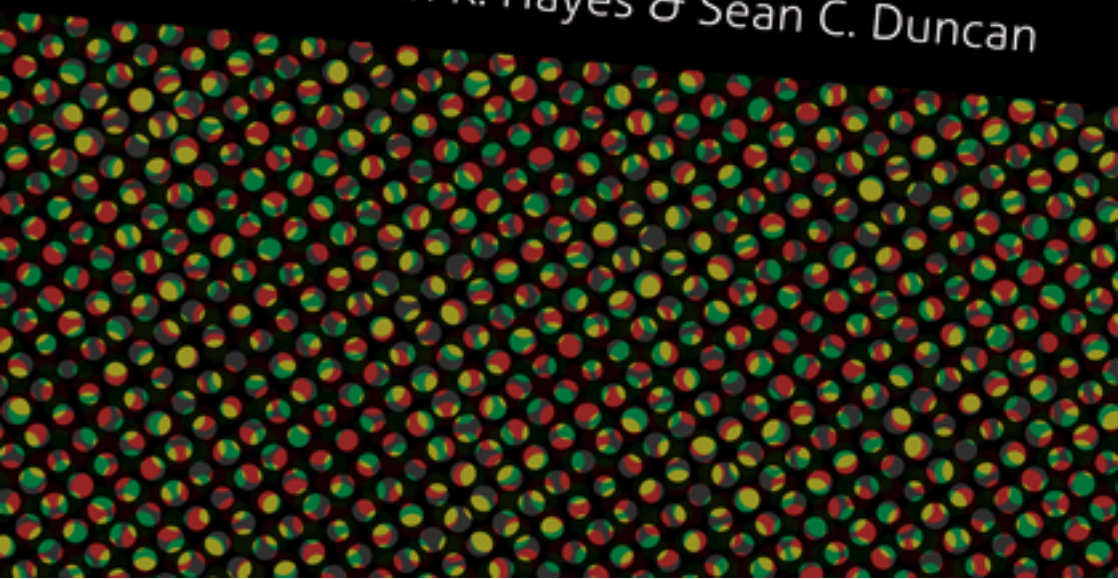games

LEARNING IN VIDEO GAME AFFINITY SPACES

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Expanding the Affinity Space

An Introduction

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Like the protected books, plays, and movies that preceded them, video games communicate ideas-—and even social messages-—through many familiar literary devices (such as characters, dialogue, plot, and music) and through features distinctive to the medium (such as the player's interaction with the virtual world). That suffices to confer First Amendment protection.

—UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT JUSTICE ANTONIN SCALIA, WRITING THE MAJORITY OPINION IN *BROWN V. ENTERTAINMENT MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION*, 564 U.S. (2011).

Games have been with us for millenia in one form or another. As ritual experiences, entertaining diversions, and even as training, games have been "designed experiences" (Squire, 2006) that have driven how we see the world, how we experience one another, and how we learn. In the early decades of the 21st century, however, games are finding new prominence and new roles in global cultures. As digital games in particular have become an important economic and cultural force, scholars are increasingly turning their attention toward the medium to better understand the ways that engagement with games may drive learning, literacy, and social engagement in the 21st century. A new mark in the history of the medium was recently reached with the United States Supreme Court's 7–2 decision (in June, 2011, see above), which set a new precedent that games (even digital games, and

especially violent digital games) are protected speech. Games have achieved a new legitimacy as an important medium for creative expression.

At the same time, the lives of today's children, teens, and adults feature the use of many forms of digital media, beyond just games. In particular, the internet serves an increasingly important role, one that fulfills multiple purposes. As a means of communication between individuals geographically distant, its importance has been long established. But, as forms of engagement on the internet have matured, we are left wondering less about whether or not it *can* be used for interesting communicative purposes, but exactly *how* to best understand the ways that everyday users congregate in virtual environments, whether they are online knitting forums, instructional sites for learning a foreign language, or game design blogs. While the objects of discussion can range quite widely, understanding how everyday participants make meaning in these spaces necessitates developing accounts of how the use of the internet is implicated in their design, their use, and their critique.

