Cyberlines 2.0

Languages and Cultures of the Internet

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◆ Chapter 8

Generating cyberculture/s: The case of Star Wars Galaxies

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Imagine an entire 3D world online, complete with forests, cities and seas. Now imagine it populated with other people all across the world who gather in virtual rebel outposts and cantinas, gossiping about the most popular guild or comparing notes on the best hunting spots. Friends and foes from across the globe collaborate or compete with you, battling for your cause or doing their best to insure your demise. Imagine a place where you can be the brave hero, the planet rascal or the village idiot, developing a reputation for yourself that is known from Peoria to Peking. Now imagine that you could come home from school or work, drop your bookbag and shoes on the ground, log in, and enter that world any day, any time, anywhere. Welcome to the world of massively multiplayer online games.

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) are highly graphical 3D videogames played online, allowing individuals, through their self-created digital characters or 'avatars', to interact not only with the gaming software (the designed environment of the game and the computer-controlled characters within it) but with other players' avatars as well. These cyberworlds are persistent social and material worlds, loosely structured by open-ended (fantasy) narratives, where players are largely free to do as they please—slay overgrown butterflies, siege cities, barter goods in town, or scalp raw materials off the local flora and fauna. They are notorious for their peculiar combination of designed 'escapist fantasy' yet emergent 'social realism' (Kolbert, 2001): in a setting of bounty hunters and bio-engineers, smugglers and squad leaders, tailors and teras kasi artists, people save for homes, fret about the trading market, build relationships of status and solidarity, and worry about crime. The virtual worlds created for such games are non-trivial. Thanks to out-of-game trading of in-game items, Norrath, the virtual setting of the MMOG EverQuest, is the 77th largest economy in the real world, with a GNP per capita between that of Russia and Bulgaria. One platinum piece, the unit of currency in Norrath, trades on real world exchange markets higher than both the yen and the lira

(Castronova, 2001). Likewise, the sheer number of people who play (and the time they invest in playing) is astounding. The MMOG *Lineage*, for example, boasts more than 2.5 million current subscribers (Vaknin, 2002) and, in the course of a year, Ultima Online devours more than 160 million man-hours (Kolbert, 2001).

Such games are ripe for cultural analysis of the social and material practices attending them. Given their increased positioning within the entertainment industry (Snider, 2002), widespread and growing popularity with people of all age groups, ethnicities and economic classes, and purported addictive quality for those who plug in (Chee & Smith, 2003; Jewels, 2002), MMOGs are quickly becoming the form of entertainment and a major mechanism of socialisation for hundreds of thousands of young and old alike.

Theorising MMOGs has finally shifted from a hobbyist pursuit of text-based multi-user dungeon (MUD) developers to the forefront of burgeoning research in fields as diverse as economics, politics, sociology, philosophy and education, inheriting visions of virtual reality long thriving in each domain. MMOGs such as Ultima Online, which boast real, player-driven economies where virtual community members generate wealth, negotiate prices, accumulate capital and form trade alliances, have emerged as important sites for economic exploration and experimentation with social systems (Froomkin, 2003). As Simpson (2000) argues, MMOG economies 'offer a unique research platform because, while the commodities traded are virtual, the resulting economies are not simulations.' MMOGamers display real economic preferences and make financial decisions with long-term consequences, thereby serving as participants in grand social experiments of genuine import (Castronova, 2001). Such virtual societies, engulfing on average over 20 hours per week for players, generate virtual goods with non-virtual currency, making it nearly feasible to live in the real world from proceeds generated in virtual ones (Dibbell, 2003; Yee, 2001). Moreover, such virtual worlds allow designers to experiment with social economic policies (such as removing various forms of taxation) in ways that would be unfeasible in real world contexts.

The emerging consensus is that MMOGs are of enormous potential to researchers, yet, despite the emerging body of investigation into such spaces as virtual worlds, there is a paucity of research on them as bona fide *cultures* (cf. Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2003; Taylor, in press)—that is, sites constituted through language and practices both within the game (e.g., virtual social interaction and joint activity) and beyond (e.g., discussion of game-related issues on player-driven websites).

Understanding MMOGs as cultures and not just environments is crucial if we are to understand such virtual social worlds as both emergent and designed. The cyberworlds of videogames entail more than virtual 3D territories and the array of characters that populate them; they crucially entail the quasi-enduring virtual communities that constitute them as well. These communities are defined by and through their cultural practices: the shared customs, procedures, rituals and beliefs through which members display themselves and recognise others as 'real gamers (of a certain sort)'. Thus, MMOGaming is a joint product of the systems we build and the ways in which people inhabit them. These two aspects exist in overlapping feedback loops in which designers design spaces, players play in them (at times, in wildly unanticipated ways), and then designers tweak and redesign in response to this. The resulting social and material worlds are, therefore, both designed and emergent. Such worlds can be conceptualised as a 'dialogic negotiation' (Robinson, 2003) between designer and player, producer and consumer—much like more mundane spaces in everyday walks of life such as corporate environments, community leisure institutions and classrooms.

