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This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of: Green, L. R., & Guinery, B. (2006). Play up! Play up! And Play the Game!. Proceedings of Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Annual Conference: The Unaustralia Papers. Canberra. School of Creative Communication, University of Canberra.
This Conference Proceeding is posted at Research Online.
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Play up! Play up! And play the game!

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Abstract

This paper is about LANing culture. For some, this is 'gaming culture plus' – for others, the games are the smokescreen for the BitTorrent sites, porn and illegal downloads. Either way, the LANing activity is a cultural choice overwhelmingly associated with young males and with the kind of commitment and technological dedication that was first recognised in Kidder's (1981) work, The Soul of the New Machine.

Alongside the passion for 'pimping' the machine – adding heat sinks, coolers, neon lights, high speed graphic cards etc – is the need to be doing all these things to excess. LANing is at its purest when it involves the negation (or postponement) of everyday life. Organised LANs, for example, are round the clock 26-hour techno-fests fuelled by full-sugar coke and cold fast food runs. It's a badge of honour to fall asleep in a morning classroom because the night has been spent in a massively multiplayer online game.

For all the value ascribed by contemporary society to technological prowess, creativity and digital literacy, the dissident uses of the LAN for copyright flouting and for trading porn and other illegitimate programming – and the implications of nocturnal engagement with the LANing world – means that kids that are into LANs tend also to be constructed as 'playing up'. Thus the exhortation to 'Play up! Play up! And play the game!' is subverted to mean non-compliant behaviour consequent upon dedicated engagement with gaming culture.

Paper

Saturday night, KL

[...] The LAN arena. This huge dimly-lit cavern is filled with more than a thousand PCs, each with a trendily-dressed young gamer, all with headphones clamped to their heads, hunched over keyboard and mouse, frantically clicking and tapping. Some have small groups of friends behind them, egging them on; others are playing solo. [...] What is happening here is not immediately obvious to the uninitiated. It might appear that these gamers are wrapped up in their own little fantasy worlds, oblivious to everyone around them. In fact, they're not. Most of them are playing games as part of teams composed of several others in the room. The LAN – or local area network – means that all the computers you see are linked together [...] there are a great many

games being played back and forth across the network [and the Internet] all at the same time, each with its own rhythm of triumph and defeat, exhilaration and disappointment. (Nichols et al, 2006, pp. 1—3)

Although academia traditionally pays much more attention to films and music, the video gaming sector (see below) holds the largest share of the non-broadcast entertainment industry. Latterly, the extreme popularity of games and gaming has created a circuit of professional gamers – some of whom are rewarded by tournaments with \$1 million in prize money (Nichols et al, 2006, p. 131). This professional pinnacle is underpinned by a culture of gaming activity which stretches its influence down through the age-groups to pre-primary school children. While gaming culture is increasingly attracting critical attention, it tends to be analysed in terms of aggression (Durkin and Barber 2002), gender (Harris 2001), community (Morris 2004), textual analysis (Caldwell, 2004) or marketing opportunities (Nichols et al 2006). Instead, this paper addresses a natural history of gamers in relation to their various environments as these are manifest in late adolescence, building upon extended engagement with a Western Australian micro-clan that calls itself ‘BDP’.

Entertainment industry	Value of market \$ Billion approx
Video gaming	25
Home video	20
Music	15
Film	10

(based on table 1.1, Nichols et al 2006, p. 5)

Since the turn of the millennium, cultural studies theorists have been examining the benefits of online game playing. It seems almost old fashioned to recall the “Nintendo (no-friend-o)” (Marshall 1997) catch-cry of a decade ago. Instead, apologists as diverse as journalist Steven Johnson (2005), and Psychology professor Kevin Durkin (Durkin and Barber 2002) are contributing to the cultural studies debate arguing that, for many adolescents, games are highly interactive educational experiences and that gaming is associated with good social development and positive relationships with parents and peers. Admittedly, such perceptions tend to emphasise forms of engagement over the content engaged with. As Johnson comments (2005, pp. 39-40): “the actual content of the game is often childish or gratuitously menacing [...] much of the roleplay inside the gaming world alternates between drive-by shooting and princess rescuing”.

