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Friendsters, Tricksters, and Playculture

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“Friendsters, Tricksters, and Playculture”
Mary Flanagan, Hunter College

In my digital media courses, it is a constant struggle to draw in students from their email, phones, and chat sessions, especially during hands-on tutorials in computer labs. Most of the time, computer users are connected through multiple means, multiple arteries of information and communication, connections to friends, games, email, news—networks. We’re ensnared in them. While we crop, copy, paste, compress, duplicate, save, and upload, computer users also search, select, get info, instant message, download, save as, open, blog, write write write, shoot the weasel, win roulette, guess the right number, and quick! switch back and forth to various work tasks. These familiar simultaneous actions in the daily activities of digital creation and information access hold a wealth of implications for cultural meaning, authorship, and community as we participate in the construction of the network through our uploads and downloads in our work and in our play.

Connectivity and play is an integral part of upload/download culture: from war simulations to BBS chess to 3D computer games, digital technology has been inherently bound with interactivity and play. It is no wonder many online ads use mock game screens to draw in users. As casinos and amusement parks and even cell phones show us, the very presence of a game can lure in thrill seekers either as the evening’s goal or as a liminal time filler. Users are responding to the commercial ubiquity of digital media products in particular ways, and such response is important to the production and design of collaboration and human-centered networks so pervasive in many computerized cultural forums.

Here I would like to engage with the social questions surrounding participatory play in computer games, and the multiuser participation in the contemporary cultural systems such as the online friendship networks. Digital

environments such as games and social network sites offer highly organized situations for playing, sharing, and purchasing. Rating systems are implemented in the design of such environments, from *Everquest's* game stats to *Ebay's* reliability stars to *Friendster's* testimonials, further structure the experience of everyday life online. However, whether it is the mythos of hacker culture or sheer rebellion and simultaneous participation in such categorical social systems, players work to intrude upon these environments and alter them, often in whimsical or even sinister ways. How and potentially why subversion is insinuated into these systems is the particular topic of this inquiry.

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It is no wonder that many computer users are interested in subversive play as an activity: from secret alias email accounts to alter egos active in blogs, from renegade killers in networked games to pop up ads featuring porn, the undercurrents of playculture become apparent. Internet users can quite literally and unintentionally view pornography on the way to work; as I receive serious emails from supervisors or colleagues or deadline notes for one's latest paper, these arrive next to Viagra and body cream spams, friends' joke emails, love letters, discount vacation notices, and reminders from my Mom to change my airfilter and should she get one for me? Just as children's play deals with the dangerous elements of living in society (cops and robbers, enacting earthquakes with Legos, war games) the mix of work and play in contemporary digital culture may function as a way for adults to disrupt the sense of cohesion and surveillance offered by the comforting yet limiting, totalizing force called ubiquitous computing.

Many computer games play on the pleasure of subversion, whether it is actual subversion of game rules or merely subverting social norms -- even if the game requires them. Take for example *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, the game politically correct scholars love to hate, where players must steal cars and resort to violence in

order to proceed in the game. Or, players dwell as a god in *The Black and The White*, a game series which offers a world in which it is much more difficult to be a good, benevolent god than it is to be a nasty one; this is due in part to the ability to garner worship points by instilling “the fear of god” into the gameworld’s subjects through abuse and domination.

Much play takes place in the home. According to a 2001 U.S. Department of Commerce report, 56.5 % of US households had a computer, and 50.5% of US households had internet connections.¹ Today at the end of 2003, these numbers have certainly expanded. Some of this play involves representative domestic environments. In *Neighbors from Hell*, players work to pull pranks and get revenge on their neighbors in return for suburban offences such as poor lawn care. In *The Sims*, players work to create and maintain a consumer-driven everyday suburban family. In *Neopets*, players choose pets to live in Neopia, and keep their pets busy on quests while earning funds to feed pets, as well as build personal home pages. In games like *The Sims*, this play is complicated and made richer through the behaviors and reactions of the characters to their surroundings. The fundamental role of suburbanized domestic space in *The Sims* seems to be to present players with economic, political, and ideological norms which rely upon a traditionally feminine role to function. Children learn through this play environment rudimentary economic skills and adult functional roles such as looking for a job.

