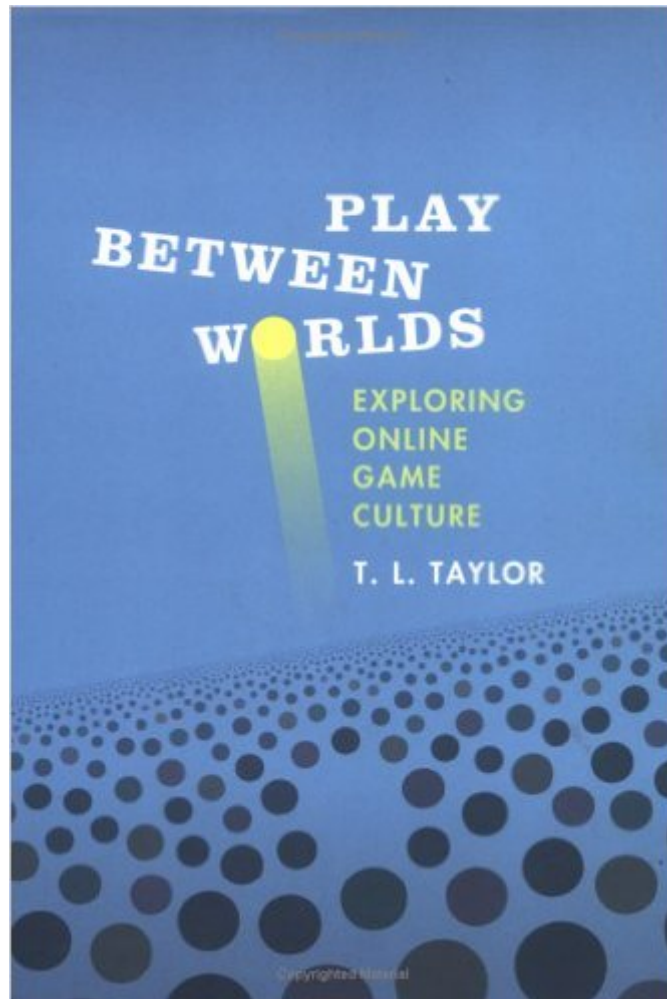# Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture (MIT Press)

Synopsis

In Play Between Worlds, T. L. Taylor examines multiplayer gaming life as it is lived on the borders, in the gaps -- as players slip in and out of complex social networks that cross online and offline space. Taylor questions the common assumption that playing computer games is an isolating and alienating activity indulged in by solitary teenage boys. Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), in which thousands of players participate in a virtual game world in real time, are in fact actively designed for sociability. Games like the popular Everquest, she argues, are fundamentally social spaces.Taylor's detailed look at Everquest offers a snapshot of multiplayer culture. Drawing on her own experience as an Everquest player (as a female Gnome Necromancer) -- including her attendance at an Everquest Fan Faire, with its blurring of online -- and offline life -- and extensive research, Taylor not only shows us something about games but raises broader cultural issues. She considers "power gamers," who play in ways that seem closer to work, and examines our underlying notions of what constitutes play -- and why play sometimes feels like work and may even be painful, repetitive, and boring. She looks at the women who play Everquest and finds they don't fit the narrow stereotype of women gamers, which may cast into doubt our standardized and preconceived ideas of femininity. And she explores the questions of who owns game space -- what happens when emergent player culture confronts the major corporation behind the game.

Book Information

Series: MIT Press

Hardcover: 206 pages

Publisher: The MIT Press; First Edition edition (February 24, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0262201631

ISBN-13: 978-0262201636

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.5 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds

Average Customer Review: 3.7 out of 5 stars See all reviews (7 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Author T. L. Taylor is an academic with MUD and MMORPG experience. This is important, because Taylor examines how real life and gaming interact in Play Between Worlds, using EverQuest as her primary source. Through interviews with players and her own experience, Taylor fleshes out what it means to "live" in EverQuest and outside of it, identifying a gaming culture that permeates both membranes. In some cases, there's not much of a membrane at all, as when EverQuest players dress up as their characters at gaming conventions.Taylor's book is filled with gaming jargon with little explanation. This book is written for people who understand MMORPGs and EverQuest in particular, which unfortunately limits its audience somewhat. That's a shame, because buried in the exposition of gnomes and necromancers are some important revelations.A large section of the book is devoted to gender issues. Taylor's female gender matters, both in her approach to EverQuest and the roles she chooses to play within it. The hypersexualization of female characters is a real problem in fantasy gaming and it's what led Taylor to pick the unsexy gnome racial archetype.Taylor also defends "roll-players." She rails against the stereotype of Achiever-style players as incompetent, unintelligent, and aggressive. Taylor takes pains to show how this archetype is unfounded and that achievers are actually highly competent, organized, and bright. What Taylor doesn't address is that this play style is destructive to other play styles. It's not that achievement-oriented players are bad for games - indeed, Taylor stresses that they actually improve games by breaking them - but that other less goal-oriented players are driven away by their dominance.

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