

Everywhere Now: Three Dialogues on Kids, Games, and Learning *Katie Salen, Moderator*

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Introduction to the Dialogues

Everywhere Now presents three online dialogues focused on games and gaming as a highly visible and at times controversial, activity shaping our understanding of a post-Nintendo generation. Games and game modification are currently key entry points for many young people into digital literacies, social communities, and tech-savvy identities. What core issues arise when we consider the “impact” of such practices within social, cultural, and learning domains?

Serving as a more open-ended and inclusive counterpart to the *Ecology of Games* volume being produced in parallel as part of the MacArthur Foundation’s new initiative on Digital Media and Learning, the series will inform what I hope is an increasingly complex and informed awareness of the meaning, significance, and practicalities of games in young people’s lives. The first dialogue looks at the kinds of participatory practices games engender for youth and asks which forms of power emerge or are reinforced through gaming, while simultaneously asking which forms are missing. A second dialogue focuses on identifying sets of emergent gaming literacies, or domains of media engagement produced by games and gaming attitudes. What kinds of skills are required in order to game and how might these skills transfer across practices? A third dialogue interrogates pathways and points of entry into gaming. How do games act as points of departure, for example, toward other forms of knowledge, literacy, and social organization?

Purposefully broad, the three dialogues that make up *Everywhere Now* are intended to complexify a debate around the value of games that has been to date, both polemic and shamefully shallow. The language of the media is replete with references to the devil (and heavy metal) when it comes to the ill-found virtues of videogames, while a growing movement in K-12 education casts them as a Holy Grail in the uphill battle to keep kids learning. The goal here is to add shades of grey to this often black and white mix, pointing toward a more sophisticated understanding of the myriad ways in which gaming could and should matter to those considering the future of learning. Perhaps most importantly, the dialogues can help us to see the kinds of questions not yet asked, the kinds of research not yet done—the failings, in other words—of our current approach to a field that is only now beginning to take shape.

The following text represents a transcription of responses from the online dialogue. Every attempt has been made to retain the sequencing of the responses, although 100% accuracy is not possible in a linear format such as this document. Please also forgive typos and grammatical errors, and any inconsistency in formatting. Embedded links from the original dialogue can be accessed in the online format:

- > <http://community.macfound.org/openforum>
- > click **DISCUSSIONS** in the left navigation bar of the site
- > find the correct thread located in the central panel

Dialogue 1: Power, Play, Participation (October 16-20)

Power, Play, Participation explores the forms of power players experience, reproduce, and generate through a range of gaming practices, from forms related to identity or community, to those enabled through activities like world-building, modding, and operating within a complex information network. As Mizuko Ito has noted, “The promises and pitfalls of certain technological forms are realized only through active and ongoing struggle over their creation, uptake, and revision.” Gaming as a production-oriented literacy moves to the forefront within this discourse, with several styles of participation in evidence. In what ways are we seeing youth empowered through their participation in the creation, uptake, and revision of games? What are the ways that power is accessed via games, or leveraged within a game community? What roles do gamers take on through their play and to what extent do they experience a mixing of roles, which may not occur outside a gaming context? In what specific ways to games turn players into producers? Is production a required mode of participation, or just one of many ways in which gamers engage?

The Kick-Off

Matteo Bittanti, Douglas Rushkoff, Jane Pinkard, and Kallen Tsikalas, Core Discussants for this dialogue, were each asked to respond to the following question:

Q: In what ways are we seeing youth empowered through their participation in the creation, uptake, and revision of games? In what ways, alternately, might participation fail?

A: Matteo Bittanti

The term “empowerment” has various meanings and implications. It is usually used in association with two kinds of power: rhetorical and technical.

In the first sense, somehow paradoxically, games can invest single users with the power to express themselves on a variety of topics, from gaming itself to politics. It is what John Fiske would call “discursive production”.

In the second sense, games can equip or supply the players with an ability to create something (“textual production”, to borrow another expression from Fiske). In the digital age, the two meanings/modes are becoming more and more interwoven. For instance, users are creating machinima to create political and social commentary on a variety of current events, such as the recent Parisian riots, the Iraqi War and sexual abuse. A medium originally created for (purposely) meaningless recreation becomes a vessel for ideological (re)production. The ultimate subversion.

Also, the creation of political games is on the rise – think, for instance, of Italian hacktivist-collective La Molleindustria, whose McDonald's Game can be considered the gaming equivalent of Super Size Me. Again, a playful technology becomes a powerful tool for criticizing the way corporations operate. I doubt that a bunch of lawyers could stop these phenomena, even when the creators are clearly (and often deliberately) infringing copyrights.

Often, the revision of games can take the form of ludic practices and performances that violate the creators' intended rules. I'm thinking of Joseph Delappe's frequent intrusions in online multiplayer games such as Medal of Honor, The Sims Online, Battlefield

Vietnam and, above all, America's Army. Videogames – and especially first person shooters – are intrinsically political. America's Army was deliberately designed as a recruitment tool, and the U.S. Army is the founding sponsor of the annual Serious Games Summit. By entering this space to protest the war in Iraq, for instance, the gamers are creatively subverting the Army's interactive propaganda.

In these examples, the consumers-as-creators are not kids, yet their practices can become a model for different kinds of audiences, youngsters included (at least, that's my hope). A second kind of empowerment is practical and technical. By using game editors and game related technologies, kids are learning new skills. Think game videos. Think gamics. Think fan fiction. Think game art. Think game mods. Think fan created games. The relationship between the industry and game communities does not have to be antagonistic/oppositional. In some cases, it takes the form of a collaboration. As we all know, back in the mid-Nineties, modding games became a recruiting tools for companies. Nowadays, new forms of game production are on the rise. Sony recently bought the rights to release on the upcoming PlayStation 3 a game originally created as a part of a Master Thesis project, Flow.

And this is just the beginning. The interplay between game communities and the game industry might grow exponentially in the next few years thanks to the development of new media literacies, better and more powerful tools, and innovative forms of production and sharing of resources online. Bottom line: we are witnessing the emergence of new ways of empowerment. Political, artistic, and ideological game-related production is still a niche, and yet, I would not underestimate what millions of people could do with the right tools.

At the same time, gamers are acquiring new technical skills at a frantic pace and they are using brand new talents to make it “big” economically and artistically. I might sound too optimistic, but I think we're on the verge of a virtuous breakdown.

What we should fear: too much emphasis on technological determinism (I am guilty as well); legal and political backlash that would lead to techno-fascist-censorship; instant commodification of game-created products, lack of critical understanding, more military-themed entertainment (in an Ender's Game sort of way).

A: Douglas Rushkoff

This is something I was writing about back before even Doom mods: that once kids are given the ability to program these games for themselves, things will get really interesting. But in spite of my extreme optimism in the early 90's, I'm not seeing as much uptake as I would have expected. Or as deep penetration into the game realities as I'd like.

First off, it is still a select few who move beyond cheat codes into real modification. And then those who do tend to stay within the parameters of the game world. They'll change the skin of the game, but rarely change guns to magic wands, or monsters to angels. Most of what's out there feels more like Levittown than an open source creative universe. Each mod has its own wallpaper.

Part of my current pessimism is a result of the Lego Mindstorms project, which I thought would really catch on—but was a rude awakening for both Seymour Pappert and Lego. Most kids really didn't want to program their own Lego machines; they'd prefer the one-way-to-put-it-together "Bionicles." And while Bionicles do have a website and offer the

ability to write one's own stories, they are not nearly as "programmable" as the original Lego blocks. There's a "way" they're supposed to be fit together.

So I often feel like the real potential to program has yet to be fully tapped. Even kids tend to stay between the two white lines, as it were, and use these products as they were "intended." That feeling of really taking apart the toy—of removing the part that says "danger of electric shock" and hacking the truck to be a robot (or the killing game to be a flying engine)—hasn't quite surfaced in the gaming cultures I've observed.

Yes, there's great personalization, and some of what I've seen in Second Life has astounded me for its ingenuity. But the relative posture of gamer to creator hasn't changed as much as I had thought.

A: Jane Pinkard

I'm amazed at how many young people are so conversant with mods. Mods used to be something rather esoteric, reserved for elite players, and now there are so many places where players can find information about how to create and install mods. Look at the blossoming of mods for the game Oblivion. What's interesting to me about these is that many of the mods attempt to fix game design issues, to streamline some aspect of the game, or in one case, to equalize the disparity between male and female playably characters. Players are using these mods to adapt the game to their desires and to make the game better.

I think merely the idea that a player can change so much in the game through a simple mod is very powerful; but the ones who can create mods are still a fraction of those who normally play. However, games like World of Warcraft, because it is a multiplayer game, is largely dependent on the participation of players to generate much of what is fun and fulfilling about the content. A player can solo, certainly, but that gets repetitive pretty quickly. What makes players get "addicted" is the social aspect, which spills over into forums and message boards and blogs. Follow the website of any guild and you will find as much drama as a soap opera has! Players hash out their roles, the rules, their strategy and tactics during raids, the relationships between players, how to divide the loot.... The depth of the game comes entirely from participation - it is a positive correlation.

A: Kallen Tsikalas

My name is Kallen Tsikalas. My training is in educational psychology, and I tend to focus on the social and motivational processes that support cognitive development and behavioral change. I work primarily with inner-city youth between the ages of 10 and 13. Presently, I direct a program of applied research at a non-profit organization, Computers for Youth (CFY). The goal of CFY is to help underserved children succeed in school (and in life, but school dominates their experiences at this age) by improving their opportunities for learning at home.

Improving opportunities for learning at home involves providing *cognitively stimulating* resources that are often lacking in the homes of low-income families. But it also involves supporting the *motivational processes* and *positive social climate* that enable and sustain learning. CFY does this by providing low-income families with a *computer-based home learning center.* This center includes a refurbished Pentium III desktop computer loaded with educational software (including several simulation games), free internet service for one year, technical support for the life of the computer,

and family learning workshops (some mandatory, some voluntary). To date, CFY has served about 10,000 families in NYC and Philadelphia.

As Matt mentioned, the term “empowerment” has various meanings and implications. My particular take on “empowerment” is psychological. With regard to youth and computer-based simulation games, I have examined empowerment in two distinct, but intertwined areas.

(1) Individual motivation to learn. From a motivational framework, I equate empowerment with:

(a) Belief in one’s own agency. In psychological terms, this is similar to an *internal locus of control.* In other words, youth feel like they have at least partial control over events in their lives as opposed to feeling like their lives are controlled by external circumstances and individuals.

(b) Adaptive interpretations of and responses to challenge/failure. How one makes sense of his/her own failures (e.g., attributing them to poor strategy or to low intelligence) heavily influences his/her future choices and task persistence—hence, power to pursue and achieve goals. Additionally, the extent to which one feels it necessary to protect the ego (ie., to maintain “face”) influences how willing he/she will be to acknowledge failure and try to improve.

(c) Development of self-efficacy (task-specific beliefs about competence) inside the games and how this transfers to life outside the game. Beliefs about one’s own competence powerfully predict one’s goals, choices, persistence, and response to failure.

My research has investigated how playing computer-based simulation games affects youth empowerment with specific regard to their sense of agency, response to challenge/failure, and development of self-efficacy. I have worked with two different computer-based life simulations: Real Lives by Educational Simulations and The Sims. And, I’m currently working on small research study with Real Lives.

(2) Affective social support for learning. Social environments (both families and friendship networks) promote youth empowerment by sharing enthusiasm and modeling willingness to learn (and to “compromise face”), learning strategies, and how to cope with setbacks.

On a very informal basis, I have looked at how families’ involvement with and attitudes towards learning change when they engage in playing computer-based educational games with their children, that is when children and their caretakers are learning math or social studies content together through games instead of through more traditional approaches.

I won’t report out on my observations here. But I think there is a lot of worthwhile research and game development to be done in this area.

So.... on the individual “empowerment” level, I have seen some interesting and promising trends for my sample of inner-city youth (ages 10-13) from low-income families.

CAVEAT: These findings are still **very** preliminary, and truly I'm not sure the extent to which they will generalize to more privileged, economically empowered youth!!

(1) Regarding AGENCY:

Playing computer-based life simulation games seems to make inner-city youth from low-income families more aware that they **do** have choices at least in certain areas of their lives. Whereas kids were unable to identify many options before playing "Real Lives", after playing the game several times, they were able to identify options and to employ them in hypothetical scenarios.

For example, before playing the game, the kids were unable to think of a variety of ways to spend their leisure time. They generally listed only a few things like "being cool," "hanging out in the park," and "playing with friends." After playing the game, one 12-year old commented that he had to think about how he was using his own time and maybe he should do some volunteering. Other kids made similar remarks – suggesting that the game was raising their awareness of choices **and** allowing them to evaluate their behavior as a matter of choice, rather than just accepting what was given.

Interestingly, many of the children also began to **appropriate the information** in the game by creating their own narratives. Creating stories may be thought of as a low-end version of **creating games**.

The kids in my research used "Real Lives" to create "friends" and to see what happened to these people. They often wrote stories about their "friends,"-- highly embellishing the details provided in the game.

From a learning standpoint, this may have positive effects on their writing skills (some of the kids were reluctant writers beforehand), but it also may have consequences on their ability to imagine future, possible selves. Both are very exciting outcomes!!!

(2) Regarding interpretations and responses to challenge/failure:

Some of the young people in my sample were able and willing to identify **bad decisions** that they had made for their characters in the game and to think through possible consequences of these actions. (They did not try to save face.) For example, one boy decided to embezzle money in the game. Even though he wasn't caught, he assessed this as a bad decision because, if he were ever found out, it would damage his reputation and compromise his job as a college president: "Nobody would want no convict as a college president." Maybe as a company president though. ;)

These kids were also more likely to abstract more generalized strategies for having a good life. (There's no explicit "winning" in this game, so kids seemed to focus on accruing wealth and having large, healthy families as marks of a good life.) After living several lives in which he was poor, one 12 year-old announced loudly to the other players that to "win" the game, you needed to marry an intelligent woman. He deduced that his partner's intelligence would impact the type of job she got and the overall income level of the family.

--> Thinking in terms of strategies, rather than innate characteristics, is an important and adaptive response to challenge and failure.

Other kids were less willing or able to identify certain decisions as bad.

These children were also less likely to come up with strategies for responding to “failure” in the game and generally rated their “Real Lives” lives as being very satisfactory regardless of what happened. However, the ability to appraise decisions in the game and to learn from them is something that seemed to increase with the number of times kids had played the game.

Most of the children did seek counsel from their peers when making hard decisions for their character in the game (an adaptive response to challenge). For example, one girl’s character was repeatedly physically abused by her father. She had to make a choice about how to respond to this abuse. Her peers were more than happy to weigh in on the situation and help her think through what would happen if “smacked him back” or “ran away from home” or sought help.

--> Helping kids evaluate the consequences of decisions (action-sequences) is a goal of most youth development programs—especially programs for inner-city kids in volatile environments, like those in my sample. It’s also something that one would encourage in empowering young people.

By playing this game, my students seemed to be engaging both cognitively *and* emotionally with their decisions and consequences. For instance, in the example I cited above, the girl was visibly distressed about the decision she had to make for her character. She was wringing her hands and holding her head, “Oh my God,” she gasped, “What do I do? What do I do?”

Decision-making is not exclusively a rational process. Therefore, it’s noteworthy that by playing “Real Lives,” the kids were able to emotionally experience and process some complicated decisions. This may be unique to computer-based simulation games, and it may truly impact their ability and likelihood of evaluating consequences to decisions in their own lives.

(3) Regarding development of self-efficacy:

I’m working on this now. It’s a very important issue, because improved self-efficacy may be the factor that links behavior in the game to behavior outside the game. I don’t have any results yet on this.

Summary

Katie: What can we learn from these initial responses and what aspects can be further teased out? Kallen speaks eloquently of the ways agency connects to motivation to learn and in creating social support for learning. Both Matteo and Jane discuss modding as an empowering practice, keying in on several illuminating examples and forms, while Douglas suggests that the uptake and revision we are seeing by players fails to deeply engage the possibilities inherent in the malleability of game systems. Taken as a whole, their responses provide any number of meaningful jumping off points.

Beyond mods, for example, or empowerment through creative production, what forms of power exist for youth (political, personal, ideological, social) within a gaming context, or are leveraged within a game community? What other historical precedents can we consider as having succeeded or failed in creating contexts for such a range of expression? Douglas mentioned Mindstorms—are there others? Kallen talks about the role decision-making, an understanding of consequence and failure play in creating a

sense of agency for the youth she works with. What other examples can we discuss that similarly explore the role of strategic choice in gaming as a pathway to agency?

Are their other roles that gamers take on through their play that might allow them to experiment with forms of power not normally available to them? I am thinking here of players who take on leadership roles in MMOs, who become mentors for newbies, or who write complicated FAQs read by thousands. And in what ways might we think about the mixing of age groups within games as an empowering form of socialization, particularly for young people who do not normally have such opportunities? What might it mean for our understanding of Power, Play, and Participation when kids can game alongside adults and develop sophisticated frameworks for knowledge exchange? Concrete examples from your own research and work are incredibly insightful, so please feel free to be as specific as possible.

>>Enter the Dialogue now.

RE: Power, Play, Participation

14-Oct-2006 7:53 PM

Anna Everett

I am interested in the recent TV advertising campaign for the V-Tech children's video game. What is particular striking about it is its anti-moral panic rhetoric celebrating games for children. The children (very young-say 5-8 years) are engaged in play, hopping on their beds, pillow fights, etc. when they are supposed to be tidying up their bedrooms. Their jubilant play is interrupted by the off-screen or disembodied voice of their mother yelling something to the effect of "Stop making your beds and start playing your video games." This is a variation of about two of this sort of commercial for the V-Tech games that began last year. It is interesting that advertisers feel secure enough to design pro-computer game ads targeted at TV's lucrative daytime audience of largely female viewers. This ad suggests that game manufacturers believe something significant has changed as apparently the fear that just watching TV is bad for youths persists, when contrasted with the view that watching and playing video games on TV and in hand-held formats is now a good thing --an easy and pleasurable entry into digital or computer learning and literacy. New youth communities are being encouraged with this branding approach to early gaming initiation for kids.

Of course the issue is more complex for teens, but as a television scholar and critic, I am very interested in how the gaming industry itself positions itself and its product within the larger flow of TV messages. Just two days ago Tiger Woods was on the Jay Leno show (I think it was Leno) to promote his new golfing "game." The photorealistic graphics and seamless animation was impressive. This is my brief comment to get familiar with our online discussion environment, and look forward to the dialogue.

RE: Fun vs. propaganda

Clay Shirky

16-Oct-2006 10:14 AM

Sorry to start this with a rant, but The McDonald's Game, pointed to by Matteo, is illustrative of much of what's wrong with the overlap of games and learning. The McDonald's Game fails the essential test—it is not fun. It has 30 (!) screens of tutorial, more concerned with presenting a particular point of view than describing a game. In a

classic case of being able to dish it out but not take it, the nominally subversive form of the McDonald's Game actually presents less room for alternate viewpoints than America's Army.

When the creator of a game works to create a didactic experience which presumes in advance the point of view of the user, it's awfully hard to locate any real spirit of play in the game. If you want to start a dialog about industrial food production or global economics, you'd have to include some hard choices that were interesting to think through, instead of just preaching to the converted. Futurefarmers antiwargame is another classic of the genre -- by encoding the political views of the designer so completely, it stops being fun, and if it stops being fun, all the 'eat your peas' content in the world won't compel unforced engagement. If you were to look at the log files of either antiwargame or McDonald's, I bet you'd find that few people every play those games twice.

The real challenge to the current educational establishment in using games is the amount of uncertainty and player-created learning that takes place in games, which in turn requires abandoning the pipeline approach to education: La Molleindustria put a message in the head of the pipeline, on the assumption that that message would be delivered directly to the user. This is lecture logic, dressed up in Flash, while the Sims is far more flexible in its ability to accommodate multiple narratives, and, partly as a result, actually fun.

RE: Dialogue 1: Power, Play, Participation

Anna Everett

16-Oct-2006 11:48 AM

I want to join Katie in thanking Matteo, Douglas, Jane, and Kallen for their insights. To borrow an idea from Clay, these posts passed an essential test, they were pageturners (what is the digital equivalent--oh well), and so they made me want to post, even though I thought I'd just lurk this morning and post later. Matteo's piece got me thinking seriously about the modes and possibilities of "textual poaching" (Henry Jenkins's term) that goes on in gaming that points the way toward independent content production beyond modding. It is likely true that these ideological game hacks do not translate right now easily to youth, I do they portend strides in that direction as youths become more sophisticated in their literacy. So, like Matteo, I am guardedly optimistic. I also appreciated the links and being able to easily access the subject(s) of your piece Matteo. I was however impatient with all the necessary downloading protocols to even get a glimpse of the games. I was struck by how well the codes and modes of the SIMS gaming aesthetic and design were mimicked and appropriated--a sort of reverse co-optation as culture industries so easily and profitably co-opt independent cultural innovations. The war games issue is one that Craig and I are interested in for our essay as the military industrial complex is pushing their use hard for their recruitment efforts in minority communities.

At the same time I agree with Douglas that the oppositional stance or resistance to the norms of gameplay beyond modding is disappointing. Perhaps it leads back to Clay's point about user-friendliness in "getting" the game before some serious subversion can go on--I am not sure. Jane's point about the addictive quality of online gaming is well-taken, and I think returns us again to clay's rant. It is important to have buy-in, and a pay-off for gameplay and it seems that the sociability question is bound up with the pay-

off of showing-off gaming mastery. In this instance, it could be very useful to think about educational strategies for collaboration and as these games suggest collaborative competition or constructive competition for learning.

Because Craig and I are working on issues of race in gaming, I was particularly interested in Kallen's project of working with underserved youths. While the findings are preliminary at this stage, I surely am interested in learning more. Just a couple of things, the CFY program seems very promising, and if the program lasts a year, but the tech support lasts for the life of refurbished computer, how does that work exactly. It is crucial that such programs have a long-term commitment for real change to take root. I believe in the ability of computer games to change the orientations of youth, they certainly changed mine somewhat when I began playing as a graduate student 10 years ago now. Anywy, I will want to come back to Kallen's work later on. What a great kick-off--logging off now--Anna

RE: Fun vs. propaganda

Ian Bogost

16-Oct-2006 11:41 AM

Clay, I remember this rant from the Games for Change conference two years ago. I replied to your objections in my own talk but you didn't bother to stick around long enough to hear it.

Your claim about The McDonald's Game's certain lack of playership is easily refuted; just go over to the game's Newgrounds page or to the forums on Molleindustria's site, and you'll see all the conversations about the game, its subject, and strategies for play.

More importantly, the game's purpose was not to create the largest possible possibility space for play, like The Sims. The purpose of the game was to construct a procedural representation of the fast food business, and in particular to show the relationship between the successful corporate food industry and corruption. I wonder if you don't perceive "hard choices" in the game because you didn't play it carefully (there are plenty of ambiguous choices), or if you think that only open-ended creative play of the "do anything" kind is the only legitimate type of play. In fact, this type of play is mythological; it doesn't exist. All play is structured, and the play in The McDonald's Game is structured to present a particular perspective on global food production. From there, the player might support, object, extend, or just drop the topic. The discussions on various forums about the game show that this is in fact taking place.

The point of these games (Antiwargame and The McDonald's Game) is precisely to present particular political views, in the form of an operating system. Do you object to the very idea of having political views?

I don't deny that these two games present extremely strong political viewpoints that might not win empathy from opponents. But I also do not believe that art needs to leave room open for alternative viewpoints. There are strategic reasons to create game with of more and less ambiguity of meaning, but these two specimens are valid ones worthy of being taken seriously.

A couple smaller notes:

On fun: I've written before on the need to decouple "videogames" from "fun," a step not necessary to help us construe the medium in new ways, without refusing the old ones. There is no reason that the output of this medium should always be "fun."

On replayability: the notion that games participate in an economy of value in which maximum replay is always desired is a closed-minded sentiment. The work we've been doing at my studio on newsgames, for example, is partly motivated by the challenge to create simply, timely games with political and social commentary but which do not necessarily demand replay.

The superhero power of social participation

Jane McGonigal

16-Oct-2006 12:17 PM

As a designer and a researcher, I specialize in two emerging modes of large-scale, multiplayer gameplay: Pervasive Gaming and Alternate Reality Gaming. (If those are unfamiliar terms to you, my favorite introductory resource on pervasive games is here, and my favorite introductory resource on ARGs is here.)

Pervasive games use mobile and ubiquitous computing technologies (cell phones, GPS devices, MP3 players, e.g.) to mobilize players' bodies and to create real-time game interaction in real-world, physical spaces. Alternate reality games use myriad, distributed media platforms (websites, email, instant messaging, chat) to engage players in weeks-long, or months-long, interactive stories and dramas.

Both of these new gaming modes, I want to argue, are working to open up social participation—pervasive games create new opportunities for social participation in real-world social spaces, while alternate reality games open up new paths for creative participation in online media production. In this post, I'd like to explore how this power shift works in pervasive games; later this week, I'll explore how it works in alternate reality games.

Pervasive games, it seems to me, are often about the power of players to participate in the spaces in which the games are played. They games usually take built environments, or carefully designed social spaces, as their co-opted playgrounds. Built environments—such as public plazas, urban sidewalks, and public parks—always attempt to structure participation through their physical design. This structure is often experienced as a series of limitations: sit here/don't sit here; walk/don't walk; don't go there, and so on. Social norms may further limit interaction in these spaces: don't talk to strangers, don't initiate eye contact, and so on. And the increasing tendency of personal digital media devices (cell phones, MP3 players, for example) to allow individuals to "check out" of social spaces makes public social participation even less likely. All of these factors conspire to make individuals feel disengaged from their local social environments. They make players less likely to act creatively or interact playfully with the objects and people they encounter in everyday life.

How can digitally-enabled games counteract these forces?

Some pervasive games simply work to teach and inspire new forms of micro social interactions in public spaces. My current project, *Cruel 2 B Kind*, does just that by engaging teams in a kind of public "benevolent assassination". Players receive

instructions over their cell phones—updates as often as a dozen times per hour of gameplay—that direct them to kill strangers with random acts of kindness. Such micro interactions might include praising someone’s shoes, offering to help, congratulating someone, pointing out something beautiful in the environment, or noticing something “intriguing” about the target.

The Go Game—one of the first pervasive games, and today running worldwide, five years after it launched in San Francisco—seeks to inspire more social participation in shared environments by asking players to recruit non-players they meet along the way, completing game missions in cafes, on buses, in elevators, in bookstores, in crosswalks, and all other manner of locations that the game designers believe ought to afford more social participation opportunities than they traditionally do.

To understand how these opportunities for power play are communicated to players, it helps to look at how the games are described and rule sets explained on the games’ websites.

The website for The Go Game (Wink Back, Inc.) poses a simple question: “Are you a superhero?” An inventory of superhero skills and personality traits is provided on the webpage so that aspiring players can recognize their own superhero potential—or lack thereof. In addition to “wit, cunning, and creativity,” would-be superheroes will need “quick thinking, a little street smarts, a lot of ingenuity, and the courage to break a few social rules”. But what if you, an aspiring player, do not fit this description? Then the game promises to transform you into someone who does. This promise is made in the form of a hyperlink, which reads “Be a superhero”; this link takes players directly to a sign-up page. The implication is clear: Becoming a superhero is simply a matter of choosing to play the game.

What does it mean to enter the realm of the superheroic? In *Men of Tomorrow*, a critical history of superhero culture in the , Gerard Jones argues that superhero mythology has the effect, for superhero fans, of “rendering the ‘make-believe’ as palpable and dignified as the ‘real’”. He argues that comic books, films and other fictional representations of a superheroic universe create “an inexhaustible supply of emotional and imaginative experiences that require no participation in reality”. In other words, superhero culture creates its own virtual reality, in which participants construct and inhabit a fantasy fan-space that resembles, but never touches, real life. Many pervasive games, however, fuse superhero themes and rhetoric with reality-based interaction. These projects claim to transform individuals into more powerful versions of themselves through collaborative gameplay, which is set in the material reality of everyday, shared social spaces.

So a pervasive game like The Go Game, I would argue, is operating under the following premise: If ordinary people are given specific instructions requiring them to take a more adventurous attitude toward public places, they will surprise themselves with their own daring and ingenuity. Moreover, players will discover how surprisingly receptive strangers are to spontaneous interaction, and how responsive non-players are to ludic intervention. In other words, that players will learn that there is far greater opportunity for gaming in their everyday environments than they previously suspected.

My favorite recent example of pervasive gaming, SFZero, makes this premise explicit by describing built environments in the language of software engineering. Its worth quoting at length, I think:

SFZero: An interface for San Francisco. That is to say, a new representation for the data that's already there. Your mind is full of /inaccurate/ representations that are affecting the way you use the San Francisco dataflow: steering you away from interaction and collaboration and towards unproductive reflexive data loops (forNext). SFZero designers are working double-shifts to engineer this next-generation interface that will bring you together with your cohabitants to experience the freedom that is /hard-coded/ into San Francisco 's protocol.

I also find it very interesting how SFZero uses the digital gameplay custom of adopting a fictional avatar/character to allow players to explore a more powerful relationship to the real world. Consider for instance the following Frequently Asked Question for the games' online rule set:

What does it mean to create a new character in SFZero? Your character looks exactly the same as you. Your character will have all the same skills and attributes as you, and even the same memories and feelings. "Isn't my character, just, well, /me/?" Good question.

Your character has several important things that you do not have. First, your character has a Score. Its Score is a barometer of its progress.

You may find that your own willingness to interact with the city in new ways varies linearly with relation to your Score. Your character is able to do things that you may be unable or unwilling to do yourself. Your character doesn't recognize the artificial boundaries that prevent non-players from doing what they want to do. Things like fear, lethargy and the police don't deter your character from achieving his or her goals. Your character never misses a connection - it will get you Score.

So, that's a very quick introduction to some of what I find to be very exciting and significant social power and participation issues bubbling up in the pervasive gaming space. I want to conclude by noting that while these power shift issues are relevant to pervasive gamers of all ages, I find them especially relevant to youth who get involved in the games. Why? Because today's culture of fear often limits parents' willingness to let their kids spend time in shared social spaces, to go outside and play. (Social technology ethnographer danah boyd explores this persuasively in a recent blog post here.) Indeed, as a pervasive game designer, I am not infrequently accused of endangering players by asking them, for example, to use GPS coordinates to go to a real-world location. For all of the criticism that computer and videogames may occasionally receive from parents, in my experience they nevertheless are often considered by the same parents as a safer alternative to real world play.

So here is my final, deliberately provocative, comment: The ability of youth to benefit from the "superhero power" of participation ultimately may well be limited by our fear of our own real world.

RE: RE: Fun vs. propaganda

Oct 16, 2006 12:23 PM

Clay Shirky

Matteo says:

Your claim about The McDonald's Game's certain lack of playership is easily refuted; just go over to the game's Newgrounds page or to the forums on Molleindustria's site, and you'll see all the conversations about the game, its subject, and strategies for play.

I don't think the forums are quite the refutation you imagine.

The majority of traffic in the Strategy section is spam; the actual number of participants is quite low. In particular, in the Newgrounds Strategy section, most of the text on Page 1 of the forums is by 1 user, IN4MER. Most of page 2 is spam.

When you get to a strategy page in the forums, search for the strings 'boring' or 'bored'. You'll be surprised at the number of occurrences of something like "It makes an interesting point too, cause after playing many times i found that the best way to survive is to just forget all health standards and feed them the mad cows and diseased cows and use waste hormones GMO's and animal flour, i made it to 2029 then got bored."

What this user discovered was that the game doesn't _show_ "...the relationship between the successful corporate food industry and corruption," it presumes it. Once you get that message, the game gets boring. (The longest game-related thread is about turning the game into a "How high did you get" contest -- Tetris with hamburgers.)

I understand perfectly well that the point of Antiwargame and The McDonald's Game is precisely to present particular political views. What I'm saying is that this makes them less good games, because they are so narrowly configured as to work only as propaganda, not play. I certainly don't object to the idea of having political views; in fact, I'm suggesting that games that allow for more than one such view will probably be both more interesting and more educational.

RE: RE: RE: Fun vs. propaganda

Oct 16, 2006 12:55 PM

Jane McGonigal

Clay wrote:

I'm suggesting that games that allow for more than one such view will probably be both more interesting and more educational.

I just want to note here that I'm not at all convinced that the importance of the new participatory modes of engagement that we're discussing here-- the new kinds of player-power within media production, social structures, and both digital and real-world environments--has anything to do with being "interesting" or "educational" experiences in the sense that we are trying to capture the attention of the gamer. I think the McDonald's game is a brilliant example of exposing the dynamics of a larger system. In order to participate in a system, we must understand it. Even if the EXPERIENCE of playing the McDonald's game isn't the fun free-for-all of a game like the Sims, I would argue that the impact of understanding the view of a real-world production system as it is presented in the McDonald's game would have a much bigger impact in terms of shifting social and participatory power to gamers than understanding the system of the

Sims. I mean, who doesn't already know that you need food and shelter and social interaction to be happy? Yes, it's a free system but it's not necessarily exposing gamers to the view of the social world as system that something like the McDonald's game does so effectively.

RE: RE: RE: RE: Fun vs. propaganda

Oct 16, 2006 2:18 PM

Clay Shirky

Jane, I disagree with that analysis on three axes:

First, and most narrowly, the content of the McDonald's game doesn't "expose" the dynamics of a larger system, it presumes them. The game assumes, for example, that McDonald is a bad actor in arenas like food safety. This is a strange claim, since the value of international brands relies on their ability to offer an assurance of an acceptable experience. Contra the game, McDonald's is exceptionally concerned both with local cleanliness of their restaurants and of their food supply. There are places where they are obviously bad actors, as with fat content and supersizing, but lumping these effects in with spurious charges about Mad Cow disease reduces the intellectual possibilities of communicating anything real.

Second, even on the limited axis of propaganda, the game is visibly failing: Few users, the dominant strategy discussed in the forums is 'run up points', and a common complaint is quitting when the strategy reveals itself to be boring.

Third, and most importantly, by shifting analysis of the game to its goals, you undermine the acid test of a game: is it fun? Elizabeth Goodman once said "The reason academics like to talk about play instead of fun is that you can make people play." Fun is threatening, because it can't be faked or forced. Your argument that the McD game would have a bigger impact (even setting aside the mixing of fact and fiction in the designers worldview) presumes the essential question: is the game attractive enough to encourage unforced play? The Sims doesn't expose users to that particular view of the social world, but by and large neither does the McDonald's game, since it has so few users.

Once we're willing to ascribe game value solely to intent and content, disregarding evidence of indifference among potential players and boredom among actual ones, we're one step from false consciousness, the "I know you are but what am I" of critical stances. If a game is good because it's creators think it embodies the appropriate values, it's hard to know what a bad game would look like.

RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: Fun vs. propaganda

Oct 16, 2006 2:57 PM

Jane McGonigal

I agree completely, Clay, that we should not look **ONLY** at intent and content, rather than outcome. That's why I spend a lot of time documenting the post-play impact of various pervasive and alternate reality games.

Indeed, I believe that outcome defined as experience **DURING** the game or direct experience of the circumscribed game system itself, should not represent the be-all and end-all of our interest in player experience. Obviously, a game needs to be

compelling enough to engage players for a long enough period of time for the game to have some impact. But I don't really care so much what someone thinks of a point system during or immediately after the game; my research shows that a game's impact has much longer term effects on the way digital systems (both games and real world infrastructure) are perceived and participated in. Much of that research is here. Much in the same way that you wake up a week after reading a book or days after seeing a movie or going to a live theater production or between weekly episodes of a series and you find yourself still thinking about it, or somehow living in its mood or argument-- it sticks in your mind and inspires thought, action, discussion, investigation.

Much more needs to be said about the after-life of games... not their stickiness, not how much time you spend playing them, but rather what happens when you STOP playing them. The work of Nicole Lazzaro-- very influential in the game design community and fascinating to anyone interesting in pleasurable interaction-- argues that this kind of mental lingering is one of the highest markers of FUN. (And yes, I'm also interested in the fun of the participant, as someone who both makes and studies games.)

That said, we shouldn't ignore intent and content! Why look at players' experience only, when increasingly players are also makers? Intent and content is HUGELY important when we are thinking about power and participation schemes emerging from gamer culture. As Jane P. and Douglas discuss above, understanding of mods and the inclination to either make or participate in their circulation-- well I care as much about what the modder thinks he or she is creating, expressing, sharing as I do about how it is received.

Finally, to your point, I don't think anyone is fooled into thinking they are receiving the TRUTH of the McDonald's production system—it is obvious to players, I believe, that they are receiving ONE perspective of one. What I'm arguing is that the ability to perceive others making arguments and investigating how the structure might work is an impetus to participation in a larger design culture and conversation space. How any given argument is received is less important to me than the idea that a game can open up perceptions of systems... indeed, that systems can be argued about! How DO they really work? What is the best representation of their processes?

At any rate, the McDonald's game is not my chosen example to deal with the most exciting stuff—see my earlier post for those examples, which are better and fuller and more to the point.

RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: Fun vs. propaganda

Oct 16, 2006 4:11 PM

Clay Shirky

But nothing in your analysis of the McDonald's game suggests a concern with the after-effects of playing—I'd be curious what your view is of players who exit a game after a condition of boredom has been reached.

And calling the game "a perspective of a production system" skirts the issue—there is no perspective from which you can view McDonald's being cavalier about things like Mad Cow. This is possible only with the introduction of political assertions unrelated to actual aspects of the system in question. If we're not even to evaluate actual goodness of fit with

the system being described for games with an expressly political goal, we're really off in the fields of propaganda.

You say "How any given argument is received is less important to me than the idea that a game can open up perceptions of systems... indeed, that systems can be argued about!" That surely favors the Sims over McD or antiwargame, no? Sims, in all its variants (which are not free-form, but highly structured), have introduced systems-thinking to orders of magnitude more people, and because it is actually fun, it rewards more and longer periods of immersion and experimentation, much more, in fact.

At any rate, the McDonalds' game is not my chosen example to deal with the most exciting stuff

Mine either, but you think its good, which surprises me, given your respect for user engagement in your writings.

I'm having a hard time understanding how anyone who could have written "We support ambiguity, multiplicity, and open-endedness in design, so that we perceive, rather than receive, our technologies. We propose that our digital domains become mysterious once again, that our environments demand our eager exploration, that every user becomes an inventive player" could hold the McDonald's game up as an exemplar.

RE: RE: RE: Fun vs. propaganda

Oct 16, 2006 5:20 PM

Clay Shirky

And my apologies for Ian for misattributing his quote—the Reply function doesn't display the author, and I can't find any way to edit my earlier post.

RE: Dialogue 1: Power, Play, Participation

Oct 16, 2006 11:52 AM

Toby Miller

Thanks for this opportunity to participate.

Each communications technology has brought with it a raft of marketing techniques focused on young people, and concerns about supposedly unprecedented and unholy new risks and opportunities for youth: silent then sound film during the 1920s, radio in the 1930s, pop music and television from the 1950s and '60s, video cassette recorders in the 1980s, and video games and the Internet since the 1990s. Each of these technologies ushers in various forms of utopic thinking that claim there will be a radical transformation in social relations and cognition because they offer new pleasures, powers, and politics, and dystopic ones that are the recto-verso.

When we focus on empowerment and young people, we must start with their actually existing situation—empowerment depends on context. For example, in the United States, George Bush Minor has continued his father's massive erosions in expenditure on health care, nutrition programs, foster care, and a whole raft of other services for young people. Meanwhile, a succession of judicial decisions has further disenfranchised them, with conservative justices contemptuous of privacy rights for children, and the US repeatedly establishing new records amongst developed countries for the execution of

people under 18, with the longstanding support of the Supreme Court, half of which favored killing those aged under 15 until a 2005 decision. Only two nations deny children rights, other than to counsel and due process in criminal cases. One is Somalia. You are encouraged to guess the identity of the latter, based on the understanding that the Kansas Juvenile Code incorporates parental rights as part of its horror in the face of children's citizenship

The outcome of decades of policies exacting a toll upon the young is that US citizens over 40 are the wealthiest group in world history, with the lowest tax payments in the First World, while child poverty is at unprecedented levels. Whereas very few teenaged-children in the US worked for money in the first half of the 20th century, almost half had to do so by its end, while today, one in eight children has no health coverage. Thirty thousand people kill themselves in the each year, making suicide the eleventh largest cause of death; but it is third amongst the young. Suicide levels have in fact fallen across the population, but risen among young people. Key social measures of unhappiness correlate with youth today in a way that they did not up to the mid-1970s, and young people report greater distress than before, beyond even the concerns of the elderly. Perhaps to cope with their feelings of helplessness, 135,000 teenagers packed a gun with their sandwiches and school books each day in 1990, while by 2004, eight children and teenagers died by gunshot per day. This in turn relates to marketing. With the white-male market for fire-arms saturated, and attempts to sell to women falling short of the desired numbers, manufacturers turned to young people in the 1990s.

Specific to games, one of the ways that young people's creativity is quickly governed and exploited is through on-line requirements to sign away the intellectual property they generate--each time they play many such games, they contribute story ideas etc to copyright holders, with no ongoing material benefit to themselves. Whilst this has led to some unrest, the same perils that generated the precariat of the so-called 'new economy' of the 1990s frequently apply--people avowing that 'I'm doing what I love, this is fun, who cares?' The way that unhappy young developers have gone beyond such slogans and become radicalised indicates the ephemerality of this position for many: the radicalization--and empowerment--that can emerge as players/co-creators become aware of corporate realities.

RE: RE: Dialogue 1: Power, Play, Participation

Oct 16, 2006 6:04 PM

Justin Hall

Hello Debating Compatriots--I'd like to introduce myself here in the context of the remarks that have already been posted. Thanks for the stimulation!

I started professionally by writing about my life on the internet. "Justin's Links from the Underground" was an experiment in attention getting and self-expression, loads of oversharing personal pages wound together in hypertext links.

I was comfortable expressing myself in that form in part because I had grown up with computers. Before I high school, I spent most of my non-school hours in front of a computer testing hypothesis and solving small problems. How to download and install software with only a 9600 baud modem? How to solve the long sequence of colored door keys in Battletech: Crescent Hawk's Inception? How to hack Virgin Games' Corporation to give me more in-game cash?

Socializing, girls, drugs, school—eventually these larger life issues seemed more pressing, more challenging than pirates, giant robots or cyber-soldiers. So I mostly ditched games and instead spent my non-school hours in front of a computer publishing online about my life. In a fashion, I might have been populating my own massively-single player online game. It wasn't very interactive, unfortunately, as I look back, but I felt like I was giving users choices and connections that Marcel Proust only fudged in his manuscripts.

I re-approached games as an adult, playing old favorites on emulators and experimenting with the state-of-the-art. And I found the same themes in play—mostly what Chris Hecker routinely dismisses as "Power Fantasies." Save the world, colonize the galaxy, rescue a princess. And so few games had mature themes or solid writing or deep characters! So I thought I would improve upon that by coming up with my own games. I became a journalist writing about games to understand and participate in this industry. Mostly because there's no other medium that can hold my attention so well, for so long. I played through *Deus Ex* with 256 saved games. I saved each time I had a conversational option—I wanted to play and replay each choice. It was a bit obsessive, but deeply satisfying. I had seen *Blade Runner* a dozen times; *Deus Ex* presented that world and let me peek into dark corners and interrogate the ethics of post-humanity.

After writing about games for a number of years, I was offered the chance to go to grad school, to see if I might actually learn to make something interactive. I had written thousands of HTML documents linked together online, so there was an illusion of dense ongoing personhood sustained online. But no one could repeatedly query me in real-time. No random reader could join me up on stage in real-time and live life online with me. I guess I feel like life is a massively-multiplayer game, and we might as well use our information systems to reflect and augment this. Jane McGonigal's work is some of the most forward-thinking in this area.

To solve some personal problems and better devote myself to interactive media making, I abruptly stopped personal writing online. Marc LeBlanc calls his game design site "algorithmancy" and it strikes me as entirely different artform than writing. Playing loads of videogames is a good start on algorithmantic literacy, but as a young game designer, I'm at risk of merely skinning game walls with a new texture (as Douglas Rushkoff observed in his first response). So I've been head down studying interaction design since I quit my regular text-spew.

For most game designers I've met, genre and story are mostly secondary to provoking as-yet-unseen interactions and experiences for players. Certainly networked multiplayer devices and the games they allow create a fertile ground for human social interactions. In this respect, online games might seem to be the final stage in human media evolution—once you have given us a large enough space to perform in, we will end up performing in that space for most of our days. *Second Life* has some flavor of this - people build games within that world. It's large enough to host virtual Burning Man festivals and lecture halls. There are undoubtedly more advanced multiplayer worlds on our horizon, but it's hard to doubt that the future is increasingly online and increasingly multiplayer.

These days I play most of my games on an Xbox 360. I like sitting on my couch and I like that the device watches me play. If I solve a puzzle in *Splinter Cell*, my friends find out I've solved it—there's a public online scoreboard for each Xbox 360 owner. Crazy surveillance! Gameplaying performance.

So this is where my research lies currently: how to follow people as they live their online lives, creating a sense of progress and problem-solving around basic tasks. All the work that I did writing up my life in a blog, what if the computer or phone simply watched me live and then created a narrative reflection of that online? I call these "Passively Multiplayer Online Games" where everyone is constantly playing, demonstrating their expertise and preferences in a data-rich world shared by their friends and strangers.

Reading over the debate about the McDonald's game, I imagine those game makers—passionate to prove a point in a new medium, eager to give players a chance to explore an ideological space with a few more degrees of freedom than a text. But there are seldom enough degrees of freedom in a game. In grad school at USC Cinematic Arts, I've seen a number of game projects take shape and the initial desire is invariably a fantastic expansive range of player freedoms that are invariably curtailed.

Case in point: Valve's *Half-Life 2*. A beautiful PC game with rich physics and fantastic graphics. Valve shipped a copy of the Source SDK (Software Development Kit) with each copy, so players can crack the game open and build their own world. Armed with a pile of historical research and some plot and interaction ideas, I sat down with the Source SDK for a few months in early 2006 and realized—holy shit, mod building is incredibly hard. Especially if I want to build a game that is anywhere near as rich and as deep as the games I spend dozens of hours playing.

Before I went to grad school, I reported on the "Christian Computer Game Developers Conference." Nearly all of the Christian game industry was there; under 100 people. Most of their games are severely behind the times, technologically, and algorithmically. If you have an agenda, and a small team, but not much money, and not much promise of big market value, it's very hard to keep up with the rafts of space marines, athletes and super spies who otherwise populate most game machines. As a player, I must admit some lingering fondness for these power fantasies; I can solve onscreen problems in a heroic fashion! Hurrah!

Hopefully as I grow up, and more gamers grow up after me, they will create a broader market for more quiet, local power fantasies. I very much enjoyed reading Kallen Tsikalas's self-introduction here about her experience watching Computers for Youth kids scenario plan through video games. The Sims was one stab at these more life-compatible, semi-reality based games; I look forward to the chance to play a compelling game as an 80 year old in assisted living, or a twelve year old during her parents' divorce. At their best, beyond gratification, games can take us out of our own immediate comfort zones and help us understand alternatives. Maybe it's too much to expect Ms. Tsikalas's kids to strap on the Source engine and make their own characters anytime soon. But as our overall digital media literacy increases we will see more independent stabs at interactivity; whether through performance in a multiplayer world or design of single-player experiences. My hope lies in increasing media literacy to keep games from simply reinforcing the predominant power relationships between producer and consumer; instead games can inspire people to seize the medium to help other folks see inside their own heads.

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 1: Power, Play, Participation

Oct 16, 2006 10:43 PM

Reid Kimball

Great discussion so far. I'm a designer at LucasArts and I got my start creating levels for the original DOOM. I've worked on many mods for DOOM, Quake, Half-Life and DOOM3 to name a few. To share my own experience, I got a team together to mod DOOM3 and add in a closed captioning system I designed. If I may be so bold, I'd say there's no other mod like it in existence, as it has nothing to do with gameplay. It is purely a mod that allows players to receive auditory information in the form of text or other visuals. It's original intent was for hard of hearing (like myself) or deaf people. It ended up that a lot of people who do not have English as their native language liked using the mod to help them learn and understand English better, which I was shocked to learn. I'm sure I'll be talking about the mod itself in future discussions, but I wanted to mention it since this discussion is about modding.

In my experience the reason people have not created mods that differ from the original game in terms of gameplay they are built upon is because some mod kits are very limited in the kinds of changes one can make. Creating mods is an extremely difficult technical challenge to overcome. The tools are always very rudimentary because the developers don't have time to advance them to a mature stage. As soon as the game ships, the developers often move onto new projects, creating new tools from scratch or using a new toolset provided by another party. Because of this, the tools and pipelines people use to create their mods can be frustrating, crashing often or taking many steps to complete a simple task. In today's world, people are used to instant gratification and simply don't have the patience to deal with the productivity issues. This narrows the user base of mods to the "hardcore". The "hardcore" groups are gamers who love games and probably want to work in the industry themselves one day. They see modding as a way to learn and practice their skills until they are ready to work professionally. Their goals to get an industry job via a mod portfolio will directly affect the kind of mod they make. They aren't going to make a mod about giving flowers to angry people to brighten their day. Those kinds of games aren't made by developers and would not appeal to them if they were in a portfolio. The developers would probably not want to hire someone that made that kind of game. The modders are going to make what appeals to developers so, if counter-strike is popular, they will make counter-strike clones. If military shooters are popular, they'll make those too.

Until the mod tools reach a level of unlimited flexibility, stability and intuitive use, we won't see mods for big budget AAA FPS or RPG games. There are several players in the industry, Monolith and Epic Games for example, who have their own core technologies that they use for every project and rather than starting from scratch with each project, they evolve their tool sets to a higher maturity. As more developers do this, we should start to see better tools for modders. It might take a few years, or a new business model where modders pay for a \$25 license, which helps fund a developers efforts to improve the mod tools.

To touch on the issue of whether it's valuable for a game to be "fun" or not, I think it's hurting the evolution of this industry with our reliance on the word "fun". "Fun" is different for everyone, yet we all say games must be "fun". It's such a vague word that it means nothing in reality and that doesn't help when discussing a games' value. I believe that games have the potential to be a revolutionary educational tool as many of us here do. I can see the day when along side English Literature 101 in high school there is also a

Interactive Entertainment 101 (or such) in which students play adventure games, about well developed characters that face morally ambiguous decisions that will cause the players to reflect on many social or political issues brought forth through the gameplay. These games will not always be "fun" and that's perfectly OK. Reading books like the Grapes of Wrath, The Catcher in the Rye, Of Mice and Men, Hamlet, Fahrenheit 451 may not be "fun" for students, but they open their eyes to many issues that exist in the world and inside themselves. Making games that were ONLY "fun" will deprive people from the unique opportunities to learn more about themselves and their world through a game.

**RE: RE: RE: Games, Empowerment and Participation: A Sociological View
Oct 19, 2006 6:17 AM**

Girlbot

Yes Reid! thanks for bringing this up. Those interested in social equity have to accommodate low end machines as much as possible, and also the chance for offline play. this brings up education... as this group knows, because of the popularity of computer games, universities throughout the United States and other parts of the world are creating games-focused degrees. Actually my grad assistant compiled a list internationally of 400 such programs... in the US, These programs have become a training site for IT professionals, not all of whom will go into game design as a profession. In 2005, there were over 15 degree programs (BS, MS, and PhD levels) established in the US focused on the development of computer games, and more in the works; most of these were created within traditionally scientific and technical degree departments (Georgia Tech, USC, Carnegie Mellon, U. of Pennsylvania, U. of Denver, and Rochester Institute of Technology.) In addition, many media areas have at least some aspect in the curriculum focused on game design and technology (Indiana U. of Pennsylvania, UC Irvine, U. of Central Florida, Northwestern, U. of Michigan, U. of North Texas, George Mason U., CUNY, Rensselaer, Purdue and the U. of Washington.). The proliferation of computer game-focused coursework translates to an opportunity to educate systems designers about equity issues in design (engines, internet access, etc) before they are employed in the industry. Ultimately, it will be this new generation of designers who will alter the industry from the inside in the years to come.

"Fun is your best weapon."

Oct 17, 2006 11:43 AM

Clay Shirky

Reid, don't give up on fun. Fun does actually mean something in reality; no one would have any trouble answering the question "Was that fun?" after playing a game. The fact that some would say yes and some no doesn't make the concept vague, it just makes it user-dependent (its key virtue.) If the word seems too much "<TM> Raph Koster" these days, substitute something else -- user-verified pleasurable engagement, say.

And no one is suggesting that games ONLY be fun; the existence of this forum presumes an interest in games as vehicles for other goals. What I am suggesting is that fun is a necessary but not sufficient precursor to the use of games to engage the interest of learners.

You bring up the parallel of literature, but the question for Hamlet isn't "Was it fun?" but "Was it interesting?" (A question that could span both games and literature would be "Did you like it?") So here's a critique of current methods of teaching literature that may

ramify in the world of games: reading Hamlet as an assignment, but not liking it, will dampen both the short-term value of having read Hamlet and the long-term value of literary engagement generally.

There's very little information intellectually north of the times table that can be forced into someone's head usefully; we all remember that teacher who could communicate not just the material but a love of literature, or math, or science. Games can do that too, but this is best accomplished if the user embraces them in an unforced way, which is to say if they are fun.

The first, and intrinsic, argument for this position is that the quality of genuine, unfakeable engagement is a better tool for communicating with a user than any other thing.

The second, extrinsic argument is that, if you turn your back on fun, you create a world where any game can be declared a good game by fiat, so long as it it embodies the beliefs of its creator. This would mean abandoning the radical possibilities for games in education, possibilities like involving the player in co-creation, or the right to register an authentic judgment independent of authority figures.

A not-fun game with laudable content isn't a way to bring the power of games into the educational environment, it's a way to denature them of the power that makes games both interesting and threatening in that environment the first place. Boring but pedagogically sound games are nothing more than a 21st century re-hash of the filmstrip.

Heiner Muller, the East German playwright, was asked by a theater student about tools for convincing the viewer of the proposition of a play. "Quality is your best weapon", he is said to have replied. That's my position -- of all the ways to think about engaging students, fun is your best weapon. The interesting conversation, in my view, starts when you think about how to make a particular kind of content fun, rather than convincing yourself that if you're making a game about Important Subjects, fun doesn't matter anymore.

RE: "Fun is your best weapon."

Oct 19, 2006 2:07 AM

Girlbot

This is a perpetually interesting topic to me. When I started doing research on the Josie True game for girls in the 1990s, I was struck by just how differently players perceived fun, and this remains a hallmark of my user groups throughout the course of my research and design. For example, many middle school girls wanted a game in which they could interview women in history and ask them questions, or learn a new language and have to use it to get by. These things were, in the milieu of present-day games, comparatively mundane things: what kind of bed did you sleep on in 1850? can I try it? How did you say ... etc. When did you decide to get married? In my more recent projects, I have been fascinated with the way that middle school girls report playing even seemingly goal oriented games in untraditional ways, such as playing GTA and just spending hours upon hours driving around. So many of these players call themselves nonplayers of games, or report being "people who do not like games at all." The bottom line is, there are a lot of different kinds of players, and i'm with Reid in my belief that this range of play is not addressed as much as it could be by those who design games. Clay, I have to admit I am

one of the many, many readers of literature (and participant/viewer of other art forms) who doesn't always like the experience when I first have it. I did not necessarily like Shakespeare, for example, and I thought contemporary art such as abstract painting was ugly. Throughout my life I've been stunned at how my first experience with something was not "fun," yet I end up growing to like it, enjoy it, or end up making it my profession. This is not to argue that games should not be fun, but things that rattle the cage / push the boundaries of what 'fun' is might actually open up play for a larger audience. New experiences are fun, and I believe new kinds of games that don't fit into the models we currently have (the way players are rewarded, the structures of points-based game architectures, even the very premise of the game industry's emphasis on large scale epic experiences, etc etc) can be fun too, and experimentation needs to be emphasized.

RE: RE: "Fun is your best weapon."

Oct 19, 2006 7:11 AM

Mechelle De Craene

Hi Mary,

"....I have been fascinated with the way that middle school girls report playing even seemingly goal oriented games in untraditional ways."

I'm a middle school special education teacher and teach at a Title 1 school if I can help you with your research please let me know. I've started exploring The Sims in the classroom. I briefly wrote about it on my blog. Also, a special education teacher I'm thankful that Reid and Amit brought up special needs.

RE: Games, Empowerment and Participation: A Sociological View

Oct 17, 2006 2:42 PM

Craig Watkins

Hello, I'm Craig Watkins. I teach and write about the social and political dimensions of race, youth, and media. Anna Everett and I are writing a chapter for the McArthur volume *Ecology of Games* that focuses on the subject of race. First, let me say that the forum has been incredible. Thanks Katie for jump starting this. I'll restrict my initial remarks to the question of empowerment. Whereas Matteo produced a rhetorical and technical account of empowerment and Kallan developed a psychological assessment, my interests in empowerment have principally been sociological in nature. One of my interests in digital media culture is this issue of access and participation. Many of you are familiar with the popular rise of the "digital divide" debate a few years ago or, more basically, the creation of a world of "technology haves" and "technology have nots." As I think about power and agency in games I work hard to locate these issues within a broader social context. What strikes me as interesting about what is happening in games—modding, the growth of massively multiplayer on line gaming, world-building, etc.—is that a great deal of it is predicated on the ability to consume. The consumption of capable hardware, software applications, broad-band, and the ability to afford monthly subscription fees, upgrades, as well as other financial commitments. I agree that this brave new world of gaming has the potential to not only build new learning environments and modes of digital literacy, but equally important, unchain young people from the clutches of big media. In my work I have become increasingly concerned with the degree to which the multinational corporations are dominating global culture—the production of both educational and entertainment content. Toby and Anna, I know that you have addressed these issues in your work. As we think about the lively ways in which

digital media enables young people to assert greater control over their cultural environment I do not think this holds true for all youth. Thus, what are the consequences for young people's whose access to digital technology is either limited (i.e., the school or local library) or virtually non-existent? The kind of gaming that has been discussed so far usually, though not always, involves a high degree of immersion into online digital communities that cultivate very specialized bodies of knowledge and expertise. Deep participation in this kind of gaming also demands more than casual or occasional access to digital media. More specifically, the ability to access gaming environments from wired homes, offices, and public spaces. Much of the data that I have read in recent years suggests that poor and working class youth play games, but primarily on consoles and not PC's. If this is true than it means that poor and working class youth are less likely to participate in gaming as producers of content and, thus, more likely restricted as consumers. What are the larger social implications of these kinds of developments? How do we begin to understand the crucial role that social and economic hierarchies play in the world of games? Kallen, I'm interested to learn more about your program. This is one way in which participation in active gaming and the issues of literacy and empowerment at stake can become more democratic.

RE: RE: Games, Empowerment and Participation: A Sociological View

Oct 18, 2006 12:27 AM

Reid Kimball

Craig Watkins makes a good point that a lot of the games that are empowering for users require a monthly subscription in the case of MMO's or high powered computers if one wants to mod a PC game. I too have noticed that low income families tend to have a console more often than a PC. If they have both, they only use the console for gaming and not the PC. With that situation I suppose it will limit the kinds of content that gets created and shared for those games. If all the content creators are male, white and have grown up in "healthy" middle to upper class homes, you can be sure the experiences they create will lack diversity when looked at collectively. Another benefit that mods give is bringing people from all over the world together. Because of mods, I've worked with people from Australia, Germany, Brazil, Spain and so on. It has put me in contact with a lot of people with different cultural backgrounds and views of the world.

The cost of MMO subscriptions also limits the kinds of people that may learn from being a leader in an MMO guild and then go on to hold leadership roles in the workplace. From my own experience, I have gained valuable knowledge about leadership from managing my own mod creations. That's experience that is giving me confidence at work on a daily basis. I don't know this for a fact, but maybe children in low income homes have less opportunities to become a leader of a small group? Just occured to me, that even games like Counter-Strike or any team based multiplayer experience can benefit from people who have leadership roles and help the team to complete their objectives.

Couple of thoughts

Oct 16, 2006 4:32 PM

Mark Chen

Hi. I'm a total gamer. And for the last 2 years I've been doing ethnographic work in World of Warcraft. I am extremely interested in these discussions and wanted to say a couple of things...

First, I see in these posts evidence of the tension between "fun" and "compelling experience" with Clay arguing for fun and Ian saying that games, to be recognized as a proper medium, don't need to be fun. I'd like to just throw a wrench in here and be a little post-modern in saying that what matters most is how gamers play. I think some gamers are "enlightened" and consider games an artform, to be sure, but I've encountered many, many people who stop playing when they are no longer having fun. Fun for them can come in many different forms (TL Taylor does a good job talking about this in a MMOG setting in her new book *Play Between Worlds*), but in the end people are leaving WoW because they are no longer enjoying it. For any research claiming that people form social networks and take part in the participatory culture and really, really feel attached to their online gamer identities, this is problematic. This is problematic for serious games, too, as I assume you guys know... I think the thing I see over and over again is that it is highly situational and varied by person.

Looking at why people leave games might also be a way to look at the modding community and why it hasn't blossomed as much as one might've hoped. Speaking personally, I don't make mods because I'm addicted to the newness of new games. The idea of sticking with a game long enough for me to make a mod for it... well... it's like taking a drug away. I do, however, use interface mods, and I can't imagine playing WoW without addons (and dread these new MMOs coming out without open customizability). I also sometimes install an old game because a new total conversion mod has come out for it. I guess what I'm saying is that it takes definite commitment to make a mod. I think most modding groups that succeed are ones who are relatively transparent to the fanbase so that they can continually receive support and encouragement. So, here's a question: How can educators or serious games people support mod-making?

RE: Couple of thoughts
Oct 16, 2006 5:14 PM
michael nitsche

Thanks of having me in here.

My current projects are also relating—to some extent—to the discussion here. I am very interested in machinima and another project is a typical mod that allows players to procedurally create their own 3D game environments. And I am not a coder. So principally I agree with Matteo's first positive view. And yes, games offer new venues for creativity. Because of my overall positive attitude I wanted first check the negative sides and avoid an easy praise of digital creativity. So excuse the negative slant.

The rest of this post will try to catch up with the discussion so far and attempt to look at empowerment. It basically asks "how gains power? And for what?"

The discussion dived into the value and use of games as political vehicles and I would suspect that this will lead—sooner or later—directly into a discussion of Open Source on the software side. One has to be able to code one's own rules. Like I said, I am no coder, but I am aware of the huge community working on that—but this is still a very specific niche community.

For the hardware side: As long as the technology advances some form of elites will remain more powerful than the rest. One has GPS on the cell phone and can play the Go Game—one does not. The moment "the other" has finally made it to the GPS device the

first one is probably doing Nanotechinterfaces. One could make a funny McDonalds-like game about that—probably somebody already did.

That is why I liked Kallen's reference to the Pentium III computer. A P III just about runs The Sims 2 (if it has a good graphics card) and goes up in smoke when it faces Doom III. And it is not only the consumer. Gred Costikyan has noted that the next gen platforms kill indie developers with the necessary budgets and technology. Games as such are not automatically empowering (which can be easily proven e.g. in the way The Movies handles machinima creation and publication)—they can widen the divide. Every Final Fantasy release does that.

And I also agree with Mark on providing tools that support the creation of mods and other formats. But I think that empowerment here turns more and more into the personal.

Even if things “work out” and creativity really catches on, the corporation can snatch the rewards up. Valve shipped a whole lot more Half-Life games thanks to the player-created Counter-Strike mod. In some way, the corporation gets empowered (meaning richer) thanks to the creativity of the players Minh “Gooseman” Le and Jess Cliffe who created Counter-Strike and both now work for Valve. There is a tendency to take the cream of the mods, buy the relevant blog, hire the handful of whiz kids and integrate them into the commercial machine which heads out into the other side of the divide.

Then there are certain fixed plateaus (like flash) that seem to support wider empowerment (and I am aware that flash already includes certain logics and concepts). They lead to countless games/ mods/ gimmicks residing behind the triple A titles. Often a plateau means sheer mass—see Pongo, atomfilms, YouTube, mySpace.

Ending on a more positive note: The “free for all” might commercially only fall back into existing categories but there is still a lot of possible self-expression (again “self-efficacy” is a notion I liked in Kallen's post). That is far more personal than McDonalds but I would argue that we can find the most valuable forms of empowerment closer to the personal user.

RE: RE: Dialogue 1: Power, Play, Participation

Oct 17, 2006 8:46 AM

katie salen

I wanted to take a minute to try and identify a few common themes that seem to be bubbling to the surface of this conversation. One thing I have been struck by in the first day of posts on this topic is the emphasis on what I might call “big picture” ideas: fun, politics, technologies, hero and superhero, value, agency, empowerment, and choice. This is a terrific place to begin, as it helps begin to identify some of the primary contexts shaping our understanding of power and participation via games. I was similarly struck by the way almost every post called attention to an interplay between ideas that are often be at odds with one another. Posts explored the interplay between game communities and the game industry, for example, especially in the discussion of mods, intellectual property, and open source. There was good debate around the interplay (and opposition) between “fun” and “compelling experience”, between experiences produced during, between, and after gaming, between the heroic and the everyday, between agencies derived at the intersection of self and performed self.

Much of the conversation focused on the tension between constraint and freedom, digging into the value of limited vs. multiple perspectives, exploring ways the tension between the expression of a game system defined by its underlying rule set, the ideologies and values embedded within the game design, and the desire of players for choice-making within the system. I am missing a lot here, most certainly, but I found it instructive to consider the ways in which each of the participants entered the dialogue from a position that valued “interplay” as an operational term. Anna’s post on advertising’s shift in rhetoric around games is another example, as is Jane’s research on the negotiations present in the complex interchange between play and public space.

So what might next steps be within this dialogue? How might we move beyond big picture concepts into the details that make these big picture ideas so engaging? One strategy would be to offer up even more specific examples of how you see these ideas embodied within your own work and practice. Kallen, in her initial post, offered up many compelling examples of agency at work, from which we can learn. Another strategy might be to pick a single small idea that you want to tease out more fully among the group, an idea that you think contributes to an understanding of how games might empower or alternately, disempower youth. We have seen some of this so far, and I would love to see more. Another might be to remain at the level of the big picture for a little while longer, identifying sets of questions around these ideas that might help compel the conversation forward. We are starting to get somewhere, and I would like to continue to push this discussion forward. I find the conversation very stimulating...I lost a few hours of sleep surfing all the links posted...and know others are finding it to be as well.

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 1: Power, Play, Participation
Oct 17, 2006 1:25 PM
Tom Satwicz

Although there is a great deal to respond to here, I’ll try to sum up my sense of the conversation thus far in a response to Katie’s question on where to go next. In short, I would like to see more discussion on how to understand the agency of players.

My question is this: what does it say about players when they use games in ways that were not conceived of by the designers? I think this is a different question (and direction) from where the conversation has been, where the primary focus has been on what moding and other forms of divergent play say about games and how they should be designed to achieve a particular purpose.

One way to think about this is to consider, as Jane M. suggests, what players do with games when they are not playing them or the game has ended. Mark also points to similar ideas in his comment about players that are beginning to leave WoW. I tend to think we become concerned too often with what is wrong with games when they are not played as intended (or ditched for new games) rather than what this tells us about the people and how they interact with the medium as a whole.

Thanks for the great discussion, it has be a great reason to extend my lunch.

RE: Dialogue 1: Power, Play, Participation**Oct 17, 2006 1:21 PM****lizbeth Goodman**

My official 'day job' labels me 'Professor of Creative Technology Innovation', but my work with the SMARTlab and MAGIClabs in London and at our sister sites internationally takes me much further afield than the university campus, and into much more difficult terrain. By 'difficult', I don't mean anything to do with levels of status, vocabulary, cultural or technological access, though of course these issues always arise at some level or other in the traversing of boundaries. By 'difficult' I mean hard, emotionally draining, exhilarating, challenging in terms of personal agency, the pushing of skills and talents and physical abilities to the limit. And I mean that I am humbled, daily, by interactions of a deeply meaningful but usually unstated kind, with our 'user communities' (such an unsuitable term for such an important group of people). . . We work, for the most part, according to a universal design model that takes us to domestic violence shelters, children's hospitals, rehabilitation centres for traumatic injury, 'special schools' for people with profound multiple disabilities. . . always by invitation, always for sustained periods of time to work with specific, individual people who have expressed (or whose carers have expressed) a particular need for some social and technological intervention that neither governments nor industry partners often provide. This is the domain in which our 'gaming' operates. It is indeed serious, and pervasive. . . But neither of those terms as applied to gaming really reaches the notes I hope to express here. The closest I can come to explaining the kind of gaming we try to invent and share, is to offer the term that I've been kicking around with phd students and colleagues this past (very recent) summer. We have spoken of the need to create not only a Peoplelab, but also an AgencyAgency to support it: a structure to protect the precious often silent moments when stillness allows movement, breath triggers sensors that cause physical feedback responses, the feel of a hand on a pulse or neck muscle shares the vibration where a voice might be, and the scent (of local roses, of a shared perfume, of the chalk on a classroom board or the lemony top note of an antiseptic) that signals an action to a child without the ability to speak or communicate understanding through other means. Gaming is a means of communication and personal connection and expression for the people we tend to work with: for each and every 'user' who helps us to find a story worth telling, even if only by one person to one other person, even if silently. And theatre games is the 'training' I draw upon in my small part of each project, workshop, game, intervention. The late Clive Barker, one of my mentors, taught me (and hundreds of others in person, thousands of others via his books and broadcasts), the power games and possible role reversals contained in physical movement. He taught me how to look for and find the 'area of our memory with pleasure in it, from the times in childhood before self-consciousness, body-consciousness, gender-consciousness. From the unconscious free state of play. I draw upon that knowledge now, but also challenge it anew daily as I realise, afresh each day, how very lucky we are, most of us, to have the ability to remember other times, consciously or not, and to control our bodies, to some extent, and to make conscious decisions and deliberate interactions with the world. Last week we worked hard, as a team, to find a way to activate an electric wheelchair with a neck click collar for one of our colleagues and dear friends, so that he could dance with us on 'his own power. And then we worked on the eyescanning technology that might enable him to write faster, as he's contributing a new book to my series on Emergenci(i)es for MIT. . . And then we set up Brian Duffy's Activechair and Chris Hales' 'Cause and Effect' games and Soda's Immersive Play and our own Peoplelab and let them all run. . . but in the back of my mind, the question would not go away: how does it all matter unless we can improve the interfaces that empower universal access, an equality of play-power for all?

The games themselves are engaging, the immersive displays are 'cool', the dances we do with motion capture triggers lead the way towards movement-correlations for equality of expression in the physical space. And yet it all lingers there when the crowds have gone and the lights are dim, and I wonder, again, how to create the energy anew to make a new kind of empowered, unconscious play. For the bare bones fact is: play (and the area of memory with pleasure in it) is only unconscious for those of us who experienced free movement at some point. Not for all. . . I am struck in the discussions on this discussion board by the clarity, the engagement with difficult issues (including 'agency', role play and embodied interactions and learning methods) that are so often lacking in 'academic' fora in other subject domains: and I find it heartening, and also challenging in a new way, to find that the Agency issue is rearing its lovely persistent head here. One of the young girls we were working with on our Trust project at the Stephen Hawking School passed away a few weeks ago, and I have been stuck for some time for a way to frame the video clips and small snippets of sound we recorded with her in her last day. The effort to 'wrap' up these moments in some kind of timeframe with some kind of musical accompaniment (perhaps just her own sound effects and my silly song from our last workshops) will have to suffice, yet it is not enough, or perhaps it is too much. The small frame matters in the 'packaging' of a young girl's last moments and movements. The game we will produce includes a small sound she made by hitting a switch with the flat of her hand on cue. A simple sound. Beautiful in this context. Yet not enough. Active play; the AgencyAgency. . . the area of the memory with pleasure in it. How do we create that within the moment of play, and capture it in appropriate ways, for replay, and for a parent's (more painful) memory too? Heavy questions for a forum on game play. But issues of participation are often heavy. More anon, perhaps with a lighter hue!

Is empowerment really about improving quality of life?

Oct 17, 2006 6:32 PM

Jane McGonigal

What are the real, specific stakes of promoting new and more powerful modes of social and cultural participation through gameplay? I ask this question because I think we would all agree that power for power's sake is not the point; nor are all forms of participation equally desirable or capable of effecting change. So I guess what I'm wondering as I read through these posts is this: What is the best possible outcome of games or gaming-positive programs in terms of increasing power and participation? What are the payoffs of power and participation through play?

I'll take here a stab at answering these questions, but I'd love to get other thoughts and responses to how I'm interpreting the previous posts/

As I've read (and in some cases, reread-- I am learning much from these posts!) this board, I've noticed two recurring frameworks for considering the payoffs of power and participation as it emerges through play.

The first framework views empowerment through game culture as mode of cultural revolution, redress or integration. That is, games are seen a vehicle for upending the traditional producer-consumer dynamic, or for bringing marginalized groups closer to the center of technological competencies and innovation, or for ensuring that no youth are excluded from accessing and contributing to digital culture. This is a fairly conventional framework, I would argue. Important, but conventional in terms of the discourse surrounding youth and digital game culture over the past 20 years. (Yes, that

long-- I recently got my hands on a copy of a 1986 book looking at the educational and social impact of arcades and home consoles on youth. It was remarkably positive and laid out pretty much all of the game-positive rhetorical positions more lately re-introduced into broader cultural dialogue by folks like James Paul Gee, Kurt Squire, and so on.)

But the second framework, which I have to admit gets me much more excited than the first, seems very new and still coalescing to me. I would argue that it has to do with quality of life issues. Is it possible to improve general quality of life through game-enabled social and cultural participation? Is there a need in real life for a sense of progress, a sense of agency, a sense of creative opportunities, and a sense of community participation that is more easily and reliably fulfilled in virtual worlds and digital games?

