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This article has two primary goals: (a) to illustrate how a closer analysis of language can lead to fruitful insights into the activities that it helps constitute, and (b) to demonstrate the complexity of the practices that make up Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming (MMOGaming) through just such an analysis. The first goal is in response to the way we sometimes treat language in studies of activity, despite calls for more nuanced analyses (e.g., Wells, 2002), as a mere conduit for information in which its other (social, identity) functions are overlooked. The second goal is in response to the diatribes against video games in the media and their frequent dismissal as barren play. In this article, I use functional linguistics to unpack how a seemingly inconsequential turn of talk within the game *Lineage* reveals important aspects of the activity in which it is situated as well as the broader "forms of life" enacted in the game through which members display their allegiance and identity.

Before symbolic processing theory developed in the late 1950s, psychology was dominated by theories of behaviorism that treated human behavior as nothing more than a direct response to environmental stimuli (S →R). Symbolic processing theory later rejected this assumption, concluding that human behavior could not be explained without positing an intermediate stratum of mental processes that occur between input (stimuli from the environment) and output (behavior). Human beings, it was argued, mentally represent information from the environment, process that information, then select behaviors accordingly. And so "the mind," if only a reduced version bound solely "in the head," was reestablished as a valid theoretical and practical concern (Derry & Steinkuehler, 2003).

Since then, scholars have run up against the shortcomings of this model of cognition, finding it difficult to account for complex human behavior without also taking into account the social, material, and temporal context through which (note: not *in* which) the "mind" works. In response, many researchers interested in cognition have shifted their focus toward intact activity systems—structures of interactions between individuals and their social and material contexts—in which the individual is only one part. Such work has included a vast diversity of scholarship, including work in activity theory (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamaki, 1999), connectionism (Allman, 1989; Johnson & Brown, 1988), discourse theory (Gee, 1992, 1996, 1999), distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995), ecological psychology (Gibson, 1979/1986), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), mediated action (Wertsch, 1998), situated learning (Lave, 1988; Lave &

Wenger, 1991), sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and situativity theory (Greeno, & Moore, 1993). Despite the internal diversity, researchers working under these paradigms have shared a view of *cognition as (inter)action in the social and material world*. To use a familiar quote from Lave (1988), cognition is "a complex social phenomenon … distributed— stretched over, not divided among—mind, body, activity and culturally organized settings (which include other actors)" (p.1). Thus, we have come a long way from studies in which *information processing* was mistaken for *meaning making* (Bruner, 1990).

Still, despite this more nuanced treatment of cognition as distributed and situated, our consideration of language as part of the activities that constitute "cognition" remains, at times, a bit cruder. Still relying on a model of communication that underlies symbolic processing theory (cf. Vera & Simon, 1993) and, for that matter, our everyday folk theory of how communication works (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), we at times still treat language as the mere transmission means for informational content. Yet, work in functional linguistics demonstrates that all language-in-use functions not only as a vehicle for conveying information but also, and equally as important, as part and parcel of *ongoing activities* and as a means for *enacting human relationships* (Gee, 1999).

To take a simple example, consider the statement "Mistakes were made" versus "I made mistakes." In the first utterance, I am engaging in an "information-giving" activity that foregrounds the ideational and shrouds agency. In the second, I am engaging in an "apology-giving" activity that foregrounds my responsibility for whatever conundrum occurred and does repair work on my social relationships with whoever my audience may be. With only a "content transmission" view of language, these two statements are roughly equivalent. Yet, in terms of both the ongoing activity I am engaging in and my social relationships with the audience, the two are markedly different. There is a considerable body of work in functional linguistics (e.g., Clark, 1996; Gee, 1999; Halliday, 1978; Levinson 1983; Schiffrin, 1994) that we, as cognitive researchers, might draw on to better account for language and communication. Without such accounts, our analyses of human activity (read: distributed and situated cognition) might run the risk of missing the forest for the trees.

GEE'S DISCOURSE THEORY

To date, Gee's (1999) discourse theory and method of analysis has been the most readily applied to understanding cognition in all its distributed and situated messiness. Coming out of the New Literacy Studies (e.g., Barton, 1994; Cazden 1988; Cook-Gumperz 1986; Gumperz, 1982; Heath, 1983; Kress, 1985; Street, 1984, 1993), discourse theory maintains a focus on individuals' (inter)actions in the social and material world, but, by foregrounding the role of d/Discourse ("little d" discourse which refers to "language-in-use"/"big D" Discourse which refers to "kinds & people") in such interactions. Along these lines, it provides a fulcrum about which theory and method can be coherently leveraged to gain insight into the situated meanings individuals construct (not just the information they process) and the definitive role of communities in that meaning.

