

1 Finding New Worlds

Taking It Offline

I am returning to Boston for a convention after having moved away a few years earlier. When I lived in the area during the 1990s, I several times found myself making my way to a downtown hotel—for a twenty-fifth Internet anniversary celebration, a popular regional science fiction convention, or a virtual reality (VR) show. This time I am heading to the Park Plaza Hotel for an event that seems to link these previous forays together. I am going to an *EverQuest* convention. *EverQuest* (EQ) is a massively multiplayer online game (MMOG), which launched commercially in March 1999 and hosts hundreds of thousands of players who participate in a virtual game world in real time using the Internet. Using avatars of Gnomes, Elves, and a variety of other fantasy-inspired characters, players move through a vast 3-D landscape and battle mythical creatures with magic and virtual swords. Within a block of the hotel I begin seeing people wearing nametags—typical enough for a convention—but I quickly notice something different. The names written on them are odd sounding and seem to contain arcane information. From this small detail alone I know I am at the right place. I slip on my own badge declaring my game character name, my server, and my (by then defunct) guild. Now identified as “Iona, Bailerbents, Hidden Lore,” I quickly feel the silent shift from outsider to fellow gamer.¹ I had not thought about myself much in those terms before this project, but I am struck by how oddly familiar this identity now feels.² This event, a “Fan Faire,” presents some unique experiences in blurring the boundaries between game and nongame space, off- and online lives, avatars and “real” identities and bodies. The longer I have spent with EQ the more I have come to believe that this boundary work is at the heart of massively multiplayer games, and indeed Internet life in general.

There is a tradition within Internet communities for online friends and gaming partners to get together for face-to-face meetings. Sometimes these events are called “bashes,” sometimes “cons” (as in convention), but generally they involve people flying or driving to a location and spending a week-end just hanging out with each other. In the course of my fieldwork in Sony Online Entertainment’s *EverQuest* I had not yet attended one of the game’s formal offline gatherings, so when I saw the announcement for one in Boston I decided it was time to go. At the time I had spent the past three years interviewing users, playing alongside them, joining “guilds,” and generally participating in the life of the game. For this event I wanted to see how the players handled meeting each other offline and how people integrated their gaming lives with their “real” ones.

I arrive early on Friday evening and the big opening reception has not yet started, so I kill nearly an hour wandering the upstairs balcony, alternating my attention between the various merchandise tables (where you can buy a sword or ring that looks vaguely like *EQ* fantasy objects and very much like stuff you would see at a Renaissance faire) and looking out down onto the ground floor of the hotel where more and more Fan Faire participants turn up and mill about. Since many people do not know in advance what their game friends look like, there is a lot of scanning going on, looking for familiar names on the badges we all wear. I wait in a long line for my free Fan Faire shirt, basically a promotional item for the upcoming expansion to the game, *Planes of Power*. A simple cheap white t-shirt, the kind I never wear, but it also sports a small Boston Fan Faire logo. For some odd reason I am happy to have it when I see this. Suddenly I have something material on which to hang my participation in not just this event, but the game more generally. After getting the shirt I look at my watch and realize I still have nearly 45 minutes to pass before the doors open to the main ballroom. My own social nervousness creeps up on me as it always does, which feels like a nasty personal failing for an ethnographer. I resist my impulse to pull out a book and just find a quiet reading spot and instead end up walking around the balcony at least six more times. There are a group of people huddled around a small table very intently playing the soon-to-be-released paper version of *EQ*. Off in another room are machines installed with *EQ* so that Fan Faire participants can still play the game while away from home. I keep catching different server names on the tags everyone has hanging around their necks. It is the one word on the badge readable in a quick glance. Suddenly at one point a guy with brush-cut hair

walks over and introduces himself. He is from my server, Bailerbents, and I instantly feel more a part of the crowd. I belong. He is wondering, as I am, where our fellow server players might be but, unlike me, he has guildmates who are supposed to turn up, so he says goodbye to go look for them. By this point the lobby and upstairs are truly packed and I am marveling at how many people have actually come. I have been to my share of offline meetings for other virtual worlds, but those had all been organized by the participants themselves. While a few gatherings reached around fifty participants or so, most were smaller affairs involving a handful of people coming together for a weekend. But this event is quite different. It is run by Sony Online Entertainment (SOE), the current developers and publishers of the game, and all those attending here have paid an \$85 registration fee, not to mention hotel and airfare costs for some. As I look around the space what I have noticed in the game becomes more apparent. *EQ* draws a more diverse fan base than often is imagined. While few people of color are present, there are men and women, teens, the twenty-something contingent, and a fairly decent number over thirty.