I am thinking here of some of the following comments on this board that strike me as very quality of life oriented:

Lizabeth Goodman describes "gaming is a means of communication and personal connection and expression".

Justin Hall notes that "networked multiplayer devices and the games they allow create a fertile ground for human social interactions" and wants to create persistent game infrastructures that "follow people as they live their online lives, creating a sense of progress and problem-solving around basic tasks."

Matteo writes: "Games can equip or supply the players with an ability to create something"

Kallen Tsikalas notes two specific positive outcomes of gameplay: "Belief in one's own agency....In other words, youth feel like they have at least partial control over events in their lives as opposed to feeling like their lives are controlled by external circumstances and individuals" and "Development of self-efficacy (task-specific beliefs about competence) inside the games and how this transfers to life outside the game. Beliefs about one's own competence powerfully predict one's goals, choices, persistence, and response to failure."

Maybe I'm reading into comments something I just happen to feel strongly myself? At any rate, my recent thinking about how to look at the role of game culture in everyday life has been very strongly oriented toward asking which aspects of digital gaming improve quality of life, which aspects seem to reduce it, and how to swing the balance in favor of the former.

RE:Is empowerment really about improving quality of life?

Oct 18, 2006 10:07 AM

Clay Shirky

I think Jane's two frameworks may be linked on the axle of "sense of agency", which seems to me to fall both in the revolution/integration and quality of life arenas.

One observation, from outside games: I've been chasing "mega-niches" recently, sites that have ~1M users, but fly well under the radar of public attention because they are not traditional media outlets but highly niche services. (By way of example, GaiaOnline,

AlbinoBlacksheep, and The Mafia Boss are all meganiches that have significant overlap with games or gaming culture.)

One such niche that surprised me was the 'screensaver/free ringtone' sites, which get millions of monthly unique visitors. Our technology is so buttoned down, so "No user-servicable parts inside", that being able to affect the machine with even the cheesiest form of personalization, analogous to selecting the perfect Hallmark card, becomes hugely popular. Given that obvious desire, games have considerably more to offer in terms of agency.

It might be interesting to analyze games on the types of agency they afford.. I can think of several:

** Personal agency about the game*

As I was saying in the Fun thread, this is to me the key agency -- the ability to have an unforced experience, and render an unforced judgment. In many educational settings, this ability alone is rare.

** Personal agency within the game*

The basic agency of play—the game presents opportunities, I make choices.. Even games that don't really offer this—e.g. Lotto—have to fake it. It would actually be simpler to go in, hand the cashier your money, and be told "You win" or "you lose." No one would play such a game, because it doesn't provide even the sense of picking the numbers as a simulation of agency.

** Social agency about the game*

This, to me, is hugely important, and another thing I talked about at the Serious Games conference. Board games allow players to argue about the rules beforehand, providing an experience of bargaining and socially enforced agreement. One of the things that is so wrong with social digital games is how rarely they allow this kind of arguing, and how small the relative effects are.

Someone made the point earlier about how much work a TC mod takes; one possible middle ground between customization and modding might be socially agreed rules. Another place social agency gets wrapped around digital games is through guild structures. Justin mentioned WeKnow in Wow; an astonishing amount of WeKnow's energy goes into determining or maintaining social structure.

** Social agency within the game*

Like personal agency, this is a feedback loop—I did X and Y happened—but unlike one player games, with the limits of luck plus rules, social agency in games runs in a non-deterministic and non-random way.

** Iterated agency about the game*

This to me is the book-end of personal agency about the game; the ability to re-play the game, to change your strategy or your behavior and observe what happens, on a growing base of past experience, strikes me as the other key element of agency. This is the reason I think that games designed to be played once are giving up one of the key virtues of games (sometimes as a result of the literature-envy that seems to nest in parts of the game world), and especially for games in education. Learning through iterated

experience is simultaneously one of the greatest pleasures for playing games and one of the biggest sources of real-world value.

RE: RE:Is empowerment really about improving quality of life?

Oct 18, 2006 3:19 PM

Girlbot

these are great categories. The issues I would like to raise in this discussion comes from my research in the area of working with girls and gaming. Matteo inspirationally identifies the "consumers-as-creators" trend happening in the revision and modding of games, which could perhaps lead to the creation of new games. Douglas cautions that this potential, however, is not yet tapped to its real capacity, and cites the inspirational open play systems developed by Papert et al as challenging—perhaps in their openness, these are too open? Jane notes that the modding community is still a fraction of players. Kallen's introduction of psychological language in the discussion is a necessary contribution. The current context of gaming, however, is a major challenge to the creation, uptake, and revision of games. As noted already, I agree that "empowerment" has various meanings and implications. In design, "empowerment" needs to be addressed from psychological, pedagogical, and social perspectives. The gender imbalance in technical fields, as well as in the gaming industry, is highly influential in all three of these categories. Clay's personal and social categories *about games and *within games could then be set within this larger framework. See various factoids about women in games, such as the "Game News" report on the Nielsen Entertainment's third annual Active Gamer Benchmark Study—there are roughly 117 million "Active Gamers." Women make up nearly two-thirds of all online gamers, but men still outnumber women in the overall video game universe by more than two-to-one. Check it out. Nielsen conducted the study online with 2,200 "Active Gamers"—those 13 years or older who owned a gaming device and played games at least once a week.<http://home.nestor.minsk.by/game/news/2006/10/0801.html>. Or the 2005 IGDA report: Game Developer Demographics: An Exploration of Workforce Diversity on Oct 18. You can download it as a PDF. <http://www.igda.org/diversity/report.php> In the IDGA study, there were 6,437 responses, with 4,006 responses ultimately used in the report, as these were active in game specific jobs rather than overall software jobs. In the summary, the report notes, "Based on the survey findings, the "typical" game development professional can be described as: • white • male • heterosexual • not disabled • 31 years old • working in the industry just over 5 years • university/college educated • is a programmer, artist or designer • earning approx. US\$57,000 in total compensation per year • agrees that workforce diversity is important to the future success of the game industry 83% of US game developers self classified as white, and salaries were comparatively higher for whites than other workers though there is also a correlating amount of time in the industry (work experience) factor in this area. Of all the survey respondents, 11.5% identified themselves as female. Jobs categories are also broken down by gender, with women holding 5% of programming jobs, 10% of design jobs, and 11% of visual art jobs, as compared to 25% of the marketing jobs and 30% of the writing jobs. Looking at average salaries, the study reported a \$9,000 gap between male and female workers with similar years of job experience. The study also explored sexual orientation and disability status. Of particular interest are the insider comments on diversity, which can be found in a separate document on the site.

When play is perceived as scary: digital or not

Oct 18, 2006 4:35 PM

Jane McGonigal

Earlier today, Ian Bogost gave me a heads up on this breaking AP news story, in which a school bans all schoolyard games at recess (like tag).

I'm posting relevant portions here, because I think it gets to an important truth about current debates of digital games and their impact on youth: play is being increasingly labeled as scary and dangerous in all forms, not just digital.

I think our investigations of youth gamer culture--not only the social realities of it, but also the public perceptions of it, and educational, social intervention and governmental approaches toward it--needs to address this labeling of play as scary. I feel like it's a sense of powerlessness on the part of adult authority figures to control what happens during the act of gameplay that creates these kinds of backlashes. At the same time, fears of the physical dangers of real-world play may lead to a more open attitude toward incorporating virtual worlds and video gameplay into school and afterschool activities...

Here's the story:

Not it! Mass. elementary school bans tag

Wed Oct 18, 10:00 AM ET

Tag, you're out! Officials at an elementary school south of Boston have banned kids from playing tag, touch football and any other unsupervised chase game during recess for fear they'll get hurt and hold the school liable.

Recess is "a time when accidents can happen," said Willett Elementary School Principal Gaylene Heppe, who approved the ban.

While there is no districtwide ban on contact sports during recess, local rules have been cropping up. Several school administrators around Attleboro, a city of about 45,000 residents, took aim at dodgeball a few years ago, saying it was exclusionary and dangerous.

Elementary schools in Cheyenne, Wyo., and Spokane, Wash., also recently banned tag during recess. A suburban Charleston, S.C., school outlawed all unsupervised contact sports.

"I think that it's unfortunate that kids' lives are micromanaged and there are social skills they'll never develop on their own," said Debbie Laferriere, who has two children at Willett, about 40 miles south of Boston. "Playing tag is just part of being a kid."

Another Willett parent, Celeste D'Elia, said her son feels safer because of the rule. "I've witnessed enough near collisions," she said.

keeping up

Oct 18, 2006 8:42 PM

Rushkoff

The lack of time I have to participate meaningfully in this conversation only underscores, for me, the devil in the details of all the 'big picture' thinking I usually do: it has very little to do with on-the-ground reality.

We've already distinguished, I hope, between the "content" or polemic of particular games and the more contextual/experiential communication afforded by game play and modification. Surely, there's lots of incidental or casual learning that goes on when person simply figures out the interface of a game in order to play it effectively. And even more when they learn how to program.

What always gets me, though, is whether and how people understand the process of value creation. What constitutes success? That the company recognizes it? That the mod or movie gets a lot of "hits"? And what does even the best Doom level or Second Life island do to change the balance of power that everyone from Adorno to Benjamin critiqued at the outset of an electronic culture?

I stopped playing games—at least the kinds of "finite" games I find in computer or online—as I became more concerned with applying any insights gleaned to the much larger games of corporate capital, resource monopolies, and human rights abuses. And unless players are able to translate the logic of programmability to the seemingly 'given circumstances' of the games (and the rules) dictating real world human interaction, then even the best games are simply serving to distract a class of people whose efforts had better be spent elsewhere, and soon.

RE: World/Culture Construction, Participation, and Power

Oct 18, 2006 1:47 AM

Linda Polin

I'm going to jump in here though technically I'm slated for this week's convo. I'm also looking/playing in WoW, but play/observe in Neopets, and watch the RP boards action through my kid. We have the consoles, the handhelds, etc. The whole family plays and has forever. We also play Catan a lot and my daughter and I were in Pokemon gym for a year.

That said...I'm just now mulling over this idea...It is still half-baked.

I think what I see as the compelling aspect of game play for her and for her friends is the creation and participation in a culture of one's own making, albeit a riff from a given commercial world. In fact, that may be what makes it viable. You have to start somewhere, and really good games give you worlds to work with in generating your own better version.

As for power, what greater power than constructing your own world culture clubhouse. She's an 8th grader, and that is a tough grade for identity work. There is a lot of her day that is not of her own making. There is no recess, as she had in elementary school, during which time she and her friends could invent and play games, many of which were RP enactments of TV shows such as Teen Titans. For much of her pre-teen day, there is

school which dictates and constrains interaction spaces, and occupies more than its fair share of the day, thanks to the American obsession with homework.

As I watch her play, play with her, and hear her talk about play with friends and family, I get the feeling that, for Akmalla (her WoW main character), games are loosely organized social spaces with a starter set of cultural tools. This is especially obvious in the "game" she plays with friends that has the least formal, rule structure, the RP boards (role playing boards; she runs a board based on *Watership Down*, and participates in several based on the *Warriors* book series...about cat clans). Just as when my sibs and I were kids, a lot of energy goes into negotiating and constructing the constraints that will govern participation and play. Massive listings of what is okay and not okay, and lots of organizing activity, all seem to carry some degree of pleasure for the participants. My guess is that it has to do with identity work and the opportunity to create and control the social participation structures, rather than be subjected to them/by them. In WoW, where there is a lot of game-shaping structure, she has taken great pleasure in creating and managing a guild occupied by the alt. characters of friendlies in the 'big' guild. Again, I see energy around organizing and structuring, being a "good" GM. Also in WoW, the guild chat creates participation structures that allow her to be a "grown up" and/or a kid, as the mood suits. She works very hard at being witty and holding the engagement with her closest guild friends, with one exception all older players (college kids, mommies, army guys, blue and white collar workers—we have a very heterogeneous guild). In Neopets, this energy appears in her construction of her store and her pets' webpages, and in her offline discussions with fellow Neopet players. For both the RP and the Neopets pages she has taught herself html code and takes great pride in the display she can create to share with others, to demonstrate her competence. In the Pokemon gym activities, including going to city championships and new releases, a lot of the pleasure came from deck construction and revision, and the discussion of this, as well as from beating other players.

In short...or well, I guess this was long...I see a lot of attraction for her and her peers in the construction and occupation of mini-cultural spaces of their own making, variations on what is given to them by the commercial play space. It is an assertion of control and power and voice, perhaps. I could be way off, of course, but this idea seems to resonate with how she talks about the engagement, and perhaps why she is so much less interested in the console games and much more interested in real-time multiplayer games in real life or online.

I suppose I might suggest we think of it as a less compsci version of modding, because at some basic level, it truly is about modding the game to play the game you want to play. Now don't get me wrong. She slays furbolgs and basilisks with gusto and plays PVP battlegrounds. However, I do not think that is the source of the pleasure she derives from games and that keeps her in them. The surrounding available secret handshake cultural experience of jargon, player community websites, YouTube machinima, and even t-shirts, are cultural tools she is taking great pleasure in appropriating with her friends. These are big, robust worlds and they support the (re)construction work she is engaged in. And, frankly, I think there's some important learning going on in that process...but we won't tell her I said that.

Whatcha think?

RE: RE: World/Culture Construction, Participation, and Power
Oct 18, 2006 3:48 AM

Justin Hall

A great pleasure to be a part of these discussions—so many backgrounds, expertises and experiences brought to bear on a common set of curiosities:

Reading Kallen's recent post on Community & Empowerment, specifically "Bridging Social Capital" across social networks—I immediately think of Joichi Ito, a venture capitalist, technology power-broker and active World of Warcraft player who is quite fond of his guild WeKnow. With little prompting he speaks of the diversity in their ranks: construction workers, priests, ER nurses, soldiers in Iraq, spouses of soldiers in Iraq. From what I've seen of Ito's life in Tokyo and at international technology culture conferences, he doesn't get much quality time with real-world soldiers and priests, except when they collectively dress up as warriors and clerics.

Rio, Austin, Aspen, San Francisco; Ito is often in an exciting city surrounded by internet movers and shakers. Invariably he escapes to his hotel room to sit with a TeamSpeak headset on, organizing a Molten Core raid, or more typically, conducting a guild politics session. I sat with him one time, listening to him smooth out ego issues and handle complaints. The issues were personal, the framework was fantasy role-playing—with an emphasis on the "role." Most of the typing and talking I saw him do during the spring/summer of 2006 surrounded social management of the guild, ensuring that they had the harmony, the trust, the collective skillset necessary to continue adventuring together and succeeding within the world. Linda Polin, this sounds something like your daughter! "The opportunity to create and control the social participation structures," as you put it.

Ito functions as a sort of emissary between WoW and the technology pundits he talks with. During the few weeks I played actively in his guild, there was a new journalist or member of the Creative Commons board or young startup CEO who had joined up to see if WoW was indeed "the new golf." Golf in the sense of bridging social capital, I suppose, or perhaps bonding social capital for the players who are less ecumenical with their guild membership.

Ito said there was an area where he meets his guildmates in IronForge (a city in World of Warcraft) that was more familiar to him than his living room at home. Ito spends most of his time on the road, so it made sense, though it was stunning to think about. The polygonal corners of some cartoonish cave-city populated by oddly-proportioned warlocks and paladins frantically jumping and running about—more familiar than a couch you picked out with a family photograph nearby? Wow!

I am very comfortable online; my online mostly consists of chat and email and web browsing, not rich 3D worlds with armor and beasts. But I like to think of my daily life online as having ongoing play potential. Jane McGonigal nailed this with her most recent post, including the question: "Is it possible to improve general quality of life through game-enabled social and cultural participation?"

For a long time I wrote about mobile phone games. I had a mission: I chased examples of mobile multiplayer. I wanted to know how I could be gaming with my friends anywhere I was, in between anything else I might be doing. Some of these types of games are just now emerging, but many of them display the characteristics that Reid Kimball

mentioned: the thematic invariance that likely stems from a demographic lock on game design by young white male enthusiasts. These are games that offer dungeons you might battle through in a small group, almost like World of Warcraft whittled down enough to fit on your phone.

Who wants to make that compromise? I want to see more asynchronous play—play that you can instigate, send to a friend, and forget before it comes back around to surprise you. Sort of like a joke you always used to tell and then someone prompts you years later and you can't remember the punch line. When might games support that kind of intangible social poke and tickle over a long time line?

Networked digital games can support bridging social groups and bonding social groups both; currently they seem to do more bridging because gamers have to find each other. I find myself playing online with people who play online. Perhaps that's a bonding within the gamer social group?

Either way, I dream of a day when I can expect my brother and mother and girlfriend to all be on the same entertainment networks so I might draft them into a quick round of brain billiards or something that involves banter and co-teaching. I suspect these games might end up looking something like the children of Greg Costikyan and Bernie DeKoven. Yum!

Perhaps because I am so enamored of games I want to see them integrated into our daily lives, our communications, our relationships, and I believe therein lies some rich potential for non-violent conflict resolution, expanded experience and understanding, and increasing social cohesion.

**RE: RE: RE: World/Culture Construction, Participation, and Power
Oct 18, 2006 9:23 AM
katie salen**

Some Thoughts on Deep Participation

I woke up this morning early to resift through yesterday's posts and remain startled and amazed by the thoughtfulness of each entry. Like many of you, I am learning a tremendous amount from this discussion, both in terms of the positions from which people are choosing to express their ideas (as Justin noted, there are a range of disciplinary voices present), as well as from the content of what is being shared. I found yesterday's posts to be particularly generative: more questions were raised than answered, and a number of frameworks introduced. I am thinking here of Lizbeth's model of an AgencyAgency, Kallen's discussion of bridging vs. bonding social capital, Jane's notion of quality of life, Craig's link between consumption and participation, Linda's rumination on games as "mini-cultural spaces of their own making," Justin's call for an integration of games into all aspects of daily life. Each of these frameworks contributes to the conceptual toolkit we are collectively building around games and learning, and I am so happy to see the dialogue tackling tough issues. The question of "participation" is most certainly tied to issues of access (physical, economic, social) as well as the way in which participatory modes of gaming intersect with lives "complicated by physiological realities, human relationships and circumstances over which many may have limited control."

I wanted to pull out one tiny thread from the giant tapestry of threads being woven here, mostly because it connects to a little and unformed idea I wanted to share. The term “deep participation” has been used several times, and in light of Lizbeth’s post on the power of “small moves” (my rephrasing here), I have been thinking about “largeness” and “smallness” as it relates to the creation of deep experiences. As a game designer, it is often easy to get caught up in the push toward making bigger games with more community features, complex mechanics, and a world that feels like a space in which anything can happen. As a teacher, it is also easy to get caught in the wave of “bigness” that drives a desire to educate—to give students as much as they can handle and then even a bit more, in the hopes that immersion in much, will result in the learning of many. Often, in discussions of power and participation, emphasis is placed, at least initially, on the complexity of an activity or the availability of multiple activities within a single space. I am making rash generalizations here, so please forgive the gloss, but the point I want to make is that when Lizbeth pointed to the power of a single small gesture made by a child with limited movement abilities, I was reminded that it is incredibly useful to remember that agency can be supported through the tiniest of interventions. We see this theory played out again and again in the failure state of games and the moments of micro learning that go on each time a player tests out a hypothesis about how something works, fails in that theory, and tries again. We also see it embedded in many of the posts made in this discussion over the past few days as people point to the specific small moments they observe where they see meaningful participation occurring.

I was thinking about this idea of “smallness” as I viewed one of the many YouTube demo video’s made around the game Line Rider. Line Rider is a simple flash game where you are given an interface with which to draw a surface for a little penguin on a sled to slide down. Once the surface is drawn, you click the play button to watch the ride. It is in essence a game where designing the level is the gameplay. There have been several recent games that use the mechanic of drawing as means of play (Draw Play, Okami) or the design of levels (Blockaction), placing something of a spin on the idea of modding. What interests me in these games, and the plethora of demo videos that document the levels, is not just the fact that players are empowered through design to literally create their own game world, but that the smallness of the game and the simplicity of the mechanic has led to the kinds of deep participation often documented in much larger and more complex games. In Line Rider, a player only has a line with which to work...the expression of that line within the context of a game turns it into any number of things: a landscape, a race course, a loop de loop, a movie set on which to film the trials and travails of a well-outfitted penguin. In noting the hundreds of demo videos made by players documenting the games they’ve designed, it is clear that the game has created a deep sense of participation from the simplest of means. Free, “casual” games like these are important, I think, because they can get into the hands of players who don’t have the economic means to support the purchase of games or subscription fees, and because they remind us that finding ways to place tools in the hands of players does not require complicated technology, nor complex gameplay. Something as small as a line can lead to a whole universe of meaning and participation for players.

What are other people's thoughts on largeness, smallness, and the creation of deep participation?

RE: RE: RE: World/Culture Construction, Participation, and Power
Oct 18, 2006 12:38 PM

Tracy Fullerton

Sorry for not jumping in before today – I’ve actually been following along and thinking about the discussion, where it’s going, and where it’s not going, before posting. So here goes. BTW, I’m replying to Justin, because I like Justin, but this is really a reply to the original topic.

At their core, games are systems of power and power exchange. Rules are created by the designers, giving them power over players – a limited power, since players submit to the rules voluntarily, and find their own power by navigating them cleverly and successfully. Like a government, a bureaucracy, or even a parent, a good game is strict enough to mold behavior, but not too strict, because total clampdown invites revolution rather than compliance.

As Justin pointed out in his first post, many games are also variations on power fantasies. They offer us opportunities to wield types of power that will probably never be part of our real world experiences. In fact, most of these power fantasies mirror and extend predominant archetypes of power—who has it; who doesn’t; what can and should be done with it. And, even if I mod a game engine, if I don’t intrinsically change the underlying game (or power) mechanics, I am at great risk of creating a “new game” that propagates the same original power fantasy and relationships to power as the original system.

In this light, it’s difficult to support the notion that copying a model of an existing power system in order to propagate its underlying assumptions is an “empowering” cultural practice. When a young designer comes to me saying they want to make a game, and can I give them some advice on how to do it, they invariably describe an idea they have that appropriates one of the power fantasies that dominate games already, rather than questioning or re-framing it. Of course, my immediate thought is to steer them towards that process.

But it is difficult. The fact is that even when young game designers set out to make original designs, the mechanics often fall into comfortable patterns of aggressive power play. And, by imagining themselves as part of the creation process (i.e. as game designers), they are in many ways trying to capture even more power, creating (really re-creating) proven models of brute force, aggregation of resources, influence, terrain, etc.

They in fact are buying into the underlying rhetoric of these systems and attempting to align themselves with that rhetoric and master it. So is this intrinsically “empowering”? Do we think that the technical skills learned in the process—which really require another discussion of intrinsic power in and of themselves—divorced from rhetorical intent, are worth practicing at any cost?

Of course, as Matteo points out, games can be hijacked to create subversive ideological content, and as others have mentioned, there are a number of independent designers working to create games that model alternative ideologies—but that isn’t what I see in many mods, or even in many “original” student games.

In many ways, I would prefer to see young people less interested in mastering the technical aspects of games, and more interesting in mastering the infinitely complex

rhetorical issues involved in creating these systems of imagination and power exchange. I've written elsewhere about the need for players to "take back the rules" of games – to examine the issue of how power is given away to the digital system acting as adjudicator. And Bernie DeKoven has written extensively on the notion of player ownership and adaptation of the rules of games.

This is not a statement against technology literacy, or modding; I'm just trying to point out that these practices are filled with latent pitfalls. To me, the potential for empowerment as related to games and game design needs to be decoupled from technology, and understood instead as a question of literacy, language and personal expression.

Game, Toy, Rules, Power: Bit of a Ramble

Oct 18, 2006 3:34 PM

Linda Polin

Great stuff in your posting, Tracy. So much to think about. I have written and revised this posting over and over for the past 90 minutes as my replies lead me to new thoughts and connections. But then, that's what this is all about as an activity, for me at least. Thank you all for making me think harder.

Part of my difficulty in replying can be traced to my research and learning theory perspectives which dictate a careful consideration of historical and cultural contexts as resources for understanding the "now." So as I read your remarks, a nagging thought for me is how/why digital games are any different, or rather, in what important ways are they different, from childhood play and gaming that is "unplugged."

Aggressive, derivative game development is not a digital world exclusive. I grew up in neighborhoods of mostly boys and learned to play war, football, spy, kick-the-can, and such. Lots of aggression, lots of power structuring. This was not especially gendered either. When I was playing with the girls, there were also power structures determining who got to play which roles in the unfolding drama of house or hospital or let's put on a show. Rules existed, and were negotiated rabidly, often endlessly. Child development researchers would probably call this stuff part of the rites of passage from egocentric and parallel play to cooperative play, matching our developing readiness to engage with the adult world. You know, baboon play. Hitting, tantrum outbursts, and all.

When I ask myself how digital games differ, the main thing I see is in networked games (eg Halo or MMOs like Warcraft) that enlarge the neighborhood and diversify the pool of players, ideas, and opportunities. Before, if Tommy's mom called him home, that could kill the game. Or if it got dark before we finished arguing about where second base was, well, that was that. If Marcus and Melanie didn't want to play Spies, you were out of luck.

In many ways, I would prefer to see young people less interested in mastering the technical aspects of games, and more interesting in mastering the infinitely complex rhetorical issues involved in creating these systems of imagination and power exchange. I've written elsewhere about the need for players to "take back the rules" of games – to examine the issue of how power is given away to the digital system acting as adjudicator. And Bernie DeKoven has written extensively on the notion of player ownership and adaptation of the rules of games.

I don't that know these are mutually exclusive. When kids come to you to make a game that is basically a variation on existing game archetypes, the need to master the mechanics serves the end goal of game creation and probably reveals the system at work underlying the play. My kid masters HMTL to put up a page on the RP boards, but it is always about the RP, not the html. The technical mastery enables the engagement in the system it supports. It helps to have a wrench if you want to tinker. I don't think modding precludes insights if the modding is derivative. It can still reveal MORE of the power system of the game than mere play does because the modder/dev has to attend to the given relationships in the system. When my kid plays on the Watership Down RP board, she and the others have to play within the cultural rules of the world of the book. In fact, they DIG that. They love that they can take over the reins and drive this universe. No, it isn't very original; it is HUGELY derivative and reproduces the given structure of the book. And let me tell you, there's aggression there too. Those rabbits do a lot of turf fighting. LOL.

When I think of a game system without power hierarchies, I end up in Second Life, where there is no explicit game or goal, there but lots of tools for personal empowerment, perhaps defined as mastery of one's land and avatar I suppose. Is that a social space and therefore not within this game discussion domain? I think it is relevant because it offers an interesting comparison. Here we see lots of cool tech and modding, e.g., streamed video to share with friends; businesses to generate money (real and Linden); tools to change the landscape even. Make an alternative life for yourself, i.e, a second life. Isn't that a "game" like dress up or house? In some ways it is the ultimately unstructured play space. (And people seem to spend a lot of time remaking reality, only this time they come out the winner with the big house on the waterfront.)

From pondering that large and unstructured world I felt the need to zoom in on a widget. I was intrigued enough by Katie, to go seek out the Line Rider game. You can play it here. The developer has written below the flash window: "Its not a game, its a toy. What i mean is there is no goals to achive and there is no score." That got me to thinking even more about empowerment and games...or toys. Toys are so cool precisely because you can make sense of your own with them. Goals sold separately. (Unless someone buys you some creepy educational "toy" like... well, let's not name names. When I was a kid, one of those unplugged versions was Go to the Head of the Class. OMG, it's in stock. =shudder=)

Being a total loser (adult), I immediately adopted the afforded goal: create a successful loop-de-loop. That was very hard. This sucker did have...RULES...about how the physics would unfold. The first time I lacked momentum to complete the loop. The second time I pretty much killed the penguin before he even got to the loop. I tried several times to get the loop accomplished and didn't. A victim of the Zeigarnik effect, I bookmarked the page. I have a goal. So is Line Rider still a toy or is it now transformed into a game? Am I a bricoleur or a player? If I mod it to be about rolling oranges or crashing cars...am I enslaved by the rules in Line Rider? doomed to make yet another game based on momentum/gravity and whatever? And, well, so what?

**RE: RE: RE: RE: World/Culture Construction, Participation, and Power
Oct 18, 2006 2:12 PM**

Amit Pitaru

Hello, Amit Pitaru here, I'm authoring a chapter about games and accessibility for this series. Much of my chapter is based on personal experience constructing gaming software and hardware for children with various disabilities.

Reading these greatly educating posts, I wonder how our questions could be answered from the narrow viewpoint of the special-needs community, and whether we can bring something back with us when zooming out into the grander scale.

For example, we are interested in assessing the interests and abilities that gamers have towards creating their own MODs as a function of empowerment. Reid Kimball brought up the difficulties that the special-needs community faces when attempting to use MODs for implementing accessibility features. These endeavors are documented and tell a story; there are rants about companies not providing the proper API's, and success stories of good collaborations between corporations and consumers. I suspect that we can learn from these difficulties as a testament to the general state of Modding culture.

Regarding transference of digital-play to quality-of-life, we ask whether digital games actually empower and if they do so differently from traditional play activities. I have seen the transformation of children with special-needs before and after they gained access to digital-games, and it is a profound quality-of-life change. If for nothing else – they can participate in their most coveted play activity (regardless of whether it's a 'good' or 'bad'). Furthermore, many of them could not previously participate in any play activities without a caretaker, but once a gaming system is adapted they have access to challenges that they can achieve independently. Via multiplayer games they also gain access to people from all over the world that are not prejudiced by their condition. So eventually, these kids pick up conversational skills, leadership skills and are revitalized via positive feedback (challenge-reward) that good games generate.

Zooming out:

When viewed through the lens of special-needs, Jane's first and second frameworks are one and the same; quality-of-life issues are issues of redress, integration and even cultural revolution.

Also, I understand the raised question of whether we are playing the game or is the game playing us. But somehow these issues become less relevant in these fringe cases.

So back to my original question - can we learn anything about the whole from its parts, or are these anecdotes only applicable to the sector in which they stem from?

Without proof either way, I align myself with the notion of Universal Design and feel that if a something greatly empowers fringe-populations, it also does so for everyone else in more subtle ways.

RE: RE: RE: RE: World/Culture Construction, Participation, and Power**Oct 18, 2006 11:32 PM****Jane Park**

Hi, My name is Jane Park, and I teach courses on media, race, and ethnicity in the Honors College and the Film and Video Studies and Women's Studies programs at the University of Oklahoma. I'm working on a book manuscript on techno-oriental imagery in Hollywood film (forthcoming with University of Minnesota Press) and have written on representations of race, gender, and sexuality in anime, cyberpunk cinema, and hip hop culture. My experience with gaming studies is limited to a (bad) paper I wrote in grad school on video game and film convergence in *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, some very preliminary research on race and avatars, and conversations with students and friends who are avid gamers. I've really enjoyed reading the posts and am grateful to have been given this opportunity to participate. Due to my limited experience playing video games seriously (except for *Grand Theft Auto* when I was writing my dissertation:)), I can't comment on the technical aspects of the various games that have been discussed here. However, I do have a few observations and questions re: issues of access, empowerment, and agency. I agree with Douglas Rushkoff, Toby Miller, Craig Watkins, and Tracy Fullerton that it's important to look at the ways in which what may appear to be "libratory" practices are restricted and/or circumscribed by corporate interests as well as how players have been interpellated by those interests. I'll give you an example from a conversation I had recently with Brian Thompson, a friend of mine who has spent many years both playing and testing MMOs (*Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, *WoW*) and who is currently a grad student in the Modern Thought and Literature Program at Stanford (he's participating in another panel next week, I think). Anyway, Brian tells me that communication channels between players and developers became broader and more institutionalized once monthly subscription fees were introduced (around the time of the open beta stages of *Ultima Online*). In other words, a player's longterm interest became important once replayability meant continued profits. This gave players more access to developers and subsequently, more agency in the ongoing production of the game in the role of consultants. What I would stress here is that whatever power they have in this situation derives primarily from their power as subscribers (i.e. consumers). Further, according to Brian and based on my observations of students who are hardcore gamers (many take my science fiction film class), gamers still tend to venerate developers. Their interest does not seem to be so much to subvert the medium but rather to go corporate within it. I think Audre Lorde's well-known statement, that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, is worth revisiting here as we consider whether certain gaming practices -- modding, dialoguing with developers through message boards, spamming the chat feature in a shooting game -- are empowering, and if so, how and to whom? To put it bluntly, do these potentially libratory practices dismantle the master's house or simply redecorate it? If the latter, perhaps redecorating might be considered a kind of political act? If so, in what ways? Echoing Toby Miller, it is important to consider the context in which these practices take place. I would add it is also important to consider the intent of the players. On that note, I'll end my post with a blog entry that chronicles one *WoW* player's decision to leave the game. In many ways, it replicates mainstream media's technophobic discourse around video games and gamers (as addiction) -- a discourse of which I have been taught to be distrustful and critical. Still, I found it to be rather illuminating and so thought I'd share:

<http://soulkerfuffle.blogspot.com/2006/10/view-from-top.html>.

**RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: World/Culture Construction, Participation, and Power
Oct 19, 2006 2:31 AM**

Girlbot

Jane, your questions are crucial in light of the cultural issues Jane M and others have brought up. Banning play is certainly not the way to transform the master's house, and leaving it behind does nothing as far as political, interventionist practice is concerned. But I hold out hope that through interesting design approaches we can think of, along the lines of de Certeau or Negri, about the subtle or not so subtle ways participants in systems can practice subversion. A Guerilla Girls approach to game making, such as the art work of Anne Marie Schleiner and others, is an active approach I favor. Granted, these kinds of "actions" are limited and tactical, but work to prove a point that some participants want to fight back and change things. One concrete thing to do here is prototype new play systems which keep a balance of power in check. Another is to create games with alternate reward structures, so that, for example, players are rewarded for creativity and contribution rather than high score and playing to win in what has become the traditional sense. I think this might happen through smaller games, and is indeed happening in games created by artists. These past few years, I have been experimenting in the borderlands between collaboration and play. How can you make a system to satisfy both drives, yet make it also open to nongamers? In this way I have been influenced by the transformative notion of play introduced by folks in the New Games Movement as well as artists from Dada to Surrealists and Fluxus. Last year I decided to try to create a public collaboration artwork, one that introduced play to those who might be reticent in other environments, and one that might encourage collaboration, spontaneity, and trust between friends or between total strangers. So I made a huge classic game controller, modelled after the familiar game joystick from the Atari 2600, that takes more than one person to play. It appeals to "nonplayers" and passersby as well as serious game fanatics. This thing, called [giantJoystick] was the first project I've done that my midwestern family, all nongamers, really liked. I think players like this piece because it is familiar and fun, yet provides a new way of engaging with other people and public locations (and 'art') to people of many ages, backgrounds, and experiences in a non-didactic manner. So I do think there is hope for creating systems that provide opportunities for agency, but we may have to think in disruptive ways about how those systems might manifest!

Atomizing Games to Rewire Open Worlds

Oct 19, 2006 4:43 AM

Justin Hall

For all the zeal I have about the educational, social, personal potential for games, I should remember that there is a ready flip side: gaming that stands in the way of self-awareness. Jane Park, that last link you included to the testimony of the departing World of Warcraft player was a stunning portrait of imbalance. I suppose I could dig up a similar confessional on day trading or pornography, but there was something particularly poignant about this young man's tale of losing himself in a complex play world.

Perhaps play should be more grounded in real life, like Second Life where you can work for real dollars as a virtual representative. I just received email that the Center for Public Diplomacy is looking for a volunteer to help coordinate events on their island in Second Life; there must be a raft of similar paid positions coming soon.

But Second Life is so much less compelling than World of Warcraft, at least if you observe the numbers. As Linda Polin pointed out, in Second Life, players make their own goals. I've been fascinated by the people who realized Second Life is a fine place to stage elaborate sexual fantasies; though I'm sure there's a million other wholesome fantasies and useful public diplomacy happening outside of the House of Furry Lovers.

WoW has attracted so many more people with a combination of limited customization and a clear track to run on. You can be the best fisherman, you could collect a million pelts from all the various animals, but really, it's about getting ahead in your job (warrior, mage, thief, whatever). Up towards level 60, and soon, beyond!

I can't play MMORPGs like World of Warcraft for very long for two reasons:

a) they are socially divisive. Because of current technology and design limits, a game like WoW has servers that host a few thousand players at once. So if you want to play with all your friends, you had better make sure they join your server. Otherwise, all the work you put into character development is anchored to a particular instance of the game and you can never freely mingle with the wide range of people who may be playing. In my case, this means I have 6 level 15 characters across 5 servers, one with my nephew, one with my schoolmate, one with my boss, etc. My effort and time is split, every few weeks someone else invites me to another server, and I feel like I'm squandering my time because I'm there to play with people and can't we all just play together?

b) it's hard to explore the possibility space. Sim.* designer Will Wright said that a video game player tests out and comes to understand the possibility space of a game in short order. I know this to be true - if I am turned loose in a 3D adventure game, I soon check to see if I can walk on all the paths, or if there are invisible walls. Can I enter the buildings, or are they fake fronts? Are those other bodies people I can talk to? Can I ask them questions or do they just have pre-selected statements to give? Aside from the plot and my goals, these boundaries tell me how deep the imagination of the game runs.