The transmission model of language takes the meaning of a symbol (what it "designates or denotes"; Vera & Simon, 1993, p.9) as a given kind of abstraction or generality. By contrast, discourse theory focuses on how the meaning of a symbol or utterance is *situated* (Gee, 1999)—a pattern that we assemble "on the fly" from and for particular contexts of use that is multiple, varying across different situations, and based on how the current context and prior experiences are

construed (Agar, 1994; Barsalou 1992; Hofstadter 1997; Kress 1985; Levinson 1983). Given this range of variability in interpretation, something must guide an individual's sense making. This "something" is (often tacit) assumptions about how the world "works," assumptions that hang together to form "cultural models" (Gee, 1999)—explanatory theories or "story lines" of prototypical people and events that are created, maintained, and transformed by specific social groups whose ways of being in the world underwrite them. These "ways of being in the world" or "forms of life" (Wittgenstein, 1958) are what Gee (1999) called "big *D* Discourses, " which are

> different ways in which we humans integrate language with non-language "stuff," such as different ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing, and using symbols, tools, and objects in the right places and at the right times so as to … give the material world certain meanings … make certain sorts of meaningful connections in our experience, and privilege certain symbols systems and ways of knowing over others. (Gee, 1999, p. 13)

Through participation in a Discourse community, an individual comes to understand the world (and themselves) from the perspective of that community. Thus, semantic interpretation is taken as part of what people do in the lived-in world; it arises through interaction with social and material resources in the context of a community with its own participant structures, values, and goals.

MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAMING

Gee's (1999) discourse theory has been applied with great success to widely disparate domains of practice, such as "sharing time" in early elementary classrooms (Gee, 1996), the academic versus "streetcorner" Discourses of adolescents (Knobel, 1999), and the workplace practices of "new capitalist" corporations (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996). It has yet to be applied, however, to the domain of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs)—graphical 2- or 3-D video games played online, allowing individuals, through their self-created digital characters or "avatars," to interact not only with the gaming software (the designed environment of the game and the computer-controlled characters within it) but also with "other players'" avatars. The virtual worlds that MMOG players (MMOGamers) routinely plug in and inhabit are persistent social and digitally material worlds, loosely structured by open-ended (fantasy) narratives, where players are largely free to do as they please—slay ogres, siege castles, or shake the fruit out of trees. Such worlds are virtual but clearly nontrivial. For example, as a result of out-of-game trading (through online auctions such as eBay) of in-game items (such as virtual equipment, clothing, and the like), Norrath, the virtual setting of the MMOG *EverQuest*, is the 77th largest economy in the real world, with a gross national product per capita between that of Russia and Bulgaria. One platinum piece, the unit of currency in Norrath, trades on real-world exchange markets at a higher rate than both the yen and the lira (Castronova, 2001). Such games are ripe for analysis of the discourse/Discourse (language-in-use/"kinds of people") attending them. Given their increasing penetration into the entertainment industry—generating a predicted $4 billion by 2008 (Online games, 2004), widespread and growing popularity with a diverse population of more than 8.5 million subscribers worldwide (Woodcock, 2005), and somewhat notorious capacity for sustained engagement (the average player games roughly 20 hr per week; Yee, 2002)—MMOGs are quickly becoming an important

form of entertainment and a compelling means for enculturation into the globally networked community of both young and old.

The analysis presented here is part of a larger ongoing cognitive ethnography of the MMOG *Lineage* (first Version I, now Version II) that attempts to explicate the kinds of social and material activities in which gamers routinely participate. MMOGs are sites for (a) socially and materially distributed cognition; (b) individual and collaborative problem solving across multiple multimedia; (c) multimodal "attentional spaces" (Lemke, n.d.); (d) significant identity work (Turkle, 1994); (e) empirical model building; (f) joint negotiation of meaning and values; and (g) the coordination of people, (virtual) tools and artifacts, and multiple forms of text—all within persistent online worlds with emergent cultural characteristics of their own (Steinkuehler, 2004a). As such, they ought to be part of our research agenda despite their periodic bad press (e.g., Anderson, 2003; Provenzo, 1992).

Lineage, both its first and second incarnation, is one of the most successful MMOG titles released to date, claiming more than 4 million concurrent subscribers or roughly half the global MMOGaming market (Woodcock, 2005). Like other popular titles, *Lineage* is renown for its "escapist fantasy" context (vaguely medieval Europe) yet emergent "social realism" (Kolbert, 2001). In a setting of wizards and elves, dwarfs and knights, people save money for homes, create basket indexes of the trading market, build relationships of status and solidarity, and worry about crime. What sets *Lineage* apart from other titles, however, is its core game mechanic of castle sieges, regular events in which individuals who have banded together in groups called *pledges* compete with one another for castles throughout the virtual kingdom. In both *Lineage I* and *Lineage II*, the pledge system is tightly coupled to both the guiding narrative of the game and the virtual world's economy, resulting in a complex social space of affiliations and disaffiliations, constructed largely out of shared (or disparate) social and material practices (Steinkuehler, 2004b). In this article, I illustrate how an analysis of the function of language within such practices can be leveraged to better understand the nature of a given activity and how language-in-use is situated in its particular (virtual) social and material context, tied to a larger community of MMOGamers, and consequential for marking membership within that community.

