

## **Bridging Gaming and Designing: Two Sites of Informal Design Learning**

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In recent years, games and learning researchers have increasingly become interested in the "affinity spaces" (Gee, 2004) around popular videogames, identifying them as instructional spaces (Squire and Giovanetto, 2008) and contexts in which sophisticated reasoning practices are enacted (Steinkuehler and Duncan, 2008). However, the motivation for participation in these communities as well as the goals of the participants have only rarely come under scrutiny (Duncan and Gee, 2008). How does the notion of "design" (e.g., New London Group, 1996; Kafai, 1995; Hayes and Games, 2008) help to explain the ways that players are increasingly engaged in productive, informal communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) around commercial videogames? In this presentation, I propose to elaborate the development of a "designer identity" among gamers by focusing on activities within two of these spaces -- the official forums for the massively-multiplayer game World of Warcraft (WoW), and the design activities around a popular "YouTube for Flash games," Kongregate.com.

In the former context, players engage in complex discussions over class "talent spec" (character configuration) choices, while often proposing implicit or explicit revisions of the game's mechanics. These players, I argue, exhibit design expertise which arises directly out of gameplay expertise and, in some cases, find their proposals commented upon or picked up by World of Warcraft game designers and community managers (the "blue posts" on the official forums). By analyzing the Discourse (Gee, 2006) of these exchanges, I propose to explicate the means by which players interact with representatives of the game designers, and challenge traditional notions of critical media literacy. How, in contemporary games, is the design of a persistent virtual world such as World of Warcraft shaped by the interaction between the corporate entitle (in this case Blizzard Activision) and its players? How can we best understand the design-like activities that occur in these spaces?

For the second case, I contrast the involvement of the WoW player with the activities of gamers explicitly learning to become designers of their own games within Kongregate.com. "Kongregate Labs," a set of game design tutorials ("Shootorials") and game design contests with monetary rewards, is an attempt to explicitly scaffold game design practices using Adobe Flash. Kongregate's numerous community tools (achievements, personal profiles, social networking features, discussion forums) serve to support the interaction of players in this space, bridging their activities into formal design skills. How can we best understand the online Discourse around these creations, especially when they include multiple channels of conversation within Kongregate (forums, chat, comments on games), multiple modalities (the design of interactive games featuring textual, video, audial, and ludic elements), and a variety of tools (Adobe software, Kongregate's "Shootorials")?

Over these two cases, I make the argument that several factors are key to both cases of developing a "designer identity." Addressing the motivations of players through analysis of their online interactions and directed interviews with selected participants, I will describe a picture of engagement with learning how to (1) navigate social affiliations effectively in online spaces (2) utilize appropriate tools present within a design environment to craft new designs, and (3) reflect (e.g.,

Schon, 1983) on stages and levels of the design process. Through a description of the activities in these two settings, I wish to contrast the ways that informal design proposals for a commercial game product (WoW) entails different emphases on each of these factors than in a case in which "everyday" game designers are encouraged to develop their own game creations (Kongregate). As contemporary internet and game culture exhibits increasing tensions between corporate and user-generated content, addressing the ways learning to design in these spaces differs between contexts becomes increasingly important.

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