They afford a heterogeneity of play, where you can do more instrumental things like questing, killing monsters, skilling up a profession like tailoring, as well as activities like exploring a landscape and taking in the world. And then there is the whole side of building a community together with others. There are a range of ways to play in these types of games.

AJP: How have you approached studying these game communities? What methodologies and sources have you used and why?

Taylor: My approach to studying game communities—whether online MMOGs or those based around a platform like Twitch—is to leverage many of the traditional tools of qualitative research (interviewing, participation observation, archival work) and concerns from sociology (thinking about power, stratification, institutions, and structures), with more science and technology studies (STS)–informed modes that take technology seriously as an actor (albeit a nonhuman one).

AJP: How does your notion of "assemblage" help us better understand games?

Taylor: Game play is made up of a complex and often messy mix of components, from deeply personal meaning making to social processes to technological structures. It generally also exceeds whatever designers intended and the formal properties of the artifact. Early on I found that the kinds of questions I was interested in were best answered by understanding that heterogeneity of nodes, processes, and structures that collectively produced play. For me the notion of assemblage is helpful in understanding the complexity of actors, action, play, and work that go into the play experience. As I wrote in my 2009 piece entitled "The Assemblage of Play," I wanted to reflect on some of the insights by people such as Paul Rabinow and the vital work of Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star on boundary objects within the framework of gaming.

AJP: Speaking of nodes, processes, and structures, in your study of the culture of the MMOG *EverQuest*, you found that players "coconstruct" the game experience, pushing it beyond the original intentions of the designers. How did players do this?

Taylor: A myriad of ways from mundane to the more spectacular, yet all deeply transformative. Players construct emergent ways of structuring otherwise chaotic gaming moments. For example, in *EverQuest* they would keep extensive sign-up sheets or raid calendars for popular camping spots in the game. These were often small moments of people maintaining social order

that had a profound impact on the experience. On a larger scale you'd see players innovate—from creating guild structures to, in the case of a game like *World of Warcraft*, authoring significant user interface mods—and these innovations (both social and technical) would often be integrated back into the formal structures of these games.

AJP: What kinds of tensions exist between the designers of MMOGs and those who play them?

Taylor: MMOG designers face an interesting challenge. On the one hand they are creative authors of environments that they then ask people to come to—and invest in—to breathe life into the world. They then regularly confront the fact that that act of living in a space spurs on both social and technological innovation from the users, often in ways that bump up against the edges of the designed vision. Adept designers anticipate this and structure ongoing development processes for it. The smartest value it. Those who see an MMOG as an artifact solely authored by formal designers are not likely to navigate inevitable tensions very well.

AJP: Have you discovered challenges to our notions about how and why women play *EverQuest* and other online games?

Taylor: Women have always played digital games, even if they've been rendered invisible in game culture (especially true when I first started my work on *EQ*). I've long been drawn to wanting to understand and learn from those who *do* play. Over and over again, what I see is that—given the barriers to entry and retention in game culture—women are some of the most dedicated gamers out there.

AJP: How do gamers play with gender in these games?

Taylor: MMOGs in particular can be powerful spaces where gender gets done, both due to the social nature of these games and to the fact that they generally tap into embodied experience. There is a lot of heterogeneity in how gender plays out in these spaces but, conscious or not, it's always being enacted in complex ways.

AJP: Does your research support the view that gamers are antisocial and isolated?

Taylor: No. From my earliest work studying MMOG players in *EverQuest,* it was clear to me how deeply social it was. Whether through chatting and collaborating in-game or the collective knowledge building or sharing that happens outside the game (on websites, in places like Discord, and others), digital play is interwoven with the social. It's also important to understand that the social is not simply about talk or social organization but also about the

way imaginaries and nonhuman actors work to shape and structure play. The encoded values, structures, possibilities, and limitations of technological systems makes them, at their heart, cultural artifacts and, as STS has taught us, political ones. Designed artifacts are social artifacts. The social is always present in our gaming, whether we are with other people or not.

AJP: How would you answer critics who consider playing and socializing online less meaningful than offline play and socializing?

Taylor: This was a battle I feel like we had to fight when I first started doing internet research in the 1990s, but it feels less pressing to me now. Our daily lives—leisure, professional, civic—are woven through with online experiences. The interweaving, that flow, has always been there and it's become much more apparent given how much the internet has simply become a part of everyday life—from the mundane to the political. It's hard to imagine the argument carries much weight anymore.

AJP: What is power gaming?

Taylor: When I did my work on *EQ,* I encountered players who, as I discussed in *Play between Worlds* (2006), felt like they were playing a different game than I was. They were more instrumental, focused, and goal-oriented in ways that often exceeded the bounds of the game. They were often reverse engineering the system to explore it, press it, and master it in ways most average players like me didn't. Back in those days, these folks were called power gamers, though now we more often use language like min-maxing (that is, focusing on minimizing weaknesses and maximizing strengths). Talking to power gamers for my book was a powerful intervention in my conceptual thinking about games because it highlighted for me that, despite our "working with" the same artifact (*EverQuest*), there was a profound heterogeneity in play. Though paying attention to the specificity of the technology and designed intent has always been central to my work, the artifact was not deterministic.

