Introduction

For the purpose of this case study, I will focus on the user interface of the massive multiplayer online roleplaying game, *World of Warcraft*. WoW’s interface is particularly useful to use for applying an ANT + Hypertext frankentheory because it is modifiable by players and is even encouraged by Blizzard. Although many interfaces are capable of being modded, not all game developers actually encourage the use of modifications to the user interface within their games. Blizzard also implements rules within the terms of service about modifications, particularly in regard to compensation. Players who create and distribute modifications cannot sell these modifications for in or out of game currency. Having a visual reference for the user interface provides an image in order to demonstrate the narrative of play. I’ve chosen to look at my own interface because ANT privileges narrative, as well as emphasizes the actor’s ability to narrate their decisions. It also allows me to point out specifically what the hypertext present in the interface allows me as the player to do/learn.

I’ve chosen to focus on two specific interface set ups that I use based on two types of play that I engage in— raiding and pet collecting/battling.

Pet collecting and battling is focused on little non-playable companion pets that you can collect, catch, and battle against within the game. The style is similar to Pokemon, but it is all integrated into the larger world of the game and pets can be bought from NPCs (non-playable characters) or received as a reward for completing certain achievements in addition to the catch/battle system.
Raiding is when a group of players (10-25 players) enter into a raid (large dungeon) in order to defeat a certain number of bosses (very strong monsters). This usually requires strategy work between the players with each player having particular role(s) they must fulfill in order for the encounter to be successful. Most raiding groups are composed of guild members and they enter into the raid a few times a week at scheduled times.

**Typical interface I use for pet battling/collecting.**

**Typical interface I use when raiding as a Moonkin (damage dealer).**

**Literature Review**

Currently, most research that discusses MMOs (*WoW* and *Everquest*, in particular) in relation to networks is specifically focused on the social network—the socializing between players. This happens between players in a multitude of ways, such as through social networks created through guilds which also is connected to the interface (Williams et al). Williams et al were interested in how the interface impacts social interactions, however their focus in the study was on social capital and very little discussion is given to how the interface ended up contributing to their study. However, they do note that in addition to other features such as game mechanics and player’s choices, that the “governing computer codes were ultimately foundational rather than entirely imposing. By analogy, we find that playing WoW is as social as a team sport, which has its own rules...” (357). Shen looked at network patterns and social architecture within *Everquest II*, another popular MMO. Shen found that “network patterns revealed that the social architecture of the world was quite effective in shaping the structure of interactions, as the involvement in various social networks” (672). However, Shen also found that many players preferred solo play despite the the built-in mechanisms of the game that encouraged social play. The interface is clearly part of this as parts of the interface encourage social interaction between players.
such as the Looking for Group tab so that players can queue for dungeons where each player is placed randomly with
other players to complete dungeons or raids and also the Social tab that allows players to see a friends list. These are
only two examples from *World of Warcraft*, but there are many others. Targett et al's article, “A Study of User Interface
Modifications in World of Warcraft,” discusses a survey study conducted by the team of researchers in 2007 and again
in 2011 that was interested in the World of Warcraft users that were creating and using user interface modifications or
UI mods. The goal was “to study the effect that user created interfaces have had on WoW and its community of users”
(Targett et al). In order to study these effects, the researchers created an online survey that specifically looked at four
aspects of the UIM (user interface modification) community. These four aspects were "(R1) the backgrounds of its
members, (R2) their attitudes towards modifications and the community itself, (R3) their use of UI modifications, (R4)
the characteristics and motivations of users who create and share modifications” (Targett et al). Despite the focus on
interfaces, Targett et al is not specifically interested in the interface as a network. One of the reasons for my focus on
the interface as a network is because of this gap in the research in which the interface of *World of Warcraft* is examined
as a network. (The other is that interfaces are just so interesting!).

**Theories: ANT & Hypertext**

I will be using Latour’s Actor-Network Theory and Joyce’s discussion of hypertext for this analysis. Actor–network
theory (ANT) is an approach to social theory and research, that comes from sociology. Latour writes that for too long
sociologists have been practicing a ‘social explanation’ discipline. Instead, he calls for a sociology of associations,
which is focusing the tracing of associations, or “social does not designate a thing among other things, like a black
sheep among other white sheep, but a type of connection between things that are not themselves social” (5, emphasis
his). He believes ANT provides a way of tracing these associations in a robust way, a way that requires a researcher to
continue to find more and more traces, ultimately that can never all be found. I chose to use Joyce’s discussion of
hypertext because as he says that “hypertext readers not only choose the order of what they read but, in doing so, also
alter its form by their choices” (19). While I don’t think he was originally considering the reading the hypertext of an
interface of a game, I think his point here fits better within a game system than a typical text, even an online text that
follows typical written conventions. The interface hypertext communicates player choices to the game and the game
responds based on the player’s choices. It acts as a much less linear space than typical online texts like web articles
that tend to mimic traditional print media.

