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Based on research conducted with a multiplayer gaming group, this article introduces and critically outlines the phenomenon of "lanning," the practice where computer game players get together to play each other over a local area network or LAN. Swalwell argues that lanning presents a significant challenge to a number of ingrained assumptions about computer gaming. Primary amongst these is that lanning entails players meeting, not just in the virtual world of a game, but also face to face, dealing a blow to theories that gamers are anti-social. Swalwell goes on to argue that the sociality of this form of gameplay also highlights the paucity of a range of other, binary assumptions, in particular about what it is to encounter a game, and to "enter" virtual environments. Attention is focussed on some of the different negotiations that lanning involves - particularly across and between a range of materiality and reality statuses - and the implications of negotiations such as these for subjectivity.

Multi-Player Computer Gaming: "Better than Playing (PC Games) with Yourself" [1]

Melanie Swalwell

<1> In the August 2002 issue of *Business 2.0*, Geoff Keighley sketches the profits that companies such as Sony, Disney, Microsoft and others hope to make, as they enter into, or expand their existing, online multiplayer gaming ventures. With *Everquest* attracting some 150,000 players within six months of launching, each of whom was prepared to pay \$10 a month to participate in online multiplay, it is easy to see why those in the industry are excited at having discovered such an apparently reliable revenue stream, with Keighley citing Sony Pictures Digital Entertainment President, Yair Landau's claim that "This is no internet hype story." If we are to believe reports such as this one, online multiplayer (or as they are now called, "massively multiplayer" [MMP]) games are set to be the next "big thing." Yet while companies are just now realizing the profit making potential of MMP hosting, the phenomenon of multiplay, where computer gamers play each other over a network, can hardly be considered new. As I sit down to write this, *QuakeCon 2002* is well underway in Mesquite, Texas. Originally organized by *Quake* fans, the event is now held annually in the hometown of the game's creators, id software, hosted by them and their sponsors. This year, *QuakeCon* once again features a giant Local Area Network (LAN), over which more than 1,300 players will compete against each other in multiplayer mode, in what is dubbed a "BYOC." And beyond the enormity of these gatherings, there are a lot of less well known stories about multiplayer groups who get together to lan.

<2> Going by various names (including lan-fests or parties), lanning is a specific form of computer gaming, in that players get together to play, generally bringing their computer along with them for the duration of the lan. As a form of computer gaming in which players meet and interact both face to face and online, lanning is atypical of gaming practices -- as well as many other cyber-interactions -- which occur only online, and arouse concerns for this reason. Barbara Becker, for instance, characterizes contact with the physical world and interactions with other people as involving a kind of *friction*, arguing that the desire for online interactions is a desire to avoid the dissonance and ambiguity of such experiences, and to be free of the troubles of the other (364-5). Margaret Morse notes that, "One can now have discourse with others [in cyberspace], but only those with the same access to the inside of the same virtual world and then only with their virtual avatars"; for Morse, one of the principal concerns is the fact that "no one is *actually* as opposed to *virtually* there" (*Virtualities* 29-30). Clearly, lanning challenges these schemas: in contrast to the dreams of no-mess, no-fuss, uninvolved interactions which these writers reference, lanning requires that players make at least some effort at face to face sociality, for which they also reap the rewards. In this article, I lay out some of the points that arise from this particular form of computer gaming, noting their significance for the emerging field of games studies (not the least of which is that gaming practices differ with context).

