Praxis

The friends that game together: A folkloric expansion of textual poaching to genre farming for socialization in tabletop role-playing games

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[0.1]   *Abstract*—Tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) are a folkloric form for creating and reaffirming community bonds and performing identity. Gaming is used to communicate and perform cultural capital and identity through fictional narratives, functioning as a form of community building and/or personal expression. With quotations from ethnographic research over the course of 2 years, including interviews with several groups of gamers and participant observation, I examine the ways that players create and affirm social bonds. I return to Michel De Certeau's idea of textual poaching, as adapted by Henry Jenkins, to contrast with it a new concept of genre farming. As both platform for and object of genre farming, RPGs allow players to display cultural competence, create and reaffirm social ties, and seek entertainment in a collaborative fashion.

1. Introduction: Terminology and stakes

[1.1]   Tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) are a form of collaborative storytelling. Like any folkloric form, gaming allows for the creation and reaffirmation of social ties between individuals. I will show how the social and narrative process of role-playing allows gamers to perform their affinity with and knowledge of cultural properties and to create/reaffirm social bonds between players. Gaming is used to communicate and perform identity through fictional narratives, acting as a form of community building and/or personal expression in a collaborative and entertaining fashion.

[1.2]   Tabletop role-playing is a meaning-making social activity that creates space for personal expression and affirms social bonds, including permutations of textual poaching à la Michel de Certeau (1984) and Henry Jenkins (1992). I focus on the White Wolf Publishing game *Exalted* (Alexander et al. 2006) as it was the game played

during much of my fieldwork, and I return to the idea of textual poaching to introduce the concept of *genre farming.* Genre farming emerges from the idea of textual poaching but covers different conceptual grounds regarding ownership and intertextuality. Whereas textual poaching pertains to illegal reworkings of copyrighted material, genre farming focuses on the recontextualization of tropes and motifs. I will be exploring genre farming primarily in terms of RPGs, where it allows for description and collaborative storytelling.

[1.3]   Role-play gaming is a collaborative art form that emerges from the interplay of the players and game master/storyteller; it lends itself to people who are looking for a way to be creative in a group setting. Gaming provides explicit rules of conduct for behavior as the group creates their play rules and aesthetics consciously through their play. Friendships are made and maintained through role-playing games: gamers share their engagement with cultural materials, create group-specific argot, and create memories and narratives that demonstrate experiential ties between the group members.

2. Methodology

[2.1]   My study combines participant observation methods with both game studies and fan studies. Ethnographic research has been used to examine RPGs before, but Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983) is terribly outdated, for all that it paved the way for later works. Although Daniel Mackay's *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (2001) provides a much more recent example of RPG studies, it is wholly grounded in and bounded by performance studies. I bring ideas from fan studies and folkloristics into contact with previous work on RPGs and role-players to discuss the intricate ways that gamers interact with the cultural properties of the games they play while they integrate ideas from other stories through textual poaching and what I call genre farming.

[2.2]   My informant interviews were conducted in Eugene, Oregon, and Bloomington, Indiana, from 2006 to 2007. I worked with three groups for my research: a gaming group in Eugene, Oregon, which played *Exalted* at a game store in Eugene; another *Exalted* group in Bloomington; and other gamers who resided in Bloomington. My informants were almost exclusively white and were predominantly middle-class and college educated (ranging from undergraduates to holders of graduate degrees). All of the participants in the study were approached specifically on the basis of their participation in one or more role-playing groups; in the case of the Bloomington gamers, I had previously interacted with them through other games. All of the informants' names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

[2.3]   I was granted access to the Eugene group after speaking with Kyle, the co-owner of a game store that sells role-playing games, card games, and miniatures games, rents Japanese anime, and sells accessories for related products. Kyle and his wife (the store's other owner) are young professionals devoted to creating a store atmosphere that is inviting and designed for playing games as well as selling them. Kyle had just begun running a game of White Wolf's *Exalted,* and after a discussion about my research, he allowed me to observe the game. The group played in an upstairs room of the game store that was specifically constructed to provide private space for gaming (RPGs and other types). Two long card tables were lined up end to end, with a half-dozen chairs arranged around them. The room is not spacious, and an angled ceiling comes to a point above the room's center. Both sides of the ceiling are decorated with murals done by Kyle's wife.

