Hey look at the weirdos: a panel discussion on deviance and acceptance in the strange space

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ABSTRACT
This panel discusses the notions of deviance and acceptance in and around virtual communities of practice. While there has been marked progress regarding how gamers are regarded in mainstream discourse due to the recent prominence of games research that explains the finer nuances associated with communication and community, there are still dark pools where respectability politics still deter much academic discussion and where researchers are likely to fear treading.

We are bringing a set of scholars who are pushing at these discursive margins to shed light upon communities of practice that go beyond “Vanilla WoW,” and after discussing their research projects, invite the audience to participate in a dialogue regarding the numerous and varied constraints and silences occur in and around the creation of the conversation in games research. This is a collection of papers about topics that usually get passed over for the more well worn game studies paths.

Included in the range of projects to be discussed in this panel:

1. EVE Online is a game with a reputation of being difficult for a new player to break into the community. But even with its tight knit community, the game has its vocal critics -- even among its current players. Drawing upon survey and interview data from EVE players, focusing specifically on a subset who vocally express their hatred of the game and yet they continue to play. I argue that much like Huizinga’s spoil sport, these players...
have no vested interest in maintaining the commonly shared narrative that EVE is a game only for a particular sort of player. Therefore, it is through these players’ narratives that we can better identify the barriers to participation in this particular game. MMOGs, like all games, are a voluntary leisure activity and for many, gameplay is a leisure activity because it a pleasurable activity. But what can we make of players who actively express their dislike of a game they currently play? Drawing on the colloquial term “hatewatching”, continually tuning into a television show week after week that one dislikes but feels like they can’t turn away, I investigate the phenomena of “hate-playing” EVE Online.

2. The Gorean communities of practice in and around Second Life. Based on novels written by American John Norman in 1966, the series combines philosophy, erotica, and science fiction. Part of the practices depicted in the series concerns the relationships between dominant men and submissive women. As such, the lore, along with their lifestyle adherents, have been also criticized and reified. Now technologically mediated through Second Life, there are even more opportunities for misunderstanding, panic, and rigorous but nonetheless theoretically convenient representations of community members.

3. Distinguishing between three forms of deviancy which have historically been confused and/or conflated: 1) kusoge (shit games), 2) kuso culture online (Little Fatty, lolcats, participatory culture parodies etc.), and 3) egao (kuso-like 2.0 phenomena in China). Kuso internet culture is a set of practices identifiable by a shared scatological attitude, present in videogame culture as Mario and Zelda YouTube Poops, The Angry Video Game Nerd content and the legend of its origins. The rise of a niche fan community celebrating kusoge has been deeply associated with the emergence of kuso culture, however they share little in terms of that defining attitude. Using kuso culture as a point of departure this discussion will demonstrate that kusoge fandom is, in fact, a combination of camp and avant-garde practice, while Chinese egao is a form of activism.

4. A key piece of how games are made to mean is the interaction between game design and player culture. As payment frameworks for games move from the straightforward purchase of a product to the in app purchases that can typify free-to-play games, game culture produces a new kind of deviance: the player who pays. Perhaps originating in massively multiplayer online games where players could purchase currency outside of the terms of service, contemporary free-to-play game typically produce communities where those who invest massive amounts of time are venerated and those who pay are deemed whales by developers and are constructed as lesser skilled players by gamers. This production of deviance is instructive in studying how game culture produced particular norms for play and rules for engagement and how those factors frame how game players and academics are likely to engage the study of games.

Names and backgrounds of the organizers
Florence Chee is an Assistant Professor of Digital Communication at Loyola University Chicago. With training in Anthropology, Communication, and Computer Science, she combines these interests in ethnographic investigations concerning the global contexts of technology engagement and experience. Her current research examines the social and ethical dimensions of our emergent digital lifestyles with a particular focus on games, social media, mobile platforms, and their effects on global labor dynamics across industrial, governmental, and academic sectors. @cheeflo fchee@luc.edu
Donald Heider is Dean of Loyola University Chicago's School of Communication. Dr. Heider is an award-winning broadcast journalist and the author or co-author of four books. Heider previously served as Associate Dean of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland. Dr. Heider is the founding Dean of the School of Communication at Loyola University Chicago. Heider's recently released edited volume Living Virtually explores politics, social behavior, journalism, and ethics in virtual worlds. He spent over three years gathering data for his research on Second Life. @donheider dheider@luc.edu

Christopher A Paul is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Communication Department at Seattle University. His work uses rhetorical analysis as a lens by which to analyze elements of digital media, particularly games. His book, Wordplay and the Discourse of Video Games: Analyzing Words, Design, and Play was published by Routledge in 2012. His current research focuses on meaning and meritocracy in video games and game culture. @real_chris_paul paulc@seattleu.edu

Kelly Bergstrom is a PhD candidate in York University’s Language, Culture and Teaching program. Her research falls into two overlapping areas of interest: (dis)engagement in online communities (in particular EVE Online), and the ways gender stereotypes are replicated in and through digital culture. @kellybergstrom kelly_bergstrom@edu.yorku.ca

Emily Flynn-Jones is a Banting Postdoctoral Research Fellow at York University’s Play:CES Lab. Her dissertation focused on representations of death and the impact of failure in videogames. Current research includes investigations into niche gaming subcultures and gendered experience in games culture. She is currently working on a monograph which focuses on cute aesthetics and play and guest editing the new issue of Well Played Journal, the “Seriously Weird Edition”. emilyfj@yorku.ca