<3> While various online fora like MUDs and MOOs have attracted critical attention, multi-player gaming groups have, for the most part, been overlooked. This is a considerable oversight. One of my aims in this paper is to detail some of the findings derived from research conducted with a local multiplayer gaming group in Sydney, Australia. In the first part of the article, I describe the lan, outlining some of its features, discussing particularly how it challenges a number of persistent assumptions about computer gaming. The anti-social thesis is prominent amongst these, but lanning also shows up the poverty of a range of other, binary assumptions, in particular about what it is to encounter a game, and to "enter" virtual environments. This grounds the discussion in the second part of the article, in which I attend to some of the different negotiations that lanning involves, arguing that notions of friction, dissonance, and ambiguity are useful ones for developing a more nuanced debate about the gaming encounter, and its products. In adopting this term, "the gaming encounter," my intent is not to deny the specificity or range of particular gaming encounters or practices. Rather, my concern is with theorizing the embodied engagement of computer gameplay, and to consider the implications of this for subjectivity. Were I writing on film, this concern could probably be described in terms of spectatorship, a term whose visual bent sometimes raises eyebrows even in film circles. While I am cautious about drawing parallels between games and film, the term is useful here in that it highlights both the aesthetic nature of this encounter, and the unsuitability of discussing what

is a thoroughly multi-sensory pursuit in terms of a single sense paradigm. Players' engagements with computer games are, then, taken to be broadly aesthetic.

The Sociality of Gaming

<4> In mid-1999, I attended a multi-player gaming day, at which I interviewed a number of players. The day was run by a small group of gamers for fellow enthusiasts, and involved the construction of a network for the day. The core organizing group grew out of friends networking their PCs in (where else but?) each other's garages, to play computer games in multi-player mode. From a small group, connections have multiplied to the point where large venues are now hired in which to stage the events. The group's occupation of space is always only temporary, lasting for a day, albeit a long one, making these lanners -- quite literally -- nomads. The events are typically held in hired public spaces such as clubs or scout halls, whose inferred usage suggests that lanning is one of the more unusual uses of these venues. The event I attended was held in the function room of a club; for that day the network transformed a room obviously intended for the hosting of wedding receptions, twenty or more years previously, into something that, by virtue of the one hundred and twenty odd computers assembled in rows, looked more like a movie-set NASA control-room [2]. For their part, players pack up their computers and bring them along to the venue. The question does of course suggest itself: why? Why do people choose to dismantle and reassemble their computer for a day in a locale with little else going for it?

<5> There seem to be three main answers to the "why" question. Part of the reason is speed: simply put, lanning is fast. When Paul Virilio writes of the importance of speed to contemporary technological mediations -- where distance is transmuted into time -- it seems that he could be talking about computer gaming. Speed is what makes it all worthwhile, including the effort involved in physically packing up computers and cables and transporting them for the day. The instantaneous data transmission which lans enable is the reason for multi-player gaming groups' existence. Gaming over the internet is just not fast enough: as one player said "If you try and play this on internet servers, it's like you move and then it stops and you wait while the connection [catches up]. Then you're already dead by the time it catches up -- so there's no point playing..." Lans provide far lower "pings" than can generally be attained over dial-up networks, and so whilst speed is also subject to other variables -- including the speed of processors and other components like network cards -- a lan generally ensures faster gameplay. Lanning also temporarily relieves the modem of the prominence it has acquired in recent years, eclipsing its dual roles as conduit for information transfer, as well as its function as meter, where time is money.

<6> Yet contrary to Virilio's predictions in "The Third Interval," where he suggests that modes of instantaneous transmission result in our bodies becoming well equipped yet in-valid, consigned to inertia as a result of being plugged in, the interaction that the multi-player gaming group auspices through computer networking has quite different effects. Far from the body becoming invalid, games heighten players' aesthetic responses; rather than atrophy, gaming facilitates *different* aesthetic experiences. Furthermore, the desire for speed here results in the *occupation* of public space, providing a reinvigorated social context for gaming. The physical co-presence of players in "real" space is one of the most obvious ways that lanning differs from many other kinds of virtual interactions, where fellow users are often located at a considerable geographic remove. Far from being ensconced in the home along the lines of Virilio's *domotics* thesis, lanning is about getting *out* of the house and the computer room (in the case of the gaming group, with one's computer in tow). In this way it resembles older forms of gameplay more than it does other online groups or "communities," in cultures where there is life on the streets, where public space is not just traversed but lingered in, and where games have long been played publicly, animating parks and piazzas, the sites of meeting and exchange broadly conceived. In such cultures, games never had to come out of the home. And as is the case in such game cultures, a substantial portion of the interaction in multi-play centers around the gameplay. Whilst few would deny that playing chess or *boules* in a park is a form of social interaction, extending beyond the players to encompass the onlookers as well, it is interesting that accusations continue to be levelled at the presumed anti-social nature of computer gaming.

