




4-2015

## A Whole Way of Life: Online Communities and Console Gaming

Carlton Fleenor  
*Film and Media Studies*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorsthesis>

 Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Feminist Philosophy Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Other Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Social Media Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Fleenor, Carlton, "A Whole Way of Life: Online Communities and Console Gaming" (2015). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 114.

<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorsthesis/114>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@wm.edu](mailto:scholarworks@wm.edu).

**A Whole Way of Life: Online Communities and Console Gaming**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Literary and Cultural Studies from  
The College of William and Mary

by

Carlton Fleenor

Accepted for

HONORS  
(Honors)  
[Signature]  
Arthur Knight, Advisor  
[Signature]  
Keith Leslie Johnson  
[Signature]  
Brad Weiss

Williamsburg, VA  
April 17, 2015  
Revised: April 22, 2015

I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it. That is why I want to talk about it, and why I can. For no one who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility can analyze it; he can only, whatever his intention, exhibit it. To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.

Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp"

I'm not watching TV, I'm preparing for a career in cultural studies!

*Grand Theft Auto 5*

## Contents

	Acknowledgements	4
	Abstract	5
1	<b>Introduction</b>	6
2	<b>The Invention of True Achievements</b>	9
	What is TA?	10
	“Socio-Technical” Objects in boyd and Jakobsson	13
	Holism, Identity, and Ien Ang’s “Ideology of Mass Culture”	16
3	<b>How I Became an Achievement Hunter</b>	20
	Coveillance and Knowability	21
	Uniform Idiosyncrasy	23
	The Question of XBA	27
4	<b>The Ideologies of Work and Time</b>	32
	Work and Coveillance	33
	Time and Server Closures	35
	Conclusion	37

## Acknowledgements

I want to thank Arthur Knight, my advisor for this project, for guiding me through this very testing process and always being there to listen to my blabberings.

I want to thank all of the English, Film, GSWS, LCST, and Philosophy instructors at William & Mary who have so influenced my thought. They are: Timothy Barnard, Varun Begley, Bruce Campbell, Victoria Castillo, Benjamin Fiedor, Mark Fowler, Nancy Gray, Keith Leslie Johnson, Sean Keilen, Richard Lowry, Ali Colleen Neff, Gul Ozyegin, Elena Prokhorova, Suzanne Raitt, Kara Thompson, and Sharon Zuber. I especially want to thank Varun Begley, whose freshman seminar on “Horror Film and Society” first got me interested in cultural studies.

I want to thank all of my friends on TrueAchievements for playing with me the past couple of years.

Last but not least, I want to thank Betty Ann Fleenor and Courtney Fleenor, my parents, for always being there for me.

## Abstract

This thesis is a study of TrueAchievements (TA), an online community and social network for players of the Xbox 360 and Xbox One videogame consoles. It is a response to the emerging canon of book-length game studies ethnographic texts, in particular Boellstorff et al.'s *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: a Handbook of Method*. The project is guided by two central threads. The first thread is a critique of danah boyd and Mikael Jakobsson's uses of the rhetoric of social constructionism in their "socio-technical" theories of the relation of 'the social' and 'the technological.' Drawing on the work of Daniel Miller, I understand this relation to be a dialectic in which the technological is "invented" at the same time as those individuals who compose the social's subjectivities' are affected by their reception of the technological. The second thread guiding my thesis is an analysis of TA and its users vis-à-vis the theories of Ien Ang, Lauren Berlant, and Judith Butler. Building on Raymond Williams' concept of the "structure of feeling" and Berlant's concept of the "intimate public," I analyze *what* participation in TA does for its users and *how* that doing is structured, ultimately arguing that the singular becomes general on TA through TA users' learning to "latch onto" certain ideological genres. I understand identity to be a discursive effect: the diffuse but palpable ties which bind the members of TA together are performatively reified through TA users' enacting of their relation to these ideological genres.

## 1. Introduction

This thesis is a study of [TrueAchievements](#) (TA), an online community for players of the various Microsoft-produced videogame platforms, most notably the Xbox 360 and Xbox One consoles. I have been an active member of TA since joining in March 2011, though I did not consider studying TA through a cultural studies lens until I learned of and began reading the emerging canon of book-length game studies ethnographic texts, in particular Boellstorff et al.'s *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: a Handbook of Method*. A majority of these texts have covered specific “virtual worlds,” such as *Ultima Online*<sup>1</sup>, *Everquest*<sup>2</sup>, and *World of Warcraft*.<sup>3</sup> Despite this growing interest in ethnography within game studies, console gaming as a phenomenon has not received much attention from an ethnographic angle. I understand this to be the case for two reasons. First, videogame consoles were not universally networked until the seventh generation of videogame consoles, which began in November 2005 with the release of the Microsoft Xbox 360. Networked play between console users—traditionally the object of anthropology’s forays into online gaming—has thus simply not been the norm for long. Second, virtual worlds’ statuses as “worlds” make them ideal objects of study for anthropologists. The virtual world is something that one discretely delves into—enters, and then leaves. A virtual world is a “community,” a “lifestyle,” a “family,” a “culture.”<sup>4</sup> There is an “*inside*,” and thus an outside, to the virtual world (Boellstorff 4). From my own experiences as a member of TA, however, I knew that the practices surrounding console gaming could become a kind of lifestyle too, but with a difference.

I thus set out to write an ethnography of TA hoping that I might introduce a language with which game studies could begin to talk about the practices surrounding console gaming.

---

<sup>1</sup> Julian Dibbell’s *Play Money: Or, How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot*

<sup>2</sup> T. L. Taylor’s *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*

<sup>3</sup> Bonnie Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft*

<sup>4</sup> Mark Serrels, [“The People Who Only Play One Video Game,”](#) *Kotaku*, 1/18/15.

This thesis is not an ethnography, however, for two reasons. First, I chose to not write primarily about boosting sessions. Boosting sessions are two to three hour-long gaming sessions in which TA users meet on Xbox Live at a predetermined time and date to cooperatively “boost” the achievements associated with a specific game’s multiplayer mode. Boosting is one of the few activities associated with TA in which TA users interact with one another in a temporally synchronous manner: most modes of communications afforded by the TA website are asynchronous in nature (forums, friend feeds, comments on news stories, etc.). The act of boosting with other TA users thus gave me an opportunity to participate in and observe TA users’ practices in the manner championed by virtual world ethnography; I ended up participating in over eighty boosting sessions during my fieldwork in Summer 2014. Second, my thesis does not integrate the voices of my friends on TA and other TA users I played and interacted with in a substantial manner. The questions I ask in this thesis are largely theoretical in nature. I did become interested in asking them while completing my fieldwork, however.

This thesis is guided by two key questions. The first is How do online communities do what they do? In the second section, I critique Mikael Jakobsson’s “socio-technical” theory of the achievement system by way of reference to danah boyd’s concept of the “networked public.” In *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, boyd defines networked publics as:

publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice. (8)

A networked public is a collectivity whose status as such is formed by and through the constitutive interactions of a user base with a networked infrastructure—a website, a board on a forum, a server in a virtual world, etc. boyd thus posits the networked public as a space whose character emerges from the conflicts of the real and the imagined, the material and the socially



constructed. I argue that the rhetoric of social constructionism which characterizes such socio-technical theories of online sociality inadvertently fetishize the technological, and suggest that we turn to ideology and affect theory if we wish to understand how members of an online community like TA come to be bound together. One of the concepts I mobilize is Lauren Berlant's idea of the "intimate public." In *Cruel Optimism*, she writes:

Public spheres are always affect worlds, worlds to which people are bound, when they are, by affective projections of a constantly negotiated common interestedness. [...] In an intimate public one senses [...] that collective mediation through narration and audition might provide some routes out of the impasse and the struggle of the present, or at least some sense that there would be recognition were the participants in the room together. [...] You might have been drawn to it because of a curiosity about something minor, unassociated with catastrophe, like knitting or collecting something, or having a certain kind of sexuality, only after which it became a community of support, offering tones of suffering, humor, or cheerleading. (226)

Several points of note from this passage characterize the ways in which I think about affect and the figure of the online community. First, the diffuse but palpable ties that bind the members of an intimate public together are affective in nature. Intimate publics are "structures of feeling," in Raymond Williams' phrase. Our ties to others in an intimate public are fundamentally experienced or perceived at the level of affect, of feeling. Second, participation in an intimate public is life-sustaining in effect and ostensibly healing or liberating in function. In its affordance of a "route out of the impasse and the struggle of the present" and its clear-cutting of a space for members' "cheerleading" of each other's efforts, the intimate public seems to restore something lost. Third, the multiple, discrete forms of identification—the individual as American, gamer, knitter, collector, etc.—which individually come to constitute or define one's singular sense of an "identity" are productions of her participation or membership in a variety of intimate publics.

