Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BOUNDARY SPACES

Majestic and the uncertain status of knowledge, community and self in a digital age

T. L. Taylor[a] and Beth E. Kolko[b]

[a]*IT University of Copenhagen* and
[b]*University of Washington*

Abstract

While shows like *The X-Files* and *24* have merged conspiracy theories with popular science (fictions), some video games have been pushing the narrative even further. Electronic Art's *Majestic* game was released in July 2001 and quickly generated media buzz with its unusual multi-modal gameplay. Mixing phone calls, faxes, instant messaging, real and 'fake' websites, and email, the game provides a fascinating case of an attempt at new directions for gaming communities. Through story, mode of playing, and use of technology, *Majestic* highlights the uncertain status of knowledge, community and self in a digital age; at the same time, it allows examination of alternative ways of understanding games' role and purpose in the larger culture. Drawing on intricate storylines involving government conspiracies, techno-bio warfare, murder and global terror, players were asked to solve mysteries in the hopes of preventing a devastating future of domination. Because the game drew in both actual and *Majestic*-owned/-designed websites, it constantly pushed those playing the game right to borders where simulation collides with 'factuality'. Given the wide variety of 'legitimate' conspiracy theory, alien encounters and alternative science web pages, users often could not distinguish when they were leaving the game's pages and venturing into 'real' World Wide Web sites. Its further use of AOL's instant messenger system, in which gamers spoke not only to bots but to other players, pushed users to evaluate constantly both the status of those they were talking to and the information being provided. Additionally, the game required players to occupy unfamiliar subject positions, ones where agency was attenuated, and which subsequently generated a multi-layered sense of unease among players. This mix of authentic and staged information in conjunction with technologically mediated roles highlights what are often seen as phenomenon endemic to the Internet itself; that is, the destabilization of categories of knowing, relating, and being.

T. L. TAYLOR AND BETH E. KOLKO

INTRODUCTION

While shows like *The X-Files* and *24* have merged conspiracy theories with popular science (fictions), some video games have been pushing the narrative even further. Electronic Art's (EA) game *Majestic* was released in the USA in July of 2001 and quickly generated media buzz with its unusual multi-modal gameplay. Mixing phone calls, faxes, instant messaging, email, as well as real and 'fake' websites, the game gives us a fascinating case study of the boundary work simulation requires, the extent to which the popularization of techno-science has found a place in the broader culture, and the status of knowledge in the digital age.

Drawing on intricate storylines involving government conspiracies, techno-bio warfare, murder and global terror, players were asked to solve mysteries in the hopes of preventing a devastating future of domination. Because the game drew in both actual and *Majestic*-owned/-designed websites, it constantly pushed those playing the game right to borders where simulation collides with 'factuality'. Given the wide variety of 'legitimate' conspiracy theory, alien encounters and alternative science web pages, users often could not distinguish when they were leaving the game's pages and venturing into 'real' World Wide Web sites. Its further use of AOL's instant messenger system, in which gamers spoke not only to bots but to other players, pushed users to evaluate constantly both the status of those they were talking to as well as the information being provided. This mix of authentic and staged encounters, web pages and information highlights what are often seen as phenomena endemic to the Internet itself and, more incrementally, to a culture that increasingly embraces the digital.

After September 11, the game producers suspended play for a week, citing a sensitivity to actual events and embedded game themes. While many video games underwent revision after the events in New York and Virginia, the case of *Majestic* highlights the interesting complications that arise when authenticity collides with indeterminacy, both online and off. This article raises questions about the ways in which *Majestic* capitalized on cultural anxieties – in this instance as played out within US culture – particularly fracturing ideas about the coherence of knowledge, communities and selves. While the game is an intriguing site of analysis for the way it mirrors and amplifies larger cultural anxieties, *Majestic* is also worth examining for the way it broke the frame of game culture and, despite its early demise, provides possible imaginings for the future direction of games, gaming environments and player identity. Ultimately, the foreshortened life of *Majestic* provides a compelling story of one game company and its community's negotiation of indeterminacy and broader cultural

anxiety as represented in the emerging genre of 'immersive gaming'. We further suggest that the brief history of *Majestic* points to the importance of games as a component of digital cultural studies. Games are not just a big money enterprise; they are increasingly a dominant media form that, like other media artefacts such as film and television, provide insight into how cultural norms are recapitulated and reified within the realm of entertainment.

THE *MAJESTIC* GAME

Majestic was officially released on 30 July 2001. With the tagline 'It plays you' the game drew in about 71,200 people by the time it finally closed, 15,000 of whom became subscribers (Kushner 2002). The initial pilot was free and, if users wanted to continue, they paid a subscription fee of US$9.99 per month for further episodes. Developed by Neil Young at Origin (a division of EA), *Majestic* was constructed as a serialized multi-modal game involving a variety of communication technologies (Marriott 2001). Drawing on similar themes and aesthetics to *The X-Files*, *24* and a general culture of conspiracy theory, the narrative of the game was one that folded back in on itself. Indeed, this kind of immersive genre is even portrayed in films like *ExistenZ* and *The Game*, in which players find the game boundaries blurred with their own 'real life' such that they lose the ability to even distinguish between the two. *Majestic* was a game about a game. The storyline driving it was that you, as a player, signed up to play *Majestic*, a game based on fringe knowledge and conspiracies, but that something goes horribly wrong before you can even start playing. Within hours of starting the pilot, players received the following message:

Date: Tue, 31 Jul 2001 20:07:54 +0000 (GMT+00:00)
From: majesticrep@majestic.ea.com
To: user@hostname.com
Subject: AUTOMATED MESSAGE: Technical difficulties

*****This is an automatically generated message*****

Player account: Username

We are experiencing technical difficulties with the server hosting the game: MAJESTIC

We are working to determine the cause of the disruption and hope to have service restored soon. We will keep you updated on our progress.

Thank you for your patience.

