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The New Third Place: Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming in American Youth Culture

Constance A. Steinkuehler

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) function as one novel form of a new “third place” for informal sociability. Based on data collected as part of an ongoing two-year virtual cognitive ethnography of the game *Lineage* (first I, now II), I outline how the features of MMOG digital worlds satisfy Oldenburg’s (1999) defining criteria for the very sorts of third places “real world” America sorely lacks. Then, building on this characterization, I discuss why such games matter for educators and researchers interested in cognition and learning not only in digital communities but also in contemporary everyday life in the broadest sense.

“All play means something.” Huizinga, J. (1949).

In his recent book *The Great Good Place*, sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1999) makes the argument that American culture has lost many of its *third places* – spaces for neither work nor home but rather informal social life. “The essential group experience is being replaced by the exaggerated self-consciousness of individuals,” Oldenburg argues. “American life-styles, for all the material acquisition and the seeking after comforts and pleasures, are plagued by boredom, loneliness, alienation” (p. 13). Recent national survey data corroborates this assertion, with television claiming more than half of American leisure time and only three-quarters of an hour per day on average spent socializing (Longley, 2004), either in the home or outside it. While editorialists such as Solomon (2004) bemoan the rise in electronic media such as videogames as “torpid” and urge American

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public schools and society to “encourage that great thrill of finding kinship in shared experiences of books,” others scholars take a markedly different tack, arguing that online digital technologies such as the Internet (Hampton & Wellman, 2003) and MUDs (Bruckman & Resnick, 1995) are, in both form and function, new (albeit digitally mediated) informal social spaces themselves. “The Web creates a Third Space,” writes Stowe Boyd (2004), editor of the technology news column *Get Real*. “People can meet and create those weak ties that make life a richer and more diverse place ... we can let off steam, argue about the local politics or sports, and make sense of the world.”

If this latter claim is true, then massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) may very well serve as the most compelling examples of digitally mediated third places to date. As Williams (forthcoming) insightfully points out, such games have kindled a deeply ambivalent attitude in American culture (for example, the media attention given the Internet based gaming habits of the perpetrators of the grizzly Columbine High School shootings), an attitude perhaps rooted in societal guilt over the mistreatment and neglect of American youth, one that again casts them as the source of problems (in this case, violence and crime) rather than the

victims of those oft-ignored risk factors associated with them (e.g. abuse from relatives, neglect, poverty). Despite the ambivalence, however, the online gaming industry continues to boom “with up to four million players worldwide regularly visiting make-believe lands to fight, hunt for treasure, or just sit their characters down for a chat” (Meek, 2004). The MMOG *Lineage* (first I, then II), for example, boasts more than three million combined current subscribers (Woodcock, 2004) and, in the course of a year, *Ultima Online* devours more than one hundred and sixty million man-hours (Kolbert, 2001). With the average amount of weekly gameplay ranging from 12 to 21 hours and nearly 30 percent of MMOGamers spending their in-game time with beyond-game friends (Seay, Jerome, Lee, & Kraut, 2004), researchers and educators interested in the contemporary lives of adolescents – not to mention adults, both young and old – may find themselves in dire need of heeding Turkle’s (1995) caveat: “Some are tempted to think of life in cyberspace as insignificant, as escape or meaningless diversion. It is not. Our experiences there are serious play. We belittle them at our risk” (pp. 268-269).

In this paper, I argue that massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) do indeed function as one novel form of a new ‘third place’ for infor-

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mal sociability. Based on data collected as part of an ongoing two-year virtual cognitive ethnography of the game *Lineage* (first I, now II) (Steinkuehler, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c), I outline how the features of MMOG digital worlds satisfy Oldenburg's (1999) defining criteria for the very sorts of third places "real world" America sorely lacks. Then, building on this characterization, I discuss why such games matter for educators and researchers interested in cognition and learning not only in digital communities but also in contemporary everyday life in the broadest sense.

