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24. POWER GAMERS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN?:
INSTRUMENTAL PLAY IN A MMOG

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore a particular slice of massive multiplayer participants known as power gamers. Through my ethnography of EverQuest, as well as interviews with players, I analyze the ways these participants, who operate with a highly instrumental game-orientation, actually facilitate their play style through a variety of distinctly social activities. Rather than seeing this segment of the gaming population as "lone ranger" figures or via various other "geek gamer" myths, this work explores the way high-end players are actually embedded in deeply social structures, rituals, and practices.

KEYWORDS

Massive multiplayer online games, MMOG, EverQuest, social-ization, styles of play, player typology, power gaming

INTRODUCTION

While there is a growing body of literature on massive multiplayer online games (MMOG) it has typically focused on a generic player. Given the newness of the field this kind of homogeneity is understandable – the terrain has been getting a basic mapping and so fine-grained distinctions had not yet emerged. Earlier work however by people like Bartle [2] provide some indication that not all players are the same. He proposes that there are a variety of different types of activities people prefer do in MUDs (though the theory is often used for other games) and that we can characterize such players through a basic taxonomy. His now oft-repeated categories – killers, achievers, socializers, explorers – form a continual basis for discussions of player types. While such distinctions are often overstated as complete archetypes, it is worth exploring the different kinds of styles of play users engage in.

The notion that people play differently, and the subjective experience of play varies, is central to an argument that would suggest there is no single definitive way of enjoying a game or of talking about what constitutes "fun." I would argue we need expansive definitions of play to account for the variety of pleas-urable labor participants engage in (see [9] for further discussion of the multi-ple pleasures of games). Suggesting that games are always "fun" (and then in turn endlessly running after the design of such) is likely to gloss over more ana-lytically productive psychological, social, and structural components of games.

One of the most interesting distinctions I have found in my research on MMOGs is the difference between the casual and power gamer. Both terms are likely to evoke a kind of stereotyped figure. The casual gamer is often seen as someone "with a life" who invests only moderate amounts of time in a game while the power gamer appears as an isolated and socially inept player with little "real life" to ground them. For the most part dialogue about the types rests on unproductive rhetoric and tells us very little about styles of play and what brings people back to a game over and over again. It dichotomizes and oversimplifies the much more complicated social experience of each category. In this paper I will, using ethnographic and interview data, focus on power gamers and try to provide some initial thoughts on their style of play and identify ways in which they participate in a kind of social labor and collective knowledge production.

TYPES OF GAMERS

The question about styles of play and gamer types is an old one and debated in both designer & player communities. There are often a normative aspects to such divisions, as in, for example, the "roll player, power gamer, or munchkin" frame. In each of these the player is seen as perverting a pure gamespace by distorting some aspect of play (too much hack n' slash, loot greediness, under developed characters) or by taking advantage of the game design itself (through loopholes and actions not intended but nonetheless not prohibited by the system). In an article at the *GameGrene* website entitled "Just Say No To Powergamers" the author suggests that such players ruin role play games by their insistence on being as powerful as possible and "see[ing] no other purpose in the game besides winning" [1].

While some put the blame on the system, the designers, or the game master (suggesting that the structure of a particular game may produce this kind

of behavior) others hypothesize it is an unethical choice on the part of the gamer – they are not playing fair or "right." Some suggest power gamers are inclined to cheat more readily, as one person I interviewed said of a high-level *EverQuest* (*EQ*) guild, "They were not interested in playing by what was basically the rules. They realized the disadvantage they were at by playing by the rules so they just bent them." Or the other who said, "I'm not that much of a power-gamer, I still go by the rules." The notion that power gamers are out to spoil everyone else's fun or that they are inclined to cheat more frequently looms as a stereotype in the player community. But what if we untangle the specter of renegade players set on cheating from the more general category of power gamers and consider this style as a serious play strategy in which typical notions of fun and pleasure are complicated? How might our understanding of the nature of play be extended if we take the power gamer as a legitimate participant in game space?