Sincerely,

Electronic Arts Operations Group
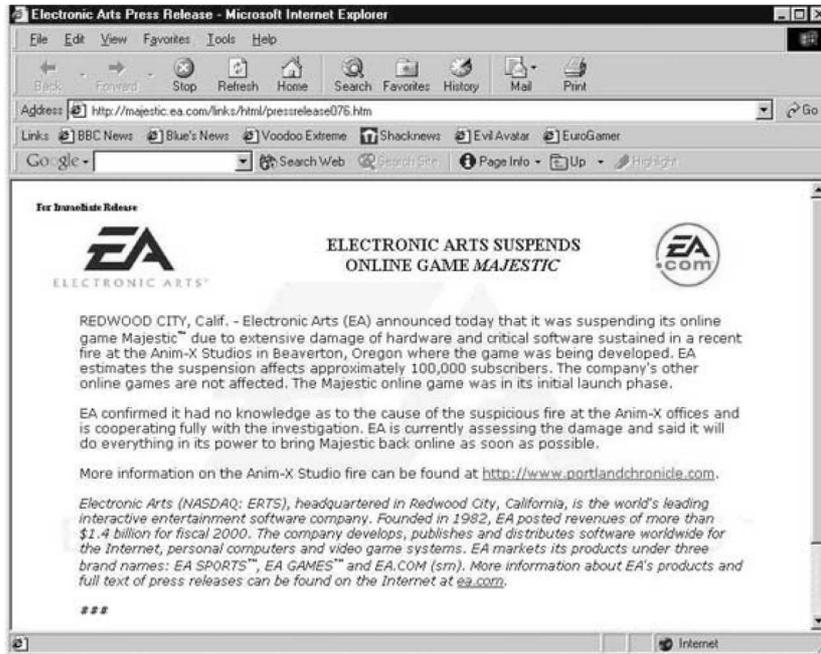
Figure 1 Fake press release at EA website.

Approximately twenty minutes later, the player would receive another e-mail stating there was a problem with the *Majestic* servers and, indeed, upon visiting the website the player would see the following notice shown in Figure 1.

Rather than legitimate technical notifications, however, these messages represent a player's introduction to the game. There was actually nothing wrong at either EA or 'Anim-X Studios', but these were each starting narratives. What emerged was a story in which one of the *Majestic* designers was drawing elements into the game that weren't fiction but fact. This inclusion of highly classified (implicitly dangerous) information leads to the disappearance of the designer and the shutting down of the game. It is your job as a player to uncover the hidden webs behind what is happening. Gameplay then becomes solving the mystery of the game you were theoretically never able to actually play.

Majestic drew on several media for play. Upon first signing up for the game, users would download a client program that would allow them access to some basic game information, websites and initial data about fellow players (potential 'allies'). Outside the proprietary game application however, *Majestic* used the America Online Instant Messenger (AIM) program, as well as email, phone calls and faxes. Interestingly, in the introductory message to the game, EA warned players to alert their families to its unusual nature.

> Make sure family members are aware of incoming phone calls and faxes: Majestic calls and
> faxes you at various times (based on times you specified and can always change). You must
> make family members aware of these calls so they won't be frightened, and so you see faxes
> when they arrive.

While most End User License Agreements (EULAs) simply offer up standard, often incomprehensible legal jargon, the EULA for this game presented some fascinating warnings. It noted that 'The *Majestic* characters are fictional. No Game character will ask to meet you in person. No *Majestic* character will make physical contact with you or any other person' and 'If children use your phone, we strongly recommend that you not receive *Majestic* phone calls.' In anticipation of potential user gameplay, it also notes that,

> Majestic has created many web sites to enrich your Game experience, but we do not own
> any .GOV or .MIL web sites. You will never be asked to contact anyone at a .GOV or .MIL
> website to play the Game and you should not do so. If you are tempted to call someone listed
> on a .GOV or .MIL site regarding *Majestic* or the events that take place during the Game, don't.

In the *Majestic* application program itself, users were able to see a listing of potential contacts, some fellow players and some bots (though the interface did not distinguish them; see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Application interface with 'allies' listing on the left.

Figure 3 Video messages with clues.

Using AIM, players then contacted these people in the hopes of tracking down clues. In addition to searching for information via conversations, players would look at videos (see Figure 3), surf web pages, and receive calls, faxes and email all with clues about how to proceed.

This aspect of the game was certainly what received the most attention in the popular press, which conjured up images of a sleek all-encompassing game.

> Picture this: You're hanging out with friends when your phone rings. You pick up and there's a stern voice on the other end of the line threatening you and your loved ones – by name. The menacing caller triggers your memory of a Webcam recording you were e-mailed three days ago, which in turn ties into a hasty instant-message conversation you had with a stranger the week before. What's going on? You're just a pawn in 'Majestic', EA's episodic online adventure that spills over from the Internet and actually invades your privacy.
>
> (Elektro 2001)

For the most part, each day presented a series of puzzles and mysteries that the player had to investigate. While the information needed to complete a day's tasks was not particularly difficult to find, it did take research and conversation. Once appropriate information was found or 'turned in', gameplay for the day ceased. Indeed, within the *Majestic* application, it would note if you were on 'standby' or in progress for that day's round of play. Unlike most games in which fast, potentially unlimited, play is the standard, *Majestic* modulated the time users spent on the game and experience, using the game-specified pacing as a way to insinuate the game into the player's regular schedule.

This kind of pervasive gameplay has been slowly growing in popularity, and several interesting 'alternative reality' games (often known as 'un-fiction' by players) have emerged over the past couple of years. While there are mobile phone mystery games, such as one run by Nokia, broader clue-based mystery games that require players to work cooperatively and across a variety of media

continue to grow (Herold 2003). It is typical for this genre to incorporate not only a range of digital media (email, web pages, instant messaging) but also traditional media (films, commercials) as well as artefacts (paper mail via the postal service). Probably best known in the genre was an extremely popular unnamed 2001 game dubbed by players as 'The Beast'. Created as a promotional device for Steven Spielberg's movie *A.I.*, *The Beast* drew an active community of clue-seekers and puzzle-solvers. The largest, named The Cloudmakers, boasted approximately 7,500 members who operated in a fascinatingly social and collaborative structure while involved with a game in which ' "immersion" meant integrating the virtual play fully into the online *and* offline lives of its players' (McGonigal 2003: 118).

The multi-modal format of these games begins to highlight how they are always explicitly working at the boundaries of gaming conventions; in addition, the format is inextricably bound to a pushing of genre boundaries both in terms of the nature of play and the cultural context within which a game is positioned. *Majestic* attempted to present a game that co-opted cultural anxieties and portrayed them as a source for engagement and entertainment. While traditional media have worked on playing with and pushing at popular understandings of hidden power structures, inaccessible and illegitimate knowledges, contingent alliances, and communities, games like *Majestic* raise the stakes by asking the players to actively inhabit such a world. The fact that these games indeed propose a more expansive definition of immersion – one in which it is not simply enough to be 'in' the computer, but where the experience of the 'virtual' leaks out into your real world – sets them apart from their more conventional narrative counterparts. The decision to engage in an 'un-fictional' world becomes even more complicated when it draws on highly contentious and, to some, quite 'real' details. Once the gameplay becomes integrated into everyday media (such as receiving phone calls, faxes or IMs) and the format by which the game activity is communicated becomes inseparable from 'normal' everyday communication activities, one's activity becomes something different than 'mere' or compartmentalized play. Whereas most games take place in confined spaces, be they on the screen of a computer or on the board of a traditional table-top game, *Majestic* sought actively to blur the line between game and non-game space. Within the computer screen itself the game was never neatly contained, given users would have to cycle through not only the game application itself, but screens of web pages, an email client and various AIM messages. Outside of screen space the boundaries were even less clear with the introduction of phone calls and faxes. The warnings players were supposed to issue to their family signal the intent to break into 'everyday life' in ways that may be

disconcerting to people not in on the game. And, crucially, these intrusions into everyday life proved disconcerting to some of the people who *were* in on the game as well. The ability of the game to disrupt and upset players was perhaps part of its design, but it is also possible that this experiment with a new kind of genre that breaks frames, crosses communication modes and redefines game space brought players into unintended directions.