<7> Even in the course of theorizing this material on lans, I have been asked whether the main reason that players participate in a lan isn't because their social lives and social skills are lacking. In line with "nerdy" stereotypes, the thesis tends to be that people who play computer games are weird, lacking in social confidence, and so turn to computer interactions because of an inability to negotiate "normal" social relationships. This particular stereotype of the anti-social nature of gaming seems to have become entrenched with role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* acquiring cult status in the 1980s. Significantly, according to this view, online interactions are turned to as an alternative to "real" ones [3]. While common, this response to claims that congregating around, or by way of, computers can be a social activity does not go very far. Nor is the tendency to dismiss gaming as trivial -- just because it does not fit preconceived ideas of what is and is not "social" -- very helpful. Apart from pointing out the normalizing effects of such a discourse, I am interested in engaging further than this. Significantly, together with the speed of gameplay over a lan, the other reasons players nominated for participating in the gaming group were social ones

[4].

<8> Like older games, lanning is social in that it depends on the presence of other players. Though it is not necessary to talk with them all and shake their hands (which would quickly become meaningless at a large lan), the presence of these other players constitutes the experience in important ways. Players appreciate that they are competing against each other. As one player remarked whilst playing *Quake*, "That's a good thing about this game...you know that you're playing another human, not just a computer in a computer game, [which will] just do the same thing over and over again."

<9> Most acknowledge that the sociality of the event is one of the best aspects of a lan. To "have a chat and a beer" and also to,

wander around and check out what is happening on other people's screens...is always a great insight into the many and varied games and graphics that exist in the gaming community. [It is] also a great opportunity to discuss different tactics and perhaps to acquire that certain patch or pic that you may need to complete your own system/archive :) (Chris)

Lanning's social nature is so strongly espoused amongst lanners that one player, Martin, announced in email correspondence that gaming exclusively online was anti-social, using the negative label "lamer" to refer to those "who just play on the net." In response to my asking whether identity play of the type associated with online chat was ever practiced by lanners, he explained: "maybe lamers who just play on the net and never LAN [do], but LAN'ers see each other face to face quite often and get to know each other..." (Martin) [5]. When I asked whether "lamers" was just a typo (gamers? lanners?), he ventured: "a lamer, is a lame person... and from a LAN'ers point of view, if you just lock yourself in a room and play games on the net and not get out and LAN then that's lame :)" (Martin) [6]. It is somewhat gratifying to be able to report that this particular lanning group continues to run monthly gaming days. Apart from the group's longevity, this is significant because, despite the fact that cable modems have become widely available in the couple of years since I first talked with players, many still opt for the social interaction and "friction" of a lan, rather than playing over a fast connection, solo.

<10> As an activity where players are co-located in physical as well as in games space, lanning is both an interesting and important case to consider for theorizing gaming encounters. Its social nature enables theorists to move beyond merely combating negative stereotypes, to think more positively about what games produce. Also, lans allow the multiple "materiality and reality statuses" which computer gaming involves, to be clearly seen. This makes explicit things which, though they might be obvious to gamers themselves, are not generally evident to outside commentators. In this, lanning lends itself to developing complex, rich understandings of the multiple interactions in which gamers are involved.