Finally eight o'clock rolls around and I line up with all the others to enter the main ballroom for the kickoff event. There is a rush in and we all find that the large grand ballroom is filled with round tables of varying sizes with the server names on them. The edges of the room are set up with low-end snack foods (fresh vegetables, cheese, and crackers) and quite a few cash bar stations. The organizers of the event have done a smart thing by encouraging server members to sit together—if you do not know anyone when you arrive at the Fan Faire, you gain an instant community through identification with a server. *EQ* players do not play in one world but are scattered amongst duplicate versions of the game that reside on separate servers, now totaling forty-seven, each of which has its own name and often develops its own culture.³ This table setup kicks off a kind of battle of server pride, something I have certainly never experienced before around the game, and I am struck by how much the structure of the event fosters these group identities. I never really thought of myself as specifically a “Bailerbents player” until this moment where, in a huge hall filled with people, it becomes a shared identity and easy point of connection. As with the game itself, the social connections quickly become a focal point of the experience. To my surprise I find that the server identities run strong and quickly people are chanting server names, as well as playfully taunting and teasing each other across tables. I spot the Bailerbents

table and my heart sinks a little—the table is very small and completely unoccupied. I had been reading one of the server message boards and had the impression a fair number of people were coming, but we clearly are outnumbered by other servers. Across the room I see moments of recognition sparking where people are meeting each other for the first time, face to face. Several people start holding up the server signs from the table and waving people over. There is an amazing amount of easygoing friendliness already, and much laughing and cheering.

The guy I met earlier spots our table and sits down with me. I think we are both a bit nervous about what the table size means. He is still scanning the room and I, honestly, am ready to pretend I am from another server just to hang out with more people. Eventually my anxieties are proven unnecessary as more people show up, including several couples. I wonder, as I have in the past, why that singular image of the male teenage isolate hanging out or gaming online holds so strong in the face of real players. The demographic truth is much more mundane. My servermates turn out to be incredibly nice people and, for those of us who have never met before (in-game or offline), we begin to exchange information. The procedure seems to be to either hold up your badge or look down at it, then back up at the person, in answer to the question “Who are you?” It’s a familiar routine where everyone easily assumes what is meant by “you.” Lori Kendall, in her wonderful ethnography of a text-based virtual world, describes attending an offline gathering having made her own nametag in advance to include both her online and offline name. She arrived at the party only to find everyone was using their online names, even when they sometimes knew each other’s “real” ones (Kendall, 2002). The vibe is much the same at this event, where even the couples refer to each other by their in-game names. At some level it feels a bit taboo to presume you could ask about people’s “real” names. Indeed, I think I only mention mine once in name exchange, somewhat awkwardly.

I buy an overpriced drink and continue to chitchat about the game, which is the main topic of conversation. We discuss particular monsters and “zones” (areas of the game) and begin to recount sometimes funny stories about misadventures. One of the guys talks about having sold a character on eBay and, though he thought he would not mind it, found it disconcerting to log in one day and see, as he put it, “someone else using my avatar.” Finally around 10 p.m. I decide to call it a night and head back to Cambridge where I am staying with a friend. I am fairly tired from the overwhelming amount of activity

and new people to process. I make my way through the crowded ballroom, amazed at how many people have turned up for this event. As I walk down Bolyston to the number 1 bus, I think about how my early Internet experiences seem to have lead me here, to this moment when Internet, fantasy worlds, and VR collide.

On Saturday I arrive in time to participate in one of the popular events, the Live Quest. I do not know much about how it will work but am familiar with quests in the game, which usually involve solving puzzles and collecting artifacts to turn in for a special item. Sure enough, the offline version is much the same. The SOE representatives running the event organize us into groups according to our servers again and I meet more Bailerbents people. Many more turn up to this event and I hear about the various parties from the night before. The ballroom has been rearranged into rows of seats, and as our server gathers together to wait for things to kick off a man shows up and starts handing out roses. I assume he is selling them or simply giving them out to his friends, but he quickly makes clear all Bailerbents women will get one. He tells us that he is known for handing out “virtual flowers” in the game, and I notice how he is mimicking his online identity and actions, how he is performing a kind of offline incarnation of his online persona. Sometimes, it seems, it is the real that imitates the virtual. I wonder if, when I meet him in the game next time, we will draw this offline experience into that space. How will I compare this real flower to his virtual one? Should I? These larger questions become a bit muted when I realize I am now stuck with carrying around a long-stemmed rose, which will make participating in the event a bit awkward. My ambivalence about the gender implications of the whole “all the women get flowers” issue reminds me of the ways that as researchers we can hold complicated relationships to the cultures we explore. I strike an internal compromise and, out of some respect for the gesture and also to not cause “trouble,” I keep the rose but break it in half and stick it in my backpack. Tucking away a virtual flower online is certainly much easier, I think.