In an MMORPG the players are most of the possibility space. And since the world is socially divisive, you can't experiment broadly with people unless you're willing to start over on each server. You can't take your character from server to server, let alone from game to game. You can't save your progress and test things. You can't easily start over and see what happens; the loss of time seems greater because you don't set the pace of play as much.

So I have 6 characters on 5 servers also because I want to know what it's like to be a druid, then a shaman, then a warlock, then a hunter, and so on. Saving and Reloading in massively-singleplayer offline games is certainly unnatural, but it works as a technique for at least some experimentation in the play space of the game world. This is the kind of Iterated Agency that Clay Shirky mentioned earlier.

Case in point: I've logged over 100 hours on The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. I play on my Xbox 360 because it's more relaxing, and the surveillance in the Xbox Live system tells my friends (and anyone who looks online) how far I've gotten in the game. I've gotten pretty far. I could have solved it two or three times by now, but I'm big into real estate. I've bought most of the houses you can buy in the game, and furnished them. I'm also an accomplished spellcaster, in addition to being a deadly hand-to-hand combat expert.

Oblivion allows me to basically go up in every level in every direction, if I put the time in. I'm an ass-kicking generalist in a fairly detailed world.

Game designer Doug Church said of Oblivion and other open-world games like Grand Theft Auto that they are effective for being combinations of smaller games. Katie Salen, your question about scale in games reminded me of his remarks. Grand Theft Auto 3 was a decent driving game, a crappy third-person shooter, a series of mafia quests, a huge city to explore, a small economy, a scavenger hunt and a mini-RPG. Folks got lost in that world for so many hours, as Mary Flanagan described: people just driving around for hours. There's so many game experiences to try within GTA, and one might just fit, at least for now.

Our discussion group is a good range of voices; a number of smart people have reminded me of how deeply enmeshed contemporary video games are in consumer technology and rhetorics of violent, materialist success. I grow concerned that the peculiar entrancing nature of these bounded deep virtual realities ensures the continuing character of most "hard-core" video games: enrapturing to the indoctrinated, creepy or impenetrable to most other folks.

WarioWare makes me happy even in these darkest moments, because it's a game that breaks games apart into tiny chunks. It's a portable game experience where each round lasts just a few seconds, and each round is somehow aesthetically or gameplay different from the last round.

The atomization of games means they can be less threatening, less demanding, and more adaptable. You can pick and choose the small pieces of game you like. And maybe someday they will merge into bigger meta-games, so each person's success at their own range of tiny games gives them a standing in the much larger massively multiplayer game that we will all be playing without pause.

But Douglas Rushkoff's challenge echos here: "unless players are able to translate the logic of programmability to the seemingly 'given circumstances' of the games (and the rules) dictating real world human interaction, then even the best games are simply serving to distract a class of people whose efforts had better be spent elsewhere, and soon."

I continue to believe that literacy, language and personal expression, as Tracy Fullerton imagined, will stem from increasing exposure to flexible rulesets and iterative systems for solving small problems. Will Wright's truism that users rapidly assess possibility space reinforces my sense that people inherently play with rules. Rushkoff mentioned Finite games; I am a big fan of James P. Carse's book *Finite and Infinite Games*, exploring the differences between games with rules and games about rules, games where you win, and games that exist to be played indefinitely.

So how can I help spread the gospel of programming from games to laws? Merging Will Wright and Lawrence Lessig to teach programming for both Sims and Senators? To help people envision a petition as a tool for modding civil society?

As games become atomized, as game-like interfaces come to characterize our interactions with most all our devices, perhaps there will be more general fluency with rules and play. In the way that print literacy has seemed to be a net positive for an

informed populace, so too might an algorithmically experienced people better understand that society is a collective consensual hallucination that can be altered by agreement.

**RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: World/Culture Construction, Participation, and Power
Oct 19, 2006 4:52 AM
W. James Au**

Hi all, I'm Wagner James Au (conversationally, I go by "James"); I'm primarily the author of my Second Life blog New World Notes, just previous to which I was a contractor and official "embedded journalist" with Linden Lab. I also consult for public/private companies interested in creating a presence in Second Life, which lets me put on my business card, without irony, "metaverse consultant". When I'm not turning my experiences and observations of SL into an upcoming book (progress slow but steady), I'm also writing for magazines like Wired. Previous to that, I was Salon's regular contributor on games as an emerging culture and art form, and between those stings, was a writer/designer for games like Electronic Arts' Majestic (an ARG before its time, brilliant but without the salsa Jane McGonigal subsequently brought to the genre) and the MOVES Institute's America's Army.

And since I was briefly a contractor for America's Army, a game Matteo cites up front, I should inject some caution on how the concept of "empowerment" is framed by such politically-weighted examples. As a rule, I'd state it this way: if it only qualifies as "empowerment" when it happens to affirm your own personal ideology, than you're doing a disservice to actual empowerment as it's observably lived and enjoyed by young people playing games. (And parenthetically, I should say calling America's Army pro-war propoganda is a rather simplistic understanding of the game and the actual US Army-- in my view, a bit akin to calling a fire rescue game "pro-fire propoganda".) Citing the "Dead in Iraq" example is troublesome, as well, for not only does that particular activist "violate the creators' intended rules", as Matteo would have it, but also violates the informal rules of propriety and good sportsmanship that gamers have created for themselves. Which is why his behavior generally seems to be seen by them as nuisance Spam grieving. (And I should know: for a Salon review written just before the 2004 election, I played Battlefield: Vietnam under the username "Lt John Kerry", just to see what kind of reaction I provoked. Even when that got me fragged in the back several times by angry Bush supporters, I'd hesitate to say I was substantially subverting anything.) By the same standard, Christian evangelical gamer clans who use first-person shooters like America's Army not primarily to play, but to proselytize their own beliefs, also meets this putatively laudable standard of violating the creators' intended rules. Is there much empowerment to be gained from the ability to annoy?

It's important not to miss all the empowerment going on that doesn't lend itself to a facile political scan. In that regard, I'd point people to a fascinating MIT thesis study by Zhan Li, who describes the community that grew organically out of America's Army's official forums-- a unique community and support group of civilian gamers and military players (veterans and active duty), bringing together social spheres which otherwise don't often intersect (probably to the detriment of both). In the process, this yielded a new, stereotype-shattering discourse between these subcultures, and on the whole, as I read Li's study, a positive one. (He cites America's Army Forums manager Major Bret Wilson who notes, approvingly, "[in the forums, we] have some veterans [who]... are actually on the left extreme [of the ideological scale] which is a shock to... [civilians who

think] that all folks in the military were card-carrying members of the Republican party. I think it's an interesting education for everyone involved.") This strikes me as a deeper and more engaged kind of empowerment, and it comes not through a desire to confound the designer's rules, so much as transcend them.

Returning to the general theme of this conversation, I should speak to my own experiences reporting in Second Life, since that's where the core of my focus has been, going on four years now. From that, I do know the temptation to give artificial political or cultural weight to gamer behavior, because I've been guilty of it myself. In retrospect, for example, in an early New World Notes entry, I over-interpreted the building (and subsequent destruction) of two structures that vaguely resembled the World Trade Center as a serious act of catharsis. (One of the residents who rode the collapsing towers lost a close relative during the real terrorist attack, and was still recovering from the grief.) That would be quite an act of empowerment-- but then, maybe it was just some young folks who willy nilly made and crashed two towers, and any catharsis was accidental and unintended. Then again, maybe that's the best kind of empowerment. Yet again, maybe that's the essence of Second Life interaction: narrative roleplay merging into roleplay that expresses real identity, often at the same time.

Doug mentions his disappointment that programmable Legos haven't sold as well as one-way-to-put-it-together "Bionicles", and I have to say: come visit a free-build sandbox in Second Life, to see where all the Legos fans went. What you see in those areas (where SL residents can build and script without having to own land) is a lucid dream and a 3D jam session with players around the world. One guy comes by and builds a bridge, someone else scripts a car to drive off the ledge of the bridge, another builds a giant trampoline to bounce the car into a massive vat of Jello-- that kind of stuff happens all the time. (That's actually a mild example.)

For fundamentally, Second Life was conceived on the premise that the kind of empowerment Katie talks about is not only great to observe academically, but a good revenue model, too. Of course, the larger game industry depends on the informal modding community to enhance and extend the value and shelf life of their games. (And sometimes, in the case of a Counterstrike and a few other mods, has not only done that, but transformed their genre, as well.) But Second Life was architected on the assumption that if you did give gamers the tools to create their own experiences, they'd do that so well, you could actually run a business by hosting their platform. I spy Cory Ondrejka on this list, so I defer to let him speak about the technical particulars. I also spy Second Life's homepage population ticker, which just yesterday registered its one millionth registered user. Which suggests a market-based reply to Katie's original question, "In what ways are we seeing youth empowered through their participation in the creation, uptake, and revision of games?"

Answer: in ways that are changing the media from the ground up.

RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: World/Culture Construction, Participation, and Power

Oct 19, 2006 10:06 AM

Cory Ondrejka

When looking at most computer languages geared at learning or kids, you tend to find overly simplified languages built around visual programming models that don't really let

you do anything. Second Life is different in that it is tremendously complex, including a scripting language that is far harder to use than C, but we have found incredibly high participation rates, both of Second Life in general and of creation in particular. The full exploration of why this is the case is far beyond the scope of this post—nor do we really know all the mechanisms involved—but we do know that we are seeing extremely high rates of user-to-user—that is to say, amateur-to-amateur—education, with hundreds of classes a week taught within Second Life on how to use Second Life. In addition, dozens of university classes have also been taught, demonstrating that at least some of the features that make Second Life a good learning platform translate to skills beyond those used directly in SL. Moreover, SL seems to embody some classic symptoms of good learning. Learning is situated, on-demand, and embedded within a culture of exploration and creativity. Many enter into knowledge via legitimate peripheral participation rather than intensive study.

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly to those familiar with games, SL demographics are remarkably gender and age balanced, with monthly usage nearly equal between men and women and residents from age 13 to 70+ (and more usage per capita from the older residents). All of this flies in the face of conventional wisdom and seems to return to the power of giving people tools and ability to explore design space.

RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: World/Culture Construction, Participation, and Power

Oct 19, 2006 7:18 PM

Mark Marino

I'm Mark Marino. I teach writing at USC, edit Bunk Magazine, and write for Writer Response Theory, an online academic blog that studies digital character art. My dissertation, completed under the direction of Toby Miller, was on conversation agents (chatbots) and interactive narratives, investigating the gender, race, and sexuality that they evoke and perform. Chatbots rely heavily on the communities of users who chat with them and who adapt and modify them.

My own works include various mods and in-game content. "Grand Thieves Audio" hijacks the audio of Grand Theft Auto: Vice City. These modologies recontextualize the game by putting you in the car with the main character's guilt-tripping Italian mother, an army recruiter, and a driver's ed instructor. The army recruiter in particular is a reaction to the use of games to prepare soldiers. Another piece, "22 Short Films about Grammar" uses Lionhead Studios' "The Movies" to produce 22 films to teach lessons on language. I have used these in classes I teach at USC.

At Writer Response Theory, we have been developing Noah Wardip Fruin's notion of "authoring games," a subset of which are authoring sim games such as "The Movies." These are games that are designed to promote active authorship (which some equate with agency). Regarding video games and learning, I recently also completed a study of former gang members in LA and how they play "Grand Theft Auto."

Modding

It's hard for me not to see modding in the context of chop shops in LA (although possibly "less cool") where car-owners reappropriate a mass-produced technology—although in many ways I agree with Toby Miller that this labor is reappropriated by the games particularly when they provide the sites for the added content (as in the case of "The

Movies”). In fact, “The Movies” may seem like a way to contain the machinima that was already going on, not unlike the Spider and PT Cruiser were attempts to reappropriate the chop shops--except what was appropriated, as Andrew Stern points out, was not the product but the practice.. Although according to those I've spoken with, the car industry has moved to prevent customization through increased use of computer-technology to close the lid, while some of the games already discussed, such as Second Life, depend on the inventiveness of their users, in the way that IFMUD did.

The question of control/power/agency, in my eyes, is the extent to which a person accepts the subject position offered by the game. To what extent does a person at the interface follow the rules.

Justin writes: I know this to be true—if I am turned loose in a 3D adventure game, I soon check to see if I can walk on all the paths, or if there are invisible walls. Can I enter the buildings, or are they fake fronts? Are those other bodies people I can talk to? Can I ask them questions or do they just have pre-selected statements to give? Aside from the plot and my goals, these boundaries tell me how deep the imagination of the game runs.

Justin’s comment speaks to the affordances. Drawing upon the work of Don Norman as adapted by Michael Mateas, I would offer that the only affordances that count are the material affordances. As I understand them, the material affordances are what a player can do. The formal affordances are what the context of the game and interface suggest are acceptable and appropriate actions: what a player should do. Ultimately, game play is defined by what is possible at the interface much more than any attempts to overlay restraints through significance. The systematic exploration that the gamer brings to the game is their coming into being in the game world.

Consider this test case. "Tactical Iraqi" is a game developed by W. Lewis Johnson and his team at the Information Sciences Institute to teach Iraqi to soldiers. His reports note that when people first started playing the game, some players, using the affordances of the Unreal Tournament engine beneath the game, began brutalizing their interlocutors. This anecdote may seem like a testament to the violent nature of video games. Perhaps it is classical conditioning of the player. Or perhaps this person was looking behind the curtain, testing the limits of the possibility space, demonstrating agency in the context of a military training game to be used at military bases under the surveillance of superiors. The game is intended to teach polite (constrained) behavior in a foreign culture and a foreign language from the point of view of a military force that is protecting/occupying another country. Certainly the behavior was neither polite or informed. The player did not learn the lessons of the content of the game. But in the context of groupthink, compliance, and critical thinking: Was this agency?

**RE: RE: RE: RE: World/Culture Construction, Participation, and Power
Oct 19, 2006 12:16 AM**

Girlbot

Thank you Katie for instigating this whole discussion! This group can make a real impact. As Justin mentioned, and then Tracy noted, "At their core, games are systems of power and power exchange." I firmly believe this. Games are a cultural medium, carrying embedded beliefs within their representation systems and structures, whether the designers intended them or not. In media effects research, this is referred to as "incidental learning" from media messages. For example, The Sims is said to teach

consumer consumption, one of the values of capitalism: it encourages players to earn money so they can spend it and acquire goods. The Grand Theft Auto series was not created as an educational game, but nonetheless, it portrays its world as a violent place, rewards criminal behavior, and reinforces racial and gender stereotypes. Many scholars, makers, and consumers observe, that games can embody antagonistic, and antisocial themes—violence and gore, genocide, crime, cruelty, problematic representations of bodies in terms of gender and race, and even viciously competitive game interaction and game goals. While of course this is not the case for all games, these issues arise in a notable number of popular games. I'm working on a project with Dr. Helen Nissenbaum (and several folks in this group) on researching "human values" in computer games. Our goal is not to denigrate existing games, but offer other alternatives for inclusive design, or alternate design practices. How can a game designer intentionally "break the mold," especially when designing for "new" or underserved players, such underrepresented populations (in my research, underprivileged girls)? Building upon the insights of those engaged in the study of ethics, science and technology studies, and design disciplines, in our project and overall research efforts, Helen and I believe that it is not enough to stop at the point of recognizing that human principles (negative and positive) could be embodied in design, but to set forth particular principles as a design aspiration. Testing these approaches, assessing the success of these efforts, is the next challenge, and we've got a 3 year research project specifically to develop approaches here... These are difficult issues for not only the game industry, but for educators, humanists, and citizens, and I am thrilled to contribute to the area of learning and agency in myriad ways within the domain computer games. I hope you find that I wholeheartedly agree with Tracy, then, that the technology of games is laden with cultural norms and issues, and that re-imagining computer games will ultimately mean creating new systems of play and power.

RE: Dialogue 1: Power, Play, Participation: final thoughts?

Oct 19, 2006 9:38 PM

katie salen

We are heading into the final day of what has been a rich week of discussion around the idea of power, play, and participation. So much has been covered that I hesitate to try and summarize; instead, I thought I might invite each of you to post a final (short) concluding note that expresses one key thought that has been triggered or refuted by the discussion this week. You have all been more than generous in sharing your ideas with this group; the conversation generated has been of a tremendously high caliber...I know my perspective has been stretched. Thanks so much for your time and willingness to engage.

My final thought might seem to be something of a radical departure from most of the posts to date, but I will do my best to connect it back to some of the things that have been discussed. I have been reading a book called *Play to Win*, by David Sirlin. Sirlin is a professional videogame player (*Street Fighter* is his game of choice), and while he is not against "playing a game for fun," he thinks that if one is to play to win, fun is beside the point. He writes "In pursuing the path of winning, you are likely to learn that concentrating merely on beating the opponent is not enough. In the long run, you will have to improve yourself always, or you will be surpassed. The actual conflict appears to be between you and the opponents, but the best way to win is to bring to the table a mastery of playing to win and a mastery of the game at hand."

Within educational circles, a lot of lip service is given to the concept of mastery, of becoming fluent in a set of key skills. Mastery is certainly a form of power, and in order to gain mastery of a game a tremendous amount of time must be spent studying the game, practicing skills, and employing those skills through play. When mastery is achieved, in either a game as simple as Warioware or as complex as Starcraft, players feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment.

Games invite mastery because they are made up of sets of discrete challenges, knowable rules, and repeatable choices. Beating a game is only one measure of mastery; I know many gamers who care not about technically beating the game (completing all the missions, for example) but only mastering the skills to play well, and to perform at the highest possible level. The emotions expressed in the blog entry from the former WoW player were in part connected to the fact that the open-ended structure of MMOs often fail to reward mastery of a known system. In WoW, the system is always changing as bugs are found and fixed, as new challenges are released—players enter into a Sisyphusian contract whereby one may never attain the kind of mastery games like Street Fighter, Warcraft, or FIFA Soccer afford. And this can be incredibly disempowering.

Several of the posts over the last few days have touched on this idea of players being played by games, and the need to acknowledge the power structures inherent in games, be they embedded in rules or in the underlying technology. But I would argue that when a player gains mastery over the game, they acknowledge the artificiality of its construct, learning to speak the system so well that they make it their own. Sirlin is instructive on this point:

“A competitive game is...a debate. You argue your points with your opponent, and he argues his. “I think this series of moves is optimal,” you say, and he retorts, “Not when you take this into account.” Debates in real life are highly subjective, but in games we can be absolutely sure who the winner is.”

The conflict is between the players; the game itself is merely the medium—the language—of the debate. The game must be expressive enough to allow the debaters to articulate complex thoughts. A skilled debater knows the nuances of the language and common tricks and traps of language he can use against untested opponents, but the language is only his tool. Once he learns the theory of debate, he can apply it to any language. It is common to focus entirely on learning nuances of a language at the expense of gaining a real understanding of how debate should be conducted. Expert debate involves gaining an understanding of the opponent and what he will say, and knowing immediately what you will say back. It involves deception and boldness, risk-taking and conservatism. If you learn to debate (play to win), then learning particular languages (games) become simple in comparison.

Is it useful then, to think about the value of competitive play in the context of power and participation? I think so, and I worry that in looking for forms of empowerment within games and gaming practices, we often overlook competition and playing to win as viable models. Part of the appeal of games is that they allow you to become something that you might not really be—for many kids winning or becoming an expert at a game in the journey toward winning might provide them a rare moment of success in a life where those moments are few and far between. Empowering a child is often about giving them a challenge you know they can take on, but which requires them to invest in mastering the skills to fulfill that challenge. Games are natural systems for such a pursuit of

mastery, and playing to win a strategy we should be more willing to take on when we ask how kids might be better empowered through their play.

Reflections on Big Ideas and their Embodiments + a little Theory Injection Oct 18, 2006 12:42 AM

Kallen Tsikalas

Hello Everyone...

Thank you for the thought-provoking dialogue! It's a pleasure to learn from all of your observations and insights.

Here are a few of my ruminations on the issues that have been raised in the last couple days. (I'm sort of an outsider to the gaming community, so I hope these aren't too off-base.) I'll address one at a time:

1. Empowerment: Improving quality of life? Inside vs. outside of the gaming environment? [Following up on Jane & Lizbeth's comments]
2. Community & empowerment [Following up on Craig, Jane & Lizbeth's comments]
3. Consumption & empowerment [Following up on Craig's comments]
4. Digital equity & CFY's program [Responding to Craig's and Anna's questions]

1) Empowerment...

I think the key issue to most of us is not how youth are empowered inside the game environment. Rather, it is how playing and/or creating games changes what young people know, believe and do outside the games – in their everyday lives that are complicated by physiological realities, human relationships and circumstances over which they may have limited control.

On the individual level, we can ask how game participation effects knowledge, beliefs and behavior independently. So, for example, we might ask:

> What knowledge do young people acquire by playing/creating games that will effect their lives outside the games?

- Technical knowledge may open new economic opportunities.
- Rhetorical knowledge (e.g., understanding of effective argument structures—verbal or visual) may increase their ability to communicate effectively and therefore better represent themselves and their communities.
- Self-knowledge may help them make better decisions and respond more adaptively to challenges.
- Perspective shifting (as Lizbeth describes in her work with physically disabled children and as I've seen in my work with disadvantaged American kids "living" the lives of children in 3rd world countries) may help them understand their own limitations in a more positive way.

> How does playing/creating games change young people's beliefs about themselves and others in ways that effect their lives outside the games?

- In an earlier post, I suggested that this could happen through 3 different pathways: Agency, Adaptive attributions/responses to failure, development of self-efficacy.

- Lizbeth also talks about providing agency alternatives for people who have physical disabilities, which is sure to effect beliefs about one's capacity to interact in the world.
- This issue was also raised at the 2006 Games for Change Conference in NYC. John Lester of Linden Lab described special communities in Second Life for stroke survivors, people with cerebral palsy, and individuals with Asperger's Syndrome. These communities enabled people who typically had a great deal of difficulty interacting with others to have successful relationships, thereby altering their beliefs about themselves and their agency.

>How does playing/creating games change young people's behavior in life outside the game?

- This, to me, is the most difficult question to answer. I believe it is usually mediated by changes in knowledge, beliefs, *and* social environments. This final factor, social environments, leads to the issue of communities – raised by Jane, Lizbeth and Craig.

2) Community & empowerment...

As Craig suggests, we may want to draw on sociological theory to help us understand how participating in computer games builds up communities and, in turn, how communities then raise up individuals.

One of the most provocative constructs we may want to consider is bonding vs. bridging social capital.

- Bridging social capital refers to the formation of relationships *across* typical social networks. Some of this may be happening in the on-line digital gaming communities that people have been discussing. Bridging social capital is definitely associated with economic empowerment. People tend to gain new employment opportunities and earning power when they expand their social networks. (There's a lot of research on this.)
- Bonding social capital, on the other hand, refers to the strengthening of relationships *within* typical social networks, for example with family members and existing friends. Bonding social capital has been shown to effect ego resilience. This means that people are psychologically stronger and able to cope with challenges when their local relationships are strong. (This is especially important for disadvantaged youth.)

> How does participating in games build *bonding* social capital?

- So, when Lizbeth says "gaming is a means of personal connection," the personal connections may be operating on and having effects at both of these levels.

3) Consumption & empowerment...

Craig asserts that power in game environments may be "predicated on the ability to consume."

I've been interested in this issue as well, particularly since I work with kids who have limited financial means to consume but, perhaps as a consequence of their economics, a high desire to do so.

A few years ago, I did an observational study with economically disadvantaged kids playing *The Sims* in small groups. One child, a 12 year-old girl, was particularly acute in her observations. Summing up what the group had learned after playing the game, she said, "We learned that they have what we can't have."

I worry about the association between consumption and empowerment, but I don't have any good framework for thinking through this yet ??

4) Digital equity & CFY's program...

I don't have the data on it, but it seems plausible that disadvantaged youth are more likely to play games on consoles than on PCs.

Among CFY's families in NYC and Philadelphia, we find that 60-70% have computers at home *before* they participate in our program. However, the state of these computers is highly variable, as is the nature of the software on them. (One mom recently told me she had a 9 year-old "Phillips" computer. I wasn't even aware that Phillips made computers!)

We also find that 40-50% of our families do *not* have consistent Internet access, and certainly not Broadband access. Therefore, as Craig implies, many of the intensive, immersion-type gaming experiences may not be accessible to a substantial portion of youth.

CFY's computer-based home learning center currently includes about 5 programs that the kids would probably classify as "games" plus another two that are open-ended exploratory environments. Once families participate in our workshop, they take the computer home and it is theirs to keep.

CFY also sponsors a Family Learning Software Award which is selected by a team of CFY Student Software Specialists working along with a panel of ed tech executives from school different school districts and state departments of education. Last year, all five finalists for the Award were games. More information is available at www.cfy.org/flsa_top.html.

RE: RE: Dialogue 1: Power, Play, Participation: final thoughts?

Oct 19, 2006 10:39 PM

Girlbot

Hi Katie, I'll leave it up to you to wrap up this intense set of provocative exchanges! But I do want to make one last point about playing to win. I think that's great, and I think giving players a chance to empower themselves through playing, and willing, should be very high on our list of design strategies. I am interested, however, in defining different or several ways of winning. This expands the way players can derive pleasure from games.

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 1: Power, Play, Participation: final thoughts?

Oct 20, 2006 10:11 AM

Rushkoff

I have to admit, as an old worlder, I've had great trouble with the interface here, and can't tell if I'm responding to the last post. (And I'm not totally stupid - I mean, I used to be able to post on Feed and even the Well—ah, Picospan). But I've got limited time and no 18-year-old nearby to show me whether I've reached the "end" of the discussion, or if I'm responding to the near-end somewhere. Katie began today's final discussion by mentioning the difference between agonistic (competitive) play, as Huizinga might have understood it, and play for play's sake, as Carse's more "infinite" game might be played. And, of course, the beauty of the latter is that it evokes more of a collaboration: the object of the game is to keep the game going. But electronic games aren't necessarily biased towards agonistic or infinite game play. I used to believe they'd favor the latter, since they don't need to respect the laws of gravity, dualism, or even conflict in order to generate quite entertaining and engrossing experiences. But I no longer believe the biases of computer games are so very different from the biases of, say, board games. Hang out with Eric Zimmerman for a while, and you'll get the sense of how cards, paper, and a few plastic pieces can be arranged into a model for pretty much *anything* we can do with C++ and a team of graphic artists. Where does this leave us? With a gaming universe in which the player's understanding of the tools and biases through which a particular game is created are the sole factors through which anything approaching true "agency" can be communicated. A game "about" the democratic process is only as democratic as the transparency of the rule set.

RE: RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 1: Power, Play, Participation: final thoughts?

Oct 20, 2006 1:21 PM

michael nitsche

Main point I take away is the empowerment of the player as player. Originally I expected a focus on creators (game modders and the creative powers of the player – and this is a safe field) but step by step I got drawn to the player being empowered by the game. The game is not transparent, you do not understand its system, and you usually cannot mod it, but you utilize it and build a model from it—your very own model, not the designer's or the distributor's. In some way I reject Turkle's "when you play a video game you enter into the world of the programmer who made it" and say you actually create your own world model—evoked by the code but always unique. And you can project yourself and you society into this model—or at least put one next to the other; you can share the model with other; you can grow and modify the model through eternal gameplay or change of playing style. It is yours. That is empowering.

I am sure James Gee, David Myers or even Raph Koster played with that point—so I am not sure it is a "new" one, but getting there on this list was an interesting experience.

Main open question for me remain: What is at stake? (I suspect it is something extremely personal) and How does game design relate to that which is at stake?

RE: RE: Dialogue 1: Power, Play, Participation: final thoughts?

Oct 20, 2006 4:22 PM

Sylvia Martinez

Thanks to all of you for a most interesting discussion. There are probably many like me who simply read without posting, and appreciate the deep thinking and passion displayed here. Looking forward to more.

Participants

Moderator:

Katie Salen, Associate Professor, Design and Technology Program, Parsons School of Design

Core Discussants:

Matteo Bittanti, Visiting Scholar, Stanford Humanities Lab, Stanford University; editor of videoludica.com game culture

Jane Pinckard, Editor of [GameGirlAdvance](http://GameGirlAdvance.com), a website tracking game culture

Douglas Rushkoff, Author, teacher, and documentarian who focuses on the ways people, cultures, and institutions create, share, and influence each other's values.

Kallen Tsikalas, Director of On-line Learning at Computers for Youth, a NYC-based non-profit organization that places computers in the homes of underserved children and families and provides a variety of services to support them in using the computer as a learning tool.

Respondents:

Wagner James Au, New World Notes

Anna Everett, Professor of Film Studies, Chair of Film Studies, UCSB

Mary Flanagan, Director, Tiltfactor Research Laboratory, Hunter College

Tracy Fullerton, USC School of Cinematic Arts, Interactive Media Division

Lizbeth Goodman, Director, The SMARTlab Digital Media Institute
Director: MAGIC Multimedia & Games Innovation Centre

Justin Hall, Graduate Student, Interactive Media Division, University of Southern California, School of Cinematic Arts

Jane McGonigal, Lead designer, 42 Entertainment, and Researcher, UC Berkeley

Toby Miller, Teaches at UC Riverside, edit Television & New Media and am Associate Editor of *Games & Culture*

Michael Nitsche, Assistant Professor at the School of Literature, Communication, and Culture, Georgia Tech

Cory Ondrejka, Vice President of Product Development, Linden Labs, creators of Second Life

Jane Park, Assistant Professor of Ethnic Studies in the Honors, College at the University of Oklahoma

Amit Pitaru, Artist, Composer, Software Designer and Educator, currently teaching at Pratt Institute and New York University's ITP.

Clay Shirky, Teaches at NYU's graduate Interactive Telecommunications Program, and is writing a book about social software called "Here Comes Everybody."

Craig Watkins, Associate Professor of Radio-TV-Film, The University of Texas at Austin

Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies (October 23–27)

Gaming Literacies explores different domains of literacy emerging from what we might call a *gaming attitude*, an attitude tied directly to the creative qualities of play. Gamers not only follow rules, but push against them, testing the limits of the system in often unique and powerful ways. As designed systems, games offer certain terms of engagement, rules of play that engender stylized forms of interaction. Learning to “read” a game system in order play with it points toward a specific kind of literacy connected, in part, to the ability of a player to understand how systems operate, and how they can, in turn, be transformed. Modding and world-building, which form the basis for much of the play of MMOs and virtual worlds, for example, might be one such literacy, while learning how to navigate a complex system of out of game resources, from game guides, FAQs, walkthroughs, and forums, to P2P learning, might represent another. A third literacy might be seen in the learning that takes place in negotiating the variable demands of fair play: players must become literate in the social norms of a specific gaming community, learning what degree of transgression is acceptable, and when a player has crossed the line; a fourth perhaps in learning how to collaborate within a multiplayer space, where knowledge is distributed and action most often collective.

I decided to kick-off this discussion with a conversation between several members of the Games, Learning and Society group at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Eric Zimmerman, co-founder and CEO of Gamelab, and NYC-based game development company, and myself. As a group we have exploring the concept of gaming literacies through a project called Game Designer, and I thought it would be interesting to outline the different forms of research the group is involved with, in an informal, conversational way. The conversation began with following questions: What are other domains of literacy emerging from the specific qualities of games and gaming?

You can listen to the conversation here:

http://spotlight.macfound.org/resources/GAPPS_podcast.mpga

Kick-off question:

How are these literacies enacted or transformed across media and to what extent are we seeing a gaming attitude assumed within non-game contexts?

>>Enter the Dialogue now.

RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 22, 2006 1:22 PM

andrew burn

Hi All, and thanks to Katie for inviting me to join the discussion, and to the group from Wisconsin for kicking it off. I enjoyed the introductory debate.

I hope it's ok for me to begin a response a little early—i haven't got too much time tomorrow, but will log in later.

I am interested in the way the games in education field is beginning to diversify into more distinct sub-fields, and wonder if people agree that a distinction that can be made is one David Buckingham often makes (of media in education more generally) between learning through games and learning about them. My own interest is in media education generally, as well as how earlier paradigms of such work in schools need to be adapted to

accommodate games. On the one hand, I guess there's a danger that this might, at present, look like the 'older models of media literacy' that Eric referred to, which explored ideological meanings and so on; though it would also include the 'new kinds of grammar' Jim referred to, as well as the kinds of informational networks that Eric was proposing. I think also Kurt's point about the way literacies work together, rather than needing to compete, is important here in that media education often involves looking at cross-media franchises (I'm still struggling valiantly to get out of the Harry Potter franchise, having looked at what kinds of 'literacy' are mobilised by kids who've read the books, seen the films and played the games).

I suppose I'm raising this partly because of an anxiety that media education - the study with kids of the rhetorics of media texts—gets overlooked in the more general interest about games as a learning tool and an exemplar of effective learning. In the UK, to consider how kids might learn about games alongside literature, film and TV would still be a novel idea for most schools. I realize that older models of media education which imply a severe and abstract analysis of media texts would raise real antipathies in this group (and with me!), but I think the best models of media education in the UK have moved beyond this, and would emphasise creative production and the principles of design as the starting-place and main interest for the kids, rather than the old model of beginning with analysis. It's this we've had in mind with our recent R&D project Making Games, which produced an authoring software beginning to be used in the UK at the moment, and which I hope Caroline Pelletier, who's in this group and was the researcher and project manager for this, will talk about during the week.

And a final practical question—later this week (thursday and friday) Diane Carr (also a participant) and I have a two-day course with our group doing a Master's module in games, gaming cultures and education. I thought it might be interesting to read contributions with them, and feed some of their responses in? They're a mixture of international students from various backgrounds (one from Wisconsin!) and UK media teachers.

RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 22, 2006 11:35 PM

Jay Lemke

I'm Jay Lemke at the University of Michigan. I do research on the role of language and multimedia in learning and communication, especially for science. I got interested in complex, graphically rich immersive game worlds as examples of the future of multimedia environments for many other activities (as we see now in Second Life). Game worlds, as Jim noted, are also places where gamers are learning: across places and across time, and for a researcher it's a lot easier to follow these learning trajectories in-game than out of it.

But what are gamers learning by playing and participating in gamer communities that we would want to call "literacies"? For me, literacy is a proficiency in using a systematic set of symbolic resources; within which different choices and combinations let us systematically produce different meanings or effects. Originally those resources were understood as just being the tools of written language, but it's artificial to limit literacy in that way when the meanings we make with language often depend on the picture next to our text or the gesture we make while saying something. Some literacies are conscious for some people and many more are implicit or tacit proficiencies. But all literacies are

tools that can be used across different situations. Game design is certainly a literacy in this sense, especially if we mean game design as Katie and Eric do: designing the rules of a game.

I think it's important to ask which literacies that we pick up as gamers are so specialized that they're only useful in designing, playing, modding and talking about games, and which ones are also likely to be useful for other purposes, too? Writing, mathematics, and programming are very general literacies. How general are the literacies associated with gaming?

Another question that interests me is whether or not a key part of what's special about gameplay as a meaning-making activity is the stance of playfulness? Does playfulness encourage transgressive play, innovating and improvising with what the game system allows, and therefore encouraging us to push it, break it, beat it, mod it, and twist it to our own purposes in ways we may not be encouraged to do with novels, films, or news reports?

If so, what happens when "transmedia franchises" get us to link novels and films, sports reports and war reports, with games? Do the gamer habits of playing with the medium carry over and let us become more subversive and transgressive with messages we are supposed to just "consume"?

RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 23, 2006 7:01 AM

Mechelle De Craene

Hi everybody, I'm posting this message early before I jet off to school to meet the kids. Just wondering... What if we looked game(s) as a poem...What if we considered looking at it through Louise Rosenblatt's Transactional theory?

Transactional theory is a theory of teaching literature. Here's a bit about Rosenblatt's Transactional theory:

"Rosenblatt argues that the term "interaction" conjures a picture of separate objects encountering one another but remaining essentially unchanged, like billiard balls bouncing off one another, and thus is an inadequate and misleading label for the mutually shaping exchange between reader and text. That exchange--a transaction--is more accurately characterized by Annie Dillard's metaphor. She writes, "The mind fits the world and shapes it as a river fits and shapes its own banks" (1982). Transactional theory proposes that the relationship between reader and text is much like that between the river and its banks, each working its effects upon the other, each contributing to the shape of the poem." (Probst, 1987)

I was trying to think of what theoretical framework would truly describe what I'm seeing when I watch my students play The Sims game and I think Rosenblatt's Transactional theory captures it. Games are poetry!

