

Online Gaming and Embodied Subjectivities Methods to Reach Women's Social Story of Gaming

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The article introduces a set of methods that have been used to explore the richness of the social world around women's relations to online gaming. It uses critical psychological notions of subjectivities and relationalities to argue for an approach to gaming as an embodied social practice, which takes place within a complex of relations that operate together to produce women as (non-)gaming subjects. Methods are developed to investigate this view of gaming, and findings from a pilot study are presented within three themes: firstly, the place of guilt, pain and other emotionality in the experience of gaming, secondly, the impact of breakdown and interruption in terms of crashing machines, inadequate Internet connections and availability of games and game-time, and thirdly, the role of significant others in how games are experienced.

Keywords: action, auto-ethnography, computer games, critical psychology, gender issues

This article introduces a set of methods that have been used to investigate women's relations to online gaming and Internet use. It foregrounds the link between the selection of methods for research and a theoretical position by exploring the development of a research design that seeks to take a broad view on the social complexity that must be mobilised to make gaming possible. It then goes on to provide some data

from the pilot study to show the scope of what these methods can illuminate about the social world of women and gaming.

Taken from a project investigating women's use of the Internet more generally, the article focuses on Massively Multi-player Online Games (MMOGs), games that allow thousands of players to be online and playing at once. Women are typically low participants in such games, which raises questions about why women are not becoming online gamers, but also about how gaming is made possible for those women who do play. In taking a wide view of the social world of gaming to investigate the scope of women's gaming practices, the article investigates how feminine subjectivities are constituted in relation to gaming, and how the activity of gaming operates as gendered and is cross-cut with other practices that we already know to be gendered, such as material culture (Ahmed 2006) and availability of leisure (Bittman & Wajcman 2000).

The project attempts to address these issues, by investigating how the Internet and MMOGs fit into women's wider social world. This means taking seriously women's accounts of everyday life which allow us to see how practices of femininity, and gendered power relations around the Internet and gaming operate in relation to women's usage. This wider view implicates several sites of the social practice of gaming that are obscured by more narrow views. These include the significance of emotional life to gaming, the materiality and embodiment of gaming, and the social links that support gaming and are maintained over a range of different communication media.

The approach used here developed from previous work looking at how computer and Internet use is distributed in the community (Furlong, Selwyn & Gorard 2001). This work found stark inequalities in access, but the story revealed about gender was a complicated one. While women had relatively high formal access to computers and the Internet, looking in more detail at how everyday use unfolded showed that women's experience of effective access was much lower (Selwyn, Gorard & Furlong 2005). This finding is particularly incompatible with much of Internet research at the time, where the Internet was seen as a disembodied space where relations of power did not apply (Hayles 1999).

The present article outlines a theoretical approach which supports an alternative view, which sees a whole range of practices and contexts as

implicated in the act of gaming, taken from the wider project of looking at how women use the Internet. It then goes on to describe research methods for capturing this, with a set of detailed case-studies that interrogate a breadth of everyday practices, collecting data at several sites both offline and online. Then three examples from the pilot study data are examined to interrogate what is added by picking up some of the relational richness of online gaming.

The Embodied Subject

The article attempts to look at gaming differently, and find methods to research it differently. It makes an argument for a shift of attention from gaming as something that happens within the game space alone, to seeing it as an embodied practice that is accomplished through the mobilisation of a rich web of relations, in many modalities. The development of this approach draws heavily on Walkerdine's (2007) recent work on children and videogames, taking up several key tools from this research, which I will outline here. Additionally, the article argues for an embodied approach to gaming. New phenomenological approaches (Hansen 2006; Csordas 2002) are used to make an argument that this is necessary. Finally, I review a few key moments in the research of other, older media, when there has been a shift from content to how these media can be seen relationally, and what these can offer the current project.

In particular I will use two concepts drawn from Walkerdine's (2007) approach here. The first is its emphasis on the study of subjectivities (Henriques et al. 1984), an approach to understanding people and their actions that works to deconstruct and critique the notion of the individual, the subject of traditional psychology. Rather than taking the liberal humanist subject with a coherent, stable personality and the agent of social phenomenon, subjectivities are seen as discursive and multiple, not necessarily coherent, not always rational but also moved by desire and emotionality, and subject to power-knowledge relations. The self is seen as a site of struggle over meaning, which is dynamic and must be constantly renegotiated and accomplished in the moment. Most notably this subject is always situated within a historical and cultural context, and meaningful only in the time and place it arises.