The second question guiding this thesis is What does it mean to be a member of TA? As I have already noted, participation in TA can become a lifestyle of sorts despite the fact that most activities associated with TA are asynchronous in nature. I use the keywords of *identity* and

*holism* to anchor this discussion. How does identity emerge from TA users' participation in all of the activities central to a discussion of TA? How does TA become "a whole way of life," in Raymond Williams' phrase?

This thesis is overall an attempt to theorize user practices on TA with cultural studies theory: we do not necessarily need an entirely new language to talk about the practices surrounding videogames. I now view this thesis as a theoretical design document of sorts for what could be a future qualitative or ethnographic project relating to TA.

## 2. The Invention of TrueAchievements

"See you on the metafield."  
--- Ryot Control<sup>5</sup>

### **What is TA?**

TrueAchievements (TA) should be understood, first and foremost, as a database of player activity which users opt in to when registering for the website. This opting into the TA platform initiates an interpolative process wherein certain elements contained within a user's Gamercard, an account or profile-like data structure unique to the Xbox Live service, begin to be "scanned" by TA's data collection infrastructure. The Gamercard's elements include, but are not limited to, the user's Gamertag<sup>6</sup> (her username—mine is Holiday9357), the user's "Rep," a "star"-based feedback system derived from the user's interactions with other users during online play, and the user's "Zone," a self-selected descriptor.<sup>7</sup> Below is an image of an individual user's profile from the perspective of another user within the Xbox 360 "Guide" interface. While the values of

---

<sup>5</sup> "[Speculations and Reflections: My friends are my achievements!](#)"

<sup>6</sup> The terms Gamercard and Gamertag are often used interchangeably by members of TA.

<sup>7</sup> There are four options: Recreation, Family, Pro, and Underground. My current "Zone" is Recreation.

several of the elements of users' Gamercards are incorporated into the visual design of the profile's interface, profiles are not direct visualizations of the Gamercard data structure's constitutive elements.



Figure 1: An Xbox Live user's profile from the perspective of another user within the Xbox 360 "Guide" interface.

Most importantly, achievements unlocked by users are bound to their Gamercards.

Achievements are tokens which “unlock” following the user’s fulfilling of particular in-game conditions specified by the videogame developer in question, and are a required element of titles for Microsoft’s various videogame platforms such as the Xbox 360, Xbox One, the Windows 8 OS, and the various incarnations of the Windows Phone. Each achievement has a certain numeric value attributed to it. The numeric value attached to an achievement is its “Gamerscore,” or GS (think of it like a unit of measurement). A user’s Gamerscore is the numeric value that is the sum of all of the numeric values attributed to each of that user’s unlocked achievements, as can be seen in Fig. 1. The term GS thus (circularly) holds two functions: GS is the unit of measurement of sorts for the numeric values attributed to individual achievements and the name for the numeric value that is the user’s sum total of GS. With the release of the Xbox One, records of many more kinds of activity within specific titles have begun to be directly attributed to users’ Gamercards. The Xbox One version of [Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes](#) (Konami, 2014), for example, attributes users’ “top scores” in individual levels to the user’s Gamercard, thus

allowing these scores to be directly read and processed—in the case of TA, “scanned”—by a third party.

Upon joining TA, the user’s Gamercard is added to the bank of users whose Gamercards are regularly scanned by the website’s data collection infrastructure. This bank of Gamercards is scanned to ascertain specific achievements’ “TA Ratios.” An achievement’s TA Ratio<sup>8</sup> is understood to denote its “True” difficulty (hence, TrueAchievements). Rich Stone, the creator of TA and owner of the [TrueGaming Network](#), relates why he chose to formulate the TA Ratio as such.

[Q:] I don’t think the way you’ve calculated the scores are fair

[A:] The [TA] score for an achievement is calculated based on a set formula - there is no decision by any of the TrueAchievement team about which game gets more or less points than any other. That would be silly.

The formula itself is based on a number of factors...

The first thing that the TrueAchievement [score of an individual achievement] takes into account is the normal Gamerscore for that achievement - we could have abandoned this completely but we felt that the games programmers had chosen how to distribute their 1000 (or 200 for XBLA) games with good reason (OK, maybe not with Avatar) so we would use that as our base.

We then look at how many people own the game (we decided this by saying anyone that has at least one achievement owns the game - this clears people playing demos out of the stats).

Finally we look at how many people have the achievement compared to how many people own the game - this gives us a difficulty factor which we multiply the original achievement Gamerscore by. We call this maths.

Obviously there are a hundred different ways we could have decided on how to calculate the score but we felt that this was the fairest way. If 100 people own a game and only one person has a certain achievement in that game then that achievement is obviously very tough to get, so the TA score for that achievement is marked up considerably. Or the game is extremely dull.<sup>9</sup>

For example, 203,673 TA users have unlocked at least one achievement in the Xbox 360 version of [Grand Theft Auto IV](#) (Rockstar, 2008). “[Off the Boat](#),” an achievement unlocked at the very

---

<sup>8</sup> The TA Ratio’s formula is  $[\text{Square root} (\text{Total gamers} / \text{Total with Achievement})] * \text{Gamerscore of Achievement}$  (“[Formula for T.A’s](#)”).

<sup>9</sup> This language is from an outdated version of TA’s “FAQ” page. The current “FAQ” page can be found [here](#).

beginning of *GTA IV*'s single-player mode, has a TA Ratio of 1.01, as 197,996 users (97%) of those who “own” the game have unlocked it. “[Wanted](#),” an achievement which requires at least 40-50 hours of play in *GTA IV*'s multiplayer mode, has a TA Ratio of 7.54, however, as only 3,573 (2%) have unlocked it. The TA Ratio of an individual achievement is then multiplied by that achievement's “base” GS value to determine its “TA score.” Thus, because “Off the Boat” has a GS value of 5 points and “Wanted” has a GS value of 20 points, the achievements' respective TA scores are 5 points ( $5 * 1.01$ ) and 151 points ( $20 * 7.54$ ). Individual TA users are also assigned an overall TA score that is the sum total of all TA scores earned by that user. This overall TA score is then divided by the user's GS to calculate her overall TA Ratio. For example, [my Gamertag](#) has 221,989 TA score, 117,785 GS, and a TA Ratio of 1.8847.<sup>10</sup>

The website has a number of features in addition to the aforementioned achievement tracking service. These features include the “Homepage,” a feed collecting the activities of TA users' friends, user-organized “gaming sessions,” user-submitted “solutions” for individual achievements, collaboratively-produced “walkthroughs” for individual games, [site-sponsored](#) and [user-submitted](#) reviews of individual games, [forums](#), [chat rooms](#), blogs for individual users, and [site-sponsored](#) and [user-created](#) leaderboards. TA is also a destination for [news](#) relating to Microsoft's various gaming platforms. Its front page hosts original features, such as interviews of TA users (“[Let's Talk with...](#)”), articles (“[Easter Eggs](#)”), and “listicles” (“[TA Top Five](#)”), though the majority of TA-hosted news stories are reports on videogame industry happenings—examples include announcements of new titles (“[Fenix Rage Coming to Xbox One](#)”) and

---

<sup>10</sup> More than 270,000 users have registered for TA since its launch in March 2008. As of 3/24/15, more than 55,000 registered users have been active in the past 30 days. According to a 7/24/13 [article](#), TA “gets 850,000 unique visitors and almost 20 million monthly page views.” Comparable platforms include Raptr (which announced that it would discontinue support for all non-PC gaming in [March 2014](#)), Playfire, and GamerDNA (which closed its 360voice service in [August 2014](#)).

releases of new gameplay trailers for upcoming titles (“[Transformers RotDS Releases New Trailer](#)”).