A great deal of pleasure, however, is derived from subverting these set norms, exploring the boundaries of what is permissible and what is not. These subversions are linked to historical models of playing with domestic space, such as doll play, where there is a long tradition of doll culture subversion. Dollhouses, real and virtual, are compelling because they are sites of symbolic play in which symbols are used freely to represent external reality—play may either reproduce functional

reality such as building a kitchen and having dolls “cook,” or players can adapt or assimilate the dollhouse or play house on his or her own terms. However, this emphasis on normative domestic behavior has historically been met with subversive resistance by girl players. In the 19th Century United States, while adults saw playing with dolls as a wholesome activity useful in social feminization, some children would use the dolls for purposes distinctly different than their intended use.² Rather than focus on household maintenance, girls would frequently have doll funerals in an effort to work out larger issues imbedded in their contemporary culture; often such play focused on Victorian social rituals such as sophisticated funerals. “For some, a doll’s worth was determined by its ability to subvert convention, mock materialism, and undermine restrictions.”³ While at first the macabre “doll death scene” appeared subversive, doll manufacturers eventually caught on and began packaging their fashion dolls to market such subversion. Some dolls arrived on the shelves complete with elaborate black mourning attire.⁴ Also in fiction for children in this era, short stories about dying dolls proliferated in books and magazines. In fact, many books were marketed to the dolls themselves, with titles such as *The Dolls’ Own Book* in which articles were purportedly written by dolls themselves.⁵

Victorian doll fiction has been replaced by contemporary fan fiction generated by *Sims* players, and Victorian practices of doll funerals have translated into morbid *Sims* play with the ability to have the virtual dolls suffer, become malnourished, or even set objects on fire within the “normative” suburban environment. Doll sadomasochism and sexual experimentation such as evidenced in the online sex industry formed in *The Sims Online* are the more recent play subversions among virtual doll play. It is if all kinds normative play environments are designed specifically to be hacked and subverted, much like normative Hollywood films are meant to be “camped.”

A similar environment is *Neopets*, an online game world where players can choose a particular kind of pet to create or adopt. The basic premise of the site is to create a virtual pet, take care of it, feed it, and cure its illnesses when it is sick. There is a thriving economy in Neopia, consisting of thousands of shops created by NeoPet members offering goods from bombs to foods to potions. Players play arcade-style games to earn Neopoints in the world, and can spend them on things like food and daycare for their pets. While the Neopet characters don't die, they can become seriously ill or near death. Starving pets from owners who neglect their pets can be taken to the kind Soup-Faerie for free food. With over 60 million virtual pet owners, the site is among the most visited places on the net. However, players explore *Neopets* far beyond the online pet community. For example, a *Neopets* dating service has developed, and sites with downloadable mutant *Neopets* abound. *Neopets* is interesting in that it is designed from the start to include darker aspects than games like *The Sims*. For example, players can create their pets as bullies or attackers; the pets can fight in the battledome; there is even a character called the "Pant Devil," a randomly-appearing pair of pants that steals a player's hard earned Neopoints. Fan descriptions of their desires are often sinister: "I will take my fire faeries to Haunted Woods where I will burn down the forest forcing all **mutant Neopets** to go crazy and attack everything while under water!"⁶ Among *Neopets* fan culture, game hacks abound, so that users can acquire 5 billion Neopoints, or even break into other users' accounts. While I haven't yet found the hack to kill my pets, I'm sure it is out there. While it is difficult to subvert *Neopets* in the same ways we see *The Sims* universe upset (no fires, for example) we see disruption incorporated into the game in the barter system, the battledome fights, marauding game figures, and fan culture hacks.

