

## 5 GAMING

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In a lengthy interview over instant messenger (IM), twenty-two-year-old Earendil described the role that gaming played in his growing up. Earendil was largely homeschooled, and though his parents had strict limits on gaming until he and his brother were in middle school, Earendil and his brother got their “gaming kicks” at the homes of their friends with game consoles. After his parents loosened restrictions on computer time when he was fifteen, his first social experiences online were in a multiplayer game based on the novel *Ender’s Game* and in online chats with fellow fans of *Myst* and *Riven*. Although he did not get his first game console until he was eighteen, he considered himself an avid gamer, and when he started community college he fell in with “a group of local geeks, who like myself, enjoyed playing games, etc.” Gaming was a focus of activity for him and his friends, as they engaged in forms of play and game-related production that often required high levels of gaming as well as technical expertise, including networked gaming parties and participation in a group that was developing a modification on a popular game. Throughout his late childhood and adolescence, gaming was a focus for hanging out with his local friends, for online relationships, and for developing technical expertise (Ito, Anime Fans).

Although Earendil is a more committed gamer than most of the youths we spoke to as part of our research, the diverse kinds of social experiences he gained through gaming are becoming more and more commonplace. By 1999, more than 80 percent of U.S. homes with children had a game console (Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout 2005). Between 1999 and 2004, average daily gaming time for children went from twenty-six minutes to forty-six (Roberts and Foehr 2008). Among those who responded to our background questionnaire, 90 percent reported that they currently engaged

in some form of electronic gaming, and 24 percent reported that they play games daily. Gaming represents the central form of early computer experience for kids. More than two thirds of the kids we interviewed had a game console at home before the age of ten. Not only is game play time growing among U.S. youth, but forms of game play and gaming demographics are diversifying. Drawing from a survey by the NPD Group, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) (2007) reports that 38 percent of game players are women. Women age eighteen or older represent a significantly greater share of the game playing population (30 percent) than boys age seventeen or younger (23 percent). Although the first-person shooter (FPS) game Halo 3 was the best-selling title of 2007, only 15 percent of games sold that year were rated Mature, and sales of Family games grew 110 percent over the previous year. Accessible online and casual social games have tipped the balance toward adult women, or more accurately, toward a diversified age and gender demographic.

In the past two decades, as electronic gaming has gradually become established as one of the dominant forms of entertainment of our time, there has been widespread debate over the merits of the medium. Some have accused games of promoting violence and sexism. Despite very little empirical evidence that games lead to antisocial or violent behavior, popular perception persists in painting a picture of the aggressive, isolated, compulsive gamer.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the image of the violent gamer, sexism in games does have some grounding in everyday practice; although in the past five years the increase has been tremendous in the number of girls and women who game, most of those gains have been made in the area of “casual” games in online and handheld platforms, and more “hard-core” and technically sophisticated forms of gaming and game modding<sup>2</sup> are still dominated by boys and men (Kafai et al. 2008). In contrast to these concerns, researchers have been arguing that games have important learning properties that can be mobilized for education. Research in this vein was a central part of the early games industry, and it resulted in the development of a genre of game software that came to be known as “edutainment” in the 1980s and 1990s (see Ito 2007, 2009). More recently, educational researchers have engaged with simulation and other state-of-the-art games to argue that games provide important opportunities for learning in practice (Gee 2003; Shaffer 2006; Squire 2006).

Our work speaks to these public debates by considering everyday gaming practice and how it is embedded in a broader set of media ecologies and genres of participation with new media. Rather than key our research directly in the terms of these public debates, however, we stay close to the empirical material to provide a descriptive base and set of frameworks for understanding the role of gaming in kids' lives and learning. Much of the public debate has ignored or overlooked contexts and practices of game play. The focus has been almost exclusively on what people hope or fear kids will get from their play, rather than on what they actually do on an ongoing, everyday basis. It is only recently that researchers have been moving beyond a conceptual focus on gaming representation to look at gaming practice and the broader structural contexts of gaming activity. There is still little work looking at how different genres of games intersect with different types of game play and broader structural conditions such as gender, age, and class identity. This chapter is an effort to fill in some of these gaps in the research literature by positioning game play within a broader ecology of media practices and identities.

Gaming practices are extremely diverse in nature and form; game play is a complex and multilayered phenomenon. We would like to suggest a possible framework for examining gaming as it is embedded in practice in relation to what we have learned about the other contexts of new media engagement that youth navigate. We heard about gaming practices across the different case studies in our project, though only Matteo Bittanti's study (*Game Play*), Arthur Law's study (*Team Play*), and Rachel Cody's study (*Final Fantasy XI*) were specifically focused on game communities. In this chapter, we draw from a wide range of different case studies, including Bittanti's, Law's, and Cody's; Judd Antin, Dan Perkel, and Christo Sims's "Social Dynamics of Media Production"; danah boyd's "Teen Sociality in Networked Publics"; Heather Horst's "Silicon Valley Families" study; Horst and Laura Robinson's "Neopets" study; Mizuko Ito's "Anime Fans" study, and Patricia Lange's "YouTube and Video Bloggers" work. In this chapter we show a diversity in terms of the ages of the participants that we describe as we transition to a discussion of interest-based practices. Unlike the contexts of family and the friendship-based peer groups we describe in earlier chapters, interest-driven practices such as gaming are not age specific, and it becomes important

to look at how youth engage with mixed-age gaming practices and discourses and also to consider the trajectories of how gaming practices extend into adulthood. Although our focus is still on gaming in the teen years, we quote older gamers reflecting on their practices growing up with games or describing the cultures of gaming more generally as reflective practitioners.

We start our discussion with a framing of the debates around gaming and learning, suggesting how a practice- and youth-centered approach can inform this conversation. The body of this chapter is organized in terms of genres of gaming practice: killing time, hanging out, recreational gaming, mobilizing and organizing, and augmented gaming. We conclude our discussion with an analysis of the broader structural and cultural conditions of gaming that shape how the different genres of practice relate to one another, and the ways in which individuals gain access to or are excluded from various game play experiences.

### **Conceptual Framework: Gaming in Context**

The dominant approach to studies of gaming and learning focus on the relationship between the gamer and the text. This holds on both sides of the aisle. Just as detractors assume that the violent content of the game encourages violent behaviors (Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley 2007), proponents of games and learning generally assume that learning follows from good game design.

Although there has been a considerable amount written on games and young people's use of them, there has been little work done to establish an overall "ecology" of gaming, game design, and play, in the sense of how all the various elements—from code to rhetoric to social practices and aesthetics—cohabit and populate the game world. . . . The language of the media is replete with references to the devil (and heavy metal) when it comes to the ill-found virtues of video games, while a growing movement in K–12 education casts them as the Holy Grail in the uphill battle to keep kids learning. While many credit game play with fostering new forms of social organization and alternative ways of thinking and interacting, more work needs to be done to situate these forms of learning within a dynamic media ecology that has the participatory and social nature of gaming at its core. (Salen 2007, 2–3)

As Katie Salen, editor of *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning* (2007), notes in the introduction to her book, what is largely

absent in the literature is an account of the relations among players, texts, and contexts of play. Researchers who have studied the reception of media such as books and television have argued for some time now that social context has a formative influence on reception (Buckingham 1993; Jenkins 1992; Mankekar 1999; Radway 1984). With interactive, customizable, and user-modified media such as video games, this is even more the case. Our focus is not on the relation between individual kids and game content and representation, but rather on how game play practice and activity are situated within a broader set of cultural and social engagements and contexts. The focus on activity in context means paying attention to the diversity in contexts that structure different forms of game play—the broader social and cultural ecology—rather than assuming that psychological and cognitive dispositions play the most important determining role.

Gaming occupies a complicated position in relation to structures of age, class, and gender because of its status as a technically-driven recreational activity usually associated with lowbrow, male-dominated identity and practice.<sup>3</sup> The moral panics over games rotting the hearts and minds of children share many of the familiar concerns voiced about television; games are frequently linked to the corrupting “bad screens” of television (and working-class culture) rather than the “good screens” of computers and middle-class culture (Seiter 1999a; 2005). Further, much like earlier forms of youth-centered popular culture, video games are a site of moral panics where intergenerational anxieties are projected onto new media (Cohen 1972). The technical sophistication of games, both as texts and practices, however, throws a unique twist into these existing cultural conflicts. While those who see gaming as an avenue into certain forms of technical expertise and learning have argued that educators and designers should work to make games attractive to girls (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Kafai et al. 2008), others have argued that gaming reproduces sexist and consumerist logics that are often of dubious value for youth (Kline, Dyer-Witthof, and de Peuter 2003; Sheff 1993). Questions about what kids learn through games are a site of conflict among the values inflected by class, gender, and generational identity.

The controversial nature of this medium becomes explicit, for instance, in the process of establishing a set of norms about the “appropriate use”

of games. Parents and kids' perspectives often collide. The nature of the clash, however, is varied. In chapter 4, we have seen these conflicts playing out in how parents from different class backgrounds regulate gaming in the home. We also have noted how certain gaming practices can function as an intergenerational wedge, where parents are shut out from certain forms of media engagement. Conflicts about how games are perceived were evident when kids talked about gender and gaming and in the larger proportion of boys who engaged in the more geeked out forms of gaming practice. In this chapter, we work to tease apart some of the specifics of how these general cultural valences play out in relation to specific game genres and genres of participation with gaming sociability and culture. Although certain core practices of recreational and geeked out gaming are strongly associated with the young, white male geek cultures that were foundational to early game practice, today we see a much more variegated palette of gaming practices. The overall statistics of an expanding gamer demographic need to be contextualized within highly differentiated forms of gaming activities. Our effort here is to specify some of these distinctions among different forms of game engagement.

When we examine gaming from the point of view of gamers and game practice, then a different set of learning issues comes into view. While we do not underestimate the relevance of the text, it is just one among a series of players in the ecological dance that results in complex social, cultural, and technical outcomes. For example, one of the most important outcomes of the practices that we call "recreational gaming" is the fact that young people develop social networks of technical expertise. The game has not *directly* and *explicitly* taught them technical skills, but game play has embedded young people in a set of practices and a cultural ecology that places a premium on technical acumen. This in turn is often tied to an identity as a technical expert that can serve a gamer in domains well beyond specific engagements with games. This is the kind of description of learning and "transfer" that a more ecological approach to gaming suggests.

We follow this approach through the body of this chapter by analyzing how gamers talk about their own investments in games in relation to the practices that they describe. In line with an ethnographic approach, we see culture and discourse as constitutive of everyday practice and vice versa. Taking gamer viewpoints and investments seriously on their own

terms challenges some of the arguments that both proponents and detractors of games bring to the table. While educational proponents of gaming suggest that games provide a motivational structure that will engage kids in more academic learning tasks, gamers talk about games as killing time and a waste of time and see value in precisely those properties of games that enable a certain state of distractedness. Even in the case of games that are difficult to learn and that require sustained investments of time, gamers often enjoy the practice because it is cut off from their everyday identities. It is a space to compete in and achieve in where there will not be consequential failure in real life. The appeal lies precisely in the fact that the game outcomes do not transfer to the real-life economies of academic achievement and playing the role of the good student, daughter, or son. The real-life social ecology of a kid's life has a powerfully determining effect on what kids get out of gaming. What they learn from gaming is not necessarily what is embedded in game content, nor what parents and educators hope and fear. In the description that follows, we outline genres of gaming practice that have emerged from our research to discuss the ways in which gaming, learning, participation, and identity are intertwined in kids' everyday play.