METHOD

Cognitive ethnography (Hutchins, 1995)—the description of specific cultures in terms of cognitive practices, their basis, and their consequences—was chosen as the primary research methodology as a way to tease out what happens in the virtual setting of the game and how the people involved consider their own activities, the activities of others, and the contexts in which those activities take place (cf. Steinkuehler, Black, & Clinton, 2005). This "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) includes 24 months of participant observation in the game, several thousand lines of recorded and transcribed observations of naturally occurring game play, collections of game-related player communications (e.g., discussion board posts, chatroom and instant message conversations, and e-mails), and community documents (e.g., fan Web sites, community-authored game fictions, company- and community-written player manuals and guidebooks), and interviews with multiple informants. From this large data corpus, I selected a single unremarkable utterance that occurred during routine collaborative activity in the virtual world of *Lineage* (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
The Original Utterance, Its Literal Translation Morpheme by Morpheme, and Its Gloss

Original utterance: *afk*	*g2g*	*too*	*ef*		*ot*	*regen*	*no*	*poms*
Literal translation: *away from keys*	*got to go*	*to*	*Elven Forest*	*to*	*regenerate*	*no*	*mana potions*
Gloss:	*Just a minute. I have to go to the Elven Forest to regenerate. I'm out of mana potions.*							

This utterance, which roughly translates as *Just a minute, I have to go to the Elven Forest to regenerate. I'm out of manna potions*, was issued by an experienced *Lineage* gamer named Gaveldor (pseudonym) during a group expedition into a moderately difficult hunting area of the virtual kingdom Aden. I chose it for its banality rather than its distinctiveness, based on the premise that any claims about a "big-D" Discourse in operation of the game must be grounded in analysis of the small, routine accomplishments of its members. This analysis, therefore, begins with the small and seemingly inconsequential, and from there builds up to claims about broader "forms of life" enacted in the game through which *Lineage* community members display their allegiance and identity.

The analysis presented here is based on functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978) and big-*D* Discourse analysis—"the analysis of language as it is used to enact activities, perspectives, and identities" (Gee, 1999, pp. 4–5). Briefly, such analyses focus on the collocational patterns of linguistic cues such as word choice, foregrounding/backgrounding syntactic and prosodic markers, cohesion devices, discourse organization, contextualization signals, and thematic organization used in spoken or written utterances to invite particular interpretive practices. Configurations of such devices signal how the language of the particular utterance is being used to construe various aspects of reality such as which aspects of the (virtual) material world are relevant and in what way, the implied identity of the speaker/writer and who the audience is construed to be, and what specific social activities the speaker and his or her interlocutors are taken to be engaged in (Gee, 1999). Particular configurations of linguistic cues prompt specific situated meanings of various aspects of "reality," meanings that evoke and exploit specific cultural models that are indelibly linked to particular communities, allowing speakers and hearers to display and recognize the "kind of people" each is purported to be. With such analyses comes explication of the full range of social and material practices with which they are inextricably linked, because the meaning of those practices is done with and through language-in-use.

ANALYSIS

As Turkle (1995) noted, the specialized linguistic practices MMOGamers use to communicate appear to nongamers much like the "discourse of Dante scholars, 'a closed world of references, cross-references, and code'" (p. 67). It is a sort of *hybrid writing*, "speech momentarily frozen into … ephemeral artifact" (p. 183). At first blush, the use of language within such digital worlds appears rather impoverished. Riddled with (a) abbreviations (e.g., *afk* for *away from keys*, *g2g* for *got to go*), (b) truncations (e.g., *regen* for *regenerate*), (c) typographical (e.g., *ot* for *to*) and grammatical errors (e.g., the adverbial form *too* in place of the prepositional form *to*), (d) *syntactic erosions* (e.g., the omitted initial string *I have* from both *[I have] g2g* and *[I have] no poms*; Thrasher, 1974), and (e) specialized vocabulary (e.g., *ef* for *Elven Forest*, a particular territory in the virtual kingdom that elves call home, and *poms* for *potions of mana*, a liquid potion that increases the rate at

which one's "mana" or magic power is restored after depletion from repeated spell use), typed utterances such as the one examined here appear to be a meager substitute for everyday oral and written speech.