Massively Multiplayer Online Games: The Case of Lineage

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) are highly graphical 2- or 3-D 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. Conceptually, they are part of the rich tradition of alternative worlds that science fiction and fantasy literature provide us (e.g. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, 1938); technically, they are the evolutionary next-step in a long line of social games that runs from paper-and-pencil fantasy games

(e.g., Gygax & Arneson's *Dungeons & Dragons*, 1973) to main-frame text-based multi-user dungeons (e.g. Trubshaw & Bartle's famous first *MUD*, 1978) through the first graphical massively multiplayer online environments (e.g., Andrew and Chris Kirmse's *Meridian 59*, 1996) to the now-common, high-end 3-D digital worlds of today (for a complete history, see Koster, 2002). The virtual worlds that today's MMOGamers routinely plug in and inhabit are persistent social and material worlds, loosely structured by open-ended (fantasy) narratives, where players are largely free to do as they please – slay ogres, siege castles, craft a pair of gaiters, barter goods in town, or tame dragon hatchlings. They are notorious for their peculiar combination of designed "escapist fantasy" yet emergent "social realism" (Kolbert, 2001): in a setting of wizards and elves, dwarfs and knights, people save for homes, create basket indices of the trading market, build relationships of status and solidarity, and worry about crime.

Lineage, the MMOG context of this research, is now in its second incarnation. *Lineage I: The Blood Pledge* was first released in Korea in 1997. After 3 years of domination in the Korean gaming sphere, it expanded to America to currently boast roughly 2.7 million global subscribers (Woodcock, 2004). Set in medieval times,

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this 2-D game features not only the regular cast of fantasy characters (elves, knights, magicians) but also a royal cast of prince/esses, each claiming to be the legitimate heir to the throne and therefore forced to compete with one another to recruit other classes of characters into their clan or “pledge” as both protection and armed forces for castles siege. Its 3-D sequel, *Lineage II: The Chaotic Chronicle*, released in Korea in November of 2003 and expanded to America in April of 2004, currently claims nearly 1.5 million concurrent subscriptions globally (Woodcock, 2004). Set 150 years earlier than *Lineage I* but situated in a similar virtual landscape, *Lineage II* captures the period of strife before any legitimate bloodline to the virtual throne has been established. Within the game, members of all races (human, orc, elf, dark elf, dwarf) and classes (fighter, crafter, mage, etc.) again join forces in the form of clans to compete for castle control in server-wide sieges and clan battles. In both incarnations, the *Lineage* clan system is tightly coupled to both the guiding narrative of the game and the virtual world’s economic system, resulting in a complex social space of affiliations and disaffiliations, constructed largely out of shared (or disparate) social and material practices (Steinkuehler, 2004a).

Methods

Lineage constitutes a robust social and virtual-material world, one that warrants full investigation in its own right, much as a new country or culture in the tangible geographic world might. As an educational researcher, I am keenly interested in the intellectual substance of such virtual worlds: What do people learn through participation in such spaces? And how is it that this learning happens? Toward answering these questions, I am conducting a cognitive ethnography (Hutchins, 1995) of the game that incorporates both (a) traditional “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) ethnographic methods such as participatory observation, unstructured and semi-structured interviews with informants, and the collection and analysis of community documents (e.g. player-authored user manuals, fan sites, fan fiction, game-related discussion boards), and (b) strategic data collection and analysis methods borrowed from traditional distributed cognition studies (Steinkuehler, Black, & Clinton, in press) in order to better understand specific socially and materially distributed cognitive practices of interest. To date, this virtual cognitive ethnography has been conducted for a period of over 28 months. In what follows, I analyze *Lineage* as a third place for informal sociability, based on my participation in the daily life of the game and critical

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reflection on my observations during this time in light of interviews and discussions with my informants.

Lineage II as a Third Place

In arguing for the value of third places, Oldenburg (1999) points to the particularly stifled circumstances of the American adolescent. Citing Sennett's (1973) dire conclusions on American homelife in the early seventies, Oldenburg makes the case that, if any population suffers most from America's "automobile suburb" life and "leisure... perverted into consumption" (p.11), it is our *middle class youth*. Left behind in the suburbs while parents work, stifled in homes kept safely isolated from the novel, and regimented into frantic schedules to shroud the loneliness of suburban existence, the American adolescent, Oldenburg argues, is cut off from the necessary benefits of participation in third places. In so doing, Oldenburg succeeds in rebuking the problem (today's adolescents' stifled daily circumstances) rather than the victim (the adolescents themselves); he fails, however, in unpacking the relationship between "gadgetry" and third places by conflating the Net-generation's use of technology with that of its parents: "The home entertainment industry thrives in the dearth of the informal public life among the American middle class," Olden-

burg (1999) argues. "Demand for all manner of electronic gadgetry to substitute vicarious watching and listening for more direct involvement is high." (p. 12)

This indictment of today's digital entertainment media as a substitution for "informal public life" and "direct involvement" fails to acknowledge the informal social spaces being constructed, inhabited, and maintained behind the home computer screen. Today's youth (and many adults) use online digital technologies as a way to, among other things, socialize. Providing interstitial spaces for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace (or school) and home, virtual environments such as MMOGs function, by definition, as new (albeit digitally-mediated) third places much like the pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts of old. A review of Oldenburg's (1999) own eight defining characteristics of third places, in the context of MMOGs, demonstrates.

