

Complexities of Gaming Cultures: Adolescent gamers adapting and transforming learning

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ABSTRACT

Games & Learning

We are well aware that video games are causing educators to take a second look at the educational value of games, technology, and the social interactions involved (de Castell & Jenson, 2004; Gee, 2003; Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, & Gee, 2005) but what does that learning look like, how does that learning or way of knowing happen, and what do the gamers have to say about their learning? What are the implications for these gamers and for education systems when we begin to value the powerful learning involved in video gaming cultures?

Gaming Cultures

Squire (2008) uses the metaphor “constellations of users” (p. 639) to suggest how gamers as individuals make up a culture which in turn is connected to other cultures and he brings attention to how game playing can be and should be observed as a social practice. Gee (2003) also uses the term affinity groups and spaces to explain how common interests and discourses draw people (e.g. gamers) together, to use technological spaces in order to group more easily and flexibly. Involvement with particular video games and the subsequent online and offline cultures are highly dependent of the gamers’ social contexts (Yates & Littleton, 1999) and these communities are self-organizing and self-directed as the members produce and create meaningful and productive interactions and texts of their own.

Our ongoing three year ethnographic research study of ten adolescent gamers has begun to reveal the importance of understanding and knowing more about individual gamers’ ways of knowing, but also about the overlapping and developing cultures they create and belong to as gamers. Case studies of these adolescent gamers, derived from multiple individual and focus group interviews as well as interviews with their parents, have helped to shed light on the complex lives and learning practices of these gamers

who are “opening new spaces”, both physical and abstract, (Squire, 2008, p. 642) in and out of their game play.

Complexities of Gamers’ Cultures

Video gamers’ cultures can be understood as a “collective of dynamic systems” (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 77) in which each individual is involved but the culture cannot be reduced to one person, nor can the individual be dismissed since s/he is involved with other systems; they can “comprise and surpass collectives of others and the systems change a gain” (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 77). This paper presentation aims to address how complexity thinking (Johnson, 2001) is a helpful lens to examine the underground, interweaving, and changing learning practices of video gamers.

The complexities involved in the gaming cultures of our adolescent male participants include how they socialize, how they learn from multiple sources, and how they come to know more through producing. Embedded in these multiple and overlapping systems is the learning that is not transparent or easy to articulate for the learners. These complex systems or ‘unities’ can be described as “spontaneous, unpredictable, irreducible, contextual, and vibrantly sufficient – in brief, they are adaptive” (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 77).

Exploring the Complex Systems

Through case studies, artifacts, and the gamers’ reflections, the blurring of their learning, knowing, and teaching are shared and the complexities of their multiple cultures involving gaming will be explored in hopes of spurring a larger conversation about how “complex systems are systems that learn” (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 78) beyond the maintenance of a supervisor, teacher, or leader, and how these systems continue to tip the balance of themselves in order to keep learning, forging new ideas, relationships, and ways of knowing. Play becomes validated

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and purposeful when viewing gamers' cultures through complexity theory and the understanding of play develops to include mutual respect, shared responsibilities, and engaging, stimulating experiences (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008). These adolescent gamers reveal the productiveness of play (Pearce, 2006) as they share and describe their communities of practice.

Why Consider Complexities?

The media fueled, societal stigma of gaming (Yates & Littleton, 1999) continues to dismiss the sophisticated and complex learning that happens for video gamers. We argue that in acknowledging the transformative learning and knowing in which gamers participate, educational assumptions will be disrupted and cultural practices of teaching and learning will shift.

Author Keywords

Adolescent gamers, learning, complexity theory, self-organizing cultures

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