3 Beyond Fun: Instrumental Play and Power Gamers

I was in Los Angeles for work and decided to try to meet up with one of the people I had become friends with in the game. I met Mitch, a mechanic living in one of the sprawling suburbs outside L.A., fairly early on through my connections with Katinka and people in our small family guild. When we first met, I was a midlevel character trying to make my way through *EQ*'s first game expansion, *Ruins of Kunark*. Mitch befriended me and we grouped up, providing a much-needed change from my recent soloing grind. We spent quite a few days camped on a hillside in the Overthere region killing the local monsters, and I gained a number of levels during that period. In retrospect, that small window of time was about the extent of our playing together. On later occasions he would start up a new character and we would have a chance to group again, or he would find a way to meet up in the game to pass along some items he could no longer use. But what quickly became apparent is that Mitch consistently passed me by in advancing in the game. If I were gone for a day or two, I would come back only to find him several levels ahead and off in another part of the world. Most of our game friendship, while in many ways rooted in those early sessions on that hill, was held together through in-game chatting.

As my small family guild fell apart and regrouped in various forms (with different names and slightly different membership rosters), Mitch found himself a place within one of the top raiding guilds on our server, and he remains there today. I figured my trip to L.A. would give me a good chance to meet face-to-face this long-time, but somewhat sporadic, in-game friend. We decided to meet at his house along with Josh, another in-game acquaintance I had played with a few times. Mitch gave me the tour of the house, ending in his game room. There he had several desks piled high with CDs, papers, magazines, and assorted stuff. On his desks were my first introduction to a very different world of *EverQuest* gaming—two computers side by side running

the game simultaneously. Later Mitch increased this to three machines, but even with two it was clear why I—a researcher dedicating quite a bit of time to the game—still could not keep up with this guy who, despite holding down a full-time job, seemed to advance exponentially faster than me.

The conversation pretty quickly shifted from our idle chat about my trip and movies to *EverQuest*. Almost immediately Mitch opened up a Web browser and talk began flying about the previous night's raid (he and Josh were at this point both in the same high-level guild) and the loot that had dropped. Recounting fights is a common topic of conversation among players, but with Josh and Mitch the talk had a slightly different quality. They seemed to know an incredible amount about the items' statistics and often carefully looked over all their properties (additional HP or intelligence points, for example), closely examining what had been won when the monster was killed. They quickly rattled off comparisons with items their characters currently wore and debated which were really valuable in terms of gameplay statistics and which were novelty items. They knew what they wanted, what they needed to improve their character, and thought about their goals in very quantitative terms.

They pulled up another page at their guild Web site that already chronicled the same fight, describing in both text and pictures, what had occurred. The page became a kind of artifact propelling the conversation—they talked around it, recounting the strategies and tactics used, remarking on who did what, what worked, what failed, and also what was the next challenge. Previously I had felt that whenever I mentioned the game to nonplayers I seemed completely off the map, that I was speaking a language they did not understand and talking about a world they could not fathom. This was the first time, however, I felt out of my element in an *EverQuest* conversation. Despite some paltry attempts at joining in, I was essentially unable to relate to their experience of the game. It was unfamiliar. What they focused on and highlighted generally were not the things I paid careful attention to. While I was not an unknowledgeable player—I certainly knew which was my best weapon and set of spells, knew where to hunt, even had my eye on a new outfit to upgrade my abilities—their intent and focus had a different quality. Like those nonplayers I had tried to talk to in the past, this time I was the one just listening, somewhat confused, somewhat bemused, and mostly feeling like I was peeking at an unfamiliar world. Mitch and Josh played a different *EverQuest* than I did.

The growing body of literature on massively multiplayer online games, and indeed in game studies in general, typically has focused on a generic player—a sort of ideal type, the imagined player. Given the newness of computer game studies, this kind of homogeneity is understandable—the terrain is still undergoing a basic mapping, so fine-grained distinctions have not yet emerged. Earlier work by people like MUD creator and game designer Richard Bartle, however, provide some indication that not all players are the same nor enjoy the same aspects of a game. He proposes that there are a variety of types of activities people prefer in multiplayer games and that we can characterize such players through a basic taxonomy. His now oft-repeated categories—achievers, socializers, explorers, killers—form a continual basis for discussions of player types and are frequently referred to by game designers as a way of understanding how they might shape their product to appeal to different audiences.[1] Though he has refined the categories in his recent book and provides a fascinating discussion on the variables that intersect any such modeling of behavior, the basic framework Bartle suggests in the 1996 article based on his experience with MUD players is that people generally enjoy four things.

Achievement within the game context. Players give themselves game-related goals, and vigorously set out to achieve them. This usually means accumulating and disposing of large quantities of high-value treasure, or cutting a swathe through hordes of mobiles (i.e., monsters built into the virtual world).

Exploration of the game. Players try to find out as much as they can about the virtual world. Although initially this means mapping its topology (i.e., exploring the MUD's breadth), later it advances to experimentation with its physics (i.e., exploring the MUD's depth).

Socialising with others. Players use the game's communicative facilities, and apply the role-playing that these engender, as a context in which to converse (and otherwise interact) with their fellow players.

Imposition upon others. Players use the tools provided by the game to cause distress to (or, in rare circumstances, to help) other players. Where permitted, this usually involves acquiring some weapon and applying it enthusiastically to the persona of another player in the game world.