Power gaming

Rather than write power gamers off as simply cheaters I propose they actually constitute a group who play in ways we typically don't associate with notions of "fun" and leisure. In worlds like *EQ* they are often juxtaposed to the role player:

> There are people that play for the role play aspect who say 'thus' and 'forsooth' a lot [...] and then there are people who have their statistics and what's best for advancing their character (EQ player).

In querying players for their definition of power gaming the comparison with role players and casual gamers often emerged. In *EQ* role players are seen as people dedicated to the backstory and narrative structure of the world. They game *through* develop-

ing characters, alliances, and plots (though it should be noted that there is no formal mechanism in the game for rewarding this activity and it has little part in actual leveling). Casual gamers, on the other hand, are likely not developing elaborate backstories for their character or following plot. They may change characters frequently, level more slowly than some, and focus on doing quests or skill development. Though they can be involved in guilds they are often of the "social" or "family" sort. In *EQ* casual gamers may never attend a high-level raid or even visit some of the zones in the game. Despite playing with varying degrees of regularity they nonetheless find the game engaging. They are often perplexed by the power gamer however, as one interviewee mused about the comparison,

> They [a guild of power gamers] did things I would just consider ridiculous like getting three or four accounts or having a group that was just them [one player playing multiple characters, essentially grouped with himself] and level themselves up and get items for themselves. I have lots of hate for the powergamers. I think like, for me I felt I played the game a lot, 4-6 hours a day, almost the equivalent of a fulltime job and I couldn't keep pace with the powergamers cause they were on 10 hours a day.

This sense that somehow power gamers are just *too* dedicated, almost bordering on the (psychologically) pathological, is a popular theme. What I found striking in conversations with *EQ* power gamers however is that they actually consider their play style quite reasonable, rational, and pleasurable. There are several qualities to the approach that emerged: a focus on efficiency and instrumental orientation, dynamic goal setting, commitment to understanding the underlying game systems/structures, and technical & skill pro-

ficiency. I would suggest that one of the reasons power gaming as a style occupies a kind of "othered" space in games is that it appears to operate directly counter to an understanding of fun and leisure. The kind of activities and orientations power gamers bring to games often look more to the outside world as work and this leads to a much broader ambivalence about what constitutes legitimate play.

Efficiency and Instrumental Action

One of the most notable characteristics of the players I observed and spoke with was the fundamental adherence to a kind of focused cause/effect model of game involvement. Power gamers in *EQ* are particularly attuned to making the most of the time in the game and undertaking actions to produce efficient reward paths.

> [I'm] more what you might call a power gamer. I look at EverQuest as the numbers. If you do this you'll get this, this is a better combination, you'll have a better chance to kill. That's all it is for me - to see the new stuff and do the new stuff and find the new stuff.

One player described how knowing the best, most efficient way to play was central to success, especially at the high-end game. The game is seen as a problem to be broken apart and solved. Working out solutions and strategies with a kind of focused intent then becomes central – "Efficiency is probably they most important word [for a powergamer]. Leveling is all about efficiency." Of course, you can level without this kind of orientation to be sure but power gamers structure actions in terms of productive or wasteful strategies. In comparing how a casual gamer approaches the issue of in-game items which provide the wearer with beneficial properties and statistics, one power gamer says,

'If you want to be the best you've got to get everything to mesh. You can't have "Oh, this is the best item from this guy, this is the best from this guy." You have to say "I have 47 points to get to my current cap [point limit]. How do I get that based on what drops what?"

This kind of intentionality extends to all aspects of play, even failed encounters and mistakes. One player I spoke with suggested that average players don't confront failure as a learning opportunity in the same way power gamers do saying, "When we die we say 'What went wrong?' and try to understand what happened." While it is certainly not unusual to hear even casual gamers talk about trying something a few times to "get it right" the level of attention power gamers give to understanding mistakes is notable. What are often viewed as the best player-guides tap into this impulse with their rich accounts of how to handle a monster (an non-player character entity, also known as a "mob") or zone, specifying down to the very pacing of the encounter how to proceed. In high-level guilds where there are often significant concentrations of power gamers is it not unusual to see extremely detailed recountings of failed and successful strategies in new zones or with new mobs. This willingness to critically examine others, let your own tactics be reviewed, and repeat encounters until you succeed distinguishes the power gamer from the more casual one who may move onto a different location after several unsuccessful attempts.