[2.4]   I observed a half-dozen games of the Eugene campaign and interviewed the storyteller and five of his players during those weeks, discussing their opinions on gaming and the cultural/fan influences that they brought to their gaming experience. I also videotaped one session of the game and analyzed the tape to examine elements such as material culture, the position of players, and the embodied elements of play. The players had met through the game store and a previous RPG campaign where they had played *Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR, Wizards of the Coast, 1974–2009). Kyle invited the players from that game as well as a couple of those player's friends to join in his *Exalted* campaign. Thus, the participants had known each other to varying degrees before the game, but the campaign served as a way for them to strengthen those acquaintances and friendships. Games began in the early evening and did not continue past midnight. Players used the same characters from game to game as part of an ongoing narrative in which their characters were the protagonists of the narrative; Kyle offered structure and antagonism in his role as the storyteller.

[2.5]   The Bloomington-based groups were drawn from the players of a live-action role-playing campaign of White Wolf's *Changeling: The Dreaming* (1995–2004) that had lasted 7 years. I interviewed players and storytellers from that game and assembled a group to run another case-study game of *Exalted* in Bloomington, which included one videotaped session. I interviewed the Bloomington-based gamers on similar topics over the course of several months but also used the long-running live-action game as a topic for unpacking or developing many lines of discussion that came up during the interviews. The Bloomington case-study game was a short-term campaign with five players. The game was played during the afternoon at the apartment of two of the players, usually on a weekly basis.

[2.6]   Because I was a participant observer, it is impossible to speak of the *Exalted* games without also speaking of myself. I was physically present at the Eugene-based

games, occasionally interjecting my own comments in out-of-character discussions. I tried to make myself an unobtrusive presence so as to not to intrude on their game while still gaining the trust of the players; however, RPGs do not tend to have audience members who are not also performers/players. In the Bloomington case-study game, I was completely a part of the game as the storyteller, and my narrative and play biases were clear in that game. Because I was a participant of each of the gaming groups, my results are not only filtered through my voice, but they are influenced by my presence as well. I will speak further on the effects of my presence in the section on folk speech.

3. A short example of RPG play

[3.1]   In most role-playing games, there are two types of participants. Most participants are *players,* responsible for portraying a single character in the narrative, describing that character's actions and interactions, and reacting to the events of the game. In *Exalted,* the other type of participant is known as a *storyteller.* The storyteller is a director, cowriter, and actor in one, portraying the secondary characters, describing the scenes, acting as a rules arbiter, and facilitating the players' interactions. The storyteller role is identical to that of a moderator or game master in other role-playing games.

[3.2]   To provide a sense for the flow and feel of a tabletop game of *Exalted,* I provide the following hypothetical example with imaginary participants. Imagine this: it's 1 PM on a Sunday afternoon, and John answers the door at his home. Sandra, William, and Andrew are at the door, there for the weekly game of *Exalted.* They settle down at John's dinner table, spreading out game books, notebooks, bags of polyhedral dice (*Exalted* uses 10-sided dice, with the faces numbered from 1 to 10), and pencils and pens. William produces bags of pretzels, and John brings out a pan of brownies. The four discuss the week's episode of the TV series *Heroes* while they eat and socialize before they begin the game, catching up with people who are not only their collaborators in role-playing but also their friends.

[3.3]   John passes out papers with character-specific notations (character sheets) to Sandra, William, and Andrew, the players in the game. Each of them looks over their character sheets and their notes, and they begin to chat about what happened at the end of the last game session, refreshing their memories as they get ready to play. Sandra talks about how her character, Verdant Jade, had just rescued Kai Nevar (William's character) and Little Bao (Andrew's character) from a tribe of wolf men ruled by an insane member of the shape-shifting Lunar Exalted. John opens his laptop and opens the word and image files for the game materials he has prepared for the game, acting as the game master for the campaign. John listens to their recap and

reminds them about the last moment of the previous game, when Silver Claw (the Lunar Exalted) burst through the door with a dozen beast men.

[3.4]   The details of the narrative—not recorded anywhere but in the memories of the players—are repeated and clarified so that the game can pick up without any confusion as to where the characters were and what had happened. This recap functions in a similar way to the group's discussion of the show *Heroes.* The group repeats events of the narrative in conversation, focusing on moments that were confusing and elements of story, characterization, and/or themes so that as a group, they can refine their understanding of the story—both the television show and the story that the four of them are creating themselves.

[3.5]   John, the storyteller, who is sitting at the head of the table with the three players seated next to him and down the table, calls for the players' attention and sets the scene.