In Bartle's model, players fall on an X and Y axis based on their general orientation and game interest. The horizontal gradient runs from "players" to "world" and the vertical line runs from "acting" to "interacting," so that those who are more oriented to other players and interacting fall in the "socialisers" quadrant and those more oriented toward the world and acting fall within "achievers." While such distinctions often are overstated as complete

archetypes, it is worth exploring different styles of play to understand better the more complex nature of engagement in multiuser game worlds. Abstract notions of a "game player" may offer some initial paths into understanding games, but we also can learn quite a bit more about the varieties of ways people think about rules, play, and game worlds by looking at the multiplicity within the game community. The notion that people play differently, and that the subjective experience of play varies, is central to an argument that would suggest there is no single definitive way of enjoying a game or of talking about what constitutes "fun." We need expansive definitions of play to account for the variety of participants' pleasurable labor and activity. Those definitions must encompass both casual and more hard-core gamers. Suggesting that games are always simply about "fun" (and then endlessly trying to design that fun) is likely to gloss over more analytically productive psychological, social, and structural components of games.

One of the most interesting distinctions I have found in my research on MMOGs is the difference between casual and power gamers. Both terms are likely to evoke a stereotyped figure. The casual gamer is often seen as someone "with a life" who invests only moderate amounts of time in a game, while the power gamer appears as an isolated and socially inept player with little "real life" to ground him. Such distinctions echo what is often said about virtual worlds more generally, that those who find online spaces compelling simply do not have much happening offline. For the most part, dialogue about the difference between types rests on unproductive rhetoric and tells little about real styles of play, everyday experience, and what brings people back to a game over and over again. It dichotomizes and oversimplifies the much more complicated social experience of players in each category.

The question about styles of play and gamer types is an old one debated in both designer and player communities. There are often normative aspects to the divisions. For example, players sometimes refer to others as "roll players," "power gamers," or "munchkins." Having roots in tabletop role-playing, these designations are given to players seen as perverting a pure game-space by distorting some aspect of play (too much hack-and-slash, loot greediness, and underdeveloped characters) or by taking advantage of the game design itself (through loopholes and actions not intended in the system but nonetheless not prohibited). In an article by Anablepophobia (2003) at the GameGrene Web site entitled "Just Say No to Power Gamers," the author suggests that such players ruin role-playing games (RPGs) by their insistence on being as powerful as possible and "see[ing] no other purpose in the game besides winning."

While some put the blame on the system, the designers, or the GM (suggesting that the structure of a particular game may produce this kind of behavior), others claim it is an unethical choice on the part of the gamer—that they are simply not playing fair or "right." Some suggest power gamers are inclined to cheat more readily. Bob, a college student who played quite a bit of the game, did not label himself a power gamer because he saw it as an identity that came with a questionable value set. He summed up a fairly common notion about power gamers and their guilds: "They were not interested in playing by what was basically the rules. They realized the disadvantage they were at by playing by the rules so they just bent them." On his previous server, Bob had grown very unhappy with the way power gamers seemed to always skirt the borders—and indeed, sometimes even push at them—between questionable and fair play. The notion that power gamers are out to spoil everyone else's fun or that they are inclined to cheat more frequently looms as a stereotype in the player community. But untangling the specter of renegade players set on cheating from the more general group of regular players allows us to consider this style as a serious play strategy in which typical notions of fun and pleasure are upended.

Straight, clear-cut cheating is not something I found to be a defining feature in the power gamers' style of play. Instead, it is just that somehow power gamers, while sharing the same world as their fellow players, seem to be at times *too* focused, *too* intent, *too* goal-oriented. To outsiders it can look as if they are not playing for "fun" at all. Bob is an interesting case in this regard because at some level he is certainly a dedicated player and devotes much time and energy to the game. Yet he felt a kind of resentment based on his constant inability to keep up with the power gamers:

> They did things I would consider just ridiculous like getting three or four accounts or having an entire group that was just them [i.e., a single person playing multiple characters at once, enough to support a formal group] and level themselves up and get items for themselves. I have lots of hate for the power gamers. I think like, for me I felt I played the game a lot, I would play probably 4–6 hours a day, almost the equivalent of a fulltime job and I couldn't even keep pace with them cause they were on probably 10 hours a day.

Clearly for Bob, and others, power gamers push too much at the bounds of legitimate play. Whether they seem to have too much time, employ strategies that look like cheating or seem against the spirit of the game, or make their involvement look more like work than play, the controversy about power gamers highlights the diverse orientations people can bring to the exact same game.

After reflecting on my visit with Mitch and Josh and talking to more power gamers, I wondered how our understanding of the nature of play might be extended if we take the power gamer as a legitimate participant in game space.

Rather than dismissing them as simply odd or dysfunctional players, power gamers play in ways we typically do not associate with notions of fun and leisure. They, therefore, tell us something about the ways we construct those categories. In worlds like *EQ*, power gamers often are juxtaposed with role players. As one player remarked, "There are people that play for the role play aspect who say 'thus' and 'forsooth' a lot . . . and then there are people who have their statistics and what's best for advancing their character." In querying players for their definition of power gaming, the comparison with role players and casual gamers often emerged. Role players in *EQ* (though fairly infrequently found outside the dedicated role-play server) are seen as people dedicated to the back-story and narrative structure of the world. They game through developing characters, alliances, and plots—though there is no formal mechanism in the game for rewarding this activity and it therefore has little part in leveling. More casual gamers, on the other hand, typically do not develop elaborate back-stories for their character or follow plot. They may change characters frequently, level more slowly than some, and focus on quests or skill development. They can be involved in guilds, but most often of the "family" sort (as described in the previous chapter). Casual gamers may never attend a high-level raid, those fights in which advanced players take on and kill particularly challenging monsters, and likely never have the opportunity to visit some of the areas in the game. Despite playing with varying degrees of regularity, they nonetheless find the game engaging. For many casual gamers then, making sense of the intensity power gamers bring to the game can be perplexing. And for those like Bob who think they are already running pretty fast to keep up, a power gamer can almost feel like a nemesis.

