

The book cover features a dark blue, starry night sky. A large, textured yellow moon is positioned in the upper center. To the left, a large, jagged, yellow triangular shape, resembling a stylized rock or a piece of a puzzle, extends from the top left corner. In the lower center, the silhouettes of three figures are visible: two standing and one crouching, looking towards the right. A bright, glowing yellow orb is located in the lower right corner. The title 'COMMUNITIES OF PLAY' is written in a yellow, sans-serif font, arched over the moon.

# COMMUNITIES OF PLAY

EMERGENT CULTURES  
IN MULTIPLAYER GAMES  
AND VIRTUAL WORLDS

ELIA PEARCE AND ARTEMESIA

FOREWORDS BY

TOM BOELLSTORFF  
AND  
BONNIE A. NARDI

# Communities of Play

Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds

*Celia Pearce and Artemesia*

forewords by  
Tom Boellstorff and Bonnie A. Nardi

The MIT Press Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England

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This book was set in Janson Text, Rotis Semi Sans, and Rotis Sans by Graphic Composition, Inc., Bogart, Georgia.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pearce, Celia.

Communities of play : emergent cultures in multiplayer games and virtual worlds / Celia Pearce and Artemesia.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-16257-9 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Internet games—Social aspects. 2. Fantasy games—Social aspects. 3. Role playing—Social aspects. 4. Shared virtual environments—Social aspects. 5. Communities.

6. Community life. I. Title.

GV1469.17.S63P42 2009

794.8'1—dc22

2008042150

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Communities of Play

This book is dedicated to my grandmother, Connie Capacchione, for a lifetime of unconditional love, support, and encouragement.

## Methods of Culture

Tom Boellstorff

We live at a historical juncture in which virtual worlds and online games stand to reconfigure the very character of “culture.” They will do so in a range of ways, yet with some common themes. They will do so individually and also in dialogue with each other, with other technologies ranging from web pages to cellphones, and with those broader sociopolitical changes that are too often hastily glossed as “globalization” or “neoliberalism.” The stakes are high, in every sense—cultural, economic, political, and personal. Additionally, it has become blatantly clear that these stakes are pertinent worldwide, for the rich and poor, for the powerful and disempowered, and not just for elite technophiles.

Given these stakes, it is crucial that we develop the broadest possible body of scholarship exploring virtual worlds and online games from a range of methodological and theoretical perspectives. Disciplinary or topical partisanship is anathema, to be avoided at all costs: what is needed is an appreciation for the vibrant possibilities offered by a new research community seeking answers to questions that are at once novel and linked to classic dilemmas of social analysis.

It is in this context that *Communities of Play* may be fruitfully read in three different ways. First, *Communities of Play* is to my knowledge the first book-length exploration of a virtual culture formed at the interstices of multiple virtual worlds and online games. Pearce explores what she terms the “Uru Diaspora”—the movement of an online community to several different virtual worlds and games in the wake of the destruction of their own. Her work here thus usefully complements research focusing on specific virtual worlds and games, as well as work focusing on relationships between virtual worlds and the actual world.

Second, *Communities of Play* is fundamentally concerned with questions of methodology. By charting the challenges and triumphs of her research, Pearce presents to the growing body of scholarship on virtual worlds and online games a useful treatise on ethnographic practice. As an anthropologist who conducts research in the actual

world (Indonesia) and a virtual world (*Second Life*), I find Pearce's ethnographic skills to be equal to any I have yet encountered: her insistence on considering method in the context of theory represents an important intervention.

Third, Pearce's experience as a game designer and her interest in the notion of emergence mean that *Communities of Play* will be valuable to those concerned with game design and virtual-world governance. Pearce shows us how in a sense all culture is emergent, since it is never intelligible solely in terms of individual actions and beliefs. She thus reaches back to classic functionalist and structuralist conceptualizations of culture in terms of an integrated whole. For instance, Ruth Benedict touched upon just this issue when noting in her classic *Patterns of Culture*, first published in 1934, that "Gunpowder is not merely the sum of sulphur and charcoal and saltpeter, and no amount of knowledge even of all three of its elements . . . will demonstrate the nature of gunpowder. . . . Cultures, likewise, are more than the sum of their traits" (p. 47). At the same time, Pearce brings in contemporary interests in reflexivity and an attention to the multiplicity of selfhood in virtual contexts quite unlike anything Benedict ever encountered. It is in this combination of an appreciation for past insights, together with an interest in forging novel tools for novel field sites, that the power of Pearce's contribution lies.

## Reference

Benedict, Ruth. 1934. *Patterns of Culture*. New York: Mentor Books.

