Finding Balance Through Doubled Resistance: Weaving a Collaborative

Ethnographic Approach to Game Studies in the Clan Lord MMO

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Introduction:

Almost one year ago I began playing my first MMO (Massively Multi-player Online

Roleplaying Game). I did not join the throngs in World of Warcraft or Everquest, rather I

almost reluctantly tried a small and now somewhat obscure game called Clan Lord (CL).

I was reluctant because everything I had heard about the game suggested I might find it

consuming, and indeed I did, but not only for the usual reasons associated with MMOs.

Along with the escape, the socializing, the excitement and satisfaction that most MMOs

offer, I also found it almost irresistible as an object of study. As with many MMOs, Clan

Lord players have created websites, blogs, a discussion forum, and a variety of media

related to the game. However, Clan Lord is unique in a variety of ways.

It has been running since late 1996 when the beta version was released, has a much

smaller user base than games like WoW or Everquest, many of the users have been

playing for over 5 years, and some since the beginning. Some users started playing in

their early or mid teens and are now in their early 20s; they grew up in the game. There

are some users playing now that are under 12, others over 65.[1] Further, all of these users

play on the same server, so they are never mechanically segmented from each other as

they may be in other games. Thus, playing Clan Lord is like living in a small town where

everyone knows everyone, and has done for years. The social dynamics are complex,

players have a shared history, and the gameworld itself is enormous, as it has grown

every year. This growth is not controlled by the parent company, Delta Tao, but rather

some players have moved into the roles of volunteer game masters (GMs), and in this

role they create new content, alter game mechanics, and manage most of the day-to-day

operations, thus having an unprecedented amount of control over the gameworld. In this

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[1] This information comes from casual conversations in game, with other players.

way, the game is closer to table-top role-playing games than to most contemporary MMOs. It further differs in largely allowing only player vs. environment (PvE) play, and almost never permitting player vs. player (PvP) play (Clan Lord Website). All of these characteristics make the game a rich topic for research.

There has been considerable debate about how research is carried out on games, fan communities and so on, when the researcher is part of them. For some years scholars such as Henry Jenkins have argued for study of popular culture from stance of engagement rather than distance (Jenkins 1992). Following this course would suggest an auto-ethnographic approach, in which the researcher's position in the community being studied is acknowledged. Because fan communities in general and gamer communities in particular are often seen as obsessive, unhealthy, and uncritical, it becomes problematic for a researcher to position herself as a member of the community while maintaining credible authority with her audience. However, Jenkins has resisted the dismissive stance toward popular culture and fan communities that long held sway in academia, and coined the term "aca-fan" to describe one working from such a position and has further argued for the recognition that fans themselves bring a critical eye to pop cultural texts that deserves recognition as having some scholarly value.

After this debate emerged again during the summer of 2010 on the blog of Game Studies scholar Ian Bogost, Jenkins called for the development of "a mode of criticism which acknowledges and explores our emotional connections to popular culture and the way it functions as a resource in our everyday life, which examines the ways that we construct meaning and form communities in and through our shared cultural interests." than those of the scholar looking from a distance or an aca-fan looking only from inside (Jenkins, at Bogost, 7/31/10). This brings us back to the question of resistance. A scholar who is also a fan may try to study the cultural product of which she is a fan, resisting on the one hand theorizing from a distance, and on the other a perhaps over-enthusiastic engagement. Is an uneasy balance between the two the best we can hope for? Or can these stances be in some way integrated into a more productive whole?

This case-study aims for just such a synthesis, using the community around a smaller Multi-Massive Online Game (MMO) in which the author participates to pilot a collaborative ethnographic approach. I use a poly-vocal approach, in which members of the MMO's community are invited to add their voices. However, I also use a poly-vocal approach myself, writing as an observer, but also as a player, using my character's name. The resulting heteroglossia offers a possible model from which to develop a more balanced and integrated approach to pop cultural products and fan communities. This approach aims to get at the kinds of issues debated between Bogost and Jenkins.

