COMMUNITIES OF PLAY

EMERGENT CULTURES IN MULTIPLAYER GAMES AND VIRTUAL WORLDS

ELIA PEARCE AND ARTEMESIA

FOREWORDS BY

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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

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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 re-enactments 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