One can already begin to see that a discussion of TA entails a discussion of a wide variety of different services and platforms. That is, in my speaking to the specificities of TA, an online community that is already multisite in nature, I am forced to also include formal discussions of Xbox 360 gaming, Xbox One gaming, and the infrastructure and features of the Xbox Live service itself. Throughout this thesis, we will keep coming back to the question of holism. What can TA tell us about the directions ethnographic work in game studies *should* be taking us?

### **“Socio-Technical” Objects in boyd and Jakobsson**

A single piece of substantial scholarly work has been written on the subject of achievements for the Microsoft videogame platforms: Mikael Jakobsson’s 2011 [essay](#) “The Achievement Machine: Understanding Xbox 360 Achievements in Gaming Practices.” In his ethnographic study, Jakobsson explores the ways in which the Xbox 360 “community of practice” has come to “appropriate” what he terms “the achievement system,” ultimately arguing that we should understand the achievement system as an “invisible MMO [massively multiplayer online game] that all Xbox Live members participate in, whether they like it or not” in a bid to “question the dichotomy between PC/MMO and console gaming.” Jakobsson’s study differs from mine in his focus on the larger videogame public’s reception of—and ambivalence towards or aversion to—achievements. While he references the [Xbox Achievements](#) website,<sup>11</sup> most of his essay’s “empirical material” comes from an assortment of videogame industry-centric

---

<sup>11</sup> The Xbox 360 Achievements website—or x360a, as it was, and is often still, called—changed its name to Xbox Achievements (XBA) preceding the 2013 release of the Xbox One console.

podcasts. In this way, Jakobsson gathers the voices of those members of the larger videogame public who have developed a relationship to achievements, yet are not part of an achievement public such as TA or Xbox Achievements *per se*.

Jakobsson argues that we should see the achievement system as a “second game that all Xbox Live members play at the same time as they play the separate retail and downloadable games.” While “this second game has no official name,” Jakobsson refers to the phenomenon as the “*Xbox Live Massively Multiplayer Online Game (XLMMO)*.” The *XLMMO* idea deploys Latourian network theory, insofar as Jakobsson mobilizes the idea of the material-semiotic relation in his characterization of the “Xbox 360 achievement system as a technological system designed by Microsoft, and as a cultural system socially constructed by the Xbox 360 community of practice.” Much like danah boyd does with her definition of the networked public, then, Jakobsson posits the achievement system as a network formed from the constitutive interactions of the material/technological/real, the “technological system designed by Microsoft,” and the semiotic/imagined/socially constructed, the “cultural system socially constructed by the Xbox 360 community of practice.”

Such “socio-technical”<sup>12</sup> theories are very questionable. On one hand, boyd and Jakobsson’s language either connotes or explicitly hails the rhetoric of social constructionism (boyd: “the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice”; Jakobsson: “cultural system socially constructed by the Xbox 360 community of practice”). On the other hand, boyd and Jakobsson’s explicit specifying of “the technological” (boyd: “the space constructed through networked technologies”; Jakobsson: “technological system designed by Microsoft”) presumes that the technological is, in some

---

<sup>12</sup> Jakobsson writes, “The Xbox 360 achievement system has had a significant impact on the gaming industry, which makes it an interesting socio-technical object of study.”

respect, detached from—even if the two elements are in a dialectical or complementary relation to each other—”the social.”<sup>13</sup>

I do not mean to say that technological objects such as Xbox Live or Facebook magically spring forth from the constitutive interactions of those individuals composing the social (they obviously do not), or that the social and the technological do not exist in a dialectical relation to one another (more on this to come). I rather wish to say that social constructionism is best used in cultural studies of media as a theory of local meaning production. Under such a theory of social constructionism, then, considerations of a technological object’s origin or of the implications of the technological object’s status as a “space constructed through networked technologies” are irrelevant, their continued inclusion a category mistake. In *Tales from Facebook*, Daniel Miller writes

The starting point for an anthropologist researching Facebook is that there is no such thing. The word Facebook stands for the social networking facility developed in the US. But what any given population actually uses, based on that facility, quickly develops its own local cultural genre and expectations, which will differ from others. (158)

When boyd and Jakobsson use the rhetoric of social constructionism *and* specify the somehow detached status of the technological object, the technological object is inadvertently fetishized.

If we assume that the technological is always-already a production of the social, how should we characterize the relation of the social to the technological? On a purely practical level, we will need to talk about the relation of TA users to the thing that is TA. I have argued that boyd and Jakobsson’s “socio-technical” theories implicitly figure the relation as that of a (false)

---

<sup>13</sup> In such a specifying of the technological, however, “socio-technical” theories go against one of the more radical implications of Butlerian social constructionism: that precisely *nothing* lies outside of the social if the “raw” is indeed always-already “cooked” (Butler 51).



dualism. I instead propose that we think of the relation of the social to the technological as that of a dialectic. As Daniel Miller explains in *Digital Anthropology*,

[Anthropology] becomes a more relevant and necessary discipline to the degree that Facebook is transformed into Fasbook. Though to take this one stage further, the point is not that Facebook is localized so much as that Fasbook is invented by Trinidadians at the same time as Trinidadians are dialectically changed through their use of Fasbook. For the anthropologist, there is no such thing as Facebook; there is only the aggregate of its particular usages by specific populations. The relativism of anthropology pertains, then, not just to the differences between Orkut, Twitter, QQ, Facebook and Cyworld; it is also the heterogeneity of each SNS [social networking site] as made evident from what we may hope will soon be multiple ethnographic encounters. (153)

What I want to emphasize from this particular passage is Miller's figuring of the relation between SNSs and users as a dialectic. Two kinds of questions need to be asked about TA, then: 1) how do TA users, in their use of TA, *produce* the uses of—or the meanings to be associated with—TA, and 2) how are TA users' subjectivities affected by their use of TA?

### **Holism, Identity, and Ien Ang's "Ideology of Mass Culture"**

While certainly unwieldy, I find Jakobsson's idea of the *XLMMO* to be most interesting for its framing of the "achievement system" as a "deterministic system" which users are impelled to "react and adapt to [...] whether they like it or not." He writes:

Based on the framework provided by Microsoft, the community has developed intriguing gaming practices where the individual games become pieces of a larger whole. [...]

On one hand, the different strategies and ways of conceptualizing the system shows how players have appropriated the technology and rules provided by Microsoft, and socially constructed systems that fit their play styles. On the other hand, many players are deeply conflicted over these gaming habits and feel trapped in a deterministic system that dictates ways of playing the games that they do not enjoy. [...]

All Xbox Live members get gamerscore points and achievements, regardless of whether they themselves acknowledge this or share this information with anyone. Participation in the *XLMMO* as a user of the Xbox Live service is not a choice. Even if there had been a way of opting out completely, the fact that the system is there means something, also to those that see no value in it.

Jakobsson thus conceives of the achievement system as a “second game,” the *XLMMO*, because of 1) achievements’ status as a required element of all titles for the various Microsoft videogame platforms, and 2) how Xbox 360 users have come to feel acted upon by the achievement system. I have argued that Jakobsson’s account of the achievement system as a “socio-technical object of study” inadvertently results in its fetishization—that is, in its figuring as a monolithic, non-local network which Xbox 360 users “appropriate” rather than invent. While the subject of the validity of Jakobsson’s conceptualization can be taken up on its own terms, I understand this circumstance to be more a symptom of his own inability to think past the fact that achievements are required elements of all titles for the various Microsoft videogame platforms. That is, in conceiving of the achievement system as a network, Jakobsson reifies his own inability to think past the category of the achievement.