In mid-2011, when this introduction was written, so-called "social media" (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Google+) pervade the discussions of digital media in much of the industrialized world. While excited proponents of the field of digital media and learning have occasionally been prone to hyperbole, within each prognostication that digital media will transform our lives is perhaps at least a small kernel of truth. After all, the era of the travel agent has been supplanted by websites such as Expedia and Orbitz, and questions over the financial viability of the printed newspaper as an industry has caused an ongoing crisis in journalism. The role of social interactions via digital media in particular gives rise to concerns and excitement over the potential that these media have for fundamentally altering long-standing institutions.

Certainly, educational institutions, from K-12 through postsecondary education, have not been spared from both these concerns and excitement. For example, challenged with a potential oncoming decrease in the number of traditional college-age students, a lack of state and federal support, and shifting staffing emphases, the future of the University seems undoubtedly to be quite different from its past. The rampant pace of change spurred on by changes in networked digital media are reshaping institutions in industry, politics, and education, for better, for ill, and in ways that we have yet to fully understand. The rise of online-only course offerings and the recognition that viable alternatives to formal education are beginning to take form on the internet are helping to spur on a crisis for educational institutions. Digital media have become more than relevant for the future of education—neither games nor the internet are ignorable, and present very real challenges to the status quo.

And yet, when it comes to the educational implications of games and the internet, discussions more often than not quickly slip into one of two modes: Either "how do we cope?" in which the desire to maintain instructional continuity with existing curricula shapes our discussions into how we should limit their encroachment on existing educational institutions, or, alternately, an enthusiastic and well-intentioned effort to appropriate games and social media as a means to keep existing goals (and organizational infrastructures) maintained for a while longer. Allan Collins and Richard Halverson (2009) refer to this as a tension between "technology skeptics" vs. "technology enthusiasts"; both are understandable desires, driven by a need to address at once the changes that are occurring as threats to existing systems, as well as opportunities for facing the changes head-on, in one sense or another. But, is this the only way to think of technological change and educational discourse? What alternatives are there, and how might we better incorporate an understanding of media "in the wild" (Hutchins, 1995) into discussions of educational reform?

In this book, we present a "middle path," considering digital media and online interactions not for how we should manage them or necessarily accomodate them within existing educational structures, but for what they tell us about the forms of learning and literacy that are *already* instantiated within the use of these media. We aim to think seriously about not just what educational systems can do to incorporate digital media into their practices, but to develop a fuller understanding of how learning and literacy are already embedded within the informal use of digital media. Through a deep investigation of the intersections of gaming and forms of engagement found on the internet in particular, we hope to help further a discussion of the ways that interactive media are more than simply "consumed" by players, but serve as the basis for internet-situated *discussions* that can help to guide our understanding of 21st century literacies.

To this end, this book delves deeply into James Paul Gee's (2004) productive and influential concept of the *affinity space*—briefly defined here and in this book as the physical or virtual locations (or some combination of the two) where people come together around a shared interest or "affinity." The most prominent examples discussed in this volume are online fan sites organized around video gaming, where fans share everything from game play strategies to fan fiction to complex technical modifications of the game itself. By addressing the learning and literacy practices that occur in such spaces, exogenous to formal educational systems, we by no means intend to claim that they are unimportant. Rather, we believe the opposite; by explicating how and why engaged fans of digital media do what they do in online spaces, we hope to cast a light, like Gee did, on the promise of

these media and the problems facing current educational systems. That is, this book presents current research on affinity spaces in order to both explicate Gee's concept, while also providing examples of critical educational research that values the forms of learning that occur outside of formal instruction.