This suggests questions about games, such as what subject positions are available to women through and around the activity of gaming, and at the same time how these positions can be accomplished, and what effects they have in terms of possibilities and constraints. Methodologically it suggests taking the individual and the everyday practices of the social world that surrounds her and are made meaningful through her activity, as the focus of enquiry. Gaming and games are seen multiply through this rich social context, allowing us to see how their use is played out in mundane contexts such as the home, work, and in relationships with others.

The second important concept is that of relationality (Walkerdine 2007), which takes us a further theoretical step, by displacing subjectivity itself from the centre of analysis. Rather than concerning ourselves with a world of discrete subjects acting on and among objects, we examine the spaces between them, the relations that are formed in moments of action. In this way subjectivities come to be seen as an effect of webs of relations within which they exist, and that can only be understood as they arise in activity (Studdert 2005). By focusing on relations even the notion of context becomes almost meaningless, as every element of a scene is implicated in making sense of it. Methodologically this suggests following participants and the richness of relations they are involved in, crossing boundary lines that might have been drawn by defining the field in other ways, such as taking a software context or community as the object of study. The path negotiated by participants and its productive power becomes the object of analysis.

There is always a danger when theorising the Internet of falling into the trap of seeing it as disembodied, or accepting some element of disembodiment in the account. A particularly significant issue when considering women, whose embodiment has long been overlooked (Young 1990), but offers such a powerful critique to notions of autonomous, rational individuality (Grosz 1994) including the use of technology (Madden 2006). So the present approach also draws on phenomenology for guidance in keeping its theorising of subjectivities fully embodied.

Recently several authors have been updating the phenomenological ideas of Merleau-Ponty's (1945) work on the clinical body and of consciousness as embodied (Csordas 1994, 2002; Hansen 2000, 2006).

They argue that when we ignore the body and experience, language and texts become the centre of an analysis. This recreates a dualism, with language and mind prioritised and set against the devalued body and experience (Hansen 2006). Instead they argue for combining the study of discourse with the phenomenological concept of being-in-the-world. This notion reinstates the body, rather than language as the 'existential grounding of culture and self' (Csordas 2002, 58). Instead of seeing the body as an object, something to be owned, studied and talked about, the body is seen as the seat of subjectivity, as having agency in experiences and actions. So our subject becomes one that is also embodied and therefore constituted through the material world. This must be a rich notion of bodiliness, allowing sensation, emotion and engagement with objects and place. Suturing this to a more traditional discourse approach gives a set of tools for interrogating embodiment at the intersection of online and offline social life.

With this reminder that subjects are also embodied, we must pay attention to how the material is as constitutive of selfhood and gender as the discursive. This shifting of gaze illuminates the many ways that the body is implicated in using a range of objects for gaming such as monitors, keyboards, consoles, tables, and chairs. Once the body is in the frame, we can take a step back and introduce a wider view of the geography of the home and the material around that body (Ahmed 2006), and how constraints such as time, economics and expertise operate around it. This view of a wider set of relationalities at once makes it clearer how power relations such as gender leak into apparently disembodied online spaces.

This represents a shift from approaches that focus on an online/ software space such as a MUD, game, or social community, to one that takes as the object of analysis the path of an individual through a web of relations, to constitute a unique assemblage of the Internet and gaming which is inseparable from their own subjectivity. It resembles the shift from analysing the content of a text, to how that text is taken up and used, which has been made by researchers in reception studies (Ang 1996), particularly those that acknowledge that these technologies are also objects.

Radway (1984) begins her research by examining the content of romance novels, but changes her focus to examine how the texts are used by readers. She finds that in use they become a different kind of object, with characteristics that are not sited within the text at all, but also in their materiality and in the relation with the reader of whom they become part. She urges a move from looking at texts alone to how they become a much wider social event in the full context of a family, inextricably connected to her reader's social situations as wives and mothers. She found romances were made meaningful by the needs and desires that emerged from women's everyday lives, that would otherwise have been missed. Ann Gray's (1992) work goes further in considering the materiality of this situation. In researching VCRs she looks also at the whole home space and how the VCR enters and is integrated into this place by a family as an active audience. She traces how this technology becomes part of women's lives, in the context of the culture of the home, around time, gendered leisure practices, and who has access to what technological expertise. I draw from these pieces the notion of moving around a technology to produce different research gazes at different analytical levels, which examine online texts alongside their place in the social practices that make them meaningful.

These theoretical concerns call for a research strategy that centres on the relations that surround participants as they move through their day and engage with MMOGs, favouring the observation of embodied experience alongside talk-based methods. The emphasis on embodied experience and shifting subjectivities requires a method that acknowledges the profound situatedness of activity, amongst geographies, embodied others, and power-knowledge relations. This work is also influenced by the insistence by narrative researchers on seeking concrete and specific stories from participants (Hollway & Jefferson 2000), relating specific incidents as they happened, rather than generalities and opinions.