The hall is completely full and people once again are cheering and teasing those from other servers. The woman in charge, Cindy Bowens (a community manager for the game at the time), runs through some welcome information and tells us how the day will proceed. Before we are to begin, though, she remarks that a large promotional *EQ* sign has been taken from the lobby overnight. She says, in a joking but clearly serious way, that if it is returned within an hour there will be no questions asked but after that hotel security

tapes will be reviewed and when the guilty parties are found out their characters will be banned. There is a kind of knowing nervous laugh across the room as people seem to acknowledge that, more than anything, the threat of being banned from the game carries huge weight. Sure enough, the banner is returned before she is done speaking, a potent reminder of the power of not only the game, but the company that runs it. Once announcements are over the Live Quest event starts.

The Bailerbents group splits into two teams, and I am with most of the people I met the night before over drinks. While I have never encountered any of them in the game I now know bits and pieces about them—both from their anecdotes about online adventures as well as stories about their families and jobs and where they live. Several of the team members have done Live Quests at other Fan Faires so they draw on that experience to direct us. I take a role as one of the runners—the part of the team that makes mad dashes gathering clues. Much as when I research the game itself, I find myself playing too, which brings with it affectivity and unguardedness. This method of participation puts the researcher in the interesting methodological position of being, both in practice and emotionally, deeply embedded in their world of study.

As the Live Quest gets underway the somewhat upscale hotel is transformed, and I smile at how a kind of properness gets up-ended. The entire hotel lobby and its public spaces have now not only been entirely taken over by players but by *EQ* company representatives dressed up as game characters. They wander around providing puzzles, clues, and rewards. Off in a corner or along a hallway I see someone in a cape, someone dressed as a wizard, someone wearing a kilt as Barbarians in the game do. People quickly dart across the room, up stairs, into the various ballrooms, all in a run to win. Regular hotel guests wander into the lobby and instantly look confused. Normal public behavior gets thrown out the window as it collides with the hotel's transformation into game space.

The conventions of the computer game are followed and even though this quest is “live” and offline, it unfolds much like the online “virtual” version. People line up to “hail” actors who are actually imitating artificial intelligence characters from the game. The loop of having a simulated person in the form of a game character now being imitated by an actual person in the hotel lobby is quite a twist on the real/virtual distinction.⁴ The participants speak words as surely as if they had typed them in the game online (Hail, Sir Gandry)

and everyone runs around—I run around—trying to find all the characters we need and catch them as quickly as we can. My fellow runner and I dash up stairs, wind our way around balconies, wander halls below the ground floor. We get puzzles that we then take back to the table where the rest of the group, consulting *EQ* reference books, complete them. Our group falls into place fairly easily—from playing the game we all know how to step into required roles—and game knowledge and skills are transferred to this space without anyone thinking twice. The clues in the Live Quest relate to the online game's locales, monster names, or procedures for completing tasks, and each participant jumps in with answers based on their play experience. In reward we get some slips of paper that have on them the image of the game currency—platinum, gold, silver, and copper—simple paper drawings signifying virtual coins which themselves refer to offline precious metals.

The Live Quest lasts a couple of hours and we are playing right to the end. We are running around, working hard, but clearly we are not nearly as on top of things as many of the teams. We are not supposed to cheat, of course, but several of us cannot help feeling some teams have an edge. Indeed, some part of me thinks that next time I should bring some walkie talkies. Even though we come nowhere close to winning, the process of playing got us all engaged with each other and was fun. I am not even sure we quite knew what it would take to win the Live Quest, but we played nonetheless.

After the event some people decide to go get lunch but I stay to hear some of the scheduled talks. The other big events at the Fan Faire are sessions where players can hear directly from, and ask questions of, the developers and artists involved with the game. These events serve as a kind of “real time” community forum, not entirely unlike those on online message board systems where people post comments and sometimes a developer pops in and replies. One of the sessions is a developers' forum. It is held in a large and very full room. Participants clearly are anxious to hear about plans for the game, as well as to voice their opinions and raise concerns they have. A panel of *EQ* developers proceeds to field questions from the audience about all aspects of game play and I am struck by the way many users ask quite precise questions about it. The developers are queried on specific things to improve (sometimes met with boos or clapping from audience members) and the developers reply equally attentively. It is an instrumental discussion—no meta questions that so often occupy academics such as intellectual-property concerns or

questions about freedom of speech. The session is recorded so it can be posted on the *EQ* boards later, which produces a feeling that while this is a local conversation, the questioners in some ways stand for, are representatives of, the much larger *EQ* community. Indeed, on a message board I frequent I later read people expressing disappointment that particular questions had not been raised. Some felt the questioners might have done a better job in putting the developers' "feet to the fire" to address some tough gameplay issues. These forums thus extend the boundaries of not only the event space, but the roles of those who participate.