> One way to advance such research practices in autoethnography is through the use of *multivocality* within the research method. I define multivocality as providing representational space in the autoethnography for the plural and sometimes contradictory *narrative voices* located within the researcher. To shed light on these narrative voices means to provoke a deeper understanding of the often silent tensions that lie underneath observable behaviors in the story (Mizzi, 2010).

As Mizzi suggests, I hope to explore the divided consciouness with which I experience and think about the game, and better understand how my participation in the community and my entusiasm for the game shapes my academic thinking about it, and perhaps learn something new about the place of MMOs in our culture at the same time.

Methods:

Voices are being gathered from a variety of sources for this study:
- ◆ keeping both a research blog and and in-character (IC) blog
- ◆ comments from other players on my blogs
- ◆ discussions in the CL discussion forum, the Sentinel
- ◆ interviews with other players via private messages and email
- ◆ articles written by other players about the game
- ◆ discussions with original creators of the game, and with Joe Williams, president of Delta Tao Software.

These sources are then being interwoven to form a text which players may then comment on, and to which they may make further contributions. In the discussion portion of the paper, I will be including not only a number of other players' voices, but my own IC voice, under my character's name, Eirian. When I use the term voice this way, I refer to the concept as described below:

> Voice, as we are using the term, refers to the possible articulations that can be given to any experience. On an individual level, this can mean conflicting discourses one might use (e.g., spiritual or psychological discourse). This extends to a social or cultural level as one potentially interacts with other voices also engaged in articulating the same experience (Johnston and Strong, 2008).

I started the entries on Clan Lord in my research blog during May 2010, because I found the game too fascinating not to write about. In October, I started writing in character at another blog, and this month I began the interviews via email and private messages with some basic questions :

1. How old are you?

2. When did you first start playing Clan Lord?

3. How did you get involved?

4. What has kept you playing or brought you back?

5. What do you think people generally need to know about CL in order to understand any research about it?
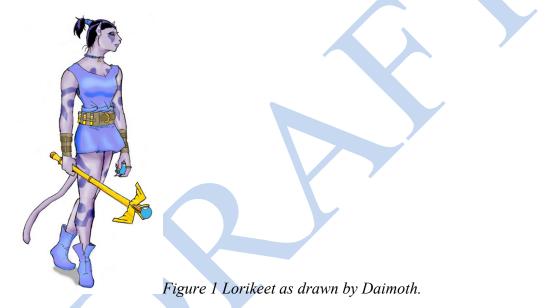
After all of these responses are returned, I will be following up with further questions. It is beyond the scope of this paper to present even a fraction of the full discussion. Instead, three players are introduced and the beginning of their "conversation" is presented, along with my more academic observations.

Discussion: Joining a 13-year Conversation.

Three players, Lorikeet, Gremlins, and Eirian; and Kim, the researcher are briefly

described below, and then the start of what will be come a lengthy and larger conversation is presented.[2]

Lorikeet: the clicker is female, 64 years old, resides in San Francisco, CA and starting in 2010 is a retired college professor. Lorikeet is a Fen and a 7th Circle Healer who has been playing steadily for 12 years and has among the most earned ranks in the game. Lorikeet is among the most powerful healers playing and is particularly known because she can withstand many creatures, can "burst" heal, bringing a player who has fallen to full health almost instantly, and can heal badly fallen players. That is, she can heal people who are badly mangled, and beyond the skill of other healers.

Figure 1 Lorikeet as drawn by Daimoth.

Gremlins: the clicker is male, 40 years old, male, and is a Quality Assurance engineer for Apple in Cork, Ireland. Gremlins is a Ghorak Zo and an 8th Circle Ranger who played in the beta version during the late 90s, left for awhile and then returned in 2005. He has been playing steadily ever since. Gremlins is known for his strength, his deadly blows, and his ability to transform (morph) into a wide variety of spider-like creatures. Gremlins is also a "brick" on many hunts, meaning he can withstand the attacks of the creatures encountered almost indefinitly, holding their attentions and giving weaker

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[2] In CL parlance, a distinction is sometimes made between characters or "toons" and "clickers," the humans playing the characters.

fighters the chance to try hitting them from behind, which is easier. Below Gremlins is pictured in his usual form and in some of his morphs.