HiRE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 23, 2006 7:21 AM

andrew burn

Just a response to Jay's interesting question about general and specific literacies. I think we found in working on game design with 12-13 year-olds that there were understandings which were both general and specific. For instance, we discussed the related ideas of rules and economies in games with one class last year. The notion of rule-governed activities was modulated of course by their cultural experience - so some cited sports, others board games, and others computer games. However, while many aspects of computer games were obvious to them, the idea of rule was much less obvious until they had to use it in design. An exception was one boy in the previous year who had a related notion - game logic - learned from using the level editor in Timesplitters 2. But because the authoring tool we were developing had a 'rule editor' built into it, the idea of rule as a design principle became much more transparent. This aspect of 'game-literacy', then, seemed quite specific. However, since we were working with narrative-based genres of game in this project, we also asked the students if rules and economies existed in any stories they could think of. One girl came up with Hansel and Gretel, citing the children's use of the breadcrumbs trail as an example of an economy; another had examples of rules which applied in The Lord of the Rings. In this respect, then, aspects of game as specific as rule and economy are in fact concepts that can apply to other media, though they don't form part of the conceptual apparatus conventionally applied to such media or to narratives more generally. In this way, then, game-design may be a way to rethink approaches to other media and the literacies that run across them, especially in cross-media franchises, or in relation to narratives with strong formulaic compositional principles.

I guess what I'm saying here is that our crude hypothesis was that we would find a generic kind of media literacy in this project which would include understandings and experiences of narrative, and that specific 'game-literacy', developed through design, would be quite separate—so this more complex set of relations was interesting. Also, it was multimodal, in the sense of Jay's work—though quite how programmed functions like rule might be conceived as a mode I'm not certain—maybe as forms of hypermodal connection in the sense Jay has referred to before?

RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 23, 2006 2:50 PM

James Gee

I fully accept your definition of literacy—well put indeed. For me, there are no truly general literacies, though there are labels that label more and less general things. Any literacy is made up of a set of specific social practices that always involve more than writing (or other codes) and more even than language (or symbol systems). They involve actions, interactions, values, bodies, things, tools, technologies, places, times—and on and on—as well. Take being a Chomskian syntactician—well that's a very specific literacy, a way of writing and reading and valuing and being in the world (really a set of changing ways). When you have mastered that literacy—as I once had—does it “transfer” to anything? Well, I have had a long career now doing other things and have gotten to see how and where it does or doesn't (just as Jay has for physics). In each specific new set of literacy practices I have picked up, I can feel transfer from my earlier linguistics—sometimes it is good, sometime I regret it, and sometimes I actively try to stop it from happening. We say transfer is hard—it often is—we forget sometimes that it

is easy, inevitable, and not something we always actually want (then we call it interference).

So we find that some quite specific practices allow and invite transfer from, say, being/doing Chomskian syntax and some don't and some are in between. If there are a family of practices that seem to allow and invite a good deal of transfer (perhaps this is true of various programming literacies), then we can get a general label and maybe there is something more general here, then—but I bet there are potential problems as well of the interference sort I mentioned above. Surely Yu-Gi-Oh transfers to Magic, though they are different literacies, and they both may transfer to a variety of other practices that recruit procedural logic (so long as you show people the underlying patterns they have in common).

The crucial point is, I guess, I am suggesting don't ask "Does playing X sort of games lead one to be better at math?" but, rather, something like "Does playing X sort of games lead one to better at X sort of mathematical practices?" Keep it specific and then look for families and families of families. Alas all this makes the issue of transfer harder to study (and this is bad for talking to the media where they just want to know whether playing games will make kids smarter). It has to be studied at the level of discourse and lived embodied practices (but then that's why we like games, because that's the level they live on).

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 23, 2006 5:52 PM

Jay Lemke

I certainly agree with Jim that the best we can do by way of "general" literacies is finding and helping other people find "families of families" of resemblances and ways to MAKE use of a literacy we learned somewhere else relevant or useful in a different context.

So maybe it's misleading to think that language, mathematics, and programming are inherently general literacies while game-based literacies or game-design literacies are just very specific ones. With language, math, or coding we have to LEARN HOW to apply these "general" resource tools in each different genre, problem type, or programming task. And as we do (or others have done before us), we begin to construct families of resemblances, similarities and identify strategies that cut across a wide range of tasks. So all literacies start out specific and are specific in each instance of use, but they are all also at least potentially generalizable. Some we know to be generalizable because people have already done this work for us. With gaming literacies, we are the ones to undertake this work and figure out where the generalizability lies.

RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 23, 2006 12:07 PM

Victoria Carrington

I'm Victoria Carrington, University of Plymouth in the UK. I come at this topic from the perspective of literacy education. In the broader sense, 'literacies' refers to the ability to accumulate and demonstrate the practices necessary to interact effectively in the social, cultural and technological contexts of our lives. Essentially then being 'literate', in my own view, involves the ability to invoke a range of practices in relation to creating and interacting with diverse and multimodal texts. Computer games are the site of some of

these textual practices—practices that I think many of us would agree are becoming highly valued in relation to being able to effectively participate in our communities.

Putting aside the argument about whether or not a computer game is a text in itself, almost all games contain various amounts and arrays of print, graphics and other communicative features. This makes them interesting to me as someone who works in the field of literacy and as a general opening, I think this is where I'll make a tentative contribution.

Navigating through traditional paper-based print text requires a culturally well-established left to right (in western culture), top to bottom pattern. In general, the meaning inscribed in the text tends to be weighted towards the patterning of one-dimensional grapheme combinations rather than accompanying pictures. The text is there, complete and static and tactile. Engaging with a digitally generated text such as a game is quite different. While there are still many of the features of interacting with print based text evident, the meaning is carried across a number of overlapping cueing systems—the sound, the various graphics, and print—in a non-linear pattern. There's mix and match and overlay of what would once have been considered quite distinct textual genres in many games. These texts are built around multiple cueing systems (visual, audio and kinaesthetic). At the same time, from different directions and travelling through differing vectors, visual cues including text and graphics of multiple types move at varying speeds across the screen. Complex musical scores and sound effects move between foreground and background and, via the game controller. As a result, interactions with text are experienced physically, but not in the way that readers touch and hold print text. Information about characters and environments becomes available through a complex interface system that displays in a variety of ways ranging from scrolling text, icons, and pop-up menus to graphic tables. Reading a text like this requires attending to multiple sources of information accessed from dynamic displays in a variety of ways. This is very exciting to me as someone who works with texts and spends time thinking about practices around various forms of text. I am very attracted to Arseth's notion of 'ergodic' in relation to these types of text – requiring active participation with the text itself. This is a cognitively, culturally and technologically different experience of text.

Much of what I've described links most directly to the ability to effectively access digital text such as games. The other issue, of course, is about the production of texts. In relation to computer games, production of text becomes a key issue and links directly to Andrew's comments about game design and construction. Can kids (and adults) be truly considered 'literate' in relation to this type of text without being able to manipulate, produce their own?

Gaming Literacies: Interaction and Transaction

Oct 23, 2006 5:41 PM

Jay Lemke

Victoria and Mechelle both raised questions about interactivity and its significance for the special interest of gaming literacies. One in terms of transactional reader-response theory in literary studies, and one in terms of Aarseth's notion of ergodic text.

I did a paper at the last Games, Learning, and Society conference talking about ways to understand what "interactivity" really means with games. I built an idea of this partly in

response to Aarseth and partly out of ideas from theories of how we interact with printed text or stories. The upshot was that I argued that game interactivity involves not just our responding to the game, but the game responding to us, in ways that were both meaningful and surprising, so that gameplay could be seen as a kind of dialogue or conversation, continuing over many "turns" in which sometimes we initiate, sometimes the game (program) initiates, the other responds, and we take turns surprising each other while never quite leaving the other totally at a loss over the significance of our move or the possible responses to it. On-going, reciprocally responsive, role-exchanging, improvisational dialogue—or a damn good simulation of it!

The generalizable literacy here may be learning how to participate in such dialogues, whether we see them as puzzle-solving or creative play. Dialogues like this ("dialogicality" says Bakhtin) are everywhere, certainly in literature, definitely in the scientific community and the scholarly community, but in texts and films we usually get to experience it only one-sidedly. If we miss out on the active production side, and on the feedback of the game's (community's) response to our moves, it's harder to get good at it. I suspect there are a lot of dialogic strategies, like rhetorical strategies, that do generalize across situations and media. If so, games may rule in education!

Gaming Literacies: Game rules as a semiotic resource

Oct 23, 2006 5:28 PM

Jay Lemke

Andrew offers some good examples of how game-based design literacies can be more general, say to understanding how narratives work in other media. I especially like the idea that we can look in new ways at print texts, films, etc. using the conceptual tools (like rules and game logic, or game economy) that we learned with games and game design. That's always been part of my thinking about the ludology vs narratology debate.

Let me try to answer the question about how the logic of game rules can be thought of as a semiotic mode or modality, akin to the logic of language or visual grammar. The best way to talk about this that I know comes from Halliday, describing it for language, who sees each modality as a "resource for making meaning", i.e. making some meaningful output or product/result/text. It is a resource in the sense that it offers us a lot of choices, and these choices are organized into small sets of alternatives, where we make a choice in each set, like a Chinese menu, and this in turn opens up some other choices and closes down or limits further choices. I think that's just how designing a system of game rules works, though maybe Eric can explain this better from his experience!

As Jim says (and he and I and Gunther Kress have written at length about this), we never use just one of these resource systems all by itself. In real life we are always using several simultaneously, even if we are not paying attention to all of them -- and therefore we often make, or allow, unintended meanings. That can be important, as I'll say in another message about interaction and transaction.

games and media literacy

Oct 23, 2006 2:27 PM

James Gee

Good point about keeping games within media literacy. We also want it inside larger issues of learning systems. When games get left all to themselves we are in danger of

techno-determinist stuff that says a game is good or bad all by itself as a piece of technology—hence the public debate about what “games” do or do not do or lead to.

I have always advocated that we should view video games in high schools and colleges as part of a new liberal arts, studying them, as we have literature and film, as “equipment for living” in Burke’s phrase. There are too many industry focused game programs in colleges and too few liberal arts focused ones. But of course to study them in a liberal arts framework will require new tools of analysis, because games do not work like literature or films.

One of the interesting things about games is the way in which “learning about games” can feed into “learning from games”. Playing a game at all requires some amount of meta-level reflection on design, if only to formulate strategies and to see how to take advantage of patterns in the game play (in fighting a boss, for example). In terms of media literacy, we want to work to enhance this meta-level reflection. Then, if we put content like science into a game, getting people to think at a meta level about the design of the game becomes a way of thinking about—and making use of—how science is being communicated as words, values, and actions in the game. This can only enhance the science learning itself, since the game grammar becomes cut up with visions of science not just as words, but as actions, values, decisions, and strategies (if we have a real game).

RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 23, 2006 5:41 PM

Caroline Pelletier

My name is Caroline Pelletier and I’m a researcher at the Institute of Education in London . I managed the ‘Making Games’ project, and worked with Andrew Burn on this, as well as Diane Carr. The project finished a couple of months ago. It was designed to enable young people (11-14 year olds) make their own computer games in a range of contexts: in school, in youth clubs and at home. To do this, we worked with a company called Immersive Education; most of their employees come from the game industry. We developed the software iteratively, working on successive prototypes with young people and teachers over a three-year period. I’m currently writing up this research, focusing on what young people learn when they make their own games.

The debate so far has raised some really interesting issues, and there’s also lots of overlap with the discussion from last week, particularly concerning what makes a game distinct from other representational forms or genres. The rationale for the Making Games project is that games offer distinct ways of representing the world and organising social processes within it. They arise in cultural contexts which are characterised by particular kinds of social relationships. These relationships make for specific forms of being, ways of constructing the self and its relation with others. This configuration of material resources, cultural contexts and forms of being make possible new kinds of thoughts and experiences, or in other words, new kinds of meanings, or new kinds of literacies. To date, most people have engaged with games at the level of play, but there is also an argument for developing opportunities for people to make their own games. It sounds like the Game Designer project shares some similar interests and this is also relevant to Constance’s interest in modding.

Some of the issues that arose for us in teaching ‘game literacy’ relates to what we mean by game design principles, to borrow Eric’s term, or maybe the idea of specific literacies in Jay’s post. If we accept that games are not simply a formal structure but also a type of social interaction, a cultural activity, then it follows that the reasons young people have for making games affects the way they design them. So when young people make games at school, they may do so in the context of exploring a particular concept, such as ‘narrative’ as Andrew mentioned. When they make them in a youth club, their primary aim might be to entertain their peers or demonstrate their fandom of a particular kind of game. At home, they may make games for their grandmother who has never used a computer before. In each situation, what it means to ‘play’ or ‘make’ a game means something different. This raises a question about whether there are principles of design or interaction which cross each of these contexts. Perhaps one of the difficulties of the term ‘game literacy’ is that it can be quite normative, with the assumption being that young people are ‘game literate’ if they can make games that are (at least a bit) like commercial games. We might then say they are on the periphery of a community of practice. The problem is that young people are in a different social position to commercial game designers, they design games for very different reasons, and in most cases, aren’t trying to join the game design community of practice.

I’ll give one example from the project. In a youth club we ran, 13 year olds made games over six weeks. We taught them certain basic principles of game design – we used Katie’s and Eric’s book which was fantastic! One student started his game by building a training level, which introduced players to the meanings of various signs and symbols within his game world. The second level of his game however did not carry over most of those signs and symbols, in other words, the training did not substantially contribute to the player’s ability to progress in the game. However, this was not because this student had failed to understand game design principles. Rather, his interest and pleasure in designing a game was tied up with watching his peers flail around and showing them his own expertise in overcoming the challenges. This was for two reasons: (1) game play always involved peers known to the author and usually took place alongside him or her. Playing a game in this situation (a youth club) meant being able to engage in banter and mockery around the screen as much as within the game environment, and (2) the student had a reputation as a highly skilled player. He seems to have designed his game at least in part to demonstrate his own playing skills. The design choices made by this student can therefore be explained in terms of the fact that design and play took place side by side and were not strongly distinguishable activities; play included social interaction around the screen; and the student sought to adopt a certain subject position as a game player.

This student was not trying to make a game like the ones he knew and had played but adapt his knowledge of games to suit his own local circumstances. Of course, his game did include design principles from games, as well as from a whole range of other media and genres. And in this respect, he demonstrated awareness of conventions and ‘game grammar’, and made use of the principles we had explored in the club. He also showed IT fluency. But I guess what’s more interesting is what he did with these resources to achieve his own social purposes. In all the research sites we worked in, this is what students did with games – they used game design as a productive medium, as a way of constructing a certain subjectivity, carrying out a kind of social action, and in the process transformed what ‘counts’ as a game.

For me this raises issues in two areas. The first relates to teaching game design. How do we teach game design whilst acknowledging that what makes a game and what

constitutes play is subjective and context dependent? The previous discussion featured a debate about whether the McDonald game was or was not a game. In the course of the debate, many interesting points were made, far more interesting in fact than the original question. As more people make games, and as games enter new areas of social life, their form changes. If game-making becomes a popular activity, how can teachers enable people to fulfil their social objectives using this genre? How can the notion of ‘game design principles’ or ‘game literacy’ encompass the very many different uses people will have for making games?

The second issue relates to conditions of production and dissemination. In our research project, students made games to suit their circumstances, to communicate with their peers / teacher / family. However, the audience was generally limited, which clearly also restricted what young people sought to achieve with games. So is it possible to create circumstances / social conditions / popular cultural spheres in which people have meaningful reasons for making their own game? People who mod or students who make their own games do not generally have access to a large audience; they have few opportunities for publishing their game and receiving feedback on its design. Designing a game offers its own rewards but people’s interest in game-making, as well as their abilities to make meaning with games, will be enhanced if there are people to play their games, swap comments, swap content, design collaboratively with, and so on. So how can we create conditions in which game-making as a popular activity has a social rationale, is a meaningful form of social action and interaction?

Although the previous discussion was very interesting, I found many of the posts too long given the publishing medium. However, I can now see why, given the range of issues to be debated. Apologies for the length of this comment. Future posts will be much shorter!

RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 24, 2006 11:45 AM

James Gee

One thing that interests me in video games is that “reading” (taking meaning from the game/text) is a form of “writing” (producing meanings). In games, the player does not just interpret what an author has written/designed, but rather engages in an action—a probing of the game world—and then considers the result of this action in terms of the game as a whole (or as much of it as has so far shown itself). This consideration of action as probing within an interpretation of game as designed patterns then becomes a momentary “reading”. This is also the fundamental form of “reading” (“reading the world”) involved in active science. When players move on to modding, then we get “writing” at yet another level.

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 24, 2006 12:48 PM

Mechelle De Craene

Hi everybody, I'm on lunch and thought I'd check in. This is a great topic.

Professor Gee, I agree with you, "One thing that interests me in video games is that “reading” (taking meaning from the game/text) is a form of “writing” (producing meanings).

With the kids I'm working with I'm seeing various decoding and encoding strategies going on (i.e. not only relating to text but the cadence of the game...I don't really focus on the text words themselves; to me, that's just one form of coding).

In addition, I'm seeing that the game can scaffold inference-making skills (i.e. if this...than that), which so many students with reading disabilities struggle (e.g. reading comprehension). We talk about the game and various paths sort of like a "think aloud" when reading a story together. Also, we are discussing character development, setting, plot and other elements of story. Its working well so far and its fun.

RE: Gaming Literacies: Game rules as a semiotic resource

Oct 24, 2006 11:28 PM

Eric Zimmerman

Jim,

Your comment about the similarity between language and other semiotic systems is one that fascinates closet-structuralist game designers like myself. I think one difference is that while the rules of language are more or less fixed (yes, they do bend), they are more or less given. So speaking a language is like being a player in a game - exploring the way the rules work, spelunking the structures of the system in different contexts to see how one can be effectively expressive.

But a game designer, on the other hand, has a different relation to such a system of meaning. From a formal perspective, the rules of the game are artificial constructs that can be shaped according to the wishes of the game designer - and they might have poetic intentions, educational intentions, aesthetic intentions, etc. (Remember that most games are not designed for educational use, and of the design disciplines, game design is just about the least utilitarian one.) Of course, in addition to the designer's intentions, games more often than not have a life of their own and players typically do things in and with and to games that the designers did not predict. And also, of course, games take place in social and cultural contexts which shape their meaning just as with other kinds of languages of meaning.

However, I do not really know enough about the models that Jay references, so it might be that the aspects of games I am describing here aren't all that different than the operation of language as Halliday describes it. Or it could be that games are in fact somewhat unique as semiotic constructs. But that might just be my professional hubris showing through.

RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 24, 2006 11:01 AM

Tom Satwicz

I'll take a shot at the question that Vicotria left us with, but first let me introduce myself to this discussion. My name is Tom Satwicz and I am co-authoring a piece in the *Ecology of Games* volume with Reed Stevens and Laurie McCarthy.

I think at this stage in the social and historical development of digital games it is certainly possible to consider a person 'literate' in relation to this type of text without being about to manipulate or produce on their own. In forming my response here, I take

manipulate or produce to mean creating or modifying a game using a programming language or production tool of some kind to alter the original design of a game or to produce a new one. For me, literacy in this sense has less to do with whether or not someone creates a lasting inscription and more to do with the interaction with the text (as Jay alluded to in reference to Hutchins and Goodwin). In my work, I have seen and written about kids who do not produce their own games but who are quite skilled at using various representations on the screen (I've specifically looked at quantitative representations) to find their way through challenges. Because of the level of motivation and creativity that it takes to begin the modification and production process, it seems like we will narrow the parameters of this kind of literacy too much if we define fluency as being able to produce or modify a game. This will prescribe the kind of interaction that is important with games long before we have a real sense of what gaming playing is and what the 'text' can afford.

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 24, 2006 3:37 PM

Caroline Pelletier

I agree, Tom, that placing value on 'game making' should not be at the expense of 'game playing'—one activity is not inherently more 'meaningful' or educational than the other, since 'meaning' and 'learning' are processes carried out by individuals, and are not embedded properties of activities or texts. Also, making and playing games are interdependent—one cannot make a game without also playing it, and without having played other games.

The value of production work is that it allows people to think about games differently, precisely because it offers a specific resource for developing ideas. Playing a game develops ideas, making a game develops other kinds of (but related) ideas. For me, the value of developing tools and social conditions in which people make games is that currently, game-making is a highly restricted activity socially. It is a medium of representation which only a small number of people have access to, yet which could offer an interesting and valuable resource for others as well. Video-making or photography have become very important resources in people's lives, constructing their social experiences and histories, creating new forms of social interaction, becoming opportunities for expression and development of thoughts. Games could follow a similar trajectory. But in the process, they'll also change, just as conventions for photography and filmic representations have done over the years.

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 24, 2006 2:24 PM

Diane Carr

If we are looking at issues of game, text, meaning and production—then if there is a need to distinguish between game and play— otherwise, are we missing something?

Do the theoretical models being evoked apply as well to play, as they do to game...?
If not, does it matter?

Also—my most recent passionate gaming experiences are on the battlefields of World of Warcraft—I get slaughtered, its fantastic. The 'rush' and the anarchy, the 'out of my hands', over the top 'falling apart' of it all are wonderfully magnified by my incompetence

- in a way that is totally compelling and completely delicious. Are there pleasures on the flip-side of 'gaming literacy' that should be part of these considerations?

RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 24, 2006 9:54 AM

katie salen

Many thanks for the generous and thoughtful contributions to this discussion so far. It is clear we have a body of experts at work here, for the discussion has already raised a number of important and challenging questions. One intention I have with running this dialogue is to begin to develop a more clear understanding of methodological and disciplinary strategies that are useful for parsing the concept of “gaming literacies” –whether these strategies come from a media studies, instructional technology, design, semiotic, or education perspective. So in that sense, we are definitely on track!

Some commonalities and differences are already bubbling up in the approach taken to the initial questions posed. It was interesting for me to see how part of the discussion focused on the “literacies” component (Andrew, Jim, Jay, Victoria), while another part focused on the “gaming” component (Caroline, Jay, Mechelle). A third group of posts began to dig into the meaning of the intersection of these two terms, particularly in the exploration of specialized vs. generalized literacies. I think Jay hit the nail on the head when he wrote: “I think it’s important to ask which literacies that we pick up as gamers are so specialized that they’re only useful in designing, playing, modding and talking about games, and which ones are also likely to be useful for other purposes, too?” This connects to the question of transfer discussed by Jim and Betty, and points to one of the great motivations for trying to better understand how games work not only to create and support certain literacies of their own, but in how these literacies might find traction in experiences beyond games.

Connected to this thread of discussion was an idea raised around the “stance of playfulness” that I would love to dig into further. One reason I titled this dialogue gaming literacies and not game literacies is that I am interested not just in how games work (formally, socially, culturally) but in how they facilitate a very particular attitude (what I call a gaming attitude) that is based in play but which also owes much of its specific character to the way games operate as dynamic, rule-based systems. Jay hints at this with the use of the phrase “stance of playfulness.” For those of us that design games, understanding the ways in which the structure of the medium itself elicits particular attitudes toward action and interaction with the medium is endlessly beneficial. But what is of even more interest is discovering how these attitudes and modes of interaction are being transcribed or enacted elsewhere, if we can make that claim at all. If we can, perhaps, we will have a more clear idea of what literacies are general and specific to games, and be able to take advantage of this understanding in the creation of both new games and learning environments.

I also wanted to touch on some of the very intriguing questions raised by Caroline in her discussion of the Making Games project. The question of how game design itself can be used as a strategy by young people to meet their own social objectives, ties in quite specifically to last week’s dialogue on power and participation. If we argue that production can be empowering (and there is a lot of data suggesting this to be the case) then we most certainly need to try and explore the specific ways in which design can support not only game production but the production of knowledge, attitudes,

relationships, and dare I say, skills. It is also paramount to ask how the deployment of what is produced (a game or game artifact) supports what is learned and gained more generally. Sometimes the making of the game itself is of less importance than the deployment and use of that game by others. Here is where the idea of communities of practice comes in (perhaps Constance or Kurt can speak to this point), for the uptake and revision of what is made by a community of players is part of the overall ecology of gaming.

I thought it would be useful to return to some of the key questions raised yesterday, and to see how we might tease out our responses to them further. Specific examples from your research or experience as a researcher, designer, or gamer are always useful, as I want to be mindful of the need to ground theory in practice, and to see where we a dearth of examples might exist. Some questions to consider:

Victoria: "Can kids (and adults) be truly considered 'literate' in relation to this type of text without being able to manipulate, produce their own?"

Andrew/Jim: "How useful is the distinction between learning through games and learning about them?"

Jay: "Do the gamer habits of playing with the medium carry over and let us become more subversive and transgressive with messages we are supposed to just "consume"?"

Caroline: "How can the notion of 'game design principles' or 'game literacy' encompass the very many different uses people will have for making games?"

RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 24, 2006 8:26 PM

Brian Thompson

Just a couple of observations from my own experience:

First, games and game communities can provide players with interesting opportunities to play with the creation and use of language. The problems inherent in communicating things like complex joystick/button movement combinations through a written medium such as the Internet and without face to face interaction has led to the creation of elaborate systems of symbolic notation resemble some kind of mathematical gibberish to the layperson. Additionally, in communities wherein geographically dispersed players come together either online or in person to play with or against one another, even innocuous slang words and phrases can take on lives of their own. Bits of gamer dialect can originate in Virginia, Dallas, San Francisco, or even other countries and then migrate with players, spreading from one to the next and forming a complex subcultural jargon that must be understood to gain full acceptance within the community.

Also, with regard to game design elements, I noticed in myself a drastic change in the way I viewed games once I began playing them competitively rather than recreationally. I would argue that most highly motivated, highly skilled players are trained to reflect upon the design elements that comprise whatever game it is that they are playing. This often enough begins as merely a survival skill, as gaining near-perfect knowledge of a game's system and mechanics allows a player to exploit all of his advantages to the maximum while defending against other players attempting to do the same.

Nevertheless, the unintended consequence of this reflection on game mechanics is the formation of strong opinions about the ways in which games -ought- to function. These players realize that, on some level, they are passive consumers. Games contain their own internal logic and, as such, reward particular modes of thinking and perceiving. What I find fascinating is the seasoned gamer's sensitivity to this issue, the ways in which it is acknowledged, and how that figures into a player's long-term engagement with a particular game.

RE: RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 24, 2006 1:01 PM

Mechelle De Craene

Hi Katie,

Re: "But what is of even more interest is discovering how these attitudes and modes of interaction are being transcribed or enacted elsewhere, if we can make that claim at all."

I think we can make that claim. What I'm noticing is that games are cultivating an internal locus of control for many of my students. Some of my students with special needs have various social-emotional issues (as per their IEP) and some have developed external locus of control (e.g. as exhibited by learned helplessness) through the years. However, I'm finding that doing "think alouds" with the kids on various gaming paths is leading to a more internal locus of control and am seeing this exhibited in other areas as well...but this is just the beginning. I'm writing my small findings in my research notes. Hopefully, one day this can be measure on a larger scale as well in the efforts to support the social-emotional needs of students with disabilities.

Gaming Literacies: generalizing playfulness

Oct 24, 2006 9:20 PM

Jay Lemke

Let me take a crack at Katie's question about the stance of playfulness in gaming. BTW, I thought the summary and focusing in your long message was very helpful at this point.

It may not just be literacies, even in the sense of fluency with meaning-making resources, that we can learn how to generalize across different settings and activities. It may also be the attitudes or orientations-to-task with which we use our meaning-making and problem-solving resources.

Stepping away from games for a moment to clarify this point, in scientific work you learn not just a set of discourses and tools, but also, as Jim has I think called it, an identity-kit for using these tools, and that kit includes attitudes of curiosity, persistence, patience, improvisation, seriousness, rational choice-making, etc. I am talking here about doing real science -- unfortunately the teaching of science misses out on some of this because science-learning activities are too cut-and-dried and too short-term. These attitudes certainly can be carried over to other activities, and in fact the constitute the basis for one of the arguments about why kids ought to learn science (or math) as the "Latin" of today. You could make a similar case, with a somewhat different mix of attitudes, for participating in competitive sports, learning to play a musical instrument, etc. And so also for gaming.

What is the attitude package that comes with gaming? Certainly it overlaps with those of other valued activities (more widely valued, today at least) like these, but it often has a special emphasis on playfulness, including the sort of transgressive play that includes bending the rules, seeing what you can get away with, trying to "break" the game, using cheats, some kinds of modding, writing "slash" fan fiction around gameworld themes, making in-jokes with your friends about the game, or inside the game, parodying RPG-speak, laughing at monsters (as well as crying, or screaming), etc., etc. This is one of the two core attitudes about gameplay, sometimes called "ludus" (playful gaming) vs. "agon" (serious gaming). People are quite capable of mixing these two modes as well, and I think mixing itself comes from the ludic attitude (agon play doesn't like breaking the serious frame usually).

Now I am not talking here about just building up a personality or identity trait. I am talking about a "way of doing something", an attitude-plus-action and attitude-plus-meaning-making combination, where the way we play, the way we solve problems, the way we think or write is different because of the attitude or orienting stance we take to and in the action. If gamers learn, or can be helped to learn, how to generalize playful-problem-solving or playful-rule-bending to non-game tasks and activities, and especially, I think, if we can generalize what we learn in gaming about mixing a serious stance and a playful stance, then gaming can offer something that might be even more important than a generalized literacy-per-se. What do you think?

RE: Gaming Literacies: generalizing playfulness

Oct 24, 2006 10:44 PM

Mechelle De Craene

Which definition of gaming literacy do you see being most applicable for youth...for schools...perhaps I'm missing the point? Thus, I wonder is there another type of gaming literacy displayed in classroom gaming vs. home gaming? And how can all the proposed theories be applied? What are the educational implications?

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 24, 2006 4:07 PM

Caroline Pelletier

One thing that interests me in video games is that "reading" (taking meaning from the game/text) is a form of "writing" (producing meanings).

Does this apply just to games? The notion of the 'active reader' in cultural studies or 'meaning-maker' in social semiotics suggests that 'reading' is not the absorption of signs embedded in the text but a construction, a selective interpretation which is shaped by social activities and processes of which it is a part. Aarseth looked at this of course and developed the idea of the ergodic, which Jay discusses. But I read Aarseth a bit differently. I didn't think he talked about games in terms of dialogues – in fact, he argues strongly against the concept of interactivity, saying that the ideological position implied by the term is that humans and machines are equal partners in communication, involved in reciprocal or mutual exchange (1997, p.48). In games, players are not in dialogue with the designer, but following the rules set by the designer (or failing to, or cheating, neither of which 'subvert' the rules). This is no bad thing, it's why games are pleasurable, it's what makes them distinctive as a genre. But I think it raises questions about whether we are somehow 'more active' in game playing than we are in reading a book or watching a

film. Or maybe it raises the question of what the criteria are for being active (versus being passive)? Is 'being active' a formal, structural kind of event or is it about the person's ability to make meaning? Aren't people 'actively' engaged with films, TV or books, sometimes more so than they are with games? Maybe we need different terms to describe these various ways of 'being active'.

RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 25, 2006 3:51 PM

Victoria Carrington

Thanks for this overview. I think it captures some key points very nicely. The question posed by Jay—"Do the gamer habits of playing with the medium carry over and let us become more subversive and transgressive with messages we are supposed to just "consume"?"—is, for me, one of the most interesting. Of course, I come at this from the perspective of literacy and literacy education. This means, I'm sad to say, that I am going to comment in terms of schooling. I think, however, that this is a legitimate direction to take because it is here that many of the tensions around texts, technologies and literacies ultimately play out.

It seems to me that the practices and contexts constructed around print text, particularly school-sanctioned text, are built around assumptions of particular adult-child, authority and knowledge hierarchies and about childhood and children. In classrooms in particular, teachers are the arbiters of truth, correct interpretation of text and correct attitudes to particular types of text. Game texts, however, require different types of relationships: there are rarely adults to mediate the relationship between text, truth and reader/player; knowledge and skill are not linked to adult-child hierarchies but to mastery. The types of attitudes that make an effective game player require risk taking, an active role in creating the meaning, non-linear navigation and attendance to multiple cueing systems and of course, problem solving and lateral thinking. These are not necessarily the same attitudes and skills valued or developed in relation to school-sanctioned texts. It seems to me that we are faced with a dilemma as educators – do we encourage these 'transgressive' and creative practices and their transfer from one type of textual practice and social context to another? If we do this, what does it mean for the relationships and practices that underpin schooling?

RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 25, 2006 12:03 AM

Eric Zimmerman

Caroline,

Thanks for your great post! It is great to hear some rich detail about the Making Games project, both for the general issues of games and literacy raised in this discussion, as well as for my own selfish interests as someone involved with the Game Designer project that Katie is heading up for Gamelab. I'd love to try and address your two questions directly. You asked:

How do we teach game design whilst acknowledging that what makes a game and what constitutes play is subjective and context dependent?

The second issue relates to conditions of production and dissemination... So how can we create conditions in which game-making as a popular activity has a social rationale, is a meaningful form of social action and interaction?

Both are great questions. The first for me is really part of what it means to teach design in any context. Yes, a design educator might come up with a set of guidelines for what constitutes proper or elegant game design, but the use and meaning of a game will always emerge in a particular context, with particular players. And this is as much true for graphic design or architecture as it is true for game design. The answer to this pedagogical dilemma that I have integrated into my own teaching is that for design, the creation of the criteria for judging the success of the finished project is part of the design problem itself. In other words, if design is about solving (and creating and exploring) problems, then part of the problem to be solved (and explored and created) is the criteria by which the solution will be judged. Of course, criteria are never fixed, and can change as a project evolves. But this kind of meta-thinking is what would have allowed the 13-year-old designer in your anecdote to reflect on the kind of game he made, and be able to be proud of a game that frustrated his close friends—or conversely, to decide to ease the learning curve because of the audience he wanted to reach. This example also makes it clear that playtesting with particular audiences is part of not just the design process of refining a game, but also part of the process in creating the evaluative criteria as well.

For the second question, I hope I am not taking the easy way out to say that the problem of disseminating games to wider communities of players and designers will very likely take care of itself. Increasingly, game fans, modders, designers, and hackers find each other online in communities of shared practices, often centering around a particular game. There are more and more technologies of media dissemination becoming integrated into internet communities, evident in everything from Line Rider to YouTube. It is clear that games will be an important activity in the media landscape of coming generations, and our players and designers will certainly find ways to share their work. All of that said, I also think that programs like yours are well served by taking such questions of dissemination into account from the very start - selecting technologies and building communities that will facilitate the sharing of the created games with the outside world. Easier said than done, I realize, but still crucial - as your question indicates.

Gaming Literacies

Oct 26, 2006 6:12 AM

Caroline Pelletier

Hi Eric

Thanks for your response which is really thought-provoking. On your first point about making evaluation criteria part of the design problem itself, I think this offers a really good model. Although the term 'literacy' has become so important to education policy making and to theories of learning in children, it's very hard to avoid implying a norm (which distinguishes literate from non-literate) to which everyone should aspire.

Obviously there are social norms, and norms or conventions of design, but these are transformed by people continuously. What I like about your idea is that it makes the process of transformation part of the design and evaluation process. I've been looking at models from Art and Design Education and there's some very interesting work being done, particularly around making art education itself into an art project (it sounds

obvious but apparently not with children). The problem with some of the literature on aesthetics and education is that it retains a model of originality and creativity which is rooted in concepts of individual genius, or individual authenticity. The great advantage of the literacy literature is that it makes clear that representation (and individuals) is socially constructed and therefore ‘learned’, and that criteria of value are also the outcome of social negotiation and power relations. Foregrounding this by making evaluation criteria part of the design process, part of debate and discussion in the design classroom, seems an excellent way to combine both traditions.

I don’t think it’s always easy to do in practice—just because designers (and not only children by any means) can find it difficult to describe explicitly what it is they are trying to achieve in their design work. On the Making Games project, students took very different approaches to constructing a game, but when we interviewed them or asked them to explain their design, some of them could be monosyllabic, focused on only small parts of the design as a whole, or told me what they thought I (or their peers) wanted to hear (thereby making assumptions about other people’s evaluation criteria). I think there are two issues here. One is that ‘reflection’ or ‘meta-thinking’ is not just a cognitive faculty but also a material practice which is learned; the ability to demonstrate ‘meta-thinking’ or engage in debate about evaluation criteria may not be related to one’s actual design skills. Of course, teaching this kind of ability is arguably part of a design education and should enhance the design process—but still, they are not the same thing. The second issue relates to the mode of representation in which reflection upon evaluation criteria should be carried out. Normally in schools, reflection is recognised when it is carried out in written form, or sometimes speech—but the design itself is being done visually, through sound and so on, and this doesn’t always translate easily to verbal language (I’ve noticed that as public galleries have become integrated into mainstream educational provision, they increasingly use ‘information panels’ which ‘explain’ visual art works in words). In Art Education, portfolios are used and this may be a better way forward, although I’m not sure if this would always resolve the issue.

These are not objections to your main point, but unanswered issues in the research we did.

On your second point, I agree entirely, I’m sure these kinds of opportunities will emerge. I think universities and researchers could help the process along, by creating certain kinds of public spaces and resources available. YouTube of course was a fantastic service—we’ll have to see what happens now with its changed ownership.