### Genres of Gaming Practice

Grounded in the previously described ecological approach to gaming, our genres of gaming are related to the genres of media participation (hanging out, messing around, and geeking out) that we outlined earlier. Rather than assume that game genres, platforms, or specific texts determine game play practice, we organize our description with different practices of play that emerged from our ethnographic material. These genres of practice correspond loosely to different genres of games, but they are *not* determined by game genre. For example, puzzle games are typical for the genre of game practice we describe as "killing time," but other games such as first-person shooters or side-scrollers on a Nintendo DS could also perform that social function. These different genres of gaming practice also are loosely correspondent with different social networks and genres of participation. Where killing time is a largely solitary activity, hanging out corresponds to our model of friendship-driven sociality. Recreational gaming is the most central practice of interest-driven peer-based gaming networks and is often

a site where we see messing around genres of participation. When we move to the genres of organizing and mobilizing, and the practices of augmented game play such as modding and machinima<sup>4</sup> making, we are moving into the domain of geeking out. While these groups also have a peer-based structure at the core of the practice, they are more differentiated than the practices of recreational or social gaming, and there is a clear demarcation between the core production community and those who use and access their work.

### **Killing Time**

Certain forms of gaming have long provided opportunities to fill small gaps in the day or longer stretches of waiting time. Tucking a crossword puzzle or word-search book into a commute bag, or getting out a deck of cards for solitaire, are all examples of the solitary, time-filling gaming that we are characterizing as “killing time.” These are the practices in which people engage with play and gaming to procrastinate or fill gaps in the day. With video games, it happens mostly through nomadic devices such as portable consoles (Nintendo DS, Sony PSP), mobile phones, and laptops. These practices also can happen in desktop situations, such as when someone takes a break from work to play a puzzle game on Miniclip. Games are often used while waiting for relevant things to happen, as fillers between more structured events. Although we found that a wide variety of kids engaged in killing-time forms of gaming, these practices tended to skew toward either younger or less experienced gamers, or for times when more sustained gaming was not an option. For example, Christo Sims notes that students at the video-production center where he, Judd Antin, and Dan Perkel observed are keen to engage in gaming activities during the short breaks between their lessons:

The Center was largely run like a hands-on class, with an adult instructor setting an agenda and directing the students in various video production exercises and activities. The kids had unstructured time before and after class as well as during a short break in the middle of each day’s session. During these free moments (maybe fifteen to twenty minutes long) many kids would get on one of the lab computers. While MySpace was a popular activity during this time, so too were casual games on sites like Miniclip as well as Flash games on websites for candy companies and other youth-targeted advertisers. (The Social Dynamics of Media Production)



The dominant discourse of this form of gaming is about boredom and filling time. Digital games are used to pass the time when traveling on a bus, car, or plane, or in other situations when there is little else to do. For instance, Nick, a sixteen-year-old black and Native American boy from Los Angeles who danah boyd (Teen Sociality in Networked Publics) interviewed, said, "If I'm bored, I play that little . . . it's a little rocket game where you shoot rocks. I play that. If I'm real bored and I really have nothing to do, that's what I do." Similarly, Natalie, an eleven-year-old white fifth grader Heather Horst interviewed as part of her study on Silicon Valley families, said: "I play with my Nintendo probably like a few times a week probably. . . . Mostly on the weekends, because sometimes my weekends are really busy, sometimes they're not, but when they're not busy, I get kinda bored, so I just play."

This genre of gaming also can be used as something to focus on in a social situation that a subject might find awkward. For instance, Monica, a Latina fourteen-year-old from Santa Rosa, California, who is part of Matteo Bittanti's "Game Play" study, said,

Often, when I am waiting for a friend [in a public space] to show up I start playing puzzle games on my phone, not because I particularly enjoy them, but because I don't like people staring at me. . . . In a sense, I am pretending to be busy, but it's easier to fake this than, let's say, a conversation.

Portable gaming can occupy gaps in the day when one is out and about. Another teen whom boyd spoke with, Luke, a sixteen-year-old from San Francisco, said: "I always carry a [Nintendo] DS with me. It's small enough so that it can fit in [one of the pockets of] my jacket, along with one or two games." In tandem with the evolution of portable media, gaming is starting to infiltrate more and more of the little gaps in everyday life.

These examples also illustrate another key feature of gaming as killing time: its solitary nature. Even when pursued in a social context, such as at the Center (The Social Dynamics of Media Production) or when inhabiting public space, killing time by gaming involves carving out a one-on-one space with the game. We see this in an example that Rachel Cody encountered in her study of *Final Fantasy XI*. When members of a group are "camping," or waiting for a monster to appear in a particular place, there are often long stretches of waiting time. At these times, players would often

open a new window to play a small Flash game, even while still occupying the shared social space in the multiplayer game. Although public discourse has tended to associate antisocial and solitary behavior with violent, graphically sophisticated games, we find that these forms of killing time gaming that are generally seen as “harmless” or “casual” were the ones that were most likely to be pursued as solitary activities. While we do not see these forms of gaming as sites of profound social activity or learning, they are part of the play, of the messing around with new media that are seamlessly integrated into kids’ everyday life rhythms.

### **Box 5.1 Neopets: Same Game, Different Meanings**

**Laura Robinson and Heather A. Horst**

Neopets<sup>5</sup> (see [www.neopets.com](http://www.neopets.com)) is a virtual pet website owned by Viacom that enables members to select, feed, and care for virtual pets. Reminiscent of Tamagotchi and Pokémon, Neopets’s members use a virtual currency called neopoints to buy food, pets, and toys for their pets; create shops and galleries; build and decorate houses; and acquire equipment to compete with other characters or play in the Battledome. The site is also host to more than 250 casual games, varying among 3D player games, Flash and Shockwave games, PHP games, and in-world quests.

Through a variety of activities, players and participants can explore the facets of “Neopia,” the virtual world where the pets live. Viacom emphasizes the creative play that can occur through these digital engagements, but in popular and academic circles (see Seiter 2005) Neopets continues to be criticized for its encouragement of capitalism, as exemplified through the salience of neopoints in facilitating participation in Neopia, the encouragement of commercial enterprises (e.g., creating shops), as well as gambling and playing the Neopets stock market (see box 7.5). Other critics focus on the immersive advertising and dislike the increasing availability of merchandise, such as “plushies” (stuffed animals resembling specific species of Neopets), as well as *Neopets* magazine, mobile-phone video games, screen savers, and breakfast cereal. Neopets’s parent company, Viacom, also takes advantage of its ownership of Nickelodeon, a popular kids’ television network in the United States, by marketing Neopets and its associated products to children during afternoon and Saturday-morning television shows. Although parents and others continue to be concerned about kids’ lack of awareness of the immersive advertising and capitalist ethos, most kids do not differentiate between the marketing in online spaces and the marketing that occurs in everyday life on television, billboards, and the array of electronic goods in contemporary homes.

While debates over the value of consumerism in gaming marketed to kids persist, our qualitative study of Neopets players suggests that Neopets is a highly flexible gaming site that allows kids (and adults) who play to adapt their engagement to their own interests and needs. For some players, it is all about the games. For others, interest and participation in Neopets is tied to the creative possibilities inherent in sites such as Neopets. For yet others, sociality is the key draw. For example, Mike, a seven-year-old who lives in an economically well-off and highly wired household in northern California, Neopets is about the thrill of the game. Mike was passionate about playing games online—any kind of game, from Neopets to Club Penguin. When asked why he liked Neopets, he made it clear that it was all about the games—not his pet, not creating a house, not any activity except playing games. Laura Robinson asked Mike, “Are you ever worried about your pet getting hungry or having treats?” Mike quickly answered negatively, “I don’t care about my pet at all. I just want to play the games!” When Mike tried to show Laura which games he liked to play, he attempted to open his site, but somehow he could not remember his password. He explained that he didn’t feel any connection with the Neopets he created. Rather, he only wanted to access the games. In fact Mike repeatedly created new accounts and even played under other people’s pets. His strategy was to earn points for all his friends in return for logging in at their homes.

By contrast, “newbie” Neopet player, Jackson, could not care less about playing the games. As Jackson, a nine-year-old from suburban northern California, explained, “I really like to make the pets. I even make new user names or let them die just so I can make more of them.” Jackson “loves” Neopets, but not for the reasons we might expect. For Jackson, Neopets is about the creative possibilities inherent in the creative act. Creating neopets, petpets, neohomes, and any other of the virtual venues or creatures is what drew Jackson to the game. This creative orientation was not surprising when one begins to understand that Jackson comes from a highly creative family. His parents and siblings all have artistic tendencies, although they take different forms: playing the guitar, dancing, and drawing. For Jackson, Neopets becomes an extension of his home world in which creativity is honed and valued.

Yet other Neopets players value the site for social connection. Mindy, a teenage female player from California, explained why she was invested in the site during high school: “I just loved playing it with my friends.” For Mindy, her Neopets experience was centered in sociality. Neopets was framed as a reason to go to a friend’s house, a reason to call a friend, or a reason to chat. Mindy’s introduction to the site was through a friend with whom Neopets became a conversation piece, a shared experience that further cemented their friendship. When Laura asked Mindy about her neopet, Mindy explained,

“Well, I didn’t really check on my pet all that much. You know, it was more about being with other people and playing Neopets with them.” As Mindy suggested, the social connection that Neopets allowed her to form with others was her key interest in the site. As with Max and Jackson, the breadth and flexibility of Neopets—be it playing games, being creative, or making and maintaining friendships—enabled Mindy to shape and customize her own engagements online.

In contrast to the genre of gaming we characterize as killing time, much of game practice centers on social activity of various forms. The genres that follow are all examples of different, more sociable forms of gaming. The first is how the hanging out genre of participation intersects with game practice.

### **Hanging Out**

The hanging out genre of participation happens when people engage with gaming in the process of spending time together socially. It is largely a form of friendship-driven sociability; while gaming is certainly important, it is not the central focus. Video games are part of the common pool, or repertoire, of games and activities that kids and adults can engage in while enjoying time together socially. Although games are usually considered occasions to compete around clear outcomes, this orientation can often be superseded by a more conversational or relaxed mode. Played this way, games are not inherently different from traditional board games. In a sense, they represent their electronic evolution. Like board games, hanging out forms of gaming were not as strongly gendered or age specific as the more geeked out forms of gaming that we examined; though boys were more likely to talk about gaming as a social focus, the hanging out genre of gaming represents a relatively democratic and accessible form of play.