While this boundary play is fairly clear and was often remarked on in popular press accounts of the game, we suggest that *Majestic*'s interface and underlying game structure only serve to highlight a much deeper notion of boundary play at work in the space. While the game explicitly made use of 'fake' websites or bots to simulate game conspirators, we argue that these moves only highlight the ways the game is situated at the very centre of a debate on legitimate knowledge (both online and off) and a broader cultural debate about authenticity and artificiality. Such questions encompass various fragments of contemporary life, including the blurring of fact versus fiction (whether in the shape of Oliver Stone's *JFK*, the rising field of infotainment, or the bizarre journalistic twist of the early twenty-first century, wherein *The National Enquirer* and Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* become purveyors of major journalistic scoops), the continuing debate over the nature of community (from Robert Putnam's lament over the dissolution of tight community bonds to societal anxiety over the validity of friendships or other intimate bonds forged via the Internet, to the continued debate over the role mass media – including games – play in the weakening of civil society, to the anxiety about politeness conventions raised by proliferation of camera phones) to increasing concerns over the status of the self (from criticism around the individual increasingly constructed largely as a vehicle for consumerism to the blurring of work and personal lives as the workday expands well outside the forty-hour week). Such questions all raise the spectre of what is real and what is true, both in terms of narratives and the proper path for life. *Majestic* cleverly capitalizes on issues that are both at the forefront and part of the underlying and unarticulated anxiety of contemporary life within industrialized countries.

MAJESTIC AND THE STATUS OF KNOWLEDGE

One of the central game components employed by *Majestic* was the use of the Web for research, information and clue hunting. Players had to visit various websites to gain information that was then turned in via a variety of methods. Providing answers to puzzles was the method of progressing in the game, so, in large part, gameplay was dedicated to a form of research. However, this is

not to say that gameplay was about searching for truths; the terrain of information that players explored was of a decidedly mixed nature. Authenticated knowledge stood alongside claims typically relegated to the political and scientific fringe, and the game fairly seamlessly inserted itself into these broader, highly contested subcultures.

While the *Majestic* application itself constituted the game space, its larger use of websites was a primary mode of extending the space of play beyond fixed traditional boundaries. There were several categories of sites the game worked with: (i) EA sites that were clearly denoted as game sites (like the *Majestic* homepage with information about the game itself); (ii) EA-created 'shell sites', which hosted 'fake' game information and clues; (iii) actual pre-existing partner websites containing information on UFOs, conspiracy theories, and the like; and, finally, (iv) pre-existing but non-partnered websites containing 'real' data.

While a category of sites were clearly meant to be seen by players as explicitly 'game' ones, other layers of counterfeit websites constructed by EA highlight the ways the game worked with notions of artificiality. Giving them unique domain names (like *AnimX.com* and even *Portlandchronicle.com*), *Majestic* created a web of fictional sites that players would visit. It was often not at all clear when one was moving from EA webspace to one of their shell websites to, potentially, 'legitimate' websites.

Some users tried to document which sites were 'real' and which EA-sponsored. One user, having undertaken a domain name search, posted his findings to a user bulletin board:

> As for two more spoilers:
>
> Since it is now common knowledge that Chemtrails and The Blackstar Project web sites are EA fronts (though how they will be used remains to be seen), the big glaring hints that tipped me off about them were THE AD BANNERS.
>
> Both banners were advertising EA Sports with large EA logos, so they immediately caught my attention. Thinking it might be coincidence, I looked at the link code and discovered that not only were they both from the Aol advert network, but they both had the same referral id numbers.
>
> (bermuda653 2001)

On one level, the game did somewhat contain the bounds of knowledge by using fake websites to provide clues. This was primarily done by using an EA search engine within the *Majestic* application and webspace (see Figure 4). Interestingly however, the search engine did not relegate itself to simply EA sites but drew in third-party webspaces. The game designers, quite savvily,
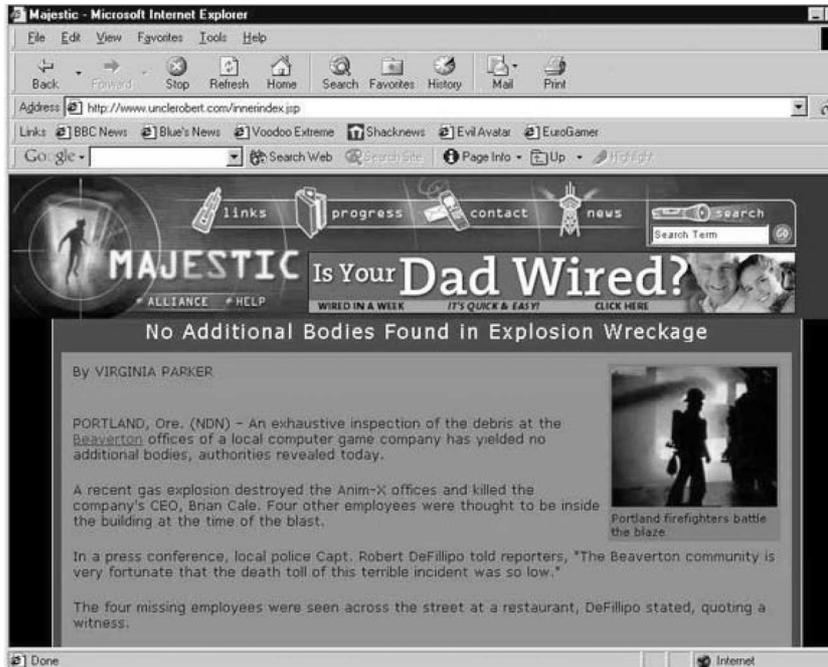
Figure 4 Web interface showing search engine tool.

piggybacked on a broader culture of conspiracy and fringe science to help build up not only a cultural aesthetic within the game, but also a knowledge base. By partnering with already existing websites, the game was able to build on information and, in fact, a kind of twisted authenticity. The very idea of legitimacy is itself doubly complicated when examining what constitutes valid knowledge online. As many critics have remarked, the Web has become a place where ideas typically not given much weight stand side by side with 'real' information. In a culture particularly obsessed with aliens, pseudo-science and general conspiracy theories, the web allows all kinds of information and ideas typically deemed 'fringe' to find a point of distribution.