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 25, 2006 4:58 PM

Linda Polin

Game texts, however, require different types of relationships: there are rarely adults to mediate the relationship between text, truth and reader/player; knowledge and skill are not linked to adult-child hierarchies but to mastery. The types of attitudes that make an effective game player require risk taking, an active role in creating the meaning, non-linear navigation and attendance to multiple cueing systems and of course, problem solving and lateral thinking. These are not necessarily the same attitudes and skills valued or developed in relation to school-sanctioned texts. It seems to me that we are faced with a dilemma as educator—do we encourage these ‘transgressive’ and creative practices and their

transfer from one type of textual practice and social context to another? If we do this, what does it mean for the relationships and practices that underpin schooling?

Not sure I understand. There are adults in gameland to be sure. In MMOs, for instance the player group can be quite diverse with regard to age. Kids are often with older kids (college and 20somethings) and older adults, all of whom are engaging with and through text. But I guess maybe these adults aren't mediating the engagement based on the status of age. The level 40 kid helps the newbie adult, i.e., mastery, and hence power, is performance based. Is this what you mean by different types of relationships?

It also strikes me that a main difference between game texts and school texts is that there isn't much to be done with the latter. They're presented as reified knowledge, the end of the quest, whereas game text is dynamic and instrumental both as content and medium. Actually, I suppose you could argue fairly effectively that there is a lot of gaming in school as text and with school texts, as well. The traits you seem to suggest have trouble co-existing in relation to school texts actually might exist, though not to the desired end as defined by teacher, legislature, or publisher.

Just the other night my kid and I had a discussion that demonstrated this to some extent. She was doing what we've all done, what most kids do when assigned the questions at the end of the social studies chapter. She was working from the questions backward, relying on her knowledge of how social studies textbooks are laid out, e.g., what the headers do and don't signify, to find the info to paraphrase for her answers. She had one question she couldn't find the answer to, even though the info was on the page directly opposite the questions. Why? She hadn't read that and it didn't seem like it would be under the header it was under. So she was trying to game the the school text. She was applying non-linear navigation, lateral thinking, doing some problem-solving. Didn't work 100% in this case, but it was definitely happening with enough wins to be consider a fruitful strategy she has no intention of giving up on.

We, educators...do we encourage these transgressive and creative practices and their transfer? You clearly call out the power relationship there. =grin= But maybe "we" don't have quite the gatekeeping power you seem to imply we have. I doubt, for instance, that the teacher encouraged her to work from the questions backward into the text. In a sense, the textbook is not unlike the World of Warcraft strategy guide, at least as far as it is mostly reference material you go to for help or info. Or maybe a better analogy would be Thotbott or Allakhazam. You get a teacher quest and you seek info needed for completing that quest. Now of course, I'm joking. But I'm also trying to argue that we educators don't have as much power as we think we have over what kids learn, or how, in school. There is a vast, lively, dynamic curriculum they subscribe to and engage with daily that is completely out of our hands. The delicious irony, imho, is that it doesn't exist in spite of school, it exists because of it. Though, I have to agree it would be better if some of that were more fully sanctioned in school.

Gaming Literacies: Authority and Play

Oct 25, 2006 10:41 PM

Jay Lemke

Trouble-maker that I am, this is one of my favorite themes: that authoritarian approaches to learning are counter-productive because they inhibit the playful attitude

of experimentation and going where the thoughts of the moment lead you. As far back as Vygotsky in the early 20th century, it was clear that this kind of play is essential to learning, and that it tends to happen naturally in children's play. And now we are at the intersection of gaming and play-in-general.

The counter-argument is that we have to force kids to learn a fixed set of ideas or they never will. I really doubt this, in science education anyway where I know something, because if a concept is fundamental, you can't go very long without coming across it and needing it. That's what *_fundamental_* means! The real problem is that we've organized education so that every kid has to learn the same stuff as every other kid, same time, same place, same pace. And we know it does not work. We never cared in the past because by and large middle-class kids can fake it, when they have a reason to (grades, careers, money). But it keeps us stuck with superficial learning, short-term learning, joyless learning, and does-stick-very-long learning. (Besides, it's not clear we have a moral right to try to make the next generation reproduce the world we've stuck ourselves with.)

So, by the same argument, transgressive play is good for learning, and not just for learning-in-games. And more than just transgressive play—it's play that is free. It still needs to be supported, guided, scaffolded for it to get further than it would on its own, or even in a good peer-to-peer dialogue. The gaming attitude can show up as a way to beat the system -- find those answers in the book without actually reading it—if it is forced to do so. But how much better if it can show up in a constructive way, pursuing its own (to us often slightly loopy) agendas?

RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies: maintaining narrative on and offline
Oct 25, 2006 12:11 PM
Linda Polin

I have been watching 12-13 year olds, mostly but not exclusively girls, "playing" on RP boards. The boards are run through Yahoo groups or MSN groups structures, which the players have adapted for their purposes. This is play, though whether or not it is "game," I'm not sure. There are most definitely rules, but the rules are concocted by the leaders of the individual RP boards, and are mostly about defining the inside and outside, i.e., the boundaries, of legit play, often by reference to the original culture of the books that define the community. For instance, in the RP boards for the very popular Warriors book series, the rules define cat clans, naming, social hierarchies among cats and clans, time and location of settings, and sometimes even acceptable vocabulary (drawn from the books). The rules are, thus, drawn from a perceived whole, functional world and merely transported, with some tweakage for medium, to another location. A huge amount of energy goes into these rules constructions, and pretty much all the players already know the rules when they arrive to play, yet rule construction (and testing) is part of the playing. This is also trans-media work, dominated by the book series, but appropriated for play.

Okay, I've been having trouble with God-Modding. Some unnamed member(s) have been making cats stronger than is possible, so here is a chart. Anyone breaking this chart will be politely reminded, and the post in violation will be ignored. And keep in mind- 'Beat' does not mean 'Kill,' and 'Can' does not mean 'will.'

At a younger age, middle elementary students can be seen on the playground at recess enacting elements of TV shows (eg, Teen Titans, when it was hot) and books that are popular. Their play at the time makes for a nice developmental trajectory into the networked realm of the e-community, though I seriously doubt they see that in any way, shape, or form. On the playground, the game may actually function differently, as kids work out social hierarchies. Do you get the role you coveted, or are you relegated to the side kick role because you are out-ranked by the other kid. Online, playing with people you mostly don't know, social stakes are considerably lower, and the negotiation of power seems based upon RP competence. Does your story line get picked up and played, or does it die off. In this way, the player seeking status or power must learn how to "play" well, to entice an audience through, in this game, clever arrangement of story narrative that allows many others to join in and doesn't overly constrain them.

Flintpelt puts up this starter under the title, Finding a Home

Flinteye was looking for a home, and also a bit of company. Being a young loner, Flinteye had had nearly no contact with any other cat. "I really need to find a spot to rest." she muttered under her breath. and draws gets 109 replies within a six day span.

When I look at the playground play of Warriors and then to the online board play of Warriors, one outstanding distinction is persistence of past moves, made possible by reification of the action through chronologically organized text. Though, I'd have to say even on the playground, girls will sometimes refer to what happened yesterday, and have been seen carrying a storyline over time, though MUCH less so than on RP boards. THIS difference in dynamism and flow versus fixity and persistence is also apparent in characterization. When you kill of a character on the RP board, that's it. S/he is dead; the 'rules' of the world don't include miraculous resurrections. On the playground you can switch out characters faster, and revive the dead, though with perhaps more negotiation, than online.

To me these are the sorts of elements of digital worlds and games that are interesting because they are different, and in their difference I find there is some room to investigate or revisit existing ideas like narrative and rules. The players seem to be acquiring a new set of gamer tools here, and are learning to play a more sophisticated versions of known games with them.

**RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies: maintaining narrative on and offline
Oct 25, 2006 1:13 PM**

Linda Polin

LOL. Sorry to reply to my own post, but I have a P.S. related to some initial questions in this discussion about computation literacy and such, available through digital games. I want to add that the players on these boards can and many do choose to construct pages for their cats or clans, by hacking out their own html from scratch. They learn from each other formally through Q&A or informally by investigating each other's source code on pages with features they like. There is also a subgroup of producers that takes great pride in working images to create montages and blends that simply serve as expressive "art." (Yeah, most of it is made up of uh...liberated...images from around the Web.)

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies: maintaining narrative on and offline

Oct 25, 2006 2:27 PM

Diane Carr

Hello everyone Linda—I enjoyed your post, and your PS reminded me of an issue that Jay's recent post raised for me—the mention of ludus etc. makes it plain (if we needed reminding) that playfulness pre-exists computer games. So I'm wondering how much of this stuff is new—and to what degree do these considerations of 'game literacy' presuppose that we're talking 'digital' game literacy? Also! Andrew Burn (who posted earlier) has done nice stuff on Harry Potter in the playground.

RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies: maintaining narrative on and offline

Oct 25, 2006 10:29 PM

Jay Lemke

I am very interested in the maintenance of themes, stories, strategies, etc. over time. Too much emphasis in learning in schools is on a very short term; once it's quickly forgotten, there seems little point to have called it "learning" in the first place. What matters is learning that lasts. Whether it lasts in an unchanged form (rarely) or, even better, gets incorporated into some on-going system of practices, interests, agendas, know-how, identity or whatever.

But there is very little study of why when and how learning gets sustained or maintained for longer times. One thing I think we do know, and you identify it for the boards, is that externalized memory artifacts (diaries, message boards, notes inked on your palm) will help keep things going. Presumably some of these ways are better than others, and a guess is that ones that are somehow integrally connected with the practice you are maintaining, rather than completely separate, work better.

What sorts of memories do games incorporate? some let you keep notes, or keep them for you; some even let you record your gameplay. There are lists of fellow-players and buddies; in persistent worlds, there are the places we can build and come back to. I am sure there are many more. This too can be seen as another kind of generalizable literacy: learning how to keep what we learn going by integrating memory-artifacts into the future-stream of our activities. And all that goes with this, such as what we do and how we change our activity when we rely on these memory elements. (Actually I don't think "memory" is the best way to think of this, but it an easier way to say it.)

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies: maintaining narrative on and offline

Oct 27, 2006 12:20 AM

Eric Zimmerman

Jay,

Perhaps this is a simpleminded response to your question, but I wonder if the more purely agonistic aspects of games can be harnessed to answer some of the questions you raise. In a community of competing game players, the record of play (wins and losses) itself serves as a kind of permanent memory of how these players have managed to survive and thrive in the ecosystem of the play community. So the tournament record in some way becomes like the geologic record, an indisputable and measurable history of how different strategies and approaches have managed to perform against each other

over time. I realize there is some translation from "winning strategies" to learned content or processes, but I am thinking about whether there is a way to use the intrinsic characteristics of games as a form of memory.

I am thinking also of *Playing to Win* by David Serlin, a book about competitive game-playing that celebrates the competitive aspects of game play. It is surprising that with the sociological turn in game studies, such approaches as Serlin's, which look at game playing for its own sake rather than game interaction as a marker of more significant social processes, are so rare.

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies: the metagame

Oct 26, 2006 7:40 PM

Jay Lemke

For Katie and Linda especially:

I am reading Pierre Levy's *Collective Intelligence*, at the suggestion of Henry Jenkins. It's a bit cyber-utopian, but at least it is offering an alternative vision to the consumer-technology-and-global-profits future that is sucking up most views of where we can go from here. The main point is that massively multi-participant online communities, lots of them of all sizes and purposes, could be radically transformative of ... Everything. A new order of human intelligence (like those sci-fi runaway AI's, but made up of us), outfitted with a different sense of social bond and moral valuation of the unique contributions of each individual to the greater community.

Henry uses Levy's idea in part to talk about virtual gamer communities and the meta-game. He suggests that game developers may have a hard time keeping ahead of such super-minds (and all other media producers, too). The solution it seems (to me, and to Levy, and I think to Henry, though he's cautious) is that it takes one to entertain one -- or govern one much less many. While it seems likely than any effort of hundreds of people to write a story collectively would be disaster (am I wrong?), the efforts of hundreds or thousands of people to develop a game (and lots of variations on the game) makes perfect sense. But the game then is not just the product, because a lot of such games would be developed FOR the community that is making them, and you might need to be part of that community to actually play the game, i.e. to understand it or get the most out of it. I think the meta-game notion shows that we are perhaps approaching this future.

So now what is the "literacy" here? it's not just knowing how games are designed; it's knowing how to participate in a collective game development group, which to some extent will be generalizable to participation in other forms of collective intelligence. And it not literacy in the sense of just making a text/game. It's doing all that needs to be done to be part of the making of that game.

RE: Gaming Literacies: Authority and Play

Oct 26, 2006 10:10 AM

Linda Polin

Hi Jay and Eric,

I'm riffing off your remarks here, hence the formal address to you both.

For me, gaming is interesting because it represents a peek at learning that is apart from schooling, training, or other intentional knowledge transfer structures (although, yes,

Eric, I bet from the game dev view there *is* an intent to have the player successfully learn to play). Yet gaming is a more circumscribed activity than say, toddlers learning to talk or patients learning to navigate the health care system.,,so I feel it is an activity size I can grapple with. Of course gaming isn't standing all alone and untouched by the cultural capital players bring from years of schooling/training. So sure, we use schooly skills. We take notes, often scribbled on the back of hand or the edge of the closet piece of paper to the console. And though game devs work to make learning to play the game as close as possible to the same thing as playing it (quite a departure from school, btw), gamers do a lot of p2p work to acquire knowledge and even skill to be successful players. From a social learning framework, this is the part I find most interesting. In large scale MMOs, like World of Warcraft (WoW), the amount of knowledge generated and shared is pretty impressive. You can't play the game as a noob for very long before someone in general chat answers your annoying query by yelling "ck thotbott," and off you go to discover a wonderful portal of info. In fact, even as a level 60 player I am still uncovering stashes of well-organized, vetted, experiential knowledge, and engaging in community debates with players, captured asynchronously, about how to best spec. out my warlock for the end game. (Pardon the jargon).

This sort of collaborative knowledge creation and sharing behavior is not unique to the gamer world, of course. It is highly cherished and sought after in the business world, under various monikers such as knowledge management and communities of practice. While it flourishes informally, it is darned near impossible to will such knowledge communities into being, for reasons I won't elaborate on but which are probably obvious to you. Yet here we are in WoW, for instance, with a dynamic knowledge base that a big corp would drool over. (There is some underlying organizational effort/structure in most cases. I'm not talking about one player's page containing a walk-through. But I don't want to unpack that discussion here.)

Do you think this sort of loosely organized knowledge sharing is a kind of gaming literacy around information and co-construction? Do you think it will be a learned cultural behavior that might be available to the player and like-minded peers in another setting, say school for instance or the workplace? Are younger players who engage in these communities learning how to transform game play experience into shareable information extracted from the in-game context but kept in community? Are they learning to value that skill and thus choose to hone it? Are they learning how to describe problems in a way that others can be responsive to? Do they acquire a sensibility that allows them to make choices in the production of explanation and narrative (the community can be harsh when your intell. is faulty or obscure)? I'm thinking yes, and that's why I play and study. What do you all think?

a posting about the legendary BIFP (big iron fishing pole), and yeah, I have one, baby!

U see to get the pole is not as hard as ppl thing... I read the comments last night and after one - one and a half hours 'farming' the pole I got 3 poles, about 40-50 shellfish and a green ring with FR on it :D It might be harder to get for other because i had Hydrocane the staff from Gnomeregan that allows to breath underwater and still i barely used it... There were a few friendly locks that kept casting the Underwater Breathing spell on me! I read in the older comments that there is a LVL limit or somth. There is no limit i repeat no limit . While i was farming the pole two warrior-twinks around lvl 26 came and started farming too. They got a pole or two. Also good for herbalist because the

Stranglekelp keeps spawning there... so GL and dont worry it will drop sooner or later. I THINK THIS IS THE BEST WAY OF MAKING MONEY EVEN BETTER THEN THE DEVIATE FISH!

But let me add that I'm not thinking of this as transfer (a concept I do not put much faith or belief in). I'm thinking of this as a more integrated cultural skill set, attitude (perhaps as Jay meant that, no?), or habit of mind, if you prefer that phrase.

RE: RE: Gaming Literacies: generalizing playfulness

Oct 25, 2006 10:52 PM

Jay Lemke

I wrote a little diatribe in another reply that is about how schools curricula can defeat playful learning, with games or without. But I wanted to tackle Mechelle's important question about classroom gaming vs home gaming.

I think that Kurt is someone who might also have interesting insights on this.

Home gaming is on students' "own time" and is free of the constraints of a fixed curriculum. They learn a lot that way, as in the rest of their out-of-school lives. When we bring games into the classroom, we encounter a conflict. If gaming means freedom to students, it will be hard to keep them on our agenda when they are playing. If we let them play around, they will learn more, but it may not be what the curriculum says they are supposed to be learning (or not this week).

Teachers need to discover new strategies to balance between student freedom to play and learn and a responsibility to help them learn important things (provided we believe we really know what those are—which gets harder as you go towards upper secondary school). If you are pressed for time (!) as a teacher you will maybe make some choices you'd rather not, in favor of covering the curriculum. If you are willing and able to go with the flow for longer, then you can find ways to link the curriculum goals to what the students are doing and learning anyway in the gameplay. I believe this is what Kurt found with Civ 3, though even then there were a lot of limitations on free time to play. I don't recall if kids got to take the game home with them in his project. That might lead to ways to further connect home-gaming and classroom-gaming over longer timescales. I predict that would work better, and many literacy educators today (e.g. Donna Alvermann, Colin Lankshear) are arguing that schools need to capitalize more on students' out-of-school literacies, interests, and appropriations of mass culture. As Linda Polin's example also shows.

RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 26, 2006 2:43 AM

Mizuko Ito

Sorry to be jumping into this thread so late. I've really enjoyed reading through the posts so far and trying to get my mind wrapped around this notion of game literacies. But as I read I am struggling to map notions of literacy to my research on game play. Let me explain where I am coming from and maybe someone can help me out.

I am more an ethnographer than an educator and my own research questions focus on what meaning games have for kids in their everyday lives and identities both in game

and out of game. I spend time watching kids play games in disorganized settings and talking to them about it. I think, in the terms of what we are discussing here, I am interested in the performativity or activity of gaming, not on “reading” or “writing” games. My struggle here is that I see game play as performative and improvisational in a way that does not map on to my understanding of how people “read” or “write” texts. To me it is more like music, sport, and theater than bookishness. The point of most gaming is not to decode texts or create them, but rather to play and perform in a temporally specific and ephemeral way. Even I can understand that modding or designing games is a form of writing texts. But that is not how most kids mobilize games in their everyday activity.

Eric has mentioned performance and Jim has mentioned a symphony. Victoria, Linda, and Caroline have given us some nice descriptions of what these embodied performances look like. I’ve had similar observations to what Caroline and Linda have provided us so vividly, of the performance and display of gaming in group social settings. Katie’s “gaming attitude” and the discussion of subversion and play gets at what I am trying to get a handle on here. Jay has invoked Goodwin and Hutchins. Can someone help me link this cluster of issues to the theories circulating on text and literacy? I know there are resources in literacy theory to deal with performativity and speech, so I’d love it if the experts can make that a bit clearer for a literacy theory noob. As an outsider to literacy debates, I’d like to get clearer on the utility and limits of concepts of literacy, reading, and writing in understanding gaming as practice. With gaming we have an opportunity to push on our existing concepts of what media virtuosity means, to develop hybrid frameworks that tie together theories developed for the study of text to theories developed for the study of habits, practice, and activity.

RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies
Oct 26, 2006 10:34 AM
katie salen

It is always interesting to watch a dialogue take shape, as I am never quite sure what turns it will take or if it will get stuck in repeat mode with many different voices circling in on one idea. This dialogue is no different and I wanted to step back for just a moment and take stock of where we are. I will do my best to keep this short!

Several new issues were raised yesterday, related both to more traditional notions of “reading and writing” texts and the ways those activities are supported and transformed through game play, and to a distinction between gaming that takes place in a game, and “gaming” as a set of attitudes and practices that are distributed and enacted within the everyday. The first issue points to how we might apply literacy theory to understanding how players create and make meaning within games; the second points to the way we are beginning to shift our thinking from a focus on the media object as the site of activity, to the sets of practices motivated by the object (game) that occur both in and around the game itself.

This is the space I am most excited about, as I believe that gaming takes place not just when someone is sitting at a console or playing tag on a playground but across everyday experiences. Eric and I have written about a model known in gaming as the “metagame” which describes everything that happens in the play of a game other than the game itself. Mimi and others (I am thinking of T.L Taylor, Constance Steinkuhler, and Jane McGonigal here) have written on this phenomenon from ethnographic perspectives, in

relation to the game ecologies that make up games like Yu-Gi-Oh, Everquest, Wow, and ARGs like I Love Bees. The metagame extends gaming into the spaces before, between, and after formal interaction with the actual game, describing the value of activities like preparing for play, practicing, talking about the game with friends, leaving a game with a social reputation or hard cash. It also blurs the distinction between play and everyday life, and suggests that games drive engagement with other media and interactions in very particular ways--not just in terms of what is accessed (blogs, tv show, FAQ, walkthrough) but how it is accessed and integrated into a larger system of meaning. The metagame helps us to begin to identify the kinds of literacies that must be operationalized in order to play in such a way. I have found it to be of great benefit in my own thinking on the subject and am curious how other disciplines might be using a similar approach, albeit by another name.

Last, I wanted to try and focus the dialogue in the final two days around trying to identify strategies for moving work in understanding this still rather unformed notion of gaming literacies forward. What theories might be explored? What kinds of projects undertaken? What is missing from the current dialogue that should be there?

In response to that question I am reminded of something Jonathan Letham has written about in regard to the discovery of ideas and the importance of finding originality and creativity through building on existing knowledge. He talks about the idea of 'undiscovered public knowledge', coined by Don Swanson, a library scientist at the University of Chicago. Swanson showed that standing problems in medical research may be significantly addressed, perhaps even solved, simply by systematically surveying the scientific literature. Left to its own devices, research tends to become more specialized and abstracted from the real-world problems that motivated it and to which it remains relevant. This suggests that such a problem may be effectively tackled not by commissioning more research, but by assuming that most or all of the solution can already be found in various scientific journals, waiting to be assembled by someone willing to read across specialties. Mimi is suggesting a similar approach when she writes of her desire to develop hybrid frameworks that tie together theories developed for the study of text to theories developed for the study of habits, practice, and activity. I'd like to see this happen as well, and look to you all as primary players in this endeavor.

RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming Literacies

Oct 26, 2006 7:27 PM

Jay Lemke

I think it's very important to get at the performance dimensions, the spontaneity, improvisation, and in-the-act-ness of gaming. This is not an issue unique to gaming, but a bias in our academic culture and our theoretical traditions towards product-orientation rather than process-orientation (Whitehead goes on about this at length). Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, has written a lot about the "logic of practice" as something distinct from the structures of activity. He means something like the acting-in-the-moment stance, the first-person viewpoint vs. the omniscient third-person of most academic theorizing. Of course it's not quite clear what a "theory" in the mode of practice-process-acting would be like. Maybe more like a simulation? more like a game? Bourdieu's favorite example is a soccer game, seen from the spectator (3rd person) vs. player (1st person) viewpoint.

In literacy theory, or more exactly in discourse theory, there is attention to the real-time generation of text, though it has not got very far. There is more success in dealing with spoken language and how it deploys time: pausing, pacing, rhythms and prosodies. A great classic on this is Dell Hymes' work on native American "poetry". Goodwin, Hutchins, and others also include the dynamic or time dimension in accounts of how meaning is made in activity. I made a link to literacy in the narrower sense in a paper about how we write in real time, improvising within constraints we make by what we've written up-to-here. Stanton Wortham at Penn has analyzed classroom dialogue as a game between teachers and students, where students' identities are at stake. Keith Sawyer has reviewed improvisation theory and related it a bit to learning and literacy.

I'm sure you know performance theory in dance, theatre, etc. Should be important for thinking about games in the more action-oriented rather than text-oriented way. Finally, the text-and-structure approach to anything, as in semiotics and linguistics, which I use myself, is inherently incomplete and needs to be complemented by a more phenomenological perspective (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, sometimes Heidegger) where we pay attention to experiential flow and do not freeze-dry time on our academic slab.

RE: RE: Gaming Literacies: Game rules as a semiotic resource

Oct 26, 2006 7:29 PM

James Gee

People use to think of grammar for a language (like English) as fixed and simply "followed" by users. But now some people think of grammar as a set of "design tools" that people put to their own creative uses. When you speak you use the same tools as me (assuming we have the same dialect), but you produce from them, eventually, sentences that are uniquely yours—you take your own trajectory through the English grammar space.

One needs I think to make a distinction between the rules of the game the designer makes up (and the "code" behind the game) and the "rules" (patterns, conventions) the player sees and interacts with. The player sees "rules/patterns/conventions" like "break crate for power up", "see ordered platforms, jump in sequence", "drop object to pick up another", "move towards places where enemies appear in order to know you have moved in a 'right' direction" [these could of course be broken down into more minimal units]. A player can then string these rules/patterns/conventions together to make longer stretches of meaning, creating their own trajectory ("story").

Games are a "semiotic system" of a distinctive sort, just as is (oral) language (though for humans oral language is a privileged semiotic system). A semiotic system is just a system of social conventions for giving and taking meanings of certain types. Right now games give rise to fewer emergent properties than language. Language has structural properties that allow for a great deal of emergence and expressive creativity (in formal terms it is infinite, thanks to recursivity in language). It would be interesting to interrogate the "grammars" of different game types to see how (and how much) emergence and player creativity/expression is allowed.

RE: RE: RE: Gaming Literacies: Game rules as a semiotic resource

Oct 27, 2006 12:10 AM

Eric Zimmerman

Right now games give rise to fewer emergent properties than language.

Jim, apologies for getting structuralist on you, but at their most elegant, games in fact do generate more emergent possibilities than does language. If you consider the simple rules of Chess or Go, the virtually infinite number of possible games that can be played using the compact rules far exceeds linguistic possibilities. This is perhaps due to the two-dimensional, grid-based relationships of these two games, in which possibilities multiply across the x and y axes, compared to the more linear structure of linguistic utterances.

But perhaps I am getting too technical here...

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 2: Gaming

Oct 26, 2006 12:01 PM

Robert Gershon

Introduction: I teach communication at Castleton State College in Vermont. I'm currently on sabbatical trying to come to grips with narrative in the digital age. What interests me most is the application of those aspects of narrative that we've come to value and understand via the literary criticism tradition to interactive texts. I think this is germane to the current discussion because I gather there's research that gamers give up much linear tv time in favor of interactive gaming. What then are they gaining and losing in terms of education (broadly defined), personal development, personal satisfaction, etc.

A seminal book in this area is Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* which postulates three aspects of effective interactive fiction: immersion, agency and transformation. It seems to me you can profitably parse gaming literacy in this light. What aspects of game playing provide each of these?

While the following examples hardly herald the Holodeck or Kurzweilian future, I've recently run across two intriguing games. My daughter plays something called "Dance, Dance Revolution," an exercise game which requires her to hit the right spots on a floor pad to provided music. And I've just picked up a game called "Journey to Wild Divine" which is essentially a biofeedback game, responding to sensors that detect my heart rate variability and galvanic skin response which allow me to move along in the narrative. I suspect games that call on aspects of our body and mind other than hand-eye coordination and problem solving will become more prevalent. What kinds of literacy (if it can even be called that) will they entail? What satisfactions will they provide? Where's Aristotle when you need him?

Better late than never + Procedural Literacy

Oct 26, 2006 10:33 PM

Ian Bogost

Hi all—apologies for jumping in late here. I had to return a book copyedit this week and, ironically, one of the things I spent the most time doing was revising my chapter on

"procedural literacy," which is related to the topic at work here. Indulge my milestone, if you don't mind, by reading the publisher's description.

I'm not even going to try to address all the interesting threads here, so I'll just throw out a number of thoughts. Speaking of literacy, I'm having a really hard time reading these complex arguments on a messageboard, possibly because I'm trying to catch up on all of them at once. So, instead of making a coherent prose argument here, I'm going to leave a number of completely unfinished notes or threads. Here goes.

1. The contexts in which games are played are interesting and valuable, but for me they are orthogonal to the question of gaming literacy
2. This is because reading and writing in the traditional sense demand mastery of specific inscriptive practices
3. To understand game literacy, we have to understand the specific inscriptive practices in games
4. The core representational mode in games is procedurality -- the creation and manipulation of processes, in rules and in code
5. "Procedural literacy" has traditionally referred to the process of learning computer programming (this is a 40+ year old discourse)
6. Learning to program is an important question, but I understand procedurality more generally
7. Procedurality for Ian: learning to author and manipulate processes
8. When we play games, this is exactly what we do
9. Playing games develops procedural literacy

BUT

- * Game processes are not generic—that is, all games aren't equally conducive to procedural literacy
- * Procedural literacy is not "critical thinking" or abstract problem solving skills
- * The different potential in different games is not based (solely) on the complexity of the processes (the more "process intensive" or "emergent" the game rules)
- * The coupling of abstract processes to specific representational goals increases the procedural value.

There's more to this argument, but that's a start.

RE: Better late than never + Procedural Literacy

Oct 26, 2006 10:46 PM

Mechelle De Craene

Thank you kindly Eric and Professor Lemke for addressing my inquiries. I always learn something new with each read.

What I've also noticed with my students is often they will exhibit behavior in the game as they do in real life. For example, students with autism will want to perseverate on certain aspects of the game. For instance, they may stop the game and go back to the copyright warnings at the beginning. Some of the kids will know the warnings verbatim and repeat them over and over and over. They are really into rules. I guess rules in the game are similar to their need for consistency in real life. Students with autism have

trouble transitioning and generalizing. Therefore, they like consistency to the point of perservation. I suppose it makes them feel safe.

Students with emotional issues (i.e. as per their IEP folder which contains medical doctor and school pyschologists' reports, as well as previous intervention strategies) transfer that into the game as well. For me as a teacher, I can see patterns of social interaction in games and various simulated situations that I may never see in the classroom environment. For students with special needs social-emotional goals are included in their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Seeing patterns of social behavior within the game in different context beside school helps me to scaffold social-emotional growth with my students. For example, a lot of the kids have trouble with inference making (if this...than that). I can see how they interacted during the game and question the student by asking, What do you think will happen next? And have you considered this path? In essence, we are doing a think aloud where we reflect together on social interaction. Eeventually, the child begins to do this on his or her own and you can hear him or her whispering or shouting to the game. I should have...I will get you next time etc...

This shows the emergence of a sense of internal locus of control, rather than an external locus of control. Students see that they can change and have control over their behavior in given situations whether virtual or real. I think this is awesome.

With that, it is my contention that Louise Rosenblatt's Transactional theory would be a practical theoretical framework applicable for teachers exploring classroom simulation gaming with their students. Rosenblatt theoretical framework explores transaction as a continuum between efferent and aesthetic modes.

RE: Better late than never + Procedural Literacy

Oct 27, 2006 12:31 AM

Mark Marino

[Hi, I research games, chatbots, and electronic literature at Writer Response Theory. I also teach at USC.] I hate to join in late, too, and to pick up the thread just at the end, but I have a question of Ian regarding his notion of procedural literacy, which no doubt will be answered when I read his book. But prior to that...

What does authorship mean in this context? Do you mean literally programming/modding or in-game mastery and performance. Also what does manipulate processes mean? Does that mean mastery of the interface as presented or going beyond it?

In any case, just want to know which terms you are using, especially since there seems to be a divide in this forum between authoring as programming (depicted as a kind of conscious literacy) and authoring as purposeful interaction with the interface (depicted as subconscious).

Perhaps you mean both and it is here that I'd like to offer a future direction for these studies of literacy:

First: I want to return to a few of the early definitions of literacy:

As defined by Jay Lemke, " a literacy is a proficiency in using a systematic set of symbolic resources, within which different choices and combinations let us systematically produce different meanings or effects." Here is literacy as (purposeful) authorship.

Victoria Carrington's definition could also apply to these site-specific lives and whatever application they might have for larger lives.

In the broader sense, 'literacies' refers to the ability to accumulate and demonstrate the practices necessary to interact effectively in the social, cultural and technological contexts of our lives. Here is literacy as fluency or (purposeful) interaction. This speaks to a value of knowledge gained from simulation or role-playing.

James Gee raises the question: to what extent does such in-game literacy inform out of game mental (and presumably physical) activity.

The computer science students I know seem driven by their desire to play (and master) games and their desire to write games. I can't help but feel that this corresponds to the (stereo)typical literature major who loves to read and wants to write. In the latter example, the supposition is that both are mutually reinforcing activities. Why not suggest the same is true for the former?

But perhaps in a deeper way, the activity, the struggle, the frustration at the game interface (and here I posit the player who is trying to finish the game....there are others, like me, of course...) is parallel to the activity, struggle, and frustration at the programming interface. Perhaps we could examine the acquisition of gaming literacy, at least in one context, as a parallel or complementary process to the acquisition of programming literacy. This may attempt to bridge the gap between the rules as perceived by the user and the rules that govern the game. Here is Lemke's use of symbols to produce meaning and Carrington's knowledge of how to interact effectively. This may also bridge the gap between the author who designs the game and the "writerly" player who learns to author their own performance of the game.

Thus perhaps to better understand gaming literacy, we should examine the particular gaming of programmers, who are literate in both senses.

RE: RE: Better late than never + Procedural Literacy

Oct 30, 2006 5:27 PM

kurt squire

Hi there—sorry to be chiming in late. But, I wanted to say that for me—the core to this "package" of literacies is something around "gaming the system (something that came up at our spencer meetings). I recently wrote a column with Henry Jenkins that I think reflects my thinking at least:

Xzin Education (or something)

Although *World of Warcraft* is usually credited with *ruining* one's education (how many college age readers have skipped a class for an instance or raid), a number of researchers think that it might hold the key to retooling our educational systems for the 21st century.

Over the past 2 years, the Spencer Foundation funded a group of leading game designers and scholars (in which we participated) to hold a series of meetings to determine what games might mean for learning and society. The group's report concludes that games represent a new form of literacy— one that is * multi-modal* (combining images and texts), *performative* (requiring active effort), *productive *(supporting creativity), and *participatory (open to transformation). Expert gamers do not just learn a set of facts about a game world, but appreciate the interworkings of game systems and rules.

Games, the report concludes, encourage us to "hack" the system --identifying problems, developing an understanding of the interworkings of a system, and then tweaking that system to achieve one's goals. As Will Wright pointed out in a recent issue of Wired, there's something almost scientific in the way that players experiment – developing and testing out hypotheses in game spaces.

If this sounds a little high flying to you, check out this video by Xzin, the genius behind “the Zins”, 5 World of Warcraft characters (a priest (Xzin) and 4 mages (Azin, Bzin, Czin, Dzin) all simultaneously played by 1 person behind a keyboard:

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=3697765098130473147&q=xzin> (or just google xzin video). It's not just that he plays them; he's actually really good. Xzin's real goal was to build a pvp machine – and he succeeded, with the Zins taking 5 of the 7 top pvp rankings on his server. Watch the Zins in action, and the speed and elegance of it all is quite impressive. All 5 Zins appear to move in unison as one single unit, with the 4 mages doing unreal amounts of damage and the priest tossing out heals, shields, and fear bombs to keep it going. And it's wildly efficient for pvp. It isn't unusual for the Zins to single-handedly change the course of battlegrounds with up to 80 players in them.

If you're like most opposing players who meet the Zins, your first reaction to this is: “This must be cheating.” No, he's not cheating (Blizzard finally posted a definitive response to this, observing that he is in control of all 5 characters at the same time and therefore within the rules). What he's doing is running an experiment on “multi-boxing” (the practice of playing multiple characters): Can one person, using custom configured hardware create an entirely new way of playing the game (particularly pvp)? It seems that after having played a few other MMOs, the thought of grinding up a single character sounded... boring. Why not make it a real challenge and play 5 at once?

The key to this setup, for those of you wondering is using a keyboard multiplexer, a device that allows one keyboard to send commands to more than one machine. Stringing together multiplexers, tweaking some hardware, keybinding creatively combined with some macroing cleverly allows him to control all 5 characters in real time from one machine. LFG? A thing of the past when you're playing and leveling all 5 at once. For those of you who want to try this at home, Xzin reports that the process was slightly more efficient than running a single character – but with huge side benefits such as the ability to earn 20 gold in 2 minutes; a feat that would impress even the most hardened Chinese gold farmer.

The Zins are a dramatic example of this kind of orientation toward gaming the system, but as MMO researcher Constance Steinkuehler has pointed out, there are countless other examples in MMO game play. Modders create new interfaces for the game. Guild leaders are social modders, creating guild rules, structures, and managing gamers' many

conflicting needs and desires. To engage meaningfully in a game world like WoW is to participate in creating it. High end MMO gaming is a deeply productive act.