[3.6]   John says, "The three of you," being the characters in the narrative "are in the tent the tribesmen used to hold you. Silver Claw has a dozen wolf men with their spears pointed at you. What do you want to do?" John has addressed the players and set the scene for their characters, doing what is called *scene framing.* John provides a situation that demands action from the characters, then he solicits a response from the players.

[3.7]   Sandra turns to Andrew and William and asks, "Should we take them, or get out of there?" Here, Sandra speaks as a player to Andrew and William, seeking a consensus among the players as to how to move the story—toward a fight scene or an escape/chase. John's framing did not necessitate a fight, only suggested one. The players have the room to shape the narrative through their response to the storyteller's scene framing.

[3.8]   William says, "Kai is pissed. I'll get the wolf men real quick; you guys handle Silver Claw." The other players nod, and William turns to John and tells him, "We're fighting. I want to surprise the wolf men with a flying kick."

[3.9]   John asks for an *initiative roll* because combat has been instigated. Each of the players rolls a set of 10-sided dice (the number of dice determined by their characters' abilities), and they count how many dice show a number higher than six (these are counted as *successes*). John also rolls initiative: one roll for Silver Claw, one roll for the group of wolf men. William's character has gotten the highest number of success, which allows him to act first.

[3.10]   William declares an attack on one of the soldiers, and consults his character sheet for the appropriate number of dice to roll. William counts his successes and tells

John the count. John compares that total against the *defense value* of the soldiers (representing how difficult it is to hit them with an attack). John declares that Kai, William's character, has hit a wolf man with his flying kick and sent the beast man flying out of the tent. Meanwhile, Silver Claw has transformed into a 10-foot-tall wolf man battle form.

[3.11]   Throughout the game, declaration and resolution follow in this pattern: one player (or John the storyteller) declares a character's action, using the game's rules to determine the result, then the storyteller describes the outcome (or asks the player to describe the outcome, giving him or her a chance to narrate) and calls for the next action. In scenes where action is time sensitive, moment to moment, such as in combat or chases, initiative is used. After the heroes defeat Silver Claw and escape the village, initiative is no longer needed, and the game master returns to the pattern of setting the scene and asking players for their actions, allowing the game to flow without needing as rigid a structure.

[3.12]   The structure of the game adapts to the demands of the participants and the way they tell the story. The rules are a launching point for many gaming groups, and the players and storyteller can agree to diverge from the rules at any point. Although most groups establish at the beginning of a campaign what rules they will be modifying or omitting, an on-the-spot decision to bend or break rules is always an option, given that there is no outside governing authority on how games are to be played.

[3.13]   Players speak for the actions of their characters and may describe the action in a number of possible ways (such as "Verdant Jade runs after the robber," "My character runs after the robber," or "I chase the robber"). The degree of closeness to their characters that players enact is not usually regulated and can shift from moment to moment. Participants are simultaneously actors embodying a character, players rolling dice and consulting character sheets, storytellers working with one another to craft a narrative, and people cracking jokes, eating food, and socializing.

[3.14]   Players may decide what to have their characters do—or put another way, what to do as their characters—in a number of ways. Players can make an aesthetic choice, a decision based on what they think makes the best story ("If my character leaves her boyfriend at the inn to go fight the villain, I'll get more drama out of the relationship as I try to patch things up when I return. That sounds like a lot of fun, and it gets my character into the fight scene."). Or they can consider the internal logic of the character, a decision based on what they think the character would do ("Verdant Jade wouldn't leave her lover without an explanation. She'll walk him to the door and say that she will explain everything later, then run to the back to get her sword."). Or they may collaborate, a decision reached by group consensus ("We'll have Kai rush in

and tell her there's an emergency."). Or they may choose other ways of determining the character's action. Depending on the group consensus (including the storyteller's approval), players can rewrite actions that were declared or resolved earlier; the events that transpire are very flexible, as if everything were written in pencil, ready to be modified or edited.