I. Neutral Ground. First and foremost, third places are neutral grounds where individuals are free to come and go as they please. As Sennett (1977) argues, "people can be sociable only when they have some protection from each other" (p. 311). Because MMOGs are played online, interaction within them is mediated by the game

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world avatars. Few places beyond the web afford such anonymity, providing a safe haven beyond the reach of work and home that allows individuals to engage with others socially without the entangling obligations and repercussions that often accompany, for example, socializing with workplace peers. After all, in MMOGs, the player can always simply log off for the time being, start a new character entirely, or, if worse comes to worse, move to a wholly new game. Thus, MMOGs are digitally mediated, autonomous neutral grounds that allow interaction and engagement without the sorts of entanglements Oldenburg argues are deleterious to informal sociability.

II. Leveler. Second and equally as important, third places are ones in which an individual's rank and status in the workplace or society at large are of no import (Oldenburg, 1999). Acceptance and participation is not contingent on any prerequisites, requirements, roles, duties, or proof of membership. On this issue, MMOGs are an excellent case in point. The only entry requirements for participation are the costs of purchasing and then subscribing to the game, typically running the gamer, if we ignore the computer hardware requirements, somewhere around USD50 (one-time retail purchase) plus a monthly expense around USD15. Such spaces

are inclusive, serving to "expand possibilities, whereas formal associations tend to narrow and restrict them" (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 24). Emerging research on MMOGs suggests their similar function. Even within the "lackluster social environment" of *Asheron's Call II*, sociologist Dmitri Williams (2004) found that playing MMOGs, which tended to displace television viewing as a primary leisure activity, generated positive social "bridging" effects of improving players' real-world community outlook. His research findings, however, were mixed: "In the language of social capital, game use appears to negatively impact local bonding, but not faraway bridging. This pattern supports the general Internet results... in which the Internet was shown to be a good facilitator for meeting new people, but not a good means of securing vital personal support. This game magnifies that general effect." (p. 239).

Such mixed findings may stem from the nature of third places themselves. As Oldenburg (1999) argues, the "golden circle" drawn around the third place relegates not only rank and status beyond the purview of the third place but also one's personal problems and moodiness. In MMOGs, troubles-telling is often met with a playful response, tacitly signaling that such material is not fodder for in-game activity per

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se, although the ways in which clans and other in-game social groups serve as informal emotional support networks for individuals who purportedly encounter real-world tragedy has been fodder for much discussion (for example, see Koster's (1998) famous "A Story About a Tree" and Spaight's (2003) expose of the feigned death on Salon.com). Consider the excerpt below taken from *LineageII* in which one gamer responds to another's conversation starter with complaints about recent ill health.¹

Liadon *how are things coming along for you soul?*

Soul *i think im gonna die*

Adeleide *no dont die. death is bad*

Liadon *If I were so mortally wounded that I thought I was going to die, logging on lin would be on the*

Liadon *top ten list, but after calling 911 for sure*

Soul *i feel like shit*

Liadon *are you sick?*

Clan member Zara has logged into the game.

Duncan *hihi Zara*

Soul *my nose is stuffy my ear hurts and my throt is really sore*

Duncan *sorry man, that stinks*

Soul *my gf [girlfriend] cousin kissed me and she had streped*

Adeleide *well there u go. off to the doc[tor] with u*

Soul *on monday*

Adeleide *er... why u kissing ur GFs cousin?*

Liadon *... did you just say you are dating your cousin?*

Duncan *Thats an interesting story already*

Soul *idk [i dont know]*

Soul *it was weird*

Duncan *It sounds weird.*

Liadon *I heard about a porno like that once*

Zara *i was 16 once*

Duncan *Liadon – lets please not even go there. :P [grin]*

Soul *i wasnt kissing my gf cousin she kisses me on the cheek*

Zara *so, for clarification*

Zara *is this like gflcousin*

Liadon *ah... the plot thins*

Soul *thats just wrong guys*

Zara *hey i'm not kissing my cousin's gf*

Liadon *I thought it was his gf's cousin*

Soul *i didnt tho*

Duncan *My gf once kissed my cousin's gf*

Adeleide *my cousin had a gf once*

Liadon *I have a cousin*

Soul *wow this is weird*

Duncan *What sense of "had" are we using here?*

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Zara *eeewww*
Adeleide **gulp**
Duncan *Feeling better yet Soul?*
Soul *no*
Liadon *This is why I game... the interesting conversation*

During this exchange on clan chat, a chat window shared by fellow clan members allowing social interaction regardless of members' in-game virtual location, clan members playfully run not with the initial claim of suffering a recent mild illness but rather the explanation given for how that illness was possibly acquired. In this exchange, clan members collectively transform a troubles-telling incident into a conversational ruse using "lively, scintillating, colorful, and engaging" (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 26) interaction, a defining characteristic of third places to which we now turn.