I do not make this point to belittle Jakobsson’s argument. I do believe, however, that the ways in which we talk about achievements affect the ways in which we talk about those users who unlock them. Specifically, when the achievement system is conceived as a network, we mistake users’ feelings of being acted upon by the achievement system as an actual act of being acted upon: feeling is mistaken as effect. In other words, when the achievement system is thought of as a network, individual users’ feelings of being acted upon become the effect of a top-down relation wherein the individual user is actively acted upon by the achievement system.

I instead propose that we think of users’ feelings toward achievements as being precisely *ideological* in nature. In line with my previous argument concerning the validity of boyd and Jakobsson’s conceptualizations, I view the user’s relation to the achievement system as one of a bottom-up relation wherein the individual user actively produces the meanings to be associated with the achievement system. The question of the relation of the achievement system to the

individual should *not* be How does the achievement system's acting upon users affect user practices?, but What ideologies concerning the achievement system do users "bring to the table," and, in this act of bringing to the table, subsequently *produce* what is acknowledged within a certain circle to *be* the achievement system? The user's (felt) relation to the achievement system can thus be thought as being formed from the user's "latching onto" certain ideologies: (feelings of) membership in certain publics affords the user (feelings of) access to certain ideological genres, which are in turn reified by and through the user's sustained latching onto them.

In "Dallas and the Ideology of Mass Culture," a chapter from her 1985 monograph *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, Ien Ang theorizes the contents of her forty-two respondents' letters in relation to two discourses she names "the ideology of mass culture" and "the ideology of populism" (92, 111). The sense of ideology evoked by Ang should be understood as being distinct from the term's various established meanings, however. For Ang, ideologies are "ready-made conceptions" which people "use when *talking* about popular culture" (95, 115). An ideology is a line of thought one "subscribes" to, a "mould" through which one "finds words," and a "framework of interpretation" one "comes into contact with" and "cannot apparently avoid" (96, 95, 110, 109). Ang's conceptualization of ideology thus installs agency—at least to some degree—in the linguistic subject, the conversing individual.

Ang does *not* want us to (necessarily) think, however, that ideology should therefore be disregarded or believed to be lacking in truth, validity, etc. She writes:

Ideologies organize not only the ideas and images people make of reality, they also enable people to form an image of themselves and thus to occupy a position in the world. Through ideologies people acquire an identity, they become subjects with their own convictions, their own will, their own preferences. (102)

Ideology is all there is for Ang: “the way[s] in which cultural forms in everyday life are approached by ordinary people” are ideological precisely because they are always-already mediated by people's relations to discourse (116). The question of the nature of this relation is irrelevant, as Ang is only interested in tracking the ways in which her subjects' relations to discourses about popular American TV can be read “symptomatically” in their responses (87).

I similarly wish to track the ways in which certain ideological genres unique to the TA online community are produced. Such an exercise will allow us to get at two additional subjects I hope to address in this study. The first subject is that of *identity*: how is one's status as a member of TA signaled through her subscription to—that is, her latching onto—certain ideological genres? For Lauren Berlant, identity is paradoxical insofar as it is both “the kind of singularity that an individual is said to have” and a quality defined in relation to “the individual's point of intersection with membership with particular populations or collectivities” (*Desire/Love* 16). The tracking of users' subscriptions to these ideological genres will thus help us better understand how TA users reify their felt relations to one another and, in turn, reify their difference from others.

The second question is that of *holism*: how can a tracking of users' subscriptions to these ideological genres help us understand what attitudes or sentiments TA users “bring” to all of the various activities central to a discussion of what it means to be a member of TA? TA is not a “world” in the manner that virtual worlds are: there is no discrete sense of an “inside,” and thus an outside, to the thing that is TA (Boellstorff 4). Nevertheless, the act of being a member of TA still means something. Our task, then, is to represent TA in a manner which heartily embraces its multisite nature.

### 3. How I Became an Achievement Hunter

Ang's conceptualization of ideology, however, carries with it a certain qualitative distinction. While all language is ideological to some degree for Ang, "the ideology of mass culture" and "the ideology of populism" are ideologies *because* of their sheer ubiquity. We will explore in the fourth section of this thesis the ideologies of "work" and "time," but for now, let us return to the subject of the invention of TA. How do TA users "invent" TA at the same time as TA users are dialectically changed by their use of TA (*Digital Anthropology* 153)?

As I have suggested, "virtual world" ethnography cannot account for participation in TA because of the explicit inside/outside dynamic at work in the ways that we have chosen to talk about participation in these "internet worlds" ("Life Writing" 181). I first came to this realization while reading Boellstorff, et al.'s *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: a Handbook of Method*, but I had long thought about what it means to be a member of TA because of the process by which I became a member of TA. My coming to TA was not a straightforward process. Like in most hobbies (or addictions), rather, my gradual integration into other, surrounding discourses brought about my eventual introduction to the TA platform itself.

The first barrier to entry for my eventual participation in TA was my family's installation of Wi-Fi in our house. While I had unlocked achievements offline on my Xbox 360 during the two and a half years I did not have Xbox Live, I only began to care about achievements and my overall Gamerscore (GS) once I was able to view the user profiles of those I had interacted with online. GS became a numeric marker by which I began viewing myself in relation to, and comparing myself with, other users. TA users I have spoken with similarly describe how they began caring about achievements at a certain point in their gaming. This development did not necessarily occur after interacting with other players over Xbox Live, but it was a conscious

development, insofar as TA users can think back to when they developed an interest in achievements.

### **Coveillance and Knowability**

I wish to further develop two points raised in the preceding example. The first is how I began to care about achievements and GS once I was able to view other Xbox Live users' profiles. In her 2006 essay "Does WoW Change Everything?" T.L. Taylor posits *World of Warcraft* players' monitoring of one another's game modifications as a relation of "coveillance in which there is lateral observation between community members." She writes:

We generally think of this kind of monitoring as pernicious, with evocations of Bentham's panopticon from Foucault. Mark Poster suggested that the perfection of means of surveillance through new technologies creates a "superpanoptic" moment in which we are not only disciplined to surveillance but to "participating in the process." But within the context of games and play, being watched (or watching) might actually be fun. How do we understand "participatory surveillance" within games? (12)

Jakobsson applies Taylor's concept of coveillance in "The Achievement System," writing:

A core property of the achievement system is the possibility to look at other players' profiles and see detailed information of their achievements, and in return providing everybody else access to detailed information about your gaming activities. [...] [Taylor] notes how the playful and fun aspects of these systems are intricately intertwined with more troubling issues of observation and control.

Under such a theory, the nature of my relation to achievements and GS "evolved" once I began to take pleasure in the viewing of other users' profiles and in the realization that other Xbox Live users could view my profile as well. My viewing of other users' profiles could thus be understood as having heralded my feeling of an entrance into a relational economy of gazes wherein achievements and GS are a currency of sorts. Siva Vaidhyanathan speaks to a similar effect in *The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)* when he writes,

[T]he forces at work in Europe, North America, and much of the rest of the world are the opposite of a Panopticon: they involve not the subjection of the individual to the gaze of a single, centralized authority, but the surveillance of the individual, *potentially by all, always by many*. We have a “cryptopticon” (for lack of a better word). Unlike Bentham’s prisoners, we don’t know all the ways in which we are being watched or profiled—we *simply know that we are*. (112, my emphasis)

Vaidhyanathan is not only interested in speaking to what Taylor calls the “micro level” of surveillance, but is also interested in talking about our mounting ambivalence concerning Google’s making of users into products to be “profiled and targeted” (Taylor 12, Vaidhyanathan 83). He writes, “we don’t regulate our behavior under the gaze of surveillance: instead, we don’t seem to care” (Vaidhyanathan 112).

I would add to Taylor, Jakobsson, and Vaidhyanathan’s theories of surveillance that the sense of pleasure one derives from the act of “seeing and being seen” vis-à-vis the viewing of other Xbox Live users’ profiles registers at the level of *affect*. That is, I understand the pleasure stemming from the viewing of others’ profiles, and the accompanying realization that one’s profile is being, or could be, viewed by others, to be, at its heart, a symptom of that individual’s growing sense of a membership in a certain kind of knowable community. The viewing of one another’s profiles is one of the axes around which Xbox Live becomes knowable, insofar as one’s unlocked achievements and overall GS become attributes around which one’s participation in the knowable community of Xbox gaming becomes legible in a seemingly discrete, concrete manner.