Partner websites like *Conspiracy-net* provide a particularly interesting example of the ways the fictional conspiracies of the game folded into the 'authentic'. Started in August 1998, *Conspiracy-net* long offered surfers a chance to check into many of the ideas typically found in *The X-Files*, *24*, and *Conspiracy Theory*. With sections dedicated to 'Conspiracies' and 'Aliens & UFOs', the website acted as a clearing house for images, theories and resources on subjects ranging from the 'New World Order' to 'Secret Societies'. In February 2001, the website became a partner with the game:

Conspiracy Net is a proud member of the newly formed Majestic Alliance, providing support and information to all fighters of the Majestic conspiracy. Here, as well as access to the massive Conspiracy Net resources, you can make contact with other people in a similar situation. . . . The Majestic alliance is organised via the digital underground. It is an organisation supporting those fighting against the Majestic conspiracy. Anyone who shares our goals of truth, freedom of information and access for all is welcome to join us . . . and if you have the skills we need you may even become an Operations Coordinator. If you want to join us, click here to make yourself known. It is of the utmost importance that the Majestic Alliance maintains its integrity. If you have come across any Alliance sites that you believe are inappropriate and are detrimental to the cause . . . you must let us know by clicking here.

(Jason & Dan 2002)

While sufficient game information came through only EA-sponsored channels, it was not unusual to find players going outside of those bounds. User bulletin boards often contained posts by players who linked game elements with non-game websites or factoids. The game in many ways seemed to offer legitimacy to speculation about the potential truth behind the game 'fictions'. By building into the game search engine the ability for non-EA sites to turn up in results lists, it drew not only on formal relationships with third-party sites but a more general culture of conspiracy. As the owner/participant of *Human Underground*, a third-party website remarked:

I was proud to be in on the ground floor with what seemed like an awesome franchise opportunity, as far as community web development went anyway; I was honoured with the invitation to beta-test the 'experience'. There were site agreements and what-not allowing me to develop off the 'Majestic, the game' theme. The community was encouraged to role-play and develop content from conspiratorial material that was 'leaked' to us and 'ripped-from-the-headlines'. Fescado's White Pages are my contribution to the community.

(Agent Fescado 2002a)

Interestingly, this blurring of game and 'legitimate conspiracy' folded back in on itself once more when the game shut down. Sometimes playfully, and sometimes appearing quite serious, users remarked on how the game hit too close to home and how it had to be ended. A not uncommon reflection was that it was doomed to failure in part because it tried superficially to tackle and riff on an all too serious topic. 'Agent Fescado', role playing, recounts the demise of the game:

THE MAJESTIC COMMUNITY HAS COMPLETELY COLLAPSED
Shame there's not one Truth seeker among you! Pathetic excuse for an Alliance! It seems most of the 'leaders' were either too weak and fled under pressure, compromised or were themselves shadow operatives; your conduct is unforgivable and your fall is welcomed.

(Agent Fescado 2002b)

What is striking about this section of the website is that, while there is some hint that it is a role-played contribution to the game, throughout the pages the author does a very good job of actually blurring his sites' 'authentic' contributions with its game focus. Indeed, several layers into the 'Agent Fescado' section of the site the theories about how the game blurred into reality become even more apparent. He writes,

> I think the fall of Majestic-Intel is indicative of how much pressure the Alliance has come under. . . . There is something larger than an Electronic Arts game experiment going on here. The topics are real and the intelligence had been specific, at least the leads were. I had been hiding various tidbits of intelligence, including Bill Cooper's words about the Majestic on various pages within humanunderground in an attempt to trigger discussion of issues at hand with the core group. None really looked, paid attention, let alone discussed the hardcore.
> (Agent Fescado 2002b)

In a fascinating twist, he goes on to suggest that the seriousness of the research done at sites like the Human Underground was seen by some as actually *undermined* by its association with the game. Ultimately, he argues that the demise of *Majestic* is probably not such a bad thing, that, 'Its [sic] best that EA's adventures and antics (Majestic the game) die a quiet death. The conspiracies won't go away. Actually, its [sic] getting pretty hot out there . . . and the research does continue' (Agent Fescado 2002c).

While reactions such as this are certainly more extreme than one expects of average players, it does highlight the complicated ways the game played on already established cultural stories and 'myths' and the ways knowledge probably deemed 'fake' actually gets absorbed into a larger body of inquiry. One of the more provocative by-products of this reabsorption of the artificial is the way several shell sites created by EA are now archived online. A user could conceivably stumble across them and is not provided with any real context to their origin or meaning. How is a future surfer to really know that the Internet Archive's 6 December 2000 cache of http://www.portlandchronicle.com is merely a long-lost game artefact? Certainly, a savvy browser might guess about its status given the lack of an entire site built around it, but at first glance it looks as if it might be 'real'. Indeed its links to actual third-party weather, TV listing, map and stock sites imbue it with a sense of authenticity.

The question of what is authentic knowledge becomes particularly tricky within the game as it evokes postmodern simulacra and exposes the purported risks of life in the hyper-real. *Majestic* itself focused attention on the increasing invisibility of simulation as it drew on pre-existing 'legitimate' knowledge, folded it into itself, and then, once gone, found that even it was translated back
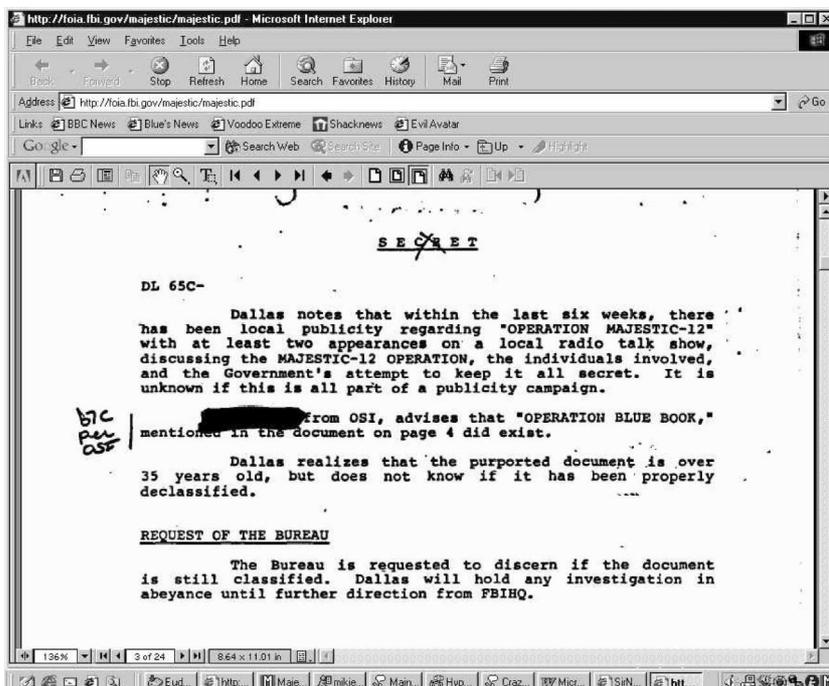
Figure 5 Screenshot of FBI pdf file.

into that same culture. In a complimentary move, pre-existing information typically deemed authoritative was also incorporated into game knowledge. One powerful example of this is a document hosted at the FBI's Freedom of Information Act website which simply contains the word 'Majestic' (Figure 5).