Research Methods

The article follows piloting work, developed to investigate women's use of the Internet in ways that are consistent with these theoretical goals. Data shown here is from pilot participants of both genders, although the complete project will be only with women. The article also reports parti-

participant observation work carried out during the early part of the project. Participants are chosen for high Internet literacy, particularly of technologies that involve writing of the self, such as blogs, social networking sites, wikis and webcams. All of the participants used the Internet most days, some for several hours. The wider corpus investigates all aspects of the Internet, with data presented here taken from those pilot participants who talk about relations to online games as part of their Internet story.

Audio-diaries form the start of the contact with participants, who are asked to record every usage of the Internet for about a week, noting times of day and the machines and web technologies that they are using. By focusing on the concrete talk about events as they happen, this method comes close to capturing an experiential account which can be read as actions and not just texts. This real time method highlights how gaming is related to other time-dependent events in the day, such as eating, work and leisure, child care, and its use with collaborating leisure technologies (Lally 2002) in the home, such as television.

This auto-ethnographic approach gives a style of narrative quite distinct from an interview. Topics chosen by participants can stray far from that of interest to the researcher. This can be a mixed blessing as it highlights new areas of relevance, or a participant can misunderstand the project's intentions and provide data that is very difficult to use. The solitary nature of this activity matches the solitary, lean-forward quality of using a computer. This method can therefore inspire intimate entries that resemble a personal diary, with several participants diarying emotional scenes such as arguments with partners as part of their Internet and MMOG use.

The next phase is a visit to the participants' home. The core of the visit is an interview, which gives structure to the event. But it is essential that this take place in a room or building that is the site of the bulk of the participant's Internet use. This allows not only for reference to the geography and objects as we talked, but also for the material around us to form an intrinsic part of the interview situation, as we make use of surfaces, seating, food and drink facilities, experience typical interruptions and conditions during the visit, and allows the researcher to meet children, animals and partners.

To make explicit these geographies, the participant and researcher take photographs together to record machines that are used, as well as other parts of the home that are relevant to use and non-use. This records areas around computers such as stacks of paper-work and reminders for chores, collaborating and competing objects such as desk spaces and tables, televisions and bookcases, games consoles and roleplaying materials. These activities interrogate the kind of machine(s) participants are using, how their bodies are used to operate the Internet and play, how these are sited in geographies of the home (Riggins 1994), and the constraints and possibilities offered by the space.

The interviews are loosely structured, and follow the diaries in seeking concrete stories about events, in the narrative tradition (Hollway & Jefferson 2000). Overall they seek a broad view of how participants have used the Internet and gaming in the weeks prior to the visit, how all these technologies gain meaning in relation to each other and participants' practices in using them, and how this use is integrated into wider practices and projects in day-to-day life. Notably the interview schedule includes and links online and offline issues, relationships between different websites and online technologies, alongside purchasing decisions about machines and how skills were gained. They probe for more detail, backgrounds of diary stories, and of the material and home geographies in the photographs. Inevitably this process translates these diary accounts into a different and more coherent story, and moulds them to fit research questions. This face-to-face-only portion of the research also takes on the function of developing a relationship between researcher and researched.

The final stage of the research is online 'interviews' using instant messaging packages (Stewart & Williams 2005). Researcher and participant are separate, using their own machines and in contact using instant messages. Participants are asked to provide a 'tour' of their online world, with both researcher and participant moving from site to site alongside each other, 'talking' over which elements of sites and navigation are used, how sites are moved between and used together. Again, participants are asked to tell their own story about their movements through the Internet, this time about exactly how they use each website or technology, with some choosing to talk about daily routines and paths through sites, and others sharing a more discrete set of favourites. This is followed up

with participation and more detailed observation of key sites (Hine 2000, 2005; Williams 2006). This phase gives insight into the lived experience of using the sites as participants do, and highlights patterns of use and non-use of site features. It addresses the conditions of possibility for identity work that online spaces offer, and representations of femininity within the sites. Field notes from observation emphasises the experiential of moving through these sites, particularly emotionality (Hollway 1989), which is used alongside discourse-based analyses to understand online spaces.

In the rest of the article I will explore in some detail a set of stories collected from the piloting work that shed light on gaming as a social activity. These are selected to give a sense of the scope of an approach that attempts to view gaming as an embodied, social activity, highlighting how it is profoundly situated in the homes and lives of gamers.

The Irritated Cleric – Emotion in the Accomplishment of Playing

If we view our gaming subject as also an embodied subject, this implicates not only movement, material and space, but also experience, sensation and affect (Csordas 1994) in the activity of gaming. The excerpt below highlights the emotionality of the experience of playing. MMOGs inspire emotions of many kinds, pleasures associated with achievement of mastery, playfulness, escapism, or painful emotion such as failing challenges, feelings of inadequacy as a player, and for significant others such as Amy, discussed later, the pain of being excluded from the player's attention.

