

Learning Reflection and Creativity in Online Game Communities

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INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly being recognized that participation in role-playing gaming communities contributes to the learning of their members. Within the field of educational research, there is a wide spreading interest in online communities and virtual worlds: Online technologies provide new opportunities for “anytime/anywhere” social interaction and the number of innovative curricular designs that incorporate online collaborative environments has been steadily increasing since such technology first emerged. As Lave and Wenger (1991) argue, understanding the learning in naturally occurring contexts, and not just formal ones, is crucial if we are to forward learning and educational theory and practice beyond the contexts we ourselves contrive. “We ought to investigate more naturally occurring, self-sustaining *indigenous* virtual cultures so that our *theory* might be a more accurate reflection of them and our *practice* a better reflection *on* them in days to come.” (Galarneau, 2004; Steinkuehler, 2005 p. 80-81)

The two online communities with which we are involved, Woldian Games and Neverwinter Nights, are the two cases we would like to present for discussing the contribution of online role-playing gaming communities to the learning of their members, specifically focusing on learning to be reflective and creative. Now with a 20-year long history, Woldian Games is a fantasy-role playing community that asynchronously interacts by posting on various boards for gaming and chatting within the community Web site, www.woldiangames.com. Released in 2002, Neverwinter Nights continues to be played online by tens of thousands of players worldwide everyday. The main reason for this sustained

popularity is, along with continuing support from the developer, Bioware (<http://nwn.bioware.com>), the ease with which game owners can create their own interactive graphical game environments and open them for online play by all other owners.

Our purpose in this article is to demonstrate that the virtual and networked communities of online role-playing games encourage and facilitate learning and development of not only technical and communications skills, but reflection and creativity. We will achieve this purpose by presenting cases of online role-playing games, which encourage and facilitate the learning of reflection and creativity, particularly in their community aspect, cases of individuals learning technical and communications skills and also reflection and creativity by participating in online role-playing game communities, and cases of successful academic use of online role-playing games. Prior background information and a theoretical perspective on technologies for reflective and creative learning also supports the presentation of these cases and findings.

PRACTICAL AND ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

Woldian Games

Along with the increasing interest in online communities and virtual worlds, the use of asynchronous computer-mediated communications to support educational practices is also growing. Asynchronous communication methods in general deserve special attention, since this method is specifically regarded as being open to discus-

sion, thus promoting the development of understanding, even through disagreements (Joinson, 2003). In addition, asynchronous communication is highlighted for its contribution to personal and collective reflection for learning.¹

As an active participant in the online community for almost two years, valuable data and information have been collected by contributing to the playing and other community activities. Furthermore we have been conducting e-mail interviews with other players, whom we have relatively close communication with and whom we have thought would have insightful comments and be available for the purposes of our research.

Neverwinter Nights

Play of Neverwinter Nights is real-time, so in-game community interactions are synchronous. On the other hand, off-line time between play sessions allows not only individual reflection, but asynchronous communication with other community members, not only via direct e-mail, but on the forum sites or chat rooms that, along with Web pages, are typical parts of a particular Neverwinter game's community presence.²

Our observations are based on active participation for more than three years in playing, guiding play (called "Dungeon Mastering" in Dungeons & Dragons, upon which Neverwinter Nights is based), administering technical and organizational matters for a number of game communities, and building game environments by choosing content and reprogramming rules.

Technologies for Reflective and Creative Learning

Asynchronous communication tools like "listservs, e-mail, and discussion forums" have contributed to transforming how people communicate and share knowledge, or learn and reflect. A discussion thread is a good example of reflective learning from an asynchronous tool: "One learner can post a thought, and hours (or days) later, another learner can comment on the posting...Learners can engage each other when it is most convenient...and, a knowledge trail is left of discussion posts, which helps the ones that are trailing behind. Content of the messages can be explored and discussed in great depth - allowing learners time to reflect and formulate thoughtful responses" (eLearn-space). Comments in a discussion board (Techsoap,

2005) for asynchronous communication are supportive of this argument, as well:

asynchronous communication allows for more "thoughtful" discussions. The learners and tutor can spend time crafting their remarks so the discussion may be more organized and thorough. You can arrange your thoughts better, get your ideas and points set before posting...you are more likely to say what you mean if you have time to compose. There is... opportunity to think before "speaking," a much higher level of reflective thinking and deep conversation than in face-to-face or chat environments...

As Markel (2001) suggests:

This particular use of the discussion forum, to negotiate and construct knowledge, is an example of using the technology as a cognitive tool to stimulate cognitive learning strategies and critical thinking...Participants draw upon their own experiences and interpretations and share these with the group discussion... This involves the processes of reflection and the construction and re-construction of domains of knowledge. The resulting kind of learning from these processes is a negotiated interpretation of knowledge, deeper, more long lasting, and refined.

The use of asynchronous computer-mediated communication tools to support educational practices is also growing in particular to support and promote computer-supported collaborative learning. There are a number of benefits from collaboration for learning, as Steeples (1998), from Centre for Studies in Advanced Learning Technology at Lancaster University, UK discusses them. First of all, group members can collaborate to learn, which necessitates them in articulating and explaining their ideas to each other. "Articulation 'externalizes' ideas for scrutiny by the group member him/herself, as well as by the other members of the group. Explaining one's ideas and sharing perspectives and viewpoints encourages each group member to examine their own ideas in the light of others' views (Kaye, 1992; Koschmann, 1996; McConnell, 1994)." Second, as group members learn to collaborate, the experience teaches them important skills, which includes "personal transferable skills (e.g., communication, coordination, self-management)."³

The possibility of expressing oneself actively in writing anytime without competing is a potent mode of



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