While I am using both ANT and Hypertext theories for this case study, it is primarily an ANT reading, showing how
hypertext, particularly in the case of this interface, helps to illuminate the connections that are taking place between the
interface, information, and player. I'll be doing an ANT reading of two different interface images. One will be from the
pet battling interface I use and, another will be a significantly modified interface I use for raiding. I’ll be talking from my
perspective as my interface, both the typical interface and then the modifications I use when raiding and why. The
hypertext theory will help me discuss the action bar and the levels of readings of the interface that the player takes on
simultaneously as part of play.

**Pet Battling + ANT/Hypertext**

The pink surrounds the default interface that WoW provides.

I highlighted the default “bar” in *World of Warcraft* that players have access to from the beginning in order to discuss
what players first encounter as well as how this the action bar changes depending on choices the player has made
during character creation as well as how new spells are added as players level up. For instance, the left side of the bar
are made up of druid damage spells—anytime I click the image which acts as hypertext, and it causes my character to
perform an action. There are two layers of hypertext here; the first is that hovering over the image provides a tooltip that
allows the player to read what the spell does. The second layer is the actual clicking which causes the spell to be used.

The tool tip allowed me as a player to become familiar with my move set when I first began playing. I still use the tool tips when I create a new character that is a class I am not familiar with, since I typically play a druid. The spells become like nodes within the network that the actor has some agency over as the player can move the spells within the bar. The player can also expand the bar through the settings under interface settings. This allows the player to places on the actionbar for more spells. In the picture of my interface, I have spells above the default bar as well as a bar on the right hand side.

The following is a full markup of what is taking place for me as the player in this particular screenshot.

The screenshot shows me preparing to engage a little spider in battle. Although the spider is not visible, I found him through looking at the top right hand corner of my interface. It is difficult to see in the screenshot, but there are green pawprints moving around the map. Hovering over these (hypertext!) shows me the name of the pet, “spectral spider”. This allows me to more easily find the pet and click on it in game to engage it in battle. My next step is to look in my bag for a specific item that gives my pets 10% more experience when battling that I acquired through an achievement. In order to do this, I click the bag hyperlink which brings up the small box in green, or my backpack. I am able to hover
over the items for more information about in case I don’t know. Clicking the hat makes it appear on my character and a “buff” appears in the top right hand corner of my screen, indicating my pets will now receive the buff. The part of the actionbar that the player has little agency over in terms of whether it appears on the bar or not is the game related hyperlinks section which brings up smaller interfaces for specific types of gameplay, although players still have some agency because they can choose to click on these or not.

Clicking on one of those game hyperlinks (the tiny little horse) brings up the interface box in the screenshot in orange: the pet and mount journal interface. This interface has tabs at the bottom, including “pets” that allows me to see all of my pets in one place as well as move them into battle spaces. It also allows me to check their spell list (and hover over it for tooltips). There is also a “rivals” tab, which is a modified part of the interface. It is from an addon created by another user that is helpful when battling new opponents. It allows the player to see what move sets rival NPCs have so that the player can make strategic decisions on which pets to use.

A lot of the nodes, although separated, have to be engaged by the player simultaneously, and the pattern for reading that the player has is likely different from other players. As players become more experienced, they will likely look at the tool tips less frequently, meaning that the content travels differently through the network because of this. The player’s choices also show how the network can grow or shrink, depending on the activities that the player chooses to engage in. For example, the pet battling I just described can be a social feature of the game, but for the most part functions as a single player activity. However, raiding, the next interface I will be looking at is quite different. My raiding interface allows me to collaborate with 9 other people as we work together in Dragon Soul (a raid/dungeon) in order to defeat Deathwing.

Raiding Interface: ANT/Hypertext

In a raiding situation, the network grows significantly because not only does the player (actor) exist within their own network of spells, bags, and item set, but players become part of a larger social player network as well. For example, most raid groups, like mine, operate within a guild setting. This means that we have a social group that interacts, and while some raid members are also guildmates, not all of our guildmates raid with us. That’s limited to 10. We have to use the calendar feature to link our schedules so we can work together at a specific time and date.

There is also the network created among players inside the actual raid. The room is sealed off when the boss battle begins and players must coordinate, moving around the room to avoid damage and provide help to other players. Depending on the fight, this can become very chaotic. This is what is happening in the background of the screenshot and completely ignores the interface that players must also pay attention to as they carry out the boss fight together. All of these layers are important for how ANT defines the network—as the researcher we want to see as much of the tracing of connections taking place as possible. The interface provides the information to the player that allows them to make decisions about how to proceed throughout the fight. Because of the growth of the network, there are so many nodes, but perhaps of different sizes. I’d say that major nodes include the NPC Boss that the players are fighting as well as the 10 players. But then each player basically has a smaller set of nodes that branch off from their larger node. I’m realizing this is actually very difficult to explain, so I’ve made visuals to explain instead.
Player characters interact with the boss as well as each other depending on their responsibilities. For instance, the tank interacts directly with the off-tank as they collaborate together to take hits from the boss. Healers deal very little with the boss, but interact heavily with other characters through healing spells.

