UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

LEARNING SCIENCES
College of Education

December 15, 2010

DML Research Associates Summer Institute Program Review Committee
Digital Media and Learning Research Hub
UC Humanities Research Institute
4000 Humanities Gateway Building
Irvine, CA 92697-3350

Dear DML Summer Institute Review Committee,

I believe that academics have a responsibility to serve the public, yet traditional publishing models often pose barriers to general access of research findings. Furthermore, because journal articles and academic books are written for other academics, even if they were made more accessible to the public, someone without disciplinary knowledge may be ill-equipped to understand efficiently the research. I've always wanted to make sure my research is grounded in practice and useful to the people I study.

I research the ecology of gaming, focusing on ethnographic accounts of online gaming practice. My dissertation (completed in August 2010 at the University of Washington, College of Education) documents expertise development, teamwork, and collaboration in a *World of Warcraft* player group, treating the group as a learning network that successfully enrolled various human and nonhuman resources to thrive in a high-stakes joint-task environment. The abstract appears below and a bullet-list summary can be found at http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2010/10/a-dissertation-distilled-into-a-single-blog-post-cry.html

> 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. The group took 7 months to master an in-game zone known as Molten Core, defeating all of the monsters within, including the last boss monster, Ragnaros. Part of the group's success depended on its members' ability to reconfigure their play spaces, enrolling third-party game modifications and external web resources into their activity. Before joining the group, the players had successfully built-up enough social and cultural capital to be recognized as expert players. Once joining the group, however, they had to relearn and adapt their expertise for this new joint task that required them to specialize, taking on different

> roles depending on the types of characters they chose to play, and structure themselves for efficient communication and coordination practices. They also needed to align themselves to new group goals and learn to trust each other. Thus, once-expert players became novices or noobs to relearn expert or leet gameplay, yet they were not true novices because they had a good understanding of the game system and ways to configure their individual play spaces to be successful players. Rather, they were "leet noobs" who needed to reconfigure and adapt their expertise for new norms of sociomaterial practice suited for joint venture. After 10 months, the group experienced lulls in performance due to a change in membership, and the group disbanded as members were unable to renegotiate and agree upon shared goals and responsibilities. Their network had been irreparably disrupted. Understanding how group success depends on alignment of goals and responsibilities helps us plan for future collaborative endeavors across both formal and informal settings.

I have published related works that include articles in *Games and Culture*, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, and *E-Learning*. While a few of my publications are accessible for free on the web, I don't believe they are easily understood, as is, to a general (gaming) audience. Therefore, I propose to create the design document for an interactive web app that explains some or all of the major findings of my dissertation leveraging new trends in digital scholarship and visualization. An example could be to animate a sequence of play, mapping out all of the sociomaterial resources the players I studied drew upon to be successful. Another example could be to create a mini-Flash game that demonstrates how players came to understand the underlying mechanics of WoW.

I believe a design document and possible early prototyping is a reasonable outcome for a week-long institute. Prior to graduate school, I created Flash games and maintained the website for the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry, so I believe I have the technical ability to do the proposed work. During this process, I also want to produce a more formal research paper that documents the design process.

More about me and my research can be found at http://markdangerchen.net

Thank you for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Mark Chen
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