While the bulk of the document provides no useful information (and in fact seems to discredit the conjectures it contains), its very existence comes to play in the themes of the game. A long-time favourite of UFO buffs, the Majestic-12 project holds some evocative power as a symbol of opaque projects and classified knowledge. This document is decidedly 'real' in that it is an actual FBI artefact, and the use of the word Majestic, despite itself seemingly discounted by the analyst who wrote the report, becomes a signifier of something quite 'real' (albeit hidden) in the game space. One of the most provocative sleight of hands in a game like *Majestic* is that even unauthenticated or discounted knowledge can retain the power to bolster the narrative. It, and documents related to the military investigation on UFOs like Project Blue Book, while not explicitly used for the game, come to act as powerful knowledge artefacts legitimizing the overall themes and aesthetics.

Of course, the starkest instance of truth imitating the fiction that *Majestic* sold its subscribers occurred when the game temporarily shut down after 11 September 2001. As Figure 1 shows, the game's opening gambit, which happens to be a suspension notice (essentially the first official expression of the game's voice to the player) was echoed in a second, all too similar, email that was sent.

Date: Tue, 11 Sep 2001 19:05:03 -0700 (PDT)
From: MAJESTIC <MAJESTIC@ea-com.m0.net>
To: user@hostname.com
Subject: Majestic temporarily suspended

Dear Majestic Player,

EA has temporarily suspended service on Majestic. Given the recent national tragedy, we feel that some of the fictional elements in the game may not be appropriate at this time. We will contact you again concerning resumption of the game.

We appreciate your patience and understanding.

Regards,

The Majestic Team

It could be argued that an initial post-'9–11' suspension of the game was in many ways inevitable given the nature of the game's material. The suspension, however, served to prove the relevance of the game and its topic by demonstrating that *Majestic* was in fact tackling issues that were at the heart of contemporary cultural anxiety. The resonance of the fake suspension notice with the real one points to the game's greatest success; it so accurately fictionalized cultural anxieties that the real eventually overlapped with the game. If part of the *Majestic* experiment was to begin defining a new genre that pushed boundaries of game space, the suspension notice seems a signal of success. To the wider population, the boundaries of what constitutes legitimate knowledge and frames for how the world works took on an entirely different shade after the events in September 2001. Indeed, the very indeterminacy that the game so skillfully played on inevitably gets re-read through a much more complex filter, one with stakes that continue to rise as narratives are written and rewritten by competing media around the world.

While *Majestic* initially was able to establish a subscriber base precisely because it presented themes that resonated with players and highlighted the indeterminate nature of knowledge, the game retreated when that connection became too powerful, too troubling. It is worth noting that this is not entirely

dissimilar to a response the founders of The Cloudmakers had to their community's attempts to try and put their collective puzzle-solving to the events of 9–11. As McGonigal notes, a number of members felt the skill the community had developed in gaming *The Beast* might be productively turned to solving the question of 'who the terrorists are'. She states the founders

> released an official announcement asking members to cease any attempts to 'solve' 9/11. [writing] 'The Cloudmakers were a 'collective detective' for a *game*. Remember that. It was scripted. There were clues hidden that were gauged for us. It was *narrative* . . . *This is not a game.*
>
> (McGonigal 2003: 116, original emphasis)

While players often acknowledge the lines between game and reality, the *experience* of that distinction may be quite a bit more muddled. As one Cloudmaker put it, 'For more than three months, this game was a very very real world. It largely took place in Manhattan (just like 9/11), for Pete's sake' (McGonigal 2003: 118). In the case of a game like *Majestic*, which often actively drew on already existing sentiment and aesthetics, such lines could prove quite troubling to a game company that finds itself no longer in complete control of the narrative trajectory and no longer able to maintain explicit play boundaries.

MAJESTIC AND THE STATUS OF COMMUNITY

While *Majestic* played with the lines between authoritative knowledge and fringe 'facts', eventually collapsing under the weight of its own heightened toying with truth, it also pushed at boundaries of interaction and community. Finding clues and answering puzzles was in large part only possible by conversing with other game participants, and at a basic level the game had a kind of social design built into it. Through talking with others, a player would get leads and tips on how to proceed. The game, however, did not simply rely on humans; instead, it deployed bots via AIM to tip off, and lead astray, players (see Figure 6).

While the use of bots is an interesting example of the kind of blurred line between humans and machines the game worked with, unfortunately the quality of the bots undermined their own authenticity. Users fairly quickly came to figure out they were not talking to a 'real person', so the interactions never sustained a quality of natural conversation. Once given a bit of information, users typically found the bot-person they were talking with go idle for long stretches of time.

More interesting, however, is the way interactions with the bots and the themes of the game affected the dynamics of the player community. Throughout

Figure 6 AIM chat with a bot (GrifterMike).

Majestic, other players were supposed to be integrated into gameplay. Provided with a list of potential allies, players often did not know who actually had valuable information. Within the *Majestic* application, you could see how far along in the episode anyone had progressed, so some clues about their game expertise were apparent; but you were not given any indication if they were a *reliable* source. Given the general climate of suspicion and conspiracy the game is built around, user interaction itself became subject to worries and concerns. Such anxieties again echo larger issues about the potential for deception in online interaction (Slouka 1995; Stone 1995). They also point to some issues that online communities have faced in recent years (Kolko and Reid 1998). The numerous popular-press accounts of e-mail or chat-room lovers deceived by cross-dressing or secretly married others provide one version of this anxiety; other versions can be seen in the fascination with filtering software that is presumed to be the answer to keeping one's children safe from unsavoury others or unhealthy community interaction. Of course, one could simply rent

the Doris Day–Rock Hudson vehicle *Pillow Talk* to understand that deceiving others via communication media is hardly a new pastime, but the level of paranoia seeping into the broader culture provides an effective narrative back-drop for how a game like *Majestic* constructs online community.