While the player is working to collaborate within the network of actors present in the raid situation, the player also has to navigate the network of the interface that they must read in order to be a valuable member of the team. This includes juggling multiple parts of the interface (nodes) and recognizing where the nodes intersect. For example: for a healer, health and debuff bars on the screen are important because healers watch these to know when to use their spells, while also keeping an eye on their own mana pool.

All of the nodes are mediated through hypertext; I say this because the interface requires the player to use hypertext in
To interact with the objects of the game as well as with other players and the hypertext allows players to make strategic decisions for play. They can see tool tips to help them decide whether to use a spell at the moment or not, for instance. In the game, the hypertext is not necessarily added in an element that moves the reader to another page like in some articles online, but rather adds layering of information on top of what the player is already seeing. The hypertext allows multiple levels of reading to take place at the same time.

What is moving in the network is the results or content of player’s choices. This is most easily seen in the form of choosing to use certain spells, since the avatar makes specific movements with animations for different spells that are used. In terms of ANT, the actor (players) have a lot of agency as they create movement throughout play for their avatar as well as move other players, items, spells, and much more throughout gameplay.

The content that is traveling through the network changes depending on specific circumstances. In the raiding example, the content is constantly shifting as players react to boss moves, to the successes and failures of other players. For example, for a healer, the health bars are constantly in motion moving up and down based on damage taken and healing received. The level of the bars means different things for different players. For instance, low health on a ranged damage dealer that will not be taking damage can wait for heals. Low health on a tank taking damage almost constantly cannot, so healers must strategically decide who to heal and what spells to use to give the right amount of heals without stressing their mana pool, because running out of mana could mean the fight ends in failure.

**IV. Conclusion**

I think I underestimated how complicated doing an ANT reading would be. I realized that I had a lot of explaining to do—perhaps more than was really possible to do without a significantly longer piece in order to trace all of the connections, especially to explain them to readers who may not play games, or who may not be familiar with roleplaying game boss fights or dungeons. It creates a lot of layers of complexity that I don’t think I fully appreciated. I also didn’t realize until I really starting writing things out how many layers of networks that players are working through as they play, especially in more social types of gameplay like raiding.

Despite this, I do think I was able to show the tracing of connections happening within the network of the WoW interface and how this interface changes depending on the choices of the player and the type of gameplay that the player is engaged in. The diagrams I think also capture the complexity of the layering of networks that the interface has for the player, pulling the player/reader to look at multiple layers of information and to read and interpret a lot of information at once. Many of these things become easier as players continue to play and become familiar with how the network/interface functions, but it can be overwhelming.

**Works Consulted**


Summary and Recommendation: Chen’s ethnographic monograph, while within game studies, comes from an Education & Literacy background. The range of disciplinary influences on game studies has helped me gain perspective on how interdisciplinary game studies is. Chen made it very clear that he viewed games as a place where expertise was gained. He sees games and the skills players learn within them as having value outside the game, which he acknowledges is not a view that is widely shared. This point of view and his discussion of literacy provided a clear lens of how he was viewing the ethnographic work he was doing. While Chen doesn’t make it clear that this lens came after his initial research, his time spent in the game in terms of observation and decision to focus on the raid group points to this as being similar to traditional ethnographic study. I’d recommend it for anyone interested in ethnography in virtual worlds because he spends time clearly laying out the information around his study, allowing newer researchers to get a feel for setting up an ethnographic study in a virtual world.

Chen lays out a solid context for where and when his research took place. He immersed himself in World of Warcraft and his study took place within a 40 man raid group that raided together between October 2005 and July 2006. Chen does provide a clear explanation of his participant selection, including names of participants (with pseudonyms or usernames isn’t exactly clear) and how often each participated in the raid being studied. While there isn’t discussion how exactly the raiding group formed, some more context about the game might be necessary to understand why, especially since this isn’t a one guild raid group which is often found in WoW, moreso now that raiding group size has downsized dramatically. It would definitely be difficult for someone unfamiliar with WoW to really understand this process, which really isn’t a failing of Chen’s so much as the specific need for the researcher to be immersed within the environment being studied. His coding seemed particularly focused on his epistemological framework games as way to learn expertise and solve complex problems. His discussion of tools was useful, but did not include information about what player add-ons he had used throughout the process. It also isn’t specified what tool was used to do the voice recording or how conversations/video were determined to be worth recording.

Summary & Recommendation:

Danielle Roach’s dissertation Pedagogy at Play: Gamification and Game Design in the 21st-Century Writing Classroom is situated within a games studies and cultural studies methodology. The foundation of her approach is “a series of interviews with writing instructors who use games and play in the classroom” (26). She uses these interviews as a sample of the ways writing instructors include games in their courses. She also collected other data including texts about gamification as well as games. She is specifically interested in the language used by educators to talk about games and gamification with attention to voices as the core of the project. The organization of the dissertation chapters followed four common threads based on responses from the interview participants: (1) playful pedagogy, (2) writing classrooms as game environments, (3) writing about games, and (4) writing in and for games (42). Ultimately Roach says that the project “by examining narratives about the inclusion of games and play in the classroom, [the] study seeks to consider how the examples offered by instructors compare with literature and prevailing attitudes about games and play in the classroom” (47).