As described in chapter 4, gaming can facilitate the interaction between peers but also between youth and adults. In fact, the family is one of the most common contexts for gaming as hanging out. In their detailed studies of game play in the home, Stevens, Satwicz, and McCarthy (2007) describe the settings in the home around the game console where siblings and playmates move fluidly in and out of game engagement with one another. This family gaming increasingly includes parents as well. A study con-

ducted by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) states that 35 percent of American parents say they play computer and video games. Among “gamer parents,” the ESA (2007) says, 80 percent report that they play video games with their children, and two thirds (66 percent) say that playing games has brought their families closer together. Hanging out genres of gaming enable people to bridge different forms of gaming expertise and to cross generational and gender divides. For instance, Steven, a twenty-one-year-old from Mountain View, California (Bittanti, *Game Play*), said,

At Christmas, I played this game called *Scene It?* for the Xbox 360 over [at] my girlfriend’s house. We played with her parents as well. . . . It’s a trivia game about the history of cinema and you use a big controller instead of a conventional joystick. It was fun. We got to sit down on the couch and play together, and we laughed at our mistakes and we had a really good time. I mean, I would not normally spend that much time with my girlfriend’s parents, you know? [laughs]

The more casual mode of this kind of gaming sociality facilitates game play by those outside the stereotypical gamer demographic. The Nintendo Wii is in many ways the emblematic platform for hanging out as a gaming practice. This console was specifically designed to reach a broader range of players. Another example is the increasing success of music titles such as *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero*. Games that tie into established forms of social bonding, such as music, dance, and sports, seem to invite this orientation. A fourteen-year-old white boy in Dan Perkel’s study “MySpace Profile Production” described his involvement in fantasy football and basketball leagues. He plays for about five minutes a day, though many of his friends are much more involved. He said that “it is hard to stay away from it.” When Dan asked for clarification, he explained: “If your friends are all talking about fantasy sports, naturally you’re going to want to be in their conversation so that’s basically why most people do it.” Even solitary puzzle games can take on a social hanging out quality when there are others around. In his observations at a video-production center, Dan Perkel (*The Social Dynamics of Media Production*) frequently observed kids playing games on sites such as *Miniclip* in the downtime between activities. They often would invite others in the vicinity to observe their game play and move in and out of social and solitary engagement with the games.

Hanging out gaming also includes online practices such as participating in social guilds in massively multiplayer online role-playing games

(MMORPGs), where players enjoy the social affordances constructed by the games. MMORPG players spend many hours logged in to the shared space of the game, and much of that time is occupied with casual hanging out, conversation, and activities such as bartering or exploring. The time spent actively pursuing game goals is only one part of what they do online. The time and space around the more goal-directed activities of gaming becomes a site for social conversation and sharing. In Dan Perkel and Sarita Yardi's study "Digital Photo-Elicitation with Kids," they spoke to a young RuneScape player, Iris, who was ten years old and of mixed race (white and black). She enjoyed hanging out on the site because of the social environment.

I like that you can play with a lot of people at the same time. It's like you have a normal life, and you get to talk to people. And it's not only one player; it's more than one player. And it's not that you're talking to an actual robot, but you're talking to actual people playing.

She said she will play with a friend of hers in the late afternoon when they both get home, but she will also talk to others she comes across in the game. The space of the online game becomes a hangout to meet her friends both offline and online.

In Rachel Cody's study of Final Fantasy XI, the core players of the "linkshell" (player guild) she was participating in would use a voice-chat program, Ventrilo (Vent), to stay in touch with their team constantly while they were at the computer. She talks with Ryukossei,<sup>6</sup> a nineteen-year-old Asian-American player.

**Rachel:** How did you like it?

**Ryukossei:** I loved it. That was a great linkshell, I thought. And, like, yeah, it was pretty fun. It was good times.

**Rachel:** Did you make any friends?

**Ryukossei:** Oh, yeah. Especially the people on Vent. If I didn't have Vent, I wouldn't be playing this game, like, seriously. . . .

**Rachel:** Yeah, Vent made it a lot less lonely, I thought.

As noted in Cody's box 5.3, Ryukossei describes how the "24/7" connection on Vent made his teammates feel like a family. While players in an MMOG may be attracted to the game play initially, they often end up staying because of the social dimensions of the game. As described in box 5.3, players will often cite the social hanging out dimensions as one of the primary reasons to stay with the game.

In describing the more friendship-driven side of hanging out forms of game play, players often explicitly disputed public perception that games were antisocial. We found this with some of our older players, who were often reflective of their game play and more aware of the stigma (Bittanti, *Game Play*). Louise, a twenty-eight-year-old from Vacaville, California, said, "Playing games can be a solo act, but when you involve friends and family you become more engaged in the play. I believe this represents our human need to be connected to others in a real-world environment." Frederick, a twenty-two-year-old from San Francisco, had a similar viewpoint:

Games are shown to be social tools that, in various ways, socially connect people of the current and previous generations. It's like parents reading their children the same bedtime stories that they themselves fell asleep to as a child. I don't see how anyone could argue with that.

The practices of hanging out around games have affinities with other social games such as golf, bowling, bridge, or mah-jongg, and this is in line with our general framework of friendship-driven participation. While there are highly competitive modes of engagement with these games, the more everyday forms of engagement tend to be driven by the social activity. Just as with more long-standing forms of gaming and play, electronic games are a focus of social activity between friends and family. Although the play mechanics of the game may involve competition and representations of violence, just as in the case of sports and games more broadly, the playful conflict becomes a source of social bonding. As genres of gaming such as casual sports games, rhythm games, and social online games expand, we can expect that more and more of young people's unstructured time together will be occupied by these experiences. In their recent study of violence and video gaming, Kutner and Olson (2008) suggest that kids who do not play video games at all are more likely to be socially marginalized than those who do play. The conversations we have had with gamers also support this finding; hanging out forms of gaming have become part of the everyday and commonplace practices of social play for youth.

### **Recreational Gaming**

While many people engage with games as a lightweight activity that fills dead time or is part of a social activity, for committed gamers competitive game play is more central to their orientation to the medium. This genre

of gaming, what we call “recreational gaming,” represents the core of what we think of as gaming practice: people gaming to game and getting together specifically to play games that require persistent engagement to master. If in the previous category gaming tends to be in the background, here it is in the foreground. Recreational gaming includes everyday in-home gaming, when kids are into a game, or play with friends or family. It can be both solitary and social. This form of engagement includes everyday offline gaming and dedicated services such as Xbox Live, where people enjoy playing online games such as first-person shooters and sports titles. As described in box 5.2 on first-person shooters, in recreational gaming, players can develop intense relationships to games. Unlike killing time and hanging out forms of gaming, with recreational gaming we see a stronger identification with the historically dominant gamer demographic—young males. We discuss these dimensions of gamer identity later in this chapter in the section on boundary work.

**Box 5.2 First-Person Play: Subjectivity, Gamer Code, and Doom**  
**Matteo Bittanti**

Kenny is a twenty-one-year-old from San Francisco who used to play games on a daily basis when he was younger, but who then reduced his game time when he started college. He is now saving money to buy an Xbox 360 because “the love of the game is just too strong.” He loves first-person shooters, a genre of game characterized by a subjective perspective that renders the virtual world from the point-of-view of the player character. According to Kenny, the “FPS embodies the quintessential traits of the medium.” I decided to reproduce with minimal editing his comments on Doom, the most celebrated FPS, because they contain many interesting points. Kenny discussed the game with a specific discursive style (note the emphasis on the pronoun “I” to describe his game play experience—“My first encounter with a pinky demon scared me shitless”—that does not happen, for instance, when somebody is retelling the plot of a movie or a novel); a clear understanding of what lies beneath the formal structure of the game (to describe the experience, Kenny uses adjectives such as “exhilarating” and “dumb,” [Doom] is very mechanistic and repetitious, and “simultaneously calls for civility, for rational thinking, and meticulous problem solving”); the morality code of the gamer (“I wouldn’t touch the strategy guide until I beat the game”); an assumed importance of expertise in discussing games (historical contextualization); and an intense emotional investment in game practices.



Doom is my favorite video game of all time. I own all of them and have played, to some extent, all of them with the exception of Resurrection of Evil and the Master Levels of Doom. It was simultaneously a triumph of technology as well as game play, serving as, arguably, one of the most influential games of all time. The greater half of big-name titles are all, in a sense, descendents of Doom: Bioshock, F.E.A.R., Stalker, Crysis. Pretty grotesque, but Doom III simultaneously calls for civility, for rational thinking, and meticulous problem solving. The problem solving goes much deeper than switch flipping, key finding, and dashing for the exit. Every enemy you encounter is a problem that needs to be solved. Doom III is easy, but you'd never guess that based on the imagery alone: shocking, intimidating, frightening. It plays on your irrational fears, expecting you to panic, to slip, to shoot wildly at nothing, but there is a logic to the game, a code, like every game. Doom teaches one to hunt, to compose oneself as a gentleman before and after war. One must supplant, or supersede, many of the atavistic urges Doom encourages in order to truly master the game.

In Gears of War, there is nothing more satisfying than dismembering your opponent with a [chain saw]. Charging headlong into the fray, your Lancer, growling hungrily for Locust intestines, held high above your head, is exhilarating. It's also dumb. There are rules of engagement. The shotty [shotgun] trumps the [chain saw], and the sniper trumps the shotty. And I love first-person shooters! My daily gaming diet consists solely of first-person shooters! I bought Doom III the day it was released, with the strategy guide and everything. I swore, like I always do, that I wouldn't touch the strategy guide until I beat the game, for a very special reason. Doom III is *huge* on atmosphere, and I'd be hard-pressed to find a game that does a better job of creating such frighteningly gorgeous environments. The use of sound is phenomenal, and the monsters are just oozing with gory details.

My first encounter with a pinky demon scared me shitless. Hell, my first encounter with an imp left me shaking. It's scary! Well . . . at least it is until the imp is eviscerated by one shotgun blast and all that remains of that pinky demon after two well-placed shots is an incongruous pile of gore. It's this knowledge that separates one from the game. That's why I didn't touch the strategy guide. If I knew how to kill an imp before our encounter, I would have never experienced that fear.

Recreational gaming is deeply social, but unlike in the hanging out genre of gaming, the game play itself is the impetus and focus for getting together. It is interest-driven rather than friendship-driven sociality that drives gatherings in this genre of play. For example, one of our interviewees described "DS Fridays," when kids meet weekly to play specific Nintendo DS games. Annie Manion (Anime Fans), in her interviews of anime fans who lived in college dorms, found an active gaming-centered social life among some of the students. One of her interviewees, Cara, described how there was a group who would get together to play Smash Bros., and group members would develop different techniques and specialties in playing different game characters. Another example is Halo parties, where gamers gather to "frag"<sup>7</sup> each other. MaxPower, a white fourteen-year-old in Christo Sims's

study in rural California (Rural and Urban Youth), described a local area network (LAN) party, involving networking computers with sixteen kids, that he was part of. The LAN was set up with four Xboxes and four TVs. “It was for five hours straight. After the second hour, I couldn’t take it anymore. I had to go out with me and my friend, Josh, just kind of went out and skateboarded a little bit while everybody was playing ‘cause my eyes started to hurt.” A white seventeen-year-old in Sims’s study, a self-described geek, said he is part of regular LAN parties with computers, where anywhere from six to fifteen kids will get together regularly to play.

Through recreational gaming, kids build social relationships that center on game-related interests and expertise. As part of her “Silicon Valley Families” study Heather Horst interviewed an avid gamer, a white twelve-year-old who described his immersion in game play together with a good friend:

**John Harker:** My friend and I, we just lived [in] each other’s houses alternating GameCube and PS2. Go over to a friend’s, like, Xbox. . . . We have all-nighter video-game parties and so it’s kind of pathetic but it’s a lot of fun. . . . My friend just got, like, he’s even more obsessed than I am. So he always gets games and I just go over to his house for the day and we’ll make stuff, eat it, bike, and play video games. . . . Watch movies.

**Heather:** It’s usually groups, like, how many of you can play, actually?

**John Harker:** I’ve had times when we have two TVs in the same room and we’re playing joint, eight-player Halo. . . . Which is awesome. . . . Halo 2 is just an incredible game.

