

Chapter 1

The Art of Gaming: Knowledge Construction in Visual Culture Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

Students learn about relationships, form social groups, and interact with peers in and through visual culture. This chapter is a discussion of the range of visual arts learning, from the development of art skills and concepts to learning about social aspects of art and design, that occurs in visual culture learning communities and the particular conditions and effects of visual culture that support niche communities tied to adolescents' and young adults' artistic and social interests. In this chapter, the author theorizes about ways that visual culture supports online niche communities and characteristics of art and design education that sustain communal life.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents and young adults communicate, learn about interpersonal relationships, and form social groups as a result of their many and varied experiences with digital visual culture. Young people in this age group learn a range of valuable social and intellectual lessons from their interactions with popular visual culture (e.g., Buckingham, 2003; Johnson, 2005; Rushkoff, 1999) and develop

strong and long-lasting interests as a result of their technological access to visual culture, such as film, television, and gaming. This age group also develops a large amount of the content that can be found online; approximately two-thirds of teens and young adults create online content (Lenhart, Purcell, & Smith, 2010).

At an apparently surface level, adolescents and young adults define themselves through visual culture. Family art preferences based on socio-economic level (Bourdieu, 1984) and professional visual culture such as advertising and television,

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play important roles in influencing these surface identities. Youth form their outward identities by making choices about a range of popular visual culture that they believe represents them, such as clothing and hair styles. Individuals become part of social groups by associating themselves with peers who have made similar choices and they develop such preferences to strengthen their friendships.

However, visual culture is also constructed by and gives coherence to groups through the establishment of deep and meaningful symbol systems, creating an agreed upon cultural capital, visual narratives of common experience, and avenues to teaching and learning about art and design (Freedman, 2003, 2006). In contemporary life, and through access to digital technologies, young people form long-lasting allegiances to visual culture forms. These allegiances play a critical role in the formation of large and small communities that supercede geographic borders because visual culture mediates among people in and across sociocultural groups. Some professional popular visual culture forms, such as advertising and television, are created by people who know how this process works to develop powerful, didactic imagery that shapes youth identity. Although people interpret images in their own ways (and artistic intention is no longer considered the only pathway to understanding), visual forms function in ways that arbitrate meaning. Rather than being merely the outward, surface expression of an individual, visual culture acts as a circuit of communication: it connects artists to viewers, viewers to each other, and viewers to artists through experience of a common form.

This chapter is an investigation of the conditions and effects of the informal art and design education that occurs in visual culture learning communities, specifically with regards to video gaming. It addresses a range of art knowledge, from art skills and concepts to social aspects of the arts, which emerge as a result of art and social interests that are connected to the visual culture forms that support online niche communities. In

this chapter, I theorize some of the characteristics of informal education that young people depend on to sustain communal life. This discussion of adolescent and young adult's visual culture preferences and practices is located at the critical juncture of sociology of community, visual technologies, and group members' desire to come to know about art and design. Finally, I discuss one of my own case studies of a video gaming community as an example of these conditions and effects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Art and the Sociology of Communities

Traditional communities have "many pathways linking members together so that the failure or breakdown of any one relationship need not weaken overall unity" (Day, 2006, p. 29). However, when referring to contemporary, urban communities, Day (2006) points out that "there is no single, bounded unit, which persists unchanged over time, and absorbs the full commitment of its members; boundaries are variable, relationships are episodic, and loyalties are qualified and provisional" (p. 115). And yet, adolescents and young adults form various types of temporary and provisional communities that are deeply meaningful to them.

A critical foundation of adolescent and young adult communities is art and other forms of visual culture. Visual culture can be both an expression of a community and a binding force that holds a community together. Art and design forms, such as paintings, sculptures, films, logos, fashion, interior design, architecture, and the many other forms of visual culture, can represent a community by illustrating commonly held beliefs, ideas, geography, and ceremonies. At about the age of thirteen, people tend to discern what will become their most valued and meaningful art form (Michalos & Kahlke, 2008). For many adolescents and young adults, knowledge and practice in the

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