One of the places that I thought was interesting was in the interview process that what the term game(s) meant was not completely clear. This has begun to make me consider when I look for participants if I should ask for any game or focus
specifically on video games or table top games. Still on the fence about that. Roach clearly sets out her theoretical framework through the literature review, as well as sets our her methodology, including study design clearly in her methods chapter. I found it very helpful that Roach spent time discussing how she solicited a population for her study (something I wish I would have read before I wrote my IRB proposal since our projects seem very similar). I also found the discussion about research tools such as using Skype and the recording add-on Evaer useful for considering how to implement specific tools in the interview process. What I realized is that Roach’s interest and study are similar to my own ideas for my study (though mine on much much smaller scale). I think it will be very useful to me for my project this semester and I plan to use it as one of my sources.

Citation:

Blog Post #3

Citation

Summary & Recommendation
I’ll be focusing my blog post on Chapter 6 of the dissertation where Hawreliak discusses the Terror Management Theory (TMT) and two experiments that he helped design and administer as a research assistant. I’ve chosen the focus on this chapter, because most of the dissertation is focused on close reading, however this chapter is specifically focused on a study.

Hawreliak begins with a discussion of TMT theory and a literature review to contextualize the experiments, as well as explain the purpose for using TMT theory. I felt this was useful because it illustrated the steps taken to decide why a theory was fitting in order to answer the specific research questions Hawreliak had. His focus for the analysis is on the second experiment. He writes, "the second study (E2) applied TMT to videogame analysis, and asked if playing violent videogames would lead to increased a) Death-thought accessibility, and b) Worldview defence” (310). Participants for the study were recruited from the University of Waterloo’s undergrad Psych courses and given credit for participation. Participants played two different games: Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 and Paintball 2. Hawreliak explained the rationale for the choice of games, highlighting that both are first-person shooter games (FPS), but Call of Duty is in the context of war and death, while Paintball 2 has no depiction of death and is a friendly game of paintball. After participants had played either one of the games, or no games for 20 minutes, each was given a 17 page questionnaire on pen and paper. The results section noted that there were not the clear results expected by the hypothesis, and the experiment was only ran once, which Hawreliak noted as a weakness of the experiment, but he said it should be "primarily viewed as an attempt to apply TMT to videogame analysis” (322).

I found the study interesting, but it seemed very crammed into one small section of the dissertation, although it seemed like it may have warranted more space. A lot of acronyms were used and were not clearly defined which made it difficult to read. While some discussion of the questionnaire was present, there wasn’t an appendix or further information about what the questionnaire contained. I found it a bit inaccessible for someone new to this kind of research and probably wouldn’t recommend it since it doesn’t even seem to be the primary focus of the dissertation as a whole. There were also some assumptions that Hawreliak made that I was uncomfortable with. He had a significant number of women in his study, and he wrote, “since men tend to be more familiar with the FPS genre than women, future iterations may want to set parameters when it comes to participant gender” (316). This seemed like a very stereotypical assumption that didn’t come from any data or sources. I was pretty disappointed with this comment and the following discussion on
Case Study #1

Case Study #1 – Genre Theories in *World of Warcraft*

Pulling from the genre theories of Miller, Bazerman, and Popham, I'll be looking at *World of Warcraft* as a network of genres that meets the needs of the community of players. Although there are layers of networks involved in the game, I'll be specifically looking at the network of video game genres that *WoW* employs. The genres that *World of Warcraft* pulls from are based on player expectations built over time within the gaming community. For instance, *WoW* defines itself and is defined by the community as first a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). This acts as its official genre, however the game employs multiple genres that act as boundary objects to each other, helping to mediate the tensions created by the ever expanding game and community. By looking at the game as a meeting place of different pieces of a genre system (Bazerman), the theories articulate the game as a series of pieces that work with and against each other in order to create the game, especially since it continues to change over time as new genres are introduced to the game over time through software patches and expansions.

The chart shows a very simplified version of the genres at work within *World of Warcraft*. The central node is the MMORPG, as that is the genre that *WoW* attempts to subscribe to in name and through marketing. However, expectations for this particular genre are vast primarily because it tells us so little. We know the game is a massive multiplayer game and the RPG element primarily comes from fantasy world setting. The RPG element also is pulling from previous work in RPG games that is quite diverse, especially over time. *WoW* doesn’t only have one particular chronological setting since it is continually updated in small software patches, but also in large expansion packs every few years which allows it continue to change in multiple ways, including in expectations of the RPG genre. Some features of this genre include mana and health bars and control of individual character that involves customization of character and that the character fits into a larger narrative framework created by the game and the player. This specific node features prominently in the eye of the gaming community and allows a lot of flexibility. It provides boundary object for other genres incorporated into the game to bump up against and create tension as well as provide new possibilities for the player.