**Heather:** Okay. So you’ve had . . . you can do all of that.

**John Harker:** Yeah, and a lot of the time I just go over, “hey Joey, you want to come over to my house?” and it’s just two people or something. And, well, say he’s losing—he’ll invite someone who’s even worse than him and then he’ll have someone to beat. So it just evolves like that.

As John Harker described, recreational gaming is a site of activity where more friendship-driven modes of gaming move fluidly into messing around and geeking out. As a genre of play, recreational gaming is compelling because kids can engage flexibly in these different modes of participation and learning. Like other more geeky, interest-driven pursuits, gaming differs from extracurricular activities that have higher status in mainstream teen sociality, particularly sports. At the same time, gaming is becoming a

pervasive social activity among boys, so gaming virtuosity does provide some peer status as well as an important vehicle for social bonding. Gaming practices provide a focus for the development of identities of expertise, performance, and virtuosity—an arena of practice that differs from the demands placed on youth for academic performance. These are extra-curricular spaces where kids can achieve in contexts that are detached from the high-stakes performance required of them in school, and where failure is not as consequential. They can frag and respawn repeatedly or change games and in-game identities if they do not like the path they have been on.

Another important dimension of recreational gaming is that the social relationships and knowledge networks that kids develop often become a pathway to other forms of technical and media-related learning. This chapter's opening discussion of Earendil is an example of how gaming became a focus of a certain trajectory of participation into different forms of media practices and literacies. Earendil's gaming interests became a focus of sociability and play in his childhood and early teen years, and in college his gamer friends introduced him to anime and to various other online activities. Gaming provided an initial focus for an interest-driven social group that became a friendship group supporting the development of technical and media-related expertise more generally. Similarly, in Katynka Martínez's "High School Computer Club" study, she noted that most of the boys associated with the club are avid gamers. After the computers in the lab became networked (in a moment they called "The Renaissance"), the boys would show up during lunch and even their fifteen-minute nutrition breaks to play Halo and Counter-Strike against one another. Again, this is an example of gaming providing a social focus for kids with broader technology- and media-related interests. As with other forms of interest-driven practice that we examine in this book, these are contexts that exhibit peer-based learning and knowledge sharing that are driven forward by the motivations of kids themselves. These dimensions of peer-based learning and the honing of expertise become even more pronounced when we turn to some of the genres to follow, such as organizing and mobilizing and augmented game play. These learning outcomes of recreational gaming call attention to the social and technological contexts of gaming practice rather than focusing exclusively on the question of the transfer of game content to behavior and cognition.

### Organizing and Mobilizing

Gamers who are highly invested in their play will often become involved in more structured kinds of social arrangements, such as guilds, teams, clans, clubs, and organized social groups that revolve specifically around gaming. We refer to this as “organizing and mobilizing” practices in which the social dimensions of gaming become more formalized and structured and more identified with geeking out than with messing around. This is where we see the politicians and warlords of the gaming universe and the people they organize, collaborate with, and lead. Organized and mobilized forms of gaming are core to the practices of traditional sports as well as to games such as Dungeons & Dragons that became popular in the 1970s and 1980s. Electronic games as they became networked in the past decade have become a new site for organized forms of gaming and high-stakes competition. Gamers in networked systems can keep track of in-game skills, “gamerscores,” records, reputation, experience points, and so on in international game networks. Services such as Xbox Live and the PlayStation Network are specifically designed to facilitate agonistic forms of playing in a particularly competitive environment based on a specific form of meritocracy: gaming skills. Online role-playing games enable players to organize guilds with formalized leadership and specialized roles and responsibilities. This genre of participation requires various degrees of commitment not only in terms of time and competency but also in terms of resources and economic capital, as gaming equipment (hardware, software, and services) are generally more expensive than other forms of mediated entertainment.

For the most dedicated players, competitive gaming might represent an evolution of recreational gaming, or they may engage in both genres of gaming. In a few cases, the passion for gaming can evolve into a profession. Consider, for instance, the rise of gaming as e-sport—electronic sports, or the play of video games as a professional sport—in countries such as South Korea as well as the United States and Scandinavia. “My hero is Lil Poison,” said Grant, a twenty-two-year-old avid gamer from Sunnyvale, California, referring to Victor M. De Leon III, the world’s youngest known professional video game player (Bittanti, *Game Play*). “His skills are incredible for a nine-year-old! I watch his videos online and I find them amazing.” While recreational gaming is practiced by youth who have a variety of interests and hobbies, these mobilized practices are specific to a group of teenagers

and young adults who often openly call themselves “gamers.” The social identity fostered in tight-knit gaming groups leads to a stronger identification with gamer identity.

While gaming as hanging out or recreation takes place mostly in the private sphere (homes), mobilizing often requires dedicated spaces such as an Internet café, which can provide fast Internet connections and powerful computers. Mobilized gaming, like many other forms of geeking out, requires more specialized technical resources and social networks as well as the time and space to dedicate oneself to a serious hobby. We can see this in the difference in scale of various LAN parties, which we describe in this chapter’s section on recreational gaming. Parties can vary in size from a small group of friends to large, more formal gatherings. Small parties can form spontaneously, but large ones usually require a fair amount of planning and preparation on the part of the organizer. Because of the size of these events, most require renting a conference room in a hotel or in a convention center (for a study of LAN parties, see Jansz and Martens 2005).

In his study (Team Play) of a group of middle-school boys (aged thirteen to fourteen) who were regulars in an Internet café in the San Francisco Bay Area, Arthur Law describes different social configurations among gamers. One group of boys went to the café to play the strategy game, Warcraft, on their own, and another group went to the café to play Counter-Strike as a clan. Both of these modes of game play are networked and social. Law describes how two of the Warcraft players go the café to play with a set of gamer friends with whom they keep in touch online. Patrick, in particular, is a competitive gamer who keeps close track of his ranking on Battle.net, a system that keeps track of Warcraft player statistics across the country. Law writes:

Both Patrick and Zachary organize their games outside of Warcraft. Patrick is an avid user of AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) and usually connects with his friends over AIM to get them to play a game. His contact list has more than two hundred people and about half of them play Warcraft. Patrick’s family moved from Southern California a year ago and he keeps in touch with his friends online through AIM. He never gets to see any of them anymore so Warcraft is one way of hanging out with his friends online. There are a number of people from his school who were international students who have moved back to their home countries and their group routinely meets online to chat about what they’re doing or just to play a few games.

The Counter-Strike players in Law's study are a group of friends who regularly come to the café together and identify as a clan. They use their clan name in their online handles. This group also has a lightweight sense of leadership in the group, where Shawn is recognized as the most experienced player. As is typical with team sports and game play, this leadership is under constant renegotiation. Law describes an instance of play when Shawn won the first round and was advising the remaining players on strategy. "Both teams ignored the advice," Law notes, and suffered as a result.

### **Box 5.3 Learning and Collaborating in Final Fantasy XI**

#### **Rachel Cody**

Final Fantasy XI (FFXI) is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) developed by Square Enix as a part of the Final Fantasy series. Although the game is not tied to the other Final Fantasy games, it shares the graphical, character, and narrative style of many of the other games, providing a major draw for players who enjoyed those games.

The game was released in Japan in 2002 and brought to North America in the fall of 2003. It can be played on four platforms: PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC. In 2006, there were approximately 500,000 subscribers to FFXI (Woodard/Gamasutra 2006). FFXI offers many of the same activities of other MMORPGs. Players are able to advance themselves through levels by killing monsters for points. Players can complete missions for their nation to advance in a ranking system, and there are dozens of quests to complete in all cities and towns. Additionally, FFXI offers players a crafting system, through which they can create their own food, clothes, or weapons to use or sell. Monsters that are extremely difficult to defeat offer players a challenge, competition, and rare and valuable gear. And for those who want to try their skills against other players, Ballista offers players the chance to form teams and compete against one another in games.

Most of all, FFXI is a social game. Players often join to be with their friends and develop long-lasting relationships throughout their time in the game. For example, Kalipea, a twenty-year-old white player in Ontario, Canada, started playing the game after visiting her friend:

Well, I was at my friend's house, and she had just got it and I used to play video games all the time when I was younger. But then I never played like an online one at all. . . . It looked kind of cool and then she got the online one and said, "Oh here, go on here." And I made a trial character and I tried it out—ended up playing for like twelve hours straight.

After Kalipea got into the game, she would go over to her friend's house so they could play together, a practice that is not uncommon for players who are friends outside the game and live near each other. Kalipea described playing with her friend:

Yep. I played with her. At first we hung out a lot because she was showing me how to work around stuff. Like we both lived in the same city at the time, and I would go to her house and even like bring my computer over there and we'd have like all-night gaming sessions, just playing and hanging out. And we'd go to like the twenty-four-hour grocery store and get all this food and sit in front of the computers and eat junk food.

Within the game, players form groups, chat with one another via private messages or in-game mail, and join linkshells. The game is built to be social; from leveling to questing to crafting, people need one another to progress through the game. Scott, a twenty-five-year-old white male in Washington State, describes the necessity of playing with other people:

Because you have to rely on so many, you're just . . . you're so limited on what you can do solo that you have to rely on other people. And if you have to rely on other people you might as well do it with people you like. And I think that's . . . it's just a very interconnected play, 'cause you have to have people you know.

Players who prefer casual, individual play, and players who do not get along with others are weeded out of the game early since lengthy parties are necessary for play and reputations (and thus party invites) are dependent on a player's ability to interact successfully with party members. Communities are also a major determinant in what players do in the game, how they play, and what they desire in the game. Players learn from one another where to go in order to level, what gear to wear, and their roles within parties during leveling or killing a monster. And players who fail to align their social interactions, play style, gear, and roles to the community norms risk being cast out of a party, removed from a linkshell, or ostracized or mocked by the community at large.

Players need one another to succeed in the game, but they play with one another because that is what they enjoy. People often log in to the game looking forward to hanging out with their friends. Chat fills the lengthy downtime while players look for a party to play with, between monster fights, while waiting for monsters to spawn, and during lengthy fights. Even when the game's activities are no longer fun, people often continue playing because of their friends. Wurlpin, a twenty-six-year-old white male in San Diego who had played the game for two years, described the relationships:

You will play with these guys eight, nine, ten hours in a day sometimes, all week and in wee hours of the morning so they kind of become your family so to speak, or your group of friends that you hang out with. It is your way of hanging out with them,

so, leaving that is kind of hard. And the only reason I pretty much stayed was for the people.

Ryukossei, a nineteen-year-old Asian-American in Illinois who played the game for more than two years, also commented on the strong bonds formed within the game:

Yeah, especially because we had Vent on twenty-four/seven, every time we logged on and stuff. We kind of got attached, you might say. And when someone quit, it would be really hard for them. I mean, you hung out with them. It's like a family pretty much. I mean, you're there with them the whole day and stuff like that.

Scott pointed out that the people make all the frustrations of the game worthwhile when he described an early experience in the game:

You have to go down there [to a dragon] and it takes a long time to get there, and we had like—I mean, it was the most frustrating thing we ever did. But afterwards we just couldn't help but laugh, 'cause it was this stupid dragon that killed us all, and I mean, at least five times. . . . And we were running out of time because each of us had been risen once at least, and already died, and so our timers were running out. And oh, it was just the quintessential just, us-against-the-world type of thing.