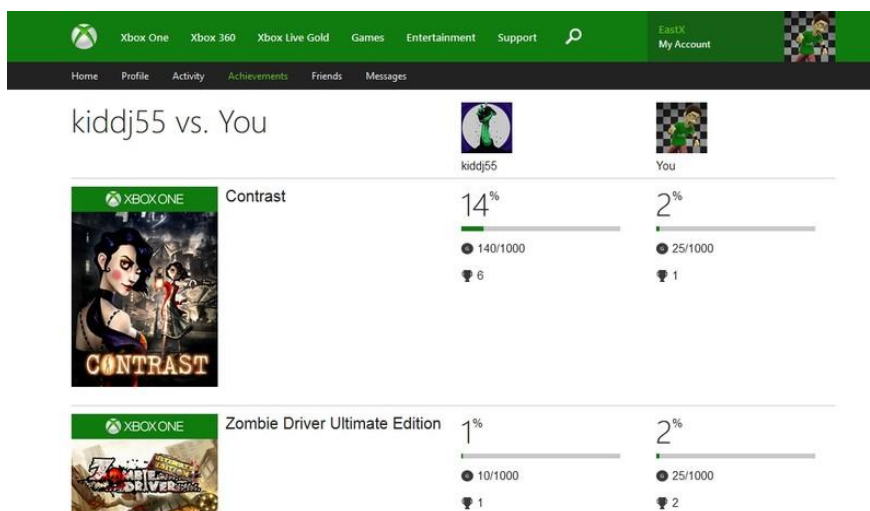


Figure 2: Comparing the achievements unlocked by the Xbox Live user in question (EastX) to those of another Xbox Live user (kiddj55) while using the [official Xbox website](#).

One's ability to view the achievements successfully unlocked by the other, and to in turn view these in relation to the achievements unlocked by the one, makes the other knowable because of what the achievement is—a marker that signifies one's completion of a universal, predetermined task. The achievement is so legible a marker, then, because its presence signifies the other's completion of that task. I thus conceive of *comparison* as a—if not the—concrete act by which Xbox Live is made into a knowable community.

### Uniform Idiosyncrasy

To think about sensual matter that is elsewhere to sovereign consciousness but that has historical significance in domains of subjectivity requires following the course from what's singular — the subject's irreducible specificity — to the means by which the matter of the senses becomes general within a collectively lived situation. (53)

Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*

The second point I wish to further develop from my framing of my family's installation of Wi-Fi as the first barrier to entry for my eventual participation in TA is the very way in which the nature of my relation to achievements and GS evolved. At the time, I viewed GS as a number which in effect denoted one's relative "experience" as a "gamer," hence my earlier labeling of



GS as a numeric marker: the more GS an Xbox Live user had, the more experienced a gamer I thought her to be. The meanings I instill in achievements and GS have changed several times since then, however. I do not pay much attention to my overall GS anymore; I am now more interested in bettering my Gamercard's completion percentage<sup>14</sup> and overall TA Ratio.

There are really two self-realizations to be read in the previous scene, however. The first was the fact that I began to “care about” achievements following my family's installation of WiFi. This newfound interest in achievements was a conscious development: achievements became valuable once I felt myself to be “in circulation” vis-à-vis my entrance into Xbox Live's relational economy of gazes (*Cruel Optimism* 43). The second self-realization was my acquiring of the ability to read the contents of that initial shift in meaning: I gained the vocabulary for thinking about the meanings I had previously encoded in achievements and GS once I became a member of TA. A description of my originary “philosophy of play” is thus a reification—a putting-into-language—of a phenomenon, the “originary” behavior, which is itself the effect of a form of “belated understanding” (Stockton 14).

TA users will often talk with one another about how they conceptualize their own gaming practices and how they recognize participation in TA to have affected those practices to pass the time during boosting sessions, which can often run two to three hours in length. Lavindathar, a TA user, outlines his own philosophy of play in the following passage from a “[Let's Talk](#)” article.

**Marc:** How has your gaming changed or evolved since coming to TA?

---

<sup>14</sup> Completion percentage is the total number of achievements unlocked by a user divided by the total number of achievements which *could* be unlocked by that user. The latter number is the sum of all achievements which could possibly be unlocked from all of the individual titles “started” by that user. A title is “started” once a user has unlocked at least one achievement in it. I currently have a completion percentage of 88.28%.

**Lav:** I've definitely tried to improve my completion percentage since joining here, and I'm up to 91% now so I'm happy with that. Anything above 90% will do me....

I first got involved into achievements in two ways. One, was World of Warcraft had the same system but completely contained within the game. As I was part of one of the world's best guilds, I started earning them to look good with other players. The other, was my brother had a 360 and I saw him playing the original [Assassin's Creed](#) and he explained the xbox achievement system to me as I didn't have one at the time. When it came time to quit WoW, I went and got an xbox with AC, and I've been hooked ever since.

I actually got my 360 about 3-4 years after it came out, so I started late. I guess my gamerscore is ok considering!

I also don't view achievements like a lot do. I do see them as sort of a marker to recognise something hard, but more importantly I view them as a gaming history. I can look back at what I've played, when, and what I did. That's more important to me, it makes me feel like something is logged forever.

I saw the following exchange on a TA user's Homepage while surfing TA (the numbers denote unique commenters):

- 1 status: Sometimes its not that games change, but how you look at them is whats changed.
- 2: How so?
- 3: How would a game change?
- 4: Think he meant graphically
- 5: I'm thinking he means as you grow older, games change. Things you once loved about games. Isn't there anymore. For example, I loved competitive MP [multiplayer] sports games, now I..
- 5: prefer them co-op [cooperative]. The competitive is still there, but my gaming habits have changed. Just guessing, that just might be me.
- 6: or he could mean TA, games have not changed in general since I joined TA, but *how I play and perceive them* has all but changed completely [my emphasis]

In the second section of this thesis I discussed how the TA data collection infrastructure's calculation of achievements' TA Ratios instills a different, relational value in achievements which is independent of those achievements' actual GS values. TA Ratios can thus make difficult achievements with low GS values, such as [Limbo](#)'s "[No Point in Dying](#)" or [Max Payne 3](#)'s "[The Shadows Rushed Me](#)," more valuable. I do not intend, however, for the previous example to merely exhibit this fact. I rather wish to ask why members of TA enjoy talking with one another about the nature of the ways in which they play now and used to play in the past. What kinds of pleasures are drawn from the act of being self-reflexive?

My argument concerning the philosophy of play's significance for the individual TA user has two assumptions. The first is that the categories members of TA use to formulate and then communicate their philosophies of play are discursively informed, which is to say, *generic*. This assumption will help us get past the reality that TA users' philosophies of play are *representations*, rather than direct translations or presentations, of users' "actual" behaviors. In "The Achievement Machine," Jakobsson notes the ambivalence with which Xbox 360 players wield these categories. He writes:

It is important to note that these three categories [casuals, hunters, and completists] are fuzzy and unstable. Players may inhabit traits from several categories at the same time and their attitudes and play styles often change over time. The players' own perception of what category they belong to often is inconsistent with their actual gaming behavior, and [...] they are often ambivalent to their play styles, noting that they wish they could act differently or that they do not understand their own behavior.

In my valuation, the gap between appearance and reality is irrelevant if we only wish to understand the affective function of the philosophy of play for TA users. My second assumption is that, while unquestionably inflected with certain ideologies, individual TA users' philosophies of play are *felt* to be idiosyncratic—that is, personal and unique.<sup>15</sup>

I argue that the act of the sharing of one's philosophy of play is a way in which the *being* of being a member of TA is felt to have become *intimate*. In line with Jakobsson's observation that Xbox 360 gamers often "do not understand their own behavior," the sharing of one another's philosophies of play becomes "life-sustaining" when one is reassured that others too have a similarly problematic relation to achievements—when one begins to sense that everyone else is in a similar boat, too (*Cruel Optimism* 43).

