



## Normalized Play Marginalizes Players in a Massively Multiplayer Online Game

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### Theory

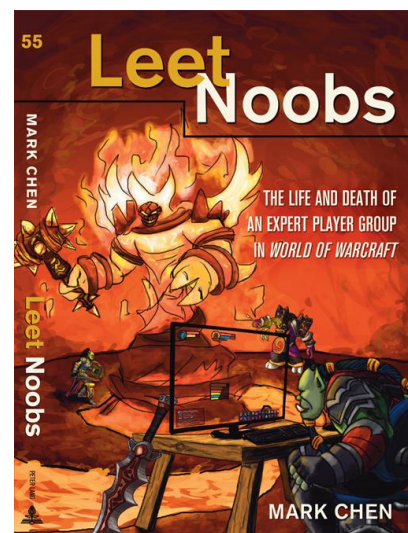
- A play space (or activity space) is a “mangle” (Pickering, 1995; Steinkuehler, 2006).
  - The actual activity occurs in an arena with multiple contentious motives from different parties or actors.
  - Their tensions, work-arounds, pushes, pulls, and constant renegotiation of positions, roles, and responsibilities make the landscape of activity dynamic and emergent. Constant motion of destabilization and restabilization (Latour, 2005).
- These game spaces (cultures) hold/build/replicate certain values, including about legitimate ways of being/playing.
  - The values are emergent from the mangle and not always predictable.
- Expertise development in this space is a matter of socialization into expert groups, learning to do what experts do (rather than just content knowledge) (Collins & Evans, 2007).
  - Practice also changes over time as values and agendas change (Chen, 2012).

### Methods, data, participants

- 10-month ethnography of an online player group in World of Warcraft (WoW), Nov 2005 - Aug 2006
- 60 players, each session had 40 players and lasted 3-5 hours
- text chat, voice chat, video, and forums data

### Marginalization

- My gaming group was founded on the values of friendship, support, hanging out and having fun.
- As they learned the underlying mechanics and math of the game, and as new tools were picked up by the community to keep track of the math, some members of the group began to focus more and more on efficiency.
  - ie, they bought into the numbers and started surveilling others’ performance, etc.
- Their change in practice reflected the larger community’s move towards efficiency and progress.
  - New ways of tracking progress and rating players were introduced by developers and other players.
    - e.g., gear score, guild rankings
- This movement was in contention with my group’s initial values, leading to its eventual fracture.





## Take aways and provocations

- By quantifying achievements, game developers normalize gaming practice and values, sometimes marginalizing other forms of play.
- Extend this to gamification: Gamification is basically a way of providing incentives for people to engage in some sort of designed activity.
  - Most ways of gamifying something does so by giving people rewards, achievements, badges, etc. for particular events in that activity, providing a quantifiable way of rating progress with that activity.
- Big questions I have are: Are these rewards meaningful? How are they meaningful or not?
- And are they narrowing what counts as “normal,” marginalizing certain groups of players? Do we even care? Informal vs. formal instruction, relevant instruction, authentic practice, culturally responsive education, etc... what do all these mean when assessment seems more in line with normalization?

## References

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