Sometimes, players spend more time with their friends within the game than they do with their friends (or even families!) outside the game. They check the websites and forums during their breaks at school to keep updated on their friends' activities and eagerly log in to the game as soon as they get home. Players often sacrifice sleep, staying up long into the night to have another adventure with their friends. The communities and relationships forged within the game extend beyond its boundaries into websites, forums, guides, instant messenger programs, emails, and even phone calls or text messages. Linkshells, especially endgame linkshells, often have dedicated websites where their members chat about in-game adventures, their homework, personal problems, or just joke around. Sites such as [KillingFfrit.com](http://KillingFfrit.com) and [ffxi.allakhazam.com](http://ffxi.allakhazam.com) allow players to chat with one another beyond the bounds of the linkshell or their server. Forums on these sites are filled with players asking questions about crafts or quests, debating the best gear or role of different jobs, proudly telling of their most recent accomplishments, or talking about the latest drama between players or linkshells. The websites and forums become extensions of the game by providing a large community of support, advice, and socializing that players often rely on and enjoy.

Final Fantasy XI players are embedded in a rich social atmosphere where relationships and communities are forged and fostered. It is the social components of the game that often motivate players to log in and support their success. The extended communities that reach beyond the game into websites, forums, instant messenger programs, and phone calls help strengthen these relationships and influence players' experiences and success within the game. The players often play for the people.



The issue of leadership and team organization was a topic that was central to Rachel Cody's study of Final Fantasy XI (FFXI). Cody spent seven months participant-observing in a high-level "linkshell," or guild. Although many purely social linkshells do populate FFXI, Cody's linkshell was an "endgame" linkshell, meaning that the group aimed to defeat the high-level monsters in the game. The linkshell was organized in a hierarchical system, with a leader and officers who had decision-making authority, and new members needed to be approved by the officers. Often the process of joining a linkshell involved a formal application and interview. The linkshell would organize "camps" where sometimes more than 150 people would wait for a high-level monster to appear and then attack with a well-planned battle strategy. Cody writes:

One of the important things about these camps was that linkshell members behaved professionally and in line with a linkshell's expectation of conduct. Enki,<sup>8</sup> the head of the linkshell, was known for reprimanding or even kicking people from the linkshell for unsportsmanlike behavior during camp, spamming the linkshell during "focus" time, or making a fairly big mistake during the actual killing of an HNM.<sup>9</sup> Even without Enki's reprimanding people, linkshell members placed a good deal of pressure on themselves to be "perfect" at these camps and not make mistakes. They realize that their behavior is a reflection on themselves and their linkshell mates. While they had a good deal of fun between focus windows, these were high-stress times demonstrated by the constant drama that occurred.

Just as in the case of some of the practices described in chapters 6 and 7, the activities of Cody's linkshell move beyond the playful toward more serious and worklike arrangements where participants are accountable to the expectations of a team. Gaming becomes a site of organizing collective action, which can vary from the more lightweight arrangements of kids getting together to play competitively to the more formal arrangements that we see in a group such as Cody's linkshell.

In all these cases, players are engaging in a complex social organization that operates under different sets of hierarchies and politics than those that occupy them in the offline world. At the same time, the dispositions and social learning that kids pick up in gaming are not completely cut off from their real-life learning. Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown (2007) explore this dynamic in their discussion of "Why Virtual Worlds Can Matter." They suggest the notion of "conceptual blending," in which players blend their understandings of online and offline. "The dispositions being developed in World of Warcraft are not being created in the virtual

and then being moved to the physical, they are being created in both equally” (15). They conclude: “These players are learning to create new dispositions within networked worlds and environments which are well suited to effective communication, problem solving, and social interaction” (17).

Following from Thomas and Brown, we also believe that the important learning outcomes of mobilized gaming cannot be reduced to an issue of transfer of knowledge or skills. Knowledge, competence, and dispositions are developed in the contexts of intense collective social commitments. These commitments can be so strong that they compromise commitments to other social groups and activities, whether they are family, offline friends, or school. At the same time, it is important to recognize that these forms of gaming represent opportunities to experience collective action and to exercise agency and political will. This genre of game play involves jockeying for power, status, and success within competitive game play with others with whom one is deeply connected. As Thomas and Brown suggest, these forms of collective action in gaming worlds can function as training grounds for collaborative forms of work and social action.

### **Augmented Game Play**

As games get more complex, and gaming culture gets broader and deeper, players increasingly engage with a wide range of practices that relate to knowledge seeking and cultural production through games. We call this genre of gaming “augmented game play”—engagement with the wide range of secondary productions that are part of the knowledge networks surrounding game play. These include cheats, fan sites, modifications, hacks, walk-throughs, game guides, and various websites, blogs, and wikis. In her book on cheating in video games, Mia Consalvo (2007) suggests a notion of “gaming capital” to understand the broader cultural context in which gaming knowledge and expertise are negotiated. She positions the development of various cheats and cheat codes in games as part of a much longer history in the “paratexts” surrounding gaming—texts that help gamers gain knowledge and interpret the culture of games. In our genres of game play, cheating and engaging with these paratexts is part of what we consider “augmented game play,” the engagement with the peripheral and secondary texts made about and with games. Paratexts, in the form of game magazines, have been part of gaming since the early years of

console gaming. As the gaming community has moved to the Internet, the volume of secondary production and information related to gaming has expanded exponentially, as has the social organization of online gaming communities. The advent of accessible video-editing tools has also created new forms of player-generated content such as machinima and video-based game walk-throughs. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve into details of the world of player-generated content (see for example Hertz 2002; Lowood 2007), we would like to describe some of how young people engage in these augmented game play practices, both as creators and consumers of player-created content and knowledge.

Most players engage with augmented game play as consumers of the work of other players or of the cheats and modifications embedded in games by the developers. In our work, we did not encounter any kids who created their own cheat codes or walk-throughs, but we do have indications that access to cheats and other secondary gaming texts was common among kids. In Lisa Tripp and Becky Herr-Stephenson's study of Los Angeles immigrant families (Los Angeles Middle Schools), Herr-Stephenson had the opportunity to see how cheat codes operated in the everyday game play of Andres, a twelve-year-old Mexican American. In her field notes she writes,

Andrew picks up his controller and pulls a sheet of folded notebook paper from his pocket. On the paper are written about a half dozen cheat codes for the game. He glances at it and decides that he first needs to "get the cops off [his] back." This code he knows by heart and he enters the series of keystrokes that make his character invisible to the police officers in the game. Then, he tries the new code and is excited when his bank balance jumps up about \$1,000. Then, he jumps in a car and takes off. When he crashes that car, he jumps out and quickly enters a string of keystrokes from memory. The car is instantly restored to perfect condition. I ask him how he learned the codes he has memorized and where he got the list of new codes. He tells me that there are some older kids who live in his apartment complex who give him the codes. He also has two older cousins (high-school age) who play the game and have given him some of the codes. When I ask if he thinks using the codes is cheating, he looks confused. I don't think he's ever thought about it as cheating (despite calling them "cheat codes") and instead just thinks that such codes are a normal part of game play.

What is interesting about this case is the degree to which cheat codes have been integrated as a commonsensical part of game play and have found their way into the hands of a player who does not have access to the

Internet as a way of easily accessing this kind of information. Cheat codes are a kind of gaming capital that circulates among game players in a peer-to-peer fashion and that is now an established part of the social and cultural economy of gaming.

Consalvo (2007) describes a wide range of attitudes that players have regarding what constitutes a cheat, and what an appropriate way of using cheats is. We saw similar diversity in our work. Players all realized that there were ways to work around the formal constraints of the game by using augmented and external game resources. Opinions varied as to whether players liked to use cheat codes or to what extent they should rely on strategy guides and walk-throughs. For some players, simply using strategy and hint guides constitutes “cheating” in a game. Peter, a thirteen-year-old from San Bruno, California, said,

When I play games on my PlayStation 2 I usually look for strategy hints and guides on sites like GameFAQs, but I only use them when I cannot kill a particular monster or I am stuck somewhere. I mean, I know that this is a kind of cheating, but when the game becomes too frustrating or long, I feel that I need to move on. (Bittanti, *Game Play*)

While Peter thought that it is a kind of cheating to look at a strategy guide when he is trying to beat a game on his own, he also enjoyed engaging with cheats as a playful activity in its own right. “Sometimes I look for cheats not to beat the game but to fool around and do funny things.” Cheats are the quintessential form of messing around that has accompanied electronic gaming since the early years in the 1980s. Today, these forms of messing around are a well-established part of gaming culture for kids, and processes of subverting the official rules of a game are commonplace.

Another dimension of augmented game play is the customization and modding of games. In the early years of gaming, the ability to do player-level modifications was minimal for most games, unless one were a gamer hacker and coder, or it was a simulation game that was specifically designed for user authoring. Today, many games come with the ability to create a custom avatar and customize the game experience, and some players see these capabilities as one of the primary attractions of the game. Games such as Pokémon or Neopets are designed specifically to allow user authoring and customization of the player experience in the form of personal collections of unique pets (Ito 2008b). This kind of customization

activity is an entry point into messing around with game content and parameters.

In Laura Robinson and Heather Horst's study of Neopets, one of Horst's interviewees (Asian-American twelve-year-old) described the pleasures of designing and arranging homes in Neopets and Millsberry Farms. She did not want to have to bother with playing games to accrue Neopoints to make her Neohome and instead preferred the Millsberry Farm site, where it was easier to get money to build and customize a home. "Yeah, you get points easier and get money to buy the house easily. And I like to do interior design. And so I like to arrange my house and since they have, like, all of this natural stuff, you can make a garden. They have water and you can add water in your house." Similarly, Emily, a twenty-one-year-old from San Francisco, told Bittanti (Game Play): "I played *The Sims* and built several Wii Miis. I like to personalize things, from my playlists to my games. The only problem is that after I build my characters I have no interest in playing them, and so I walk away from the game." Kenny, a twenty-one-year-old from San Francisco, described messing around with the editing tools in different strategy games:

I remember, when I was younger, the editing tools that came with *StarCraft* and all the hours I would spend crafting campaigns and single-player missions, or the multiplayer maps I would develop for *Command and Conquer: Red Alert* for my friends and I to play on. Oftentimes I spent more time outside of the game, crafting my own complex story lines and campaigns than playing the actual game itself.

With players such as Kenny, who are messing around with modding outside the parameters predetermined by the designers, augmented game play can turn toward more geeked out activities. Rather than working within the parameters of the game, as in the case of building a neohome or a home in *The Sims*, more geeked out game customization means actually hacking and rewriting the rules or creating secondary productions that are outside the sanctioned game space. These activities are tied to much more specialized forms of technical knowledge. For example, one of the participants in Patricia Lange's YouTube and video bloggers study is a white eighteen-year-old who is involved in the MUD and MUSH<sup>10</sup> gaming communities. Although he learned Java in high school, he says he learned C++ and C through his modding activities. Box 5.4 gives another example of a player highly committed to the creative side of augmented gaming. As described in chapter 6, these kinds of secondary productions can become

intensely consumed within some circuits that rely on specialized forms of production knowledge that are outside the kind of gaming expertise centered on game play itself. Even within the technical communities of video making, machinima makers are a highly specialized lot. Not only does the making of the videos require intimate knowledge of game mechanics and video editing but also the content of the videos often references highly esoteric details. One of Dan Perkel's interviewees (MySpace Profile Production), Aaron, a fourteen-year-old white Armenian male, was involved in the production of machinima for *Battlefield*. He is part of a community that specializes in filming stunts in the game. Each video generally involves about twenty people. Although it used to be easier to get into the group, he says that now new applicants have to have "a talent" such as video editing or using Photoshop. Playing *Battlefield* and participating in his machinima got him interested in digital production and other artistic hobbies he is involved in.