In the many articles – and, increasingly, books – written about games and gaming, the genesis of the gamer has been comparatively neglected. If the primary student graduates from *Zelda* to *Grand Theft Auto* before entering high school, s/he also stands poised to develop, as a teen, a range of skills and competencies beyond refining their kill-to-death ratio. A significant (if not overwhelming) proportion will go on to adopt LANing culture – a multi-faceted engagement with online gaming that has the capacity to forge and deepen friendship networks, develop complementary skills and technical competencies, and monopolise time and social life. In Australian contexts –

unlike the KL LAN arena at the start of this paper – LANing culture also requires the cultivation of a range of (typically) middle income attributes such as online broadband access, individualised personal computers and at least one indulgent driver per two LANing teenagers. (Sometimes, especially with players yet to be liberated by flat screen monitors, it is hard to fit two teenagers and their computers and peripherals into a car and have enough space to drive it. Laptops are treated with contempt by gamers – they are poorly designed for most video games and are either ruinously expensive to upgrade or non-upgradeable.

Using a pejorative analogy, in the same way that only a small proportion of social drinkers graduate to become fully-fledged alcoholics, so only a small proportion of Nintendo/Xbox/PlayStation players go on to embrace full-throttle LANing culture. Those that do, however, have generally started out at the sole-player console level and moved into competitive engagement with other console players using a number of interlinked controllers to pitch different avatars (in-game characters, on a one-per-player basis) against each other. Such games tend to require co-present engagement – in the same room, at the same time, building friendship networks and technology sharing. Personal competitiveness against opponents already known – usually from within the gamer’s friendship circle – leads to an acknowledged hierarchy of competence. In addition to the pleasure of ‘mastery’ of the game is the satisfaction of recognition for developing an expertise within a specific context. (Gamers often specialise in one or two games so it’s possible to be an expert at one and to ‘suck’ at another.) This pattern of specialisation – where friends within a gaming circle effectively develop complementary competencies – is mirrored in LANing contexts as the players get older.

Going online takes the gaming scenario a further step. Games played on the Internet require access to a high speed broadband connection, preferably (from the player’s point of view) in private space, such as a teenager’s bedroom. Here the decade-old comments of David Marshall continue to resonate: “Children’s bedrooms [present] a whole new set of anxieties that again operate in the particular middle-class fraction of culture. The bedroom is a complex enclave of security, pleasure, vulnerability and privacy.” (1997, p. 74) Parents entering their child’s space may find themselves confronted with an aural wall of gunfire and a screen splattered with blood and exploding body parts. New online gamers are often second or third year high school students and guard the privacy of their personal space jealously.

Once a gamer is connected to the Internet, s/he also has access to any other non-filtered communication channels available – from MSN, chats, blogs through to porn and engagement in the copyright infringing download communities accessing music, films, TV programming and alternative digital media. Such ‘investments’ in online materials become a status point for the young person concerned – the person in a given peer circle with the greatest Internet access, and the largest capacity for storing downloaded materials, is in a good position to develop key-guest status for the evolving LANparty culture.

LANing engagement occurs at a variety of levels. Many LANers start by playing on the Internet with strangers, having checked out the servers operating to support the various games desired. At any given time the popular FPS (first person shooter) games – such as those provided by the steam online distribution network (*Counter-Strike* (source), *Day of Defeat* (source), *Red Orchestra*), and the store purchasable '*Battlefield Franchise*', '*Call of Duty Franchise*' etc – will have a choice of concurrent versions of the game operating from different servers around the globe. The games programmes list the active servers with games in progress. Choosing the 'right' server to join involves the player weighing a complex balance of factors: the number of shooters active in the game on a server; the distance of the server from the LANer's Internet connection (affecting the 'ping' – the time taken for a packet of information to travel to the server and back), the map being played and the game type itself, and whether the 'clans' likely to be playing on the operational servers are known to (and respected by) the LANer.