Its code-like appearance, however, is misleading: Closer examination of such talk reveals that, in fact, Lineagese (and other MMOG variants) serves the same range and complexity of functions as language does offline. Such language is simply forced to do so within the tight constraints of the given medium of communication—one small chat window with a maximum turn of 58 characters allowed per turn. Working from the utterance's most basic structural parts (its syntax) to increasingly broader units of analysis (treating the utterance as "small-*d*" discourse or language-in-use), we can unpack how this small, seemingly inconsequential turn of talk instantiates a broader "form of life" enacted in the game—forms of life through which this speaker, like all *Lineage* gamers, indexes his identity and membership within the *Lineage* gaming community.

Syntactic Analysis

In everyday written text, punctuation and capitalization conventions partition the utterances into separate tone units (such as sentences), each of which may serve a different function. In *Lineage* communication, however, these conventions are flouted. If we restore the missing segmentation by parsing Gaveldor's utterance into its three separate tone units, a pattern emerges in which the social is monitored on the boundaries of the informational (cf. speakers' heightened attention to audience at the boundaries of narrative units in Chipewyan storytelling; Scollon & Scollon, 1979; see Table 2).

Tone Unit 1 is *interpersonal* and serves as a request that temporarily disengages the speaker from the ongoing collaborative "pledge hunt" activity during which it occurred. Immediately after delivering the utterance, Gaveldor did not go "away from keys" by leaving the computer and therefore suspending all online activity but rather left the joint endeavor to return to the Elven Forest within the game to restore his avatar's mana or magic points, an action necessary to continue the activity at some later point in time if his avatar's magic ability (and therefore ability to hunt) had already substantially declined. In this context, *afk* functions much like the more common requests *just a minute* or *one sec* (Jesperson, 1924), which temporarily disengage the speaker from the activity and momentarily suspend one's obligation to the (social) interaction at hand. Gaveldor' bid for exemption from the activity, however, only makes sense if one presumes that the pledge hunt has some conclusion defined by something other than one participant's resources being depleted (i.e., the event has some goal other than using up supplies) and that, once engaged

TABLE 2
The Three Tone Units of the Original Utterance and Their Functions

	Tone Unit 1	*Tone Unit 2*	*Tone Unit 3*
Original Utterance (Parsed):	[afk]	[g2g too ef ot regen]	[no poms]
Literal Translation:	away from keys	got to go to Elven Forest to regenerate	no mana potions
Gloss:	Just a minute.	I have to go to the Elven Forest to regenerate.	I'm out of mana potions.
Function:	Interpersonal	Ideational	Interpersonal

in the activity, one normally sticks with it until its end (i.e., until that goal has been reached). In this way, the request displays, at least partially, the speaker's "framework of expectations" (Levinson, 1983, p. 280) about the nature of the activity at hand: It has some form of goal beyond burning through virtual supplies and one is typically expected to remain in the activity until that goal is met.

Tone Unit 2 is *ideational*, foregrounding a particular configuration of process, participants, and circumstance (Martin, Matthiessen, & Painter, 1997; see Table 3). Gaveldor stated where he was about to go and why, providing content information that characterized his forthcoming respite from the activity in terms that assume familiarity with the constraints and affordances of being a *Lineage* elf. In terms of constraints, elves rely on mana or magic power to cast maintenance and enhancement spells on themselves and others. Thus, regeneration is crucial to an elf's ability to participate in hunts in any useful way. In terms of affordances, elves also have the capacity to travel to the Elven Forest and back quite rapidly, making quick medicinal runs customary, even in the middle of ongoing activities. For those without game knowledge based on normative play (rather than the written explanations given in the user manual), Gaveldor's characterization of his impending "afk-ness" would make little coherent sense because the process, location, and purpose he communicated are not related in any obvious (written in the manual) way.

Tone Unit 3 is again *interpersonal*, serving as a justification for Unit 2. Gaveldor did not simply take leave as needed; instead, he provided his audience an *account*: He had "no poms" (i.e., no mana potions that would aid restoration of his magic points). Here, regeneration in the Elven Forest was treated as the logical alternative to consuming "mana pots" such that the impossibility of one (i.e., taking mana potions) necessitates the other (i.e., regeneration in the Elven Forest), forming a closed set of alternatives that would make sense only if his listeners were, again, familiar with standard *Lineage* game play. This final clause orients to the social by providing his audience an explanation for his impending action. With its production, Gaveldor displayed a sense of social obligation to the ongoing event. He treated his taking a temporary leave from this collaborative activity as an "accountable action" (Sacks, 1989), one that requires some form of explanation and therefore is presumably not within the normal course of the main activity.