One of the more interesting phenomena in the game was the way experienced players would often actively fool or lead astray 'newbies'. Each new player was given a random list of potential contacts and, typically, people would cycle through contacting members of this list in the hopes of finding someone with clues and information. Between chatting with bots and other new users, players would encounter more experienced players who – to add a bit of fun to their own game – would provide disinformation or veiled clues. This active play with questions of reliability is certainly one of the more provocative themes that emerged around the social interactions of the game.

Beyond the question of whether or not you as a player are interacting with a human, or if indeed that human is giving you truthful information, the status of the game community itself poses some interesting questions. EA sponsored bulletin board spaces in which players could communicate with each other and discuss the game, storylines and leads. These were fairly active spaces and players would discuss not only game clues, but also speculate on broader conspiracy theories, world happenings and even some off-topic subjects. While the notion of online community is hotly debated, certainly, at first glance, one might propose there was one around the *Majestic* game (Turkle 1995; McRae 1996; Fernback 1997; Foster 1997; Lockard 1996; Wellman and Gulia 1999).

Upon the game closing, however, these ties between players were abruptly discontinued. All EA-sponsored websites were closed down and entire discussions disappeared. Given the tenuous nature of this kind of site and its basic lack of autonomy, can such a corporate-sponsored space indeed be called an 'authentic community'? Does the very nature of ownership of the space, the boundary between public and private, complicate the notion of the *Majestic* game community actually being legitimate? Indeed, were communities set up on third-party websites and e-mail lists more authentic in some way than those sponsored by EA? And what about users who came to existing website communities solely because of their involvement in the game and stayed. Do we consider their actions meaningful? Authentic? Are they in any way partici-pating in a 'real' community?

One user tapped into this question on a third-party bulletin board site:

> But now it's like a wasteland in this once proud community. The remnents [sic] of these once cool ass sites spot the internet like ruins in a testament to what one day might be called one of the greatest blunders in online game history.

> I joined this board in either late January or early Febuary [sic] of 2001 I can't remember which. In the months following that I had the most fun I've ever had on the computer. Every single day I checked the boards whenever I could just to see if a single new post had been made. It was exciting to me to have found a board were people were actively pursuing the search for the truth (or lack thereof) in conspiracy theories. I'd made a few buddies (Topsy, Urgewyrm), more noteably a few enemies (MajesticIntel and occasionally Ivalen when he had a bug up his British Bum), and was always learning something new.
>
> Right now as I'm writting [sic] this, I'm listening to the Spooky soundtrack of Majestic and I'm actually sad that it had to end this way for a great community. This was the first board I'd ever posted on and I had so much fun doing it that the game we were all waiting on pales in comparison to it [sic].
>
> (Seeker 2002)

This question, not only of the status of the community but its fragility, has been remarked on by a number of former players. Several quite clearly link it to the fact that the community was fundamentally not theirs in a way that, in the end, was meaningful. One even suggested that: 'We ought to band together and try to create our own game. Our own *free* game. One that will challenge people and involve people like we had all hoped Majestic would' (eVoSuperman 2002). While the most obvious border play may be the interactions that took place between bots and users, the question of whether game communities such as the *Majestic* one are able to access authenticity despite their fundamental lack of autonomy seems crucial. In a moment in which more and more online communities are either being co-opted by corporate sponsors or fundamentally built around some kind of subscription model, the issues of community status, autonomy, and ownership are pressing (Taylor 2002).

MAJESTIC AND THE STATUS OF SELF

A tandem discussion of *Majestic* testing boundaries can take the shape of considering how the design of the game posed an explicit challenge to players' identity as gamers, violating notions of public/private space and autonomy, and collapsing the everyday code-switching that individuals depend upon to negotiate the world around them. As described earlier, *Majestic* provided clues to the mystery at predetermined intervals, a schedule that was not always dictated by a gamer logging in, choosing to slip into game-playing mode, or in any other way signalling an explicit desire to resume the game. In this way, the design of the game set up how boundaries will be tested in terms of both knowledge and people. The subjectivity of the gamer was tested in terms of the role that was proper during gameplay and how much agency gamers had

in approaching the game. In addition, though, the game disrupted notions of public and private space in such a way that violated the containment of game space in general terms.

In particular, the strategy of having the game communicate with players on the game's, rather than the gamer's, schedule required participants to abdicate a kind of control that goes deeper than adhering to traditions of truth or fiction. In essence, the game hinged on forcing players into a different kind of game space, one that, instead of activating players' sense of assuming a separate role, imposed that role by intervening into non-game reality. The subjectivity of the player was clearly up-ended in *Majestic*. While discussions of technologies have increasingly acknowledged a blurring of private and public space (most notably, perhaps, in the critiques of cell-phone usage), games have not traditionally been part of that conversation. While critics may concern themselves with a game's bleed-over effects into 'real life' (e.g. Internet addiction concerns, 'Evercrack'), there is still an admission that such effects are the result of the game not being contained properly. The very design of *Majestic* forces us to confront the question of what constitutes proper play and gamer identity.

Earlier we discussed a *Majestic* player who embarked on some extra-game research in order to discern which websites were 'real' and which were fake domain creations by EA. Shortly after the user exposed the falsehood of various sites, they returned, about two posts later, to remark on their activity, writing,

> I feel dirty. Like we're cheating. We're not playing a game, we're playing a meta-game. The object here is to play out an immersive storyline based on a theme of conspiracy theory, and yet what we're doing is equivalent to hacking the game. Or reading a tip book. I think I'm going to back off on the cyber-sleuthing, and try to stay 'in character' for a while.
>
> (bermuda653 2001)

This kind of ambivalence is striking in the way it highlights how some players felt unsure about how far they were actually supposed to carry their detective work. Essentially, players tried to negotiate within the game space itself the boundaries of what was legitimate gameplay and what verged on cheating. On the one hand, the game encouraged exactly the kind of detective work this player was engaged in, and yet there was a point at which exactly such activity served to undermine the experience itself. But on the other hand, the unravelling of familiar gamer identity meant that bermuda653 could not be sure of where it was appropriate to stop in the sleuthing. The very notion of a 'spoiler' (sharing a clue or hint) becomes quite ambiguous. While such uncertainty of the game-player's role could have contributed to the game's eventual failure in the marketplace, it is also a remarkable achievement in terms of EA playing

with the conventions of the game genre. Feeling unsure of whether a particular approach is 'correct', or, as bermuda653 indicates, not wanting to act 'too smart' for fear that would ruin the game or be a form of cheating, players found themselves in unfamiliar space. Unable to leverage the knowledge gained from previous game-playing experience, *Majestic* forced them to redefine themselves as gamers in relationship both to the game and the larger world.