While LANers tend to have aliases by which they become known to each other, effectively, early engagement in online gaming occurs anonymously. As skills are developed, and as the apprenticeship is served (many games require huge expenditure of time to achieve mastery), so it becomes more important to choose servers with enough players to keep a game humming, but not so many that the niceties of the individual's game-play techniques are lost in the crowd. One of the biggest compliments that can be paid to a teenage gamer is for a clan leader to ask the LANer if they are interested in becoming a clan member. Membership implies a range of commitments – an online gamer's willingness to be available to play at specified times, and invest certain amounts of hours per week; the development of collaborative skills and strategic understandings; and the mentoring of the newbies (n00bs) on the part of the senior clan members.

This kind of dedicated behaviour resonates Judy Wajcman's summary of Tracy Kidder's (1981) work describing the intense commitment required of early computer designers and developers recorded in *The Soul of the New Machine*:

A world of men working compulsively into the small hours, enjoying being stretched to the limit of their capacity, where there is no space for or compromise with life outside of work. It was 'the sexy job' to be the builder of new computers, and you had to be tough and fast; members of the group often talked of doing things 'quick and dirty', and of 'wars', 'shoot-outs', 'hired guns', and people who 'shot from the hip'. Sexual metaphors abounded such that the excitement of working on the latest computer was likened to 'somebody told those guys that they would have seventy-two hours with the girl of their dreams'. (Wajcman 1991, p. 141)

LANing culture – as with hacker culture, open source, blogging and wikipedia culture – valorises excess and builds in tests of commitment. The number of unbroken hours spent playing a game is a badge of honour; the latest possible hour at which parents (literally) pull the plug gets extra marks when it precedes a school day. Persuading a parent to upgrade the Internet

connection, or increase the download capacity, is a noteworthy achievement and boosts an individual's status in their local clan's eyes.

Although the solitary LANer is expected to be dedicated, they are also expected to be multi-tasking. At the same time that the game is being played, another screen – sometimes physically on a separate monitor, sometimes minimised in the game screen – details MSN traffic against a screen saver background of (commonly) scantily clad starlets. Sometimes the visual overload is compounded with the replay of a recently downloaded TV programme or film: usually one that can only be accessed illegally, and that isn't available on Australian free to air television. Such titles as *Pimp my ride*, *That's my Bush* and *Family Guy* – almost all of them American popular culture – make it a status symbol to not have Foxtel, since illegal downloads (usually via BitTorrent swarms and protocols) become the only way in which the programme material can have been garnered.

LANers take their copyright violations seriously (Knight 2006). They address the challenge of collecting whole series of episodes, or the entire oeuvre of a favoured director, with the utmost dedication. (Typically, the movies collected are forbidden to the LANers by the Office of Film and Literature Classification regulatory regime: and may include R-rated titles such as *Fight Club*, *American Psycho* and most of Quentin Tarantino's work.) Some LANers learn the scripts through constant repetition, parroting the onscreen characters. They discuss plot development and talk knowledgeably about the production circumstances – the many points at which the series or film was almost cancelled (but, often, saved by the fans). They construct the notion of intellectual property as if shares can be acquired through admiration and attention – as if consuming media in and of itself transfers some of the intellectual property to the viewer. The reward for their eyeballs is the right to consume. The justification seems to be that the creator's work is respected, circulated and discussed and thus positive regard outweighs any mere financial issues of royalties or revenue streams. On the other hand, LANing and movie going are complimentary passions and many LANers recognise that they have developed a sophisticated level of media literacy through their online engagements.

Dedicated LANers place a high priority on pimping (spec'ing) their machine to make it fit for purpose. This involves increasing the hard drive capacity (to allow for the storage of an ever-greater downloaded 'library' of material and priming the machine to make it operate faster than specifications would usually allow – thereby increasing frame rate. Over-clocking the CPU tends to create higher than optimum temperatures requiring a range of cooling devices from fans, through heat sinks, to – at the pinnacle – water cooled computers. Concurrently, gamers aspire to flat screen non-reflective monitors and enhanced video graphics cards to optimise the game aesthetics (and the blood splatter patterns). Expensive technological components means that fast frame rates need not entail a significant drop in visual presentation. As with the ultra-violet undercarriage and booming bass of the pimped car, so the keen gamer aims for sound-surround audio and neon illuminated working computer innards. Further, it becomes important for each LANing circle to

include at least one gamer who has competencies in building (and gutting) computers, to be able to pimp their own machine to the max, and augment their own social capital by trading this expertise for other currencies (money, computer parts, peripherals, status).