## Play, Community, and History

*Bonnie Nardi*

The study of virtual worlds gained quick traction in academia. In a few short years, a multidisciplinary arena of scholarship emerged with participation from media studies, organization studies, education, anthropology, and computer-related fields such as human-computer interaction and computer-supported collaborative work. Celia Pearce's book is unique in this literature for situating analysis of virtual world activity in a historical frame, following the development and diaspora of an online community over several years across a series of online environments. It is remarkable that Pearce was able to attain such scope. Eighteen months of fieldwork were a part of her success, but a principled digging-into of multiple strands of virtual world history, with careful tracery of earlier games, worlds, and events that influenced her study participants, brought forth a depth and lucidness that should become a touchstone for virtual worlds scholarship.

Pearce's work is important in studying an unusual group of participants—middle-aged men and women. Typical gamers tend to be younger, and tend to be male. Pearce's research takes seriously the need to examine diverse populations; it reminds us that understanding topics such as play and play communities—Pearce's primary interests—entails developing a corpus of careful empirical work conducted in multiple contexts. Her study is so absorbing, so compelling, it issues a captivating invitation for more such work.

I am usually wary of "me-ethnography," finding it self-conscious and boring. Pearce explains how she herself emerged as a participant in the community she studied. But it's not about her, it's about the community. She uses discussions of the development of her identity as a special kind of participant not to talk about herself, but to reveal the dynamics of the community she investigated. I'm not sure most could have pulled it off. If others seek to emulate Pearce, I hope they approach the task with the humility and sense of cultural dynamics manifest in her work.



It is a pleasure to write this small bit of text, knowing that very soon you will be immersed in the abundant satisfactions of Pearce's excellent writing. Her background as a games designer is evident in the way she respectfully engages readers in clear, vivid prose structured in an original and—can we say it?—entertaining way. From its thoughtful analyses of play and community to its authoritative contextualization of games and virtual worlds, this book repays study on many levels. Enjoy!

## Acknowledgments

This endeavor would not have been possible without the support, patience, and guidance of a number of people, for whom I am eternally grateful, and whom, to varying degrees, have all had a hand in the birthing of this book.

First and foremost, I'd like to express by gratitude to the wonderful people of The Gathering of Uru (TGU) with whom my fate is inextricably linked, and who have become friends as well as collaborators. This is their amazing story and I am merely their scribe. In particular I'd like to acknowledge Raena, who not only subjected herself to numerous lengthy interviews, but also contributed to the study by doing some supplemental research and helping me navigate the group's archives; Lynn, who generously gave of her time and attention to make sure I got what I needed, including a kick in the pants from time to time; Leesa, the mayor and founder of TGU, the group's amazing leader, who welcomed me into her community; Wingman, my friend, guide, and navigator; Nature\_Girl the Wise for being my go-to gal on all things *Uru*; Bette, for turning the tables on me and asking *me* the questions; Damanji, for putting up with my incessant questions; Petrova and D'evon, my guides in *Until Uru*; Tristan, who really did turn out to be a nice guy after all; Leshan, for expanding my virtual wardrobe and helping me to see my value to the community; Maesi and Shaylah, for their support and contribution to the community and to my research; and Uno, for all the virtual chocolate. (Note: all study participants are referred to by pseudonyms.)

I'd like to thank all of those who supported this work during its chrysalis period as a PhD thesis, including my advisory team, Dr. Lizbeth Goodman, Dr. Hayley Newman, and Dr. Tricia Austin, for their support, guidance, and feedback. I'd also like to thank my external advisors, who put an enormous amount of effort into this with no particular reward: first and foremost, Tom Boellstorff, who was my tour guide into the world of contemporary anthropology; Katherine Milton for her guidance in sociology and general support and friendship; T. L. Taylor for her feedback and inspiration; Neil Bennun, the proofreader and "anglocizer" of the original thesis; and Dr. Marc

Price, who asked the right questions. I'd also like to thank the SMARTlab cohort alongside whom I took this amazing journey, as well as the SMARTlab staff, including Joy Barrett, Jana Reidel, Taey Kim, Jo Gell, and Cassandra St. Louis. In addition, particular gratitude is due my extended network of UK friends who kindly housed me during my term as a PhD candidate at SMARTlab: David Furlow, Susan Benn and Gavin McFayden, Lucy Hooberman and David Triesman, and Tom Donaldson.

I'd like to thank the people I worked with on the re-launch of *Uru Live*: Blake Lewin, Laurie Baird, Cari Price, Trent Hershenson, and Eric Large (Turner/GameTap), and Rand Miller, Ryan Warzecha, Tony Fryman, Mark Dobratz, and Richard Watson (Cyan Worlds).