Dynamic Goal Setting

As is probably clear from the above quote and scenarios, the focus on efficiency is typically driven by the "desire to be best." In a game like *EverQuest* this goal is particularly tricky given the ongoing expansions which increase level caps, the diverse race/class structure which produces varying skill sets, and the variety of arcana one might master. Nonetheless

what distinguished the power gamers was their constant engagement in dynamic goal setting and the focused attention to achieving them. Goals can range from gaining levels to securing particular weapons and armor, killing particular monsters, gaining admission to a specific guild, getting special skills, and exploring difficult zones. As many *EQ* players comment, the game never ends so you have to be self-directed in how you progress.

What was striking to me was the willingness of power gamers to go through very hard work to achieve their goals. It was not the activity itself that became the measure of "fun" but the possibility for success that pushed them forward. One player recounted a fourteen hour session to reach level 50. By the last few hours he found himself going "snowblind" and yet pressed on. When I asked if he had enjoyed that evening, he replied, "I'd still rather be doing that than other things. This is my goal, it's going to be fun when I get there. It's the grind sometimes but then you get there." In *EQ* players of all levels often talk about "the grind" which is the experience of going through often painfully boring or rote gameplay with little advancement. Everyone knows and accepts this is a (flawed) part of the game but the threshold for tolerating it varies widely. Power gamers seem willing to endure much more than many other players and are particularly adept at breaking down the game to meet their personal goals (which they are constantly revising and developing) as they progress. As one player put it, "These individual goals you set determine what kind of player you are. I want to be 50. I want to be 50 first. I want to be 50 in three weeks. How am I gonna do that?"

Game Structure Knowledge:
History and Experience

It is important to keep in mind that all participants in a game come to it with some history of play. They

may only have played board games or may have extensive FPS (first person shooter) or Live Action Role Play (LARP) experience. They may have never played on a team and only against the computer. In the case of power gamers I found that they often drew from a much broader base of game knowledge as a way of advancing their play. In the most basic instance there may be game commands that are transferable. *Star Wars Galaxies*, for example, has added an interesting feature in actually allowing players to select an *EQ* keymap so as to minimize the time it takes to learn how to execute basic actions and gestures. Some *EQ* players were likewise familiar with the game's structure based on their previous experience with MUDs.

Beyond these interface considerations however are the ways games in effect teach players to *be* gamers in a general sense. As one player put it, "*EverQuest* was training for *Dark Age* [*of Camelot* (DAoC), another MMORPG]." This same player was also previously a player of *Quake*, *Unreal Tournament*, and *Halo* and suggested his experience in these games provided him useful information for "how people move" in *DAoC*. Power gamers seem particularly adept at creating transferable knowledge between games (and conversely realizing the limits of such an endeavor based on how unique the game is).

This kind of general game knowledge of course gets rooted in figuring out the particularities of each system and the specific mechanics at work. Power gamers often push systems to their limit by trying to "break" them or find points at which the game architecture is internally contradictory or malleable. In many ways it is these kinds of behaviors that get seen by the broader game community (and quite often the administrators) as looking far too similar to cheating. But power gamers generally see these kinds of explorations into the dynamics of the game

as simply smart moves – that only by understanding the constraints of the system will you be able to most effectively play. How do mobs path through a zone and what is the most efficient route to take when fighting them? What are the rates of respawn on a particularly rare monster and what triggers that process? How do different spell combinations work in breaking up a tough group of monsters? What happens when I do this? Or this? As power gamers work and rework such questions their knowledge of the game can almost at times appear *too* good. They seem to understand how things work at a level the average player does not quite grasp. Given the gap in understanding how power gamers actually play this kind of knowledge sometimes gets labeled negatively, as cheating or trying to exploit the system.

