# Productive Play

## Game Culture From the Bottom Up

Celia Pearce
*University of California, Irvine*

In this article, the author argues against the assertion, originating with "canonical" game studies texts such as *Homo Ludens* and *Man, Play, and Games*, that inherent in the definition of games is that they are "unproductive." Instead, she makes a case for the notion of productive play, in which creative production for its own sake (as opposed to production for hire) is an active and integral part of play activities, particularly those enabled by networks. Citing from her recent ethnographic research studying intergame immigration between massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), the author describes one case in which players ejected from the MMOG Uru: Ages Beyond Myst became highly productive, creating artifacts from Uru in other virtual worlds like There and Second Life. Over time, the Uru Diaspora expanded the game's culture, eventually creating their own original Uru- and Myst-inspired artifacts, including an entirely new game.

***Keywords:*** *play; games; MMOG; massively multiplayer games; game studies*

## Productive Play: An Oxymoron?

Most of game studies has inherited from the two canonical texts of play, Huizinga's (1955) *Homo Ludens* and Callois's (1961/2001) *Man, Play, and Games*, the axiomatic assumption that games are by definition "unproductive." This position is shared by the majority of game taxonomies in recent years, although thankfully, we seem to be moving out of the phase of taxonomania and into a more mature cycle of investigation. The "mass media" at large also shares the view that games, to invoke Monty Python's forgotten classic, are a "complete waste of time"—or worse. As with chess in the Middle Ages (Yalom, 2004), theatre in Shakespeare's day, and film during the McCarthy era, some sectors of the U.S. government are trying to protect the masses from perceived dangers of games, as if the medium has some mysterious property that made it a particularly insidious way to take one's daily dose of media violence.

Even for people who regard games as a high cultural form—including those of us who make a living playing, writing, talking about, and making them—the general

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consensus is that games are not productive. Game developers themselves are sometimes puzzled by the academic interest in games—after all, they say, it's "only entertainment."

I would like to argue that in fact neither play nor games is inherently unproductive and furthermore, that the boundaries between play and production, between work and leisure, and between media consumption and media production are increasingly blurring. In the process, the sacred "magic circle," which appears in various forms from Turner (1982) to Salen and Zimmerman (2004), is also beginning to blur.

## The Play Revolution

In an earlier article on emergent authorship (Pearce, 2002), I began to examine the notion of play as an act of production, identifying a new hybrid entertainment form in which players were paying to produce their own entertainment media. I believe that this fundamental shift in the media production schema has profound cultural implications that transcend merely the "questionable" pursuit of "game studies."

First, the trend in consumer-production represents a fundamental inversion of the capitalist/industrial media production/broadcast model that has dominated Western culture for at least a century—it is the media snake eating its own head. Enabling people to their own entertainment experience has become a viable business model, as evidenced by the thousands of Sims skins (player-created characters) that have perpetuated that brand's longevity to historical levels (Poremba, 2003). What new business opportunities are emerging around these new autoludic practices? What happens when we empower players to "play with themselves?"

Second, in an ironic reversal, the malleability, discursive quality, and networked infrastructure of the Internet returns us to a preindustrial culture of play, a time when games were not products that were owned, published, and distributed by a corporatized "hegemony of play" but were made up, changed, and reconfigured by groups of ordinary people in site-specific, socially and culturally specific contexts. "Pre-digital" thinkers—such as Bernie DeKoven (1978) and Iona and Peter Opie (1969)—give us insight into these analog cultures of play. As Henry Jenkins (1998) so eloquently pointed out, for many children in Western culture, as wide-open natural spaces, like those portrayed in books like *Huckleberry Finn*, have given way to pavement and apartment complexes, children have expanded inward, into cyberspace. Yet all too often, these overmediated virtual playgrounds have not had the flexibility of a piece of chalk, a tree branch, or an upside-down cardboard box.

