

Leet Noobs

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF
AN EXPERT PLAYER GROUP
IN *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

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Introduction

Wait a Sec... Is Expertise in Games Valuable?

Well, yes, it is. And I don't mean that learning how to be an effective player in WoW prepares one to be effective in other areas (though, I fully believe it can and sometimes does). I subscribe to the notion that the purpose of education is to prepare people to be successful in all areas of life. This includes helping people become engaged in civic life and prepared to take actions towards their personally meaningful life goals. This means that the role of education is to help people develop critical attitudes in the settings they participate and care about. In other words, I value everyday learning and expertise, recognizing that people position themselves and get positioned (Holland & Leander, 2004) in deeply situated contexts that require experiential knowledge and specific literacies (Knobel, 1999) about not just how to be, but how to be successful. I look at gaming culture and online games as a setting for studying the development of everyday expertise, but I see this as part of a larger endeavor in education that looks at informal learning contexts and values any setting in which consequential decisions are made and meaningful actions taken.

The definition of expertise in these socially situated contexts moves away from a cognitivist conceptualization of expertise as individual knowledge and skill acquisition. Instead expertise is about successfully learning to participate in a *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991)—a group that is defined by its members' common actions and behaviors, coming from a shared understanding of legitimate participation within that community—and developing expertise can depend heavily on access to these communities of practice.

This definition aligns well with new definitions of literacy from a field called “new literacy studies,” in which being literate is no longer just about reading and writing. It matters what kinds of texts are being read and written, which means it matters in which social contexts or domains of practice the activity is occurring, because different texts are valued in different contexts.

Being literate means being able to take on an identity as someone who is part of a larger discourse, affinity group, or particular domain of practice (Gee, 2003; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). A full or legitimate participant is someone who can produce, consume, remix, and critique the cultural goods and actions of their particular group. In other words, new literacy studies always looks at the social setting in which meaningful interactions and discourse occur.

New literacy studies' concept of literacy dovetails with both Project New Media Literacies's (Jenkins et al., 2006) and the National Research Council's (2010) list of necessary 21st century skills for students to be successful, and I have combined the two lists together to form the one below. While the NRC report focused specifically on science education, its list fits in perfectly with the more general list that Project New Media Literacies came up with while thinking about what it means to be successful in our rapidly changing, digital world. To be successful, people should be able to

- *produce, consume, remix, and critique all sorts of media.* This is important for an engaged public.
- *communicate and coordinate on joint tasks.* This is important for mobilizing our collective resources in solving our world's problems.
- *play and problem solve.* Everyone should be able to act as a scientist and engineer. Everyone should be able to act as a gamer.
- *perform, identity shift, and metacognate* (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000)—*the ability to reflect on where one is in relation to end-goals of a task or endeavor—in all the various settings they participate in.* This ability to play different roles is necessary for thinking about what could be and assessing where we are in relation to that imagined future.
- *think in systems and form social networks.* An awareness of the world as globally connected and comprised of systems upon systems and then being able to take advantage of networks that leverage this understanding is important for radical change.

Many of these skills are developed naturally through game play. Good games inherently provide two main benefits as a backdrop for participation. First, all games, to be considered *games*, present players with a system of rules or constraints that must be recognized, understood, and navigated in order for players to reach predetermined goals (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Juul, 2005). This is why *Second Life* is not a game but more a platform for user-generated content and interaction. What this means is that, in good games, players have to see the game as a system and take a playful stance of trying, failing, revising,

and retrying various tactics and strategies in order to become expert players and achieve.

Second, many games tell a story or narrative that drives and motivates play, and, actually, in such games it is player decisions and interactions that create an emergent narrative. This requires what Gee calls a *projective identity* (2003, p. 55), where players must imagine who the hero / avatar that they are controlling and being is like and what outcomes should result from their play before making strategic decisions. The imagined future gives players agency, and good games reward them with satisfying stories that players understand through embodied experience.

Understanding these two aspects to games and gaming necessarily complicates our current push to use games for learning and to appropriate gameplay for schools. To play is to explore the rule / constraint systems in a game, motivated by an imagined reality. In many cases, to play expertly is to push at these rules / constraints, to exploit them and break them, to make the world the way it ought to be. This obviously turns the way learning happens in schools on its head. The very act of gaming is subversive and radical, the antithesis of top-down models of authoritative schooling. Yet seeing these benefits to gaming makes it clear that games represent sites of empowerment and agency.