4. *Exalted:* From textual poaching to genre farming

[4.1]   *Exalted* explicitly draws inspiration from mythology, science fiction/fantasy, novels, Korean comics (*manwha*), Japanese cartoons (anime), and video games. These influences range from Greek mythology to Korean interpretations of Norse myth to internationally acclaimed Chinese adventure novels (*wuxia*) to seminal works in sword and sorcery fiction. *Exalted* is like *The Illiad* as if directed by John Woo, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as if drawn by Yoshitaka Amano. With strong manga/anime influences (coinciding with an all-time high of American interest in those media), *Exalted* is mythic without being culturally specific. It is inspired equally by imperial China, classical Greece, mythic India, and other cultures, and it accommodates a wide range of play in a rich setting designed for adventure and intrigue. White Wolf Publishing's second edition of *Exalted* was released in 2006, revising the original version of the game that had been released in 2001. Thus, *Exalted* is a high-profile, recent RPG and therefore a useful subject to analyze as an alternative to the Fine (1983) and Mackay (2001) studies that are dominated by *Dungeons & Dragons.*

[4.2]   Unlike in the most famous RPG, *Dungeons & Dragons,* where characters begin as amateurs with potential, a single starting character in *Exalted* can be a match for a small army. Starting characters are much closer to Conan the Cimmerian of Robert E. Howard's Conan novels than J. R. R. Tolkien's Bilbo Baggins from *The Hobbit.* The world contains many dangers more powerful than the players' characters, but the thematic paradigm of *Exalted* is "How will you change the world?" as opposed to "Can you change the world?" In the Eugene game, all players were depicting members of the Solar Exalted, who are divinely empowered by the world's sun god (called the Unconquered Sun) and charged with restoring the glory of a long-forgotten golden age. Solar Exalted are just one of the many types of powerful beings in the world of Creation, and they are pitted against darkly beautiful undead champions, amoral and incomprehensible alien faelike beings called *Raksha,* and more.

[4.3]   In a game such as *Exalted,* I would refer to the recontextualizing process as one of genre farming. Players perform nonliteral recontextualizations of motifs, themes, and structures from games, films, television, and other cultural properties to enrich their game, prove their cultural knowledge, and cement social bonds through shared experience. Many gamers have grown up immersed in intertextually interlocked

narratives in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror where tropes like giant robots, magical swords, and powerful prophecies are not owned by any one creator or specific to any one text. Each theme or motif is more akin to a type of seed or crop, which has been harvested year after year and continues to bear fruit for the players, drawing upon their previous experiences with these motifs/themes to serve as shared context. Whereas fan-fiction writers, the subject of much of Jenkins's discussions of textual poaching, use copyright-protected characters in new and often transformative ways, gamers as genre farmers create new characters who then interact with one another. In *Exalted,* the use of copyrighted characters established by the game books is explicitly allowed as a part of play.

[4.4]   Given that the result of role-playing is discussed in terms of memories, experiences, and feelings, there is no artifact of play that can be spoken of as violating copyright. There is no crime in talking about the Star Wars character Luke Skywalker with your friends, nor would there be in telling a story where Luke duels with Robert E. Howard's Conan the Barbarian. And given that the characters in the *Exalted* games I observed were original and the purpose of play is the entertainment or intellectual nourishment of the players (to continue the farming metaphor), there is no worry of lawsuits or question of intellectual property. Recordings of role-playing games are uncommon and are even less commonly the primary purpose of play. Role-playing gaming is something done by gamers for one another and for themselves, their action and stories belong to themselves, with their own characters and their own interpretations of motifs, themes, and genre conventions.

[4.5]   Genre farming allows gamers to collaboratively shape their play to one another's aesthetics, drawing upon shared motifs, themes, and conventions from established genres, utilizing the genre fields as a resource for a gamer's individual entertainment in a fashion that does not violate any copyright laws.

5. Identity and community

[5.1]   In role-playing games, participants take on one or more fictional personas, performing for one another as simultaneous performers and audience, eliminating the performer/audience gap. Most gamers role-play without any formal acting training yet perform without difficulty or any reservations about their performance abilities. Among my informants, fewer than half had had any formal acting training though several had had other kinds of performance experience (such as choral, ballet, or band). The development of role-playing acting skill is a grassroots process that is done through observation and emulation.

[5.2]   Role-playing is, above all, a hobby, with personal and group enjoyment at the heart of the player's objectives. When asked why he chooses to role-play, Kyle explained,

> [5.3]   Because it's fun…It's playing pretend. Too many people are too quick to grow up. I mean, everyone played pretend as a kid. And that's all this is. It's playing pretend without, you know, being afraid to say that you still play pretend. It's just entertaining, it engages the brain. It's fun to escape…same reason, it's entertaining. (Kyle, personal interview, May 29, 2006)

[5.4]   Role-playing is, on a basic level, just a more sophisticated way to play make-believe; Victor, a video game designer from the Eugene group, says that it allows players to "re-create childhood experience of being someone who you aren't" (Victor, personal interview, May 29, 2006).