Fan culture cannot be underestimated, for such group formation is not only a phenomenon surrounding what we normally consider games; such groups are of

course created on a daily basis in personal and work environments as interest groups. Online social networks are expanding the definition for interest groups, instead constituting how larger cultures are identified. Social formation in Blogs, sites such as *LiveJournal*, and electronic logging systems known as wikis, are also constantly reworked –a great deal of pleasure is derived from subverting these set norms, exploring the boundaries of what is permissible and what is not. Most of net culture explores and constantly reinvent that boundary line: social networks constructed using the gnutella clients rely on trust to protect users from viruses, but they rely on play to retain interest and build communities. Online culture constantly subverts and reinvents itself through rapid meme artifacts --the strange images or quicktime movies that are part artwork, part joke, and serve as a kind of “net currency” among net customs. *Friendster*, an application that allows users to network their friends together and displays location, interests, and social intentions (options include listing oneself as "single", "in a relationship" or desiring "activity partners") charts human relationships through networks of friends, mirroring the degrees of separation between different community groups that search engines such as *Google* use to effectively conjure relevant file types. In *Friendster*, users write "testimonials" about their friends, frequently fictional or fantasy tales to push the elements of play through well-intentioned pranks.

Contrary to some theorists and critics writing about games, I'd like to argue that networked community situations where participants can surprise or subvert function as games, because even here there is a pleasurable competition, a battle of wits; a clear winner or loser needn't emerge per established, preset wining rules in order for a game to be enacted, to arise spontaneously from circumstances of interaction. Depending on who is playing, the most fantastic friend's testimonial, strangest photograph, or the highest number of friends may be important--the network depends on such play. While these trust systems can be exploited (renegade

players, or hacks into *ebay* accounts where purchasers are swindled from purportedly reliable sellers), they generally function to maintain a strong sense of community. Thus *Friendster* becomes an identity game: as a *Friendster*, I know that many players are not 83 year olds in an open marriage, for example, and that knowledge clues me into the game played by *Friendster* participants. I also know there are not, in the physical sense, 17 Johnny Depps or 28 Bill Gates in the world, but I do know that one of the Bill Gates on *Friendster* may be the Microsoft chief himself. Players can choose to interact with any of these Bill Gates personae, or Burt and Ernie, Madonna, Ludwig Wittgenstein, or Frida Kahlo, and if they do, they willingly participate in the identity game, the joke of *Friendster* participation. Perhaps we can develop a measure online community strength on the amount of participation and on the amount participants are playing with the system.

Participants in online worlds such as *Friendster* reveal a strong desire for connection with others through the network. As the network expands to mobile devices and comprehensive systems for social interaction, education, work, and play, the links become more and more important to study, and thus desire is an important means to examine the philosophical implications of online systems. The manipulation of characters and environments that many games offer are complex sites for negotiating player desire in controllable worlds. Like other pleasurable activities, play can be addictive and rhythmic. Email language games, online Massive Multiuser RolePlaying Games, and online auctions keep up the tantalizing suspense that drives the craving for connectivity. This system of desire drives technological development (dsl, internet cafes, subscriptions, etc) as has other desiring systems such as the sex industry. To explore this desire, I'll turn to Gilles Deleuze's theory of desire and the position of the Other, for computer games and network culture offer us complex sites for negotiating the subject that are not only the keys to such gaming experiences but

an under-explored site of scholarship. Who we are when we play games and how we relate to the worlds around us are important, for the pleasure from games relies on the structure of rules which defines the game environment.

Working from Freudian and Lacanian notions of the Other, Gilles Deleuze offers a compelling argument for the construction of desire and the role of the Other by arguing that, contrary to Freud and Lacan, desire for the Other is in fact a structure for the "*expression of a possible world*: it is the expressed, grasped, as not yet existing outside of that which expresses it."⁷ Deleuze refutes the systems of desire offered by psychoanalytical frameworks of voyeurism, exhibitionism, and various ways the Other is positioned visually. In fact, he claims that interaction with Others depends on a desire for either the object the Other represents, or the desire for other worlds the Other expresses.⁸ Though there is not much room in this essay to fully explore the implications of desire in online worlds, one can recognize that games, blogs, and other participant-driven systems function because desire produces real, meaningful interaction and motivates the creation of new worlds. If desire fills some kind of lack, the development of such systems implies that internet users have a strong need for connectivity and ways to understand themselves within electronic culture.⁹ Deleuze's post-visual look at systems of desire provides a valuable tool for examining online systems, where words and things are forever interchangeable and are exchanged in an everyday framework.