Figure 2 Gremlins; screenshots from the Clan Lord game window.

Eirian: the clicker is female, 43 year old, and coordinates instructional technology at a college near Sacramento, CA. Eirian is a Fen, and a third circle fighter who has not yet decided whether or not to specialize as a Ranger. She began playing in February 2009 and has played since then, but sometimes only once or twice a week for a few hours. Eirian is starting to be know for her willingness to launch herself at any creature, no matter how far beyond her abilities it probably is.

Figure 3 On a hunt, Gremlins, Eirian and others wait for Lorikeet and Moon Kitty to heal them.

Kim: a 43 year old female human. Kim studies online communities and digital culture. She found Clan Lord a year after meeting Joe Williams, president of Delta Tao Software at a friend's party. She wisely waited until a break between semesters before starting to play.

Kim: What has kept you playing or brought you back?

Lorikeet: I like playing my character. I keep track of ranks and have goals of what I want to do. The people who play and the fact that there is no experience cap probably are the biggest factors in my continued enjoyment (as well as aggravation sometimes.)

Eirian: I really enjoy hunting and adventuring with a group. And it's even more fun now that I am stronger and can really help. And people in the community really take care of each other. When I am out, alone or in a group, if I fall, I see messages appear from others asking if I need help, if anyone's with me. When I did need help, people always came. I do the same when I see someone in trouble. The level of support is wonderful.

Gremlins: The game play. It's actually very simple and very efficient. I tried quite a few mmo, and none I've found were that easy, while still maintaining some challenge.
The community, much more mature than in other games I've tried (there are exceptions of course…) and the "friends" I've made there, players I hunt regularly with, talk with.
The lack of level cap, added to the large content available, with new challenges regularly.
Of course my beloved spiders studies :-) More seriously, rangering gave me mid and long term goals.

Eirian: I agree about the play. The creatures are unpredictable, which keeps hunts interesting.

Gremlins: And, while this is more recent, a sweet fen :-)

Eirian: /action blushes.

Gremlins: I was more thinking about the way the players control their toon. But this is also a very valid point, the high randomness (though it can also be frustrating at time).

Kim: So what should people know about the game?

Lorikeet: I guess people would have to understand the niche aspect of the game. It's technically in the same "category" as a game like WoW, but with such a small player base it's more like a small town. I suppose that "small town" feel, lack of nonconsensual pvp, as well as the retro graphics make it not appeal to the more juvenile elements of some other games, thereby sparing us.

Eirian: I think that's true, because even the younger folk that play are generally very pleasant, and not "juvenile." I'm often surprised to learn how young some are, because their behavior is very mature and often they are very good hunters or healers, or whatever. What do you think, Grems?

Gremlins: Besides that spiders are better than noids ? ;-)

There isn't much to explain or much to know. This is an old game, with graphics that are feeling their age most of the time. While the community is much smaller now, it makes it also possible for most players to know most others, whether one likes to hunt/chat with them or not. It is also a very helpful community, making it usually easy for new players. The share system is one way to enforce that. It's an important piece of what CL is and definitively needs to be known.

Someone (I can't remember who) said that CL was a social chat software with some hack and slash thrown into. Maybe that's not far from what it is. :D

Kim: Well, I think it's a bit more. But I notice that both you all mention how everyone

can know everyone else; the community is remarkably cohesive. The "sharing" system certainly encourages this. According to the Clan Lord Unofficial User Manual (CLUMP):

For each dispatch, kill or vanquish, the person being shared with (the sharee) gets 10% of the experience the person slaying the beast (the sharer) receives. The sharer does not loose the 10%, but instead gets a 1% or 2% bonus for sharing. Thus, if a person is sharing with 5 people (the maximum number of people you can currently share with) and slays a beast, they get 105% of the experience, while each sharee gets 10% of the initial 100% (CLUMP).