Discourse Analysis

Making sense of Gaveldor's utterance, given its code-like appearance due to its morphological and syntactic omissions and complexities, requires familiarity with the lexical and grammatical features of Lineagese. It must be mentioned that it also requires considerable background knowledge acquired only through having actually played. Manuals and guidebooks may outline the territories

TABLE 3
Tone Unit (2) of the Original Utterance and the Role of Each Element Within It

Original utterance (Tone Unit 2):	[ellipsed I]	g2g	too ef	ot regen
Literal translation:	[ellipsed I]	got to go	to Elven Forest	to regenerate
Gloss:	I have to go to the Elven Forest to regenerate.			
Role of element:	Actor	Process: material	Location	Cause: purpose

of the virtual kingdom Aden, the features of each character class, and the material goods available in the game, but they do not (perhaps even cannot) teach a player what the different territories are good for, what the constraints and affordances of various character classes are in actual practice, or what alternative actions are possible given the characteristics of each class and the supplies they might carry with them. The abilities associated with expanding and translating Lineagese into standard English and utilizing knowledge of the game as a designed object (rather than as an emergent practice) are insufficient for grasping the meaning and function of Gaveldor's utterance as a whole. For those without some understanding of gaming practice, Gaveldor's utterance would appear of little consequence. And yet, if we examine the activity in which Gaveldor's utterance was situated, we find that it most certainly *does* have consequence. His utterance both reflected and shaped the activity in which it was situated and, as such, can be analyzed as one "move" in a complex coordination not only of language but of (virtual) material objects and people as well.

The complex coordination of a pledge hunt.   Pledge hunts are the quintessential collaborative activity of *Lineage*, and, in part, constitute what it means to play the game. They are joint hunting expeditions into difficult virtual territories that have their own characteristic (a) objectives (e.g., increased experience and distributed wealth); (b) division of labor (e.g., knights melee, mages heal, elves play a supportive role through both range attack to assist the knights and healing spells to assist the mages); (c) virtual materials, tools, and artifacts (e.g., healing and regeneration potions, "power up" potions that temporarily boost one's ability; official and unofficial territory maps; and weaponry); and (d) conventions (e.g., using different forms of chat functions for different types of communication such that "party chat," which appears only in the chatbox of individuals hunting within the same party, is used for informal socializing, whereas "public talk," which appears on the screen of all individuals within a given virtual area, is reserved for directives). Pledge hunting is a community-wide practice within, across, and despite actual pledge allegiances within the game. Through them, individuals display their prowess, build solidarity, develop strategies, and mutually undertake challenges that are oftentimes beyond the competencies of one person alone.

How Gaveldor's utterance reflected the activity.   Gaveldor's utterance was issued in the midst of a complex coordination of (virtual) material objects and people, and as such, its architecture reflected the very context for which it was designed. First, the "theme" or point of departure for the entire utterance, Tone Unit 1, foregrounded that his absence would be temporary. Given the way in which pledge hunt participants' actions (and survival) are contingent on each other's activities, this initial framing of his absence as short-lived was important. How (or whether) the remainder of the group continued hunting was contingent on who was there to participate. Second, the central part of Gaveldor's utterance, Tone Unit 2, was committed to explaining where he was going and why. The upshot of this action communicated that this temporary absence was *required* for him to continue participating in the hunt in a useful way. To grasp this, one must know something about the customary division of labor within pledge hunt parties. Elves serve a crucial supportive role for the party, shifting their range attack to wherever the knights in front need it most while, at the same time, also aiding the mages in healing other party members. Gaveldor's utterance paid tribute to this customary division of labor and the function of elves within it: If he was out of mana,

then he was unable to function in the expected ways; if he regenerated his health, however, he could return to continue supporting the other members of the hunt as is tacitly required. Finally, the last tone unit of Gaveldor's utterance eliminated the alternative solution to the problem of no mana (i.e., consuming mana potions) and paid tribute to customary pledge-hunting practice. Participants are expected to stock up on any needed potions or equipment prior to embarking; hence, the account he gave for why he must temporarily leave the hunt was framed in terms that presumed this common preparatory procedure. He stated that he had "no poms" as would otherwise be expected given common protocol for preparing for the activity.

How Gaveldor's utterance shaped the activity.   Gaveldor's utterance not only reflected the activity in which it was situated, it also crucially shaped that activity in return, transforming the ongoing collaboration in a manner consequential for those involved. After the utterance was delivered, the group had to commit to remaining in their current location to find him upon his return and temporarily adjust the distribution of responsibilities across the remaining participants. Moreover, his utterance signaled that the hunt would presumably continue for some significant period of time, at least long enough to justify the time and labor involved in one elf going back to the Elven Forest to regenerate. These were precisely the effects Gaveldor's utterance had on the ongoing activity: Though the hunt continued in his absence, the group members, all the while never voicing these conclusions outright, remained in their location, redistributed the workload, and even, in this instance, engaged in a brief public survey of their remaining supplies under the tacit assumption that the hunt would indeed continue for some extended period of time.