This sense that somehow these players are just too dedicated, indeed almost bordering on the psychologically pathological, is a popular theme. What I found in conversations with power gamers, however, is that they consider their own play style quite reasonable, rational, and pleasurable. There are several qualities to their approach that emerged: a focus on efficiency and instrumental orientation (particularly rational or goal-oriented), dynamic goal setting, a commitment to understanding the underlying game systems/structures, and technical and skill proficiency. One of the reasons power gaming occupies an "othered" space in games is that it appears to operate directly

counter to a popular understanding of fun and leisure. The activities and orientations power gamers bring to games often look more to the outside world as work which leads to a much broader ambivalence about what constitutes legitimate play.

One of the issues that sometimes arises with an examination of this style of play is whether or not women can, and do, occupy the position of power gamer. Is there anything inherently gender-biased about the approach? My answer is no, but with two caveats. I have certainly talked to several women who fit the bill of a power gamer and heard from others about women in their own guilds they would identify as such. The caveats arise not around internal psychological orientations to the play style (i.e., "women are not competitive enough"), but structural considerations. There is debate, for example, about how much time is required to be a power gamer. Some feel that power gaming has more to do with how time is used than the amount of time devoted to the game. Others, however, suggest that many women, because of domestic or work pressures, simply do not have the required amount of leisure time needed to fully embody the play style. My sense is that time definitely plays some role, especially at the high-end game where participation in raiding guilds, a natural home for the power gamer, comes with significant responsibility.[2] The fact that many women still perform an enormous juggling act with domestic labor, social-familial responsibilities, work outside the home, and their leisure time certainly plays a part in their ability to inhabit the power-gamer play style. The other factor, which I discuss a bit in the next chapter, is that (just as offline) dedicated ambitious women often are seen as abnormal, not fitting within traditional feminine roles. This can carry a certain amount of stigma that has to be cautiously negotiated. Rather than saying that women do not enjoy this style of play, I am more inclined to note that the social barriers to becoming a power gamer are worth taking into account.

Efficiency and Instrumental Action

One of the most notable characteristics of the power gamers I observed and spoke with is their fundamental adherence to a cause-and-effect model of game involvement. Such gamers in *EQ* are particularly attuned to making the most of their time in the game and so undertake actions to produce efficient reward paths. John, a small-business owner who was introduced to the game

by his brother, early on in our conversation self-identified as a power gamer: "I look at *EverQuest* as the numbers. If you do this you'll get this, this is a better combination, you'll have a better chance to kill. That's all it is for me—to see the new stuff and do the new stuff and find the new stuff."

This kind of efficient, almost quantitative orientation is something I saw again and again. Chris, an undergraduate in computer science, came to typify for me the play style. While he had started the game with his college friends, he found himself quickly surpassing them and eventually shifted his networks from offline to online connections, turning solely to better matched in-game players for groups. He described how knowing the best, most efficient way to play was central to success, especially at the high-end game. For players like Chris the game is seen as a problem to be broken apart and solved. Working out solutions and strategies with focused intent then becomes central for players with Chris's mindset: "Efficiency is probably they most important word [for a power gamer]. Leveling is all about efficiency." While a player certainly can advance without this kind of orientation, power gamers structure and evaluate actions in terms of productive or wasteful strategies. In comparing how a casual gamer approaches the issue of in-game items that provide the wearer with beneficial properties and statistics (figure 3.1), Chris said, "If you want to be the best you've got to get everything to mesh. You can't have 'Oh, this is the best item from this guy, this is the best from this guy.' You have to say 'I have 47 points to get to my current cap [point limit]. How do I get that based on what drops what?'"

This intentionality extends to all aspects of play, even failed encounters and mistakes. One player suggested that average players do not confront failure as a learning opportunity in the same way that power gamers do: "When we die we say 'What went wrong?' and try to understand what happened." While it is certainly not unusual to hear even casual gamers talk about trying something a few times to "get it right," the level of attention power gamers give to understanding mistakes is notable. What are often viewed as the best player-guides—written tips and walk-throughs, usually put on Web sites—tap into this impulse, with their rich accounts of how to handle a monster or zone that specify down to the very pacing of the encounter how to proceed (though often the nuts and bolts are left to private, password-protected member areas). Just as frequent are pictures and documentation for successful encounters. This willingness to critically examine others, let their own tactics be reviewed, and repeat encounters until they succeed distinguishes the

Figure 3.1
Inventory screen and breakdown of statistics for specific items

power gamer from the more casual one who may move onto a different location after several unsuccessful attempts.

Dynamic Goal Setting

As is probably clear, the focus on efficiency is typically driven by the desire to be the best. In a game like *EverQuest* that goal is particularly tricky given the ongoing expansions which increase level caps (when the game began, the maximum level was 50, now it is 70), the diverse race/class character structure that produces varying skill sets, and the variety of arcania to be mastered. In the face of this complexity, what distinguishes the power gamers is their constant engagement in dynamic goal setting and the focused attention to achieving those goals, which can range from gaining levels to securing particular weapons and armor, killing certain monsters, gaining admission to a specific guild, getting special skills, and exploring difficult zones. As many *EQ* players comment, the game never ends, so players must be self-directed in how they progress. People continue to play well after reaching the highest

level in the game, which is a testament to the multilayered and locally defined nature of the win condition.