Gremlins: Due to the age, the lack of level cap and that some players have been playing all along or intensively, there is however a large level gap which a new player can't really hope to close. Even if the "library" system which allow a player to get experience when not playing was created first to help more casual players to stay in contact with more active players, it ended up creating a large gap between players starting now and characters who were stored for 10 years in the library. :D   So the library is also an important part of CL that people should know.

Kim: The Library is a series of connected buildings in Town Center, which allow players to leave the game safely, knowing they won't return to find they've appeared in a pack of creatures ready to attack. Further, when you disconnect from the game in a library, your character still earns some experience "studying." This helps people who cannot play as often keep up with those who play daily, but as Gremlins notes, it can create divisions in other ways (CLUMP, "10 Things for Newbies page.").

Gremlins: And a last point that I think makes CL a fairly different game (and therefore should be known by people who would compare it to more mainstream mmo). There is no Solo game at all past the first few weeks. Sure a player can always do something by himself but that will likely yield no experience (though probably some coins and possibly some progress on a ranger morph or something). The whole game, with its 3 classes (fighter/healer/mystic) is designed for group play. The fighters fight, the healers heal, the

mystics suck ;-)

Eirian: That's true about there being no way to really hunt solo and gain much. I've been lucky that folk in Puddleby were remarkably kind to me when I first arrived. Within my first few days, I met Geotzou, who showed me how to use a sunstone, and how to toggle for help if I fell somewhere alone. I still recall how hard it was to just let the baby rockodiles bite and bite, so he could chain me back to town center and introduce me to Stora for some healing. And I don't think mystics suck. :D

Though I was at first bashful about speaking to older fighters, many went out of their way to invite me on hunts and help me learn the best way of dealing with creatures that were too tough for me to strike head on. Some went even beyond that and gave me weapons, coins, clothing, etc. :-) That was good because otherwise, all I could do on my own was hunt rats, vermine, and slugs. :P Making progress on your own is hard, and gets harder the stronger you become.

Luckily, many much stronger fighters and healers also helped me to gain experience and went with me to areas that were hard for me, but ridiculously easy for them. In that respect you've been a stalwart friend on the hunt, Grems, along with Geo. Only I was more excited than you and him when I finally passed my fighter test to join the Third Circle. :-)

Other players are also participating and this conversation will expand. Ultimately it will be analyzed and compared to the perspective of the other players with the dual perspective of Kim/Eirian.

In/conclusion: Shared World Building and Development of a Critical Voice

Kim: When talking with other players about the game I notice that they recognize many elements of the game that contribute to their enjoyment. Not only the way the basic design influences play, but many players also understand how various existing elements

and proposed changes affect or might change player statistics and options for play.

This understanding stems from two obvious sources: direct communications from Joe and other GMs, and the ability for players to contribute artwork and programming efforts to the game. The direct communications occur via the Clan Lord web pages, GM posts in the Online forum, and GM visits to the game.

Figure 4 Joe Williams visiting town in July 2005.

Designed for Socializing

One of the most interesting aspects of the game is the way it is designed to encourage, if not force cooperation and support socializing. Many mechanisms operate to do this,

among them are: "sharing experience," as explained above, the rhythm and rate at which creatures appear, and the requirements for accessing various areas of the game. Players spend much time discussing how the game's design encourages or forces certain behavior, styles of hunting or other player choices. How does this analysis compare to a more academic approach? The depth of analysis depends in part on the data available. As is discussed below, players in CL have more data available than players of some larger MMOs precisely because it is smaller and older.

Volunteer GMs and Player Contributions

Joe Williams designed Clan Lord and is president of the company that publishes it. Joe is represented as a unified voice since he doesn't appear openly in the game as anyone but a GM. Below Joe addresses some of the ways the game was designed to allow socializing.

> *Joe:* Since everything is mouse-based, the keyboard is used 95% for talking -- there's no competition for it with attacking and moving. And we paced the game for social pauses.
>
> The monsters show up in waves, so there are flurries of activity with time in between. And there are "safe areas" sprinkled throughout to hang out in (email, 3/7/2010).