Situating Gaveldor's utterance in its social and material context—as "discourse" or "language-in-use"—reveals how it simultaneously both reflected and shaped the activity of which it was part. Analysis of the basic functional parts (tone units) of the utterance in light of the material and social activity surrounding it not only reveals important aspects of the activity itself (its presumed objectives, means, division of labor, and conventions) but also suggests that the talk did not simply "mediate" the activity but, in fact, helped constitute it. Everyday routine MMOG activities such as pledge hunts crucially involve a complex coordination of virtual material objects, other gamers, and specific forms of hybrid writing used in specific ways, at specific times and places, for specific ends. Participation in such practices is not only cognitively and materially nontrivial, but it is also consequential for membership and identity within the gaming community as it is through such routine accomplishments that participants display their allegiance to and identity in the broader "form of life" or big-*D* Discourse of the *Lineage* gaming community itself.

Big-*D* Discourse Analysis

A *Discourse* is the social and material practices of a given socioculturally defined group of people associated around a set of shared interest, goals, and/or activities (Gee, 1992). Such practices include precisely those we have examined in our analysis of Gaveldor's utterance: discourse practices including word choice and grammar, customary practices for social interaction, and characteristic ways to coordinate (and be coordinated by) material resources or "props" such as tools, technologies, and systems of representation (Gee, 1996; Knorr Cetina 1999). These practices, however, are only the means by which Discourses are enacted and historically preserved (if only

for a brief time), not their ends. Rather, it is the shared goals and values embedded in those practices (Gee, 1999) and their bearing on individual identity that define a Discourse as more than a mere constellation of practices and warrant the use of this broader theoretical concept.

Community-valued goals.   Gaveldor's utterance "afk g2g too ef ot regen no poms" was one move in an ongoing activity that functions as a way to accomplish two widespread community-valued goals at once: (a) developing one's avatar in terms of experience and wealth, and (2) creating and maintaining social relationships. Pledge hunts function to "level up" (increase the level of experience and therefore power of) the avatars of those who participate. The experience gained from killing monsters during such an event is distributed across members of the "party" and, because several hunters can kill more monsters than can any one individual hunter alone, the individuals participating profit from such collaboration. The ongoing debate (conducted in the game, on *Lineage*-related discussion boards, and via e-mails, instant messaging, and chatrooms) regarding how experience is mathematically distributed among party members demonstrates the importance of "leveling up" to the community. Gamers not only debate the issue, they gather data, create mathematical models, and test those models so created in terms of fit and predictability. Dividing up the plunder (i.e., the virtual goods obtained from the monsters killed) from a collaborative hunt is also a volatile topic, and considerable time and energy is spent on the game (and off) discussing fair practice and equity in terms of who should get what from such collaborative endeavors. Gaveldor displayed his allegiance to this community value of "experience and wealth" not only through the delivery of an utterance whose function was to allow action that would advance the activity but also through the sheer fact of participating in the first place. Collaborative hunts are not easy; participating in them requires extraordinary skill and patience.

Gaveldor's utterance also displayed his allegiance to the community-valued goal of creating and maintaining social relationships, be they friendly or adversarial. Collaborative activity is the hallmark of MMOGaming and few people who log in remain social isolates. The overwhelmingly most popular topic for conversation is who said/did what to whom, who have "paired up" (platonically or otherwise) and who have parted ways, and how doing *x* betrays *y* but befriends *q* because it benefits *r*. Pledge-hunt practices pay homage to this preoccupation with status versus solidarity: The division of labor within the activity (such as who serves as "point man" issuing orders and who as "medic" healing the others from behind), the unofficial policy of inviting strangers (even members of rival pledges), and the expectation of sticking with it once the activity has begun all mark the event as definitely collaborative and, at it's root, *social* in function. Gaveldor's utterance, as a part of this activity, likewise signified the value placed on social relationships. It monitored the social (Tone Units 1 & 3) on the boundaries of the ideational (Tone Unit 2), *framing a material act as a social one*. He communicated that he would take respite in the forest. Yet, he initiated it as a request, emphasizing that his absence would be temporary (hence not a move that might flout social obligation), and signaled a sense of commitment to his interlocutors by providing them with an end-of-turn account.

It is through participation in standard community practices such as pledge hunts that players display tacit knowledge of, and alignment with, shared community values and goals. By engaging in particular practices, they get the meaning of those practices—the goals and values implicit in them— "for free" (Gee, 1996, p. 159). That *failure* in such practices is routinely interpreted as a rejection of their concomitant values and goals evidences this. For example, if a

healer takes the lead in front of the melee character and tries to fight incoming monsters hand to hand, other party members will not recognize his or her actions as a meaningful performance of "pledge hunting" and will assume the individual has foregone all collaboration and is now selfishly attempting to "steal monsters" (and therefore experience and plunder individually rather than share). Thus, the small and seemingly inconsequential utterance of one player in the context of one activity over one brief moment in time is indelibly tied to a broader system of shared values and goals.