---

<sup>15</sup> I began to think about the significance of the holding and sharing of one's philosophy of play while boosting with a TA user who quite excitedly, even fervently, described himself as a *completionist*. I realized that (a) one's philosophy of play can be a strong marker of identity, and that (b) one's philosophy of play can *feel* singular though generic in form.

## The Question of XBA

I earlier posited my participation in networked play with other Xbox 360 users on Xbox Live as the first barrier to entry for my eventual introduction to TA. The second barrier to entry was my participation in another achievement public, Xbox Achievements (XBA). Like TA, XBA is a multisite destination for achievement aficionados. The website's most notable features are its extensive [forums](#) and [home page](#), which features news, reviews, and original stories relating to Microsoft's various gaming platforms written by XBA [staff members](#). TA and XBA have increasingly grown to mirror each other feature-wise in subsequent updates. When I initially became active on XBA in May 2010, however, there were a number of pronounced differences between the two services. One of XBA's features I used at the time was its "Achievement Guide and Roadmap" functionality: XBA users are [encouraged](#) to write and post guides for individual games as threads in those games' subforums.<sup>16</sup> Users can then [submit](#) these guides to be reviewed by XBA's Guide Team and, once approved, published on the game's official XBA page. After I stopped "[lurking](#)" in XBA's forums, I also began soliciting play with other XBA users via individual games' subforums' "Achievement Trading Threads."<sup>17</sup>

In "Uniform Idiosyncrasy," I described how TA users amass the vocabulary with which to develop a philosophy of play via interaction with other members of TA. Implicit in this formulation is the philosophy of play's status as something one *learns* to develop. Angian ideology can thus be alternatively conceptualized as a kind of cultural literacy: TA users' past and present behaviors become intelligible to themselves and other members of TA through those users' employing of certain categories common to TA.

---

<sup>16</sup> For example, [here](#) is the subforum for the Xbox 360 version of *Limbo*.

<sup>17</sup> For example, [here](#) is the achievement trading thread for the Xbox 360 version of *Grand Theft Auto IV*.

I wish to extend this line of thought to the subject of XBA. Specifically, I contend that my participation in XBA fostered my development of certain *ideological* literacies. Framing Angian ideology as a mode of literacy will help us conceive of ideology as not only a linguistic discourse which one learns to employ but also a series of practices which one learns to become willing to adopt. The first of these literacies developed from my increasing use of XBA-hosted achievement guides. For example, the following is XBA's published [roadmap](#) for the Xbox 360 version of *Limbo*:

#### **Overview:**

- Estimated achievement difficulty: **4/10**
- Offline: **12 (200 GS)**
- Online: **0 (0 GS)**
- Approximate amount of time to 200 GS: **3-5 hours**
- Minimum number of playthroughs needed: **1** (2 recommended)
- Number of missable achievements: **All but "Where Credit is due" which is story related.**
- Do cheat codes disable achievements?: **No cheats**
- Does difficulty affect achievements?: **No**
- Glitchy achievements: **No**
- Unobtainable achievements: **No**
- Extra equipment needed?: **No**

#### **Introduction**

Limbo is a puzzle/platformer game. It can be quite challenging in some parts but with practice you should be able to complete it without much hassle. It is up to you whether you want to do this game in one or two playthroughs. I recommend two playthroughs, because the "No point in dying" achievement can be quite difficult to achieve on your first playthrough. You can replay every section from the main menu which will help you practice the more difficult parts of the game.

#### **Step 1: Full playthrough**

This playthrough should net you 190 GS, upon completing the game and collecting all of the eggs. You should collect the hidden eggs by using the video found [here](#). After you have completed this playthrough you should only have 1 achievement left, "No point in dying". If you get stuck on any part of this game use the videos at the bottom of the achievement guide. You can also use this written guide [here](#) for more help.

#### **Step 2: "No point in dying" playthrough**

This can be tedious and quite hard at times but with practice you should be able to get this. You have to attempt this in one sitting, meaning don't turn your console off or quit the game. You cannot die more than 5 times. If you have problems with certain sections keep replaying them until you can ace them without even trying. You can also use the videos at the bottom of this achievement guide under the "No Point in Dying" achievement for further help.

#### **Conclusion**

You should now have all the achievements. If not use some of these tips, replay levels if you need to practice sections or collect eggs you may have missed. Take your time when it isn't a

timed section and if you can't do something, take a break and then comeback to it. You should now have all the achievements so CONGRATULATIONS!

Before I began using roadmaps to guide my play of individual games, I did not go out of my way to unlock especially difficult achievements. XBA roadmaps' outlining of an exact course with which one could unlock all of a given game's achievements—in the quickest and easiest manner possible, too!—made me realize that I *could* complete games... if I was willing to put in the effort, that is. The “solution” functionality on TA is similar in intent to that of the XBA roadmap: TA users can write and publish “solutions” for individual achievements on TA. Unlike XBA's roadmap functionality, these solutions are immediately published to the website and are not approved by administrators. TA users have the ability to vote positively or negatively on solutions; the solution with the highest number of positive votes for a given achievement is listed at the top of that achievement's solution page.

XBA and TA users are often ambivalent about the actual practices promoted by participation in these solution cultures, however. For example, a friend on TA commented on a Homepage item in the following manner.

**SwearHare** won the [Ghost Hunter achievement](#) in [Destiny](#) for 60 points  
**SwearHare:** Thank you DLC ghosts we stumbled across! I never did break out a guide and “grind” out searching, just a little help from friends and finding them the old fashioned way.

For Hare, the following of a text or video-based guide detailing the locations of all the “Dead Ghosts,” a collectable<sup>18</sup> in *Destiny*, would have been a grind because of its repetitive nature: if he had elected to use a video guide to locate all of the Dead Ghosts, Hare would have had to refer back and forth from a YouTube-hosted video to the Xbox One version of *Destiny* itself.<sup>19</sup> While

---

<sup>18</sup> Collectables are in-game items that can be collected by the player. Achievements are often tied to collecting all of a certain kind of collectable.

<sup>19</sup> I and many of my friends on TA almost always have a laptop propped open next to us while playing games.

the sense of literacy one gains from participating in the solution cultures of XBA or TA is practical, insofar as XBA and TA users become aware of and learn how to use resources like roadmaps and video guides, I point here to the ideological content of this literacy—how participation in the solution cultures of TA and XBA normalizes practices which users recognize as detracting from what would otherwise be a “pure” game-playing experience. As Jakobsson reminds us in “The Achievement Machine,” however, such notions of a “pure” game-playing experience are already ideological. He writes:

Achievements go against an internalized ideal of gaming that exists within this community of practice. Just as gambling is seen as a violation of these unwritten rules, caring about achievements also goes against what Sutton-Smith (1997) describes as a romantic notion of pure play.

Jakobsson is referring to the manner in which Xbox 360 players who “embrace the [achievement] system” can come to be seen as “traitors” by members of the larger videogame public who value pure play. Even avowed members of achievement publics like TA or XBA are forced to come to terms with internalized notions of pure play, however. I have often heard TA users say that they will run through single-player games that have collectables first without a guide so that they can get the “true,” uninterrupted experience, and then follow a video guide during a second playthrough.

The second practice I learned to become willing to adopt was “boosting.” Boosting is a widely accepted practice on both TA and XBA: I was initially implored by a fellow XBA member to join TA solely because of TA’s “boosting session” functionality. I began boosting, however, as a result of my solicited play with other XBA users via individual games’ subforums’ “Achievement Trading Threads.” XBA users post messages in these threads stating what achievements they are looking to work on with others. For example, [cozza87au](#) posted the [following](#) in the *Grand Theft Auto IV* achievement trading thread:

I'm just starting the MP [multiplayer] on this so i need all the achievements. Looking for a partner to do all the races and rank boosting

gt: cozza87au

XBA and TA users are decidedly ambivalent about the grindy nature of some boosting methods. For example, two friends of mine on TA commented on a Homepage item in the following manner.