[5.5]   In this performance context, players reveal aspects of themselves on several levels. Their choice of characters, play style, and sense of humor and maturity in out-of-game conversation; all of these are ways that participants perform their identities, and all are read by others. Many of the players stated that they play characters who are reflections of themselves or expressions of personal desires.

> [5.6]   I think everyone sort of plays aspects of themselves…I think people sort tend to play archetypes of themselves that they don't really get to express normally. Ah, for example, playing the hot-headed warrior type who figures they can make things right through the power of their ability to kick people's ass, obviously not something one gets to do in real life very often…I think that's why a lot of people are attracted to the idea of…rogue type characters, where they get to sort of engage this, like, semi-sociopath "oh I'm just going to steal stuff and do whatever I want and stab people in the back" kind of thing. It's obviously something that can't be expressed in real life if you want to be at all socially adjusted. (Victor, personal interview, May 29, 2006)

[5.7]   College student Frank (also of the Eugene group) said, "It's fun to play characters who aren't like you" (Frank, personal interview, May 29, 2006). Following this logic, we can see gaming as a venue for exploring facets of personality that are taboo, for blowing off steam by sublimating, for living vicariously through fictional simulacra, as Frank once called RPG characters (Frank, personal interview, May 29, 2006), or for dealing with personal stress by portraying a powerful character capable of achieving victory in many different situations. Some players tend to draw explicitly on their own experiences and personalities for their characters, to ease their role-

playing. Wade (Eugene group), who works as both an artisan baker and video game designer, discussed this aspect.

[5.8]   **Wade:** I don't know if [my characters are] specifically like me; they tend to be quiet or gruff, um, which I think is a slight failing on my part. Most of the time my characters are fairly quiet, fairly reserved. The play style of a Dwarven fighter isn't actually that dissimilar from a quiet magician. You're both just—hang back and offer their advice as needed. Which is kind of how I like to play. I like to be social, but I don't like to take things over.

[5.9]   **[Author]:** Do you find that that's similar to the way you, you interact in social groups, yourself?

[5.10]   **Wade:** A lot of the time…it depends a lot. Because you know, there's sub-sets within a social group. And you know, in some situations I'm more of—yeah, but I'd say I probably play pretty similar to myself, on deeper thought. (Wade, personal interview, May 29, 2006)

[5.11]   Sometimes it seems the degree of closeness between a character's personality and that of its player is unknown even to the player, until he or she is pressed.

[5.12]   However, characters are far from the only way that players make themselves known in role-playing. Just the act of playing, as a social activity, exposes a great deal about a person, as Kyle said:

[5.13]   In a single session you can tell a lot about somebody. If you haven't been friends with somebody, and in a single session you can really tell a lot whether or not you want to be friends with them, based on just kind of how they are." (Kyle, personal interview, May 29, 2006)

[5.14]   Most of the players knew each other before this game and before the *Dungeons & Dragons* game that had preceded it, but playing RPGs together led them to interact outside of the game. Gaming served as a kind of gateway or introductory mode of interaction that fostered friendships, which were frequently reaffirmed by playing. George, an anime fan, game designer, and frequent storyteller from the Eugene group, had this to say:

[5.15]   The best way to stay friends with someone is to see them. At least in person, probably once every month. Less than that depending on the stability of the person. And so, with games that's continuous, you're always going to see the person. Even if you're not talking about anything, you're still seeing the person. And that's what it takes, as far as I'm concerned. (George, personal interview, May 30, 2006)

[5.16]   The *Exalted* game is therefore a place where the participants continually reconstitute their friendship. For example, English literature doctoral candidate and Bloomington gamer Richard gave this account of gaming's social possibilities:

> [5.17]   I think that also, [gaming has a] tremendous social function. That's my sort of theory-esque kind of utopian idea about what I think gaming does. But probably on a more practical level, I think that on the ground, it mostly fulfills a social function, in terms people [have] in common, giving people something to do together. And you don't get that from movies. Yeah, you can go to a movie together. When you come out of a movie, you've seen something and you can talk about that experience, but it's different than having done something together. And that's what I think people get from role-playing. And there's really powerful social bonds I think that are created through role-playing. People who are my friends that I've gamed with, a lot of friends that I'll have through the rest of my life. (Richard, personal interview, September 6, 2006)