In this chapter, we examine the early developmental stages of the 'cyberculture' of the newly released and long-heralded massively multiplayer game *Star Wars Galaxies* (LucasArts & Sony Online Entertainment, 2003), highlighting aspects of the culture (discourses and practices) of gaming within this virtual space, the tensions that naturally emerge within the community between varying styles of play, and how these point to and intersect with theoretical design issues about what it means to create such environments (e.g., the tension between pre-specified storyline and emergent play).

Using quasi-ethnographic techniques (Guba & Lincoln, 1983) including observations, interviews, and analysis of player talk in online forums, we examine some of the distinguishing rhetorical and material practices of this emergent culture in order to tease out some of the ways in which players' cultural practices point to and

intersect with the challenges of design. What does it mean to be literate in such virtual cultural spaces? How do player practices align or conflict with the intentions of designers? And, finally, what are the tensions that arise when designers 'design for emergence', as is the case with Star Wars Galaxies? The social and educational implications of these findings are also discussed.

Language and literacy in Star Wars Galaxies

Despite frequent public dismissals and indictments, MMOGs constitute complex and nuanced sets of multi-modal social and communicative practices, tied to particular communities and consequential for membership and identity (Gee, 2003). MMOGaming is participation in a discourse space, one with fuzzy boundaries that expand with continued play. What is at first confined to the game alone soon spills over into the virtual world beyond it (e.g., websites, chatrooms, email) and even life off-screen (e.g., telephone calls, face-to-face meetings). The discourse communities these practices serve likewise expand from collections of in-character playmates to real-world affinity groups, and the social structures so generated are complex and overlapping—comparable, as Jakobsson and Taylor (2003) point out, to traditional 'mafia' structures. Like the mafia or other organised communal systems, MMOG social structures appear to be powerful means for mobilising players' identities. In such communities, fluency in the discourse determines whether one is located on the periphery (as a newbie) or at the centre (as a beta vet) (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991). Understanding the forms of (voluntary) participation in complex communities and environments such as MMOGs is crucial. Such virtual communities function as a major mechanism of enculturation for those engaged with them:

> Playing one's character(s) and living in [these virtual worlds] becomes an important part of daily life. Since much of the excitement of the game depends on having personal relationships and being part of [the] community's developing politics and projects, it is hard to participate just a little. (Turkle, 1995, p. 184).

The discourse of MMOGs can be perplexing to the uninitiated (n00b). Nerfing, G2G, ATM, aggro devs, AFK, spawn, mob, pwn and tanking are but a few of the terms originating (or at least flourishing) in online gaming communities. Not all of this language is wholly constrained to MMOGs; online game language has its roots in several earlier and co-existing settings, including bulletin board

systems, chat rooms, hacking communities, strategy games and first-person shooters, and some of these terms (e.g., AFK meaning 'away from keyboard') flow fluidly between communities.

In online games, however, the language used frequently takes on new meanings, particularly as they are positioned in relation to other text. In an earlier paper, Steinkuehler (2003) has unpacked the complexity of just one text string from the game Lineage: 'afk g2g too ef ot regen no poms' (which roughly translates as: 'Just a minute, I have to go to the Eleven Forest to regenerate. I'm out of mana potions.'). Steinkuehler found that this seemingly mundane (within the game) string of text was designed not only to communicate that the speaker was leaving the group, but also achieved several functions not readily apparent to an outsider to the game: to show respect for the integrity of the hunting party, to explain that the player would be gone for a length of time but planned on returning, and to signal the player's status as an old-timer in the community. While newcomers might focus on the odd spellings and abbreviations of MMMOGamer textual communications, Steinkuehler points us to the communicative functions that such text accomplishes—functions that arise in dynamic relation to the constraints of the medium and the complex social and material practices that emerge within the game. We briefly discuss each in turn.

Though language in such settings exhibits all of the very same functions as in everyday talk, novel linguistic forms emerge because online gameplay asks ASCII language to serve the same range of functions but under very particular constraints (Steinkuehler, 2003). Players need to communicate quickly during battle within the tight constraints of small text windows. They express emotions, intent and identity in the absence of other communicative channels while slaying monsters, battling other players, harvesting resources or crafting items. What in face-to-face interactions might be communicated through a shrug, smile, nod or raised eyebrow is winnowed through just a few lines of type. Moreover, because text is not shared with other players until the <return> key is hit, there is an extra premium on speed. A wonderfully thought-out, composed sentence may earn students good grades in school but, in an MMOG, the result can be (virtual) death. Imagine football players, soldiers or jazz musicians communicating in the heat of performance through typed turn-taking and you get a feel for the challenging conditions under which players using ASCII text must perform. The

novel ways in which MMOGamers make the medium bend to their needs is extremely sophisticated, raising serious questions about the purported 'literacy crisis' of the contemporary United States (cf. Kozol, 1985; Sanders, 1995) and elsewhere.

