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Becoming a (Virtual) Skateboarder: Communities of Practice and the Design of E-Learning

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Abstract: *An analysis of a popular video game is used to illustrate how digital technologies can be used to provide learners with an experience of moving from novice to expert in a distinctive, though virtual, community of practice.*

A Model for Improving E-Learning

This paper explores the value of a theory of *learning as participation in communities of practice* for the design of e-learning. It is widely believed that digital technologies have the potential to support new and powerful forms of learning. However, much e-learning mirrors traditional instruction, reflected in the wide array of digital “learning management systems.” To find more innovative examples of how digital technologies can support learning, a growing number of scholars are turning to a surprising source of insights: videogames.

Video gaming has become a pervasive part of society, recruiting growing numbers of women and men gamers of all ages. Despite stereotypes of videogames that emphasize violence and scantily dressed women, videogames take varied forms, ranging from puzzle games such as *Tetris* to complex simulation games such as *Railroad Tycoon*. Gaming is interactive: players are active rather than passive, knowledge and ideas are used, not simply acquired, and players can pursue allow multiple routes in problem-solving. More than one scholar (e.g., Gee, 2003; Jenkins, 2003, July/August) points out that gaming supports learning that is far more compelling and complex than traditional education.

In this paper, I use the popular video game *Tony Hawk Underground* (THUG) as a basis for discussion. THUG offers a particularly intriguing example of how digital technologies can be used to support more holistic and meaningful learning opportunities situated within compelling representations of communities of practice.

Theoretical and Experiential Sources

Communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al, 2002, p. 4). Learning occurs through participation in the practices of a community, as individuals develop ways of thinking and reframe their identities and interests in relation to the community (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) identifies four aspects of learning within the community of practice framework: (a) learning as doing, or changes in how we engage in social practices, (b) learning as experience, or changes in how we make meaning of our lives and worlds, (c) learning as becoming, or changes in our identities, and (d) learning as belonging, or changes in our relationships to the community and practices.

My discussion draws on my own many hours of playing THUG, as well as the experiences of my research assistant. I draw on other relevant sources of information, such as chatroom discussions, websites, strategy guides, gaming magazines, and other publications. The game that I describe, *Tony Hawk Underground*, includes a “story mode” which takes the player through a sequence of “chapters” reflecting a narrative about a skater’s beginnings in the streets of New Jersey to her/his rise to fame. I draw examples from this story mode since it offers a more deliberately structured environment for introducing players to the social world of THUG.

Four Aspects of Learning in Communities of Practice

One way that learning as becoming (creating identities) is elicited in THUG is through offering the player extensive options for “customizing” his or her character, including choices of gender, body type, clothing, accessories, aptitudes, and even hometown. Players can change these attributes at any time, allowing the evolution of identities as players change their self-image and becomes aware of the community’s codes for appearance.

Engagement in practices (learning as doing) is the primary vehicle for learning as well as the primary source of pleasure in the game. The first chapter of the game introduces many social practices, starting with the mastery of simple tricks, and including observing experts, competing and “showing off” with your peers, and doing favors for friends. A limited amount of “direct instruction” is offered in association with various challenges throughout the early stages of the story. The player always sees the relevance of information in relationship to tasks, and learning really becomes doing, engaging in practice.

THUG promotes learning as belonging (forming relationships) by encouraging players to see themselves as “skaters” from the beginning of the game, part of a community that engages in meaningful practices. Three facets of learning relevant to belonging as a skater include acquiring specialized language, relating to other skaters through competition and ‘showing off,’ and to other groups such as drug dealers and police through conflicts.

THUG supports meaning-making (learning as experience) of several types. The game encourages the player to recognize the importance of “tricks” as a key practice, to differentiate among tricks, and to understand how they are composed. The environment takes on new meanings, based on its affordances for skating moves. Designing goals, skaters, and skate parks offers opportunities for players to make new meanings, within and across design tasks.

Relationship to Existing Theory & Practice in E-Learning

Videogames such as THUG suggest how designing experiences, not organizing content, might serve as a focus for creating new forms of e-learning. Digital technology makes it possible to design virtual learning spaces that provide access to experiences, identities, practices, and relationships that cannot be created in a traditional classroom or even in real world settings. THUG is just one example. New questions for the design of digital learning spaces are “What design elements are important for offering opportunities for participation/learning?” “How closely should learning spaces reflect the elements of real practice communities?” “How much variation is valuable in allowing learners to experiment with new modes of participation?”

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