[5.18]   Buttercup, a librarian/seamstress with a collection of cats, said, "Families are built on stories. Then role-playing lets you build surrogate families" (Buttercup, personal interview, August 3, 2006). The social aspect of role-playing was brought up by many of my players, whose friendships with their fellow players extended and often predated their time spent role-playing together. This is very different than the startling lack of out-of game sociability found by Gary Alan Fine in his research (1983). According to *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game,* Mackay's research participants (which included Mackay himself) were all friends outside of the gaming group—gaming was just the primary way they stayed in touch. In my experience, many if not most gaming groups are formed out of already existing social groupings. New players may find their way into groups without previous ties to the other players, but those individuals will often be incorporated into the friend group.

[5.19]   Bloomington-based system administrator Andrew (a devout anime fan and video gamer, who briefly worked at a game store between jobs in information technology) came down strongly on the side of playing with friends.

> [5.20]   Being a part of a gaming experience where everyone is friends and trusts each other, and are friends first and playing a game second is extremely powerful in its ability to remove all of the normal roadblocks, and barriers and problems and hiccups that can come along in a gaming group comprised of people who aren't primarily friends, where the sole purpose is gaming. (Andrew, personal interview, September 10, 2006)

[5.21]   For Andrew, the play experience is enhanced by having those already established bonds and shared memories/references between players, so the gaming is not a precursor to friendship but part of the friendship itself, one of many social activities shared by friends, one that is creative, social, and draws upon common interests.

6. Folk speech and group identity—Strike!

[6.1]   One way of expressing solidarity within the Eugene *Exalted* group came via an item of folk speech. I discovered and identified the tradition of giving "strikes" to players, and players having a certain number of strikes left. I was not present for the first instance of strikes, so I will rely on the narration from Thomas, the Eugene group's designated class clown:

> [6.2]   That was an example of the collaborative thing, where I hadn't heard the thing before, and neither had the rest of the party, but Wade worded it in such a way that it was really funny. I told a horrible pun, which I don't remember what it was. And Wade said, "Thomas?" and he held up two fingers, and he's like "You've got two strikes left, and then you get stabbed." Or something like that, and later, I made some other horrible joke, and he was like "One strike left…" (Thomas, personal interview, May 29, 2006)

[6.3]   Of course, it is clear that at no point was the actual threat of physical violence part of the equation; stabbing was the stand-in for the censure of the group. When asked about the strikes, Wade said,

> [6.4]   We play pretty casual, like I said. There are certain folks in the social group who are known for making lots and lots of off-color comments. And none of us really mind, but it's fun to "punish" them, quotation marks. You know, just kind of let them know they're getting a little further afield than maybe you want to go, while still letting them know, that *is* kind of funny. (Wade, personal interview, May 29, 2006)

[6.5]   Thus, following Wade's description, the issuing or removal of strikes was an informal way for players to police the boundaries of out-of-game talk while allowing for recognition and appreciation of humor. As a joke tradition, it serves several functions simultaneously, as "clique talk" (in George's words), as a way of reaffirming the connections between the players by referring to in-jokes, as a way of reminding players to stay on task, and as a venue for illustrating the differences between the personality types of the players. In the fourth game I observed, the idea of strikes came back and recurred several times during the session.

[6.6]   I must acknowledge the strong possibility that my inquiring about strikes during interviews in the previous week may have affected the process of taking strikes from a one-time joke to a recurring folkloric tradition of the group; however, prompted or not, strikes became clique-talk from one game to another. The subject of strikes resurfaced as one player made an off-color joke, which led the players to discuss what was necessary for each participant to earn a strike. Kyle stated that strikes were dependent on each person—players who were notorious for more outrageous comments had to say more outrageous things to earn strikes than other players. Talking about strikes was and is a way for the players to have meta-discussion about the ways that they joke and interact during their role-playing.

7. The yield of farming: Recontextualization and (sub)cultural capital

[7.1]   Now that I've talked about the ways that gamers socialize through gaming, I'd like to return to the idea of genre farming. Genre farming in gaming varies among several different types, a display of personal agency and individual creativity that extends past Jenkins's application of the textual poaching to fan fiction writing. As role-players reach intertextually across genres, they rework narratives and create new worlds out of old ideas.