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

This was echoed by Jackie, a computer programmer and one of the women who, while not self-identifying as a power gamer, expressed many of the qualities I have come to see in them. She described her time in the game:

> I enjoy progressing in the game, having a sense that there is this path that I'm going on and I've made some progress toward it. I used to enjoy xp'ing [gaining experience] and leveling a lot, in and of itself as a kind of progression. I have enjoyed in the past kind of competitive xp'ing, like on my previous server I was the first enchanter to get to level 50 on the server. And that was a competitive thing, I definitely put in a lot of effort . . . I'm also competitive in other goals too. Like, I wanted to be the first platinum jeweler on the server and then it became focused on doing other server firsts like trying to kill this dragon before anyone else, that sort of thing. I've enjoyed that sort of thing. I'm very goal oriented I think so I like setting goals and going for it.

Game Knowledge: History and Experience

It is important to keep in mind that all participants in a game come to it with some history of play. Bob, for example, was a longtime game player who

started out in the first grade with the *King's Quest* series on his PC. Jackie had started playing offline RPGs when she was about ten years old then continued into the online world of MUDs in college, finally making her way to *Ultima Online.* Players of all types come with a diversity of game experience, be it drawn from board games played around the family dinner table, a first-person shooter (FPS) game on a home PC, or maybe even a live-action role-playing (LARP) experience. They may have never played on a team and only against the computer. People bring with them a play history that in varying degrees informs their interaction with any particular game. This historical and contextual specificity of play should not be overlooked in an analysis of gamers. In the case of power gamers I found that they often drew from a broad base of game knowledge as a way of advancing their play in *EQ* and were good at figuring out what skills they could lean on from past experience. In the most basic instance, specific game commands may be transferable. *Star Wars Galaxies,* for example, has added an interesting feature by allowing players to select an *EQ* keymap, which minimizes the time it takes to learn how to execute basic actions and gestures. Some *EQ* players were likewise familiar with the game's structure based on their previous experience with MUDs.

Beyond these interface considerations, however, are the ways specific games in effect teach players to be gamers in a general sense. Chris saw his time in *EQ* as a part of his larger biography as a gamer, saying, "*EverQuest* was training for *Dark Age* [*of Camelot* (*DAoC*), another MMOG]" and, similarly, his previous experience with games like *Quake, Unreal Tournament,* and *Halo* also provided useful information for "how people move" in *DAoC*.[3] Power gamers seem particularly adept at creating knowledge that is transferable between games (and, conversely, realizing the limits of such an endeavor based on how unique the games are). Jackie, for example, had spent time in tabletop *D&D* both as a DM and as a player. Like many others, she brought her tabletop knowledge of that game and previous characters (in terms of race and class combinations) with her. But she noted that in *EverQuest* "class balance is very different" and that, while she had played clerics in other games, in *EQ* she found them much too passive for her taste, so she instead picked other classes based on her goals at the time. This willingness to adapt to the specific affordances and limitations of the game is something less pronounced in the players who find themselves, no matter what the game, drawn to a particular character type.

This general game knowledge, of course, becomes grounded in figuring out the particularities of each system and the specific mechanics at work. Power

gamers often push systems to their limit by trying to "break" them or find points at which the game architecture is internally contradictory or malleable. In many ways it is these kinds of behaviors that are seen by the broader game community (and quite often the administrators) as looking quite similar to cheating. But power gamers generally see these kinds of explorations into the dynamics of the game as smart—that only by understanding the constraints of the system can they play most effectively. How do mobs path (walk or move) through a zone, and what is the most efficient route to take when fighting them? What are the rates of respawn on a particularly rare monster, and what triggers that process? How do different spell combinations work in breaking up a tough group of monsters? What happens when I do this? Or this? As power gamers work and rework such questions, their knowledge of the game can at times appear "too good." They seem to understand how things work at a level the average player does not quite grasp. Given the gap in understanding how power gamers actually play, this kind of knowledge sometimes is labeled negatively as cheating or trying to exploit the system.[4]

This boundary-pushing is one of the first instances in which my account of power gamers differs from Bartle's consideration of the "achiever." In many ways the achiever fits the mold of the power gamer with the attention to goals. Bartle, however, suggests that for achievers, "Exploration is necessary only to find new sources of treasure, or improved ways of wringing points from it" (Bartle 1996, 3). By contrast, he posits, "Explorers delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them. They try progressively esoteric actions in wild, out-of-the-way places, looking for interesting features (i.e., bugs) and figuring out how things work" (ibid.).

In my discussions with power gamers I have found that this line is not so clear. Certainly there is a goal behind the system exploration that power gamers engage in, but it does not seem to have quite the peripheral "only if I have to" quality Bartle hints at. Indeed, there seems to be a kind of pleasure attached to mapping out such mechanics and responding to them in creative ways. While detailed explanations of effective strategies (the outcome of "explorer" labor) on the one hand serve a functional purpose in sharing knowledge so others can replicate a tactic, such rich recountings of strategies through informal chatting, stories, and written-down guides also seem to mark a pride and pleasure for the power gamer. In this regard there is a distinct social pleasure that arises from the power-gamer orientation that is not fully cap-

tured within the rubric of "achiever." Be it the status that comes from accomplishments or the ability to help others with one's knowledge, power gamers seem to be deeply embedded in the social processes of the game world. Power gamers also may refine strategies of others, seeking increasingly esoteric (but more efficient) methods of play. Indeed, in a game like *EQ,* power gamers cannot simply be achievers but seem to require a fairly complex set of social and exploratory skills . . . and even enjoy them.