An intriguing toying with subjectivity and the tension between Paul Smith's determining agent and the determined subject, such manipulation of identities and distortion of accepted subject positions were one of the hallmarks of *Majestic*'s innovation (Smith 1998). Oft-repeated promotional sound bites for *Majestic* asserted that 'you don't play it; you interact with it', or that 'the game plays you'. In conjunction with not drawing clear boundaries on how far players were supposed to go in their detective work, the game posed pacing issues that raised similar challenges to gaming convention. Games, like mysteries, are often about restoring order in the world, but *Majestic*'s removal of traditional gamespace boundaries also meant that the game played with traditional subject positions. In Smith's formulation, the subject and the agent are in constant flux – in part in response to a world that lacks clear boundaries and lines of control. Subjectivity may in effect be a continuum, but it is also useful to imagine various subject positions in opposition to one another in order to understand their differences more effectively. The agent, for example, is the position that is capable of resistance; the agent can undertake action and is able to choose a path through the world. The subject, by contrast, is subjected to power and is written upon and circumscribed by the forces of the world. While the players of *Majestic* chose to put themselves on the path of the game, the game continued to push at that subject position of choice by forcing gamespace activities into the 'real' world and thrusting game communications into 'real' schedules. Consequently, gamers' subject position fluctuated between subject and agent, presenting a nuanced version of subjectivity that bespoke both the innovation of the game and its (financial and cultural) risks. Because of how the story of the game unravelled, the seeming agency of the game trumped that of the players and forced them to interact with the game when it ultimately demanded. Of course, you could turn off the phone, not answer the e-mail, log off from AIM. But the game drove the progression of play rather than the player. This was in fact one of the critiques that players had of the game. Many felt frustrated that they could not progress at their desired speed, and their annoyance at the largely constrained speed at which the game would unfold led to comments like the following:

majestic was pretty good. at first. i tried to absorb myself into the world. i got a bunch of freaky emails and cell phone calls (the later could be turned off). i had a good time through episode 1–2. i started to dislike the game when the content was coming out slower than i could 'level'.

(iamlost 2001)

What was arguably the game's greatest innovation – shifting control away from the players – was also one of its significant frustrations for participants. In some ways, this frustration stands as an argument in favour of players wanting to retain some semblance of familiarity in their power relations and in their sense of who controls what. But, overall, the balance of power between the game and the user was one of the most transgressive elements of *Majestic*'s design. In breaking the frame of game space and non-game space, it forced players to confront the artificiality of their identities and roles. It is worth examining whether the complaint about slow pace of play is a reflection of poor strategy on the part of EA (hoping to prolong the playing experience to maximize the monthly revenues), discomfort with shifted player subjectivity, or some combination of the two. Even the more enthusiastic defenders of the game admitted to discomfort with the pacing problem.

I disagree with the harsh comments in relation to majestic. I've played the game and I'm incredibly sad to see it go. The concept was new and well thought out. I agree that the standby took too long and left players waiting and frustrated before making a move, but the concept was to blur the line between game and reality and in that sense it was fantastic.

(Taty 2002)

The challenges to player identity posed by the *Majestic* designers echoes a more general contestation of truth and community, and, for that reason, it seems too simple to explain away players' unease as simply the result of misjudged game pace. Whether the fear of looking too deeply or questioning too far, or dissatisfaction with the game setting the pace of play, *Majestic* managed to tweak the familiar roles of gamers. In so doing, it threw open a series of beliefs that had yet to withstand a serious challenge in the game-playing community.

CONCLUSION

Media saturation was one of the pre-conditions for creating a game like *Majestic*; it was also a condition of its temporary suspension in 2001 and, some might say, similarly played a part in its eventual early termination. The suspension of the game after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon provides

a certain insight into the kinds of anxieties the game produced as well as the kind of manipulation of players upon which it was predicated. While there has indeed been a broad cultural debate (both academic and popular) over authenticity versus simulation, the televised collapse of the World Trade Center towers confronted television viewing audiences with a shocking example of simulation. Our modes of entertainment are so imbued with simulation and violence that it has become increasingly accepted to claim that it is difficult to discern the 'real thing'. We have reached a general critical juncture in which the questions of artificiality and authenticity, simulation and fact, the virtual and the real, have woven themselves into not only knowledge but everyday experience and play (Baudrillard 1983; Eco 1986; Poster 1990; Jameson 1992; Virilio 1995; Haraway 1996; Levy 1998; Darley 2000). Games should be seen as useful cultural barometers, and in this way *Majestic* brings us to the heart of these debates. Its history is useful both as a reflection on contemporary critical theory and as an argument in favour of game studies as a crucial component of new media theory.

A common remark heard in the USA during the Gulf War in 1991 was that it somehow resembled a video game. All that CNN footage of scud missiles and fighter jets dropping bombs reminded viewers of games they had played, or movies they had seen, or movies they had watched about games. What could have been construed as a crisis of simulation, however, was never critiqued in a purposeful fashion, and, instead, the conflation of militaristic and entertainment imagery continued unabated. When the World Trade Center towers burned, then, viewers again, even those within breathing distance of Ground Zero, referred to the experience as like watching a movie.

The suspension of *Majestic* in late September 2001 seems to have been inevitable. The boundary play interface of the game so acutely tweaked the fragile understanding of truth that it seems unlikely that people experiencing in their everyday worlds what happens when traditions of knowledge and understanding no longer hold would continue to want to play with such concepts. But what remains, perhaps the more interesting question, is whether and/or how the boundary-pushing of *Majestic* will affect the shape of game culture, and gamer culture, in the future. With 'viral' games like that developed for Steven Spielberg's movie *A.I.* or Nokia's mobile phone mystery (an 'interactive adventure' as they put it), the development of boundary play is clearly showing signs of growth and industry interest (Herold 2001).

For this initial round, however, *Majestic* tweaked a culture that was only able to entertain boundary-pushing that remained safely in isolation from lived experience. Indeed, one reviewer who waxed poetic about the game in

early September later posted a follow-up to his review. His initial review on 1 September 2001 began with this introduction:

> Majestic is a game which defies definition, breaks barriers, and is one of the most original, engrossing entertainment titles I've experienced in quite some time. It is part spy novel, part adventure game, part reality TV show, and part Internet chat room. It is, at least so far, the game of the year.
>
> (Finkelstein 2001a)

A month later, he posted this update to a game review site.