The other genres incorporated into the game have specific roles in game play, and often different types of players categorize themselves as certain types of player in terms of the secondary genres. For instance, most players identify as a dungeon/raider player, or a *PvE (player vs. environment) content player* which fits into the dungeon crawler genre or as a *PvP (player vs. player) content player*, similar to the tower defense genre. It is possible to strip this down...
further to cooperative (PvE vs. PvP) competitive play styles, but this is very simplified as it ignores that both types of play incorporate cooperative and competitive play elements. However, these types of play are both integral to the WoW community and meeting the needs of players. They create tension between each other, but both help to define the MMORPG genre as encompassing both types of game play as well as giving players multiple outlets for play. The game also incorporates the use of quests from the dungeon crawler genre for players to experience both dungeon crawler and tower defense elements at the same time.

The game also incorporates other genres in smaller areas of game play such as the inclusion of social games or Pokemon style of catch and collect. While Pokemon typically falls into the role-playing game genre, there is argument in the community that it has created its own genre that has been copied and employed in other games as well. For WoW, I specifically thought of the pet collecting feature that allows players to travel around Azeroth catching little animals called companion pets. WoW also implemented a battle system where the player can play against non-playable characters (NPCs) or other people, very similar to Pokemon. Even community members often call it Pokemon.

![Genre Hierarchy Diagram](image)

Specifically in more recent expansions, secondary genres have emerged within the game and gained more agency, such as the Pokemon style of catch and collect. As players have expressed interest in these types of genres incorporated into the larger framework of the game, achievements and prizes for completion have been added. A genre like the social/mobile gaming genre being implemented into the game, such as through the follower mini game in the garrison, has been met with very mixed reviews from the community. The agency of the nodes seems primarily connected with audience response, particularly to how they see the genre meshing or disrupting their genre expectations when playing. The nodes are situated in a hierarchy that respond to the primary defining genre, as well as the two genres that players typically categorize themselves under. There are more genres within game play, but the fall under the main genre of MMORPG, and then under either the PvE or PvP content genres, sometimes connecting the two in some ways such as the Pet catch and collect/Pokemon genre that exists in the game that allows players to stay entirely in the PvE content genre or mix it with the PvP content genre. The smaller genres that begin to appear and become categorized under the different content genres allow the overall genre of MMORPG to expand. When there is too much of a cognitive dissonance between the overarching genre of MMORPG however, the tertiary genres may experience tensions and possibly die out because players refuse to engage or complain openly within the community. Since the genre is to serve community, this dissonance means that the genre may dissolve from non-use, but also may be taken out of the game by developers.

The genre theories provide affordances in that they helped me consider the hierarchy of genre that exists within the game of *World of Warcraft*. However, there were also some limitations in discussing the agency that individual players vs. developers have in the creation, emergence, growth, and dissolution of the networks. It also ignored the ways that specific social networks are built in relation to these genres, which is something I’m really interested in discussing in further case studies.

**Works Consulted**


Blog Post #1: Me and Lee: Identification and the Play of Attraction in The Walking Dead

Summary:
Taylor et al's article "Me and Lee: Identification and the Play of Attraction in The Walking Dead" is about a microethnographic participatory research project focused around eight players of the point and click adventure game/visual novel The Walking Dead. The game has similarities to both the graphic novel and television show in terms of the world, however the main characters of the game are Lee and Clementine.

The purpose of the study was to explore "whether, how, and through what processes the players form associations with the game’s playable character" (Taylor et al). The researchers carefully provide a literature review, detailing the limitations of avatar/identification research that has been conducted within Game Studies. Their methodology was meant to be on a small scale with exploratory aims. They provide a working schema for accounting for these associations as "attractors" or complex categories: simulated (relating to the ludic gameworld), lived (relating to player real world experience), conventional (player’s relation to other similar types of genre or media), and situated (localized and embodied settings of play).

I felt that the study provided a lot of pertinent and useful information, including the detailed lit review, participant descriptions, and methodology walk-through. I thought this would be really useful for anyone beginning work in Game Studies, because it provides such a strong description of the study, but also of the intention of the study and why the researchers set out to do the research in the first place. I had previously considered microethnography for studying games, but Taylor et al also included the participatory turn on this research, which they observed isn’t typical for the microethnography, at least not in game studies. They had participants look back at particular moments of play and reflect on their decision making. It was through the descriptions and reflections of participants that Taylor et al determined the four attractors that explained how players form associations with in-game characters. I really appreciated the detail included for it being article length and found it useful for considering my own microstudy this semester.

Citation:
Rationale

An ethical piece at this point might seem a little strange, but I think it fits closely into the topic of OoSes particularly for Game Studies. My reasons for choosing this specific article are twofold. First, that I think ethics is incredibly important in terms of how a researcher approaches a virtual object of study in an ethical way. The article makes a very salient point: how the researcher views the OoS is very connected to if they view the virtual world as space or place. Second, the article begins to get at Juul’s question that I mentioned in my last paper: Do we study games or players?