The excerpt features Mark who is in his late twenties and lives in a room in a shared house. He has no post-16 qualifications, and usually works in a call centre. He uses the Internet every day, mostly for things related to playing, such as reading webcomics about gaming, and plays MMOGs in most of his free time. He has a long history of fantasy computer gaming, which has dominated his engagement with computers throughout his life. Despite using most of his free time to play, Mark has avoided high pressure end-game content and 'power gaming', as he considers this too much like working.

The data presented here is taken from the audio-diary, the first stage of the research. It features three recordings that describe an episode of

playing *Dungeons & Dragons Online* from 12:13 AM to 1:35 AM on a Saturday night. The recordings are made just as the session starts, during the session, and as he finishes a quest and moves on to a new phase of playing.

Figure 1: Excerpts from Mark's audio-diary, taken while playing Dungeons & Dragons Online.

Recording A

1 *okay it's 13 minutes past 12 on Saturday. uh first entry obviously I'm just literally logging*
2 *onto Dungeons and Dragons now. [Windows start up sound] [...] not really because I can*
3 *really desperately want to play. but I've got a my paladin Derfel is nearly level twelve,*
4 *which is the cap level of this game at the moment. and I guess I just want to get it done. I'm*
5 *not thinking about what I want to do I want to finish him and go onto the next one. sounds a*
6 *bit heartless and stupid. [...] um so I've basically just logged on to finish off Derfel I thought*
7 *I might and what I'm doing is having a quick look to see if there are any groups available.*
8 *um. which is a no. They're all pretty much doing. I'm not sure what they're doing. um Spawn*
9 *of Whisperdoom. but they do want a cleric though. I think what I'm going to do it is join this*
10 *group that wants to do the new Whisperdoom quest which is one of the latest ones. and I'll*
11 *uh I'll report a bit more later*

Recording B

12 *It's umm one minute past one. [sigh] I'm in the middle of the Whisperdoom quest in*
13 *Dungeons and Dragons Online. still downstairs obviously. uh just literally had to log on*
14 *cause it I'm feeling rather irritated right now. Umm the game consists of various different*
15 *classes. my character I'm on at the moment is a healer. you've got your wizards, your*
16 *rogues who pick locks and stuff. and uh you're warriors who are the front-line fighters. and*
17 *they take all the damage. and uh whatnot. um basically the two warriors in this party. one*
18 *called Osgood the other called Owlwolf. uh Owlwolf's a warforged, which is a robot type*
19 *things. it's really really hard to heal them. and he obviously hasn't taken any enhancements*
20 *that help me heal him better. so I'm having to basically leave him alone, he's a nightmare.*
21 *Osgood's even worse though. I I've found out he's actually got 30 armour class. and in a*

Cont'd.

Cont'd.

22 *level 14 dungeon which is what this is that's laughable. he might as well be running around*
 23 *naked. I me, the cleric has more armour class than he does. so consequently I'm I'm getting*
 24 *really stressed I'm having to bump all of my heal- all of my healing into him. and it's still*
 25 *not keeping him alive. because he he goes down so quickly it's ridiculous. umm rather a a*
 26 *stupid thing to talk about I know. but. I was feeling rather irritated so I thought I should*
 27 *have should report it. um we've actually got a break at the moment coz the wizard's gone to*
 28 *get his mana back, which is his spells. so umm I just thought I'd fill in the recorder. umm*
 29 *I've actually had to use some of this uh fox freaky fox tiger balm stuff. temple balm stuff.*
 30 *which is relaxation stuff. to try and. and. which is. I don't know why a game gets me so*
 31 *irritated, it shouldn't do. all I can say is I'm really really regretting joining this party.*
 32 *[laugh] yea. but still It could be a lot worse I guess. with any luck we'll get the experience*
 33 *at the end of it. so um... I'll probably report back at the end if I find it if I make it to the end.*

Recording C

34 *okay it's one thirty five the quest is now completed. um that was really not fun I burnt so*
 35 *many wands. um. it just. and most of my money as a cleric goes on buying those wands. to*
 36 *keep everybody alive and of course the parties don't care unless you get a good guild. which*
 37 *is what Alison and I are in. but that's done now. I'm actually swapping over now to do some*
 38 *loot runs with Alison's character.*

There is a complex organisation of emotion and affect in this excerpt. Initially, there is an expression of lack of pleasure, with the motivation to play given as instrumentality to gain experience points (lines 2-4). These are rewards given by the game for completing quests and adventures. When enough experience points are gained, a character moves to the next level, becomes more powerful and has access to higher level adventures and items. Despite his motivation to play Derfel, a paladin character, to “get it done” he ends up playing not this character but a different one, a cleric. This move takes place at lines 9-10. However, towards the end of the extract (line 32) he again expresses the motivation to gain experience points, this time for this second character.