New social and material practices that emerge in the game require new forms of language in order to encapsulate those practices in typed talk for communication of both speaker intent and, at least tacitly, speaker identity. In the days of the *Star Wars Galaxies* release, a slew of conventions and attending terms arose. By design, the game itself introduced hundreds of new game concepts and terminology, included in extensive in-game glossaries, that were taken up and soon became part of the raw material for emergent culture. For example, the game noun 'death blow', used to describe a computer-generated final strike dealt from a non-player character that (temporarily) ends a player character's life, was soon transformed into the abbreviated past-tense verb *DBd*, functioning as a descriptor and often used as a one-syllable utterance to describe the fate of the speaker's avatar or the avatar of another playmate, as in 'ur DBd, friend.'

Though given game concepts were readily taken up by the community (at times in novel ways), embellishments and wholly new conceptual tools quickly become the regular fanfare. For example, take the practice of 'kiting'—a strategy in which a marksmen or other range fighter attacks a monster from afar and then runs away with the monster in chase, maintaining a distance between themselves and the prey so that the player can attack the creature but the creature cannot attack in return. This practice soon inherited the moniker 'kiting' because, when viewed from a distance, it looked as if the players were flying kites (with the monster being the kite and the lasers bullet streams from the player to the monster being the kite strings). Another example is the use of the term 'social' to describe certain computer-generated monsters that serve as prey in the game. On the *Star Wars Galaxies* player forum, a player named Chessick defines 'social' in the following way:

> ['Social' refers] to creatures that attack you as a group (you hit creature number one, and then creatures one, two and three all come after you. So 'are they social?' means, 'If I shoot the nearest one, will the other four all come after me and kill me?' Another way to say this is that 'They BAF' – Bring A Friend. (You hit one, he brings a friend along to pummel you). So you could ask, 'Do bocatts BAF?' or say, 'Watch out, they BAF.' This is the same thing as saying, 'Watch out, they're social.'

Terms such as *death blows*, *kiting* and *socials* are important not so much in and of themselves but rather in the way that they signal and reflect the emergence of a unique cultural space. Such terms are shorthand for practices whose use marks one place in the gaming community. The only means of learning what such language is meant to connote is through reading posts on game-related discussion boards (as the one excerpted above), asking other players within the game (and thereby positioning oneself as a 'n00b'), or seeing their situated use during real-time gameplay. Hence, a newcomer to the community must either do their research, display their ignorance to others, or simply find out through joint engagement in common practice. An argument can be made that only the latter route toward facility with such terminology results in robust understanding (Gee, 2001).

Gameplay in MMOG worlds is a complex, real-time activity, facilitating the generation of new language to facilitate play. Within months of *Star Wars Galaxies* release, new practices and specialised terminology designating them arose and spread like wildfire throughout the community. At times hot controversy within the game centres on activities taken up by some and eschewed by others caused deep-seated conflicts within the community. One such practice is the activity of 'grinding', when game-players engage in repetitive behaviour to earn experience (hence, power) so that they might move on to another skill (more power). The practice has been found in other games (a.k.a., 'farming,' 'minimaxing,' 'powerleveling') but, in the *Star Wars Galaxies* virtual universe, it was quickly taken up among the entertainer class (among others) as a way to 'grind' through levels until they hit mastery. Go to any cantina in *Star Wars Galaxies* and you will be likely to see several characters 'grinding' away, entering the 'dance flourish' command every 10 seconds to maximise experience gained through dancing. Many such players have gone so far as to program in macros, short scripts designed to save keyboard commands and to 'grind' as efficiently as possible. Here is a sample grinding macro for dancers that was developed by a more experienced player and published on the web as a resource for others:

```
/startdance EXOTIC;
/pause 10;
```

```
/dazzle;
/flourish 1;
/pause 10;
/flourish 2;
/pause 10;
/flourish 3;
/pause 40;
/ui action toolbarSlot 00
```

The way that gameplay, for some, serves as an introduction to rudimentary programming is captivating for researchers interested in informal learning and in how the leisure pursuits of the new millennial generation provide inroads into more traditional (and more socially valued) domains of knowledge.

Role-playing vs. power-levelling

Within the gaming community itself, rich controversy surrounds the use of macro programs of the kind described here, since they allow players to execute a string of action commands while away from their keyboards, thereby detracting from the depth of the social space for those gamers more interested in the social aspects of the game rather than the mechanical ones. Thus, a real tension emerges between those who care to role-play and those who prefer acquiring in-game power through rote mechanical labour or 'grinding.'

