

thy, and communication skills through everyday, unstructured interactions with siblings and peers.

In general, many Western educators, psychologists, other social scientists, and practitioners associate learning in childhood with activities occurring in school or other settings in which adults deliberately instruct children. Many university students associate the study of learning in childhood with information processing, cognitive, or developmental psychology. Yet, anthropological research on learning has advanced significantly since the mid-twentieth century. As Lancy, Bock, and Gaskins's book reflects, this scholarship has resulted in a fundamental reformulation of learning including its evolutionary significance, what children learn, and how learning takes place in diverse cultural contexts.

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Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds

Celia Pearce and Artemesia
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Forwards, illustrations, references,
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Celia Pearce's *Communities of Play* is a fascinating, wide-ranging study relevant to anyone interested in online games and worlds, ethnography, or game studies. The book tells the story of a group of players who originally met in the massively multiplayer online game (MMO)

Uru Prologue and their efforts to stay together after the game closed. This work is significant for three major reasons. First, it is a study of the processes that give rise to emergent behavior in MMOs, a topic of relevance to both game designers and sociologists. Second, the book is also one of very few studies addressing how a virtual world's closing affects its players. Finally, it contains an insightful analysis of the perks and perils of doing ethnography in an online community, an analysis that is invaluable for anyone considering a similar project.

Uru Prologue was intended as the beta test for *Uru Live*, an MMO set in the popular *Myst* universe. *Uru Live* was canceled before release, however, and *Uru Prologue* closed on February 9, 2004. This closure marked both the end of the beta test, the cancellation of *Uru Live*, and the birth of what Pearce refers to as the "Uru Diaspora," a group of players who now inhabit other online spaces but still identify as *Uru*-vians (p. 93). The book focuses on how one particular group of players known as "The Gathering of Uru" (TGU) reacted to the closing and attempted to stay together.

One notable theoretical tool Pearce defines early in the book is a continuum of online game types, with "fixed-synthetic worlds" (such as *Uru* and *World of Warcraft*) at one end and "co-created worlds" (such as *There.com* and *Second Life*) at the other. In the former, users have few content-creation tools, while the latter emphasize user-created content. Pearce's continuum provides a useful means of analyzing how the emergent social behavior occurring in an MMO is shaped by the affordances and constraints placed on

the player. (Here “emergence” refers to a phenomenon whereby complex systems organize themselves and act in unpredictable ways, while “affordances and constraints” refer to what a given MMO does and does not allow its users to do.) For members of the TGU, the affordances of co-created worlds such as *There.com* and *Second Life* enabled them to re-create environments and objects from *Uru Prologue* in other virtual worlds. Pearce’s identification of this phenomenon offers game designers insight into how a virtual world can be designed to support varying kinds of emergent behavior among the players.

Methodology is important to any study, but Pearce proves continually mindful of the particular complexities associated with studying how emergent behavior arises out of player action in virtual worlds. As she notes, the inherent unpredictability of both emergence and play necessitates a flexible and wide-reaching methodology. She refers to her approach as “multi-sited cyberethnography,” a blend of anthropology, sociology, and virtual ethnography. Pearce identifies three “sites” of focus for the study: the migration of TGU members as they search for a new “home”; the intellectual property of *Uru*; and the story of TGU and how *Uru Prologue*’s closing affected TGU’s members. She further notes that the combination of method and subjects required “a highly improvisational approach,” as many of the group’s activities were unplanned and unstructured (p. 57). Throughout the book, Pearce continually returns to the question of appropriate methodology, explaining her choices and their useful-

ness. The book is nearly as much about the process of ethnography in an MMO as it is about TGU.

Perhaps the most enjoyable section of the work is book 4, which contains a series of journal entries in which Pearce narrates her experiences throughout the study. This section makes for interesting and engaging reading, and it gives great insight into the dynamic process of ethnography. One entry, “The Crises,” stands out. It recounts a time when a local journalist interviewed Pearce about her work studying TGU. Members of TGU disliked the article, and Pearce had to spend much time and effort repairing relationships with group members. This incident caused Pearce to alter her approach, prompting her to take a more active and involved role in the group rather than simply observing it from a distance.

As a whole, *Communities of Play* is a multifaceted work that touches on many fields and disciplines yet remains interesting throughout. The book’s main weakness is structural. The book’s topical organization makes it somewhat difficult to follow the exact history of TGU. The fact that *Uru* has reopened and reclosed twice after the original closure of *Uru Prologue* compounds this problem. Readers would be well served to familiarize themselves with the timeline of events surrounding *Uru* before diving into the book. Such an effort would be worthwhile, however, for the book is a major contribution to the study of games and online communities, both as research and as a reflection on the process of research.

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