But, before we dive in, we first need to consider more fully what it means to understand learning and literacy in informal media contexts. This will be followed by a discussion of the "affinity space," and then we will conclude with a brief description of the ways that each of the authors in this book seek to understand learning and literacy in contemporary gaming-related affinity spaces. As we attempt to expand the borders of what has typically been considered important digital media and learning research, we first aim to provide an example of how Gee's concept can be expanded, critiqued, and further adapted.

Informal Learning with Digital Media

Faced with the challenges of the 21st century, educational scholarship and practice has increasingly turned from solely being the purview of education scholars, administrators, and teachers, and has incorporated a number of voices from allied professions. While formal education has seen an influx of corporate interest for good and for ill, media scholars, non-profit foundations, and even commercial video game designers have begun to play a role in shaping how youth and adults use digital media for learning (for example, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning, e.g., Kahne, Middaugh, and Evans, 2010; Davidson & Goldberg, 2010; Gee, 2010).

We begin this book by highlighting a different approach to the understanding of digital media and education. Rather than emphasizing the utility of online cultures to bolster existing forms of educational practice, we shine a light on an "in vivo" approach to understanding learning with digital media. That is, investigating how the use of media pervades forms of learning inside and outside the classroom, how learning may look quite different or quite similar to the forms of instruction we intentionally craft, and how the depth of engagement with media may rival (or pale against) the forms of engagement in formal educational settings. As of yet, we simply do not know much about how such learning occurs "in the wild" (Hutchins, 1995), which begs for more research.

Henry Jenkins, Ravi Purushotma, Margaret Weigel, Katie Clinton, and Alice Robison (2006) have labeled this stance to understanding media in their informal contexts as an "ecological approach," or one in which the lived media experiences

of children, teens, and adults outside of schools are taken seriously and investigated. While Mimi Ito and her colleagues (2010) have characterized the "hanging out, messing around, and geeking out" practices that youth in particular engage in, we need to move the discussion into further understanding the forms of affiliation and collaboration that typify digital media use. In doing so, several issues deserve particular mention.

First and foremost, perhaps, is how learning and literacies are conceptualized. Much of the recent research on the out-of-school learning and literacies associated with digital media is informed by sociocultural and situated theorists (Gee, 2008; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; New London Group, 1996; Rogoff, 1990; Street, 1984; Wertsch, 1991) who understand learning and literacy in broad terms as the acquisition and enactment of new identities, practices, social relationships, and forms of meaning-making, tied to particular social and cultural contexts. Such perspectives are not new, and indeed are rooted in studies of face-to-face practices and settings, not mediated by the internet or digital tools. These theories might seem directly relevant to questions about the learning ecologies of digital media, since they demand a more holistic approach than, say, a focus on learning as the acquisition of particular cognitive abilities.

Still, when applied to the kind of learning environments and activities that are the focus of this volume, certain limitations in these conceptual tools become apparent. Indeed, the concept of affinity space itself was Gee's response to the inadequacy of "community" as a construct in such prominent theories as Lave and Wenger's community of practice model. With the shift from community to space necessitated by the more fluid forms of social organization evident, for example, in online game fan communities, additional questions arise about, for example, the role and nature of identity in such spaces. How are identities taken up and enacted in virtual spaces where not only are traditional social markers such as race, age, and gender less visible, the means of displaying expertise or affiliation may be quite varied (Buckingham, 2007)? How are shared meanings developed and acquired when both the people and accumulated knowledge of a space are constantly in flux, and may be distributed across multiple locations and modalities? If learning trajectories are not clearly defined in these spaces (they're not), how do people come to judge prior knowledge and expertise?

Concurrently, researchers have adopted conceptual frameworks focused on desired learning outcomes, such as "21st century skills" (however vexed this concept may be; Partnership for 21st Century Learning Skills, n.d; Willingham, 2009) in efforts to make more explicit connections between out-of-school and in-school learning, as well as to use examples from out-of-school learning to flesh out descriptions