AJP: You continued to explore these power gamers in your next project about the rise of esports. Why?

Taylor: Given the work I'd been doing on this kind of focused instrumental play, it's probably not surprising that when I heard about professional gamers, esports players, my curiosity was piqued. Here was a group playing in ways I recognized from power gamers, but they were doing so professionally (or at least aspiring to).

AJP: What exactly are esports?

Taylor: Simply put they are a form of competitive digital gaming. My definition isn't tied to a specific genre or abstract formalization but focuses on the social organization around a title and competition and whether or not a community frames it as an esport.

AJP: Can you describe an esports tournament?

Taylor: At its most basic, they're about creating a structure of competition around a game and a particular attitudinal stance. Amateur esports can be as simple as having some kind of competitive mechanism with a couple of players. High-end professional tournaments bring together a range of institutional actors and practices, from elaborate rule sets (that exceed or augment the formal conditions of the software) to forms of labor like administrators, commentators, and broadcasters.

AJP: What was most important to the development of esports?

Taylor: When I first set out to explore esports in 2003, I went to a tournament in the hopes of talking to players. While there, I spotted a guy standing off to the side wearing a suit, and I was so perplexed about who he could be that I went up to talk to him. Turns out, he was there scouting for players to contract to his team. At that moment, I realized that esports as we currently understand them were only possible given a range of people, institutions, structures, and technologies beyond individual players. Our current moment in esports is, beyond the specificity of particular games, deeply shaped by everything from infrastructure and platform development (think about the growth of the internet, services and platforms, and the rise of spectatorship online) to institutional development (think about teams, leagues, and broadcasters) to financial models (think about advertising and sponsorship or the role of investment capital these days).

AJP: How does professional gaming differ across the globe?

Taylor: Widely—and this is something we need a lot more research on. We've long known, for example, that South Korea's esports scene was profoundly shaped by the presence of young people playing in PC bangs (gaming cafés) and by a national policy that promoted internet infrastructure and technology growth. If you spend time in China, you'll find an esports scene that has fundamentally integrated mobile titles into its competitive leagues and tournaments in ways currently seen as unimaginable in North America and Europe. If you visit India, you will see the esports, and its broadcasting, structured in ways that deal with a very different set of material infrastructures. National and regional specificities are profoundly important, and this

is one of the trickiest but most important stories in the space.

AJP: How would you describe a typical (if there is such a thing) professional gamer?

Taylor: There are several characteristics I think are central to pro players—an ability to work hard to understand a system and adapt to it, to set dynamic goals to improve their play, and a willingness to fail, get up, and try again. There is a focused doggedness to playing at the high end. And of course, a pro gamer has to find a way into, and sustain participation in, the formal structures of esports, from tournaments to ways to pay the bills (contracts, sponsorships, and the like).

AJP: What role does gender play in the pro gaming scene?

Taylor: Despite women being avid game players—and often competitive ones at that—they still face serious cultural barriers to entry and retention all along the chain, up to and including the professional scene. Having to work twice as hard to prove themselves, harassment, microaggressions, and not having full access to networks that would help them advance, all continue to pose serious challenges to those aspiring to the highest levels of competitive play.

AJP: What would you say to those who argue that esports are not a sport?

Taylor: Sport is a socially constructed category, and so what constitutes one—or where the boundaries of athleticism lay—is always up for debate. Esports are just the latest in the long line of activities under discussion. I don't have any particular stake in how that designation shakes out. My work on this has generally been more invested in tracking how the community was navigating that debate (and how it has actually changed over the years). What I will say, though, is that playing games is an embodied activity and that many traditional sports are deeply interwoven with technology. Thinking about esports as a sport is not an outlandish idea.

AJP: How did live streaming game play online come about?

Taylor: There has been experimentation in live streaming online for many decades now, and what we see on sites like Twitch is part of an ongoing trajectory of people trying to find ways to connect and share their experiences, whether it is just about daily life or in the case of games, performative play.

AJP: How have commercial interests and regulations shaped the rise of game live streaming?

Taylor: Two big angles come to mind for me with this. The first is the ongoing regulation and governance of intellectual property. Game developers and

publishers still largely claim sole IP ownership of game content, which puts content creators in the position of always being reliant on companies to "allow" productions. I've long argued this is not a robust model for understanding game play, which is more a cocreative activity, but it's the legal model we have been stuck with for a while now. The second answer to your question is about how game live streams have sought to be commercialized, not just by some broadcasters themselves but platforms and third-party organizations. One of the most important things that has occurred with the rise of live streaming is the creation of an audience for these broadcasts that is, in turn, being monetized.