#### **Box 5.4 Machinima: From Learners to Producers**

##### **Matteo Bittanti**

Tom is a twenty-year-old machinima maker who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. His family is originally from Boston, and both his parents are educators. "I have always been fascinated by visual media," Tom said, "and machinima offered me the perfect opportunity to combine my two greatest passions, cinema and video games." He elaborated: "When I was a kid, I was blown away by *Star Wars*. It was, for me, a true epiphany. After watching it, I decided I would become a filmmaker. . . . Then I discovered video games, which I consider cinema's natural progression." "Machinima" is a term used to describe animated films created using game engines and game play footage. In 2006, Tom spent approximately eight months ("from beginning to the end") working on an ambitious film that re-created one of Julius Caesar's most famous battles. "It was much harder than I thought," confessed Tom, "also because it was my freshman year in college and I was taking many classes."

He worked an average of two hours per day, seven days a week. "I could not devote more time to 'the cause' because I was studying at the same time and I did not want to compromise my grades." School has never been a problem for Tom. "I love studying but also doing side projects that are tangentially related to the things I like." What he likes most about these "side projects" is that they allow him to be "in complete control": "I also felt that

working on something so complex like a movie could have helped me to learn not only new skills but also about myself." Tom never talked about video games in terms of "gamer guilt": "I never felt that playing a game was not culturally valid: I really don't see any difference in watching a movie and playing a game. They could be both very enriching experiences." However, Tom is not a fan of television. "*That* does feel like a waste of time." In his media hierarchy, television is at the bottom because "it is so dumb" and "never really asks the viewer to do any effort." Machinima making, on the contrary, was intensely creative.

To describe the process, Tom frequently used words such as "persistence," "perseverance," and "tenacity." "I have never felt that I was going to quit, but I must admit that I underestimated the time and effort that it takes to make something *good*." Tom's biggest fear was to be perceived as "the lazy kid," "the flaky one," somebody "who cannot finish what he started." When he first announced to his friends that he was making an animated movie using video games, he felt that "bailing out of the project would have been catastrophic [laughs]." What drove him to complete his film was "a mixture of ego, stubbornness, and excitement." He added: "I kept telling myself: *Don't give up on me, don't give up on me*." Tom is fascinated by the Roman Empire (some of his favorite books are *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* series by Edward Gibbon) and he was surprised to see that very few games focus on this particular historical period. "There are millions of titles set in the future, like *Halo*, or during World War II, like the *Call of Duty* series, but almost nothing on the ancient Rome."

To re-create historical battles, Tom resorted to *Total War*, a very popular strategy game for the PC. It was an unusual choice for a machinima: in fact, most authors use first-person shooters or simulations such as *The Sims*. Tom wrote the script in two days, but he faced a daunting task. He needed to obtain the necessary game footage to construct a long and complex story. While most machinima last a few minutes, his intention was to create a one-hour film, quite an ambitious goal for a first-time effort. Producing a machinima requires technical and social skills: One, one has to collect the appropriate footage from a game. Such content needs to be edited. Convincing dialogues and/or proper subtitles need to be added. The implications are twofold. First, creating a machinima is much more complex than just "playing a game"—the gamer becomes a director. The implication or prerequisite is that the creator needs to understand the language and conventions of cinema as well as the inner workings of a video game. He also assumes the role of a skilled technician able to master sophisticated applications such as *Final Cut Pro* or *Vegas*. But personal expertise is not enough. Second, after he collects all the raw material, the production process becomes intensively

collaborative, since each character of the game speaks with the voice of a different human being. “Machinima is a bit like puppeteering: There is always somebody pulling the strings of a doll. There is always a real person behind the simulation.”

Tom recruited his roommate and his friends to play the roles of the different Roman soldiers. “Coordinating and managing ten, twelve people at the same time was not easy, but that helped me to grasp the complexity and nuances of teamwork.” The result of Tom’s efforts is a forty-minute animated film (“the director’s cut,” as he called it) that has been freely distributed online. Some loved the movie; others accused it of being “Too Hollywood-ish.”

I received many letters of support, but others, inevitably, disagreed, and wrote harsh comments on my Internet Archive page. It felt I had to respond, to defend “my baby,” you know. Now I would not probably do it; I would just let the film speak for itself, but discussing my intentions with other readers helped me to understand more about my creative process even though I still oppose their ideas of what machinima is or should be.

Tom thought that such creative production was “empowering” and “overall, fun.” “It’s the feeling of deep satisfaction that you get when you build something from scratch.”

When suggested to Tom that machinima is comparable to a remix practice, a bricolage—since most of the content is already available—he disagreed: “The process required to transform game play into a coherent narrative is an act of creation in itself. It’s not just a matter of reassembling what’s out there. And that happens in games because game play has a potential for infinite innovation.” Tom is now working on a new machinima. “I’ve learned so much from my previous experience,” he said, “and now the production process has become smoother and faster. I started with a complete storyboard this time and created parts for specific people that I had in mind. In a sense, the infrastructure is now already in place.” I asked him if he thought that the skills he had learned with machinima could be transferred to other contexts. “Absolutely! To create a machinima I had to learn editing, sculpting, but also I had to learn how to manage people and cooperate with them efficiently. It was both a personal project and a collective effort.”

He quickly added: “The funny thing is that now I can’t watch movies like I used to do before, you know, naively. . . . I am aware of the camera, the angles, the cuts. . . . I imagine myself reediting the films as I watch them.” Tom plans to move to Hollywood after graduating to fulfill his dream of becoming a film director. “I did an internship last summer in a Los Angeles studio. It was exciting. This is the direction I intend to take after I’m done with school.”



Tom's case shows how video games can become tools of production for students eager to combine the literary (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* series) and the visual (film). Rather than being alternative to traditional learning practices, digital games can become complementary and enriching educational experiences: the pedagogic values of such practices lie not only in the information apprehended but also (especially) in the technical, social, and personal domains that they entail. Above all, creating a machinima allowed Tom to be apprentice and producer, learner and circulator of meanings.

The activities of augmented gaming are highly varied, and in comparison to the other genres of gaming practice we describe, are a less clearly defined category of practice. We have included practices varying from game-strategy guides to secondary fan productions, cheats, and customization. What is common throughout all these practices is an orientation that points outward from the competitive practices of game play toward engaging more broadly with gaming culture. In her study of Yu-Gi-Oh! play, Mizuko Ito (2008b) suggests that these practices of personalizing games and engaging with the viral knowledge exchange surrounding games are key sites of learning and "hypersocial" exchange. Through games, kids engage in sophisticated forms of knowledge exchange in a context where they are personally invested and identified. This is not about a generic position of spectatorship but rather an active subjectivity where gamers can acquire unique, esoteric knowledge tailored to their interests, and develop their own custom content as part of this engagement. This kind of relationship to media content is a quality that has been present in fandoms surrounding traditional media, but it is much more pervasive in interactive media formats. This orientation toward remaking and customizing media is in many ways a hallmark of the digital era and a key training ground for learning critical engagement with media; it is also a pathway into various forms of creative production, which we describe in chapter 6.

### Flows and Boundaries of Gaming

Gaming has been at the center of ongoing cultural debate over what are appropriate forms of media for kids. A substantial part of this debate has included discussions of age and gender appropriateness. In our discussions

with parents and gamers, we have found a range of perspectives on boundaries of game play, how kids should move in and out of game engagement, and what kinds of identities kids formed with games. This is the cultural context in which the practices of game-related learning and development unfold. Before we conclude this chapter, this section reflects on the genres of gaming practice we have analyzed to consider the broader social and cultural contexts that frame game play and how kids move in and out of participation with gaming and particular game genres.

### **Boundary Work and Gamer Identity**

Throughout our discussion of gaming genres, we touch on issues of gamer identity, particularly how gamer identities intersect with gender and geek identities. This identity work differs depending on what forms of gaming practices are at play. While killing time and hanging out forms of gaming tend to have more inclusive identity profiles, recreational gaming and more mobilized forms of gaming tend to be more exclusionary and strongly associated with male geek identity. Within the genre of practice that we have called augmented game play, the practices associated with aesthetics and design tend to be gendered female, while those relying more heavily on technical expertise tend to be gendered male. These gender dynamics are not surprising given our existing knowledge about gender and games (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Kafai et al. 2008). To understand how these broader structural distinctions and divisions are produced, we need to understand how they emerge through different forms of play and talk.

Producing particular forms of gamer identities is a form of “boundary work.” Almost without exception, kids we spoke to engaged in some forms of gaming, but they have well-developed discourses for distinguishing different kinds of game play identities. Players who engaged in the killing time and hanging out genres of gaming often described their enjoyment of games, but they do not move beyond these more casual forms of gaming. These forms of gaming are considered everyday, unremarkable activities that are part of using computers and entertainment centers, and they were the most pervasive forms of game play that we encountered. The boundary work of creating gamer identity involves constructing boundaries between gamers and nongamers, and kids who engage in killing time practices are not generally considered “gamers.” Among boys, certain genres of gaming were ubiquitous and socially acceptable. These genres included sports games and FPS games such as Counter-Strike and

Halo. Among girls, the dominant social norm was that it was not socially acceptable to be identified as a gamer. In danah boyd's study (*Teen Sociality in Networked Publics*), she interviewed two kids who talked about some of the gender dynamics around gaming. Catalina, a white fifteen-year-old from Texas, and Jordan, a Mexican American, also fifteen and from Texas, do not really play video games, but Jordan would love to get a PlayStation 3 because she thinks that *Dance Dance Revolution (DDR)* looks fun.

**Catalina:** Occasionally, I play with my brother just like one game once a month but that's it.

**danah:** Does he play a lot more than you do?

**Catalina:** Every day.

**Jordan:** He's a boy.

**danah:** Why do you say he's a boy?

**Jordan:** I don't know any girls that play video games.

**Catalina:** I know a few that do.

**Jordan:** Really? Not like a lot, though.

**Catalina:** It's stereotypical but . . .

**Jordan:** Yeah, but it's kind of true.

**Catalina:** It's really very stereotype but it is true for the most part.

**Jordan:** They're all like war games, a lot of them. Like I don't care to play . . .

**Catalina:** Yeah, the girls I know that play video games don't play war games and stuff.

**Jordan:** *DDR*, *Mario Kart*, and stuff like. Like Rachel will play video games sometimes.

Catalina spells out the cultural assumptions about gaming in their friendship group. Although girls might play some of the genres of gaming associated with hanging out genres, the genres associated with recreational gaming tend to be associated with boys. These distinctions are played out in the everyday kinds of boundary work that kids are engaged in. Dan Perkel (*The Social Dynamics of Media Production*) spoke with Shantel, an African-American high schooler, who told him a story of how she was relegated to the margins of boy game play:

Shantel spent the weekend with her cousins, "all boys!" She said that all they do is play video games. I asked her if she got a chance to play. She told me about a trick they played on her. They gave her the controller and didn't really tell her how to play. And then when she scored they got all excited for her. But, it turns out, the

other boy was playing against the computer and Shantel wasn't controlling anything. She looked mad when she told this story, or at least frustrated, because she really did want to play. I asked her if she ever did get to play and she said that she did. She said that it was hard to figure out the controls (well, she said something about all of those buttons and that she didn't know what to do). But when she said that she scored two touchdowns, she was smiling.