Technical and Skill Proficiency

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

Another common activity among power gamers in *EQ* is what I saw at Mitch's house, the practice of "2-boxing": playing multiple characters simultaneously on two machines. There are players who extend this even further, with 3-boxing being not uncommon (though generally the additional characters are not quite as active as the primary one). Before *EQ* was allowed to run in a windowed mode, this might additionally require using a hack program such as *EQWindows* to allow for several instances of the game on one machine.

Beyond actually playing multiple accounts, there are also tools like *ShowEQ,* a program that runs on Linux and gives a detailed accounting of any zone including what mobs are present and what they holding, a listing of exits, and a listing of other players. *ShowEQ* is certainly one of the more debated "helpers" for the game and is often seen as a cheat. While it is by no means the case that all power gamers use it (or even see it as ethical to), players relying on such a program are more likely to be power gamers. The program runs only on Linux and, in that regard, was explicitly created with a big built-in barrier for use. Only those with some specialized technical knowledge,

not to mention a computer running Linux, can use it. But for those who do get it running, it can be very useful in providing a kind of god's-eye view of the game world. Yet it is certainly a contested "helper," something right on the border of legitimacy for all players. John, for example, speculated a bit more about his self-identification as a power gamer when he reflected on the use of things like *ShowEQ,* saying, "I guess I'm not that much of a power gamer, I still go by the rules."[5] In general, though, this kind of active engagement with, and sometimes pushing back on, the technical constraints of the system seems to be another notable feature of the play style of power gamers. Programs like *ShowEQ* and the more general ways players build up competencies within a game also highlight the important ways players bring to any given game a history, replete with skill sets and technical knowledge. These take on a direct role in the game experience and should not be considered external to the enterprise but central to game play. Focusing on the larger context a player operates in can move us beyond abstract (sometimes idealized) notions of "player" to grounded experience that can highlight not only creative play strategies, but difficulties between player (as user) and game (as system).

The Myth of the Isolated Gamer

With this description of power gaming, it easily could be imagined that the type of player engaged in this style of play is quite isolated, grinding away with a hyper-focused efficiency out of sight from other players. While there has been some interesting work done on FPSs that taps into their sociological aspects (Morris 2003; Stald 2001; Wright, Boria, and Breidenbach 2002), MMOGs as a genre and *EverQuest* in particular actively facilitate the production of a very specific power-gamer identity that problematizes notions of individualized play. *EQ* power gamers are distinctly social players, although at times such sociality may not look like what we see in casual or role-players. Nonetheless they are typically linked to both informal and formal social mechanisms which facilitate their play.

As we have seen *EQ* is a game in which success (especially at the high-end) can only be gained through a reliance on social networks. Players not only socialize in the simplest sense (through chatting and hanging out in the virtual world) but form complicated systems of trust, reliance, and reputation. Play in *EQ* is grounded in the production and maintenance of social relationships

and larger organizations such as guilds. These kinds of connections are no different for power gamers, and in *EQ* they certainly are not the "lone ranger" figures one might expect. Indeed, in many cases the deeply social quality of the high-end game and guilds, where power gamers inevitably end up, is even more pronounced than for lower levels. The reliance on, and involvement with, social networks and resources—Web information and bulletin boards, guilds, and off- and online friendship networks—indeed reveals power gamers to be some of the most socialized players in MMOGs.

Community Knowledge

Power gamers are constantly evaluating, planning, and organizing their game sessions. With the wide variety of locations and monsters, the reliance on statistics, path progressions (needing to make sure you have "keys" or "flags" before proceeding onto the next challenge), large amounts of armor and weapons (all with their own statistics that modify the player), and spell/combat strategies, there are numerous factors of gameplay that players, and power gamers in particular, need to juggle. As a response to this complexity, a broad knowledge base grounded in the community has developed in conjunction with the game. In the previous discussion of the social life of the game I suggest that we consider the ways Web sites, message boards, and the like operate as extended social networks. We similarly can think about how these sites form the locus for a kind of "collective intelligence," an idea Henry Jenkins (2002) picks up from Pierre Levy's (1997) work on the reconfigurations occurring in contemporary society around technology and knowledge. Jenkins (2002, 1), following on Levy's argument, suggests that:

> The new knowledge communities will be voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments. Members may shift from one community to another as their interests and needs change and they may belong to more than one community at the same time. Yet they are held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge.

The screenshots taken from the popular Web site Allakhazam (figures 3.2 and 3.3) show the ways players contribute an immense amount of information to the broader community. Figure 3.2 shows the front page at the Web site that provides links to maps, detailed character information, play guides, region information, and equipment data along with long lists of "new" and "updated" items being cataloged. These are objects in the game that have been