At least for me, and my question of ‘How about both?’ I think this article made me think of nuancing that question a little bit. This gets complicated, even when we talk about games because different games have different purposes and different levels of interaction of player to game and player to player and these are necessary to consider when deciding what to study and how to go about doing it. While I do think that the approach will depend on the type of game being studied and Juul likely wasn’t focused on MMOGs, it also depends on what we as researchers want to know. I do, however, feel that it would be hard to separate the game from the player in research.

Summary

McKee and Porter are primarily focused in the article on Virtual Worlds or MMOGs (massive multiplayer online games). These games are social games in that many players take part in the game and interact with both the game and other people (or at least that’s the assumption). Their primary focus is on ethical issues in investigating these places (spaces could also be used here, but I’m particularly using places to situate myself based on the terminology in the piece).

McKee and Porter provide a theoretical framework for researchers as they work through ethical issues that deal with these virtual places using rhetoric and heuristics (visual) in order to avoid ethical relativism. “What this mapping strategy visualizes is Sveningsson’s point that neither the public-private continuum nor the sensitive-nonsensitive continuum by itself is a sufficient basis for deciding whether informed consent is necessary. A researcher must take both continua into account” (11).

![Figure 1: Mapping types of interactions with research participants (adaptation of Sveningsson) (McKee & Porter, 2008, p. 732)](image)

Visual heuristic

McKee and Porter also interviewed researchers that were currently working on research in virtual worlds such as Second Life, City of Heroes, and Lineage I & II.

![Figure 3](image)
One of the specific areas that McKee and Porter focused on was how researchers viewed a virtual world in terms of place or space. If researchers viewed the internet as space, they likely saw the location as medium of text, and saw the things they were researching as published text in the public sphere that was open to use for research. Researchers that viewed the internet or virtual worlds as a place were more likely to see the location as a community or world, the object of study as players. Clearly it isn't as cut and dry as one side or the other, but it does present a continuum of mapping views of research of virtual worlds like MMOGs.

McKee & Porter also looked at harm and risk to the larger community of players being studied and how researchers negotiated that in their work. They discussed that many researches did not evaluate the risks of their research the same way that an IRB did, for example.

They also discussed researcher credibility which boiled down to a researcher needing to spend a significant amount of time within the community of study in order to be credible and trustworthy to participants. This also included levels of transparency to members of the community as researchers.

Situating Myself

This particular article really made me begin thinking about my own research, which is primarily focused in MMOGs, though I like studying games outside of MMOGs too. Specifically, I'm currently interested in Mia Consalvo's call to document toxic gamer culture that I wrote about in PAB 1.2. I've found myself in the defining the virtual world as place, rather than space because as McKee and Porter argued, "The position that sees MMOGs and virtual worlds as places—particularly as real places rather than as simulated places—views ethical issues of harm and risk differently from a view that sees them as spaces" (17). McKee and Porter say, "researchers taking this perspective see the game or simulated world as a real place, and, thus, treat avatars and players in such worlds as also real" (17). I'm not sure I could align myself differently even if I tried as I consider my (vast) time investment in virtual worlds.

There's some dilemmas I'm encountering in my own head as I continue to try to work out how to approach this call for documentation. The researchers that McKee and Porter discussed said many things that resonated with me.

"I refuse to use any of the data that would show anyone in a poor light or raise any issues about their own integrity" (Steinkuehler interview, 25). All the researchers made some comment about not wanting to harm the community through their research.

In one sense, I've seen the struggle of the gaming community to be seen as legitimate, as well as scholars working to make video games a legitimate area of study. However, as a female gamer, and as a gamer that has seen some of the toxic culture in games harm other players in very real ways, I'm still working out how to negotiate this research. The water seems murky and I'm kind of afraid the Loch Ness monster lies below. I don't want to represent the community in a negative way, but the truth is that this toxic gamer culture exists and that since it is harmful to many within the community, it seems absolutely necessary to document these issues. How to go about doing that ethically is still eluding me a bit, though I'm slowly starting to generate an idea of what that might look like.

P.S. For anyone that reads the article or this and is interested in playing the games mentioned by researchers as their places of study. Second Life and Lineage II are both free to play. City of Heroes (which I played for awhile) however, is no longer available to play anymore.

Second Life
Lineage II

References


The Narratology vs Ludology Question

There seem to be multiple threads of questions within game studies, including the use of games in the classroom. However, I decided to focus on the question of are games rules or narrative? The question has seemed to consistently come up in game studies, starting near the beginning of the development of defining "Game Studies" with a formal name. Even after scholars have said that the debate is over, it continues to reappear in blog posts, in the teaching of games studies, and in scholarship which makes it all the more fascinating. The question arose out a much simpler question, "What is a game?"

Timeline of Scholars Discussing the Issue

Some of the first scholars that begin talking about narratology and ludology are Espen Aarseth, in 1997, in his book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, and Gonzalo Frasca in his 1999 article, “LUDOLOGY MEETS NARRATOLOGY: Similitude and differences between (video)games and narrative.” However, the debate that begin to rise out of these discussions, was, as Ian Bogost describes, "Gonzalo Frasca tried to remind us at the very first DiGRA conference six years ago...these two concepts were never intended to be opponents in the way a Las Vegas marquis-worthy label like "Ludology vs. Narratology" suggests." Rather, the scholars didn't want to reduce video game discussions to only being about narratives, as they saw games in more nuanced, complicated ways.