III. Conversation is Main Activity. As the excerpt above demonstrates, "third places are veritable gymnasiums of Mother wit" (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 29). In the words of MUD-Dev guru J. C. Lawrence, "The basic medium of multiplayer games is communication." (cited in Koster, n.d.) Conversation is a core activity, often enriched by and centering around game-play of another sort:

"Conversation is a game that mixes will with many other games according to the manner in which they are played.... The game and conversation move along in lively fashion, the talk enhancing the card game, the card game giving eternal stimulation to the talk. Jackson's observations in the clubs of the working-class English confirm this. 'Much time,' he recorded, 'is given over to playing games. Cribbage and dominoes mean endless conversation and by-the-way evaluation of personalities. Spectators are never quiet, and every stage of the game stimulates comment – mostly on the characteristics of the players rather than the play...'" (p.30–31)

MMOGs are virtual environments for game-play: leveling one's character by slaying monsters that pepper the countryside, bartering goods in virtual villages as a way to improve the strength and ability of one's equipment, holding formal and informal competitions of strength in the form of arena duels, clan wars, and castle sieges, completing quests for items and virtual cash, even venturing off into yet untravelled territories in search of lovely vistas and fantastic creatures of every sort. MMOGs feature multiple text-based chat channels, including *public talk* visible to all in the current vicinity, *clan chat* enabling fellow members' constant communication, *party chat* for members in a temporary

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party to communicate during their adventures, *trade chat* where those buying and selling can advertise their wares at a distance, and *private chat* between two people. This multiplicity of communication channels facilitates ongoing commentary on players' individual or shared hunts and exploits as a mainstay activity. Multiple conversations occur in tandem with each individual oftentimes engaged in several conversational threads simultaneously – sharing a laugh over clan chat about someone's recent untimely death, haggling over the price of some sorely needed item on trade chat, arguing in party chat about how to distribute the spoils of the hunting groups' current escapade, privately catching up through private whispered talk with a good friend who has been offline the day before. MMOGameplay is constituted not only by joint in-game activities but also and overwhelmingly by constant conversation around the game and beyond, ranging from theoretical debates over what constitutes most efficacious hunting to in-game gossip about the latest “who did what to whom and why” to social banter over today's latest real-world headlines to discussion of the weather, politics, recent real and/or virtual events, girlfriends, food, the Iraq war, movies, music, and even other games. MMOGs are, in fact, so thoroughly social in nature that game designers and theorists debate the value of

categorizing them with other videogames at all: “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.” (Koster, n.d.)

IV. Accessibility & Accommodation. According to Oldenburg (1999), third places must be easy to access: “One may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there” (p. 32). MMOGs are again a case in point: They are perpetually accessible and played in real time, meaning that individuals can log on and off as they see fit. Barring the occasional server update, such virtual worlds are continually available social spaces where people enter, stay for as long as time (or parents) allow, and leave of their own accord. Given time-zone differences, the average MMOG server population fluctuates as students and workers in different areas of the world return home from school or work and log on to visit with friends and participate in joint activities. Most in-game activities remain impromptu as a result, depending on who is online when and what the general mood happens to be. Unlike bricks-and-mortar third places, MMOGs are most commonly accessed directly from one's home and remain available on a daily basis for whoever cares to join in. Social mores in the

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game support this: Though the typical salutations and farewells are used, sudden appearances and departures are rarely made a noteworthy event (see above transcript as an example).

