

Chapter 5.12

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

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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 discussion, 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

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