This type of activity is actually one of the first instances in which my account of power gamers differs from Bartle's consideration of the "achiever." In many ways the achiever fits the mold of the power gamer with the attention to goals. He however suggests that for achievers, "Exploration is necessary only to find new sources of treasure, or improved ways of wringing points from it" [2, p.3]. By contrast he posits that "Explorers delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them. They try progressively esoteric actions in wild, out-of-the-way places, looking for interesting features (i.e. bugs) and figuring out how things work" [2, p.3].

In my discussions with power gamers I have found that this line is not so clear. Certainly there is a goal behind the kind of system exploration that power gamers engage in but it does not seem to have quite the "(sigh) only if I have to" quality Bartle hints at. Indeed there seems to be a kind of pleasure attached to mapping out such mechanics and responding to them in creative ways. While detailed explanations of effective strategies (the outcome of "explorer"

labor) on the one hand serve a very functional purpose in sharing knowledge so others can replicate a tactic, such rich recountings of strategies also seem to mark a kind of pride and pleasure for the power gamer. It is also the case that power gamers may refine strategies of others, seeking increasingly esoteric (but more efficient) methods of play. Indeed in a game like *EQ* power gamers cannot simply be crude achievers but seem to require a fairly complex set of exploratory skills... and even enjoy them.

Technical & Skill Proficiency

The final category that is worth mentioning is the role technical proficiency plays in the life of a power gamer. While *EQ* is a fairly straightforward game, requiring little technical know-how (often this is seen as contributing to its popularity with a fairly diverse audience) there are certainly higher degrees of technical engagement players can deploy. The use of elaborate macros or remapping keys is one way power gamers often streamline their sessions for maximum efficiency. While the average player may not either know about or take the time to learn how they might "script" an encounter, power gamers often spend time distilling down essentially strategies or customizing the game (through keyboard mapping) in a way that makes their play more tuned to their unique style. They do not just accept the interface but alter it to suit their methods.

Another common practice amongst power gamers in *EQ* is what is known as "2-boxing." Quite simply this involves playing multiple characters simultaneously on two machines. There are players who extend this even further with 3-boxing being not uncommon (though it should be stated that generally the additional characters are not quite as active as the primary one). Before *EQ* was allowed to run in a windowed mode this might additionally mean using a hack program such as *EQWindows* to allow for several instances of the game on one machine (though this was less common than using separate computers).

Beyond actually playing multiple accounts power gamers have deployed tools like *ShowEQ*, a program which runs on Linux that gives a detailed accounting of any zone including what mobs are present and what they holding, a listing of exits, and a listing of other players. *ShowEQ* is certainly one of the more debated "helpers" for the game (often seen as a cheat) and it is by no means that case that all power gamers use it (or even see it as ethical to) though it is more likely to find this type of player relying on such a program (especially given it requires some knowledge of Linux to set up).[1] In general this kind of active engagement with the technical constraints of the system seems to be another notable feature of the play style of power gamers.

It should be mentioned that the very definition of what a power gamer is remains quite open and debated in the community. While I have tried to give some key areas that were repeatedly reflected in my discussions and observations, I do want to note that the dis-

[1] One interesting exception I found to this was a player who considered himself "almost" a power gamer. He saw his use of *ShowEQ* as a way of competing with power gamers, saying, "It allowed me to do something sort of passively that allowed me to level the playing field. It's such a good tool, everybody would love to be running it I think."