Friction in the Gaming Encounter

<11> Earlier, I referenced Becker's argument that interactions in cyberspace lack the friction of face-to-face interactions, an argument that could be read as a variation on the anti-social thesis. While lanners clearly do not fit this framework, the notion of friction is nevertheless a useful one to consider. The sources of friction at a lan are multiple. Though it might seem as if lanners share desires for optimal conditions -- guaranteeing the smooth flow of packets of data -- actual lanning can be quite another thing. Apart from the friction of gamers in the same space (chatting, meeting and greeting, negotiating on game strategies), technical issues like overloaded power circuits tripping or players finding on the day that a vital component of their machine is missing and so won't work (in which case it is just as likely to get rebuilt on the spot) are all sources of friction. Conditions are not controlled and so there are many factors which introduce or produce friction, disrupting the flow particularly of large lans, where there are more things that can go wrong. As Andrew said, "it's hard enough trying to get six people online doing one thing at once, try doing that with three or four hundred!" In fact, mid-interview/game of *Tribes*, Andrew's unexplained high ping of 290 meant that he had to give up and restart his computer: "that should be nothing like that. Best [thing] I can do is shut down...and reset." Other factors which disrupt the flow relate to the time spent not gaming -- looking for a game to join or organizing new competitions, for instance, as well as replenishing and caring for the cyborg body, for these cyborgs do eat, need toilet breaks, and make repeated trips to the bar. Crucially, however, none of the lanners whom I spoke with viewed these activities as "disruptions." Rather, getting around and talking to people and checking out what others are doing formed a central part of their day.

<12> Compare this reality -- of compromise and DIY pragmatism -- with the stereotype that involvement in virtual worlds threatens, or comes at the expense of, players' involvement in the "real" world. In some ways an extension of the anti-social thesis, this idea probably derives from the fact that computer gameplay (like a number of other cyber-interactions) takes place in the "no place" of cyberspace, the "where" of the "elsewhere" not locatable. The idea, however, that involvement in a virtual world necessarily constitutes withdrawal or abdication from the "real" world is a false

dichotomy. It shares the problematic assumptions of the often-cited images from cyberpunk novels -- of "jacking in" and "escaping the meat" -- wherein one is either "in" (and constrained by) one's body, or else the body is an empty vessel, while consciousness floats freely around in the network. Typically, the divisions between these pairs are sharply drawn -- in or out, body or mind, material or virtual -- with the one assumed to negate the other. Despite their pervasiveness, Lanning clearly shows that such sharp distinctions cannot be maintained. Apart from the noticeable absence of desires amongst lanners to be rid of the body, the mix of interactions which gamers participate in suggests that the ease with which we rattle off the real and the virtual as though they were separate categories belies a much more complicated *intertwining* of these realms.

<13> Game space is not so much a cyberspace that one goes to -- spectacularly jacking in and leaving the body "parked" -- as an *other* space which constantly informs and punctuates familiar spaces, pervading everyday practices. Players experience both these at the same time (and the notion of friction is again suggestive here). Margaret Morse's work on virtual environments is helpful for thinking about computer gamers' experience of *both* sides of the interface, as she attends closely to the overlaps between the real and the virtual, the organic and the technological [7]. Morse's argument that "Cyberculture is built upon such a proliferation of *nows* in diverse modalities and inflections and *heres* that are not single, material, and contiguous but multiple, discontinuous, and virtual" is particularly important (*Virtualities* 15). It reframes the alleged disembodiment of cyberspace by noting that the material and virtual are contemporaneous, a point which strikes a chord with Lanning's operation across multiple zones.

<14> Morse has extended these insights in her 1996 essay, "Nature Morte: Landscape and Narrative in Virtual Environments." Using the example of Virtual Reality, Morse observes that operating in virtual environments can involve "crossing through a variety of reality statuses...[as well as across] different degrees of materiality" (200, 208). Virtual Reality, she notes, gets its playfulness from the *links* (as material bodies are mapped onto virtual bodies) but also the *disparities* between organic and virtual bodies ("Cyborgs" 179-80). The approach Morse is advocating here is important because focussing on the interstices and overlaps of the different reality and materiality statuses involved in computer gaming moves the debate beyond the binary terms in which it has often been expressed. Morse's approach offers directions for exploring the confluence of materiality and virtuality, helping to better account for some of the riddles of embodiment and subjectivity in digital immersive environments. Thinking about the overlaps and discontinuities between different realms also suggests ways for thinking about the responsiveness that animates some gamers in relation to virtual worlds and their representatives in them, as well as the condition of being in-between these worlds.