Bogost argues that the entire debate originally was to set up a movement from viewing games through a functionalist approach to a formal approach. Setting up ludology and narrative meant that either choice would be a formalist approach.

In other words: Formalism vs. Formalism = Formalism wins.

However, Bogost discusses that these pieces, as well as work from other scholars on narratology vs ludology caused some confusion and that the debate ensued from there.

Based on other pieces that I've read and my understanding of the threads I've been digging through, this also seems to be a push from Game Studies scholars to establish Game Studies as a legitimate and separate discipline from other areas of study. I want to return briefly to the Games Studies Journal Year One issue editorial written by Espen Aarseth. He writes, just before he heads into the next section about creating a new discipline

In this issue, the debate about narratives’ and narratology’s relevance to game studies is clearly visible. This is a debate that shows the very early stage we are still in, where the struggle of controlling and shaping the theoretical paradigms has just started.
He discusses narrative very closely in relation to what he contends are problems with the current state of Game Studies. “Games are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonising attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again.” It seems as though scholars are equating the discussion of narratology with the colonization of other disciplines, which they see as a problem to situating Game Studies as its own field. So, it seems that the question is largely about epistemology about what Game Studies is, but also in where people align themselves on the issue of discipline and where Game Studies belongs within the departmental framework.

Aarseth directly addresses pieces within this first issue of the journal, which includes, Jesper Juul’s article, Games Telling Tories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives that I used for my PAB post. In the 2001 article, Juul seems tentative on where he sees narrative playing out in games studies but he does acknowledge, relating back even to his own work, that “Games and narratives can on some points be said to have similar traits. This does mean that the strong position of claiming games and narratives to be completely unrelated (my own text, Juul 1999 is a good example) is untenable.”

Juul’s work seems to evolve over time though, along with this debate. By 2005, Juul has reevaluated his views again in his book, Half-real: Video games between real rules and fictional worlds. Discussed by both Colby & Colby from my other PAB post last week and Ian Bogost, Bogost explains that, “Games, argues Juul, can be both ludic and fictive, without giving up either their systemic nature or their fictional one.”

Ian Bogost goes on to talk more about Juul, explaining that, “More recently, Juul has offered another take on the current state of game scholarship. The old problem of ludology and narratology has passed, he argues, and in its place we find a new one, which he calls the Game/Player Problem.”

Before I address this supposed “shift” in debate, I’m going to provide a succinct infographic to simplify some of this a bit.
Is the Debate Really Over?

I was curious if this debate actually seems to over as Juul implies, or it still something very much a
live in Game Studies. Based on what I found, I think that while there seems to be less focus on complete dismissal of narratives or gameplay rules, this is still a debate or at least a topic of interest in game scholars.

First, I looked into classes teaching Game Studies. I found some slides that point to this discussion happening in classrooms where video games are being studied. The slides featured here are from Slideshare and were published in 2012 and 2015 on the site. These two slides in particular show that attention is still being paid to the debate in discussions among gamers and in game studies classrooms.

Also, the debate is still being discussed in journals, such as *reconstruction: studies in contemporary culture*. One of the most recent calls for papers from managing editor Marc Outlette reads in part:

Even though it might be considered a relatively new discipline, Game Studies has galvanized around a readily recognizable set of determinisms. Indeed, the necessity of differentiating between video and computer games instantiates highlights an important pair. Conversely, it might be argued that a set of determinisms have galvanized around Game Studies, not least of which is the ongoing duel of the ludology and narratology dichotomies.

**Players or Games?**

Maybe I’m rushing into saying this, but why is this a “this or that” question? It seems much more likely to me that a complete picture of study involves the study of both—not necessarily that everyone needs to look at both in every study, but that a solid understanding of video games involves work on both players and games, as well as the intersections or convergences of players and games seem inseparable. My own interests are particularly within the MMO communities, like *World of Warcraft*. These are highly social games, even if players choose to play solo (which begs the question, why?!), but at the same time, the game itself is also very important in studying this space.

Perhaps Game Studies could benefit from attempting a more nuanced look at the dichotomies that continuously seem to be set up whether that is in narratology vs. ludology, players vs. games, or as Marc Outlette discussed, relying on the male vs. female dichotomy sex role theory used by many scholars studying games and gender. Why are we setting up these dichotomies? What purpose does it serve? How is it limiting the potential that our work has?

**References**


Paper #1: Game Studies History

Game Studies — Where to Begin?

I mentioned in one of my PAB posts the even narrower niche of Game Studies that ADA: The Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology defines in their 2nd issue: Feminist Game Studies that was published in June 2013. One article within the issue, written by Mia Consalvo, “Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Game Studies Scholars,” called on scholars to look beyond just the game itself, but to look at the gamer culture and the prevalence of hate speech towards those who fall outside of the assumed default white, heterosexual, male player. However, the more I considered this as a place for my own research, I do feel that it really is a theoretical lens to be applied to Game Studies, rather than it’s own sub discipline, so I decided to focus my history on Game Studies.