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tinctions can be endlessly refined. One final consideration often remarked on is the amount of time a player can spend in *EQ*. Some people contend that power gamers are simply the people who devote endless hours to playing. One player, the founder of one of the uber guilds on an *EQ* server pondered this, saying,

> I think there are two kinds of power gamers: [A] power gamer is a gamer who knows the system and plays for the goal. Doesn't play to explore. He plays to reach some goals and that's why he's a power gamer cause he goes straight in for the goal. Level fast, goes very fast for that goal. People around him fall behind and that's why they think he's a power gamer cause he knows the game system, knows all the stuff and just wants to get to his goal. So that's one power gamer. The other power gamer is how much time you spend. The common power gamer spends a lot of time as well. What is a casual gamer that plays like a power gamer? Is he a power gamer or a casual gamer? The guy who logs on and knows exactly what to do but doesn't log on everyday. I don't know what to call that guy. I still think he's a power gamer. I mean, the time invested isn't really about power gaming but really about... uber gaming maybe. Uber gamer maybe [laughter about this distinction].

I have been struck by how many casual gamers play for an equal number of hours with very different results. Despite hours of play they do not level as fast, gain (as many) rare items, or accomplish other high-end activities of note. This seems to suggest that it is not simply a matter of time but orientation.

THE MYTH OF THE ISOLATED GAMER

With this description of power gaming in mind it could be easily imagined that the type of player engaged in this style is quite isolated, grinding away with a kind of hyper-focused efficiency out of sight from other players. While there has been a bit of work done on first person shooters that taps into some of their sociological aspects [7, 8, 11], I argue that MMOGs as a genre, and *EverQuest* in particular, actively facilitate the production of a very particular power gamer identity which problematizes often individualized notions of play. *EQ* power gamers are distinctly social players, although at times such sociality may not "look" like what we see in casual or role-players. Nonetheless they are typically linked to both informal and formal social mechanisms which facilitate their play.

As Mikael Jakobsson and I have noted in previous work, *EQ* is an game in which success can really only be gained (especially at the high-end) through a reliance on social networks [5]. Players not only socialize in the simplest sense (through chatting and hanging out in the virtual world) but form complicated systems of trust, reliance and reputation. Play in *EQ* is grounded in the production and maintenance of social relationships and larger organizations like guilds. These kinds of connections are no different

for power gamers and in *EQ* they are certainly not the "lone ranger" figures one might think.[2] The reliance on, and involvement with, social networks and resources – web information and bulletin boards, guilds, and off and online friendship networks – indeed reveals power gamers to be some of the most socialized players in MMOGs.

Community knowledge

Games like *EQ* can prove particularly daunting to a new user. With the wide variety of locations and monsters, the reliance on statistics (each character has a designation of points in categories like intelligence, strength, charisma, etc.), large numbers of armor and weapons (all with their own statistics that modify the player), and spell/combat strategies a player can very quickly feel like killing rats simply isn't enough to master the game. As a response to this complexity a broad knowledge base grounded in the community has developed in conjunction with the game. Jakobsson notes that the very boundaries of the game can be seen as extended through such sites. He suggests, "It is very hard to imagine a game like *EQ* without all the resources on the web helping players with maps, information about spells, equipment, etc. From the players point of view these websites are an integral part of the game itself" [4].

Detailed information about the game and play strategies can be found at a multitude of websites dedicated to *EQ*. Players can visit places like *Allak- hazam* or *Illia's Beastiary* and find enormous amounts of detailed information about items, monsters, and zones. In addition there are numerous websites dedicated to particular classes, such as *EQNecro* which details a variety of strategies and tips for playing a necromancer in the game. Finally, guilds (especially high level "uber" ones) will keep detailed records of tactics, items, and raid encounters which members will regularly consult.

Power gamers are active visitors and contributors to these kinds of sites, especially in terms of their own guild pages. They will often daily make the rounds visiting their key sites to get information and strategies. As one of them put it, "We have these goals, and we go onto those websites and see what people got on other servers and what we want." This kind of labor is a collective collaboration in the production of valuable game knowledge and presents a fascinating example of player sociality. While the casual gamer may visit a map site on occasion or peruse a bulletin board sometimes, power gamers are regularly consulting, disputing, refining, and building knowledge through the more formalized mechanisms of websites and bulletin boards.