Identity.   Gaveldor's utterance also indexed his membership within the community under-writing the Discourse of *Lineage* gaming. "It is in and through Discourses that we make clear to ourselves and others *who* we are" (Gee, 1996, pp. 128–129). In the context of *Lineage*, individuals do not simply play the classes of characters the game design provides them (elf, knight, mage, prince, princess, etc). Rather, they play highly specific versions of those roles, defined in terms of several tacit "interpretive systems" (Gee, 2000) embedded in community practices that overlap and intersect in complex ways. In combination, these interpretive systems underwrite the situated online identities that gamers both perform and recognize. Although one's in-game identity, whether ascribed or achieved, is never static or determined once and for all, one's position within this multidimensional space of coinciding taxonomies determines who one *is* in the "here and now." Gaveldor is no exception.

Of the myriad interpretive systems implicit in community practice that gamers enact (Steinkuehler, 2005), the central one of interest for this analysis is the "newbie versus beta-vet" distinction. Within *Lineage*, as with most MMOGs, there is an overwhelming characterization of players in terms of a continuum that runs from *newbie* (peripheral participant; Lave & Wenger, 1991) to *beta vet* (central participant). Gamers' varying use of written Lineagese functions, in part, to display their standing in the virtual community along this dimension. Members who are central to the Discourse use terminology left over from *Lineage*'s early beta-testing period (a stage in every software's design production cycle, right before retail release of the product to the general public, in which a selected subset of volunteers are given access to the software to help identify any issues or problems that remain) that is no longer officially used by the game com-pany. Newcomers, on the other hand, use terms that have now replaced these older beta ones. For a beta vet, moving around the virtual world by means of special scrolls is *venzing*; for a newbie, it is *teleporting*. For a beta vet, the huge spiders found in Heine Forest are *shelobs*; for a newbie, they are a*rachnids*, the label now assigned them within the game. Through participation in valued Dis-course practices such as leveling up one's character, acquiring wealth, interacting in the right ways at the right times with the right people, and even knowing where to hunt and with whom, players move from periphery to center (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, if one's social or material practices should at any time fail to display community norms, the Discourse will "disci-pline" the individual to get his or her practices back "in line" (Gee, 1992, p. 108). For example, in my own online history in *Lineage* as Princess Adeleide, I have been called "newbie" for lack of knowledge (thinking apples were a rare find in the game when they are instead abundant and rela-tively worthless), lack of skill (accidentally stabbing another person's avatar rather than the mon-ster we were supposed to be collaboratively slaying), being "out of sync" with social norms (not knowing it was considered a blemish on my pledge's reputation for my avatar, the clan leader, to die in battle and therefore mistakenly fighting in sieges alongside them, to my much repeated pub-

lic demise), and flouting core community values (preparing for a clan war by temporarily transforming my avatar, with the use of a special scroll, into a gentle deer instead of a powerful orc just before a pledge war, effectively inverting the community's preference for function over form). Fellow gamers regularly engage in apprenticeship to help transition one another from periphery to center (Steinkuehler 2004a); however, to ascribe the term *newbie* to someone is to signal your perception of their position within the social hierarchy, often in terms of your own (ostensibly higher) one. As Liadon, one informant, remarked, *newbie* is a derogatory term that applies to anyone who one wants to demean, or has shown any lack of knowledge on any facet of the game. For some people it's anyone less knowledgeable than themselves. For others, it stops at a certain level. Being a newbie or a beta vet is contingent, not a game-granted right. Although by definition one's current level of experience in the game and length of time in the game community determines where one is on the continuum, by practice such distinctions must be interactionally achieved. Throughout the pledge hunt, through both language and activity, Gaveldor displayed himself as a beta vet. His use of the outdated beta term *poms* for what currently is more commonly called *mana pots* or *blues* (given their unique color) placed him at the core of the *Lineage* gaming community by indexing his own history of game play stemming back to *Lineage*'s beta-testing days. Moreover, the skillfulness he showed throughout the hunt in changing locations in response to terrain and incoming mops, monitoring the health and position of other participants, and even knowing when to return to the Elven Forest in response to depleted supplies revealed him to be a highly skilled and professional gamer. His fluency in the linguistic, material, and social practices highly valued within the *Lineage* community positioned him as the kind of "old timer" that "newcomers" aspire to become.