When a group is hunting they will almost certainly experience times when they must retreat to a safe area to heal. During these times, interactions can range from casual chat, to word games, to flirtation, or role-play that includes any or all of the above. Because the community is small, even players who don't know each other directly will have a common set of acquaintances and knowledge of in-game events. However, over the course of time, player involvement has grown far beyond socializing in-game or even participating in the CL discussion forums.   In many ways, CL hearkens back to old table-top RPGs in the way it allows player/GM co-creation. In the excerpt below, a distinction is identified between how world building happens in the MMO World of Warcraft (WoW) and the table-top RPGs that preceded today's big MMOs.

…in table-top role- play, the fictional world is continually co-created by interactions between the players and the GM. This leaves room for the human imagination to fundamentally alter the fictional universe in any number of ways. One example might be a GM overlooking a rule in the game's rulebook in favor of a better role-play experience. A table-top GM can also introduce and develop new characters or fundamentally redefine the world in which players are role-playing. However, in WoW role-play, the decisions of the players and the very world itself is cemented within the programming that Blizzard has created (Pittman and Paul 2008).

Players gain much insight from participating in world-building activities. Some products of these activities appear in the game itself as contributions of art and programming efforts. Others are external, such as browser plug-ins and stand-alone desktop applications to see who is playing; reports on game news, and the user manual.[3] Since about 2005, Clan Lord has been maintained and expanded largely through the volunteer efforts of former and current players. This affords what may be a unique chance for players to be part of world-building. Some players go so far as to become game masters, others assist the GMs by contributing art or working on programming. Many players create ancillary material for the game by contributing to the online user manual, by creating macros that enhance gameplay, by composing music and by organizing in-game events.

Participating in these ways has allowed many players to develop a dual perspective that may be usefully comparable to that of an aca-fan. For example, in a recent thread, players and a GM discussed creating a new kind of quest. Discussion ranged from pseudocode examples, to game-balance to social mechanics:

   Garr wrote: But upon finishing the quest and killing the boss monster a chest was

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[3] Most of these creations can be found linked from the Thoomcare Media Network, the main source of in-game news, which has run since April 2001.

dropped, and a massive amount of exp was dropped in it. Which was then split between all exiles in range.

Yappy wrote: How would you address the circumstance when one exile corners the boss, kills it and opens the chest on his/her own?

Phroon wrote: An if statement?

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Code: Select all
    expPerPerson = expTotal / numExilesInRange;
    if(expPerPerson > yappyExpLimit) {
      [awardExp: yappyExpLimit toExiles:exilesInRange];
    } else {
      [awardExp: expPerPerson toExiles:exilesInRange];
    }
```

Pardon the Objective-C syntax… (The Clan Lord Sentinel, May 22, 2010 8:33)[4]

Subsequent comments take up Yappy's question from the perspective of social dynamics and what would motivate players to share the rewards and prevent them from "camping" at the locale to complete the quest repeatedly, preventing others from befitting. Later another player offers her take:

Talin wrote: I doubt lonely-openers will be policed out, after a certain level. I remember the time the locks in DW (Dredwood) gave massive amounts of exp. Some exiles were notorious for opening alone, and were still invited on most hunts. People are just too nice in CL ;) Granted, in DW, the next chest was just around the corner, which might not be the case here. A reason for me to be in favor of snell-wide distribution of exp, though.

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[4] Yappy is a GM, and Garr, Phroon, and Talin are long-time players. Many CL players have programming experience that informs their participation in the game and in discussions.

The discussion and analysis carried out by players here is not overly empassioned or uncritical; finding an approach to ethnographic study of fan communities that can incorporate and learn from these kinds of voices will allow a better understanding of the cultural objects, and may also enrich our own critical practice. Several GMs and player-contributors have agreed to participate in this study, and more are being recruited. The best way to represent all of these voices is a clear challenge, and a satisfactory approach has not yet been found. Collecting data from them will take time because most of them make contributions to CL on top of maintaining regular jobs, having families, attending college, and so on. Further, because the game and the players have persisted for so long, a lengthy study seems the best approach in order to gain a real understanding. This paper is merely a sample of what is to come.

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