The emotion that *is* mentioned is irritation (lines 14, 27, 31) and stress (line 24). However there is a lot of work to disavow these emo-

tions. The irritation is twice hedged with “rather”, and at line 26 declared “rather as stupid thing to talk about”, and at line 30 “I don’t know why a game gets me so irritated, it shouldn’t do”, quite explicitly reflecting that these negative emotions are not preferred responses to playing. But at the same time he describes actions that match his irritation, he regrets joining the party, applies some relaxing balm, and has felt he “had to log on” and make a recording to express his irritation. As well as this profile of affect, many of the statements suggest work rather than play. Such as line 4 “I just want to get it done”, lines 14-17 that talk of jobs and roles in the group, lines 19-23 the responsibilities the fighters are failing to live up to, lines 24-25 having to use all this healing to keep up.

The emotional work done in this playing session suggests several lines of enquiry into how play takes place. It raises an interesting issue of the relationship between work and play. Unlike Taylor’s (2006) power gamers who find pleasure in a highly efficient and achievement oriented play-style to ‘beat the game’, Mark’s playing is quite inefficient and may result in no rewards at all. So it can’t be fitted into such a coherent story of goal-orientation, or even of pleasure-orientation. He seems aware of this in his hedging, but presents a problem in how to theorise this negative emotionality. It is consistent with his overall identity performance as a player who does not pursue traditional masculine concerns of mastery (Walkerdine 2007), and thus takes up a more marginal position. The style of work this narrative of affectivity represents may be closer to the semi-skilled telephone work he does than to the high flying professional performances of Taylor’s power gamers.

These recordings are interleaved with playing over the course of over an hour of time, giving a sense of being present in the action and feeling some of the experience of playing. Emotion such as this is frequently talked about in the audio-diaries. This particular one has a therapeutic feel to it. Mark seems to feel compelled to make a recording to unburden himself of his feelings as he plays. There are lots of examples in the corpus of this kind of intimacy and emotionality in the recordings. Mark himself makes a recording later in the week about a row with his partner, as he plays the game to keep out of her way, and about his fears about becoming too mindlessly absorbed by gaming. Other participants also make entries about the emotionality of gaming, such as Alison who talks

about using gaming to escape from feelings of distress and anxiety in the rest of her life.

Constitution of the Gaming Computer

Enquiring on the materiality of gaming highlights many opportunities for disruption and breakdown in the practices of playing. These demonstrate not only the work behind the scenes that must be done to make gaming possible, but also the messiness of real-life use of technology. When we enquire into the embodiment of gaming we dispose of the notion that technology exists in clean, information-only systems (Grosz 1994), and foreground the preponderance of maintenance and repair that technology requires (Thrift 2005). There are a variety of elements that must be in place to create the conditions of possibility for play, many of which can become problematic and disrupt gaming. Breakdown can appear in many modalities; the quality of time that is available and the opportunity to devote it to leisure. It can appear in space, and whether the geography of the home can offer a suitable place, and enough ownership to use it. Or we can see it in the body being unable to sustain the physical demands of sitting, concentrating and manipulating the controls for many hours.

The data examined here highlights some of the significance of a particular object in constituting the possibility for playing – the gaming computer, a vital component of the materiality of gaming. There are many ways in which the machine can be a site of regular disruption to gaming practices. This example illustrates how the gaming machine – or in this case the non-gaming machine – is constituted not just as a discrete object but also through home geographies and the operation of gendered distribution of childcare and work.

The data presented here was collected with a participant called Amy, as part of a home visit. Amy is in her mid-thirties and lives in an urban area with her husband and ten-month-old son, for whom she is the primary caretaker. She is on maternity leave, but about to return to her work in a technical profession. She uses the Internet most days. Her use over the period of the diary is very instrumental, focused around procuring items for her young son using a range of auction, commercial and freecycle websites, and researching for home maintenance and voluntary

work. The story presented here is taken mainly from the home visit, including the interview, field notes and photographs of the computer that Amy uses.

Figure 2. Excerpts from field notes: interview and photographs of Amy's computer.

1 Amy's Internet use is currently mostly at home, but more usually she does many of these
2 online chores at work. Her husband runs a small business from their spare room, dealing
3 with electronics equipment. The business owns a powerful computer, which is kept in the
4 very messy spare bedroom/office. He uses this computer all day while he works, and to play
5 World of Warcraft most evenings and often during the day, which is an issue of contention
6 in their relationship. She uses an older computer belonging to the business for her Internet
7 use, which has been placed in the living room.