One particular community-authored prefix highlights this controversy best: the prefix 'holo-.' In *Star Wars Galaxies*, the single most powerful and highly coveted position of status—and one of the most controversial game design issues to date—is that of 'Jedi.' The game designers (for now) have chosen to make these positions very rare, so that to become a Jedi one requires the highest rank across several professions, which takes several intense months of gameplay in order to rack up profession points and thus advance one's character through the game. Which professions each individual is required to master is determined by 'holocrons'—bits of wisdom given to players after a certain threshold of profession mastery is reached, that point the individual toward the particular profession path they must take should they want to become a Jedi. After achieving master status in several professions, players are given a 'Force-sensitive' character slot that can, with enough work, become a Jedi. This design choice has driven many players to engage in

hard-core levelling of their characters—not in order to enjoy the moment-to-moment game experience, but rather in order to gain a particular a priori goal. Players use the prefix 'holo-' to denote any game practice engaged in solely for the reason of becoming a Jedi (i.e., because a 'holocron' told you to). Dancing in the cantina solely to gain dancer skills, to master one more profession and thereby move one step closer toward becoming a Jedi, becomes being a 'holo-dancer.' Churning out player equipment solely to gain crafter skills, to master another profession and take yet another step toward Jedi status, becomes doing being a 'holo-crafter.' Standing at a crossroads, healing whoever meanders by, yelling for visitors to bring them their wounded avatars, solely to gain doctor skills, to master (yes) another profession and take yet another step toward Jedi status, becomes doing being a 'holo-doctor.' And so the prefix proliferates,—the pun between holo- and 'hollow' alluding to the perceived vacancy behind such actions from the perspective of those gamers who feel such activities rob the virtual space of the seemingly real.

In contrast to 'holo-gamers' (power levellers), role-players go to great lengths to maintain the integrity of the virtual world while shrouding the mechanical reality of key-punching, logging in and out, and real world interruptions beyond the confines of gameplay. Role-players, who remain 'in character' (IC) while in the game, speak from the voice of their online avatar personae rather than from the voice of a human being at a computer keyboard controlling from behind the scenes. Special linguistic forms are used to keep 'real life' hidden from view while still communicating content that spans the 'boundary' between real and virtual life. For example, problems with lag or slowness in the system are called 'fog', as in the following transcribed utterance: 'The fog is really bad in Coronet right now, so it's going to take at least 30 seconds to kill all the Rebs instead of the usual 10.' And one goes to 'sleep' rather than 'logging off,' as in 'I'm going to sleep for a bit but will return shortly.' Thus, role-players use language in ways that facilitate their in-character gameplay while, at the same time, negotiating the fact that it is a thoroughly technologically mediated space.

A tension exists between power levellers and role-players that is salient not only within the game—in the ways people group themselves and through the constant cantina debates over who is and is not AFK and merely holo-grinding, versus who is and is not complaining about who is or is not AFK—but also beyond it on game-

related discussion boards. There, long threads of conversation are kept active with power levellers constantly grumbling about which class and/or items have been *nerfed* (a term used to describe when developers have reduced the effectiveness of equipment or a character class or profession) and role-players constantly protesting against those who do not engage in the game in ways that maintain the *Star Wars* fantasy. In one thread on the official *Star Wars Galaxies* message boards, these two conversations came together as players took to speculating about the very discourse they were helping to create. The conversation began with queries as to the origin of nerfing and then Formica, a veteran gamer, explained its etymology to other players:

> Origin: The term 'nerf' as a verb in the MMOG context has its roots in the original weapons balance pass of Ultima Online in late 1998. At the time, the melee weapons in the game were so damaging as to make all other forms of combat pointless – much like CH [creature handlers] in SWG today. As a result, one of the first serious balance actions of the dev [game development] team was to reduce the damage done by melee weapons drastically – 50%. As a result, players began to decry the action, claiming they now had nothing but 'nerf weaponry', using the word as an adjective derived from the Nerf brand of foam weapons and sporting gear common in the United States.

As with most online game meta-discussions, the conversation quickly became multiple parallel strands of conversation with players using the activity as a way of commenting on one another and on the game itself, all the while displaying for the designers (who were also publicly participating in the discussion) what the controversy was and where it lay. One *Star Wars Galaxies* player playfully responded to the power levellers in the following way:

> Nerf – a term to indicate you didn't get exactly what your little heart desires. Synonyms: beef, bellyache, carp, complain, drone, fuss, gripe, grouse, grumble, howl, kick, mewl, moan, murmur, pule, repine, snivel, sob, wail, whimper, whinge, yowl.

Soon, role-players entered the discussion, inventing novel terms as a way to make a case for their grievances as well. For example, one such gamer offered up to the discussion a new term he had authored as a counterpoint to the common abbreviation descriptor *AFK* for 'away from keyboard': *ATK* or 'at the keyboard,' a very rare state of player being present, due to all the Holocorny grinders. *Holocorny* – the state of the nation.' Like the discussion board

posters before him, the author uses the ongoing primary activity—a quasi-facetious meta-discussion of the origin and meaning of various elements of the current discourse of *Star Wars Galaxies*—to participate in a jointly shared secondary activity — the expression of one's identity on the role-player / power-leveller continuum through a display of in-game concerns from that position. Specifically, he argues that too many players are mindlessly grinding to gain experience rather than playing *Star Wars*-like roles, resulting in a 'holocron'-dictated (and therefore 'corny') community.