After the developer sessions we lined up again, this time for dinner. As I entered the hall I was quickly waved to one of the Bailerbents tables, a contrast to my experience of somewhat aimless wandering just twenty-four hours earlier. Some people from our server have gone in and quickly grabbed two tables next to each other near the front of the hall for us all to sit together. I end up at a table of people I have spent most of the day with. The dinner itself is fairly uneventful and is followed by a series of raffles for some good items such as computer speakers and membership to *Allakhazam*, a popular third-party Web site. By this point people at our table have grown familiar with each other, now having played, talked, and just hung out for hours. As with the game, the Live Quest became a powerful shared experience and dinner that evening was easy and congenial because of it. Though we all continue to adhere to the unspoken norm in which we only call each other by our "game names" we have a new bond built around not only our server identity but through several hours of working together through play. In the same way on-line game experiences are recounted and used as a way of building community, we now talk about the Live Quest. From there the conversation traverses, fairly seamlessly, across stories about people's lives—both real and virtual. We chat about where we are from, what we do for a living, how we all started playing, and who we play the game with. I find out that one of the couples is, in fact, sister and brother-in-law to one of my in-game friends. We all move back and forth through our offline identities and our in-game ones. As "Iona" I am able to live in that complex space of participant observer. While the power of play puts me, as a researcher, into new and sometimes unfamiliar, risky territory it also gives me a powerful way to connect to the community I study. Though SOE is throwing another party that night, most people at our table are unsure whether or not they are going. It costs extra to attend and many of

them have already spent a large amount of money to participate thus far. In the end many of us say our goodnights, always with comments about contacting each other back in the game once we are home. While I do not become friends with everyone I met from my server, I definitely leave feeling I have made a few new connections with people I genuinely like and would be happy to see more of, even if just in our shared virtual world.

The next night, back home in North Carolina, I log in and test the waters. I send a message to one of my Live Quest teammates—Hey there. This is Iona, we met in Boston:)—and wait. Across my screen I see, Hi!! Was great to have met you! Looking for a group? And so we group up again, in this instance as avatars online, and head off to quest—virtually.

This experience of the Fan Faire, while on the one hand quite unique as a phenomenon all its own, also epitomizes for me some of the things that have long captured my attention with *EverQuest*. Much like the game, it weaves together the offline and online, the real and the virtual, as well as muddying the formal boundaries of “game” and “not game.” The transmission of information about the event to those not present, the Live Quest money simulating in-game money which itself simulates real world currency, people bringing in their online identities, networks, and experiences to these kinds of offline events, or the ways the convention presents moments and connections that feed back into the online play experience itself—the Fan Faire, much like the game, is a kind of in-between site.

As also became quickly apparent to me, social connections, collective knowledge, and group action are central to the individual’s experience. Both at the Fan Faire and within the game, solitary players quickly find themselves immersed in much larger structures that are crucial to their enjoyment of the space. The social is not just an add-on. Much like my experience of the Live Quest, it is in the moment of play in which the social and the formal game intersects that the more familiar connections are created. Shared action becomes a basis for social interaction, which in turn shapes the play. At the Fan Faire, of course, while there is a common object everyone is gathered around, there are interesting variations in how people talk about the game and describe their play. There is no single-typed *EQ* player, nor any single way to play the game. Similarly, people evoke different forms of *EQ* through their play (not unlike how, for some, the Fan Faire was a guild meet while for others it was a chance to talk to the developers). Some refer their play around Web sites

or particular guilds they rely on, others construct their interaction with the game through specific family relations. In much the same way that there is a multiplicity of play, we might also imagine a multiplicity to the artifact of *EQ*.