8 The photographs are of Amy's living room, which is a square shaped room, with three sofas
9 arranged round the outside, and a large clear space in the centre. Most of one wall is taken
10 up with French windows which lead out into her garden. A television is located against this
11 wall. The opposite wall has an archway through to the kitchen. Figure 3 shows the
12 computer Amy uses to access the Internet. It's located on a coffee table at the edge of the
13 room, near a sofa on the wall opposite the television, so using the computer can easily be
14 done while watching television, and Amy often does this. The coffee table is slightly to the
15 side of the sofa, and is approximately knee height. The front of the table can become a
16 resting place for clutter on the way to the kitchen. The computer has a flat screen monitor,
17 and the keyboard is behind the monitor tucked out of the way when not in use. Also behind
18 the monitor is a stack of letters and paperwork waiting for Amy to deal with them. There is
19 no clear comfortable position to sit while using the computer, Amy can choose between
20 resting the keyboard on her knee as she sits up straight on the sofa, or rest it on the low
21 table and lean forward to type. Figure 4 is taken from the same vantage point, the seat
22 beside Amy's usual one. It shows the corner of a second coffee table that sits in front of the
23 sofa, and a play area for Amy's baby. In the background is a second sofa, and a large
24 cabinet that looks home-made and houses a large aquarium that seems to be empty and
25 Amy considers ugly.

There are several elements of the computer itself that make it unsuitable for gaming, and highlight some of the requirements of a gaming computer. This computer has specifications barely high enough to run *World of Warcraft* and is a cast off from the business (line 6). It still does not technically belong to Amy, and is a temporary measure that may be removed if situations change. There are issues of ownership and purchase, and this moment of purchasing a computer is key (Lally 2002). Unless gaming is considered at the time of purchase, it is unlikely that a computer's specification will support the latest games, with gaming requiring constantly updated machines. This echoes Lally's (2002) findings, with women having a difficult time negotiating for spending on computers for their benefit, and commonly using hand-me-downs.



Figure 3. Amy's living room: showing the location of her computer.



Figure 4. Amy's living room: showing the baby's play area near the computer.

In terms of home geographies and time, the location of her computer allows Amy to watch the baby play while using the Internet, and her audio-diary records many interruptions as she does so, and snatched moments of browsing while the baby is temporarily engaged, a complex story of carving out leisure time in the home (Bittman & Wajcman 2000). Amy had previously used the Internet in the office (line 3), but this space had several disadvantages, including being so messy it could be difficult to enter, and having difficulty combining it with her child care responsibilities in that space. Although this location allows her to watch

television in the evenings as she uses the Internet, the seating arrangements here are unsuitable for gaming (lines 21-23), which requires a comfortable upright place to sit. It also separates her from her partner in the evenings, while he plays *World of Warcraft* in the office upstairs (lines 2-4).

The method of using photographs draws attention to space, and provides a stimulus to explaining the surrounding home geography during interviews. The photographs and indeed the home space itself become full of meaning when set alongside Amy's narrative, and it becomes clear how constitutive this space is of the activity that takes place here. Although the story told here is predominantly about space and home geography, it is impossible to tell a story that is purely about that, and we can see here how this cross-cuts with issues of sharing childcare and work, and the gendering of time.

Gaming Relationships and Communication

The final example addresses significant others in gaming. In order to see gaming as a social practice, we need to consider it as something that is worked up with others and that always takes place surrounded by others in an environment full of expected modes of communication and agreed practices. Relationships with others exist in all kinds of relations to games. We have already touched on how gaming is incorporated into Amy's relationship with her partner, and Mark's painful engagement with others as the underappreciated healer in a party. This extract looks at a group of players formed into a guild who play regularly together. As Taylor (2006) points out, such guilds are often made up of people that have a variety of relationships that often pre-exist the formation of the guild in game. Here we ask how such relationships are accomplished through playing and related activities, and their cross-over into and out of game, and from online to offline life.

The excerpt features the game *Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach*. This is a fantasy MMOG featuring real-time combat. Gameplay takes place in instanced adventures, in parties of up to six and raids of 12, playing a complimentary set of character classes. Both team play and character design have a lot of flexibility, meaning expertise is necessary as

part of play to meet the challenges and gain rewards throughout the game.

The text quoted here features an amalgamation of field notes from the early part of participant observation on European servers of the game, and records a significant series of events in a guild of about 30 members, as a dispute develops between several prominent players. These events took place over the course of about one week and changed the balance of power in the group.