Gamers of the recreational and mobilized variety are often militant and vocal about their passions and can put down other players they do not see as gamers. Recreational gamers are serious hobbyists who are committed to learning and honing their game play expertise. They are engaged in both messing around and geeking out on their gaming hobbies. This can appear as obsessiveness to nongamers, and their practices can be exclusionary to "noobs" (beginners, short for "newbies"). This is not the more open and accessible mode of gaming that we see in the hanging out genre. One young woman Matteo Bittanti interviewed for his Game Play study, Lynn, a twenty-one-year-old from Santa Rosa, California, described her younger brother's game play with a popular online first-person shooter, Counter-Strike, as a space that was highly social and in which he was invested in a way that was inaccessible to her.

My younger brother has been playing Counter-Strike on our home computer since late 2003. . . . There have been times where I have just sat in our computer room and watched him, so I've seen these player interactions for myself. . . . For example, Luke's screen name is NubMuffin, because, well, he likes muffins, and thinks it sounds good (whether there is another reason, he chose not to tell me). It really has become a second name for him, because even when playing under a different moniker, his friends still refer to him as "muffin," even on Xfire (where his name is currently "Saddam got pwned!"). And then his Counter-Strike clan was called "teh\_noobz." Both are examples of insider language, and both are interesting as they present a false identity to other players. "Nub" and "noobz" pokes fun at how new players are targeted, and partially disguises the ability of the players. I believe this secondary identity is one of the primary reasons he returns to Counter-Strike again and again. I can see the attraction in improving your standings, taking advantage of environment glitches, or using the surfing or Warcraft mods. However, his online identity exists apart from the physical, and he has built [it] up outside of his local friends and family. When I watch my brother yell, laugh, and react to his friends through the game talk, teamspeak, and Xfire, it's not the brother I deal with day-to-day. He's a much gruffer person.

The kind of game play that Lynn described here contrasts with hanging out modes of game play that are more accessible; here her brother is relying

on insider knowledge and expertise and a social network that is primarily interest-driven rather than being grounded in the local given relations of family and local friends. NubMuffin is a gruffer, more masculine identity than the one Lynn interacts with every day, and he goes online to find a peer group that supports this more specialized form of practice and expertise. Just as a stadium or auditorium provides a space where a kid might develop an alternative identity as an athlete or a performer, game spaces provide contexts bracketed from their primary, everyday contexts and identities. Lynn's discussion also indicates the role of the spectator in these performances as well as the gendered nature of the spectator role in gaming. Bittanti (Game Play) finds similar dynamics at work in another interview with nineteen-year-old Mary, who also watches her brother play.

I never really understood what was so great about Counter-Strike. Watching my brother play obsessively might have caused me to turn away from the game because it felt overrated and typical boy genre (and the graphics weren't that appealing at the time either). Typical as in aimlessly hunting down other people, shoot and kill, rake in the points, et cetera. When Counter-Strike's popularity reached its peak, I watched my brother play this game a couple times and he explained to me the basic rules and goals and such. After a couple rounds, I noticed how the players were chatting to each other and I had no idea what some of the words meant, like "lag," "owned," "pawnd," et cetera. Eventually, I got pulled into the game as my brother got popped by the same guy a couple times in a row and he was desperately trying to get revenge, ha ha.

In this example, Mary positioned herself as an outsider to her brother's practice, not understanding "what was so great about Counter-Strike" and describing it as a "typical boy genre." At the same time, she was interested enough to play a spectator role, and she got drawn in as a support person to her brother's play. This dynamic has much in common with the stereotypical role that girls have played in relation to more masculine forms of sports, that of the spectator and cheerleader (Adams and Bettis 2003; Shakib 2003).

For the boys who do engage in the more geeked out forms of game play, relationships that kids build through recreational gaming provide a space for socializing that is an alternative to the mainstream status regimes that boys navigate in their everyday lives. One white thirteen-year-old, an avid gamer in Heather Horst's Silicon Valley families study, noted: "Well, as far as sports and music go, I'm not that big of a person on those. I am,

I think, by definition, a geek. The main things I actually normally do are either homework-related or video games or hanging out with friends.” Similarly, a fifteen-year-old of Egyptian descent in danah boyd’s study (Teen Sociality in Networked Publics) described sport-related identity and gaming identity as distinct from each other. “I’m not really much of a sports person. So it’s pretty much the games and systems and that’s pretty much it, although I don’t really own any systems right now.” As a genre of practice, engagement with recreational gaming parallels much of the social activity and identity play that young men have historically developed through sports, but there is an important difference in how these activities are culturally identified. Like gaming, sports are interest-based activities that are strongly gendered and focused on competition and performance; the difference is that the identities and reputation cultivated in sports translate to status in the mainstream friendship-driven popularity negotiations in a way that gaming identities do not (Edley and Wetherell 1997). Although we found that it was socially acceptable for mainstream boys who were popular within their local friendship-driven networks to engage in recreational gaming, kids who were more deeply involved in recreational gaming tended to self-identify as “geeks” rather than boys who are into sports.

Among recreational gamers, those who identify with the first-person shooter genres, which have been demonized by the mass media, see their interests in oppositional terms with those of mainstream culture. Players tend to reject some forms of gaming considered “too mainstream,” such as the so-called casual games typical of killing time practices. Matteo Bittanti (Game Play) spoke to one player of these games, twenty-one-year-old Steven, who was particularly articulate about these oppositional stances.

Society as a whole looks down on video-game culture because they see it as a collective of geeks or geeky guys who live their lives through virtual reality. They judge video gamers on the basis that they could be doing something more productive or essentially more creative with their lives. Ninety percent of these people have never picked up a controller for themselves and [need to] just let go of stereotypes. They haven’t allowed themselves to be submerged into a culture about pushing boundaries and storytelling and character development and scenery exploration. They don’t allow themselves to be a part of the creative genius or problem solving. They are only a part of the judgmental side of society.

Young adult players such as Steven are part of the definition of the subcultures of forms of gaming, ones based in a certain kind of gamer pride and defined against mainstream norms. Players of first-person shooters are demonized by the mainstream because of the violent content of the games. By contrast, MMORPG players are often stigmatized as being socially marginalized. Although FPS and sports games were fairly ubiquitous among boys, it was rare for us to find MMORPG gamers in the mainstream teen demographic. This is partially due to the cost involved, but there are also important cultural distinctions between gamers. Here the discourse revolves around commitment of time and energy to the online world, and both those on the inside and outside of these practices often describe them in these terms. For example, in her YouTube and video bloggers study, Patricia Lange interviewed an eighteen-year-old who was an avid gamer but who says he does not play World of Warcraft because role-playing games “suck up too much time.”

In an interview with Katynka Martínez (High School Computer Club), Altimit (an eighteen-year-old Filipino American) and Mac Man (a seventeen-year-old Filipino American) distanced themselves from the “real, dead, hard-core” MMORPG player in a discussion of the World of Warcraft (WoW) *South Park* episode.

**Altimit:** Because there’s a couple of kinds of gamers. There’s me, I’m hard-core semi.

**Katynka:** Hard-core semi.

**Altimit:** Then there’s the real, dead, hard-core ones, which I can’t even kill. I know them, trust me.

**Mac Man:** And then the casual one.

**Altimit:** The casual ones, and medium ones. The hard, the ultra-hard-core ones are like those in WoW, the one that we saw in the *South Park*.

**Mac Man:** Yeah, the . . .

**Altimit:** The guy.

**Mac Man:** Yeah, the guy.

**Altimit:** No life. He has everything. He goes to buy, he has Dungeons and Dragons. Stuff, food. He’s like all day . . .

**Mac Man:** He has all this sodas and stuff around.

**Altimit:** Yeah, he has in a single room.

**Mac Man:** It’s like a beast in there.

**Altimit:** Yeah, he doesn't go anywhere. He just stays there. Everything's just there.

**Katynka:** Do you guys know any of these people, like in real life or do you just know that they exist?

**Mac Man:** I know them in . . .

**Altimit:** I don't know that they exist . . .

**Mac Man:** Yeah, they never get out of their house. Yes. They stay there all day.

Although the boys referred to ultra-hard-core gamers who have “no life” and are “like a beast,” Altimit admired “real dead hard-core” players who are highly skilled at shooters. He suggested there is a difference between gamers who let games control their lives and those who use their skills to acquire money and status. A player who is able to balance game play with other dimensions of life and still succeed is “normal” in his view, compared to the guy who sees the online game as his whole life. The former is the kind of gamer with whom Altimit would like to identify. As described in box 7.3, Altimit admires a professional first-person shooter player he described as “the best gamer in the world.” Unlike MMORPGs, first-person shooters have subcultural capital as a form of gaming that relies on masculine performance and virtuosity that provides high status among most teenage boys.

A final form of boundary work deserves mention—the issue of generational differences in understanding of games. As described in chapter 4, we saw some instances of hanging out gaming that would involve parents, but for the most part, gaming was the province of kids. Even when gamers talked about playing with their parents, it was almost always in the genre of hanging out, not the more geeked out forms of game play that rely on mutual respect and expertise. We can expect, as members of the current gaming generation start raising their own children, that these dynamics will start to change. For example, one participant in Mizuko Ito's Anime fans study was a serious gamer, even competing in major tournaments, and acted as a gaming mentor and hero for his son. Further, with the popularity of platforms such as the Wii and the Nintendo DS, we can expect more intergenerational sharing around gaming. At the same time, the rapid rate of technology change with regard to gaming is likely to continue to produce a generation gap in gaming experience, even for parents who are avid gamers. The processes of distinction that core gamers



engage in, defining their practices in opposition to mainstream culture, are likely to continue to produce an elite geeked out gaming culture that will be out of reach to most of the older generation.

The different forms of boundary work, of making distinctions between different kinds of gaming identities and between the world of gaming and mainstream culture, demonstrate how varied kids' game-play experiences are. When considering how games contribute to learning (of both the celebrated or demonized variety), we need to be specific about which forms of gaming and gaming identity we are referring to. Gaming practice is articulated in relation to the broader cultural and social dynamics of youth culture. Some of the most important outcomes of geeking out on games are experiences of mastery that translate into identity and status within peer groups that care about gaming and technical expertise. When one considers these dimensions, gender becomes important not only in terms of gender representation in video games but also in terms of participation in certain social, cultural, and technical worlds. As gaming becomes increasingly central to young people's socialization into networks of technology expertise and learning, the persistent gender gap in recreational gaming is problematic. Although we are seeing a broadening base of participation in the killing time and hanging out genres of gaming, recreational gaming is still a male-dominated sphere.

### Transitions

Our descriptions of genres of gaming practice and identity provide us with a vocabulary for discussing trajectories of learning and participation with games. As we discuss in chapter 4, parents often make determinations about what is age appropriate when making decisions about game access. Recreational and mobilized forms of gaming generally peak in the early teen years, when parental prohibitions have been relaxed but before kids are fully transitioned into a focus on dating and peer-status negotiations that characterize the later teen years. When a teenager starts to transition to adulthood, or starts college, video games are often left behind (Bittanti, *Game Play*). Mary, a nineteen-year-old from Alameda, California, said: "I guess when I went to college [I gave up gaming]. I did not have enough time to socialize and still play games and most of my friends were into MySpace and Facebook and so I stopped playing altogether." For others, such as Chris, a twenty-nine-year-old from San Francisco, quitting gaming

was work related. “When I joined my business firm, I did not have to play anymore to ‘feel powerful,’ you know. I had ‘real’ responsibilities and goals. Also, my free time decreased dramatically and spending hours in front of a screen just felt wrong.” Although many gamers persist in their hobby despite the crush of real-world accountabilities, many gamers also report moving out of engagement when they thought that it was no longer productive or that it was interfering with other responsibilities.