This book is in some sense a collection of what I think of as border stories. It is not, for example, a story of everything that has happened in *EverQuest* since its launch. I anticipate such a story would only be told successfully through the studies of a variety of researchers approaching the subject from different angles. My work has focused on players or issues that typically are not seen as central in retellings of these games. I am interested in gaps or boundary work in that such locations can be the place in which definitions become problematized or previously hidden practices are accounted for. This book takes up, for example, the notion that games like *EverQuest* are fundamentally social spaces. While the creators of MMOGs have actively designed for sociability, this aspect of them does not commonly filter out into how the public understands what it means to play a computer game. Examining player life allows us to problematize the all-too-common formulations about computer games as an isolating and alienating activity. By looking at the areas of gaming normally neglected, I hope to suggest that we can learn something useful about both the games themselves and also about the broader culture in which they are embedded. I also turn my attention to power gamers, gamers who play in ways that seem to outside observers as “work.” Rather than saying these players are overly invested, playing the game wrong, or ruining the experience for others by being too focused on what they do, I use their style as a way of examining our underlying notions of what constitutes play. Power gamers help us understand the limits of using terms like “fun” and give us ways to talk about how play sometimes feels like work, and may even be painful, repetitive, or boring. Power gamers reside between the worlds of play and work, illuminating for us assumptions and properties of both. In much the same way I take up the seemingly “fringe” category of power gamer players, I explore women players in the game and suggest that the games industry continues to ignore the active engagement of women to the detriment of both commercial potential and the experience of the actual players. Researchers often have over generalized what exactly women want from computer games, formulating a fairly narrow stereotype about femininity and the kinds of play women engage in. By looking at women who play *EverQuest*, I suggest we can broaden our understanding not only of women gamers, but interrogate underlying notions of femininity. The final area I explore re-

volves around questions of ownership of game space. In a world where much of our life is embedded in commercial systems and corporate “publics” games like *EQ*, which is owned by the major corporation Sony Online Entertainment, offer us an interesting opportunity to analyze what happens when emergent cultures confront privatized systems.

Ultimately I believe this case study of *EverQuest* can provide not only a useful snapshot of the larger multiplayer culture that is emerging in the world of gaming, but some more fundamental insights into issues that are independent of games—the relationship between work and play, gender identities, the use of technology in our lives, and our complicated relationship with commercial culture.

On Becoming a Gnome . . . and a Researcher

When I first began *EverQuest* I did not have in mind that I was launching a new ethnographic project that would lead me to spend the next four-plus years of my life engaged with the world and its players. I began not unlike many others—the game was meant to be a distraction for me from the “real” work at hand. Almost immediately, however, I began to see a space not unconnected from what I had been investigating previously. There were avatars, people communicating, a shared persistent virtual space, and items and objects that filled the world with artifacts. As my new character, a small Gnome Necromancer, began to engage in the world, killing rats and meeting other players, I found myself captivated.

I should note that this was after several weeks of motion sickness. It is always fascinating when our corporeal bodies conspire against or play catch-up to our digital ones, and having most of my screen experience grounded in text or lower-end graphical worlds, I was not quite prepared for the experience of embodiment and motion the game produced in me. *EverQuest's* high resolution, three-dimensional nature—one that allows you to shift from first to third person perspective—took some adjustment. I had to acclimate to the new experiences, the new visions the technology afforded me. It did not help, of course, that I picked a type of character, a Gnome, who starts out in underground caverns (to this day it takes me some time to get used to indoor game locales). But in retrospect I think even this early experience in negotiating the dual spaces—running around in caverns on my screen and sitting upright in a chair at a desk in my apartment—signaled my overriding impression of

engagement with these spaces. When we enter into places like *EverQuest*, we are indeed playing between worlds.

As I think back about this initial choice of character, one made not with an eye toward future research, I can see ways I both benefited and was hindered by it. As is always the case with shared virtual environments, how you choose to represent yourself has meaningful implications psychologically and socially. In my past work on social virtual worlds this was certainly the case. Users often spoke of the ways their avatar shaped the kinds of conversations or interactions they had. Meg, one participant of an early social graphical world, said, for example, “I have a favorite human [avatar] that I use the most now. [The] cat and lion [avatars] are more for playful moods. I seem to connect more with people as a human, and people open up more. Whereas as an animal . . . it’s more of a surface thing. Lots of fun . . . but not all that much depth” (Taylor 2002, 52). Another member of the world commented on the ways avatars shape our sense of ourselves: “But I have [been] experimenting quite a bit, and the one thing that I’ve found most interesting is that people treat you based on how you present yourself, and, if you pay attention, you’ll notice that *you* change depending on how you present yourself” (ibid. 56).

When I began *EQ* I faced the same choice all new players do: what gender, race, and class should I play? This language can be somewhat confusing to those unfamiliar with these games and more use to popular or social-science discourse in which terms such as “race” and “class” indicate very specific (and sometimes problematic) variables around identities. In *EQ* they both refer to something quite different and yet something that has similarly profound effects (though I will take this issue up a bit more critically in chapter 4). In the game players choose from “races” that probably are best thought of as species types. This language, and even the kinds of choices available, go back to pen-and-paper role-playing games. For example, when I started *EQ* players had to choose to be a Barbarian, Gnome, Troll, Halfling, Ogre, Erudite, High Elf, Half Elf, Dark Elf, Wood Elf, Dwarf, or Human.