Both Sides of the Interface

<15> The question of player responsiveness to virtual game environments has long been a thorny one, with many contributions to the debate evidencing fears and anxieties about the perceived powers of (new games) technology. The application of psychoanalytic ideas of identification to computer games from film theory is one example of the way that questions of player responsiveness have developed a decidedly non-responsive quality, with the alleged identification of gamers with avatars regarded fearfully as (a) inevitable, (b) total, and (c) unshifting. A variant on these ideas is the also common assumption that players will confuse the material and the virtual, the fantasy of the game and "reality," unable to tell the difference. Such assumptions, which drastically simplify the gaming encounter, seem to be at once everywhere (having been broadcast very widely) and nowhere (being not easily traceable); they have become part of the air that we breathe [8]. Attending to (the friction between) the different reality and materiality statuses that players cross through in the course of gameplay, helps to unseat some of the determinism that has become associated with these questions, returning a degree of contingency to the gaming encounter.

<16> To provide a couple of examples of this -- extending Morse's proliferation of "heres" and "nows" in cyberspace -- I point to the mutability of "here" and "there" in games. This was something which came up often in my interviews with players, who, in demonstrating a particular move or feature of the game they were playing, often spoke of space within the game as "here," rather than "there." As one player (John), demonstrating the moves that he could execute within *Quake*, explained to me, "I can do whatever I want. I can run down here, I can go down here..." and later, in discussing how reflexes develop with practice, "like I could jump up here...spin around (I'll pull it off if I can), and now I'll see who I can shoot." John's explanations also drew my attention to the slippage between his use of the pronouns "I" and "you." (Talking about the speed at which the game moves, he used "you," in contrast to the "I" of the above quote: "once you get used to it, you think about doing something and it just happens.") I wanted to know about his use of these terms: when I asked him to clarify this, and specifically whether he thought as though he was that character, he responded in the negative, but with an impatience that spoke volumes, which I took to mean "That's what people always think." He continued, "You don't go as far as to like [believe that you're that person or anything]." Too often, I think, those pronouncing on the significance of players' involvement with games opt for an absolute rather than a

negotiated understanding of these questions, failing to appreciate that responsiveness toward a game avatar, for example, need not be a sign of psychic identification; it might be that a player is responding kinaesthetically to the movements of an avatar, as in John's case.

<17> Ideas of mimeticism are helpful for thinking about players' involvement on both sides of the interface, where the mimetic refers not to copies and likenesses, but to a drawing near and yielding. Walter Benjamin, for instance, was interested in the creative perception by which children project themselves into picture books, writing that "The objects do not come to meet the picturing child from the pages of the book; instead, the gazing child enters into those pages, becoming suffused, like a cloud, with the riotous colors of the world of pictures" (435). Roger Caillois conceived of the mimetic as a confusion or "temptation by space" (28), what Michael Taussig describes as a sort of "spacing out" (34). This tradition of thought on mimesis may be helpful for thinking about what is involved in the games encounter, and the partial becoming it facilitates. As players become involved in a game (it is common parlance to talk about the way that a game "gets you in") there can be a breaching, a dissolution, whereby the distance between oneself and the object of perception is diminished (conceivably turning a "there" into a "here"). Interestingly, where Benjamin writes of the mimetic faculty as a sign of the creative perception and responsiveness that children are still capable of (it mostly having been brought under control in adults), Caillois reads succumbing to the temptation of space as a pathology, involving the renunciation of self.