[7.2]   The *Exalted* game I observed was not just an amalgam of several pieces of fantasy literature as if it were fan fiction—it delved deeper than the specific texts to the broader cultural context that creates and encompasses them. In interviews, for example, I learned that Victor had specifically designed his *Exalted* character to draw upon the Young Hero archetype, wanting to create and experience his own version of that arc, where a naive but talented youth has to grow up, make tough decisions, and attempt to keep his ideals while coming into his own as a warrior. Rather than just excorporating the characters and plots of a work, gamers excorporate and rework entire genres and archetypes (such as the Mad Scientist à la Dr. Frankenstein or the Young Hero à la Luke Skywalker), and they put their personal spin on these genre conventions and artifacts, negotiating and reworking the elements in a collaborative creative expression.

[7.3]   The Star Wars RPGs allow players to tell new stories in the world of George Lucas's Star Wars series, but if a group of gamers has played in the world of Star Wars for almost 20 years, are they less "owners" of the stories they tell just because it started as someone else's intellectual property? Does original authorship or being a paid professional dictate the only form of legitimacy in the world of entertainment? Michel de Certeau sees textual poachers as nomads with no claim to the fields where they take prey—instead they roam the worlds of the texts and take what they want.

Some games do follow this model, where the players have no legal claim to the world of the narrative.

[7.4]   In most RPGs, however, gamers don't poach texts directly. Instead, they lay claim to genres and stake their claim on those lands, developing their own crops/ideas for personal nourishment/entertainment. Instead of being nomads, they are permanent residents of these genres who cultivate the land themselves. They may be considered sharecroppers by the media moguls, but the land of these genres can be—in terms of identity—more naturally and authentically home to those who live aesthetically off the land than those who mass-produce from it.

[7.5]   Many gamers surround themselves in these genre fields, subsisting in their fantasy life off a collection of fantasy narratives that ranges from superhero comics to science fiction movies and console video games. From old media and new, gamers take tropes, characters, settings, and ideas, put their own spin on them, and collaborate with one another to recapture the wonder they've felt before as consumers of stories. They become artistic subsistence farmers, making the aesthetic objects that they consume themselves, and their direct hand is in the process at every level, sharing the labor and the results with their fellow players. They take pleasure both from the process and from the eventual product. Like a family who cooks as a group, singing as they chop vegetables and telling jokes while a cake is baking, every part of the process is aestheticized, draws upon cultural traditions, and provides the meaning-making context for the purported reason for being together. It's the same with gaming: gathering for playing role-playing games provides the space and time for all of these social discourses that flow in and out of the creative performative event itself.

[7.6]   Gamers do not necessarily excorporate as a form of active resistance to the author-ownership model of intellectual property; they do so as a way to claim agency over their own entertainment, to take the reins of cultural producer and author of the narrative, and to have immediate feedback from their collaborators/audience. Several of the players in the *Exalted* game, when acting as storytellers, created or utilized settings they had created themselves, drawing upon other media sources to farm their own worlds. These players are taking materials from their background in different genres, coming from commodified television shows, books, movies, and more. But in assembling a role-playing game world of their own, which is never intended to be used as a commercial venture but instead as a personal and small-group setting for collaborative storytelling, they have stepped outside of the mass culture consumer system without leaving behind the experiences that they gained from that system's products.

[7.7]   Both George and Wade professed a preference for using their own settings in some role-playing contexts, showing the high level of engagement with the

textual/media corpus of the genres that role-playing games draw from. George created and runs games in a fantasy world called Midoria (inspired by his love of anime), and Wade's near-future worlds draw inspiration from anime such as *Ghost in the Shell* and *Robotech.* More than just writing fanfic in an already established universe or even creating original characters and stories within an already established setting like *Exalted,* gamers will go so far as to craft entire worlds—in the tradition of J. R. R. Tolkien—where loyalty to ideas of canon is irrelevant and the participants have total control over the subject matter.