It is just these ways of thinking that are needed for success in the new economy. Talk to educators and business leaders, and you find that the single greatest challenge is that our schools are not teaching kids to innovate creatively. Our schools (like most institutions) weren't designed to produce (or even handle) the Zins of the world. They were designed for the industrial age – where uniformity and conformity were valued. By fostering this kind of innovative creativity, games may be a much better match for today's world than schools.

Participants

Moderator:

Katie Salen, Associate Professor, Design and Technology Program, Parsons School of Design

Audio Roundtable Discussants:

Jim Gee, Tashia Morgridge Professor of Reading at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

Betty Hayes, Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Dept. of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

Kurt Squire, Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the Educational Communications and Technology division of Curriculum and Instruction

Constance Steinkuhler, Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the Educational Communications and Technology division of Curriculum and Instruction

Eric Zimmerman, Co-Founder & CEO, Gamelab

Respondents:

Ian Bogost, Assistant Professor, School of Literature Communication and Culture, the Georgia Institute of Technology, and Founding Partner, Persuasive Games

Andrew Burn, Reader in Education and New Media in the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media at the Institute of Education, London Knowledge Lab

Diane Carr, Research Fellow, School of Culture, Language and Communication, Institute of Education, University of London

Victoria Carrington, Associate Dean (Research & Innovation), Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth, UK

Mechelle De Craene

Jay Lemke, Professor in the School of Education, Department of Educational Studies, at the University of Michigan and Co-Editor of the journal Critical Discourse Studies

Mimi Ito, Senior Fellow, USC Annenberg Center for Communication

Mark Marino, USC

Caroline Pelletier, School of Language, Culture and Communication, Institute of Education, London

Linda Polin, Professor of Education at Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Brian Thompson, is a lifelong gamer who has played competitively for several years, and he is now studying the intersection of technology and the humanities in Stanford's Modern Thought & Literature program

Dialogue 3: Pathways To Gaming (October 30–Nov. 3)

Pathways to Gaming explores the different paths taken by young people, educators, and parents into (and out of) gaming, for there is certainly no single trajectory common to all players. If we are to try and grasp the impact and implications of games for a generation of kids who consider them a second skin, we need to better understand how players come to games in the first place, and the different pathways they take once games become a part of their lives. Thus the conversation will address both the cross-generational play enabled by an emerging handheld and casual gaming market, as well as the issue of familiarity and access: who games and who doesn't? What barriers of entry exist into gaming and game communities and what are the implications for those who haven't been invited to play?

Moreover, games are currently used by players/teachers/parents in many different ways. Games can function as doorways into specific content, offer an introduction to a specific skillset (learning probability by playing D&D), or operate as a node within a larger learning system, as they often do in science museums, for example. Games can be used to occasion family interaction or to escape from the social fold. The reason people game is rich and varied and worthy of attention.

The Kick-Off

Bernie DeKoven, Jason Della Rocca, Brian Thompson, and Nicole Pinkard, Core Discussants for this dialogue, were each asked to respond to the following question:

Q: How might we think about gaming as one experience within a larger system of experiences, which constitute contexts for learning, whether they are institutional, familial, or personal? What are the ways in which we might capitalize on the different paths players take into gaming to develop new ways of thinking about learning and literacy across communities?

A: Nicole Pinkard

Pathways into gaming is one question that I have been pondering lately as I attempt to figure out the role of game playing in our Digital Youth Afterschool Program. Our program serves a 99 percent African American audience of 6th through 9 graders who each have a laptop computer. I have been struck by the lack of MMOG game playing by our kids. Our kids play Xbox, Sega and Playstation but for the most part they use their laptops to create movies and music, to engage in social networking sites such as MySpace, Tagged or view videos on YouTube. The students that play MMOGs such as World of Warcraft, are few and far between. What accounts for this reality especially in situations where the digital divide in relationship to access has been addressed? I hypothesize that our kids have not taken up MMOGs because they are not surrounded by peers or mentors who play MMOGs. Thus who is going to teach them or motivate them to spend the money and time necessary for MMOGs. The mentors that we surround our youth with in the Digital Youth Program are filmmakers, music producers, spoken word artists, graphic artists, and web designers. Our focus is on youth using media to create media that represents their understanding of the world in which they live. Thus, our kids make movies, podcasts, write songs and publish a paper and online magazine. We do have kids using MacScratch to build video games and using Mindstorms to build robots but these are still not MMOGs.

How can we use MMOGs to engage urban youth in understanding and changing the world in which they live? I am beginning to think about the role of immersive worlds but what is the relationship between MMOGs and immersive worlds such as Second life?

A: Bernie DeKoven

>>*How might we think about gaming as one experience within a larger system of experiences, which constitute contexts for learning, whether they are institutional, familial, or personal?*

Before we can put the gaming experience into context, we need to consider the entire spectrum of activities that fall within the rubric of play (or perhaps "rubric cube of play"). Games of all sorts, sports of similar sorts, contests, solitary play, social play, pretend play, play fighting, dramatic play, dress-up, dance, music, dangerous play, nasty play, jokes, riddles, silliness of all sorts, seriousness of related sorts, toy play, puzzle play - and then maybe we can put gaming in its play context, at least. Then, of course, there's the kind of gaming that focuses more on achievement than on play, games that we use to help us learn things, or to distract ourselves, or focus ourselves (I wonder if meditation can be considered a kind of gaming?).

>>*What are the ways in which we might capitalize on the different paths players take into gaming to develop new ways of thinking about learning and literacy across communities?*

Then maybe we need to consider the kinds of learning that are native to games and play. Ever since I first taught elementary school I've been amazed and confused by kids who can play chess well, and are failing math. Maybe we need to take a closer look at an educational system that seems not to be able to capitalize on the many competencies people develop when they are in pursuit of nothing other than play. In fact, maybe we need to contemplate the nature of an educational system that is guided by the things kids do in the name of play

Well, I must admit that I've been contemplating that very thing for very many years now, since 1969 probably when I began to understand how much kids were learning about themselves and society playing games like "Duck Duck Goose" and "Capture the Flag." And how utterly confused I've become by an educational system that has all but eliminated recess and a culture that has almost outlawed free play.

A: Jason Della Rocca

Dang, Bernie beat me to the *Ambiguity of Play* type reference for the first part of the question. As he suggests, we really need to start looking at digital games in the larger context of play—and not as some new techy anomaly.

So, the real question is how can we bring back the sense of play—digital or otherwise—to education and learning?

I'd like to believe that parents have an innate understanding of the value of play and games for the development of their children. Watching my own young children grow (3 and 1 years of age), I am amazed by their voracious appetite for play. Even, I'd say their absolute need to play—other than crabbing about eating their veggies, it is all they want to do.

And, as an aside, it is quite amazing to see the often subconscious socialization aspects of play. For my daughter's first birthday she got a toy purse, baby doll and stroller, a plastic tea set, a toy cell phone, etc. Even at 1, we are purchasing toys to "train" our kids to be good participants in society.

The easiest solution to the second question is time. Once we have a society that grew up on video games (and have their own children), we will no longer have a digital divide. Games will be games, no matter where you play them. Once we get to the point where we stop calling ourselves "gamers" we'll know that that has arrived...

Good news is that we're already starting to see this process starting :)

A: Brian Thompson

I think Jason is correct in asserting that the digital divide will be eroded and games fused into the larger context of play as ever more people grow up with video games. I am living proof of this, having played games since I was probably four or five years old. While this still may have been something of an aberration in the mid-80s, it was considered rather normal in my peer group. This leads me to what I consider to be a crucial aspect of my own pathway to games: the social component. Conventional wisdom, of course, dictates that gamers are reclusive, solitary denizens of cramped and poorly lit basements. While I doubt anyone involved in this discussion feels so strongly, I think a certain lack of attention is being paid to the social component of single-player (and two-player) gaming as compared to MMOs.

While I have been active in MMOs for years, I did not find the opportunities for socialization they offered significantly different from those I had previously known. My first contact with games came from my schoolmates, many of whom were playing Super Mario Brothers, Dragon Warrior, and whatever else fell into their hands. The excitement with which they discussed these games on the school bus was infectious, and it prompted me to beg, plead, and save until I could join them. For much of my childhood, talk in the lunchroom, on the school bus, and at recess revolved around whatever games we kids were playing concurrently. We competed with one another to see who could advance farthest and fastest, who could amass the highest scores, and so on. We also developed and traded strategies, basking in the prestige that came from finding the most effective way in which to dispatch a boss or complete a level. True, we did the majority of our gaming at home and apart from one another, but this largely occurred on weeknights when we could not have otherwise met to engage in other forms of play. In this sense the games provided us with a shared context by which we could advance and deepen our friendships based on similar experiences.

I would also argue that this pattern applies to multiple age ranges. In my experience it has persisted until the present, has provided me with friends across the country (thanks to the Internet), and has also afforded me opportunities I otherwise would not have enjoyed. In fact, I fell into competing in fighting games at the national and international level because I just happened to have some friends who enjoyed playing Soul Calibur together on their nights off.

I believe this provides us with a new method of understanding how we might capitalize upon these pathways to gaming. Conventional wisdom dictates that players will develop a bevy of new skills in order to advance games simply to satisfy their own desires for accomplishment. My experience with the social aspect of even single-player games,

though, tells me that players will work equally hard to develop those skills even in games they do not enjoy if their peers are doing the same. Some element of this is the competitive drive, but I believe that substantially more is due to the shared experience of the game narrative.

>>Enter the Dialogue now.

RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 29, 2006 11:21 PM

Barry Joseph

Katie, Thank you for framing the issue so clerly and Nicole, Brian, Jason and Bernie - thank you for getting us started.

Like Nicole, the students in our after school programs – the ones in person – are predominantly youth of color from low income neighborhoods. We offer a variety of programs that use games in different ways – they make games, play games, and, for lack of a better word, use games.

But before I get into the specifics, I want to share a story. My 10th grade history teacher was a 1st cousin of Teddy Roosevelt. In case we forgot, she was kind enough to remind us each month. The only thing I hated more than her was her class. It was so BORING. Why couldn't it be more like my favorite class, which was so FUN! What I remember most that history class was not the class itself but a vigorous discussion I had about it with my mom. She did not understand why I thought learning should be fun. She never said as such, but it was clear to me she felt that the more learning was fun the less substantial it became. In her mind, education being boring or difficult was a sign that it was good education. I challenged her over and over but she was unable to articulate why fun would make education less effective. But she felt it to be true, and she felt it so strongly that she recoiled at my suggestion that learning could be fun.

Fifteen years later I found myself working at my current job, as director of the online leadership program at Global Kids. GK works with youth in after school programs around New York City to develop their leadership skills around global issues. There are many reasons why teens attend our programs. But for the sake of our dialogue, the most significant is that they are fun (and, as such, in direct contrast to their daily classes). GK employs what is now known as a youth development model, which, amongst other things, relies heavily on the use of games as a pedagogy for creating interactive educational experiences. What I sought in 10th grade is precisely what GK offers to teens ever day.

My mom passed away many years ago. But were she alive today would she still recoil at my use of games to educate? Has U.S. society evolved since my high school years to value play and fun within an educational context? If not, how can we move past these often unstated prejudices and, in the meantime, identify where they continuing to put up barriers that severe the potential linkages between informal game-based education pathways and formalized educational pathways?

To give a little background for my work so I can refer to it later in the discussions, I mentioned at the top our Global Kids youth leaders make games, play games, and use games.

Make games: We are in the second year of a four year program, funded by the Microsoft Corporation, in which teens in South Shore High School, Brooklyn meet after school in their computer lab once a week to make a game about a social issue. Last year we made a casual game with Gamelab, called Ayiti: The Cost of Life. It can be found at theCostofLife.org and is a challenging strategy game about poverty and education in Haiti. This year we are taking the teens into Teen Second Life, under the presumption that we can train the teens to collaborate on their own TSL-based games.

Play games: I am glad Nicole mentioned Teen Second Life, because it really as become my second life. Global Kids is the ONLY organization working in TSL (since it opened earlier in 2006, funded by the MacArthur Foundation) to work directly with the teen residents of this virtual world (around 35,000 at this point). This is in contrast to the many programs like Playing 4 Keeps in which educators bring their own students into TSL in their own private spaces. The teens in SL are often homeschooled, have access to powerful computers and are receiving a remarkable education in new media literacy every time they log in to TSL. This is not the space to explore all we are doing in TSL but, in short, we are running our standard after school leadership programs in TSL (albeit, in a virtual form), supporting the initiatives of teens residents who are propose projects they can run on our island, and bringing outside speakers and events in, like Henry Jenkins or the MacArthur announcement about his very initiative. Much of this is digital play, and not strictly games, but often it takes the forms of in-world games.

Use games: We are about to launch our first year of a three year program, funded by MacArthur, in which teens around NYC will meet after school, two days a week, at the Museum of the Moving Image in Queens, to make Machinima (animated movies using game engines, specifically Second Life) about important social issues.

There are so many educational and gaming pathways criss-crossing throughout all of these programs, including but not limited to the school's, the museum's, Global Kids', Linden Lab's (who run Second Life), and the different demographic of youth across our various programs. What does it mean when they connect and, for a period of time, become fellow travelers? What is retained when those pathways diverge? We don't yet know but I hope, by this week's end, through dialogue with all of you, I will have a better framework for thinking about it.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 10:56 AM

Bernie DeKoven

Thanks so much, Barry, for sharing your work and passion so clearly. It was both oddly familiar, and deeply inspiring: your being so puzzled at why things that could be so fun were so boring; your commitment to creating alternatives.

I wanted to share a paper with you written by people who understandably became very close friends of mine - Sustainable Play: Towards A New Games For the Digital Age [http://www.artn.com/DAC_SustainablePlay.pdf] I thought you might find it relevant, maybe even worthy of a few more of your wonderful observations.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 30, 2006 1:04 AM

Carrie Heeter

On Oct. 9, 2006 the AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS posted a clinical report, "The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds" <http://www.aap.org/pressroom/playFINAL.pdf>

The report describes benefits, including cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth derived from "free unscheduled time for creative growth, self-reflection, and decompression" in the form of child-driven play. The report laments the loss of free time in the face of academic pressures and overscheduling of hyper-achievement oriented youth. The report also blames passive entertainment, including television and video games, as interfering with quality free time.

Since our discussion topic is pathways to gaming, I note that a pathway unlikely to emerge in the discussion is pediatrician recommendations to parents to encourage children to play video games. On the other hand, the Federation of American scientists would favor such a recommendation.

I wonder what are children's pathways to this idealized free, child-driven creative play. Does any child engage in it, in the face of unscheduled time (and no TV or video game)? Or do we need to add play to the preschool curriculum? People who are good at utilizing their free, unstructured time probably also experience cognitive, physical, social and emotional well being. Which direction is causality? And how do we teach kids and parents to play video games in healthy, creative, unstructured ways?

Creative Play

Oct 30, 2006 4:12 PM

Tom Satwicz

"I wonder what are children's pathways to this idealized free, child-driven creative play."

I have tried to approach our ethnographic work on gaming with the assumption that kids are going to create a great deal of the structure on their own. They'll do this, in part, by using the adult created tools such as games, televisions, etc. but will be the primary drivers of what goes on. In our observations, we've seen kids play the same games but in very different ways. In one case, a young girl chose certain games because they allowed her to be creative and design things. In other words, we might infer that the desire for "creative play" is a pathway into gaming. I wonder if a child's desire for more unstructured time would lead to gaming as an activity that can fit into those free moments.

RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 30, 2006 1:20 PM

Joel

I am the founder and Ex. Director of the Kindersite Project <http://www.kindersite.org>

The Kindersite is being used for the early introduction to technology for children (ages 2 to 8 years), introduction to English (6 to 11 years) and special needs (Autism, Downs, ADHD etc.). The Kindersite resource includes interactive, rich multimedia games, songs

and stories. About 13,600 schools in 148 countries and many 1,000s of parents have registered on the Kindersite.

The Kindersite has 2 areas:

- For adults (Teachers, parents, librarians, also older siblings and older students) to work with children
- For children to play independently (about age 4+)

The Kindersite content, in many instances, is not directly educative from a curricular point of view, although many items do address aspects of learning. I am not an expert in analyzing or know exactly why the Kindersite has such widespread usage or what is the effectiveness and impact. I see the Kindersite primarily as a motivational instrument and a method to engage children. Within the age group I address, my limited observation leads me to believe that the children at this age do not differentiate the mediums that are presented to them critically, but only consider the content. Thus the Kindersite offers entertainment that is better or worse than other mediums available, TV, Video, Books or Play.

I have completed a very limited survey of adults who use the Kindersite and the results are available as a PDF on the Kindersite at:
<http://www.kindersite.org/PDF/Kindersite%20Survey%20March%202006%20Full.pdf>
A further survey or research is necessary to gain a greater understanding.

From the aspect of this dialogue, I hope my contribution is to bring your attention to the Kindersite as:

- A pathway to gaming
- A platform that enables gaming interaction for students with adults

I hope this is of interest and would be very interested in your thoughts.

RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 30, 2006 4:12 PM

Mizuko Ito

One thread I'd like to pick up on is how the pathways to gaming differ depending on the genre of gaming in question. I think this is implicit in Nichole's question on MMORPGS and Brian's discussion on the sociability of so called "single-player" games.

I was sensitized to some of the gender dimensions of this issue at a workshop on gender and gaming that was putting together a follow up volume to the book *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* [<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/~conferences/content.htm>]. The question on the table for the first book had been the role of "girls games" in bringing girls into gaming. For this second book, there is much more work on MMOs and international contexts of gaming. Nick Yee, TL Taylor, and Holin Lin have really good material on the different social support mechanisms that bring in or exclude girls from MMOs. For example, I found it interesting in Nick's work that a large proportion of women MMO players cite a romantic relationship as a reason they started gaming. Holin has some nice work on cybercafes and dorm rooms as contexts that support boy gaming but is not so helpful for girl gamers. TL is doing work on pro gaming and more activists efforts to bring women into the scene.

My own interest has been drawn lately to casual gaming, portable and handheld gaming (including trading cards), and brain training games as providing alternative pathways into gaming. I love that the handhelds are getting networked - providing new meaning to "networked gaming." Trading cards have been great vehicles for physically co-present gaming for a long time. These forms of game play in more ad hoc physical settings provide different contexts to learn about gaming.

Although I haven't looked into this carefully yet, at least in Japan it seems that the Nintendo DS and Brain Age and its imitators have opened up new demographics for gaming. Many of the best selling games on DS have been pitched in a more girly/feminine idiom which I've been following with interest. Last time I was in Japan I picked up a DS cookbook, a variety of right brain training games, and Japanese and English language training "games." For older women at least, it seems that "self-improvement" and "training" provide a pathway into gaming that "fun" doesn't. The difference between how the PSP and DS have appealed to different demographics (narrower/geekier versus broader) is a nice illustration of how varied pathways to gaming are.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 11:09 AM

Bernie DeKoven

I worked with Mattel Media. Our first product was called "Barbie Fashion Designer." It wasn't networked, because the net wasn't working so well at the time. It was designed to promote Barbie, of course. The idea - girls could make clothes for their Barbie dolls. It was hugely (\$20 million dollars) successful. And pretty much the first hugely successful software product for girls. The thing I most liked about it was that it wasn't so much a game as a tool - a kind of computer-aided design tool, as a matter of fact. You could design a minor myriad of clothes, watch a 3D-modeled Barbie model swish down the runway wearing her user-made outfit, and then, most importantly, print out the design on special paper-backed fabric, and glue it together with similarly special "glue strips."

Which made me think that maybe there's a whole host of tools like these to develop. And they, oddly enough, may be perceived as self-improving fun.

RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 30, 2006 4:42 PM

Carrie Heeter

Here are highlights from a recent study my graduate student and I conducted looking at leisure time as a barrier to game play. This began as an MA thesis and was presented at the FuturePlay conference last month.

“Leisure Time and Gender: Understanding why non-gamers don’t play”

Jillian Caywood and Carrie Heeter

Michigan State University Games for Entertainment and Learning (GEL) Lab

Dept. of Telecommunication, Information Studies, and Media

The study provides the first research evidence of relationship between gender, leisure time availability and time spent playing digital games. To better understand why people choose to spend (or not to spend) time playing digital

games, 276 college undergraduates were recruited to respond to an online survey about (1) gender, (2) current and prior gaming behavior, (3) non-leisure time demands, and (4) leisure time availability are examined.

This study provides the first research evidence of a relationship between leisure time availability and time spent playing digital games. Time allocated per session of game play is strikingly shorter among female than male undergraduates, with females typically devoting one half hour or less per play session and males typically devoting one hour or more. This tendency was not strongly correlated with available leisure time nor with chunk size of typical leisure time. The difference appeared to be deeper and gender-related. The need for short play cycles in games designed to appeal to nontraditional, female gamers is very clear

This study is a first attempt to look at gaming across the life span for college students, revealing that a propensity to spend time playing games is consistent though proportionately lower over time between middle school, high school, and college. Even though college students do not have familial responsibilities or parental demands for household chores, female undergraduates have less leisure time, available in smaller chunks, than male undergraduates. Being in a relationship was unrelated to game play, as was GPA. Gaming was associated with less time spent doing homework, but not with lower GPA.

Synthesis of key findings

Our study confirmed the well-known gender gap in gaming, verifying that this overall trend also occurs among college students. Seventy percent of male undergraduates had played a digital game the week of the survey, compared to only one quarter of the females. The majority of women fell in the category of non-gamers, those who had not played a game in over six months, or never. The goal of the study was not to add evidence in support of a gender gap in gaming. We wanted to explore some of the underlying causes and predictors of differences in gamer orientation.

Female undergraduates in our study spent significantly more time per week working at a paying job than male undergraduates, 2.8 times more. Women also reported spending more time on homework. Those who had played games “today,” worked less hours a week than those who had not played at all within the last six months (8.2 hours per week, compared to 25.6 hours per week). [Hypothesis 6]

Since women reported spending 16 more hours per week on obligatory activities (work + homework) than men, it follows that women would have less available time to dedicate to leisure activities. Male participants reported having more free time than female undergraduates. Men reported larger chunks of free time and more days per week with at least some free time. Comparing what can best be considered estimates of the minimum available free time, males reported nearly twice as much free time as women did, per week (10 versus 5.2 hours per week). [Hypothesis 4]

Gender and gaming behavior were significantly related to the amount of free time one had available and the size of their blocks of time. Students with less free time were less to spend time playing games. [Hypothesis 5]

Our findings suggest that one reason women play fewer games than men is because they are required to fulfill more obligatory activities, leaving them less available leisure time, which in turn makes them less likely to “make” time for games. Therefore, how one’s time is divided between responsibilities and “free” time is a predictor of their game behavior.

Regardless of the amount of time, or leisure time, that one might have available, if they “make” time to game at an early age, players will continue to do so. When looking at gamer orientation across time, individuals were fairly consistent in their game playing in comparison with their peers’ gaming. Across as much of the lifespan as we measured, avid gamers consistently played more than their peers. Those now, in college play the most games in were also the most frequent gamers in high school and middle school. Those classified as non-gamers in college were also likely to be non-gamers in high school and middle school. Our study shows that time spent playing games at younger ages is a good predictor of future play.

Looking at gender and game play behavior over time, males played significantly more than females at all three stages in life. Males played 266 more hours per year each year of middle school, 305 more hours per year each year of high school, and 225 more hours per year in college. [Hypothesis 1]

Females played more games when they were younger than they do in college (yet less than their male counterparts). When comparing playing time in middle school, high school, and college, undergraduate women played more in high school than in college and more in middle school than in high school. [Hypothesis 2]

Looking across the study results, time stress and the perception of limited leisure time is linked to gender, even during college before adult gender roles are fully enacted. Shorter chunks of leisure time, more time spent on homework, less game play and shorter game play sessions even beyond actual time limitations characterize female undergraduates. Almost all of these gender differences were highly significant and large.

Directions for future research

Our study looked at (1) free time and time pressure and (2) current and past time spent playing digital games in relation to both gender and gaming orientation. We studied college students, so data was collected about the present and recent childhood which included middle school and high school. Today’s female casual gamers aged 35 and older do not have a childhood history of digital game play. Yet casual digital games attract them to allocate precious leisure time to gaming. Research should be conducted with this player segment to understand how gaming fits into their lives and interests. Will future women over 35, those who grew up with games, spend even more time playing? Games and gaming behaviors are still rapidly changing, and need to be studied and reported with attention to when in the evolution of games and society each study is conducted.

Although 20 members of the game industry converged on a definition of the broad concept of casual games as “web and downloadable” when they co-wrote

the 2005 IGDA Casual games whitepaper, this distinction based on distribution mechanism, and not the game genre or content. Players do not necessarily use or even understand the term “casual games.” The biggest defining factor of a casual game is to be playable within a short time period. The current study asked about typical duration of a digital game session. Future research should attempt to further define and measure the construct of casual gaming.

Common sense explanations of casual game play among women 35 and older claim women have less free time, available in smaller chunks. Therefore casual games are well suited to the leisure time constraints of older women. The current study clearly shows that it is not just older women but indeed even undergraduate college females who play in blocks of half an hour or less. Games that want to attract larger numbers of female players need to dramatically change game designer expectations of how long a player will or should spend in a typical play session. A female player who knows she can spend as little as 10, 15, 20, or 30 minutes can more easily justify spending her time with a game. Quite likely it is useful to be able to know and control exactly when the play session will end, to facilitate time management and to permit temporary concentration on the gaming experience without the worry of being sure to stop on time. More time in a play session is not better, for the typical adult female player.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 10:26 AM

Bernie DeKoven

Which made me wonder—if blogging, chatting, texting, emailing were also considered games, or at least platforms for social play—would leisure time gaming be more equally divided between genders.

Which also made me think—if we really thought of these as games, what other games like these might we create.

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 2:28 PM

Bernie DeKoven

In my book, *Junkyard Sports*, I describe an approach to engaging children in creative, and less-structured play that is based on ways children play sports in unsupervised, unstructured environments, when they use found equipment to play an adapted version of a sport - one that is better suited to the players, the environment, and the desire to participate in a community of play. Games like Stickball, Halfball, Wallball are all classic examples of this kind of ad hoc, informal play.

I was wondering—well, hoping—that there are equivalents of this kind of unofficial play online—perhaps a use of a combination of different technologies: chat, group whiteboards, texting—to complement some more structured online gaming experience...

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 5:00 PM

Amit Pitaru

Thank you Mimi and Carrie for the great research. My name is Amit Pitaru, a designer (software/hardware...games) and educator from NYC. I'm writing a chapter for this MacArthur series on the topic of games accessibility for special needs.

I was wondering if you know of any research that examines the daily video-game usage of children with special-needs?

I'm *guessing* that historically children with special needs spend less time than average (for their age group) in traditional play-grounds - playing dodge ball, swinging on swings, visiting friends... and so I wonder if the same is true for their usage of video games. My assumption is that many simply cannot play video-games due to the game's physical accessibility issues, and some will not play games because of heightened frustration levels (which also relate to accessibility). But on the flipside, i've been told that many children that are constrained to their homes will play computer games (often multi-player) to compensate for a lack of social access, so it's plausible that they play even more than the average child.

Does anyone know of data that is available on this subject?

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 5:21 PM

Carrie Heeter

Amit,

"Special needs" covers a diverse group of children. I have seen some research in which video games are used as therapy for children with ADHD, to improve focus and concentration. Here's a popular press article on the topic:

http://www.usatoday.com/tech/gaming/2006-03-09-game-therapy_x.htm

MSU professor John Eulenberg, director of the Artificial Language Laboratory, uses serious games to help individuals with motoric and sensory impairments to practice skills needed to communicate and control their environment. I believe he has also developed interfaces for severely handicapped kids to play games.

<http://www.msu.edu/%7Eartlang/Focus.html>

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 5:32 PM

Carrie Heeter

One other thought about special needs. My main focus is serious games. When games become central to classroom learning the experience disparity between gaming experts and novices can present barriers to learning. Accessibility based on gaming experience becomes a consideration for educational game designers.

Some of my own work has looked at the impact of in-game reward structures on play style and, by extension, learning style. We have found that rewarding speedy play does speed up play but also results in lower scores for girls. On average, boys already play

quickly so there was no increase in speed nor difference in score when speed was and was not rewarded.

RE: RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 6:09 PM

Amit Pitaru

Carrie,

> Special needs" covers a diverse group of children.

Indeed. I'm deliberately 'broad-stroking' the question, knowing that the issues differ for every condition and severity (sometimes changing on a daily basis). At this point, I would love to see anything that points to the play-habits of children that are categorized under the 'special-needs' umbrella—particularly about leisure gaming habits at home.

Here's one example that caught my attention—a good friend of mine is an avid world-of-warcraft gamer. When he encounters a gamer online that is extremely talented, he often starts an in-game conversation. In over two-dozen cases gamers revealed that they are disabled and attribute their unique skills to the fact that they are constrained to staying home.

I initially considered disabilities as barriers to gaming-pathways, but here's an example of a gaming-pathway that is triggered by lack-of-access to traditional social interaction.

And I wonder, is it a healthy chosen pathway or a problematic derivative one?

(btw—one other such pathway is the computer games that children play during therapy sessions).

RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 7:37 AM

katie salen

Thanks for a very interesting and focused first day of discussion. What I like about this topic is that it is trying to get at the heart of a really simple question: Why would someone choose to game?

The idea that game playing is a choice is an important one, as both Carrie and Nichole point out in relation to conditions that might affect one's ability to play (lack of leisure time, for example, or lack of models that provide precedent). The question of choice is certainly related to socioeconomic conditions or accessibility issues (kids with physical or cognitive disabilities, for example, who aren't even offered the choice to participate because the games have not been designed to accommodate special needs) and as Brian points out, is deeply entwined with the social dimension of peer networks. Choice gets expressed, in many instances, through genre or platform: Mimi points out her interest in casual gaming, portable and handheld gaming/trading cards and Nichole expresses a similar observation in the lack of MMO play by the urban youth she has been working with. Platforms are chosen for many reasons, and understanding how and why certain platforms support specific types of gaming can help identify some of paths taken in and out of gaming.

Several specific pathways, contexts, and “triggers” for an entry into gaming were identified, and all are worth looking at more closely:

1. a desire for “creative play” (Tom)
2. pediatrician recommendations or recommendations by the Federation of American scientists (Carrie)
3. leisure time as a barrier to game play (Carrie)
4. forms of engagement: making, playing, using within structured programs like global kids (Barry)
5. mentors as models and peer groups as motivators (Nichole and Brian)
6. Portals such as Kindersite (Joel)
7. genre of gaming in question: what platforms and what play styles? (Mimi)

This idea of “triggers” is really interesting and I would like to think about it some more. What are other triggers that might bring kids to games, or alternately, drive them away from games?

I’d also like to think about ways that parents or educators might find pathways into gaming as well, as they constitute a resource for better understanding how we might build out the larger ecology of games around the many stakeholders involved. How do parents that don’t game (this relates to Nichole’s post on a lack of adult models playing MMOs within her community of kids) get brought into gaming? How might we build out a network of models for kids and with kids that brings more players to a wider variety of experiences? And more specifically, what should these experiences look like?

It is no longer enough to just play games...RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 4:10 PM

Carrie Heeter

It is no longer enough to just play games...

I had the pleasure of working with project leader Yasmin Kafai and co-editors Jill Denner and Jen Sun to organize the UCLA workshop Mimi referred to and forthcoming book, *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New perspectives in gender, games, and computing*. At the original Barbie and Mortal Kombat MIT workshop in 1997, video games were almost exclusively a male activity, designed by young men for young men. A question of the time was how do we get girls to play. A decade later, girls do play games, though for much less time than boys. At the 2006 workshop academics researching on gender and games it was no longer sufficient simply to play games. Attendees wanted to change girls and change what and how they play, empowering them to become technological superheroes.

Elisabeth Hayes, professor with the University of Wisconsin Games, Learning, and Society Research Group, wants girls to play the games that boys play. She doesn’t want them to play just any game, it has to be games which help girls develop tech-savvy abilities, attitudes, and identities. In her forthcoming chapter, “Girls, Gaming, and Trajectories of IT Expertise,” Hayes acknowledges girls are not technophobic; they do play games and in fact surpass boys in some uses of computer technology such as blogging. But for Hayes, just playing games is not enough. It matters what games girls choose, and she wants girls to move beyond being players and engage in game-related practices such as creating in-game and game-related content. These kinds of activities

develop domains of IT expertise and problem solving which translate easily into careers in programming and computer science and other fields that rely on technologies. Hayes is exploring strategies to intentionally foster girls' deeper participation in game-related constructive activities. Despite our ulterior motives of personal empowerment and world domination, Hayes also reminds us that "fun" is one of the primary underlying reasons that people want to play games.

RE: It is no longer enough to just play games...RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming New or unread items

Nov 2, 2006 9:56 AM

Bernie DeKoven

"...Hayes is exploring strategies to intentionally foster girls' deeper participation in game-related constructive activities. Despite our ulterior motives of personal empowerment and world domination, Hayes also reminds us that "fun" is one of the primary underlying reasons that people want to play games."

I'm probably missing the point. I don't actually understand this. 1) It frightens me a bit to think that someone is making games obligatory, or suggesting to kids that they need to play a particular kind of game. Why would anyone believe that it is "better" for girls to play games that don't particularly interest them? and 2) what does this have to do with fun?

I certainly am a believer in the notion that the larger the repertoire of games one enjoys, the better, but it seems obvious to me that the important thing is that people are playing. The better game is simply the one that is more fun for whomever is playing it.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 4:22 PM

Carrie Heeter

Games are changing.

As we ponder pathways to gaming, let's remember that games are changing. Social and cultural constraints can be barriers to gaming, but as a designer I also blame the games. Market forces and technological innovations expand our concept of what games can be. Popularity of casual games among women who did not grow up with digital games will result in games better tailored to that market. The serious game movement will see new forms of games for a wide range of purposes.

Industry consultant Nicole Lazzaro, President of XEODesign, offers delightful reframing of the often-asked question: are games designed just for girls necessary? Necessary for what depends on who is asking the question. For example, game companies that hope to expand their market wonder whether girl games are the best way to sell games to female consumers. And activists that hope games will be a means to technological empowerment wonder whether girl games are the only way to entice girls to learn and love technology. On the other hand, in her forthcoming chapter in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, "Are Boy Games Even Necessary?," Lazzaro questions whether the game industry should continue creating games for boys. She argues that the game industry remains stuck designing for a niche market —: the once adolescent but now aging males

who were the original consumers of console first person shooter, war, and sports games. Segmenting the game market by sex, and developing for a narrow, extreme subset of either males or females limits market size. Designing games which are strongly “male” typed (or strongly “female” typed) limits the appeal of a game.

Pathways to gaming five years from now will look much different than today, and today looks much different than 5 years ago.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 8:13 PM

Bernie DeKoven

Reflecting on my last several comments, it seems that I'm suggesting that any use of technology for just about any purpose serves as a pathway to gaming—texting, message boards, social networks, even using a remote control. Whether the pathway is in itself a form of gaming, or will someday become identified as such, is another, perhaps even more intriguing grist for our conceptual mills.

RE: RE: It is no longer enough to just play games...RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Nov 6, 2006 12:27 PM

Betty Hayes

I've been "lurking" in this discussion and found it to be very thought-provoking. I want to thank Carrie for mentioning my work, and to clarify a point for Bernie and whoever else might be puzzled by it. I am not advocating that kids be forced to play games that aren't fun (but keep in mind that in some cases this is happening, for example when educators try to use games in the classroom and wind up with games that are far from fun). What I do hope to see, and this relates to katie's request for visions of the future, are efforts to give all kids more access to games that can be starting points for what I call "trajectories of IT expertise." We know from recent research that gaming is THE most important out-of-school experience that draws (mostly white) boys into an interest in computer science and the mastery of IT related skills such as programming, knowledge of hardware and software, etc. Not so for girls of all backgrounds, or boys of color. There are many reasons for this, but one most obvious reason is that girls tend to play games with fewer affordances for developing these interests and abilities as well as less social and family support (we have less information about boys of color but I suspect the same is true). Indeed, most games that have been designed specifically for girls do not include built-in modding features, etc. or have robust fan communities engaged in related production practices such as interface customization. I hope to see game designers take this into account when designing games for girls or any other group. In addition, while more girls are playing games that do have such affordances, they seem to be less likely to engage in these productive practices. I and my colleagues are gathering more information about these patterns of engagement.

While I certainly don't think that the only reason to play games is to become more tech-savvy, I do think that this is a potential outcome and equity issue that deserves more attention. For me, as for others who have contributed to this discussion, pathways into gaming don't end with gaming per se, but continue to the range of productive practices associated with games.

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 8:35 PM

Brian Thompson

I honestly wonder as to whether we can define pathways to gaming so broadly. Game spaces have ethereal but fundamental differences from non-game technological spaces like message boards and so on, at least in my experience. Still, I think this is borne out when you look at the number of people who use social networking sites but never feel compelled to play actual games. In other words, I'm not entirely certain that "formal" video games are on a continuum with texting, myspace, and so on. Of course, my opinion could be affected somewhat by the fact that I played games on home systems long before I had Internet access or much exposure to technology, thereby leading me to form distinct and separate categories for each. Is the distinction between game space and technological space destined to erode as more young people come of age in the time of cell phones, Internet cafes, and next generation home game consoles?