<18> Invoking schizophrenia, Caillois answers the question "where are you?" with the response "I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself" (30). At a time when entering virtual environments is fast becoming commonplace, this aspect of Caillois' account -- that I can know where I am, but not feel as though I'm at that spot -- seems less pathological and more like a description of working across physical and virtual realms, where each is able to affect us sensorially, sometimes at the same time. I think of this mixing of realities not just in relation to computer gaming, but also when I see someone dodging cars to cross a busy street while talking on their mobile phone. But rather than Caillois' quite literal reading -- for whom not feeling that you are where you are is evidence of pathology -- this aspect of his account is more productively read as an indicator of individuals' capacity for engaging across, and moving between, multiple spheres. Indeed, I suspect that the old excuse for vagueness -- that "my mind was elsewhere" -- actually points to the ability to conduct complex negotiations and interactions across different zones, quite a handy cognitive trick. In any case, my point is that to insist on sharp distinctions between "here" and "there," material and virtual, in either/or fashion is to miss much of the complexity and nuance of the gaming encounter, that which derives from the both/and.

<19> It is interesting to note that other writers are also investigating these overlaps between different zones, where "here" and "there" bleed into each other. Vivian Sobchack, for instance, does so in relating her sensory responses to the film, *The Piano*. Describing the scene in which Baines reaches out and touches Ada's flesh through a hole in her black woollen stocking, and referring to another reviewer, Sobchack writes that she also,

felt an "immediate tactile shock when flesh first touches flesh in close-up." Yet precisely whose flesh I felt is ambiguous...At that moment when Baines touches Ada's skin through her stocking, suddenly my skin is both mine and not my own: the "immediate tactile shock" opens me to the general erotic mattering of flesh and I am diffusely -- ambivalently -- Baines' body, Ada's body, what I have elsewhere called the "film's body," and my "own" body. Thus, even confronted with an "objective" shot, my fingers know and understand the meanings of this "seen" and this viewing situation and they are everywhere -- not only in the touching, but also in the touched.
(unpaginated)

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of Sobchack's discussion is her insistence that "I am not speaking metaphorically of touching and being touched, but 'in some sense' quite literally of our capacity to 'feel' the world we see and hear on-screen and of the cinema's capacity to 'touch' and 'move' us off-screen." For Sobchack, on-screen and off-screen are not mutually exclusive locations for what she calls a "cinesthetic subject," and this aspect of her analysis marks, for me, a rare moment when computer gaming and filmic perspectives seem to share a common concern -- and it is interesting to speculate on how the darkened theater and headphones that lanners often wear might function in each case. While I have discussed players' kinaesthetic responsiveness to the movements of computer game avatars elsewhere, and their ability to (literally) mobilise players' bodies, I want now to offer some comments on the significance of players' involvements on both sides of the interface: the sense in which the gaming encounter can involve both an "I" and a "you," and occur both "here" and "there."

<20> Players related stories which evidenced both continuities and discontinuities between virtual and material bodies and spaces, and which my questioning presence helped to accentuate. The most immediately apparent negotiations were players' reports

that they found gaming good for stress relief. As Andrew put it: "It saves me from going and belting the hell out of the boss." Such a statement could be read in terms of a classic "safety valve" argument, which would assume that actions in the virtual world of a game provide an outlet, allowing players to "get it out of their systems," with the "it" often assumed to be "bad," pent up emotion, perhaps anger or aggression. While this is an argument familiar from carnival (carnival is just a temporary aberration, which, its proponents argue, actually reinforces the *status quo* [9]), such a functionalist approach reduces the many possibilities that both carnival and games present, down to a single, definitive purpose: the reproduction of life as we know it. This is not an adequate reading of either carnival or gaming. It assumes that the virtual is a substitute for the material realm, rather than an adjunct to it. To accept such a functional argument about gaming is to miss the significance of the interaction of virtual and material realms, not to mention dismissing the exuberance of gaming. The context for Andrew's colorful reference to finding gaming good for stress relief is instructive here. As he continued,

After lane-splitting from Penrith to the North Shore [as a motorcycle courier], this [playing computer games] is actually relaxing, believe it or not...

I remember one of the worst days. I started lane splitting at Penrith, I was still lane splitting through the city. For the tape, less than an inch between the handlebars and the [car mirrors]. It was like that all the way across the North Shore, the Harbour Bridge was closed. You turn around and...it's just as bad...