Figure 5. Excerpts from field notes: participant observation in MMOG.

Players:

- 1 **Vagabond:** *A frequent player, very charismatic leader of the guild. Took an interest in*
- 2 *helping others and having fun, but also an expert and skilled player.*

- 3 **Cristy:** *Long time friend of Vagabond in offline contexts. Mainly played with him and viewed*
- 4 *herself as a poor player, asking for instructions from Vagabond and others in the guild, but*
- 5 *also an experienced player with several high level characters. Acted as a social secretary,*
- 6 *maintaining guild forum and encouraging guild interaction.*

- 7 **Jacob:** *A frequent player, taking pride in his knowledge, strength of his characters and skill*
- 8 *as a player, and enjoys competing with others. Would have liked to lead the guild, and took on*
- 9 *some leadership roles. Had many high level characters. Active on the guild and official*
- 10 *forums, and uses MSN messenger with guildmates.*

- 11 **Gwyn:** *Wife of Jacob. Also a regular player, but played mainly with him, and had her playing*
- 12 *supported by him in terms of expertise and in-game items.*

- 13 **Rich:** *Housemate of Jacob and Gwyn, who had introduced them to the game. Frequent*
- 14 *player, with several characters in a different, roleplaying guild. Not interested in leading*
- 15 *groups or studying forums and game information, prefers roleplaying.*

- 16 **Louise:** *The researcher. Less regular player. Brought into the guild by Vagabond and Cristy.*

Cont'd.

Cont'd.

17 *Has met Jacob, Gwyn and Rich offline as they live close by. Regular contributor to the guild*
18 *forum. Has only one character she struggles to get to high levels.*

23 **Events:**

24 *Cristy had a period of not playing much, and it slowly became known within the guild,*
25 *through rumours in several channels that her father was ill, and eventually died. The evening*
26 *after the funeral she came online to play. Not many in the guild were online, but she joined a*
27 *party with Jacob. They argued, and as he was the leader he kicked her from the party*
28 *complaining of rudeness. She quietly logged off. During the next evenings play, Vagabond*
29 *was angry with Jacob and they had a confrontation in private chat. Their dispute continued*
30 *for several days, with other guild members slowly becoming aware of it, as it impacted on*
31 *game playing and other practices such as forum posting. Jacob insisted his behaviour was*
32 *appropriate and didn't want to apologise to Cristy. Both Jacob and Vagabond's public*
33 *messages became more and more irate. Eventually Vagabond told me in forum private*
34 *messages he had had several long MSN conversations with Jacob and planned to kick him*
35 *from the guild if the situation didn't improve, although concerned about the impact this would*
36 *have on Rich. Finally, Jacob resigned his characters from the guild one by one during a peak*
37 *playing time, creating a pop-up message all the guild members would see. At the time I was*
38 *online in a party with Cristy, and she stated in party chat that she was having a heated*
39 *exchange with him in private messages telling him not to be so childish. The next morning*
40 *Gwyn's characters had also been removed, and he had left an angry message in the guild*
41 *forum with implied blame. Rich was under considerable pressure to take their side as they*
42 *lived together. So did I, as I lived nearby and had a 'real life' relationship with Jacob, Gwyn*
43 *and Rich.*

Most notable about this vignette is that these events unfold over a range of communication modalities. It is apparent that all these media are mobilised day-to-day by players to maintain their gaming relationships. Inside the game there is text chat and notices within the guild (lines 35-36) and within parties (lines 26, 37-38), voice chat within parties, and in-game private instant messages between pairs of players (lines 27-28). Many significant sites are out-of-game but still online. The official game forums (lines 9, 15, 30) and guild forums allow both public

(lines 9-10, 17-18, 39-40) and private messages (lines 32-33). The guild website and forum is particularly important, where a lot of relationship building takes place within the guild, players post notes/articles on features of the game, appointments to meet, apologies for missed play time and information about their characters. And most guild members keep in touch while at work during the day using MSN messenger (lines 10, 32-35).

Several alliances originate in out-of-game offline contexts (lines 1-6, 11-12, 13-14, 17), who meet regularly or even live together. A surprising impact of this for me was that I was assumed by many in the guild to have stronger links with Gwyn and Jacob than Vagabond and Cristy (lines 41-42), because we lived locally and I had met them in town. This was despite my feeling that relationships I had formed within the game were more significant. Additionally many other media have intertextual relationships to the game, and knowledge of these is also required to produce a performance of mastery of the game, such as films, novels and other games for further scene setting. Players use websites and other social networks to study details of mechanics of the game and improve their play.