**victorlous4332** joined a Boosting Gaming Session for the game [BioShock 2](#)  
**1nnate Corruptor**: Ooooh turret boosting is so much fun \*deadpan\*  
**victorlous4332**: Soooooooo boring lol

“[Turret boosting](#)” is a boosting method for *BioShock 2*'s multiplayer which requires six total participants. Two boosters go to one of a given map's three turrets and begin trading hacks<sup>20</sup> back and forth for the length of the ten minute “[ADAM Grab](#)” match. *BioShock 2* was the second game I boosted after registering for TA in March 2011, and I can assure you that turret boosting *is* very boring; TA users will often listen to podcasts or watch TV during mindless boosts like this, though.

While people of all nationalities use TA, a widespread assumption in TA's boosting session culture is that boosting session participants *must* be able to speak English: many leaders of boosting session will explicitly state this in the “notes” for their boosting sessions. For example, the leader of a [Battlefield: Bad Company](#) (BFBC1) boosting session I participated in stated the following in the session notes:

Session is for awards only. Will be going in session order. Applications from untrustworthy boosters will be turned down. 5 spots reserved, last 2 spots are back-ups.

Please have a mic and speak English.

---

<sup>20</sup> Hacks are performed by holding down the “A” button on the Xbox 360 controller for about 2 seconds while standing next to a turret.



Because of these biases, non-English speakers who want to boost with others will either create boosting sessions on TA intended only for those able to speak their language or form their own off-site online communities. I became aware of one of these off-site groups through the viewing of a BFBC1 session, the leader of which stated the following in the session notes:

**\*\* Important: read this \*\***

This session is only for my french group (nobody else will be accepted).  
 One day, while we boosted the awards, a group of boosters arrived and tell us "we have a boost planned now, watch the sessions on TA". So, since this day, we schedule our sessions on TA to show at the other groups of boosters when the conquest mode is "busy". This is only one day by week during 3 hours.  
 We need nobody because we are enough numerous to be full squads. Even if all the players don't join this session, we are well 8 players and the session is not cancelled.  
 So, please, don't do a request to join this session.

>> I do sessions apart from those sessions for boost the kills, and in this session anyone can join it. <<

The leader of this session was forced to host this placeholder session on TA because BFBC1 only has one server for its “Conquest” mode, therefore only allowing one boosting group to play the mode at one time.<sup>21</sup> Another BFBC1 session I participated in ended prematurely because members of a German boosting community named [ThePlayerz](#) were in control of the single “Conquest” mode server.

#### 4. The Ideologies of Work and Time

Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object. (24)  
 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*

---

<sup>21</sup> The method for boosting the “Conquest” mode in BFBC1 consists of having a session participant crash the single “Conquest” server which is up, which is usually being played by “randoms,” and then having all of the session participants search for and join the newly refreshed server as soon as it comes back online. The boosting session participants will then neutralize all “flags” on the map currently being played on the server, preventing anyone, including randoms, from being able to enter the game.

Members of TrueAchievements (TA) have a significantly problematic relation to achievements, and they know it. I argue that this problematic becomes public through TA users' latching onto the twin ideologies of "work" and "time." I do not intend, however, for the rubrics of work and time to hold a function similar to that of Ang's two ideologies, "the ideology of mass culture" and "the ideology of populism," as Ang plays these two ideologies off of each other while analyzing the contents of her forty-two respondents' letters. I instead characterize the ideological genres of work and time as *twins* because they are (a) different in form and (b) identical in function: the ideologies of work and time *do* the same thing (make the problematic public), but in different ways.

### **Work and Coveillance**

"Work" has been a central locus of this project from the beginning. The following was my research question before starting my fieldwork:

How can the ethnographic observation of the TrueAchievements community yield insight into the relationship between "work" and "play" in modern society? Many texts concerning virtual worlds are intimately interested in this dialectic; Julian Dibbell's *Play Money* is famously about a man who attempts to make a living solely from the "playing" of *Ultima Online*, while Nick Yee's *The Proteus Paradox* examines some of the psychological reasons why we love to complete "grindy," repetitive tasks in videogames. I will question this dialectic from the unique perspective offered by the TrueAchievements community; why do TA users strive to play and "complete" games in a manner that is so strikingly similar to practices traditionally associated with work?

I wanted to understand why TA users' play so resembles work. The primary work-like behavior I was referencing in my research question was TA users' willingness to engage in repetitive practices like boosting and the use of video guides, but I also wanted to address the question of work's relation to play because of my own phenomenal recognition that the act of participating in TA *felt* like work. I realized during my fieldwork, however, that there was also a certain linguistic element to be read in my association of the act of being a member of TA with the

figure of work. TA users will often say they are “working” on particular achievements or grinds, like in the following two examples:

**Toracic** won the [Committed To The Cause achievement](#) in [Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag](#) for 78 points

1: Nice! I'm just about to get to work on this one.

**BOMETHEUS** status: Working on NBA 13, Gears of War, Velvet Assassin, and ResidentEvil 5. Trying to get 3 achievements in each game per day

A friend of mine posted the following status:

**Dr Feelgood** status: Trying to finish up Halo, Battlefield, and Far Cry games all the same time. I think I'm about to have a breakdown.

1: I know the feeling im doing Quake 4 gears of war rainbow six vegas wsop poker and uno and friends feels like to much

2: Keep up the good work however don't get too hard on yourself. This is supposed to be a hobby :)

3: More like a lifestyle than a hobby... competition, skill and perfectionism. Don't stress it man, we all go through the stress and anxiety. To think ..its just a game

3: NOT !

1: haha yeah sometimes it feels like a job

**Dr Feelgood**: Eh, I consider it a part-time job, but in all honesty, I love achievements to the point that I hate them. Does that make sense?

**Holiday9357 (Me)**: That sure does make sense.

1: yeah i know what you mean

The word “work” is, in general, used by members of TA to describe the act of unlocking achievements; TA users will often comment on one another’s accomplishments with congratulations such as “Excellent work.”

It is worth noting the generic role of the TA Homepage—its colloquial name is the “friend feed”—in the showcasing of the past four examples. The Homepage collects and renders the activities of one’s friends as items within a feed. Examples of items include friends’ status updates, alerts signaling friends’ unlocking of achievements in specific games, alerts signaling friends’ starting of a new game or completion of a game, and so on. In this way, the Homepage is like an RSS or Twitter feed which gathers the gaming related activities of one’s TA friends.

What is significant about the Homepage is TA users’ ability to view other TA users’

Homepages: unless a TA user has disabled the ability to do so in her privacy settings, all of the elements of TA users' Homepages are displayed when viewing their user profile. As far as I know, this functionality is completely unique to TA. An analogous example: imagine viewing the profile of another Twitter user and seeing that own user's Twitter feed (the collected tweets of all the accounts followed by that user) rather than a list of all of the tweets that user had ever made.

I argue that the ability to view the activities of other TA users' social circles is one of the ways in which the singular—in this case, TA users' latching onto the discourse of “work”—becomes general on TA. In line with my discussion of coveillance in section three of this thesis, I understand this becoming general of the singular to be a symptom of the TA user's growing sense of membership in a certain kind of knowable community—a sense of membership which is itself an effect of the TA user's realization of her own entrance into a relation of coveillance vis-à-vis the figure of the TA Homepage.

### **Time and Server Closures**

The ideology of “time” does make itself known in a manner similar to that of the ideology of work. TA users will often describe how they generally lack time, such as two of my friends do in the following Homepage item:

**Signaldark** status: Serious Sam 3: BFE Jewel of the Nile MP [multiplayer] session up. Also looking for a Co-op [cooperative multiplayer] partner.

1: I have this game and dlc<sup>22</sup> ...when Looking to do it

**Toracic**: have all the serious sam games.. its making time thats the problem :)

**Signaldark**: Time is always my issue as well. Not going to be playing certain games on this tag for that reason. Such as Binary domain, RB6V2 and many others.

---

<sup>22</sup> Downloadable content (DLC) is “additional content created for a released video game” ([Wikipedia](#)).