V. The Regulars. “What attracts a regular visitor to a third place is supplied not by management but by the fellow customer,” notes Oldenburg (1999). “It is the regulars who give the place its character and who assure that on any given visit some of the gang will be there.” (pp. 33–34) Such regulars dominate not in a numerical sense but in an affective sense, setting the tone of conversation and the general mood of the place. In the MMOG *Lineage II*, two types of game-regulars shape the social impression of the game: clan members and squatters in specific virtual territories (for an interesting discussion on the proper unit of analysis for analyzing MMOGs as third places, see Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell, 2004). For the 78% of MMOGamers who join a clan (Seay, Jerome, Lee, & Kraut, 2004), fellow clan members set the tone of sociability by remaining ever-present within the clan chat window. Clan members depend on one another’s strengths and exploits for their own individual success in the game by cultivating a shared clan reputation, sharing riches, and engaging in joint activities of mutual benefit. Regulars within the clan set the daily

mood through their ongoing interaction with others. While clan regulars travel with you in the form of ongoing banter in the ever-present clan chat window, the second group of regulars, squatters in specific virtual territories, provides a social context specific to various areas in the game. Virtual hunting grounds vary not only in terms of level of difficulty but also in terms of who hangs out there and therefore can be heard on public chat. For example, an area in *Lineage II* called Cruma Tower is marked by maximum leveling efficiency – the percent experience an avatar gains over time for killing computer-generated monsters – but also by off-color and precocious (if not somewhat offensive) public parlance. As one informant satirically commented about Cruma Tower, “You go for the experience, you stay for the enlightening conversation.” Moreover, regulars of both types largely determine which newcomers are accepted within the group, functioning as the “oldtimers” of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) be it clan- or territory-based.

VI. A Low Profile. Oldenburg argues that third places are characteristically homely. Here is the first point on which MMOGs and Oldenburg’s definition of third places differ. MMOGs vary widely in quality of graphics and territorial “décor,” ranging from the old school retro

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type 2-D graphics found in *Lineage I* to the high-end 3-D splendor of contemporary titles such as *Lineage II*. Yet, regardless of their position on the timeline of technical innovation, MMOGs are characteristically fantastic, both literally and metaphorically, including a regular fanfare of spectacular characters and creatures that ranges, for example, from delicately drawn elves to frightening ogres and insects. In other words, MMOGs, even in their earliest incarnations, are extravagant settings for informal sociability rather than plain ones. Why this disparity, if MMOGs are indeed third places for informal sociability?

Perhaps the answer lies in the *function* Oldenburg argues such homeliness serves: “Not having that shiny bright appearance of the franchise establishment, third places do not attract a high volume of strangers or transient customers.... When people consider the establishment the ‘in’ place to be seen, commercialism will reign.” (p. 36–37) Woodcock’s (2004) analysis of subscription growth indicates that MMOG populations follow a parabolic curve, typically attracting a high number of transient customers only immediately after launch: “Large numbers of customers try the game out in a short period of time, and some of them sign up to become subscribers, but within a few short months the

growth starts to slow appreciably.” It may be that, once the initial wave of gamers moves through a given title and onto the next new release, those who stay behind become the basis for a sustained community. My observations on the everyday culture of first *Lineage I* then *Lineage II* support this interpretation, with a core audience remaining on the former, some shifting to the latter to be joined with gamers from such titles as *Star Wars Galaxies* or *ShadowBane*, only to eventually coalesce into a sustained population of gamers who stick with *Lineage II* as their title of choice. As a result, a more-or-less stable in-game culture took several months to emerge from the combined collective practices imported and adapted from the smattering of previous games individuals played. By the time the latest “in” game is released (i.e. *World of Warcraft*), *Lineage II* will likely share the fate of its predecessors to become, by all technical definitions, “homely” by comparison.

VII. The Mood is Playful. The fact that the general mood in MMOGs is playful hardly requires discussion. In essence, while Oldenburg argues for recognition of the playground character of the third place, I argue for the third place character of the new digital playground. He cites play scholar Huizinga, who writes, “the feeling of being ‘apart together’ is an exceptio-

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nal situation, of sharing something important, or mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.” (cited in Oldenburg, 1999, p. 38) If one theme emerges from the data corpus of my virtual ethnography of *Lineage*, it is one of abundant playfulness. Gaveldor, a girl dwarf, constantly emoting handstands and giggles in the midst of grand battles. Liadon, a male human fighter, making jokes about the way the heavy armor on his avatar look like knickers. Zara, a female orc, teasing about how she will slay huge monsters wearing little more than a decorative thong. Constant capers and cavorting become the yarn from which clan and server stories are woven, with numerous fansites featuring a plethora of screenshots that document the antics, creating a rich shared history for those who participate.