You just can't handle it anymore. You sit at home, you just sit there shaking...one little mistake. Not only are you going to [do damage to the cars], but on a motorcycle [you're the one that is going to get hurt].

After working under such pressures making time critical deliveries, he finds that, though he does not play games *that* much during the week at home, gaming does help him to relax. He reported experiences of going home and not being able to get the center line out of his mind: "being on the highway, non stop, dead straight, with a nice white line...then you try to relax and go to sleep that night. You're just lying in bed and you can see this white line. The brain adjusts to it, and it expects that and it just can't unwind." The contrast between the material conditions of his life and the virtual conditions of a game helps him to unwind, to change the pace and zone out, producing a transposition of affect, by virtue of the differences. As he says, "You can do things that you can't do in real life."

<21> John, as noted earlier, reported enjoying the possibilities for movement in *Quake*, together with the game's violence: shocking as it might seem, John reported liking the violence in *Quake*, "Because you can't do this in real life. You wouldn't want to, but I'm just saying..." It is interesting that both Andrew and John used phrases to this effect (that "you can do things that you can't do in real life"). To me it suggests that it would be too limited to interpret John's liking of violence in *Quake*, because "you can't do this in real life," *just* in relation to violence. It might stand more generally for that which is not socially sanctioned or approved (as in carnival), that which is not consistent with civilized restraint, or -- perhaps more to the point -- that which is not consistent with contemporary pressures to *get ahead*, for the felt pressures of the moment are not only work related ones.

<22> To accept arguments which treat the gaming encounter as characterized by an either/or logic of interface is to miss out on the range of ways in which gaming is experienced as involving negotiations between material and virtual realms, as well as to risk missing opportunities to understand the implications of such negotiations for subjectivity. As Morse further argues, it is important in considering a user's experience of virtual environments to attend to the multiple roles, functions and "aspects of a person," which are factors affecting the experience of cyberspace. Surrogates of the user within the virtual realm can be expressed in many different persons and degrees of immersion:

an "I" or the subjective and "embodied" view of the world from inside it; a "me" as a corporeally separate persona or avatar, whose appearance and characteristics (often chosen from stock) represent the self in a screen-based world; a self that lurks as a ghostly, disembodied perception, marked or unmarked in that world; or a character, "he, she, or it," with a more distanced relation to the visitor's self -- and there is the uncanny agency of the space itself. Furthermore, the voice of a controller/programmer/author may leak in from "outside" or the view of the virtual world may be superimposed over physical space. ("Nature Morte" 199)

<23> To think about a player's encounter with, and involvement in, the virtual world of a computer game in terms of the proliferation of aspects of their person, is to entertain a conception of player subjectivity that is substantially more complex than many of the "models" that usually get bandied about. Rather than accepting uncritical notions of player identification, or rushing to announce players' "fusion" with a game

during gameplay, or their total "immersion," I am suggesting that it is worth attending to the tensions of being so located at the intersection of multiple aspects of a person, while also moving between and across different realities and materialities. And as Morse argues, contrary to the speculations of those who think that "a subject immersed in virtual reality, with its mobile perspective and multiple narrative paths, would lose its identity, splinter, and fall apart," there may actually be "more continuity between the experience of the physical, the electronic, and the virtual environment...not less"; "the many aspects of person available to the user of a virtual environment may offer more possibilities for subjective integration and control" ("Nature Morte" 199). Rather than reading negotiations between different materialities and realities as indicative of confusion (in line with Caillois), games researchers would do well not to rush to explain away points of friction, dissonance, and ambiguity. Given some of the difficult legacies and assumptions that games studies has inherited, and the conceptions of audience these support, attempts to theorize the gaming encounter need to attend closely to such moments. Lanners offer a suggestive model for players' involvement and negotiation across and between different materialities and virtualities, which might be extended to other gaming and non-gaming situations that offer similar potential for negotiation.