Examining the discourses in and on *Star Wars Galaxies* gives rich insight into how MMOGs operate. Players develop language and practices to meet their needs and, through time, culture emerges and evolves through these shared forms of discourse and engagement. Gamers' proclivity for spontaneously cataloguing, describing and critiquing their own emergent language and practice is a curiously common gaming practice in and of itself. It is almost as if the overall community is aware that they are participating in a grand social experiment of online world-building and are eager to reflect on their experiences within it. There is a propensity for players not only to invent novel linguistic forms for describing their activities and experiences but also to turn this language in on itself, reflexively commenting on the nature of the online world overall, including the tensions that naturally emerge between varying styles of play.

The Star Wars universe: Pre-set storyline vs. emergent play

The discord between role-players and power-levellers is only one of many dynamics that contribute to the shaping of the communities in the MMOG virtual space. In truth, such cultures always arise at the intersection of several complexly interrelated factors—not only game design (what affordances and constraints the designed virtual world offers) and players' goals (whether they be to role-play or to power level), but also and equally gamers' presumptions based on genre and title expectations. For example, this tension we describe between role-players versus power levellers intersects and points to players' expectations about what a *Star Wars* universe should be like in the first place. The following transcribed in-game conversation illustrates the way in which the former issue is tied up with the latter one:

Trevvor: Why, I just literally saw a post about a guy

who is charging $2600 on eBay for his FS slot [Force-sensitive character slot, which is the only means toward becoming a Jedi] enabled account. I checked it out myself, it's true.

Zara: Think he'll get it?

Trevvor: He already has.

Trevvor: That's the current bid.

Dakibukka: See there . . . it's awful. I refuse to work diligently to open a FS slot with that around.

Dakibukka: Now if it happened by itself . . . then much the better.

Zara: I agree . . . if good role players found it arising that would be perfect.

Dakibukka: I wanted a Twilek male cloaked in the Obi-Wan style cloak . . . hood up . . . light green or dark purple with a facial tattoo.

Trevvor: You have to understand Zara, some of us have literally been waiting on this game for over half a decade.

Here, Dakibukka expresses consternation over the fact that opportunities to become a Jedi are being acquired by brute purchase (the most straightforward form of power levelling—simply purchasing it) rather than through in-character gameplay (role-playing). One reason for this response to the situation is simply that he (and others) have been anxiously awaiting the chance to inhabit the *Star Wars* universe for some time. If Jedi status is acquired naturally through gameplay, the integrity of the digital world as *Star Wars* universe can be maintained; with accounts being bought and sold on eBay, however, the illusion of a coherent world is dispelled. Thus, players' expectations about how gamers should engage with *Star Wars Galaxies* (in terms of both the designed virtual world and the community of players who inhabit it) are, to some extent, rooted in expectations about what a *Star Wars* universe should be like.

Key to the great hopes for *Star Wars Galaxies* to attract a broad audience is its derivation from just this *Star Wars* mythology. Not much needs to be said about the global popularity of the *Star Wars* series, a media property wildly successful across film, animated television, comics, novels and dozens of games. For decades, fans who have been playing out *Star Wars* scenes with action figures have wanted to participate in a world based on its universe. Who wouldn't want to be a jawa, wookiee or a beautiful princess? Who wouldn't want to use the Force to help the rebels overthrow the Evil Empire? *Star Wars Galaxies* offers its players the chance to do precisely this—all the while interacting online with hundreds of thousands of other *Star Wars* fans from around the world. The *Star Wars* universe—its creatures, locations, and mythos—are critical constituents of the emergent culture. Individuals are drawn to the game largely out of the particular flavour of 'escapist fantasy' it offers (cf. Kolbert, 2001), not just its 'social realism' per se.

This *Star Wars* mythology intersects with gaming practice and how players' experience and expectations, based on this mythology, are negotiated within the game. Thus, contemporary designers of MMOGs like *Star Wars Galaxies* face a critical challenge—that of creating worlds which are possibility spaces for gamers to play in, thereby abdicating significant authorship to the players themselves while at the same time ensuring that a particular kind of social space emerges (here, a *Star Wars*-like world). How exactly does one design for emergence? The designers of *Star Wars Galaxies* (like designers in many mediums) face an enormous social engineering task: how to design a world with participant structures that allow player culture to emerge while at the same time ensuring that a *Star Wars*-like world is what ends up resulting from it. Such open-ended design coupled with an overarching (and pre-determined) storyline requires that players realise the digital world as all things *Star Wars* rather than the designers per se. When I, as a player, meet another wookiee, it is up to that player to enact the *Star Wars* universe and fulfil my expectations as a player. This is why Star *Wars Galaxies* former lead creative designer Raph Koster (n.d.) writes, 'It's a SERVICE. Not a game. It's a WORLD. Not a game. It's a COMMUNITY. Not a game. Anyone who says, "it's just a game" is missing the point.'