Friendship networks

While one type of social play coordination occurs through websites like those mentioned above, at a more basic level knowledge about the game and tactics are distributed through peer and friendship channels. Interestingly these information networks regularly cross off- and online boundaries. One play-

[2] Indeed, in some cases the "mafia-like" quality of the high-end game is even more pronounced than for lower levels. See [5] for more on this comparison.

er I interviewed talked about how for him playing was intricately woven into his offline relationships with his dorm-mates. His ability to be a power gamer was supported by a kind of supplemental processing with this "real world" friends:

> We'd play for a couple of hours and go to the dining hall and be talking about it and go to class and be talking about it. It's a pretty con-suming game. A lot of the game was items so we were talking about items we wanted to get and stuff like that. And some of it was stuff that hap-pened. The adventures. Since we're on a PvP [player versus player] server it was a little differ-ent. We'd talk about the encounters we had with other people.

This player went on to describe how he had access to several of these friends' accounts at various times which aided him moving his character around, doing item transfers, and various other game tasks. The benefits of swapping strategies and sharing knowl-edge (and accounts!) cannot be underestimated in a game like *EQ*. This kind of sociality and group reliance was certainly intentional on the part of the designers [5] in terms of game play but it is fasci-nating when it also occurs outside of the boundaries.

In addition to the ways offline friendship networks support power gaming in-game relationships also develop which become important tools for play. The social networks of power gamers are incredibly important at a couple different levels. The first is a very basic need for interaction. In talking to players I noticed how often they referred to strategies they employed for making through the "grind" parts of the game. One said, "Killing the same monster for four hours and not do[ing] something else is very boring. So if you don't have someone to talk to or something else to do you'll go crazy. You needed to chat if you wanted to get level 50." While some power gamers will watch television or read during these periods, it was just as typical to hear them talk about using chat channels or private communication to entertain themselves during these boring play periods.[3]

Beyond chatting with people in the game, there is a deep reliance on each other to be able to progress. As one gets involved in the high-end game it quickly becomes apparent that the kinds of challenges pre-sented can only be handled with group effort. Monsters are simply too tough to take on alone and breaking difficult camps (spawn-points for clusters of monsters) can often only be achieved through a diverse set of skills (or basic force). Most significant-ly much of the best equipment in the game, including the "epic" item for a class (a kind of penultimate weapon) can only be gotten through help from other players (sometimes more than forty people). The reliance on not just grouping, but getting *good* groups (productive ones in which you get a decent rate of experience and have minimal deaths and downtime), becomes central to high-end game play which is where power gamers in *EQ* cluster. As one of

[3] Players noted with some amusement the introduction of a Tetris-like game called Gems within EQ. The game allowed people to play a very simple game within the game (overlaid onto the standard interface). As one reviewer wrote, "Somewhere, a merciful pro-grammer noticed that certain aspects of the game were SO GODDAM DULL and downtime was SO EXTENSIVE that people were doing things like laundry and watching television while they waited to hunt, level, cast spells, travel to meet friends… in short, to play EQ. Out of the goodness of his heart, he leapt into action (on his own time) to solve the problem. The result? Gems" [10].

them put it, "A lot of it is knowing people you trust to play the class well." Power gamers rely on building strong social networks so they are able to call on help as needed, form well-balanced groups for particular tasks, and propagate raids. They are also quite clear on their need to be seen as good players - "how am I going to work in conjunction with people" - ones who can be counted on to valuably contribute to a group. The better your reputation the more likely your opportunities to advance.

Guilds

These reputation systems play a significant role in the construction of the high-end game, thus not only linking power gamers to a broader community of players but at times making them quite beholden to it.[4] The development of high-end "raiding" guilds (often known as "uber guilds") act as formalized institutions which, based on reputation systems, provide social support and legitimacy to the power gamer. These guilds are often central to player success as they provide a consistent and reliable source of not only game knowledge, but labor (in the form of help from guildmates). As one player suggested, in "*EverQuest* it's impossible to do it [reach the high-end game] without a guild."