The races have a range of strengths and weaknesses. Barbarians, for example, are quite strong but not as intelligent as Elves, who are more intelligent but also weaker. These capacities are rendered via points, also known as statistics (again another convention going back to tabletop gaming). The Barbarian, for example, begins with 60 intelligence points and 103 in strength while the High Elf starts with 102 and 55 respectively. The quantification of capacities, abilities, and skills through these stats is the underlying founda-

tion of the game. Indeed the focus on stats makes up a large part of the game, especially at the high end, given how integral they are to the characters' abilities. The choice of race is, both theoretically and practically, tied to the class the player picks as some combinations simply are not allowed. Classes might be best thought of as ability sets or vocations. The original group of choices I had was Bard, Wizard, Ranger, Necromancer, Druid, Monk, Shadowknight, Magician, Enchanter, Paladin, Rogue, Cleric, Shaman, and Warrior. Wizards, for example, damage monsters and opponents by casting magical spells while Warriors engage in direct combat using weapons.

The instruction manual that came with the game gave some basic ideas about how races and classes combine to make characters, but just as important for me was the character-creation screen that allows experimentation with which combinations worked and what different characters looked like. Eventually I found many Web pages dedicated to player-generated tables, overviews, and character-planning guides outlining the pros and cons of various permutations. When I created other characters it was to these I would turn to more fully understand my options. I should also note that character-building choices require an alignment with forces of evil (as in the Necromancer, whose specialty is commanding the undead or wielding plague and disease) or good (as in the High Elf Cleric, whose main job is the healing of other players or bestowing protections). There has always been a somewhat dizzying amount of information at this stage of the game and many players simply do not bother with some of the arcana in the choices (often because they do not fully understand the underlying workings of the game mechanics). As I discuss later, the complexity of the game has continued to increase, but suffice to say that when I began my time in *EQ* I made some very basic calculations in my character creation that had a lasting impact on me both as a player and, I discovered, as a researcher.

My first character was a female Gnome Necromancer.⁵ While I admittedly did not give much thought to which gender category to choose (typically I represent myself as a woman online, as I am in "real life"), I quite consciously chose both other categories—Gnome as the race and Necromancer as the class—based on several factors. When I looked at the choices of female avatars available I found what many women I have talked to over the years report: an assortment of fairly stereotypical sexualized bodies. Female avatars in *EQ*, especially those derived from a basic human form, wear very little clothing and often have large chests and significant cleavage. I am particularly sympathetic

to the kinds of tensions Lori Kendall (2002) recounts in her work on MUDs where she found herself, as a feminist researcher, dealing with “partly compatible” settings in which her values were not always aligned with that of either the space she was involved with or the participants in her project. In many ways this is exactly how I felt when confronted with the avatars of the *EQ* world. Both the Gnome and the default Human were a bit better in that their clothing was a little less revealing. Having a human character did not appeal to my more experimental side, so I picked the Gnome avatar as it was the clearest path I could see out of a particular kind of gendered representation.⁶ In part, by virtue of not looking too much like a “normal human” it seemed to present a nice option for breaking away from the typical form femininity takes in these games. My hunch about the Gnome proved quite on target over time. I believe I received many fewer “hey baby” comments than I would have had I chosen one of the more common female characters (something I confirmed with later experimentations with character creation). As a researcher I also think that the Gnome was so unassuming, so nonaggressive (compared to, say, a Barbarian), and indeed often seen quite playfully, that it facilitated spontaneous interaction and communication with players of both genders—something invaluable to me as a researcher.

When I decided to be a Necromancer I was relying much more on the information that was provided by the game, which was very little. By comparison, players starting the game now are given much more grounding. The original game manual, however, included no detailed descriptions of the classes and races available—the pros and cons of each—as there are now. Interestingly, the original manual opened with an eight page narrative on the history of the world and the gods, ending with the now infamous *EQ* tagline, “You’re in our world now!” Such a backstory would be seen as an indulgence now to be sure. But by reading these stories one could hazily intuit what it might mean to choose to become a Dwarf (“Brell claimed the bowels of the planet and created the Dwarves, stout and strong, deep beneath the mountains of Norrath”) or Elf (“And on the surface of Norrath did Tunare create the Elves, creatures of limitless grace and beauty”). Of course, my sensibility toward the more shadowed and idiosyncratic led me to pick a Gnome (“consumed with tinkering their devices”) and while I did not know much about Necromancers, my nightowl-ish tendencies made me think it would be fitting. In this way I was using the game as an opportunity to experiment, but my choices also were shaped by some reflection of what might be “more me”