RE: RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Nov 1, 2006 5:29 AM

Laurie McCarthy

"Is the distinction between game space and technological space destined to erode as more young people come of age in the time of cell phones, Internet cafes, and next generation home game consoles?"

This is a good question. While certainly not everyone who uses technology will become gamers, games themselves are becoming more integrated into (or at least accessible via) everyday technologies. During a recent interview with a 10-year old boy for a (non-gaming focused) research study, we discussed cell phones. The boy, who does not currently have a cell phone nor do many of his friends, explained that, in choosing a cell phone plan, he would select the one that offered the most minutes. His decision was not based on his voice call needs, but on the ability to play games. It was fascinating to me that, while he never played a game on a cell phone, that he perceived the phone more as a gaming than a communications device. It also brought home the importance of understanding not only how artifacts (technology-based and otherwise) are used, but the youths; perceptions of what they are and what place they have in their lives.

We tried to address this issue in our gaming study through an ethnographic design, entering the homes of children to observe them play video and computer games. A view of the social interactions around their play and how the game space was organized in the home helped us gain a deeper understanding of the role of games and gameplay in the lives of our participants that we may have otherwise missed.

RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Nov 1, 2006 1:33 PM

Carrie Heeter

Laurie, you point about the boy thinking of a cell phone as a gaming device is fascinating. A challenge researchers face is being more specific about what we are studying. Games, or cell phones, or television, or play are broad constructs encompassing a spectrum of behaviors and positive or negative consequences. How do we talk about the same thing, how do we be specific enough to be comparable, to sort out which dimensions of games we are studying?

"Methods" sections need to include clarification of the nature of the game and the cultural context.

Somehow without possibly having any time for this I ended up taking a memoir writing class this semester. A quote from a brief assignment about a relationship that went sour also illustrates that a phone is not always a phone...

*"Mail between East Lansing and Rio Frio, Costa Rica took anywhere from 3 to 5 weeks. Sometimes after 5 weeks of no mail, two letters would arrive on the same day even though they were sent 2 weeks apart. **A single telephone located in the café served the entire town and surrounding 8 mile area.** I call it a telephone, but it was used more like a telegraph. Calling for romantic conversation would have been impossible to coordinate via slow mail and (25 years ago) would have cost more for a single long distance call than many villagers earned in a year. Not something a Peace Corps volunteer trying to fit in and earn the trust of residents would dream of doing."*

RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming: some references

Nov 1, 2006 8:24 AM

katie salen

I wanted to jump in a post a couple of references/links for papers and other materials that people have called out in their posts, but not offered links to.

1. Betty Hayes work on girls, games, and IT: www.glsconference.org/pop/hayes.htm
2. Laurie Mcarthy: Gaming to Learn What? An Ethnographic Study of Kid's Video Game Play [<http://life-slc.org/?cat=10&paged=2>]
3. Mimi Ito's work on Yu-Gi-Oh and gaming via handhelds [<http://www.itofisher.com/mito/publications/>]
4. Some of Carrie Heeter's work with girls and games: [<http://aliengames.org/>]; [<http://commtechlab.msu.edu/carrie/>]
5. A podcast for the game developer portal Gamasutra on Game Design Education, which is surely one pathway into gaming. [http://www.gamecareerguide.com/news/11459/gamasutra_podcast_game_education_.php]
6. Game Making in Education: Australian-based community of teachers working with game design software to teach kids how to make games. [<http://www.groups.edna.edu.au/course/view.php?id=81>]
7. On a related note, I am currently working on a project called Game Designer [http://website.education.wisc.edu/gls/research_gamedesigner.htm], which will embed game design curriculum and thinking within a game making and modding environment, with a strong community and social networking orientation. The project argues that empowering kids through design is one way to support a range of literacies--here games

become a jumping off point for other forms of education and experiences, some aesthetic, some social, some technological.

I will try to post other links as they come up.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Nov 1, 2006 5:44 PM

Robert Torres

Katie: thank you for inviting me to participate. This and the previous two dialogues have been great and tremendously illuminating.

I am a school designer, ph.d student focusing on games and learning at NYU and a returning gamer. I run a small consulting group that designs small high schools in NYC, mostly funded as part of the national initiative by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to create new small schools in cities that have long been hurting for better ones. Before now, I was the principal of a small progressive middle school I designed with a group of teachers. I have a background in film and my first film, *Nuyorican Dream*, premiere at Sundance and have HBO acquire it back in 2000. It's about the impact of poverty and substandard education on my Puerto Rican family.

I can't recall the pathway to my obsession in my early teens with Atari and Pacman other than to say that my peer group then had just about everything to do with whatever I was interested in. I also I remember that gaming—with digital platforms, board games or otherwise—seemed as natural to us as puberty. What was unnatural to us was the resistance to gaming, especially of the digital type, we got from adults (this reminded me of Barry's post about his recent visit to the high school). It's hard to say if this resistance finally gave way to our letting go of games for other preoccupations, but I think it's worth noting that today's resistive narrative about digital games hasn't evolved much nationally, but perhaps especially within low-income communities.

Disillusioned with the bleak progress of education reform work in our country and wanting to better merge my media and education work, I started a doctoral program at NYU three years ago. Not long after, I came across Jim Gee's work on games and learning, and haven't looked back since. Connie Yowell says it best when she talks about the potential of this work. At a panel at the Games For Change conference in NY in October of '05 she commented (citing Gee) that not since the days of John Dewey (and the 50s with Piaget) has there been an effort to revolutionize how we think about learning and pedagogy and that we in education are in dire need (grave, really, I'd say) of rethinking our approach to pedagogy and curriculum. She added, that when she spends time with game designers, she feels as if she's in "the middle of the that potential revolution." (I actually recorded this panel discussion on my iPod, if anyone's interested.) Like Connie, my interest in the area is not gaming per se, but in the huge potential this space has to contribute and indeed transform the archaic and behaviorist learning model that still largely predominates in our schools, in spite of the tireless efforts of inspired educators to alter it. The revolution lies in the understanding game designers have developed (unlike, lamentably, the majority of teachers and principals I work with) that conditions for learning, engagement and indeed empowerment (not to return to Dialogue 1) require an identification-with, a desire to become, and highly social interactions that allow for sharing emotions, skills and knowledge.

This is why most kids I know, boys and (certainly to a lesser extent) girls, are so attracted to games while school remains for them, research shows, mostly irrelevant. I work extensively with low-income kids and their pathways to games (overwhelmingly, as others have noted, game consoles, not computer games) aren't at all mysterious or greatly varied. The vast majority of them are playing them for they are as much part of their youth culture as is MySpace and the fly-est sneakers they can get their hands on. My interest here as someone principally interested learning is precisely because they're so pervasive and because schools still remain far from noticing. I am encouraged, though, by communities like the Serious Games movement that is inclusive of a pool of diverse sectors that has begun to forge the way to making immersive and interactive technologies an acceptable tool for learning, maybe even in schools.

RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Nov 3, 2006 10:50 AM

Beth Kolko

I wanted to respond (albeit a little late in the week) to Carrie's comment about definitions and also Mimi's earlier comments about gaming patterns and gender in other countries. One of the reasons I've been absent from this discussion is I'm out of town giving a talk on precisely the topic of when is a technology a different technology based on the conditions of its deployment. I mostly do my research internationally, in a variety of places that could be termed the developing world, or emerging markets, or lesser-developed countries—depending on who's doing the naming. What I've found over the past five years of this work is that games are hugely important as a technological entry point for youth. Kids don't have computers in their homes, and the small percentage that do have computers in the schools have them as testing machines or highly regulated work spaces, not places for exploration. A primary mode of Internet access is through public Internet access points (Internet cafe, computer club, etc.). In many countries, playing games is cheaper than purchasing Internet access, so kids will come to an Internet cafe to play games -- which allows the owner of the cafe to stay in business during the early days even if there aren't enough customers to provide Internet-related revenue. But my point here is two-fold. First, games are what bring kids in to first touch a computer. And second, gaming is a profoundly social activity (going back to the discussion from Monday) at all levels. In interviews with gamers in Central Asia, for example, gaming is a coordinated social activity with friends connecting via their cell phones and then meeting up at the game cafe. And while the economic structure doesn't support traditional MMO play, people have created LAN-based versions of popular MMOs that allow them to experience the virtual world of the game within their local context. Also worth mentioning is that when computer/game use is restricted primarily to public spaces, there are implications in terms of gender, especially in places where women have more circumscribed lives. But I do think that looking at gaming patterns globally can productively complicate our ideas of what constitutes a game and game-playing activity.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 8:52 PM

Barry Joseph

"What are other triggers that might bring kids to games, or alternately, drive them away from games?"

I thought about this question quite a bit on Monday, as it was the first day of our gaming program at our high school. I'll reflect on Katie's question through sharing some stories from the day (incidentally, a tv crew came: You can watch the video or read the transcript at: <http://www.ny1.com/ny1/Living/technology.jsp> Look for "Students Make Video Games, Learn Life Lessons")

During the morning school-wide announcements, it was announced, as a reminder, "Any technology found on a student will be confiscated and returned at the end of January." That would mean a gameboy, mp3 player, cellphone, pda, laptop, etc. How are these teenagers suppose to develop the new media literacies required for the most basic office job when they are not allowed to access these tools as part of their basic education? Not only are they prevented from learning how to integrate digital media into their education but they lose their benefits of being around knowledgeable adults who could informally mentor their usage. As I did last minute recruitments, the way the Treo attached to my belt was eyed you would have thought it was a pot of gold. Many asked if they could touch it.

As we pitched our Second Life-based game design program, we learned to say that it was an opportunity to design and trade clothing - this seemed to have great appeal to many of the girls, and some boys as well.

Later in the day, a half dozen boys we had met earlier in the day came to hang out in our office. They complained to me about the technology ban in the school, a ban which is part of a larger anti-cellphone ban citywide. They explained how stupid it was to them, how they wished they could bring their laptop in to school. "What if a teacher said something and you need to look something up," one boy said, somewhat naively as there is no wireless access in the school. Another suggested we hold a gaming competition in the Global Kids office, as a way to recruit new students (an excellent idea).

Mostly they sat around, happy to find a safe place to sit and talk before their next class. I took them over to our magazine table, where we keep some gaming magazines. They hungrily grabbed them up, each taking a different issue to thumb through. I also tried to pitch the NYTimes. There was no interest. "My dad reads the Daily News," one boy said, to which I replied, "If you read this, you'll know more than him." Still no interest. I began separating out the sections. "Arts. Sports. Business," and then, reading the headlines, "Here's one about the new Sony gaming platform." They all came running and gathered round the Times' business section to read it. Many were probably reading the New York Times for the first time in their lives.

Finally, as part of the recruitment earlier in the day, we asked what games they played. They played all sorts, but I was interested to note that only one girl played World of Warcraft, the only white girl I met all day. It caused me to reflect on Nichole's comments on lack of MMOG playing amongst adults and youth of color, as well as my recent reading of Henry Jenkin's talking about new media literacy being about not just learning how to use tech tools but becoming fluent in the cultural competencies that surround their usage. Most of the teens in my school don't use MySpace but a social site called Sconex. They play games but don't play MMOGs. So one one hand I am pleased to see that while the school prevents most new media literacy that is available through games, they are still finding access on their own time, nonetheless they are doing so in a somewhat marginalized way, perhaps due, as stated earlier, to their lack of adult or peers engaged in the more mainstream environments.

It's hard to spent a day in the school without running into various triggers that bring teens into games as well as ones which drive them away.

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Oct 31, 2006 9:03 PM

Bernie DeKoven

Congratulations, Barry, on the fine article! What a validation for your students - if they need any more than they are already experiencing.

Given that these kids are working together in a face-to-face environment, I was wondering what you've noticed about the social dynamics of their work relationships, and any parallels in their virtual relationships. This might help us contemplate other pathways that somehow merge, connect, relate the worlds of flesh and flash.

Re: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Nov 2, 2006 12:48 AM

Barry Joseph

>I was wondering about their community—how effective they are at teamwork, mutual support, etc. and how they play when they are online. In other words, is effective teamwork a pathway to a more community-oriented kind of gaming?"

Bernie, That's an interesting question. However, I am not sure if my anecdotal experiences supports that. We always do an icebreaker at the beginning of our workshops and I have been amazed at the start of the program, both this and last year, at how effectively these teens—who start as strangers—collaborate in the very bizarre tasks we give them (the sort of getting-to-know-you exercises that we design to force collaboration skills, and discussions about them, early on). Yet I don't think these teens take this collaboration online with them into games. At least, not from what I have seen.

Re: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Nov 2, 2006 1:20 AM

Joel

There is now considerable evidence that older students prefer collabarative gaming to stand-alone game playing. The critical factor being the potential for 'Chat' and collabarative, often competitive, activities. This online collabarative play is preferred even to using stand-alone Console games players (X-box etc.).

This can also be seen in the huge usage of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG also MMOG) see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MMORPG> for more. Some of these games have experienced over 50 million users globally. See also <http://www.mmorpg.com/index.cfm?bhcp=1> (MMORPG.COM).

RE: Re: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Nov 2, 2006 10:05 AM

Bernie DeKoven

Ah.

Ah 1: hope is restored, faith in play-community connection likewise affirmed

Ah 2: if chat is the primary vehicle for empowering collaborative relationships during games, then it is:

1. another pathway to gaming
2. another pathway to community

and could be considered a play form in its own right, maybe even.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Nov 1, 2006 1:33 AM

Philip Bell

"This idea of 'triggers' is really interesting and I would like to think about it some more. What are other triggers that might bring kids to games, or alternately, drive them away from games?"

My research group is conducting a set of child ethnographies that focus on everyday learning related to science and technology (<http://everydaycognition.org/>). Videogaming of some genre is strongly present in most of the cases. We've seen some complex and fascinating social contexts that provide reinforcing conditions that "trigger" (and sustain) the gaming that is present. Here are a couple of examples...

In one case, the family leads the most technology-rich life I've ever encountered. The house is just filled with an array of consumer electronics. (The battery / gadget charging area is very intimidating!) We quickly learned that there is a formal process in place for passing the older technologies down within the family, from oldest to youngest in the home. So, a new game system comes in the home, often initiated by the father (although there is apparently quite a bit of joint deliberation on such things). The next oldest N-1 system goes to the desk of their oldest boy, and the N-2 system goes into the space where the younger daughter plays. This "hand me down" process is done for gaming systems, TVs, and digital cameras. What is beautiful about this arrangement is that it sets up natural apprenticeship opportunities between members of the household since one's developed expertise can be used to help the person currently learning a particular game that has been passed down. The father also engages in a fair amount of MMORPG play. He brought his son into it a while back to the point that the fifth grader developed quite sophisticated expertise in one game (beyond the father's ability). They have game parties at their house with adults and visiting "expert" gamers—and the child is frequently called out as being the best player in the group. This called out "precocious expert" reputation certainly reinforces his expert gamer identity. In this family, we also believe an important line of influence is that this is a family that is deeply into gaming of many kinds (puzzles, board games, card games, plus the full gamut of computer games). The boy was a ranked chess player in the fourth grade—and the family puts significant effort into chess lessons and tournament play. In our fieldwork, when the children are not doing homework, they tend to be gaming in some way—and frequently with peers. So, there are multiple lines of influence that "trigger" the children's gaming in this home (technology inheritance, a broad ecology of gaming, prodigious product purchasing)—and there is active reinforcement of developing expertise from multiple fronts (apprenticeship arrangements, reputation systems, peer and cross-age interaction).

In another case, we have a Filipino mother and her fifth grade daughter who does a fair amount of Nintendo DS gaming. We have learned that there is an extended parenting

network of sorts—made up of four sets of formal godparents and a handful of additional adults that go by the honorary title of "aunt" and "uncle"—who regularly interact with the daughter on specific domains or interests. They describe it as being common in Filipino culture. One godmother helps the girl with her math learning. Another is actually her "technology godmother"—who bought her the DS and her cell phone—so that the girl can have access and learn how to use technology. This strikes us as a fascinating social organization where adults with particular interests / backgrounds / resources can serve as targeted learning brokers for the children.

So, in both of these cases parents and adults play a crucial role in the triggering. And there are specific social and material organizations that are used to do the triggering and sustain subsequent learning.

As a closing (and I think obvious) thought, various media (advertisements in magazines, game posters on the wall, manuals, commercials / teasers) are also thickly present in the lives of these children—and likely trigger specific lines of action that take them deeper into gaming.

RE: Dialogue 3: The Kindersite's Pathways to Gaming

Nov 1, 2006 2:38 AM

Joel

I will have a go at describing how very young children (2 to 11 years) are being brought in to the Kindersite (the pathway). This is primarily based on:

1. Feedback from users
2. Analysis of registration forms
3. Survey of users (mentioned in my opening comment above)

Stage 1: Dissemination

The Kindersite undertakes a number of Internet based dissemination activities that have gained us global usage and are now being utilized within other educational projects funded by the European Union government. These dissemination activities bring many new teachers/principals of schools/educational authority to the Kindersite, our primary focus.

Stage 2: Testing

The recipient of our message then tries out the Kindersite independently to gain trust of the resource and understanding of what is available.

Stage 3: Usage in Schools

The adult/teacher tries out the Kindersite within a class/lesson/free play period. Gaining experience of how they can use the Kindersite with their students. Generally, teachers use the Kindersite by; showing the whole class an item/s of content and then asking the students to use it/them independently and/or using the Kindersite in class and recommending it for use outside of school (parents, Libraries) as well (we have flyers on the Kindersite that teachers can print and distribute for students to take home).

Feedback and experience shows us that once children are introduced by adults to the Kindersite, very quickly they will use the site independently and enthusiastically as their first experience in using technology and gaming. They also, again almost independently, will quickly build the mouse and PC skills to use the games and resource successfully.

This ability to build skills independently has been the subject of an incredible project, "Hole in the Wall Experiment" see <http://www.niit.com/niit/ContentAdmin/NWS/NWSPR/NWSPR2/pr-010405-sugata-dewang.htm>

Stage 4: Viral Dissemination

Established users of the Kindersite are now the primary disseminators of the resource (pathways). Teachers/Principals etc. tell colleagues, up and down levels in an authority (often resulting in technology workshops where the Kindersite is introduced), place postings in Listservs, write descriptions in association newsletters etc.

We have many examples of the above, plus instances of Grandparents passing the site on to their children with young children etc.

Conclusion

Clearly due to the extremely young age of the Kindersite users our pathway to gaming is through an adult interloper BUT this is a temporary stage as students quickly gain ownership of the resource. I cannot comment at an academic level on what is the trigger for this step but I believe, regarding the Kindersite content, it is purely a question of the engagement with the content i.e. interactivity. The more interactivity, the more the children will play a particular piece of content. A perfect example of an engaging game is a very simple one. The children are presented with an Open Dolls House with a large choice of furniture and ornaments that can be dragged and dropped in to the house, I have seen children (from the age of 4 years) play with this game for considerable periods.

RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming

Nov 3, 2006 7:23 AM

Laurie McCarthy

The conversations around triggers and what brings kids to games and gaming has been quite stimulating. On this last day of discussions, I'd like to toss out a couple thoughts I've been mulling over this week. One has to do with the role of personal interests in influencing pathways into the gaming space. We have seen this emerge in different ways with the children in our study. One girl, for example, who plays simulation games (Zoo Tycoon, The Sims, Age of Empires) is drawn to games for the way in which they are simultaneously "realistic" and "not the real world." This allows her to connect her game activity with her own values (e.g., taking care of the animals in Zoo Tycoon) yet also frees her to make decisions that she would not do "in real life" (e.g., making choices based on money rather than compassion). Another child plays baseball, football, basketball, and soccer in both the "physical world" and games, often bringing experiences from the former into the social space of his game play. Then there is the girl Tom mentioned earlier who selected games that allowed creative play. Did the interests and values of these children influence their pathway into gaming or is it that the relationships emerge within play? Also, the examples I cite allow us to consider clear mappings, but I wonder what those cases where the relationship between interests/values and pathways to gaming are less evident might look like. I have also been thinking about pathways moving outward from gaming—not away from gaming, but beyond the "game space." Are there experiences during game play that form and/or expand connections outside of the game? The boy I mentioned earlier who played sports games sometimes used, in his real life games, moves/strategies from the video game. One girl learned about baseball from the video game, Backyard Baseball. In a different study, a 10-year old boy commented

that he learned about finances from video games and explained commodities using the example of Runescape. We could not track, through our observations, how some of these connections played out over time. I would be very interested in other's thoughts and observations about pathways beyond gaming.

RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming: Final Thoughts

Nov 3, 2006 7:29 AM

katie salen

As we head into the last day of the dialogue I want to see if we can focus on some blue sky proposals and “worry scenarios”—the best and worst—of what we see the potential for gaming to be for young people, parents, and educators. In the past week you have all shared so many good examples of existing programs and research, and now I’d love to brainstorm a bit and ask: “What would you like to see happen?” What new pathways need to be invented to address some of the access and inequity issues that have been raised? How might we better build on parents and grandparents playing together with their kids or providing mentorship models that are missing from so many kid’s experiences?

Conversely, I’d like to know your thoughts on what you fear in this area: what kinds of dangers do you see the kinds of pathways that do exist?

RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming: Final Thoughts

Nov 3, 2006 9:45 AM

Barry Joseph

“...some blue sky proposals and “worry scenarios”-the best and worst-of what we see the potential for gaming to be for young people, parents, and educators.

From a recent ze frank podcast:

In a recent press conference, White House spokesman Tony Fratto was asked about reports that the president refuses to engage in any strategic planning to deal with the possibility of a Democratic takeover.

Mr. Fratto replied, “I think the President has been very clear that's he's preparing for a Congress that has Republican leadership and that's the way we'll continue to proceed, it's the only way to proceed.”

Asked why the president wouldn't consider planning for both alternatives, Fratto said, “We're still in the game and if you're in the game, you're in it to win.”

The reporter... responded by saying, “Government isn't a game, and you are governing, and so your responsibility is to prepare for how to govern, regardless of how it turns out, so it may be a game in the political sense, but it's really not a game to Americans who want their government to be ready to do what needs to be done.”

Listening to this on my ipod (watching it, actually) as I commuted to work reminded me that language is one of these pathways that intersect with and frames how we approach games. This is both an example of the linguistic pathways of politics and games intersecting, but it also uses a variety of definitions of games, one which I think is often a

barrier to access. "It's really not a game to Americans..." In this definition of games, we are not talking about games at all but a contract between the trivial and the substantive. When parents and educators think about youth and games, as long as they are trapped in the "games means trivial" framework, the hurdle for appreciating what games offers is enormous.

How much easier would it be if the dominant linguistic framing, when it came to discussions of games and learning, were more influenced by the framing implied in "gaming the system" (identifying and manipulating underlying rules to advance) or "Would I like to try something daring and new? Sure! I'm game." (an open, flexible willingness).

So a "best scenario" is that people become more conscious of the way they use language to frame their understanding of games and interrogate how that reinforces or contradicts their own prejudices and hopes for the role of games and learning as they bring that language into other domains (e.g. politics, education, etc.).

In other news: I was impressed to learn a library by my school has (or had, it was 2 years ago) Yu-Gi-Oh contests to bring teens into the library. That is a brilliant way to engage youth and create an intersection between libraries and gaming.

In reference to my recent email in which I noted that teens in one of my schools are not allowed to have any digital technology on their bodies, I would like to see administrators recognize the importance of youth developing new media skills, recognize the importance of bringing youth's informal learning within their school space, and then work with educators and studies to create more rational policies about personal and communal technology use and access while in school.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming: Final Thoughts

Nov 3, 2006 10:48 AM

Tom Satwicz

Here is a short story from my days as an elementary school teacher back in the late 90s that speaks a bit about the pathway games can take and where they can end. This was a time when Pokémon was all the rage and a large percentage of the kids were playing every chance they got. At some point it became evident that some kids were taking advantage of less knowledgeable trading partners (usually this occurred along age lines) and the principal decided to "ban" Pokémon cards from the school. This, of course, links to some of what Barry posted while I was composing this message and is, I suspect, a common story.

I do not want to question the principal's decision to ban this game from the school. She did an incredible job in difficult place. But what I think needs to be done is some work to not necessarily bring more kids into gaming, but to allow their gaming activities to have a pathway into school and other contexts. I do not see this as a policy issue at this point; the school I worked in was not equipped, on many levels, to make use of what were ultimately emergent practices of commodification (like what Laurie mentioned). Teachers and other school personnel have very few resources for bringing gaming (and many other everyday activities) into school, and so it is incredibly difficult to create policies that make sensible use new media. I would like to see some work that thinks seriously about how activities like trading Pokémon cards or developing strategies for

leveling up characters can be used to help kids make sense of the content they are being taught in school. This does not mean that kid's should be trading cards or playing games in class, but rather some kind of hybrid between what school is now and the practices kids are already involved in.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming: Final Thoughts

Nov 3, 2006 11:08 AM

Bernie DeKoven

Hopes:

- Education becomes a pathway to gaming, and vice versa
- Gaming itself becomes a far less isolated or bounded experience, blending seamlessly with other forms of social and intellectual discourse
- Television and other entertainment media (commercial and public) serve as ever more effective triggers for gaming activities (I realize now that we probably should have spent more time on exploring TV, etc, as pathways to gaming.
- The online gaming experience will blend with more face-to-face invitations to play.

Fears:

- As games become more embraced by the educators, there will be: 1) the development of games that are clearly not fun, nor intended to be fun, at all - and strong censoring efforts will be put into place, and 2) kids will be obliged to play these games, whether they want to or not.
- Commercial pressures will erode the willingness to enter into the online gaming space—things that are labeled as games will prove to be thinly disguised attempts to sell products and services.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming: Final Thoughts

Nov 3, 2006 11:42 AM

Beth Kolko

Some thoughts in response to Katie's closing charge:

As a way to address continued schisms along lines of gender and age, I'd like to see more work on gaming as an integrative activity, as just another element of engagement with technology.

In thinking about how to develop new pathways to deal with some of the inequities discussed over the past week, I'm struck with the consistency of the theme regarding collective or community activity (whether peers, caregivers, etc.) that influences gaming pathways. More opportunities to integrate gaming into other social activities and existing social groups might provide pathways that broaden the gaming audience.

I also suspect that some of the questions we now face will fade a bit as devices and activities increasingly converge. Some people mentioned earlier in the week about mobile games and what happens when we start including cell phones in the conversation. The increasing ubiquity of mobile devices, and the expansion of those into

gaming devices or social interaction devices (via sms, photo sharing, etc.) is, I would argue, one of the most interesting trends globally.

A blue-sky proposal from me, then, would focus on developing more varied content for mobile devices. And, since we're blue-skying, I'll also add to my wish list something I tried and abandoned, but would hope people with more skills and resources might tackle: to develop gaming content that dovetails with the goals of international development efforts (health information, poverty alleviation, growth of civil society, etc.) that is designed for mobile devices and perhaps incorporates sms (but not web content which is too expensive) to leverage the strength of existing social networks. Mobile devices are the most prevalent technology in many countries, especially in rural areas, but new content tends to be targeted towards different kinds of audiences (or 'consumers,' to be precise). If overcoming inequity is a goal, then I do think a wider range of mobile gaming content would be a great beginning.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming: Final Thoughts

Nov 3, 2006 11:55 AM

Carrie Heeter

In the "glass half full or half empty" continuum, I have been accused when I see a glass one quarter full of seeing it as overflowing. So, forgive my optimism, but I believe that pathways to gaming are inevitable. Some of us participating in this discussion did help invent digital games, many of us are catching up with the train that is building momentum whether we help it along or not.

Games are exploding, still. Already we talk about wanting kids to play the right games, not just any game. And we want them not just to play but to mod and create games. More people of all ages play more games every year.

Games for health are new and growing. I look forward to the day when health care professionals are as likely to prescribe a game as a drug. Games have not transformed schools yet because we are nowhere near a critical mass of viable learning games. Even if a school district wanted to adopt a plan where children could win fourth grade, the games aren't there yet. But they will be.

Socially concerns would target ways of building in access, not just for physical handicaps for but novice and expert, for game lovers and game reluctant, for those who learn by watching and those who learn by doing. We can look for the places where factors such as income or gender or experience can use a boost. We can guide game makers with good advice about the kinds of reward structures and play patterns which do offer gateways.

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming: Final Thoughts

Nov 3, 2006 6:25 PM

Robert Torres

I too think that we have way more to hope than to fear. Schools, for example, are far from embracing gaming and the constructs they can instantiate, but they can hear the rumblings up yonder of a world shifting, a world less afraid to let themselves, their children, their employees, play. Certainly we need more options that can immerse kids in worlds that effectively mirror disciplinary thinking and learning, but those too are coming. (See the work of David Shaffer at Univ-Wisc, Madison on epistemic games.)

In my earlier post I spoke of the resistance to gaming (and digital expressions in general) that exists in schools and among many adults, but while it's there and undeniable, I am hopeful that as games change to deliberately include populations beyond today's dominant demographic, more mothers, daughters and people of color will join in the magic circle that are games. We've a way to go, but the sky, I think, has never looked bluer.

RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming: Final Thoughts

Nov 4, 2006 1:44 AM

Philip Bell

In terms of pathway dreaming, I would love to see significant theoretical progress on understanding how gaming expertise developed under the conditions of play may (or could be made to) transfer to other aspects of a person's life. This could take the form of direct connections that can be made to particular everyday activities or social futures that are personally meaningful. Similar to Beth's post, I would love to be able to establish a connection between game-based learning and personal health management, community development, or political activism. Also, there is a second class of more indirect transfer effects that would be important as well—things like the development of technology / programming expertise or the expansion of the social networks that broadly benefit a person.

RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming: Final Thoughts

Nov 4, 2006 5:13 PM

Reid Kimball

Triggers that drive kids to games—I think an important trigger are parents that share their gaming experience with their children. Unfortunately, there are not very many children's games released that both parents and children can equally enjoy. I sense that if a parent says they enjoy a children's game, it's because they see the child is happy with the game and it then makes the parent happy. Lego Star Wars II was released recently and because of its recognizable association with Star Wars and LEGO brands, both parents and children can enjoy the game equally for their own reasons. These games can be played cooperatively between parents and children. This kind of experience is one that can be shared between the child and parent and help foster a positive gaming experience and relationship.

A trigger that drive people away from games is accessibility as Amit mentioned earlier and it is one that doesn't have to. Those that are hearing impaired or deaf may experience frustration as they struggle to understand what is going on in the game and live up to what is expected of them. They are at a disadvantage that can't be overcome unless the game features subtitles or closed captioning. I myself find myself not buying very many games these days because I know my experience will be plagued with frustration if the game lacks full closed captioning. In fact, I've gone on to mod the games I wanted to play to include closed captioning so I could enjoy them more. It was my hope that my efforts would influence others to do the same and eventually publishers and developers would make closed captioning standard. After 3 years of working to close caption games, I don't see any change in attitude from publishers and developers at large.

Carrie has an interesting point, "When games become central to classroom learning the experience disparity between gaming experts and novices can present barriers to learning. Accessibility based on gaming experience becomes a consideration for educational game designers."

I think designers are coming up with more tools to help those with less experience to still participate in the gaming experience without frustration. Concepts such as dynamic difficulty are being used to evaluate a player's performance and tweak the difficulty on the fly to ensure the player continues the experience, rather than quitting in frustration and never returning due to repeated failures.

US education is failing our children's potential by boring them to death and not giving them the tools to understand on a fundamental level the material presented to them. Instead they are taught to memorize, long enough to pass the test and then immediately forget it, as it has no noticeable relevance to their daily lives. Games must be incorporated in education curriculum and to do that the games must be more accessible to those with various disabilities whether they are cognitive or physical. Failure to make these games accessible to those with visual, auditory, cognitive or mobility impairments will be a failure to educate our children in an increasingly rapid pace and complex 21st century global environment.

Games that neglect to include accessibility features will lose massive profits as education professionals skip over them, in favor of games that do have accessibility features. Otherwise, the educators may see class action lawsuits filed against them as parents feel their child is not given equal access to education as their peers.

Amit also asks if special needs kids play more or less? Those that play more because they lack social commitments outside of their homes cause him to wonder if the gaming is healthy for them. I believe that those with cognitive impairments that cannot function in a structured environment are given more chances to play through vocabulary lessons that use games such as Hangman and so on to engage them more. I can remember specifically in 5th grade, when part of my day was split between a special ed program and mainstream education. Upon coming back to the mainstream school building from the special ed lessons of the day, some classmates teased me that I was playing games and not learning. I certainly did learn, in both environments, however the material was presented differently, one structured and one through play and other more interactive, hands on activities.

In regards to Katie's comments: "What would you like to see happen?" What new pathways need to be invented to address some of the access and inequity issues that have been raised? How might we better build on parents and grandparents playing together with their kids or providing mentorship models that are missing from so many kid's experiences?"

I think the LEGO Star Wars games are a good example of a gaming experience that can be experienced by both the parent and child as they play cooperatively. Games could be built to put the parent character in morally ambiguous situations that may cause the parent and child to discuss why certain decisions were made.

I would like to see a reform of sorts in the US educational system. One that stresses more on learning through experience, experimentation, discussion and play rather than

memory and regurgitating facts under timed pressure. I would like to see the education system hungry to incorporate educational, experience driven gaming into their classrooms. I would like to see the government feed this hunger with money to purchase those games and also fund the efforts of developers to create the games and ensure they include all the accessibility features required. Say there is a game created that lets people experience both sides of the issue of racial segregation in the 19th and 20th century (until 1960). This game may present or allow people to play the role of famous people in history, such as Rosa Parks and allow them to learn history as if it actually happened to them. A game like that, if it becomes THE standard game for educators to use in the classroom can present untold profits for developers, only if it is accessible for all.

The fear I have is that in the case above, if the education system does adopt games into their curriculum, yet they are not made accessible, those with the various disabilities will fall into the category of have-nots, become under-educated and miss out on opportunities to become productive members of society. Related, educators may be sued by parents of those who are disabled and then give up on using games and fall back to the old education practices of making children memorize facts rather than truly understand the world in which they live in.

RE: RE: RE: RE: Dialogue 3: Pathways to Gaming: Final Thoughts

Nov 5, 2006 7:08 AM

Joe Beckmann

There are some real phenomenological problems elided when we hold to a presumption that games do things that other forms of dialog do not. Chiefly, to presume that THIS VERY DIALOG is NOT a game is a massive presumption. It is for me, and it is for many who "play" on the net and even more who get paid to play on the net, to play in higher ed, to play in research institutions and publication and game production and a host of other analogous activities.

To start with the individual's expression of self to others—in preschool or graduate school - is to observe how we pursue that odd square in the Johari Window—how others see us. All learning is a form of that pursuit, and all gaming is exploring that pursuit within somewhat arbitrary and usually consensual terms call rules. Why is that analog different in a game than in a group, online or in person, serious or trivial, long or short, multiplayer or individual? Settings have some meaning, but are—whether in romance novels or romantic games or sentimental classrooms—all variants on the same analogy: we play for grades, for the support of others, for parental satisfaction or oppositional defiance.

In some fields this analog of play is more clearly just a rhetorical convenience, as in how we "play" politics. Yet we ought to look more carefully at how similar playing politics is to playing a teacher, playing a parent, or playing an employee or professional. We all know many teachers who are lousy at that play, and justify their failure by adhering to rules they enforce but fail to understand. So also we know plenty of politicians who play exactly that same "game," and manipulate voters the same way those teachers manipulate their students. And cops. And the military. And so on and so on.

When play reveals the deeper, underlying strategies we seek to develop to engineer victory in other analogous games—from a profession to "professional sports"—we should

look to how the game of school rejects certain frameworks like overt game play or play in any pleasant or engaging form. When school becomes "work" we ought stop doing it.

Participants

Moderator:

Katie Salen, Associate Professor, Design and Technology Program, Parsons School of Design

Core Discussants:

Bernie DeKoven, author of *The Well Played Game* (a book that helped to revolutionize physical education worldwide)

Jason Della Rocca, Executive director of the International Game Developers Association

Nichole Pinkard, Senior Research Associate/Assistant Professor, Center for Urban School Improvement, University of Chicago

Brian Thompson, is a lifelong gamer who has played competitively for several years, and he is now studying the intersection of technology and the humanities in Stanford's Modern Thought & Literature program

Respondents:

Joe Beckmann

Phil Bell, Associate Professor of Cognition & Technology, Cognitive Studies in Education Program, joint appointment between Educational Psychology and Curriculum & Instruction, College of Education, University of Washington

Betty Hayes, Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, with joint appointments in the Departments of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

Carrie Heeter, Professor of Serious Game Design, Michigan State, University in San Francisco

Barry Joseph, online director, Global Kids

Joel Josephson, Founder and Director Kindersite

Reid Kimball is a game developer

Beth Kolko, Associate Professor in the Department of Technical Communication at the University of Washington

Laurie McCarthy, Cognitive Studies in Education, College of Education, University of Washington

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