

Chapter 14

Forming The Guild: Star Power and Rethinking Projective Identity in Affinity Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This paper expands on Gee's (2004) notion of "affinity spaces" by placing them in the context of games, media stars, and their fans and combining cultural studies and new literacies approaches. The Guild, a web series about the misadventures of MMO-players, written by and starring actor, writer, producer, and gamer Felicia Day, is examined. On WatchTheGuild.com, fans of The Guild enact literacy practices, particularly those that align with Day's activities and star persona, such as media production and critique. These literacy practices are constrained by the limitations of projective identity in the context of star-based affinity spaces. Taking on projective identities within The Guild's affinity space, individuals are faced with the impossibility of fully achieving the star's – Day's – successful identity as simultaneously gamer and media producer. The imbalance in cultural power allows the professionally manufactured star image to remain forever unattainable. This paper proposes reconsidering projective identity to move beyond the affinity space to develop one's own sense of mastery outside the context of star-based fandom.

INTRODUCTION

Fan communities have long been studied as sites of ideological resistance, audience activity and creative appropriations of mass media (Fiske, 1989; Jenkins, 1992). More recently, scholars

aligned with digital media and learning research communities have argued that fans also create valuable informal learning spaces, in which fans learn and practice valuable skills while engaging with a favorite media artifact (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Gee (2004) addressed media-based fan

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communities as “affinity spaces” in which fans of media come together around a common endeavor, bridging identity categories, degrees of expertise, and traditional structures of leadership or status. In these flexible environments, various forms of learning are facilitated through a community’s practices, forms of mentorship, and the sharing of knowledge.

Recent affinity space research (Black, 2009; Steinkuehler & King, 2009; Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2008; Duncan, 2010) has illustrated that fan communities are often centered around sophisticated learning practices, in addition to engaging within social communities that may bring them into contact with those very different from themselves. Much of this work has built off of Gee’s (2004) early claims regarding affinity spaces, their characteristics, and their potential power in fostering valuable learning experiences. In a key statement, Gee (2004) argued that:

[P]eople who may share little and even differ dramatically on other issues, affiliate around their common cause and the practices associated with espousing it via affinity spaces... Fans of everything (e.g. movies, comic books, television shows, video games, various lifestyle choices) create and sustain affinity spaces (p. 87, emphasis added).

However, in this litany of fandoms, Gee (2004) left out star- or celebrity-based fandom, in which everyday fans closely follow the careers of a particular actor, musician, or other creative producer. Star-based fans undertake many of the same practices as other fans: Forming fan websites with forums or chat functions; reading specialized publications such as gossip magazines and blogs; attempting to view, or collect, all of a star’s work; speculating with others about the “real” nature of the star; or even enjoying the “game” of observing how a star is produced (Gamson, 1994). Yet, studies of star-based fandom must also contend with the propensity for aspiration, emulation, or direct imitation of stars. What are the learning

and literacy implications of such spaces, and what might we gain from a deeper investigation of affinity spaces that are centered on an individual with agency rather than solely a media artifact such as a game or television series? How does the star’s or celebrity’s intentions affect and shape these spaces, and how does the active management (or cultivation) of them cause us to rethink the means we should use in trying to understand learning and literacy within them?

In this paper, we address how our notions of affinity spaces (and the forms of learning that emerge within them) are affected when they are studied in the context of a fandom that celebrates both a media artifact and the star at its center, exploring the intersection of educational literatures regarding informal learning communities with cultural studies approaches used to investigate stardom and media production. In particular, we explore how Gee’s (2003) notion of projective identity takes on new meaning when placed in the dual contexts of star emulation/appropriation and involvement within informal learning communities. Toward this end, we problematize Gee’s (2003) notion of the affinity space and the role of projective identities within them by identifying trends of power and resistance within popular gaming-related media and their relationships to social and political currents, as well as investigating how a focus on learning within informal fan communities addresses practices found within them.

Additionally, we wish to note that we are explicitly attempting to forge a bridge between our two fields and respective sets of methodologies, cultural studies and the interdisciplinary field of digital media and learning. We seek to better understand the means by which accounts of learning and literacy in informal contexts necessitates an understanding of fan communities as cultural spaces, and vice versa. We try to delicately dance across the lines between these literatures and academic cultures, in order to provide a model of how our individual fields may productively benefit from one another. We follow Squire’s (2008) in-

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