or what might feel right. Of course, what is so striking now is how much my lack of knowledge of traditional tabletop gaming limited those initial choices. My early MUD (multiuser dungeon, a text-based virtual world) experiences were primarily around postapocalyptic storylines, so the fantasy world of *EQ* remained a bit of a mystery to me. I had no real sense of the various issues that arise from different types of characters, which in turn meant I did not configure my character optimally but instead went with what I liked. At the time I had no real idea of what kinds of people I would meet in the game, or the kinds of group activities I would become involved in. Much like my offline personality, I was more inclined to pick a character that would let me hang back in the shadows and be somewhat self-sufficient, at least until I got a lay of the land.

While I do not want to suggest a researcher can make inherently good or bad choices in terms of thinking about how representation and game structures will affect their experience and data, I do think understanding how avatars and play choices are inextricably tied to the research process is important. In this regard, my choice of Necromancer was probably not the most ideal, at least initially. Necromancers are able to play alone or “solo” for a much longer time over the course of a character’s life than many other classes. For this reason my experience grouping with others in any kind of regular way came a bit later than, in retrospect from a methodological perspective, I would have liked. I did group with others from a very early stage, but I did not rely on having to do so in the same way I would have if I had been a Warrior, for example, who would need another player to heal her as she fought. Nor was I particularly valued in groups as a Cleric would be. My choice certainly fit my personality and in that regard probably kept me playing, but it did have downsides. I learned good team skills much later in my game life than others, and at times it took a bit more work for my participation to be seen as valuable (again, the best comparison is with a Cleric or Druid, who rarely are unable to find a spot in a group given their very useful skills).

On the other hand, in part because of the nature of my play as a Necromancer I found a fairly rich world of “external” *EQ* spaces. This came about in a couple ways. I ran into relatively few other Necromancers, so I relied heavily on a fan-run Web site and bulletin board to assist me. The site provided not only forums where other Necromancers would chat but an enormous number of databases around spells, playing strategies, and the like. The choice of Necromancer also structured my game play sessions. When soloing I often

had a lot of “downtime”—time in which the character is sitting around regaining health or mana (a depletable and renewable element used to cast spells) between fights. I typically played the game on one machine and would have a second computer running alongside for browsing message boards, looking up maps, and basically extending my playspace well outside the confines of the formal game. Had I been a Warrior regularly grouped who got healed by others and therefore had little downtime, my experience of an *EQ* play session would have been vastly different.

I should note here that a couple years into my playing the game I did try a different character and indeed experienced a very different world. I opted for a Barbarian Warrior that was the exact opposite of my Gnome Necromancer in both looks and skills. Though the Warrior often fought in the same locations (known as “zones”) my previous character had, even fighting the exact same mobs, the experience was quite different as I was much more reliant from the earliest stages on the help of others and the ability to get groups together. I found myself much more often in a leadership role as “tanks” (characters that deal out and take direct, close-up damage from a monster) often take charge of initiating battles and coordinating the actions of others by deciding what they should attack and when. I rarely found myself with downtime to browse Web sites while I played and in many ways felt a much stronger sense of duty and responsibility for the people in my group. Since I was the character who was supposed to be able to “take the hits,” when a teammate came under fire—and, in the worst case, died—it was hard to not feel more pressure to improve my skills to prevent such a thing from happening again. I found this dramatically contrasted to my experience playing a Necromancer, in which as a spell-caster I would hang back in a group situation, watching with a kind of distance and often multitasking amid battles.

With these characters I came to inhabit the world and game alongside fellow players. Through the course of that time I moved through several guilds, saw sets of people and friends leave the game (and a few come back), and eventually found myself outpaced by a game that grew and changed in some fundamental ways from the one I started in 1999. This work is a product of that engagement, a product of a qualitative approach in which the researcher immerses herself in a culture and lives, talks, and works with and among the community members for a stretch of time. I want to make a strong case for the role of this method, and of ethnography, participant observation, and interviewing, in understanding the richness of spaces like *EverQuest*. As Christine

Hine describes it, the goal of this kind of work “is to make explicit the taken-for-granted and often tacit ways in which people make sense of their lives. The ethnographer inhabits a kind of in-between world, simultaneously native and stranger” (2000, 5). The game I began playing is not the same game that exists now. The experiences I had that first week, month, even year, were only a slice of what life was like in the space over the long run. Deep qualitative approaches methodologically foster this kind of layered understanding. As Mikael Jakobsson remarked on his own experience, “I myself have several times thought that I had reached a status quo where the gaming experience would not change dramatically again—only to be proven wrong by continued play. The understanding of the properties of the game world goes hand in hand with a more developed experience of the game as a player” (forthcoming, 14). Of course, I do not want to say short-term or quantitative work can tell us nothing about life in virtual worlds. Certainly it can, and throughout this book I make use of work done by scholars whose methods are quite different from my own. But the account that follows, my account, is deeply informed by my choice of method.