Instead of treading the same ground, however, I wish to return to the subject of how ideology can be conceived of as a form of literacy: how does ideology become a practice one learns to subscribe to?

One of the ways in which the ideology of time becomes public on TA is through TA users' general anxiety over the possibility of publishers' closing of games' multiplayer servers. When a game's multiplayer servers are closed, that game's multiplayer achievements generally become discontinued.<sup>23</sup> Publishers will usually release some form of notice a month or so before their planned date for the closing of servers. Upon learning of such a closing, TA users will sometimes go out of their way to start games whose servers are being shut down and complete all of their multiplayer achievements in the case that those users would ever want to start the games in the future: as one TA user posted in a status in response to Ubisoft's [closing](#) of multiple games' multiplayer servers in August 2014, "I like when the TA community comes together for a good ol' fashioned server closure :)" If a game's servers are shut down without any notice from the publisher, however, TA users will often appeal this action in some way, like I did in this Change.org [petition](#).<sup>24</sup>

Some TA users have adjusted their behaviors to adjust for the possibility that a game's multiplayer achievements could become discontinued at any time. ArcaneNight778, a friend of mine on TA, is a fourth-year undergraduate who spends what little gaming time she has boosting the multitudes of games she owns in an attempt to complete the multiplayers of any games she has any intention of starting in the future. She wrote the following on a Homepage item:

**ArcaneNight778** started the game [Devil May Cry HD Collection](#)

---

<sup>23</sup> TA users call achievements that have become so "unobtainables."

<sup>24</sup> Activision did end up restoring the servers for the GHTunes service in *Guitar Hero: World Tour*, as documented in [this TA news story](#). It is not known whether my petition directly had anything to do with this, as Activision never reached out to me, but the servers went back up about a week after I wrote the petition and started promoting it on TA.

1: You must seriously hate your completion percentage.

**ArcaneNight778:** LOL .. I had a very hopeless moment today when I saw all the games that I have will be getting unobtainables

**ArcaneNight778:** I'm trying to work on CoJ:BiB so I can complete it, but I seem utterly fucked on MK vs DCU and possibly FEAR 2, Two Worlds II, Bulletstorm, GRAW 2, and a few other titles

1: This is why you should consider temporarily ending this insane bean dive and actually working on games. [laugh emoji]

**ArcaneNight778:** Actually I have been. That's all I've done this entire week. I can't boost when I'm in college though so I've spent an entire week boosting while on break

1: You've been boosting during your break? That is hardcore.

**ArcaneNight778:** lol yeah. I only have a week break between spring and summer semesters. My next break isn't until July 24 so those 3 weeks I'll be boosting too

**ArcaneNight778:** Unfortunately, the servers will already be shutdown by then. So I'm losing hope in completion to be honest. I need a hope boost :P

1: Haha just don't start an GFWL<sup>25</sup> games then. They close sometime in June or July and several games are already closed.

**ArcaneNight778:** Yeah only GFWL I have is tinker and Age of Empires

1: You have AoE too? I'm so sorry. That game is hell to finish. I could probably help you with it if you want. I have a maxed out empire on my profile.

**ArcaneNight778:** I highly doubt I'll be able to finish it in time, but any help you could give would be amazing

1: Yeah, it's a bitch to grind out even for basic achievements sometimes. But if you wanted to get some of the coop stuff done or something I could see if my game is working

2: AoE actually isn't so bad right now! See [URL] .. you get a free gift, which is huge

1: That and the free blueprints certainly make it easier to do and lowered the ratio a LOT, but there's still a ton of grinding to get to level 100 four times.

2: ^ Tis true. Definitely helps, but time is still a monster in completing it.

I engage in the same practices: I will start games I will most likely never complete just so that I can ensure that their multiplayer are complete.

## Conclusion

I have asked a variety of questions in this thesis. The first related to *holism*: how can an analysis attentive to user practices on TrueAchievements (TA) complicate the tidy inside/outside dynamics of virtual world ethnography in productive ways? A properly holistic reading of TA should entail a discussion of how console gaming and participation in a variety of online communities converge into the *being* of being a member of TA. The second question related to the *invention* of TA: how do TA users “invent” TA at the same time as TA users are dialectically

---

<sup>25</sup> GFWL is Games with Windows Live, Microsoft's now defunct platform for playing PC games which supported achievements.

changed by their use of TA? I have attempted to answer this question through a mobilization of the sense of ideology evoked in Ien Ang's "Dallas and the Ideology of Mass Culture." I extended the discussion of Angian ideology to the subjects of *identity* and *holism*, a relation I had already begun to explore in my characterization of the relation of the individual to the achievement system as one of a *production* wherein the individual "brings" certain ideological genres "to the table": what does it mean to be a TA user? Angian ideology provides a possible answer to this question in its focus on the everyday linguistic nature of ideology.

In "Coveillance and Knowability," I further explored the subjects of identity and holism through an auto-ethnographically framed discussion of coveillance and the Xbox Live infrastructure. Here I began to link Berlantian affect theory with Raymond Williams' concept of the knowable community. In "Uniform Idiosyncrasy," I theorized the TA user's philosophy of play and linked the phenomenon to Berlant's concepts of the intimate public and cruel optimism. In "The Question of XBA," I extended my earlier discussion of Angian ideology, alternatively framing it as a form of literacy through a discussion of two practices I became aware of through my participation in the Xbox Achievements (XBA) online community prior to joining TA. The "ideology as literacy" discussion was also an attempt on my part to suggest that a holistic reading of TA should strive to account for the commonalities in practice across all achievement publics—TA, XBA, and those achievement communities founded by non-English speakers included.

In "Coveillance and Affect," I connected my earlier discussion of affect and the Xbox Live infrastructure to the ways in which TA users reify their problematic relations to achievements through their latching onto the ideology of "work." I posit one's identity as a member of TA as something that is produced performatively—in this case, through the enacting

of one's relation to the ideology of work. I thus understand the feeling of being a member of TA to be the discursive effect of one's learning to latch on to a variety of different Angian ideologies. In "Time and Server Closures," I returned to my earlier framing of Angian ideology as a form of literacy through a discussion of one of the more concrete ways in which the ideology of "time" can be reified by TA users.

You might be wondering, however, why I chose to base this thesis on the theories of Ang and Berlant. I went to Ang because her theory of ideology is able to astutely account for the ways in which people *talk* about popular culture: a majority of the phenomena I wanted to theorize, such as idle talk during boosting sessions and comments on Homepage items, were speech acts of some kind. I went to Berlant for two reasons. First, her idea of the intimate public allowed me to further develop my mobilization of Angian ideology: my concept of "ideological genre" is an attempt to link the two theorists, as they are both interested in the mechanics of how the singular becomes general. Second, Berlant's idea of cruel optimism gave me a language with which to speak to TA users' cruel relations to TA and achievements as a whole in a manner which does not simply explain that discontent as being the product of a relation of "ambivalence." My engagement with these two theorists, however, arose from my desire to write a *cultural studies* analysis of TA and its users.



## Works Cited

- Ang, Ien. *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. Print.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Desire/Love*. Brooklyn, NY: Punctum, 2012. Print.
- Berlant, Lauren, and Jay Prosser. "Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant." *Biography* 34.1 (2011): 180-87. Web.
- Boellstorff, Tom. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008. Print.
- boyd, danah. *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2014. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Jakobsson, Mikael. "The Achievement Machine: Understanding Xbox 360 Achievements in Gaming Practices." *Game Studies* 11.1 (2011): n. pag. Web.
- Miller, Daniel. *Tales from Facebook*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011. Print.
- Miller, Daniel. "Social Networking Sites." *Digital Anthropology*. Ed. Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 146-61. Print.
- Stockton, Kathryn Bond. *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. Print.
- Taylor, T.L. "Does WoW Change Everything?: How a PvP Server, Multinational Player Base, and Surveillance Mod Scene Caused Me Pause." *Games and Culture* 1.4 (2006): 318-37. Web.

Vaidhyathan, Siva. *The Googlization of Everything: (and Why We Should Worry)*. Berkeley: U of California, 2011. Print.