[7.8]   Just as Tolkien turned to mythology and cultural recontextualizations of those myths (Wagner's *Ring* cycle, for example), writers and gamers today take in cultural ideas and narratives, personalize and rework them, and share them with their friends. This process of recontextualizing is an important part of being a gamer. In creating worlds out of genre materials, participants draw points of commonality based on shared subcultural capital—a concept that Sarah Thorton adapts from Pierre Bordieu's cultural capital (Thorton 1997:202). Making a world that displays knowledge of the genre and its texts gives status to the creator. And for players of gamer-created worlds, identifying those textual influences and making their own references and recontextualizations provides subcultural capital within the gaming group, based on displays of knowledge/understanding of interests shared by members of the group. In role-playing games, the clever use of a reference to another RPG, film, comic, or video game is rewarded with smiles of recognition and laughter. Players remind one another of the things they have in common as well as using shared context as shorthand when explaining their actions or describing a character. Players' regard for one another is partially based on awards and recognition of (sub)cultural capital.

[7.9]   For example, in the Eugene game, Victor is an artist, and provides character sketches for the player characters and various nonplayer characters. His contribution to the group in providing visual aids was recognized by the group, who have an extra focus for their creative imaginings of the characters through internalizing the character sketches. (Sub)cultural capital involves references to shared interests but also contributions to the group such as providing food, using outside skills (like drawing) to provide game aids, and any number of other things. The game and the friendships it supports are carried out through small social transactions such as this, as the group continues to build their social connections. In my fieldwork, I also saw seen in-game rewards given for these kinds of extra efforts, with additional points (to be spent on improving the character) awarded for such contributions as providing food, writing fiction about their characters, or creating game art. In these cases, the (sub)cultural capital is implicit in the appreciation from players but also explicit in the points granted for the player's characters.

[7.10]   Role-playing lets players create characters within a generic framework such as superheroes, science fiction, or fantasy and perform their affiliation with those genres by embodying and identifying with a character. Playing RPGs can grant new perspectives and help players become better at socializing. As Thomas said, "If you know about somebody's circumstances, and you can put yourself in their headspace, or at least try and get an understanding, it helps you just interact and understand people a lot better in the real world" (Thomas, personal interview, May 29, 2006).

[7.11]   Victor and Edith Turner describe rituals as occurring in spaces outside of normal life, places in between that are *liminal,* where people come together to create social bonds independent of other hierarchical relationships, which allow them all to share in *communitas,* the energy created in the ritual moment and shared equally by the participants (Turner and Turner 1982:202–3, 205). By collaboratively imagining another space, one in between all of the players but shared by all of them—a *liminal* ephemeral space that can be summoned up again and again but is always as fleeting as speech—gamers not only can connect with one another by creating and experiencing *communitas,* but they also can take the perspectives they gain through story-making play and come back to their "normal" lives refreshed, entertained, and educated. Players get out of their own headspaces through the liminal space of the fiction created by their play, where they can empathize and think within the mental framework of other characters—and therefore with other people.

[7.12]   Etienne Decroux, actor and pioneer of the corporeal mime style of performance, wrote, "Art is first of all a complaint. One who is happy with things as they are has no business being on the stage" (Decroux in Sklar 2002:131). Victor and other gamers posit that, because the world we live in is sometimes mundane or oppressive, we (gamers and others alike) turn to our imaginations to dream up a better world, be it more exciting, more egalitarian, or something else. One of the results of the collaborative community created by gaming is the ability to imagine these better worlds, to create intellectual sandboxes to explore ideas and possibilities. By creating a fantasy world for our entertainment, we are implicitly stating that the world as it is is not enough, that our real lives are missing something, that we yearn for something more. The liminal space of gaming allows gamers create art in the medium of role-playing games; and rather than waiting for that something more to be delivered—to be advertised to them so that they can consume it and feel fulfilled— gamers take elements of their favorite genres and make their own fulfillment.

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8. Conclusion

[8.1]   Gaming occupies a marginal but important part of culture in America and other places. It is an example of a form of creative recontextualizion I call genre farming,

which extends far beyond de Certeau and even Jenkins's versions of textual poaching. It is also an inherently social activity that allows participants to play together, crack jokes, and reaffirm the friendships and commonalities in their groups by displaying competence in acting and showing familiarity with science fiction archetypes and motifs. Personal aesthetics become group aesthetics, and fellow players become friends who may continue their relationships long after the ending of an individual game.

[8.2]   Gamers reveal themselves through their play, making statements about their personalities, beliefs, and tastes by stepping outside of their normal lives and exposing themselves to one another through the safe space of private performance. Gaming allows players to create community in a *liminal* time-space where they are both themselves and not-themselves; they explore types of difference and recontextualize motifs, themes, characters, and structures from shared cultural references for entertainment and socialization.

9. Acknowledgments

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