Endemic to this design challenge is that role-playing, modes of participating in the world, cannot be enforced. The best that designers can do is to create reward and incentive structures so that desirable behaviour emerges. A classic case example of this is that designers cannot require Jedis to behave consistently in the *Star Wars* universe, but they can design game structures (such as bounties) that elicit Jedi-like behaviour (such as placing a high reward on capturing a Jedi, which fosters covert action on the part of Jedis). Players have noted an emerging design tension between rewarding those who power-level, who favour efficient goals achievement in

the game, and those who role-play, who choose to interact with the world in a manner that serves the community as a whole.

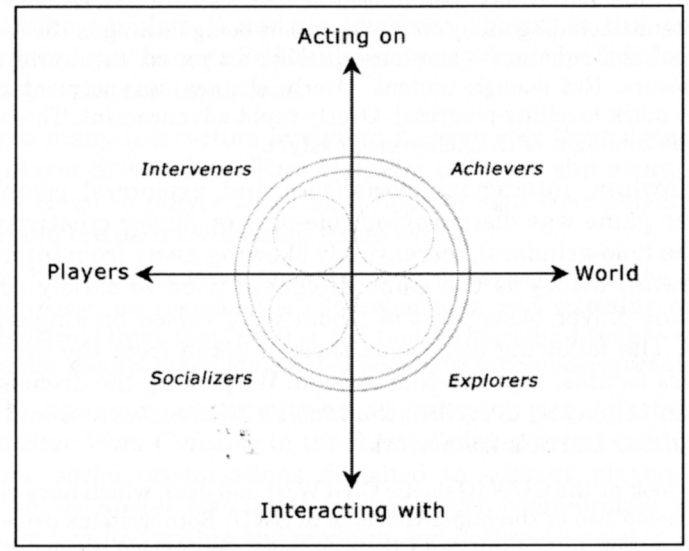
In designing an epic world with so much room for improvisation, so many planets to explore and so many histories to make, LucasArts has developed an inferentially rich space where players can construct widely different understandings of and connections with the given world and narrative. Engineering social structures so that *Star Wars*-like behaviour emerges is extremely difficult. Indeed, initial reviews of the game applaud the designers for the game's stellar graphics but question whether or not the universe 'feels' like *Star Wars* at all. Central to this issue is one of player interaction. How do designers create not just a 3D model of the *Star Wars* universe but also a culture that reflects the many different players' conceptions of the *Star Wars* universe?

Player behaviour: Acting vs. interacting

MUD designer and theorist Richard Bartle (2003) describes how players approach multiplayer games in at least four unique ways (see Figure 8.1): as socialisers, achievers, explorers and player killers (or competitors). (Within the MUD community, many argue for a fifth player type, 'builders'.) Bartle argues that the game experience is an entirely different activity depending on who the player is and why he or she plays. For the socialiser, the game is like a chat room or club. For the achiever, the game is a challenge to be conquered, like a quest. For the explorer, the game (or more appropriately the game world) is a place to be uncovered or mapped. For the competitor, it is a contest between players. Bartle argues that successful multiplayer games cater to all four player types, and good gameplay arises through the dynamic interactions among all player types.

In a move unprecedented in MMO game design, the *Star Wars Galaxies* team opened discussion boards two years before the games launch in order to generate publicity for the game, gain feedback on game design ideas from the player base, and begin building a knowledgeable, creative community of players who would drive the game community. The *Star Wars Galaxies* community used Bartle's grid and other design principles derived from the MUD developers community to think through the design of the game, thereby not just generating content (such as creating quests, missions and social relationships that constitute the *Star Wars* world) but also, and importantly, setting the tone for the *Star Wars* culture. These players established community norms for civility and role-playing, giving the designers an opportunity to effectively create the seeds of the *Star Wars Galaxies* social world months before the game would ever hit the shelves. AA robust community quickly emerged with players and designers exchanging thousands of posts every day.

Figure 8.1: Bartle's (2003) typology of player types



The game that the designers promised and the community expected was largely player-driven. The in-game economy would consist of items (e.g., clothing, armour, houses, weapons) created by players, with prices also set by players through auctions and player-run shops. Cities and towns would be designed by players, and cities' mayors and council leaders would devise missions and quests for others in the game. The Galactic Civil War (the struggle between rebels and imperials) would frame gameplay, but players would create their own missions as they enacted the *Star Wars* saga. In short, the system was to be driven by player interaction, with the resulting world the proverbial brainchild less of the designers and more of the players themselves.

Not all players wanted such a player-driven game experience. As the game shipped, a split between actors and interactors emerged within the *Star Wars Galaxies* community. Many players (and reviewers) complained that the game was too thin, that there was

not enough 'content'. These players, most of whom were interested in acting (Bartle's achievers and player killers) complained that there were no levels marking progress, not enough designer-based missions and too few shops. Raph Koster (former lead creative designer of *Star Wars Galaxies* cited above) describes this issue in a thread on bulletin boards in the following terms:

> If anything, SWG has been dinged in reviews both professional and amateur (including many on this board) as being lacking in the Acting side of the equation – most specifically, acting on the world, aka Achievers. Not enough content. Overly shallow advancement trees [that mark levelling progress]. Overly rapid advancement. These are all the comment of the Achiever playstyle.