In addition to the solitary pursuit of a game played in isolation in a bedroom (with an online cast of hundreds) LANer friendship circles often congregate at weekends, and during the holidays, for LANing parties. These LANs always involve at least two participants (but can accommodate a dozen, space and power board overloads being the limiting factors). This is the eponymous activity that gives the LANers their name. In the early days of the Internet, LANs were Local Area Networks (usually housed in a set of connected spaces, such as a school, or the floor of an office block), often all maintained by a single team of support staff. LANs were distinguishable from WANs – Wide Area Networks – which typically would connect a number of LANs together. In those days ‘the Internet’ was defined in terms such as “a huge global network of computer systems which provides users with access to electronic mail, a range of information sources (data bases) and mechanisms by which collections of information (computer files) can be moved between users” (Green & Guinery 1994, p. xxii). In most contexts the term ‘LAN’ has become as redundant as the cited definition of the Internet (although the closest approximation might be the collected users of a specific server). The LAN title has now been appropriated by LANers, and recognises their reinvented skills which allow them to setup a temporary, portable network in a specific locality.

As amateurs, LANers reclaim the competencies of the early IT enablers, connecting computers to each other and to the Internet. This involves amassing and utilising a large array of cables, spare modems, power boards, connectors, surge protectors etc; and carrying them from location to location, often in oversize sports bags or washing baskets. LANing set-up skills are far from trivial, although they soon begin to look polished through practice. The assembled computers are all connected and powered up so that they are both interlinked and online. LANers also wear headsets to keep their aural feed localised so that they can still hear each other when shouting out comments, instructions and witticisms during a game. Typically the LANparty joins an online server (depending on the speed of the Internet connection) and may choose to cooperate together as part of one of the Internet teams. This means that the avatars doing the killing (and being killed) include the known avatars of fellow LANers at the same party. Alongside the playing of the game, the interconnected gamers set up a peer-to-peer file sharing network allowing the accumulation of desired ‘wares’ (TV, films, games, music, photos and other digital media) from each other’s hard drives.

The local LANing communities hold LANfests for hundreds of gamers on a regular basis, usually as a volunteer/not for profit activity. While there is some variation, the general age range is 14—24 and the new administrator class is promoted from within the ranks of the attendees to learn the finer points of negotiating with councils for access to huge spaces with appropriate power outlets and capacities. LANfest gatherings run through the night – usually

from Saturday morning to Sunday lunchtime – and include competitions and a range of childlike party games (pass the parcel; musical chairs) to mix the gaming and download activities with more physical pursuits. The combination also allows a balancing of rewards for skill-based activities with luck. The LANfests serve to introduce participants to new games, new technology and new downloads. The community-based LANs become a clan of clans (or a group of groups). Red Flag LAN (RFLAN) is one such LAN community, immortalised – as many are – in a YouTube documentary (RFLAN 2006). Although it has become necessary in cultural studies to emphasise that girls are gamers too (see also Figures 5.1 and 5.2, Nichols et al 2006, pp. 54–5 for data to support this), as the RFLAN documentary demonstrates, when it comes to FPS LANfests they are in a comparatively small minority.

The games industry – with vital statistics discussed earlier, and with predictions that it will double in five years (Nichols et al 2006, p. 120) – is a highly competitive market with a range of game lineages. A games platform underpins a series of games and players tend to develop an affinity and expertise with specific ways of constructing an online world. Each new iteration of a game is eagerly awaited by the fans to see what graphic and structural improvements have been added. For example, the *Half-Life* series caused some excitement in 2004 with the bundling of *Half-Life: Source* – “It's the original *Half-Life*, imported into the new *Source* engine” (GameSpyPC 2004) – with the launch of the *Half-Life 2* game. *Half-Life: Source* was described as a ‘proof of concept’, to explain the retention of old graphics standards along with the updating of the physics engine (which dictates the visual effects of bullets impacting upon bodies, for example, or blood spatter). LANers debate the finer features of graphics, water effects, underlying game engine etc with all the appreciation for the finer points of game differentiation that would be evident in an expert analysis of the works of Leonardo da Vinci.