In order to understand these events, we need to attend to all these different modes the participants take for granted. Any boundary that we set up between spaces, such as that between the on and off-line, would obscure some of the story and rob it of the meaning that it had for participants at the time. This example offers a powerful critique of the notion that these relationships take place only in-game. Although these players spend a lot of time together in that context, most of them play nearly every evening from the hours of about 6 PM till midnight, and all day at the weekend.

This vignette also raises several questions about how gender operates in such groups and through practices around playing. Within MMOs, for example, roles around guild leadership become part of a performance of masculinity through mastery of the game (see Walkerdine 2007). Both Cristy and Gwyn have playstyles that are largely supported by a male other, which my observations suggest is a common occurrence within the game. Turkle (1995) notes comparable situations in MUDs, where for men helping women with game mechanics became a way to 'buy' female

company, much like paying for drinks in a bar. For Turkle's women however, this had deleterious effects as it prevented them from learning gaming skills themselves and gaining confidence as players.

This raises further questions about the function of such mediated positions for women, and how more active positions might be accomplished. Taken with Amy's story above, and her distress that her partner uses so much of his free time playing *World of Warcraft*, it seems that women's experience of MMOGs is commonly tied to their partnerships with men, and that fruitful lines of enquiry would look at gaming in the context of such relationships.

Conclusions

This article set out to find methods to give an account of gaming that views it in its full context as a set of social practices. It examines the complex of relations that make gaming possible and are constitutive of gendered, embodied subjectivities. It particularly asks how women's gaming becomes possible and the kind of constraints that impact their relations with games. To do that I have elaborated a research design examining gaming at a range of sites, with particular emphasis on experience and taking the material alongside gaming content.

Overall the shift in focus has been a successful one. Much like the work of Radway (1984) and Gray (1992) in earlier media, this shift has revealed relations between gaming and other areas of life that significantly modify their meaning. It has also shown how central the computer and gaming practices can be to home life, linked to and giving insight into such intimate practices as eating and affect, but also relations of inequality such as home finances, share of expertise, and work and leisure.

Data from piloting this research design shows that the work of gaming takes place at many sites, both inside and outside the game itself, through a rich set of interconnected practices. The female gamer and gamer subjectivities are constituted through these practices, and I would argue that in order to understand these we need to attend to these wider relations as they happen at multiple levels. A consideration of embodiment shows that to be a gamer also requires maintenance of material; the achievement of a suitable machine, negotiation of an arrangement of space in home geographies, and time for leisure. Such a broad picture en-

ables us to see the privileged position of the gamer, with not everyone having equivalent power to negotiate such space (Leung 2005). This more relational picture allows us to see how women's interest and non-interest in games play out – with a wide range of relations such as time, place, and expertise, creating conditions of possibility and impossibility for gaming. This suggests many fruitful lines of enquiry to be taken up in the full study.

How did the research methods discussed serve these theoretical aims, and what can be gained from using such methods? Overall, the full case-studies for each participant present a very fleshed out picture of their gaming practices, a sense of capturing some of the experience and action in their use. Particularly idiosyncratic to this project are the audio-diaries and the photographs, so I will make a few remarks on their effectiveness.

The audio-diaries produce a useful alternative to more traditional interview methods, with many similar benefits. Unexpected at the start of the project, many participants use these during action, deepening the narrative with interactions with computers, other people, televisions, and other objects as they speak. They are always located in time and place, as recordings are made throughout the day, and give particular insight into how participants' lives are patterned. So we see how gaming relates to other time-based activities such as morning rituals, eating and work. The level of control participants have in telling their own story, but also the eagerness to please and follow instructions that has so obviously informed the recordings, highlights how interview texts are also co-produced by researcher and participant. However this level of freedom can make the analysis tricky. Different participants will have provided quite different styles of narrative, levels of detail or quantitative information, so the analysis must have the flexibility to benefit from this variety. This design places the audio-diary before a face-to-face interview, which ameliorates some of these problems as it allows the researcher to seek clarification and elaboration.

Photographs, again in this instance intrinsically linked to the interview narratives, add richness to them. By allowing the researcher to study in detail places that otherwise would be seen only briefly, they are invaluable in drawing links between the material of the home space and the story behind choice and then impact of how space is used.

The research design as a whole captures a sense of the rich bodiliness of practices of gaming. We get a sense of how they are both rooted in materiality, constantly dynamic, and taking place in many modes. Of particular benefit in this design is an emphasis on concrete, current events in participants' lives, as well as a set of methods that explore different levels and views simultaneously. These principles could be used to develop a similar design with a different set of methods to focus on other aspects of gaming. Overall this piloting data is enough to reassure that this research design will give fruitful stories and avenues for analysis, and to make an argument that examining relationalities sheds fresh light on a more traditional view of use of content.

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