Social networks provide a safe space which encourages subversive identities and emergent community formation, as noted earlier; but these still function within much larger cultural systems. According to Luce Irigaray, we cannot simply step outside of current contemporary social systems so as suddenly to write and think in ways completely free of the rules of, for example, patriarchy, for language and discourse are themselves inscribed with those rules. Instead, we have to work like a virus from within patriarchal discourses to infect and radically change them, thus

"leaving open the possibility of a different language."¹⁰ This different language may be a visual one, given the reliance in the West on visual culture, or they may in fact be structural, linguistic or procedural, as hacking demonstrates. Other social theorists express similar concerns about creating meaningful social change with subversion. Judith Butler, for example, critiques activist strategies by noting that it is only through changing the logic of traditional relationships and categories such as gender that social systems can be changed. Representing a logic of power, social systems like heterosexuality or other seemingly fixed categories can only be changed through the redefinition of the categories, not the system itself.¹¹ While Butler argues that subversions such as crossdressing help indicate the locations of social constructions, such subversions also can be used as tactics for deconstructing normative social categories. Like Butler, Michel de Certeau agrees that power systems must be changed from the inside out, and argues for tactics such as trading and bartering, free exchange, using scraps and working for oneself in the context of employment for another, and advocates the return of everyday tactics such as creating "networks of connivances and sleights of hand."¹² A great deal of pleasure is derived from subverting online culture's set interaction norms, exploring the boundaries of what is permissible and what pushes at that boundary. Online networks are where users discover what is permissible: the movement and play of all kinds of users within the structures of work and entertainment systems represent the pleasurable aspects in the creation of playculture. If digital culture has truly become a "magic circle" in which players enter a sanctioned play space, then this playculture in which many participate is an open environment focused on experimentation and subversion.¹³

Thus gaming, and more, digital culture in general, fits into the Deleuzian framework for not only the wish for, but the creation of, worlds. While the 1990s liberatory claims for cyberculture should be approached with caution, the structures

provided by online cultural institutions provide a playground where we treat the everyday as a game. Play in the system of desire Deleuze describes, these possible worlds in which we participate in building, brings us unexpected kinds of pleasures, pleasures we create through creating rule sets as we create emergent cultures through social networks and games. It is refreshing that both the home and the workplace has become also a site for personal play and art. The workstation has evolved to be a site of play and pleasure, and can finally be recognized as a playground.

¹ US Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration. (2001). "A Nation Online: How Americans are Expanding Their Use of the Internet." <http://www.esa.doc.gov/anationchart.cfm>. Accessed 10 Nov 2003.

² Formanek-Brunell, Miriam (1993). *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 8.

³ Formanek-Brunell, 32.

⁴ Formanek-Brunell, 22.

⁵ Formanek-Brunell, 23

⁶ Neopets, Pet Spotlight, www.neopets.com/petpetspotlight.phtml?place=28. Accessed December 1, 2003

⁷ Deleuze, Gilles (1993). "A Theory of the Other." *The Deleuze Reader*. Ed. Constantin V. Boundas. NY: Columbia University Press, 59-68, 60.

⁸ Deleuze, 66.

⁹ Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. (1983). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press, 54.

¹⁰ Irigaray, Luce. (1985). *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. Ithaca, NY: Cornell U P, 80.

¹¹ Butler, Judith (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, NY: Routledge, 9.

¹² De Certeau, Michel (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 28.

¹³ Huizinga, Johan (1977). *Homo Ludens*. Boston: Beacon Press, 77.