Within the guild power gamers not only have a very local mechanism for sharing knowledge and tactics, they are also called upon to support the other members and advance the cause of the guild. Most uber guilds in *EQ* are very dedicated to raiding ever increasingly difficult or unexplored zones. New challenges are always being sought after and created. Doing so becomes in part a status marker but it also serves as an important mechanism for continuing to enjoy the game. I would argue that the participation of power gamers in guilds points to a kind of sociability we don't normally associate with this kind of focused play style. Not only is there a kind of broader community the players are involved in, they are quite often called upon to put aside their own individual needs for the good of the group. As one put it, "Somebody calls a raid, you get there. You drop everything. 'I'm half a bub to level!' No, you get there."

This kind of commitment to a larger group is important to specifically note given it moves the idea of socializing beyond simply chatting, or informal friendship networks, to a recognition that there is a *fundamental* necessity to rely on others in a game like *EverQuest*. The power gamer is not exempt from this. Their intense focus, commitment to instrumental action, near love of efficiency does not in the context of *EQ* produce an isolated and individualistic player but a highly networked one.

THE PLEASURES OF INSTRUMENTALITY

In the examination of power gamers you begin to confront a model of play that at times looks and sounds quite unlike how we usually speak of gaming in general. The simple idea of "fun" gets turned on its head by examples of engagement that rest on efficiency, (often painful) learning, rote and boring

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[4] Guild membership is not always a sure path to success, especially when ones character is not quite tuned to the other members. One player I interviewed addressed this when he talked about how he joined a guild for the social support only to find his character was essentially locked out of advancing due to the deeper structure of the game - "At that point [after his offline friends left EQ] I was kind of alone in the game. Not having anybody to rely on, I joined a guild. That was kind of fun for awhile [but] the better people get the better items... so you can get better items. And I wasn't getting any of the good stuff. And that's sort of discouraging I guess."

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tasks, and the like. Indeed many power gamers don't at all use the term fun to describe why they play but instead talk about a more complicated notions of enjoyment and reward. At times it almost appears as if they were speaking of... work.

I would argue that one of the problems with simple notions of fun is that it cedes the discussion of the pleasures of play to an overly dichotomized model in which leisure rests on one side and labor on another. But might we imagine a space in which our games at times aren't fun at all and, conversely, our labor is quite pleasurable? Does the framework in which work is about suffering and play is about relief get us very far in understanding the multiple ways people not only game but experience their activity?

As is probably quite obvious the line between the style of play power gamers engage in and that of professional gamers is not very distinct. After some preliminary work in the area it certainly appears to me that the instrumental and rigorous approach to gaming you find amongst professionals is not unique. In fact, professional gamers (who often play FPS's and strategy games) would probably be more at home discussing their approach with some of the *EQ* power gamers than a casual gamer in their own genre. I would that some of the suspicion or skepticism with which power and professional gamers are viewed does not do justice to the *general approach* as a legitimate gaming style.

Caillois for example has written that play is "an activity that is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, regulated, and fictive" [3, p.43]. He speaks of the "contamination" of play when it is encroached upon by reality, obligation, or professionalism. He writes that in these instances,

What used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession. What was an escape becomes an obligation, and what was a pastime is now a passion, compulsion, and source of anxiety. The principle of play has become corrupted. It is now necessary to take precautions against cheats and professional players, a unique product of the contagion of reality [3, p.45].

This rhetorical linking of cheats with professional players strikes me as not unlike the kinds of moves people make when they equate power gaming with cheating – both are styles of play to be mistrusted as they corrupt authentic game space. In this model there is an imagination of what pure play looks like and it is inherently incompatible with instrumentality, extreme dedication (such that it appears sometimes to look like "work"), and even occasional boredom. I would suggest that this kind of dualism does not appear to match the kinds of varying experiences players report about their styles of engagements with a game like *EverQuest*. Unpacking the complex pleasures of play –even when it does not match common notions of "fun" – is the only way we will be able to understand the power gamer who said, "It's learning a skill and getting better at a skills. Even if they are pixels, it's rewarding."

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