This newbie-versus-beta-vet interpretive system (and this is by no means the only one) is not "in the head" of any particular individual; it is embedded in the ways in which gamers orient to one another in their social and (virtual) material interactions. In combination, systems such as these underwrite the situated online identities that gamers both perform and recognize. Individuals design their on-screen presence through words, symbols, gestures, and activities. As such, they are both creators and consumers of the "kinds of people" available within the game. By design, virtual worlds such as *Lineage* provide a "highly visible medium for the scripting of social roles" (Lam, 2000, p. 474), leaving it up to individual gamers what kind of virtual someone they want to craft themselves to be. For Gaveldor, it was a "beta vet elf" type of individual that was crafted in the interstices of the combined social and material (inter)actions accomplished through virtual activity, performance, and typed talk.

CONCLUSION

This analysis began with inspection of a single utterance's most basic constituent parts: its morphology and syntax. From there, I progressed to increasingly broader units of analysis, treating the utterance as small-*d* discourse or language-in-use by situating it back in its particular social and material context, and finally as one instantiation of a big-*D* Discourse operative in the online game. The utterance examined here—Gaveldor's "afk g2g too ef ot regen no poms"—does not represent some particularly artful conversational move within the game, nor does the pledge hunt it helps constitute. Rather, both the talk and the event function as routine activities within the game space that few gamers would find remarkable. That is, of course, precisely the point, for it is through such

small, routine accomplishments that big-*D* Discourses are created, maintained, and transformed over time. One of our challenges in the analysis of human activity (and therefore, situated cognition, in all its messiness) is to ground our interpretations not only in the microdetails of what people do *and* say, but also, and just as crucially, in broader claims about the "forms of life" that render those activities meaningful (e.g., the values, identities, worldviews, and philosophies that function in ways that enable us to recognize when one is being a particular sort of someone, doing a particular sort of something, and not something or someone else). This analysis is one illustration of how attention to the *function* of language, and not merely its informational content, can be leveraged to better understand the nature of the social and material activity it helps constitute and how that activity is tied to the very community that renders it meaningful in the first place.

Robust online communities such as *Lineage* (and, despite its success in the global MMOG market, *Lineage* is not exceptional in terms of its design or emergent culture) are complex social spaces of affiliations and disaffiliations. Such spaces are constructed largely out of shared (or disparate) social and material practices (e.g., ways of behaving, communicating, interacting, and valuing) through which individuals enact not just their character class, be it elf or princess, but also the "kinds of people" (Hacking, 1986) that they construe themselves to be and that others can recognize. Such play requires complex and nuanced sets of multimodal social and communicative practices that are tied to particular communities and one's identity within them (Steinkuehler, 2004b). MMOGaming is participation in a Discourse—one with fuzzy boundaries that expand with continued play. What is at first confined to the in-game space alone (between log-on and log-off) soon spills over into the virtual world beyond it (e.g., Web sites, chat rooms, e-mail) and even life off screen (e.g., telephone calls, face-to-face meetings), while collections of in-character playmates likewise expand into real-world affinity groups. Although the worlds so inhabited are virtual, they are not "less real" in any meaningful sense. Perhaps Turkle (1995) expressed this best: "Some are tempted to think of life in cyberspace as insignificant, as escape or meaningless diversion. It is not. Our experiences there are serious play. We belittle them at our risk" (p. 268). What people are doing in such cyberspaces is not mere barren play. It is cognitively complex and consequential for those who participate, and our task as researchers interested in cognition and learning (in virtual environments, particularly) should be to find out how.

If such communities are indeed rich spaces for social interaction and enculturation, requiring complex cognitive and cultural knowledge and skills, how is it that they are so often dismissed if not vilified by the media? Many nongaming (and publicly vocal) communities bemoan the rise of electronic media such as video games as "torpid," inviting "inert reception" (Solomon, 2004), and fostering "antisocial behavior" (Provenzo, 1992). Yet, if MMOGaming is participation in a Discourse much like any other, such as corporate law or medicine or even academics, why such dismissal of the intellectual and social merits of this Discourse in particular? One possible explanation put forth by Williams (2003) is that Americans' deeply ambivalent attitude toward gaming may be rooted in societal guilt over the mistreatment and neglect of American youth, which tends to cast adolescents as the source of problems (e.g., violence and crime) rather than the victims of those (often ignored) risk factors associated with the problems themselves (e.g., abuse from relatives, neglect, poverty). Confound that with the tendency to greet every new technology with stories of salvation or damnation (and relatively little between), and a picture emerges in which games such as MMOGs are only the latest of a serious of technological objects that function as tokens we use in communally therapeutic ways to work out our own societal issues. Perhaps the public conversations happening around games in contemporary media say more about

who we are and what we think and value than they do about who gamers are and what they think and value.

Regardless of where one stands on these broader social issues, however, it is in our own intellectual best interest as researchers to take MMOGs seriously. They serve as naturally occurring, self-sustaining, indigenous versions of the types of online learning communities much present research seeks to design and understand while, at the same time, such virtual environments provide a highly visible medium for the collaborative construction of mind, culture, and activity.

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