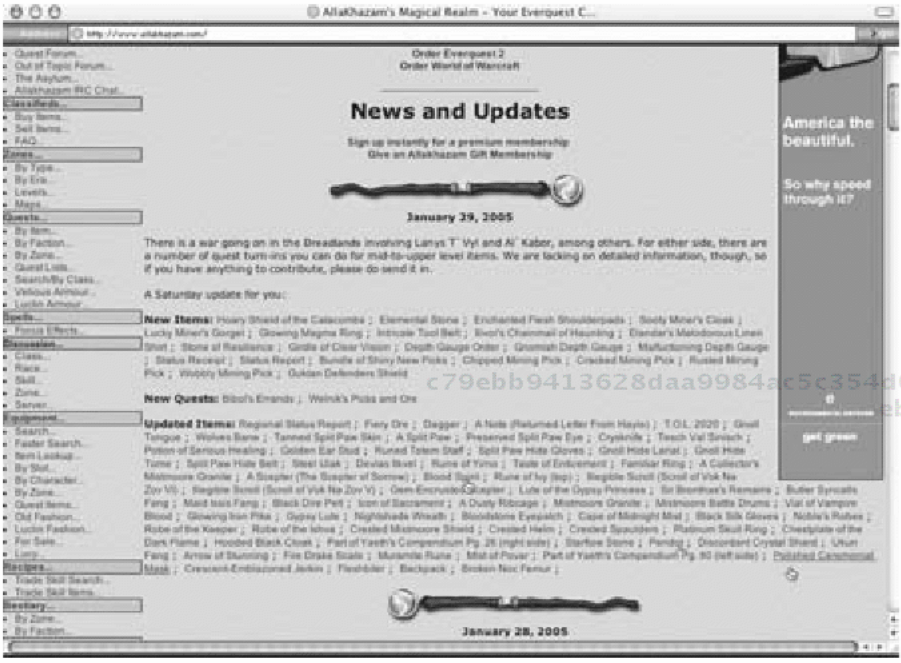

Figure 3.2
Image from Allakhazam Web page

submitted to the Web site's database by players, for players. Users can click on any of these items to bring up detailed information about the object. As shown in figure 3.3, players collectively submit information about an item, adding bits and pieces to flesh out its record. This item, the Faithbringer's Boots of Conviction, has been submitted to the database by a player named Rithina of the guild named Paradise of the server Nameless (as noted in the tag that has been added to the image of the item). The information includes a variety of statistics, where the item is found, and how it is obtained. Note that both the "where" (Wall of Slaughter) and "how" (part of the Trelak's Plate Armor quest) are themselves links to further information in the database, also provided by players. Matt Hills (2002) points out the ways fan-produced culture intersects with status claims, which is quite visible here. He notes that paying attention to this aspect of engagement "allows us to consider any given fan culture not simply as a community but also as a social hierarchy where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowl-

Figure 3.3
Item information from Allakhazam user-built database

edge, access to the object of fandom, and status" (Hills 2002, 46). Knowledge about the game simultaneously circulates through gift, status, and reputation economies (Kollock 1999; Sun, Lin, Ho 2003). Within the world of *EQ* players seek and acquire status not only through the items they own, but more generally via their knowledge of the game, its artifacts, and how to acquire them. Below the item details is a message board (not show in the screenshot) that allows players to comment on the object, extending the range of participants that can contribute to the database. This communicative space allows players an opportunity not only to add to the information given, but to rebut and challenge each other's contributions. Such critical collaborative practices around which *EQ* artifacts are embedded points to the ways they are constructed as meaningful objects only within complex networks that include not only the original designers, but Web-site managers and the various players that interact with them both within and outside of the game world.

It is also common practice for Web sites to link to each other, thereby extending the network even more. For example, clicking on maps at Allakhazam

launches another site, EQAtlas, in a new browser window. While much of the game is confined to very specific server-based experience, sites such as this form a meta-community for the game. Information found on one server is just as applicable for another, and in this regard such sites also act as a central umbrella organization for the larger *EQ* community. Information found at sites like Allakhazam are invaluable for *EverQuest* players, particularly those operating at the high end of the game.

Jakobsson notes that the boundaries of the game can be seen as extended through such spaces, suggesting, "It is very hard to imagine a game like *EQ* without all the resources on the web helping players with maps, information about spells, equipment, etc. From the players' point of view these websites are an integral part of the game itself."[6] Play strategies, maps, and databases of monsters and items, not to mention information and tips for playing particular kinds of characters, are available online. Combined with the detailed records of tactics, items, and raid encounters guilds regularly track, information outside of the game is crucial for the power gamer.

Indeed, these players are active visitors and contributors to such sites, especially via their own guild pages. They often will make daily rounds, visiting key Web sites to get information and strategies. As John put it, "We have these goals, and we go onto those websites and see what people got on other servers and what we want." This kind of labor is a massive collaboration in the production of valuable game knowledge and presents a fascinating example of player sociality. While the casual gamer may visit a map site on occasion or sometimes peruse a message board, power gamers regularly consult, dispute, refine, and build knowledge through the more formalized mechanisms of Web sites and bulletin boards. By participating in guild sites, gaining status through contributions, and entering discussions with others, players bond to the collective and enact social modes of play.

Friendship Networks

While one type of coordination occurs through Web sites like those mentioned in the previous section, at a more basic level knowledge about the game and tactics are distributed through peer and friendship channels. And these information networks regularly cross off- and online boundaries. One player I interviewed talked about how his playing was intricately woven into his offline relationships with people in his dorm. His ability to be a power

gamer was supported by a kind of supplemental processing with his "real-world" friends:

> We'd play for a couple of hours and go to the dining hall and be talking about it and go to class and be talking about it. It's a pretty consuming game. A lot of the game was items so we were talking about items we wanted to get and stuff like that. And some of it was stuff that happened. The adventures. Since we're on a PvP server it was a little different. We'd talk about the encounters we had with other people.

He went on to describe how he had access to several of these friends' accounts at various times, which aided him moving his character around, doing item transfers, and other game tasks.