Meanwhile, interactors (socialisers and explorers) complained that the game was discouraging role-play or player creativity (witness the holo-grinders), increasingly skewing away from interactors and toward actors as the game designers tried to satisfy the predominant player base, most of whom were raised on single-player games. The following discussion thread, taken from the *Star Wars Galaxies* forums, explores this tension. We pick up the discussion as Shyoran (a player) describes the tension between actors and interactors using Bartle's framework:

> Let's look at the GCW [Galactic Civil War] and Jedi, which have clearly become two of the major concepts in SWG. Both systems drive the introduction of content, and both support the 'Acting' sector of the [Bartle's player] grid . . . the same reinforcement mechanisms cannot be seen supporting players involved in the 'Interacting' sector. In fact, by allowing behavior like afk dancing, the system actually hinders the development of 'interactors' to a degree.

As Shyoran notes, the Galactic Civil War and Jedi are two design features with immense power to organise player activity, and both pull the community toward acting and achievement rather than interaction. Another player, Enix_Dayspring responds in agreement:

> Very true. . .This is the Single Player Mentality I ranted so much against while the game was in development. Somebody had a thread called 'Jedi should be rare . . . except for my character'. . . Players have always been the hero of their single player games and expect to be so in this game . . . So, this is what SWG is based upon. Not roleplayers who find ways of interacting with each other, even when the game mechanics don't specifically provide opportunities, as happens in many fantasy based MMOGs. The SWG base is filled with players whose attitude towards gaming is that they should be the lone omnipotent, unbeatable player.

For Enix_Dayspring, *Star Wars Galaxies* as a world and culture is not solely the result of design decisions but also of the goals and intentions of players who have co-opted the space to meet their game goals, vocalised their desires and forced the community into more of a single-player, pre-set storyline mentality. The game is not only a series of design decisions but also a culture created by the people who populate it and, as has been shown, in this case the emergent player base pulled the game away from the designers' and from some players' intentions.

While many interactors lamented as they saw their dream for a truly player-driven *Star Wars Galaxies* universe slip away, Koster pointed them to player cities as a hopeful sign that players could and would create a compelling game world:

> Now, Enix says that early board posters fantasized about the game being based on communities. Standing back and watching player cities form, I think that it still is. But that perhaps the degree to which communities get taken for granted may have been underestimated.

As Koster notes, community-based gameplay was in fact thriving within *Star Wars Galaxies* in the form of player towns (and guilds), in game social organisations designed to support players' goals. However, as Koster also notes, perhaps such communities are now taken for granted within the medium and designers need to support community-based gameplay in more subtle ways. Guilds (and player cities), which have existed in MMOGs since Ultima Online and even longer in MUDs, are understandably perceived by players not as content but rather as inherent parts of MMOGs and inevitable products of gameplay. To point toward player communities as signs of successful player-driven (interactive) gameplay, from this perspective, is simply to point to social structures and conventions that emerged in previous games and are natural outcomes of gameplay activity.

For interactors, the dream of *Star Wars Galaxies* was one where they could create and participate in a *Star Wars* universe; as of the time of writing, signs are emerging that perhaps these players' dreams will be fulfilled. In late 2003, a growing number of guilds and informal player groups began holding 'player game events' for their own amusement. These range from pet races, where players race (and bet on) creatures that they tame, to interactive stories. In one example taken from the official *Star Wars Galaxies* forum, a

group of players fashioned tales of an illegal spice (i.e., drugs) upsetting the spice trade as a way to anchor an elaborate set of overlapping player-authored missions. One group offered money to players who could scout out and uncover the make-believe ring, while another player group offered a bounty on the head of any smuggler participating in the trade. Still other players banded together to stop these smugglers. This example suggests how player-driven gameplay might succeed in a *Star Wars* universe. Players begin by taking the *Star Wars* mythology and using it to construct a conflict—in this case the existence of a dangerous drug and a group of smugglers who need to be stopped. This event not only creates goal-driven missions (i.e., stop the drugs, earn the bounties on those smugglers who are involved) within the game but also plays into many players' fantasies about smuggling spices (like the hero Han Solo). Finally, it suggests the power of a simple design mechanism (here, a player-event forum thread with sample events) to mobilise an entire player base. How player events pan out remains to be seen; however, tracing their evolution and the ongoing dynamic between actors and interactors offers rich insights into how MMOG cultures form and evolve.