Third, this confluence emerges out of a prevailing postmodern sensibility in popular culture and across all media in which appropriation is not only allowed, it is exalted. Players feel emboldened not only to borrow but to reformulate and remediate their gaming experience, creating still more breaches in the magic circle, as well as breaches between magic circles—machinima films made in game engines being perhaps the best instance of this. Furthermore, those who do this well are both respected by their peers and in isolated but growing cases, empowered by the game companies

themselves, who see player production as a way to mitigate spiraling game development costs. But there's more. Not only do player-producers simulate simulations, they propel them out into the real world so that reality becomes the playground of the virtual. And, as we've seen in the case of earlier fan culture forms, such as the *Star Trek* fan Trekkie phenomenon (Jenkins, 1992), they also expand the game narrative and eventually begin to take it over. The preponderance and increasing legitimacy of blogs, zines, and "open-source" content-production frameworks, such as Wikipedia (www .wikipedia.org), demonstrate that self-created content is not just an isolated phenomenon within game culture but a widespread, transmedial, and international zeitgeist.

These trends fly in the face of the status quo of centralized, hegemonic, broadcast, and distribution models of media creation. Like the Vatican of the Middle Ages, the Western media hegemony (including the game industry) has enjoyed total control over content for at least a century, probably longer if you go back as far as the printing press. This power elite has maintained total control and economic domination through technologies that by their very nature are nondiscursive. A dynamic, two-way medium in which the "audience" has just as much power to create content as the "producer" threatens to upend this power structure.

More important, productive play also challenges traditional capitalistic notions of "productivity" versus "leisure." We need only look at the history of hobby culture in the United States and elsewhere to see that for many, productive leisure is a welcome escape from the regimen of being productive at someone else's behest. Furthermore, as we have tended to relegate play to the realm of childhood, also a period of "supposed" unproductivity, the notion that play is not only productive but an adult-worthy activity represents a major shift in cultural perception.

## A Case Study:
## The Myst/Uru Diaspora

To illustrate some of these points, I'd like to draw some examples from my recent research that demonstrate the many facets of productive play.

Over the past 14 months, I have been conducting an ethnographic study of what I have come to refer to as the Uru Diaspora—a group of players who were made refugees by the closure of the Myst-based massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) Uru in February of 2004.[1] There were about 10,000 Uru players in total online, and although the game ran for a relatively short period of time and had a relatively small subscribership, it inspired a passionate response from its player community. The closure of the game server compounded this by subjecting the players to a collective trauma that formed a bond that, as of this date, has outlived the original game by a time factor of about 2 to 1.

The core of the study focused on one particular group that immigrated and formed an "ethnic" community in There, an online virtual world that has allowances for player asset creation. Players combined the existing culture of There with that of Uru to create a hybrid culture that is comparable to a Chinatown or Little Italy in the United

States. Like a real-world group of immigrant refugees, the Gathering of Uruz met much initial resistance from the There community. Because the group was so large (about 300 people), they wielded a significant amount of power in the relatively new virtual world. This was only exacerbated by their demographics. These longtime Myst fans were mostly professional people in their 40s and 50s, most with children, and about half women. They were competent, articulate, and their traumatic experience in Uru made them somewhat demanding of There management, wishing to avert the mistreatment they felt they had experienced in being cast out of Uru. The community became extremely influential, both socially and politically, and eventually "assimilated" so that they now feel as much Therians as Uruvians. Concurrently, they also explored ways of creating their own self-contained re-creation of Uru using first text-based MUD technology and later, the Adobe Atmosphere virtual world creation tool. In the summer of 2004, along with a number of other Uru groups that were still active, they were able to negotiate a deal with publisher Cyan to release the server software to allow for player-run servers. The Uru Diaspora literally took over the game, and now all Uru servers are run by players. Surprisingly, the Uru immigrants in There did not return to Uru as their main home world; rather, they meet there once a week to experience their homeland and meet up with other members of the group who do not make their virtual homes in places other than There (Figures 1 and 2).

Even from the beginning, there were controversies regarding how to bring the Uru culture into There. Some wanted to try to re-create Ages (the Myst/Uru term for game levels), but others had a philosophical objection to this based in the narrative of the original game. In all Myst games, Ages are created by writing books, each of which is a distinct world and complex, elaborate puzzle unto itself. It would seem that the storyline supports the idea that one could "write" new Ages. However, according to the Myst mythology, only the D'Ni, the lost society at the center of the game series, had the ability to write Ages. This somewhat talmudic theological argument led to some interesting outcomes. At first, players created artifacts that were directly derived from the original Uru game. Over time, players who emerged as the artisans of the group began creating new Uruesque objects, using the aesthetics, symbols, imagery, and in some cases, back story of the game. One of the top artisans of the group, Damanji[2] proposed building an entirely new Uru Age in There, but this was met with intense resistance from the There community, reinforcing their anxiety that the Uru refugees were trying to take over their world. Damanji then formulated a new approach to what I would call emergent Age creation, although he did not characterize it as such. His idea was to create new Uru-like objects in the style of There and put them on sale for the general There public. (There has an auction mechanism for player-created items.) He created an octagonal cone house, inspired by but distinctly different from one that appears in Uru. As a result, Thereians who were not Uruvians and knew nothing of the game or its immigrant population in There began to purchase cone house components, and over time, these structures became ubiquitous throughout There. In addition, one of his Uru comrades, one of many Uru refugees who became influential citizens in There, founded the University of There. Most of the buildings on the campus are constructed from Damanji's cone houses (Figure 3).