Given the pervasiveness of gaming culture amongst selected audiences in the upper years of secondary schools, and given the cultural imperative for workforce aspirants to develop a range of computer skills and literacies, it might be anticipated that elements of LANing would be encouraged by parents and teachers. In some circumstances, this is the case. A recent Cyber Tournament (2005), run by Edith Cowan University for teams of school students in years 11 and 12 to publicise the commencement of a Bachelor of Design in Game Design and Culture, attracted participation by a number of High Schools, and was eventually won by a team with the creative name of ‘Friendly Fire’. Of interest, however, were the reactions of a number of schools that declined to submit teams (even in the face of parental support for them to do so).

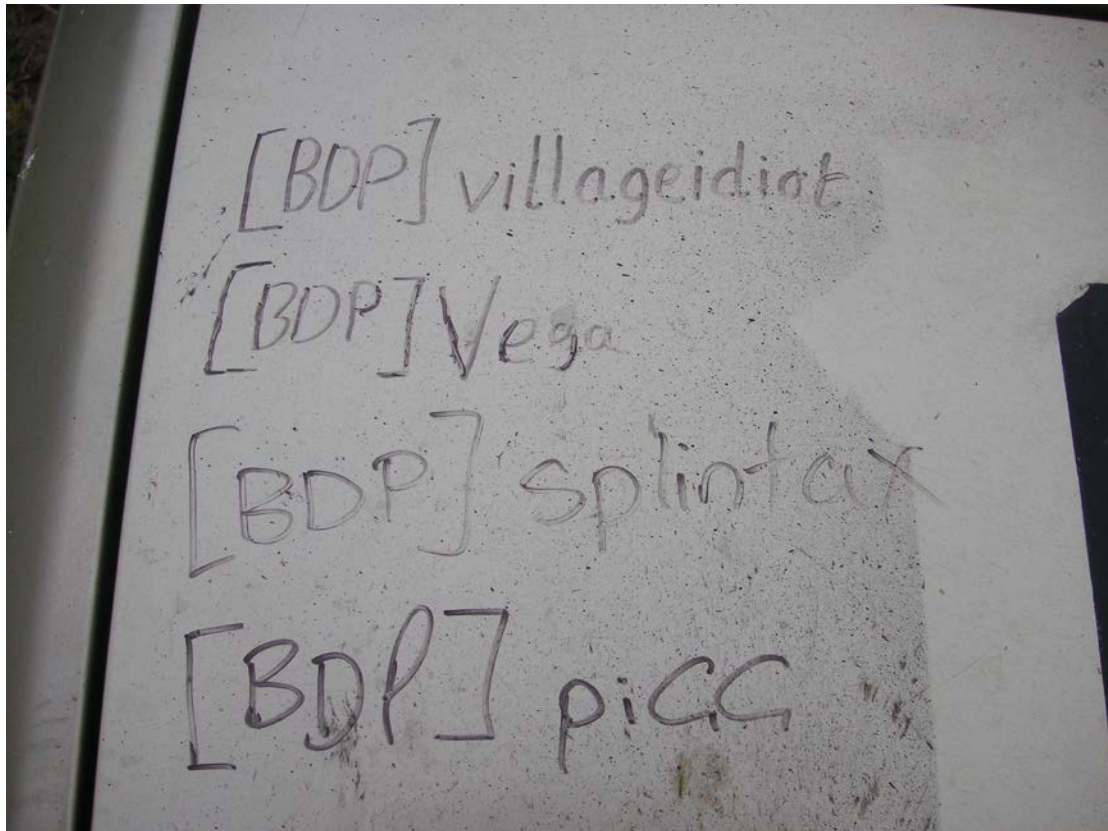
One school, with a significant commitment to IT literacy that requires all students to have a personal laptop, argued that sponsoring a cyber tournament team would send the ‘wrong message’ to students. According to the teacher in charge (and the Principal) a major part of the school’s IT compliance policies centre upon preventing students playing games in the on-site computer labs and on the laptop machines (individually purchased by parents for the students). There is little doubt that the school constructed

game playing as an undesirable activity, and one to be resisted. In such circumstances, the developing gaming skills of some students at the school became a dissident activity and served to underline the school's failure to fully 'enculturate' specific students in the ethos of the school. (In the same way that wearing visible piercings and black nail polish in class might; or the clannification of a student's car, parked in school grounds.)