Concluding Thoughts

<24> When I began this article, QuakeCon was in full swing. As I conclude, I read in the weekend newspaper of the case of a local driver sentenced for the murder of a police officer, who was laying road spikes during a high speed pursuit in western Sydney. The case serves as vehicle for the state Opposition's predictable scaremongering on law and order issues, particularly their calls for tougher sentencing in the lead up to a general election. The journalist, Ellen Connolly, writes "The court heard [that the driver] was re-enacting one of his PlayStation computer games and was testing his car rally skills during the 40-minute pursuit," a sentence which goes without comment or contest, yet which instantly implicates computer gaming in what is already a highly emotive case, calling up the same old stereotypes. My stomach turns.

<25> No doubt we will continue to see reports such as these, for some time yet. I do not expect those who criticize computer gaming on the basis of games content or the alleged psychic identification of players to suddenly be swayed from their positions. I certainly hope to be proved wrong on this, as experiments occur with the games form, helping to realize its considerable potential, and lessen the stigma that currently attends certain genres of games, like the shoot 'em up, as well as computer games more generally. Given that these are the contexts in which current research is being conducted, it is particularly important for accounts of the gaming encounter to attend to the nuances and complex dynamics that are set up between material and virtual environments, and the negotiations which players perform between these. Games studies, then, needs to talk about configurations rather than fixity, and work to retain a sense of the *contingency* of the gaming encounter as well as the ambivalence of its products. Doing so not only results in more nuanced readings of the gaming encounter. It also points up the significance of users' experimentation with computer games, as they try out a range of new relations with self, others, space, and things, including technology.

Notes

[1] Comment made by Martin, a lanner, in email correspondence with the author anticipating the multi-player day, 11 February 1999. [[^](#)]

[2] According to players, criteria for a good lan venue include there being not only sufficient room for players and their computers, but also its having a robust electricity supply to meet the significant demands made on electric current. Other factors such as lighting (the ability to dim it to avoid screen reflections is valued), and the presence of food services and a bar are considered desirable by some. [[^](#)]

[3] In her reading of MUDs, Heather Bromberg nominates four main social functions of MUDs. Apart from identity play, mastery over the virtual environment and what she calls the erotic appeal of playing in computer mediated realms, Bromberg writes that "Isolated individuals can find solace in interactive computer-mediated communication (which) can act as a virtual response to loneliness and a lack of connectivity and meaning in the exterior world" (147). [[^](#)]

[4] The social aspect of multi-play lanning also has implications for the ways in which group members make meaning out of particular gaming texts, something which is rarely allowed for by critics of games content. Martin, in email correspondence with author, 11 March 1999. [[^](#)]

[5] Martin, in email correspondence with author, 11 March 1999. [[^](#)]

[6] Martin, in email correspondence with author, 12 March 1999. [[^](#)]

[7] In her essay "What Do Cyborgs Eat?" for instance, Morse is concerned with the culinary discourses of non-food and of food's denial finding expression in images of interimplication, where organic human bodies and electrical bodies are mutually incorporated. After tracing various figures of incorporation, she concludes by suggesting that rather than accommodating the human within the machine, the better question might be how cyborgs can become meat? In a way, this is how I think of computer gamers, as fleshy cyborgs. [^]

[8] This is a phrase from Sven Lindqvist's novel, *Exterminate all the Brutes*. While I am not trying to equate the pathologization of computer gamers with the genocidal tendencies with which Lindqvist is concerned, the phrase does serve to capture for me the pervasiveness, and non-locatability of this discourse. [^]

[9] The functional, "safety valve" thesis is a topic John Docker discusses in depth (171). There are also resonances here with Sandy Stone's account of what she terms "technosocial" games (she includes multi-user interactive gaming amongst these). Stone writes, "Instead of carrying on an established work ethic, the beliefs and practices of the cultures I observe incorporate a play ethic -- not to displace the corporate agendas that produce their paychecks, but to complexify them." Stone continues,

The people who play at these technosocial games do not do it out of any specific transformative agenda, but they have seized upon advantages afforded by differences of skill, education, and income to make space for play in the very belly of the monster that is the communication industry. (401) [^]

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