**Figure 1**
**The fountain was central to social life in Uru.**



**Figure 2**
**Player-created Uru fountain in There.**

**Figure 3**
**Player-created, Uru-inspired artifacts, such as**
**Damanji's cone houses, can be seen throughout There.**



From a methodological perspective, tracking a digital Diaspora is a challenging task. I have been able to keep track of some other trajectories of the Uru Diaspora and continue to find new instantiations of it in various contexts. A large community of Uru/Myst players has settled in Second Life, which also has affordances for player creation that are much more versatile but harder to use than those of There. A small builder's group created an exact replica of major portions of the Uru game in Second Life, an example of what was referenced earlier as a simulation of a simulation. This area is so like the original Uru game, down to the most minute detail, including scripting features such as swarms of fireflies that follow you around and linking books that take you between Ages, it is a stupendous achievement by anyone's reckoning. Another group of combined Uru and Myst players in Second Life finally did the inevitable and designed their own entire Age. Rendered with equal craftsmanship and attention to detail, it is a completely new game in the Myst tradition, with the same type of puzzle structure, including notebooks and poems with clues hidden throughout, strange machines that have to be reactivated, and unusual combinations of things that must be done to enter a new area. Both areas are popular with non–Myst/Uru players, who admire the elaborate craftsmanship of the buildings and furnishings, fantastical natural settings, intricate narratives, and complex scripting. As with There, Uru players are among some of the top creators in the larger Second Life community (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**
**Myst- and Uru-inspired game created by players in Second Life.**



Numerous other examples of Uru fan culture abound, some resembling more traditional forms such as fan art and stories, dictionaries of the D'Ni language, T-shirts and mugs, and so on. But there are also some unusual offerings. One woman makes Uru-themed quilts. The Welcomers (see Note 2) whose mission in Uru was to greet newcomers, now have a similarly charged branch in The Matrix Online.

The Uru group, though only one example, is of particular interest because the game itself is no more. Players have quite literally taken it over and made it their own, carrying it forward to a new level. Eighteen months after the game was closed, we still see a vibrant, creative, and highly productive community, dispersed throughout other games and reinforced by their shared traumatic experience. As games begin to integrate increasing affordances for player creativity, I anticipate the growth of an entirely new form of autoludic culture in which players will feel more and more empowered to make the game their own.

## Conclusion

As more and more players engage in productive activity in and around play, we may want to question the assumption that games and play are unproductive. These

trends show that play has its own productive character, which can also be seen as a form of cultural production and perhaps could be defined as a form of folk art. Studying emergent forms of player production can also inform game design. How can player production be promoted within the game structure? Can we find new models for production in partnership with players? It seems from these examples that players are more than willing to pay for this service, and given the increasing costs and complexity of commercial game production, it may turn out that in the long run, we have no choice but to let players take over their play experience completely.

## Notes

1. The detailed ethnographic study will be published as a doctoral dissertation in summer of 2006.
2. All avatar and group names have been changed to protect subjects' annonymity.

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**Celia Pearce** is an award-winning game designer, artist, researcher, teacher, and author of *The Interactive Book: A Guide to the Interactive Revolution* (Macmillan, 1997) and other writings on game design and culture. Since 1998 she has worked as a researcher and teacher at the University of Southern California and the University California Irvine. Prior to that, she primarily designed interactive attractions for the museum and theme park industry. She cocurated ALT+CTRL: Festival of Independent and Alternative Games for the Beall Center for Art & Technology at UC Irvine as well as other media art exhibitions. She is also cofounder of Ludica, a women's game art collective.