At the time of this writing, there is a battle coming up within the games for learning arena. It may be happening as you read this. This battle is for the future of games for learning and its place within both formal and informal educational contexts. Evidence of this upcoming battle can be seen in the line-up of presentations on games for learning at the 2011 meetings of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), which seemed focused on the assessment of specific content areas (i.e., facts and figures), and the Games Learning Society (GLS), which focused on gaming ecologies and systems thinking.

On one side of the battlefield exists the old guard, the dominating power, which represents a traditional view of how technology and games should be used: as new content delivery platforms—tools for rote memorization. This way of looking at games' potential fits within a model of top-down assessment in schools. Teach to poorly designed standardized tests, focus on content knowledge, use games to deliver this content.

On the other side of the battlefield, mostly younger researchers who have grown up as gamers line up (or, more accurately, clump up in a haphazard, unfocused, amorphous mob) to argue for games as part of larger ecologies of practice and meaning-making. I identify with this group, and we understand

games as systems and gaming as participating in a larger culture around games, learning how to solve problems, collaborate, and push at the systems.

Games make the perfect sites to study how people can develop 21st century skills and everyday expertise and how people can learn to be agentive in the face of difficult problems. More precisely, emergent play that is situated in gaming culture—historically and socially based practices, beliefs, and symbolic thought—and with specific games can give us insight into the development of expert practice in personally consequential settings.

Social and Cultural Capital

Ironically, sometimes the most resistance I receive when I express the importance of everyday learning (and posit that expertise exists in all settings in which people participate in meaningful ways) comes from gamers themselves. Having grown up accustomed to the idea that what is valued in schools, labeled as “education,” only happens in schools and other formal environments, many people see elective activities, such as gaming or reading comic books, as holding no educational value. I suggest, however, that success in life does not necessarily depend on one’s knowledge of decontextualized facts and trivia. Instead, it depends on knowing how to act and be within one’s everyday activities and communities.

A useful idea here is found in Bourdieu’s (1986) writings on social and cultural capital that are alternative to economic capital as ways of valuing status and participation. Specifically, social capital is what one accrues through personal relationships such that parties in the relationships have an understanding of reciprocal responsibilities. This is the idea of scratching one another’s backs when someone in the social network has an itch. Making these social connections and maintaining one’s network is important for online gaming (Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003).

As summarized by Thomas Malaby (2009), Bourdieu’s cultural capital takes on three forms: having embodied knowledge—that is, knowledge originating in lived experience—about what is important or how to do things, owning particular artifacts or tools that are important to the culture, and being labeled as an expert by some sort of institution or authority that identifies one as having cultural credentials (pp. 36–45). What Malaby adds is the idea that relevant *contingent* acts—performative acts that have a chance of failure—can often be more valued than non-risky acts (p. 87). By their nature, games present players with spaces in which to routinely make these contingent acts. More to the point, any sort of community of practice or cultural domain has a

lexicon of contingent acts that people can perform to build up embodied cultural capital.

The idea that expertise development is dependent on access to expert practice means that one has to have the ability to accrue social capital and make connections with other people or friends. These friends are more valuable if they can be leveraged or can act as sponsors into an activity space or community of practice, providing social supports that help facilitate moving between spaces (Brandt, 1998). Knowing what the actual practice is and how to take part in that practice by going through the process of enculturation into the community becomes embodied cultural capital. And, of course, these two forms of capital build on each other. The old saying, “it takes money to make money,” can be applied to other forms of capital. It takes capital to make capital.

For elective pursuits, including engaging in gaming culture, both social and cultural capital need to be developed in order for a person to fully participate. Therefore, everyday settings are definitely sites where meaningful and consequential events and linkages are happening among their participants. To counter the gamer who doesn’t value gaming, the cultural production and social bonds that form in informal everyday settings can have great importance to many of the people who are participating in those communities, so socially produced value exists as part of these informal settings. It may be unrecognized by the gamer, but it is there, and the gamer is using it. The educator in me—the human in me—wants to help people in these settings. Furthermore, if certain people are successful in some settings but not in other settings, perhaps this means that the idea of “transfer” should get turned on its head. Instead of trying to help people transfer individual skills from one setting to another, we may want to think about how to help people transfer or convert their social and cultural capital from one setting to another.

Description of Chapters

The specific game that this book is about is *World of Warcraft* (WoW), which follows a tradition of role-playing games where players take on the identities of characters in a fantasy setting full of things like elves, dwarves, and orcs. More precisely, however, this book is an ethnographic (narrative) account of WoW gamers and their situated practice as they learn the game together, make new friends, and test new ways of being social. Players each log in to the game from their own computers, and they are represented as avatars in the virtual world.