AJP: How have broadcasters responded to regulations? Have some actively pushed back?

Taylor: Broadcasters do a lot to navigate a legal system often out of step with the larger culture. Sometimes there's outright push back, but more often, we see streamers trying to find safe ground where they can keep producing content that doesn't get flagged or catch unwelcome legal attention. At times they try to build such a big audience that—so they hope—their popularity protects them. At other moments, it's about working hard to articulate and demonstrate you are clearly engaging in "transformative work" (a legal designation that has some protection). Other strategies include enfranchising developers as partners that you see as a valuable part of a marketing strategy. Most broadcasters I talk to sense the gap between the way IP is currently handled legally and how creative cultural production actually works. But they also recognize they don't have a lot of formal power in our system.

AJP: How has live streaming changed the way many people play games?

Taylor: It's important to remember that gaming has always been a spectator activity. In the arcade era, this spectator quality was apparent. Consoles and PCs let your friends and family, either seated with you on the sofa or looking over your shoulder, watch you game. In the case of esports, people have long been innovating ways to share competitive play. Live streaming scaled up the audience. But the pleasure of watching others play, or being "on stage" yourself, has always been there. Other things do kick in when you have platforms that afford this now. Everything from thinking about what games will draw in an audience, how to construct a sustained performative identity, how to use other technologies or creative outlets (green screens, overlays, bot systems) to build and manage your

channel, all then get layered onto that base of spectating play.

AJP: Why do people watch other people play games online?

Taylor: In the same way there are many different reasons people stream, there are many different reasons people watch. Sometimes it's educational and you want to learn how to play a game better. Sometimes it's about entertainment and loving the personality of a streamer. Sometimes it's what I call ambient sociality and wanting something on in the background to keep you company. Much like streaming itself, it's not easily distilled down to one motivation.

AJP: What most surprises you about those who live stream play online?

Taylor: I anticipated the care and work that went into sustained streaming but was blown away once I started getting into the details with folks. Whether it was how some would save special games for themselves to experience in private or the complex assemblage of practices and tools they deployed behind-the-scenes to manage a successful stream, it was the specificity and depth of their work to produce what looks effortless to us as viewers that impressed me.

AJP: You've written about the transformative work of play. What do you mean by this?

Taylor: As I suggested a bit earlier, actual game play is made up of a mix of actors, practices, and processes, only one of which is the game developer. Going back to my earliest work on MMOGs and continuing to my more recent research on live streaming, what I see over and over again are people co-creating their play experiences and often doing more than what is given by the software product. Players regularly create new forms of meaning and expression for games. Their practices (sometimes made material in mods—software modifications to a game) often alter how people play, pushing games beyond what designers imagined. In turn, many developers leverage these creative interventions back into formal products. The transformative work of players has always pointed me to a cocreative model of cultural production.

AJP: How does this kind of play complicate the so-called divides between work and play?

Taylor: Even from my earliest work in MMOGs I found that setting up an abstract line between work and play is quite difficult to justify empirically. People regularly play in ways that may look like work to outsiders, and sometimes our play is painful. Conversely, sometimes our work can have

joyful, playful moments. I found it was very hard to know just by looking at an activity how you'd categorize it. Here Clifford Geertz's old wink, blink, squint, or twitch is important to remember—you actually need to know how people give meaning to their action, how it sits within contexts and circulates socially, to truly understand action. As a sociologist, this is also a methodological intervention I lean on Max Weber for. In my research I find play is often a flow between (and perhaps even around) these modalities. It's deeply tied to the disposition of the player and the social context in which it's happening. The same activity can be work one minute and play the next. What I've found most fulfilling for the kinds of questions I'm interested in is exploring the granularity of meaning making and practices people bring to their gaming.

AJP: What is AnyKey and how did it come about?

Taylor: AnyKey is an initiative cofounded and codirected by Morgan Romine and me in 2015 with the support of Intel and ESL. We launched it because we'd both been working in the games and esports space for a while and saw continued issues around diversity and inclusion we wanted to tackle. Our hope was to build interventions and programs based on research, to play a long game of change built on a foundation of solid data (I'm trained as a sociologist, and Morgan holds a Ph.D. in anthropology). I'm proud of the work we've done over the years. People can not only learn more about the organization but find a lot of practical resources (things like recommendations for collegiate esports or how to run gender inclusive tournaments) at anykey.org.

AJP: One final question: Will you tell us about what you're currently working on?

Taylor: I'm in an unusual position right now where I didn't have a thread from my past project that seamlessly carries me to my next. I have a small project now which is a pretty fun pivot for me. I've been looking at everyday play in theme parks. Think game studies meets Disney studies. It's been a neat change of pace! I don't know if it'll ever be much more than a conference paper, but it's been a kick to shift gears in a pretty significant way. We'll see where it leads.