> Update (October 1, 2001): I am re-posting this article to update on my new feelings about Majestic. I am no longer playing Majestic. Majestic, which I called the game of the year one month ago, seems so incredibly dumb and stupid now, for reasons you can probably guess. Receiving personal phone calls where characters scream at you or threaten your life seemed cool a month ago. Now – well . . . it just seems scary.
> EA suspended gameplay on Majestic for a week following the events of September 11th. Perhaps it was not enough. Personally, I loved the idea of Majestic: the gameplay, the amazing, engrossing plot, how it is refreshingly different.
> I still consider Majestic to be the game of the year (so far) on its technical merits alone. But personally, it will be a long, long time before I play it again.
>
> (Finkelstein 2001b)

Reactions like this one are no doubt part of the reason *Majestic* suspended the game in September 2001, although EA does not admit to any specific relationship of the 9–11 events to the cancellation of the game in April. But, ultimately, we want to ask what the suspension of *Majestic* can tell us about the role of games. And what does its eventual termination, purportedly because of lack of revenue, further tell us about the role game space continues to play in gaming culture? Was it the violation of boundaries of game space that eventually doomed *Majestic*? And, ultimately, how do games like *Majestic* participate in broader cultural debates, anxieties and practices around life in a digital age?

The appeal of *Majestic* as a text for analysis is precisely the multiply transgressive modes of its interaction. Whether or not it was a victim of bad timing, or even sloppy marketing, the game found unique ways to cross borders. By pushing boundaries of the genre, the game in turn pushed the boundaries of players, and in that it was a startlingly successful cultural text. It brought to the forefront persistent questions about the nature of knowledge, community and identity in the digital age. What remains to be seen is whether that text will come to form a precursor for other liminal challenges to game conventions

and how, in general, our games become spaces in which we work out, and work through, broader cultural questions and anxieties.

T.L. Taylor
Department of Digital Aesthetics & Communication
IT University of Copenhagen
Glentevej 67, DK-2400 Copenhagen NV
Denmark
E-mail: tltaylor@itu.dk

Beth E. Kolko
University of Washington
College of Engineering
Department of Technical Communication
Loew 14, Box 352195
Seattle, WA 98195
USA
E-mail: bkolko@u.washington.edu

REFERENCES

Agent Fescado (2002a) 'Agent Fescado's White Pages', *The Human Underground*. Online. Available: http://www. humanunderground.com/whitepages/intro.html (8 October 2002).

Agent Fescado (2002b) 'Hu-Majic Eyes Only, Level 00', *The Human Underground*. Online. Available: http://www.humanunderground.com/majic00.html (8 October 2002).

Agent Fescado (2002c) 'email2ea', *The Human Underground*. Online. Available: http://www.humanunderground.com/whitepages/email2ea.html (8 October 2002).

Baudrillard, J. (1983) *Simulations*, New York: Semiotext(e).

bermuda653 (2001) Majestic Alliance Bulletin Board, 7 February. Online. Available: http://pub50.ezboard.com/fmajesticalliancefrm4 (8 October 2002).

Darley, A. (2000) *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*, London: Routledge.

Eco, U. (1986) *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Elektro, D. (2001) 'Preview: '*Majestic*' Online Game Blurs Reality', *Gamepro. com* (reprinted at *CNN.com*), 8 January. Online. Available: http://www.cnn.com/2001/TECH/computing/01/08/majestic.idg/ (8 October 2002).

eVoSuperman (2002) Majestic Alliance Bulletin Board, 31 January. Online. Available: http://pub50.ezboard.com/fmajesticalliancefrm4 (8 October 2002).

Fernback, J. (1997) 'The individual within the collective: virtual ideology and the realization of collective principles', in S. G. Jones (ed.) *Virtual Culture*, London: Sage, pp. 36–54.

Finkelstein, D. (2001a) 'Review: *Majestic*', *Suite101.com*. Online. Available:

http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/computer_gaming/81567
(1 Dec 2002).

Finkelstein, D. (2001b) 'Review: *Majestic* (part 2)', *Suite101.com*. Online. Available: http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/computer_gaming/81567
(1 Dec 2002).

Foster, D. (1997) 'Community and identity in the electronic village', in D. Porter (ed.) *Internet Culture*, New York: Routledge, pp. 23–37.

Haraway, D.J. (1996) 'Modest_Witness@ Second_Millenium.FemaleMan_ Meets_OncoMouse', in *Lynn M. Randolph Illustrator*, New York: Routledge.

Herold, C. (2001) 'Crossing into Cinema and Real Life', *New York Times*, 30 August.

Herold, C. (2003) 'It's Just a Fantasy, but Real Life is Always in Play', *New York Times*, 6 March.

iamlost (2001) *Techdirt: Innovation at Risk*, 19 December. Online. Available: http://www.techdirt.com/articles/20011219/1248254_F.shtml
(8 October 2002).

Jameson, F. (1992) *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Jason and Dan (2002) *Conspiracy Net: Majestic Alliance*, 11 December. Online. Available: http://www.conspiracy-net.com/majestic/main.shtml
(8 October 2002).

Kolko, B. and Reid, E. (1998) 'Dissolution and fragmentation: problems in online communities', in S.G. Jones (ed.) *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Press, pp. 212–29.

Kushner, D. (2002) 'So What, Exactly, Do Online Gamers Want?', *New York Times*, 7 March.

Levy, P. (1998) *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*, New York: Plenum Trade.

Lockard, B. (1996) 'Progressive politics, electronic individualism and the myth of virtual community' in D. Porter (ed.) *Internet Culture*, New York: Routledge, pp. 219–231.

McGonigal, J. (2003) ' "This is not a game": immersive aesthetics and collective play', in A. Miles (ed.) *Melbourne DAC 2003 Streamingworlds Conference Proceedings*, Melbourne: RMIT University, pp. 116–25.

McRae, S. (1996) 'Coming apart at the seams: sex, text, and the virtual body', in L. Cherny and E.R. Wiese (eds) *Wired_Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace*, Seattle, WA: Seal Press, pp. 242–63.

Marriott, M. (2001) 'Game Designer Who Breaks the Mold', *New York Times*, 23 August.

Poster, M. (1990) *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Seeker (2002) Majestic Alliance Bulletin Board, 10 January. Online. Available: http://pub50.ezboard.com/fmajesticalliancefrm4 (8 October 2002).

Slouka, M. (1995) *War of the Worlds*, New York: Basic Books.

Smith, P. (1998) *Discerning the Subject*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Stone, A.R. (1995) *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Taty (2002) *Techdirt: Innovation at Risk*, 15 March. Online. Available: http://www.techdirt.com/articles/20011219/1248254_F.shtml (8 October 2002).

Taylor, T.L. (2002) 'Whose game is this anyway?': negotiating corporate ownership in a virtual world', in F. Mäyrä (ed.) *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings*, Tampere: Tampere University Press, pp. 227–242.

Turkle, S. (1995) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

Virilio, P. (1995). 'Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!', *CTHEORY*. Online. Available: http://www.ctheory.com/a30-cybersapce_alarm.html (8 October 2002).

Wellman, B. and Gulia, M. (1999) 'Virtual communities as communities: net surfers don't ride alone', in M. Smith and P. Kollack (eds) *Communities in Cyberspace*, London: Routledge, pp. 167–194.