Of course offline friends sometimes get left behind and new ones in the game are made. As Chris put it, those new in-game connections often are not built around common (outside) interests but on "mutual respect" for each other's abilities in the game. The social networks of power gamers are incredibly important at a couple of different levels. The first is a basic need for interaction. In talking to players I noticed how often they referred to strategies they employed for making it through the "grind" parts of the game. As one player put it, "Killing the same monster for four hours and not do[ing] something else is very boring. So if you don't have someone to talk to or something else to do you'll go crazy. You needed to chat if you wanted to get level 50." While some will watch television or read during these periods, it is just as typical to hear them talk about using in-game communication to entertain themselves during these boring play periods. The amount of downtime and dull moments should not be underestimated, and it is something even the designers acknowledge (albeit implicitly). Players noted with amusement the introduction within *EQ* of a *Tetris*-like game called *Gems* (figure 3.4). The game allows people to play a very simple puzzle within *EQ* (overlaid onto the standard interface). As one reviewer wrote:

> Somewhere, a merciful programmer noticed that certain aspects of the game were SO GODDAM DULL and downtime was SO EXTENSIVE that people were doing things like laundry and watching television while they waited to hunt, level, cast spells, travel to meet friends . . . in short, to play *EQ*. Out of the goodness of his heart, he leapt into action (on his own time) to solve the problem. The result? *Gems*. (Thomas n.d.)

Beyond chatting with people in the game to get through lulls or simply to socialize, as detailed in the previous chapter there is a deep reliance on each other to be able to progress. The reliance on not just groups but good groups

Figure 3.4
Gems, a *Tetris*-like game within *EverQuest*

(productive ones in which a player gets a decent rate of experience with minimal deaths and downtime) become central to high-end game play, which is where power gamers in *EQ* cluster. "Knowing people you trust to play the class well" becomes crucial. A simple example is of group members being able to trust that the group's Cleric, a healer character, will follow the fight attentively and cast healing spells on members in a timely manner so they do not die.

Being a good team player is key, and power gamers are particularly good at not simply knowing the strengths and limitations of their own class, but that of the others in the game as well. Chris suggests that the key is to ask "how am I going to work in conjunction with people based on class, skill, and equipment" in any given group? Rather than being asocial, power gamers seem extremely *relational* in their orientation—paying attention to how the competencies of people relate to each other and how they can be coordinated. On the more sophisticated end, then, it is not simply that the Cleric, for example,

knows which heal spells are most effective, but that the main melee (weapon-wielding) character also knows what kinds of assistance the Cleric can provide, including the precise timing at work, a sense of how much healing can be given before a monster starts attacking the Cleric, and what specific buffs to ask for. Power gamers also can bring much more flexibility to bear than average players in how characters are played. They are more likely to innovate an encounter, asking how, given a current group configuration (and any constraints it brings), tasks can be divided up best.

Power gamers rely on building strong social networks so they are able to call on help as needed, form well-balanced groups for particular tasks, and propagate raids. They are also quite clear on their need to be seen as good players, ones who can be counted on to valuably contribute to a group. The better a player's reputation is, the more likely her opportunities to advance. Ultimately the benefits of swapping strategies and sharing knowledge (not to mention accounts) cannot be underestimated for this play style. Because of the kinds of investments power gamers can put into the group, it is worth noting that they can often travel in packs, sometimes even from game to game, porting their collective knowledge with them. It is not uncommon for people to start and leave games with each other so that entire groups move for example, from *EverQuest* to *Star Wars Galaxies* to *World of Warcraft*. Power gamers know the value of a good working team and can go to some lengths to preserve it.

Guilds

As shown in the previous discussion, reputation systems play a significant role in the construction of the high-end game, thus not only linking power gamers to a broader community but at times making them quite beholden to it. The development of high-end raiding guilds provides social support and legitimacy to the power gamer. These guilds are often central to player success as they provide a consistent and reliable source of not only game knowledge, but labor (in the form of help from guildmates). As Jackie suggests:

> The evolution of the game environment was becoming more and more guild focused and less and less individual focused. I saw that guilds gave players a large advantage in terms of organizing and the game has become more focused on defeating large powerful mobs that require a lot of organization and coordination . . . it's impossible to do it [reach the high-end game] without a guild.

Within a guild, power gamers not only have a very local mechanism for sharing knowledge and tactics, they also are called upon to support the other

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

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

The Pleasures of Instrumentality

In the examination of power gamers, we begin to confront a model of play that at times looks and sounds quite unlike how we usually speak of gaming. The simple idea of "fun" is turned on its head by examples of engagement that rest on efficiency, (often painful) learning, rote and boring tasks, heavy doses of responsibility, and intensity of focus. Indeed, many power gamers do not use the term "fun" to describe why they play but instead talk about the more complicated notions of enjoyment and reward. At times it almost appears as if they are speaking of work. One of the problems with the term "fun" is that it cedes the discussion of the pleasures of play to an overly dichotomized model in which leisure rests on one side and labor on the other. The question about where the boundary between work and play lies is something Roger Caillois has taken up, writing that play is "an activity that is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, regulated, and fictive" (2001/1958, 43). He speaks of the "contamination" of play when it is encroached upon by reality, obligation, or professionalism. He writes that in these instances, "What used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession. What was an escape becomes an

obligation, and what was a pastime is now a passion, compulsion, and source of anxiety. The principle of play has become corrupted. It is now necessary to take precautions against cheats and professional players, a unique product of the contagion of reality" (ibid., 45). This feeling, that once outside factors begin to leak into the world of play it loses its specialness, its sanctity even, still circulates with some frequency. But might we imagine a space in which our games at times are not always "fun" and, conversely, our labor can be quite pleasurable? Does the framework in which work is about suffering and play is about its relief get us very far in understanding the multiple ways people not only game but experience the activity? Certainly when we look at power gamers we see a production of pleasure that may seem unfamiliar at first glance. On the other hand, even the most casual of gamers probably has experienced those instances in which their play slides into boredom or repetition or where they feel compelled to finish just one more round of their game. And what do we make of professional players in this model? Ultimately it strikes me as a fairly narrow formulation not only of what constitutes a game, but just as significantly what constitutes pleasure in the broader sense.

