

Chapter 44

Supporting Visibility and Resilience in Play: Gender-Supportive Online Gaming Communities as a Model of Identity and Confidence Building in Play and Learning

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have highlighted the learning opportunities afforded by online gaming communities of practice, which include providing authentic and meaningful contexts for engaging in and learning 21st century skills and digital literacies. However, lesser attention has been paid to how these environments can be inequitable in including and supporting members across gender. This chapter highlights the importance of gender supportive online gaming communities and their role in increasing the visibility of and resiliency necessary for equitable online play and learning. The history of a gender-supportive community and its structures are explored. The chapter further provides recommendations for educators, based on the social structures of this gender-supportive community and related research on educational climates and equitable learning.

INTRODUCTION

Several scholars have begun to explore the relevance of online communities and fan sites to education, often calling them “affinity spaces” (Gee, 2004); in these informal learning communities, individuals have the opportunity to engage in 21st century skills and apply their knowledge and learning in contexts that are meaningful to them and where they can have an authentic audience for their skills (Gee, 2007; Squire, 2011). Online gaming communities, often popularly termed “clans” or “guilds” offer a glimpse into this informal learning process, by providing spaces where players can knowledge-share, build relationships, and impart their skills and expertise in meaningful ways that provide value to other individuals. Such

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assistance includes helping other players better their gaming abilities by sharing strategies, helping others learn technical skills relevant to live-streaming their game play, and designing image-based avatars and forum signatures in Photoshop.

Affinity spaces, such as the ones formed among these gamers or the toy collectors noted in Author Four's chapter, are akin to communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in that they highlight learning and application in context:

The concept of community underlying the notion of legitimate peripheral participation, and hence of 'knowledge' and its 'location' in the lived-in world, is both crucial and subtle... A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice... participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice, its power relations and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (i.e., for legitimate peripheral participation). (Lave & Wenger, 2002, p. 115)

Both the pioneering work of Lave and Wenger (1991, 2002) and Gee (2004) point to the importance of community and cultural practice in the learning context, and propose that power relations can have an impact on learning, identity and participation. In her study of the "digital identity divide," Goode (2010) argued that "technology identity" is shaped considerably by socio-cultural context and in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991); in other words, individuals' sense of ability, performance and engagement with computers, technology, and digital literacy are often shaped by access, and early experiences with technology that are often grounded in socio-cultural experiences and economic realities, which, in turn, create "opportunities and obstacles" (p. 509). Thus, an individual who may not have been afforded the ability to use a computer at a younger age like her colleagues, or wasn't equally socially supported by being in a family or community of tech-savvy users, would be less likely to develop the same kinds of efficacy and identity with technology than an individual for whom both early access and social support was readily available.

In addition to providing authentic contexts for learning, some communities also provide spaces for supportive play. While equity has often arisen as a potential crisis for engagement and learning in affinity spaces (Gee, 2007; Duncan & Hayes, 2012), little has been explored when it comes to understanding how inequity shapes play, and how communities can seek to support inclusive practices around play and learning. In gaming spaces, these inequities have traditionally been seen as operating along gender lines, though more contemporary research points to racial and ethnic inequities that similarly impact play (e.g., Gray, 2012; Nakamura, 2009; Richard, 2012b; Richard, 2013a; Richard, 2013b; Shaw, 2012).

This chapter will specifically explore how players are using a gender-supportive community as an authentic context for informal learning around games and 21st century skills, as well as how this learning would be relevant, more broadly, for education. The chapter will further provide a historical framework for the formation of the community, its relationship to the greater game culture, which has often been unsupportive and openly hostile to females, as well as its changing state from a community of resistance to one of resilience and support. While the community was initially formed to be supportive for females, it has evolved to include male participation, and emerging research (Richard & Hoadley, 2013) is showing that its supportive structure benefits players across gender. The chapter will also highlight research (Richard, 2014) that shows the community can support identity and efficacy in play. Specifically, the chapter will focus on how the community provides structure for supportive play across gender, as well

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