In retrospective discourses of game play, the more geeked out forms of gaming are associated with a period in one’s life when one has time to waste. Dave, a white seventeen-year-old from rural California Christo Sims interviewed (Rural and Urban Youth), reflected on an earlier game “addiction” from when he was in seventh grade to distance himself from that moment in his life. He described how he was highly involved in *The Sims*, and that it was “bad” and “addicting.” He says of the game that “it’s kind of creepy now that I think about it.”

**Dave Cody:** I played it for hours every day; that’s actually the only thing my parents have ever taken away from me.

**Christo:** Oh, really?

**Dave Cody:** Yeah.

**Christo:** And why?

**Dave Cody:** I was just like a zombie. I was just logged on to it and I’d be there for hours, hours on end and it was horrible. I couldn’t walk away from it . . . .

**Christo:** Uh-huh, and what was the, you said you sort of had a system for it or something?

**Dave Cody:** Uh, yeah, that was weird, I just had a, like certain points where people would sleep and stuff like that. I don’t know how to put it, like certain people would make breakfast for people in the morning and stuff like that. I got way into it. It was, no it was gross. I wish I’d never got that far into it, but I just had way too much time on my hands.

**Christo:** Uh-huh. Why do you think it’s gross, though?

**Dave Cody:** Just the fact that you get so far into someone else, like a person who’s not even real, like you try to control their life, like playing God almost, you know? It’s like, I don’t know. . . . It’s not normal, I don’t think.

When Christo interviewed him, Dave Cody was a starting football player at his high school, and though he played sports games, he distanced

himself from the more feminine forms of recreational gaming he had been involved in earlier. Playing *The Sims* was not a genre of gaming that was a suitable transition to the more mainstream forms of male sociability and identity of his later teenage years.

In the case of Dave Cody, his earlier forms of game play were out of alignment with the social identity he wanted to maintain in high school. MMORPG players, particularly those who are involved in competitive guilds, need to make hard decisions about whether their lives and identities outside or inside the game take priority. Commitments to competitive guilds are highly demanding of players' time and attention. Ryukossei, the nineteen-year-old Asian-American in Rachel Cody's study of *Final Fantasy XI*, described how he had to quit the game to deal with real-life commitments:

I quit because, I get very emotional as I talk about this. Nah, I'm just playing, I'm just playing. I quit because of school, pretty much. It was right when I was about to take that break and I was, like, right when the semester was going to end, I was, like, I know my parents would never let me play any games ever because they would probably know that it would be the game's fault that pretty much did it. And it was . . . And the majority was the game that got me to drop out. But I'm not going to blame it all on that 'cause it was my fault too. So that's pretty much why I quit.

Another player Cody interviewed, twenty-year-old Kalipea,<sup>11</sup> reflected on the time in her life when she was immersed in game play.

Like when I played, I played. That's all I did. I would go to school, I would come home, I would eat while playing, and then I would go to sleep, I'd wake up, I'd check my fricken auction house, go to school, go home, eat while playing, play for all night, and that was it. I wouldn't go out with friends, I wouldn't have friends over, and I wouldn't hang out with my roommates, which they hated last year and this year until I quit. I would once in a while, but in general if they were like, "Oh, do you wanna go out to the bar; go out drinking?" I'm like, "No, I wanna play." Or, "I don't feel good" and then stay home and play. I would always make up something. . . . I was really addicted.

She went on to describe how she eventually left the game as well as most of the relationships she had fostered online. This discourse of addiction and "recovery" is a theme that emerges among players who were formerly immersed in gaming. Their earlier social context, in which gaming was dominant, is framed as unnatural and compulsive; they have switched frames to a more mainstream notion of social health.

Players who have left the game have difficulty reconciling whether that time spent playing was time wasted or simply a moment in their lives that they were investing in a different set of relationships and commitments. Another one of Cody's interviewees (twenty-six-year-old white male) reflected:

**Wurlpin:**<sup>12</sup> Yeah, it is a lot of lost time. Well, let me rephrase that. It is a lot of time dedicated. I could never say it is lost time because there was a lot of memories and it took me to a lot of places and I am very happy with how it all went, but it is also, it is a lot of time.

**Rachel:** It is a lot of time when you think about what you devoted. Imagine if you spent that much time in school?

**Wurlpin:** Exactly [laughs]. And that is exactly the case. It is kind of like you start to think to yourself, "Well, what else could I be doing? Yes, I am making memories, but how else can I be more productive or how else can I do something better for myself?" So like I said, it wasn't lost, but it was definitely, um, invested.

It is clear that we are entering an era in which gaming is not an activity confined to a particular life stage. At the same time, our interviews with gamers of different ages demonstrate that there are clear ebbs and flows to gaming activity, and players may move in and out of more intensive forms of gaming practice. As a focus of hanging out social activity, gaming becomes a way of moving into practices of messing around and geeking out with new media. As youth move away from more home-centered sociability of early childhood to a moment when the peer group starts to take over, and youth become interested in romantic relationships, there is an initial shift away from recreational gaming practices. In a similar move, older players may move away from their intense interest-driven forms of gaming practice when the demands of adult responsibility set in. This is particularly true for gamers who are engaged in the more organized forms of gaming that entail a high degree of social and time commitment. Although killing time forms of gaming are easy to maintain in the margins of other life responsibilities, the more geeked out forms of recreational gaming, organizing and mobilizing, are more difficult to maintain. Regardless of whether kids sustain a strong gaming interest or interest-driven peer groups around gaming, when kids pass through more geeked out gaming practices, they have picked up certain dispositions toward

technology and interest-driven learning that are not characteristic of hanging out and killing time genres of gaming.

At the same time, we have seen many interest-driven gamers who are sustaining their hobbies into adulthood and who are able to balance real-life and gaming commitments. We have seen instances in which hardcore gamers will move to a different form of interest-driven activity, transferring their passionate engagements into other hobbies. They talk about not having time to game during times in their lives when they have other pressing responsibilities, or are engaged in a different hobby, but they plan to return to gaming at some point. Gamers will bring their interest-driven and geeked out dispositions to other kinds of media engagements. Many of the anime fans Mizuko Ito interviewed were active gamers and described how they divide their interests between their hobbies or decide at certain times in their lives that they will focus on one or another. Much like traditional hobbyists will decide to focus on a project intensely for certain periods, recreational gamers will move in and out of intense engagement depending on game releases, their social gaming activity, or the other rhythms of their lives.

## Conclusion

This chapter describes different genres of gaming practices and the discourses that create boundaries between various forms of game play, and we analyze them in terms of issues of learning and development. Our goal in this discussion is to begin to tease apart the diversity of practices and identities that often get lumped under the gaming label. This chapter is more suggestive than conclusive with regard to the learning outcomes of engagement with a wide range of gaming practices. We can, however, venture some initial conclusions with regard to the general findings of our work.

Our work is not focused on issues of gaming representation and content learning, but we focus on the broader social and cultural ecology that contextualizes game practice. We emphasize the importance of cultural genres of game play and how they intersect with identity formations such as geek and gender identity. Where we find some potential issues of concern are not in issues of game addiction and alienation but rather in the inverse—the issue of exclusion from certain forms of gaming. In line with

research on gender and games, we found that there is a persistent gender gap with regard to participation in forms of gaming that are tied to technology-related learning and certain forms of interest-driven participation. Although girls are participating at high levels in killing time, hanging out, and the less technical forms of modding and customizing, the core practices of recreational and mobilized gaming are culturally coded as male. Similarly, although we found that the more accessible forms of gaming were pervasive across different socioeconomic divides, access to mobilized and augmented forms of gaming were limited to those with high-end gaming resources, both technical and social.

Geeked out gaming activities of recreational, mobilized, and augmented game play are those activities that are most likely to be pathways into technical expertise and other forms of interest-driven learning. Gaming provides an accessible entry point into geek identities and practices that are tied to technical expertise and media literacy, but clearly this entry point is more accessible to some. In line with recent research in this area, we also believe that lack of access to game-centered sociability is of greater concern than the fears about game addiction (Beck and Wade 2004; Kutner and Olson 2008). Gaming is quickly becoming a lingua franca for participation in the digital age.

Finally, our ecological view of gaming suggests a different frame for the questions surrounding learning and transfer of game-related knowledge and skills. Rather than focus on the issue of content and knowledge transfer (of either the desirable or the undesirable variety), our focus on gaming practice suggests that learning outcomes of gaming are neither direct nor obvious. Few of us believe, for example, that the most valuable lessons that kids learn from sports are the game rules or the competitive and often aggressive “content” of the sport. Rather, we might emphasize sportsmanship and teamwork in addition to the more obvious physical benefits of sports. We understand that sports are embedded in a broader social ecology that is worthwhile for kids to participate in. Here we make a similar argument for games—that the most important benefits of gaming, if they are to be had, lie in a healthy social ecology of participation, an ecology that includes parents, siblings, and peers. Recasting the debate over games and learning in this more ecological frame is an important corrective to many of the dominant discourses of gaming that have focused on game content and design.

## Notes

1. For a review of the literature on gaming, violence, and aggression, see Kutner and Olson (2008). Although there are some indications that high levels of play with Mature-rated video games is correlated with aggression, there is no conclusive evidence that there is a causative relation or that game play has any correlation with violent crime. After completing an extensive study of video games and violence, Kutner and Olson (2008, 8) conclude: “The strong link between video game violence and real world violence, and the conclusion that video games lead to social isolation and poor interpersonal skills, are drawn from bad or irrelevant research, muddled-headed thinking and unfounded, simplistic news reports.” In this chapter, we do not engage directly with the empirical material on video games, violence, and aggression, but rather we focus on actual social practices of gaming and what game players describe as meaningful outcomes of their play.
2. “Modding” involves players and users making modifications to technology. This can involve modifying game chips or designing new elements of games such as cheats, interface elements, or game levels.
3. Although there has been almost no work that takes a critical look at how class and racial identity intersects with gaming, survey work indicates that in contrast to personal-computer adoption, game-console adoption is not biased toward white and higher socioeconomic status families. In fact, through the 1990s black families adopted consoles at higher rates than white families, and even now families who are high school-educated adopt consoles at higher rates than those with higher educational backgrounds (Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout 2005). Ellen Seiter (2005) has noted how in her fieldwork with youth from diverse backgrounds that working-class boys were generally more familiar with gaming consoles than computers, though they would often search for gaming culture when they had access to the PCs at the center where she was observing.
4. “Machinima” is a contraction of “machine” and “cinema,” and it refers to the practice of making videos using a game engine.
5. Originally created in November 1999, Neopets is widely recognized as one of the “stickiest” sites on the Internet. In July 2007, Viacom announced that by the end of 2008, “Neopets ([www.neopets.com](http://www.neopets.com)) will be transformed into Neostudios, which will focus on developing new virtual world gaming experiences online, while continuing to grow and evolve the existing ones.”
6. “Ryukossei” is a real character name.
7. In gaming jargon, “frag” is roughly equivalent to “kill,” with the main difference being the player can respawn and play again.
8. “Enki” is a real character name.

9. High-level notorious monsters—these are the most difficult monsters in the game.
10. MUDs and MUSHs are text-based online games.
11. “Kalipea” is a real character name.
12. “Wurlpin” is a real character name.



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# Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out

## Kids Living and Learning with New Media

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