This particular ride (below) – in desperate need of pimping – was pwned (gamer slang, explained below) by the BDP clan, during a weekend when the adult-in-charge was at the 2006 Association of Internet Researchers Conference. The black enamel paint is non-removable and was applied using a semi-stencil technique. The REPESENTS!!1 statement reflects the humour inherent in the gamer pwning the game – where the typographical error becomes a source of mirth because, in the very act of claiming mastery, the supposed claimant's pre-eminence is compromised. The possibility that the stencil might give offence was discounted in that 'Dikk' and 'Pimpz' are non-standard spellings (allegedly like the FCUK brand), and anyway "It's only people in 4-wheel drives who can see it on the road. You should see them in the rear view mirror, explaining to their kids what it means".



Clan members are immortalised in (much less) permanent marker – ensuring that other gamers seeing the car may be able to recognise the online personas behind the 'pimped ride'.



Judy Wajcman famously coined the statement that technology is a masculine culture – and it is true that most LANers are male. However, she also differentiated between everyday technology (including cars and power tools) and new technologies, such as alternative and leading edge computer competencies. Wajcman's (1991, p. 144) view is that: "In our culture, to be in charge of the very latest technology signifies being involved in directing the future and so it is a highly valued and mythologised activity." Arguably, the BDP clan by pimping 'their' car are drawing attention to the occupants' status as gamers. The four wheeled vehicle may be older than the occupants, but the BDP stencil claims respect from gamers for the wherewithal to pwn the car. While mainstream computer decision-makers may not recognise gaming as a mythologised activity, within the FPS gaming cosmos, such activity is – as Wajcman suggests – quintessentially masculine.

As with any offline friendship circle, the LANing group has a range of history and shared activity to draw upon. They also develop a shared vocabulary which serves to outrage people who casually overhear them ('Sup Nigga?' is an affectionate greeting) while also keeping the details of their communication obscure. The Urban Dictionary (n.d.) references thousands of terms (including 'pwn' – meaning 'I dominate') and records some of this vocabulary, and the debt it owes to keystroke humour!!!¹ As LANers develop a wider range of social options – they gain drivers' licenses, become able to procure alcohol and attend clubs, they go to RL parties and raves – so the LANing parties may become less central to their gaming practices, heralding a retreat to the initial habits of individual engagement with gaming servers at down-times when real life activities might otherwise be boring (school work, for example, or sleep).

In the meantime, LANing culture (as with all respectable teenage pursuits) offers an oppositional engagement with everyday life and with the agencies and structures that attempt to ensure a balance between compliance and autonomy. Few people construct gaming in general and LANing in particular as evidence of highly desirable social and technical skills. Instead, it is more generally the case that gamers are deemed to be 'playing up' in their dedication to this dissident activity.

For people raised in the 1960s and 70s, in the dying embers of the British Empire, this injunction to 'play up' contains a delicious irony. Two of the most jingoistic poems taught to school children as recently as 40 years ago include Rudyard Kipling's 'If', and Sir Henry Newbolt's 'Play up, play up and play the game'. Indeed, the latter describes a scene straight out of a (Napoleonic era) FPS:

The sand of the desert is sodden red
Red with the wreck of the square that broke
The gatling's jammed and the colonel dead
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke
The river of death has brimmed its banks
And England is far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks
Play up! Play up! And play the game. (Clark n.d.)

Just as Lindsay Anderson gave *If ...* its subversive come-uppance with his 1968 film, the LANers are finally putting a new spin on Newbolt's old injunction to 'Play up! Play up! and play the game'.

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