In a very grounded sense, then, this work is based on numerous player hours logged in the game (over several characters and several years), membership in guilds and a variety of social networks, reading and participation on player-run bulletin boards, meeting in-game people offline, attending a Fan Faire, and fairly active reading and keeping up-to-date with map sites, databases, comics, as well as formal and informal conversations with players. My research practice is that of bricolage, pulling from a variety of techniques, tools, and methods to understand a mix of practices, representations, structures, rhetorics, and technologies (Becker 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 2003). It is worth noting how many of these items fall into “extra-game” activities, and this should be an early signal about the meaning of the title of this book. Playing *EQ* is about playing between worlds—playing, back and forth, across the boundaries of the game and the game world, and the “real” or nonliteral game space. It is about the moves we make between the corporeal and the “virtual.” This book is deeply concerned with understanding the nuanced border relationship that exists between MMOG players and the (game) worlds they inhabit. The stories that follow do not simply contain themselves to phenomena “within the game” as it is narrowly defined via the system’s rules or structure, but instead tries to tackle the ways these game worlds are interwoven with activities, lives, practices, and structures typically seen as

“outside” of, or secondary to, the game. My hope is to show that the very notion of being able to bound off what is game and not game is not a particularly fruitful way of understanding these spaces—either as games or via their status as a cultural space.

If the history of MMOGs should be told with an eye on both text-based worlds and social graphical environments, we might similarly turn to Internet studies to help us make sense of this blurred boundary life. That field has grown almost in tandem with my time researching *EverQuest*. While many of us had been researching Internet phenomenon since the early 1990s, the first official Association of Internet Researchers conference was held in 2000. Some of the best work to come out of nongame virtual spaces has revolved around an exploration of the ways online and offline life are interwoven together in complicated ways.

A good deal of Internet research in the 1990s focused on what might be seen as a hard line between the on- and offline worlds—epitomized by the now infamous cartoon in *The New Yorker* of a dog boasting to another that “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” (Steiner 1993). The second wave of Net studies took a more critical approach and elaborated ways in which the online world was not a tidy, self-contained environment but one with deep ties to value systems, forms of identity, and social networks, and always informed by the technological structures in which it was embedded. This is not to say that experimentations do not exist online (such as gender-swapping) but that how people make sense of and experience who they are online is not inherently separate from who they are and what they do offline. What seems more to be the case is that people have a much messier relationship with their off- and online personas and social contexts. That people can slip into and out of complex social networks that cross not only online and offline space, but genres within the online world is a fact often under-acknowledged. The journalistic anecdotes that circulate, of identity deceptions for example, hide a much less sensational, even mundane, integration of technology into people’s everyday lives. People are very adept at moving back and forth between on- and offline spaces and relationships, even while being ambivalent or unsure of how to frame the experience online life produces. These nuanced practices of negotiation, of flexibility in the face of emerging technology, are quite different than early rhetoric, which mostly framed online life as a bounded-off zone of experimentation. While online

life certainly has experimental qualities, it simultaneously has a broader context in everyday offline lives and practices.

Similarly, we also might complicate the earlier formulations that saw online life as simply always referring back to the offline. My call to attend to the interweaving of these spheres is not that we need to reground in the offline so that we can attribute meaning or significance to online lives. It is not, for example, that online worlds are spaces in which we simply work out offline issues and once sorted, happily leave. That story over-privileges the offline in ways that are not particularly useful. It is instead the case that we have phenomena that are unique to both spheres and also occupy spaces of overlap. What happens in virtual worlds often is just as real, just as meaningful, to participants. A friend can be a friend online, even if you never meet them face to face. It is, of course, much simpler when we bound off both spaces and try and come up with tidy categories for each, but what I find in my work (and see in many others') is that people live much more in the gaps between the two and negotiate that experience in fascinating ways. This research then takes as an instructive jumping off point the work done in critical studies of online environments and technologies. Its departure point is one in which not only the design of the game is looked at, but the actual use and practices that circulate around it are considered. And rather than simply taking *EQ* at face value, so to speak, this book tries to understand the ways not only the artifact of the game, but the production of play within it, are multiply constituted by a variety of actors located in particular social contexts. In much the same way we now see the relationship between on- and offline life as not a bounded one, in many ways a game/not-game dichotomy does not hold.