Book Review


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In hundreds of low-rent buildings across the southern and eastern provinces of China, young workers huddle at their stations for US .30 cents a day, repetitively performing a task. Unlike the millions of other workers earning similar wages for similar conditions, the gold farmers of China present a considerable challenge to our concepts of gaming and leisure. Their task is not lathing furniture or bolting panels onto toys for the western market, but buying and selling in the fiat currency of online gaming worlds. The labour economy is mind-boggling. They slay dragons in World of Warcraft, to gain items which they give to their in-game ‘bosses’, who sell the items for in-game currency, which is then sold for real currency to western players, who use the in-game currency to buy items for their characters, to make the game easier.

Well apart from the gyroscopic forces generated from Marx's spinning corpse, the situations of online gameplay require a total reappraisal of our conceptions of information economy. Key texts by Edward Castronova and Julian Dibbell provided early interventions into how the economic and the social have collided in these worlds, with the latter's "Play Money" offering an intelligent trajectory through the economic imperatives sitting underneath MMORPGs. "Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture" T.L. Taylor's new ethnography project, is an intelligent triangulation of in-game phenomena, player profiles and meta-data such as the corporate profile of the companies involved.

Going beyond the economic strata of most interest to Castranova and Dibbell, Taylor seeks to put all the cards out to play without drawing too much from a single well. The breadth of the approaches is well balanced; most importantly, a considered approach to gender’s border controls is developed with enough academic consideration to satisfy doubters who would insist that transgressive, political, interpretative action is impossible in gameworlds.

Taylor spends a good deal of time on power gamers, for whom the MMORPG system offers only opportunity for achievement of incremental increases in overdetermined spreadsheets – of which the gold farmer is the logical conclusion. A power gamer interprets fun along a different axis; finding mastery not over a game system, but meta-mastery so that achievement of extreme in-game power is streamlined and creative. The fun comes in finding ways to streamline fun. Taylor is inquisitive enough about the politics of this phenomena to offer up an indepth inquiry, and is thankfully entrenched enough in game culture to observe that each game offers a totally unique set of cultural registers. With the shadow of World of Warcraft looming large over MMORPG research as much as game culture, much to the detriment of far more interesting worlds such as Lord of the Rings Online, Eve Online, and Maple Story, Taylor’s book is celebratory of its imperfect position, a snapshot of late-era Everquest.

Taylor engages with the most difficult element of online game culture; its relationship to corporate power, with aplomb and a deeply considered political direction. The ethnographer discards the notion of impartiality here, expressing what has only become more urgent in the years since Everquest. Players demanding change to game mechanics through in game protests begin to intersect with out-game politics and direct political action is only possible in virtual space, when the territory of power is virtual in itself. The double-bind is not as simple as it can seem at first glance; the more controlled and tested an environment, the more
glaring its spaces for political deviancy and anti-authoritarian movement. After reading “Play Between Worlds”, the corporate fantasia of multi-user environment Second Life pales next to the sometimes entirely more frightening behaviour of corporations and players in the gaming worlds. As an ethnographic intervention, there is a curious paradox involved in the project – but the depth of research and thoughtful, humane, elemental approach is going to be well regarded once the waves of Warcraft Studies come roaring over the hill.