VIII. A Home Away from Home. In arguing for the home-like quality of third places, Oldenburg (1999) builds on Seamon’s (1979) five defining traits of “home”: rootedness, feelings of possession, spiritual regeneration, feelings of being at ease, and warmth. An argument can be made for how MMOGs can function in all these capacities; to save space, however, I will discuss only the first two most tangible

ones. First, third places function as a home away from home by *rooting people*, providing a “physical center around which we organize our comings and goings,” (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 39), where we expect to see familiar faces, and where unusual absences are quickly noted and queried. MMOGs, although virtual, root individuals who play them in much the same ways. Participation becomes a regular part of daily life for those who play them and unusual absences (i.e., prolonged or unforeseen ones) are queried either within the game, by email or other means (e.g. internet relay chat, telephone). For example, upon returning from a three-day game studies conference on the west coast, fellow clan members inquired about my unannounced absence from *Lineage II*, with one fourteen year old advising me, “Next time, just let us know in advance.”

Second, third places function as homes away from home by evoking a sense of “possession and control... that need not entail actual ownership” from those who attend them (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 40) In MMOGs, such feelings of ownership run so strong that court cases have emerged in which gamers claim legal rights to their virtual avatar, equipment, and cash despite the fact that the game company owns the code and software. Academic blogs such as *Terra Nova* ([146](http://terra-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

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nova.blogs.com/) and conferences such as *State of Play* (New York Law School) are testaments to the economic, legal, and societal importance of the issues such gamer-versus-designer ownership debates raise, including intellectual property issues, end-user license agreements, virtual world property rights, and the ramifications of real world exchange of virtual currency earned online.

Such feelings of rootedness and possession over the virtual worlds within MMOGs combine to create a shared sense of home, and with it, the sense that support and warmth that some folks simply lack in their own “real world” households, work places, and schools. Player-generated fan films such as Doasa Arsim & Javier’s (2004) “True Colors” music video perhaps sum it up best: With a mix of playful campiness and sheepish sentimentality, *Star Wars Galaxies* gamers collaborated to create an in-game video of entertainer avatars dancing in a virtual cantina to heal the “mind wounds” of players of another class, all set to the beat of the Cyndi Lauper lyrics, “If this world makes you crazy and you’ve taken all you can get, you call me up because you know I’ll be there.” The plethora of fan websites, fictions, videos, digital art, and blogs, are a testament to how MMOGs, beneath all their fantasy and gore, are often places

of solace and rejuvenation for those who regularly log in.

MMOGs & Learning: Why Such Games Matter for Educators

In this paper, I have argued that MMOGs indeed function as a third place for informal sociability for those who inhabit their virtual worlds and make them part of their regular leisure activity. Oldenburg (1999) dismisses such gameplay, stating that, “A room full of individuals intent upon videogames is not a third place.” (p. 31) I disagree and would argue that such a conclusion completely ignores the thoroughly social nature of what it is such gamers are, in fact, so engaged in and intent upon. It is all too easy for traditional “bricks and mortar” sociologists to ignore the activities that occur behind the computer screen. But, then, it is also all too easy for researchers and educators to ignore the personal, social, and intellectual value of participation in third places altogether. In the end, Oldenburg missed the boat regarding the capacity of online virtual environments for “retribalizing” people across time and place (Steinkuehler, 2004a). My sincere hope is that education does not make a similar error of underestimation when it comes to the capacity of such spaces to profoundly shape the cognition and culture of the net-generation of kids.

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As I have argued elsewhere (Steinkuehler, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c), more is intellectually at stake here than the informal social life of adolescents and adults. Videogames such as MMOGs are sites for socially and materially distributed cognition, complex problem solving, identity work, individual and collaborative learning across multiple multimedia, multimodality “attentional spaces” (Lemke, n.d.), and rich meaning-making and, as such, ought to be part of the educational research agenda. For the K-12 millennial generation of youngsters, videogames are a – if not the – leading form of entertainment, despite their complexity and the considerable cognitive investment they exact from those who play (Gee, 2003; Squire & Barab, 2004; Squire & Jenkins, 2004; Squire & Steinkuehler, in press). Students who are disengaged and failing basic coursework in school spend substantial time outside of class playing, sharing, discussing, and mastering the latest videogame title release. And, yet, to date, educators know little if nothing about these sectors of kid culture, let alone how they operate as sites for socialization, enculturation, and learning. And we ought to.

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Endnotes

¹ The transcript excerpts are verbatim save changes for ease of reading, such as expansions of truncated words, typographical corrections, and supplementation of dietic references with appropriate referents [in square brackets]. I am using pseudonyms in place of all actual avatars names in order to protect (virtual) confidentiality, save my own virtual name Adeleide.