Special thanks are due to my colleagues at Georgia Tech, especially Janet Murray and Kenneth Knoespel, without whose sincere support and flexibility this book would never have been completed.

I also owe a great deal of gratitude to my biological and extended family. Numerous thanks are owed to Bob Rice for his emotional and technical support, his patience, and especially his continuous reminders to back up my work; my parents, Lucia Capacchione, Peter Pearce, and Susan Pearce, and my grandmother Connie Capacchione, for their encouragement and support; my sister, Aleta Francis, for her support and sense of humor; and her family, all of whom had to suffer my extended absences and lack of availability. I thank them for their patience throughout this process.

A number of friends and colleagues were instrumental in helping me think through various aspects of this research, including Mary Flanagan, my friend and college roommate; Jacki Morie, Tracy Fullerton, and Janine Fron, my partners in play in Ludica; Rob Peagler for general support and inspiration; Bernie DeKoven, my Play Guru; the Narrative Unlimited cohort; and my former colleagues at UC Irvine, especially Bonnie Nardi, Bill Tomlinson, Antoinette LaFarge, and Stuart Ross. I'd also like to thank Elizabeth Plott, Elizabeth Fricker, and Doug MacMurray, as well as Pam McCormick and Peggie Geller for their support and encouragement.

The birthing process of this book was also made possible by a small army of supporters who lent their time, efforts, and editorial talents to this endeavor: Janet Murray, Richard Kahlenberg, Clark Dodsworth, and Katherine Mancuso.

And finally, I would like to thank the wonderful people at the MIT Press who helped magically transform this book from virtual to actual: Douglas Sery, Alyssa Larose, Katie Helke, Krista Magnuson, Mel Goldsipe, and Jean Wilcox.

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# PLAY, COMMUNITY, AND EMERGENT CULTURES



## COMMUNITIES OF PLAY AND THE GLOBAL PLAYGROUND

### Communities of Play

Play communities are neither new nor unique to the Internet. They surround us in many forms, from chess and bridge clubs to sports leagues to golf buddies to summer camps; from *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing on tabletops to outdoor historical reenactments of renaissance faires or famous Civil War battles. As commonplace as these practices are, with the exception of sports, adult play tends to be marginalized in the U.S. and Europe. As anthropologist Richard Schechner has noted, “In the West, play is a rotten category tainted by unreality, inauthenticity, duplicity, make-believe, looseness, fooling around, and inconsequentiality” (1988).

In spite of this, anthropologists have long noted the deep connection between play and more serious traditional forms of ritual and performance, many of which involve the adoption of alternative roles or personas (van Gennep 1909, Schechner and Schuman 1976, Turner 1982). In contemporary society, this takes the form of ritually sanctioned celebrations such as Mardi Gras and Halloween (Santino 1983), which create allowances for adults to engage in fantasy role-play as part of provisional, short-term, play communities. Mardi Gras also supports a year-round culture of creativity devoted to the crafting of floats, costumes, and other ritual artifacts (Schindler 1997).

Yet in many other contexts, such ongoing play communities tend to be viewed as outside the norm. This is especially true of communities whose play cultures are deeply tied to imagination, fantasy, and the creation of a fictional identity, such as “Trekkies,” who engage in role-play around the television series *Star Trek* (Jenkins 1992). Like participants in historical reenactments (Horwitz 1998, Miller 1998), live-action and tabletop role-playing games (Fine 1983), and the Burning Man festival (Gilmore and Van Proyen 2005), these play communities devote a high level of effort and creativity to their play culture, often to the bewilderment of the population at large (figure 1.1).





| Figure 1.1 |

Participants in the 2004 Burning Man festival. (Image: Jacquelyn Ford Morie)

Nonetheless, social play is a rapidly expanding category in the entertainment landscape. Cosplay, the practice of dressing up in costume, has gained widespread acceptance in Japan (Winge 2007). The Dragon\*Con fan convention, which embraces a range of role-playing traditions, including cosplay and other fan practices, attracted over 30,000 participants in 2007, over twenty times the attendees of its inaugural event in 1987 (Dragon\*Con 2008). The same year, over 47,000 people attended Burning Man, an annual festival/campout combining art, role-playing, and creative expression in the Nevada desert (Red Rock LLC 2007).

What do we mean when we say “play community”? As a pervasive element of diverse human cultures, anthropologists have long had a fascination with play and its social function, some devoting much of their oeuvre to the subject (Schechner and Schuman 1976, Turner 1982, Sutton-Smith 1981). Johan Huizinga, considered