

**New Tech, New Ties: How mobile communication is reshaping social cohesion** by Rich Ling, MIT Press, 224 pp., \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-262-12297-9. **Play Between Worlds: Exploring online game culture** by T. L. Taylor, MIT Press, 197 pp., \$15.95, ISBN 978-0-262-51262-6 and **Communities of Play: Emergent cultures in multiplayer games and virtual worlds** by Celia Pearce and Artemesia, MIT Press, 327 pp., \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-262-16257-9  
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There is no doubt that technology shapes our world, and since so much recent technology has been related to communication, it is no surprise to find that the way that we communicate and interact is changing rapidly. All three of these books are concerned with the changes wrought by such developments in communication.

Of the three, *New Tech, New Ties* is the one that most directly addresses the question of how changes in technology are affecting the way we communicate. In the last decade, mobile communication has become ubiquitous, not just in terms of coverage (which in many countries was pretty much universal at the start of the decade) but in terms of the proportion of the population who carry a mobile phone. Now that so many of us carry a phone at all times, our patterns of communication have clearly altered. While some of these changes seem to be beneficial—it is much easier to contact someone when you can call a phone they are carrying rather than guessing where they are and calling a phone at that location—others, such as the increase in the use of phones while driving seem to be less beneficial. Identifying whether the overall effect of increased mobile communication is beneficial or not is going to take time.

*New Tech, New Ties* concentrates on one specific area that is affected by increased mobile communication, that is its effect on our relationships with the people around us, drawing on a wide range of research. Here the evidence is ambiguous. There seems to be a clear negative effect on the amount of communication we have with people who are physically close to our location. It seems that instead of talking to the people who are physically near us, we frequently use mobile communications to talk to people who are further away. This is not a conclusion that will surprise anyone who has a child with a mobile phone. However, what *New Tech, New Ties* also argues, again based on evidence from various studies, is that this reduction in communication with co-located people is not indicative of a move away from a cohesive society to a society in which people do not talk to each other. Rather, what it indicates is that we are tending to use mobile communication to talk to the people we are emotionally close to even when they are some distance from us:

given the choice between conversing with another marginally known person at the bus stop and sending a text message to a paramour, there is little doubt as to the outcome.

Of course, this suggests we are prioritising our immediate social networks at the cost of more tenuous links, and the long-term effects of this kind of shift are not easy to predict.

Now, *New Tech, New Ties* concentrates on the effects of mobile telephony. New technology has enabled other new kinds of connection many of which (unlike those examined in *New Tech, New Ties*) were not really around before the technology was introduced<sup>1</sup>.

One of the most striking new kind of connection is between players in multi-player online games where, through the medium of a common game, it is possible for people to interact with each other in a purely virtual way. ‘New’ here is a relative term since the facilities for creating these kinds of connection were available in the early 1990s when I was spending time in some primitive MUDs, but there is no doubt that the connections have become stronger and the opportunities to make them have become more widely available as the games have become more sophisticated and the number of people playing them has increased. There are now many more possibilities for

<sup>1</sup> Mobile telephony is primarily a new mechanism to deliver telephony services that already existed—text messaging was very much an afterthought in the design of mobile services, and arguably does not provide any additional function over that which email already provided when text messaging was first introduced.

sustaining connections through non-game channels, and many online games have associated message boards and discussion lists on which players can interact, both in and out of character. *Play Between Worlds* and *Communities of Play* focus on different aspects of these connections.

*Play Between Worlds* looks at the communities and conventions that have grown up around the game *Everquest*. *Everquest* is a fantasy game set in a Tolkeinesque world featuring elves and dwarves, warriors and wizards in which players progress by killing monsters and collecting various forms of treasure. Though it is possible to play the game solo, the very fact that it is a multi-player game means that any player that does not isolate themselves in some remote part of the world is interacting at least implicitly with others by occupying adjacent space and thus having the results of their actions affect others. This co-location of players, or more precisely the players' *avatars*, has led to some of the conventions discussed in *Play between Worlds*. For example, if a player is being running from a nasty monster, or line of monsters, then the convention is to warn others of what is coming.

This kind of interaction is, of course, at the minimal end of the scale of possible interactions. The structure of the game, which means that the biggest rewards come from killing monsters that are far too powerful for any single player to manage, encourages players to team up. This teaming up is complicated by the need to ensure that a group has the appropriate mixture of abilities. These abilities are determined by the type of the avatars, and many of the types have very specific skills, meaning that an effective group will require an eclectic mixture of avatar types. These groups can be temporary, brought together for a single session of play and with a specific target in mind, or they can be more permanent, in the form of *guilds*.

Guilds can exist purely as a mechanism for playing the game—members of a high-performance guild are typically all committed to making quick progress in the game, and the guild is an efficient way of making sure that enough avatars of the right sort are available for any given quest. Guilds can also be much less game-focused, acting as a mechanism for socialising that interacts in interesting ways with players' socialising in the real world. There are players who started playing *Everquest* because friends and family were players. In this case, the game provided a mechanism to deepen existing interactions in just the same way as friends and families get together to play cards or board games. There are also players for whom the connections are initially established in the game, and then reinforced by meeting outside the game. (*Play Between Worlds* mentions one married couple who first met in the game.) While many of these in-game relationships, the ones we can consider to be the product of the game technology, have clear analogues with relationships outside the game, there are others that are more ambiguous. *Everquest* allows players at a certain level to take a second name, and by convention pairs of players to adopt the same name to indicate that they are 'married', often to players other than their spouses outside the game even when their spouse is also a player.

Given the central role of the game *Everquest* in the lives of the gamers studied in *Play between Worlds*, a legitimate question is to what extent the community is dependent on the existence of the game. Clearly the relationships that the players have built up could be sustained in the absence of the game through other channels of communication, but would they? *Communities of Play* suggests that there is every chance that they would.

*Communities of Play* does not study *Everquest*. In fact, the game that is central to the community discussed in the book, *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, was no longer being operated commercially at the time that the author began her study. Rather than study the community of *Uru* players in what might be considered their native habitat, Pierce (though the medium of her avatar Artemesia, who is credited as a co-author of the book) got to know players of the game, who following its demise, had set up new communities in the virtual worlds *There*<sup>2</sup> and *Second Life*.

Of course, those worlds do not support the original game (though the 'Urufugees' did their best to recreate the aspects of their old virtual world in the new ones they adopted) so the study in

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.there.com>

*Communities of Play* is of a community of gamers who continue to interact because of reasons that are not directly to do with the initial game. Rather the initial game served to identify people with some common traits (enjoyment of problem solving being a good example), many of whom did not have a large number of like-minded friends, who then found that they wanted to continue to interact socially with the rest of the community. *Communities of Play* documents the extraordinary determination of the Urufugees to maintain their sense of community, a determination that is demonstrated both in terms of the time that individuals were prepared to invest in shaping areas of *There* and *Second Life* to make them reminiscent of their lost 'home', and in terms of the financial cost that the *Uru* community was prepared to shoulder rather than see their new home in *There* close down.

It seems to me, then, that the main message of *Communities of Play* echoes that of *Play Between Worlds* in suggesting the extraordinary depth of connection that game players can forge in the virtual worlds that they inhabit. These connections, like those discussed in *New Tech, New Ties*, are only possible because of the advent of new technology, and these connections have altered and will continue to alter the way in which we live. We do not yet have a clear view of exactly what changes these connections will lead to, but all three of these books provide a small piece of the overall picture. For this reason, all three books are all well worth reading.

Simon Parsons  
Brooklyn College, City University of New York, USA