Conclusion and implications

The early developmental stages of cyberculture in any massively multiplayer online game, let alone one as anxiously awaited as that of *Star Wars Galaxies*, are important sites for internet researchers interested in MMOGs not just as environments but as cultures as well (Squire, 2001). In this chapter, we have detailed part of the emerging discourses and practices in the virtual world of *Star Wars Galaxies*, highlighting one of the tensions that naturally emerge between varying styles of play (here, power levelling versus role-playing), and how, implicit in this tension within the community of players, is a broader design tension between creating an environment that meets people's expectations based on the pre-specified storyline versus allowing and encouraging emergent play. So far the economic and technological accomplishments of online worlds have (justifiably) received a great deal of attention, but we argue that the ways in which MMOGs are negotiating this terrain among designed worlds, player goals, game structures and broader cultural practices have thus far received far too little attention. In this description of *Star Wars Galaxies*, we see several emergent phenomena of interest to educators, sociologists or anyone charged with the task of designing social systems.

First, educators, policy makers and cultural critics need to understand the complexity of MMOGs and the sophistication of MMOG play as a social practice. Participating in virtual worlds recruits complex literacies that can be confusing, even alienating, to outsiders. Contrary to the fears of many critics who see such media as threats to literacy (cf. Kozol, 1985; Sanders, 1995), we find that, in *Star Wars Galaxies* at least, the demands to participate in the game space require players to engage in complex literacy practices that embody most aspects of what it means to be literate within a given community (cf. Gee, in press). Players invent language, negotiate power relations, present identities and engage in complex argumentation. What should be particularly encouraging to educators is that participants frequently and willingly reflect on these discourses, even creating language designed to critique the practices they engage in. Being literate in an MMOG culture means not only getting one's language right but getting one's practices right as well. Language mediates practice and organises activity, as players collaborate in joint tasks enabling players to engage in sophisticated practices. In short, whereas many have feared that participants in MMOGs are 'doing nothing' or 'wasting their time', we find that MMOG participants are engaging in complex practices where they invent and reinvent themselves in powerful ways.

The design of MMOGs is of increasing interest to educators, business leaders and entertainment executives looking to apply design principles from this emerging medium to the design of learning environments, customer help sites or other entertainment media (cf. Barab, Thomas, Dodge, et al., in press; Kim, 2000). We have shown that MMOGs as they form are not just the result of technical specifications but, importantly and equally, cultural processes as well. The culture of *Star Wars Galaxies* has evolved in dynamic relation to players' intentions, the game's design features and broader mediating cultures such as other existing MMOGs. Because MMOGs are living, breathing cultures, player practices do not always align with the intentions of designers as one might anticipate. On the one hand, such improvisation is the very fodder for grassroots community building. On the other, players can and do game in ways that are orthogonal to the most fundamental narrative aspects of the game. A real tension emerges when designers are, essentially, expected to 'design for emergence'. One can put incentive structures in place, but one cannot predict the results with any meaningful degree of certainty.

Indeed, we argue that MMOGs are perhaps most interesting in how they serve as examples of 'designed cultures'. In the case of *Star Wars Galaxies*, the world is designed not only to be entertaining, but also as a reflection of the *Star Wars* universe overall. The tensions that we have described here between achievers and role-players, actors and interactors, are instructive. They show us how leading activities (such as the Jedi achievement structure) can result in unintended consequences that impact on an entire community, and how the addition of simple out-of-game communication tools (like the player event forum) can enable players to transform their communities in powerful ways. In all of these processes, we see that MMOGs are neither designed nor wholly emergent, but rather arising at the intersection of player goals, expectations and design features. Watching the *Star Wars Galaxies* design team struggle to manage these interacting (and at times contradictory) forces reminds us of the similar challenges faced by educators designing classroom and school cultures.

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◆ Chapter 9

Interactivity and pedagogy in 'edu-tainment' software

David Buckingham and Margaret Scanlon

While some have argued that the market is now approaching saturation, the exponential growth of home computing seems to be continuing unabated. There are many reasons for this. As the equipment has fallen in price and become more 'user-friendly', the internet in particular is increasingly being utilised as a medium for entertainment—for leisure interests, home shopping and personal communication. Yet the potential role of home computers in children's education is undoubtedly a key explanation for their rapid dissemination.

Children are a primary market for computer-based entertainment, which is largely delivered through dedicated games consoles. But when it comes to the PC, it is the educational potential of computing that is most strongly emphasised in the advertising and in public debate. Indeed, the home computer could be seen as one of the indispensable 'symbolic goods' of contemporary parenting (Cawson et al., 1995). Investing in computers is, so parents are frequently told, a way of investing in your children's future. Computers give children access to worlds of knowledge that would otherwise be denied to them; and, so it is argued, they give children control of their own learning. Education and parenting without technology thereby come to be seen as at least conservative, if not downright reactionary. It is the fundamental responsibility of good parents and teachers to 'catch up' with the children who are in their charge (Buckingham, 2000).

In her research on the marketing of computer hardware and software in Australia in the mid-1990s, Nixon (1998) points to the emergence of a new range of specialist magazines aimed specifically at the family market, with titles like *Computer Living*, *Family PC* and *Parents and Computers*. As Nixon shows, these magazines and the advertising they carried featured prominent images of 'happy techno-families', and they played particularly on parents' anxieties about their children's education. Computers were represented as a