Play across networks: An ethnography of information behavior in online gaming

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Abstract
Our work details the process by which a young gamer accesses information and social resources in gameplay. We first frame this practice using the literacy studies concept of affinity spaces. Then, using ethnographic data from both our participant's online and offline life, we describe the way that he uses several disparate spaces for specific reasons, and stitches these spaces together through ongoing voice communication using Skype. We conclude with two provocations for future research: 1) that the process of combining multiple spaces into a single space should be explored in greater depth, and 2) that the use of Skype as the common communicative platform raises further questions regarding the way that the physical self is backgrounded and foregrounded in digital gameplay.

1   Introduction

Play in digital games is a prime example of the way that young people connect across a collection of networks in their day-to-day life (Thomas & Brown, 2011). The complex information ecosystem of people, technologies and tools that comprises online gameplay presents a rich site of study for youth information behavior (Ito et al., 2013).

Our research describes an ethnographic account of how youth engage in play across networks. We present data collected from a young gamer, named Ben, who is an accomplished player of the game Minecraft. We met Ben through an afterschool program called Sci-Dentity (Ahn et al., 2014), that is dedicated to engaging middle school aged children in STEM topics through science fiction storytelling.

The findings from our Minecraft experiences with Ben show the way that he stitches together multiple networked spaces to engage in his gameplay: sharing information, pulling together tools to create digital artifacts, and dealing with the complicated social interactions of play. We position Ben's interactions using the concept of affinity spaces from literacy studies. We describe how Ben plays in these spaces, and examine the way that the voice communication tool, Skype, acts as a connector between his other networks.

We conclude with two primary provocations for future work: 1) that although Ben is using four distinct technologies in his play, he effectively combines all of them into a singular holistic space; and 2) that Skype's function as a ubiquitous mode of communication across networks raises questions about how players background and foreground their race and gender in online play.

2   Background and Research Question

Modern digital gaming does not only take place in a single game environment, but across the many physical and digital contexts of a player's life (Salen, 2008). Gameplay occurs within the confines of the game software, but there is also play and production within the meta-game. The meta-game is the set of social practices that arise from the websites, technologies and media which are developed to support gameplay (Gee & Hayes, 2012). For example, a World of Warcraft player will navigate their character across the virtual world of Azeroth, but they will also debate and discuss the game with fellow players in external online forums that are dedicated to the game (Duncan, 2013).

A theoretical concept that has been used to make sense of the meta-game is that of the affinity space. Affinity spaces are online and offline locations dedicated to a common pursuit that participants are passionate about. In affinity spaces players share information, socialize and construct new content that feeds back into the game (Gee, 2003; Lammers, Curwood & Magnifico, 2012).

The idea of affinity spaces draws attention to the fact that people's activities are distributed across many different environments, called portals. Individual users curate and connect these dispersed portals

according to their needs and desires (Lammers, Curwood & Magnifico, 2012; Baym, 2007). Participants may start out by exploring a single portal, but as time goes on they often branch out into "satellite spaces" (Duncan, 2012, p. 75). As participants gain in social position and increase their content literacy, they are able to fluidly and confidently move between portals, maintaining contacts and sharing knowledge across multiple platforms, technologies and communities (Curwood, Magnifico & Lammers, 2013).

The research described above points to the idea of affinity spaces being stitched together by individual users who pick and choose among a number of portals to create a networked whole. However, there is little work that describes the practice of this stitching. Our goal is to provide a rich description of this process through an ethnographic account of one youth who is an avid Minecraft gamer. We were guided by the following question: how does a young gamer connect multiple networked publics to facilitate play within a larger game-based affinity space?

3   Methodology

We approached this project from an ethnographic perspective, due to our overall positioning of digital games as being a cultural practice that is heavily contextual to the individual player (Thornham, 2011; Consalvo, 2011).

Data collection was informed by an ethnographic perspective known as connective ethnography. Connective ethnography is distinct from traditional ethnography in the way that it expands focus from a single site of interaction, and instead draws on several interrelated sites across all spheres of life, both digital and physical (Hine, 2000; Leander & McKim, 2004; Vittadini & Pasquali, 2013).

Guided by this methodological choice, we collected data from a wide array of sources: informal face-to-face conversation recorded through field notes; weekly play sessions with Ben that were screen-captured for later analysis; video recorded interactions in our weekly after school program; and through artifacts produced by Ben (e.g. Youtube videos and screenshots of his in-game creations). The collected data was checked against Ben's self-reported conception of what was occurring in his online play through three semi-formal interviews that were constructed by ongoing data analysis (Fernback, 2007; Dirksen et al., 2010).

4   Findings and Conclusions

Our findings detail four spaces that shape Ben's gameplay experience. He plays Minecraft itself in public servers where he acts as an administrator and designer. He records his play and uploads his sessions to Youtube, where he seeks to maximize subscribers and viewers. He gathers information (but doesn't actively participate) in text based affinity spaces such as discussion forums and wikis. All interaction is connected through Skype with nearly all play taking place amid a multi-party voice call comprised of his network of friends.

The spaces that mediate Ben's play in Minecraft each have unique affordances and challenges. For example, in his use of Skype as the main communication technology, he is able to pull in many different people that he has met during his gameplay to tap into their unique talents. As an example, after he had recorded a video of a play session for his YouTube channel he added a player named AtomicMonkey to the ongoing Skype call, and they discussed the artwork for the video's thumbnail image. However, the same affordance of easy voice communication lead to a tense moment in a later play session after Ben's grandmother could be overheard on the call, causing another player to make a racially charged remark about her accent.

Each of these environments produces different outcomes in terms of media literacies and digital artifacts. For example, in Ben's role as a YouTube video producer he creates videos with the goal of attracting large numbers of viewers. His ultimate goal is to receive a share of advertising revenues from YouTube, as a way to purchase better hardware and software for his other gameplay related pursuits. In the process Ben gains skills with video production, advertising his content, and managing others to help him with production.

Each space also has a multitude of connections between the others. Ben's movement between spaces is fluid and occurs without thought. In one session, when the server he maintained was having a problem due to a recent update to the game software, Ben moved between the voice call, text based affinity spaces, the game server itself, and his network of friends to find information, leading him to eventually solve his problem. Although finding the solution involved interaction in four different affinity spaces, Ben effectively used them together as a single, combined space.

In the poster we provide a rich account of the flow between spaces through an example vignette of gameplay, to give a more concrete description of how these spaces interact in practice. Our findings suggest two provocations for future research:

- Ben moves across four primary affinity spaces, and in doing so, combines them into a single holistic experience. Future research should examine the way that this experience shapes both gameplay and the acquisition of digital literacies.
- Skype is primary in Ben's interactions. This feature of his gaming practice calls into question an earlier assumption of affinity space theory, which held that participants in affinity spaces can choose whether or not to reveal key aspects of their real-life identity (Gee, 2003). Voice is a revealing technology that makes it difficult to strategically background one's demographics. Future work should be dedicated to examining the process of background and foregrounding the physical self in social gameplay.

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