Julian Dibbell, an astute long-time observer of virtual worlds, has, for example, pushed this question of the boundaries between fun and work even further with his attempt to earn a living solely by buying and selling in-game goods from *Ultima Online* for real-world cash (Dibbell 2006). Through his year-long experiment to earn a living (well, $11,000 in 9 months) just by selling items from *Ultima Online,* he explores the ways our play time is increasingly intersecting with work and productive activities. Whether it is the gamer who decides to sell off a character on eBay once he has grown bored with the game, the companies that arise and marshal cheap labor to send into game worlds for the purposes of creating massive storehouses of virtual goods, or, just as powerfully, the webs of connections and practices that weave between the game and "nongame" space, the idea that there is an autonomous circle of play set off from the "real world" seems increasingly tenuous. Researchers like Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), whose fascinating work on children's play historicizes this divide by pointing to the ways play has always been tied up with weighty notions of identity, community, and the very process of civilization. Similarly Johan Huizinga (1955), whose work is undergoing a kind of renaissance through its use by designers and theorists like Jesper Juul (2006) and Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004), while circumscribing

the sphere of play through its "spatial separation from ordinary life," simultaneously notes how it is often entangled with the serious—indeed the civilizing—in complicated ways.

As Dibbell suggests, "It is precisely because of the proliferation of play in the digital age—and of the peculiar compatibility of digital logics with the logic of games—that modernity's longstanding balance between the productive and the ludic now stands threatened with undoing, the realm of work verging now on overwhelming that of play" (Dibbell 2004). While some see this development and worry, he notes a provocative call from the Situationist movement of the 1960s, which sought for "the central distinction that must be transcended" between play and ordinary life (ibid.). While quickly noting that this development, as it so deeply intersects capital and commercial culture, may not exactly be what they had in mind, he raises a crucial question about the status of play and the pleasures found in it.

The rhetorical linking of cheats with professional players strikes me as not unlike the kinds of arguments people make when they equate power gaming with cheating—both are seen as styles of play to be mistrusted.[7] They are seen as corrupting some kind of "authentic" game-space. In this model there is a notion of what pure play looks like, and it is inherently incompatible with instrumentality, extreme dedication (such that it appears sometimes to look like "work"), and even occasional boredom. The model of legitimate play that underpins much of this rhetoric is one that continues to bound off play and work, pleasure and pain or suffering (or boredom!). This kind of dualism does not appear to match the varying experiences players report about their engagements with a game like *EverQuest*. Unpacking the complex pleasures of play—even when they do not match common notions of fun—is the only way we will be able to understand the power gamer like Chris who said, "It's learning a skill and getting better at a skill. Even if they are pixels, it's rewarding."

Sentiments such as Chris's prompt us to think more about what engagement in games brings for players. Some find Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (2002) notion of "flow" particularly useful for understanding the attraction mastery in games can have for people. He proposes that optimal experiences arise when

> one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of

time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous. (Csikszentmihalyi 2002, 71)

While there is certainly something about this model that expresses some of the "zones" power gamers find themselves in, it is also one in which the "flow channel" is fairly narrow and unforgiving to boredom or more socially-embedded forms, something we see a lot of in *EverQuest*. I find Torill Mortensen's examination of "alternate pleasures," drawn from her extensive research on a role-playing MUD useful in broadening the discussion. In Mortensen's 2004 article, she highlights how the kinds of nuanced social play found in role-playing spaces might be better understood in terms of seduction and "mutual interplay." While she is basing her work on a particular genre of game, it highlights the ways the production of, and engagement with, the social can form a pleasurable and motivating experience. In a related spirit, Espen Aarseth's (1997) work on the (potentially illusory) "pleasure of influence" evokes something more than flow. In his formulation, there is a kind of relational quality between player and game, one that is founded on taking risks and asking "What happens when I do this?" (1997, 4). As he notes, it is the potential to "explore, get lost, and discover secret paths" that animates this engagement (ibid.). While power gamers certainly inhabit the functional and instrumental orientations to the game, they simultaneously—through their affiliations, networks, and engagements—point to these more relational pleasures, be it with others or the game artifact itself.

So what can power gamers teach us about "fun," about work, about the social life of gaming? The recognition that online participants are not isolated individuals but more often than not "regular" people having meaningful everyday connected experiences with each other is something being discussed in relation to general Internet use more and more. Rather than simply framing the power gamer with a throwback isolation rhetoric, they can typify the kind of sociability we see not only in games, but online in general. Their reliance on social networks and their contribution to broader collective knowledge locate them as decidedly networked players. And the way they refigure popular notions about the distinction between work and fun is striking. The simultaneous weaving of both instrumental and social orientations is notable and something we typically hear little about.

Recognizing power gamers as a unique type also pushes us to refine categories we often gloss over. In much the same way that Internet studies has

moved from speaking about generic Net users to focusing on particular activities and specific communicative environments and acts (newsgroup readers, bloggers, MUDders, file-traders, etc.), we are coming to a stage in game studies where we would be well served to tease out specificities around not only different game genres but styles of play, forms of interaction/communication, and the various pleasures of gaming. The variety of subject positions and forms of engagement available to players can help us understand the lived meaning of play in diverse sets of communities.