Even starting there is difficult. While there have been several calls for Game Studies to have its own discipline, most of Game Studies is still housed within other disciplines, including English, likely because questions of some Game Studies scholars focus on narratology. Since English has such a close relationship with narrative, it makes sense how it has come to house Game Studies scholars.

Tension

As I spent time researching, I came across some tensions concerning the beginning of game studies and the place of game studies in academia. One of the main tensions is the call by some for Game Studies to have its own discipline separate from the many disciplines that currently house it. The Editor-in-Chief of Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research, Espen Aarseth, called for the development of Game Studies as its own discipline in the very first issue. He references Game Studies in English, mentioning English as a colonizer: “Games are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonising attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again” (Aarseth). His discussions seem reductionist in the discussion about how other disciplines have contributed to Game Studies, but that seems to be based on the focus to emancipate Game Studies. In some ways his call has been answered—he now works in the Center for Co...
mputer Games Research at the IT University of Copenhagen. (Side note: All the faculty are male. All but one of the PhD students are male.)

On the other hand, Frans Mäyrä, in his book An Introduction to Game Studies, says:

Game Studies is faced with the double challenge of creating its own identity, while at the same time maintaining an active dialogue with the other disciplines...the majority of game studies will continue to be practised by individuals who are nominally situated in some other field: in literary, film, or media studies, or in departments of communication research, sociology, psychology, computer science, or in some of the other numerous fields where game studies is currently exercised. (5)

The interdisciplinary nature of current Game Studies can make it difficult on new scholars though. “students focusing on games may find it hard to get the advice, support, and understanding they need while engaging in the academic study of games” (5 Mäyrä). I can definitely see this linking to my own scholarship. I received my Masters in English with a focus on rhetoric and composition. While I could use tools from my training there and apply them to games, especially the rhetorical training, the help from faculty members was minimal. I don’t want this to sound bad– in fact my mentors were very supportive of my research ideas, of my work, and of using games in papers that I completed– but most of the faculty members had little to no experience even playing video games which meant that the feedback I received was limited by their own experiences. Perhaps herein lies the difficulty of game studies being so interdisciplinary and being housed in so many departments. I do think that the interdisciplinary nature means that scholars come with a lot of different perspectives and offerings for the field and I don’t see that as a weakness.

Setting a Time & Place for the Emergence of Game Studies

Espen Aarseth sets Game Studies beginning very recently historically, 2001, in the first issue of Computer Game Studies.

2001 can be seen as the Year One of Computer Game Studies as an emerging, viable, international, academic field. This year has seen the first international scholarly conference on computer games, in Copenhagen in March, and several others will follow. 01-02 may also be the academic year when regular graduate programs in computer game studies are offered for the first time in universities. And it might be the first time scholars and academics take computer games seriously, as a cultural field whose value is hard to overestimate.

2001 seems very recent though, and other scholars trace back Game Studies much further. Frans Mäyrä points to the early 1900s as a place where scholars first took an interest in games (though not computer games/video games as we know them now) and he considers them to be classics in the field: ethnographer Stewart Culin’s Games of the North American American Indians (1907) and History of Chess by Harold James Ruthven Murray (1913).

Mäyrä also discusses the International Simulation and Gaming Association (ISAGA) that was established in 1970 that has organized annual conferences and the academic journal Simulation & Gaming has been published since 1970, “making it the oldest regular publication in the field” (7).

Why Did Game Studies Come About?
“Leet Noobs” addresses key issues in new literacy studies from a unique position. As both a gamer and a sophisticated thinker about technology, games, and learning, Mark Chen is able to trace the ongoing successes and failures of a high-end raiding guild in ‘World of Warcraft’ from multiple perspectives, and draws the reader into the fraught and uncertain process of raiding. Leet Noobs provides an accessible account of players teaming together to accomplish a goal. Written from the perspective of a learning sciences researcher, Leet Noobs offers not only observations from a hardcore gamer, but also deconstructs game play on a cognitive level. Mark Chen traces how group expertise is formed and contrasts this with individual expertise. Group expertise in socially-situated joint tasks requires successful
negotiation and distribution of roles and responsibilities among group members and their material resources such that the group is a network of actors all in alignment on shared tasks. Using ethnographic methods, the author documents the life and death of a player group in the online game World of Warcraft as it engaged in a 40-person activity called raiding, which consisted of highly coordinated battles against difficult game-controlled monsters. Before joining the group, the players had successfully built up enough social and cultural capital to be recognized as expert players. Thus, once-expert players became novices or noobs to relearn expert or leet gameplay, yet Leet Noobs: The Life and Death of an Expert Player Group in World of Warcraft (New Literacies and Digital Epistemologies). M Chen. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012. Leet noobs: Expertise and collaboration in a World of Warcraft player group as distributed sociomaterial practice. M Chen. University of Washington Graduate School, 2010. Measuring flow in a computer game simulating a foreign language environment. M Chen, S Johnson. Unpublished article, 2004.