Preface

THE PRESENT IS NICHE

Whether computers can be of benefit to the learning process has been a topic of discussion in educational technology research since the 1950s. Information and communication technologies have promised to revolutionize both teaching and learning in higher education; in fact, some researchers have proselytized that computers have transformed the very nature of how we educate. Since the popularization of the Internet in the early 1990s, programs dedicated to the democratization of information technology have assisted the general public to become members of electronic communities. With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, the shape of these online communities has changed drastically. Online social interactions have seen an exponential growth since the increased adoption of social media.

Social media are defined here as a form of media that provides a means for creating and maintaining social relationships. Social media activity can often be described as friendship or interest-driven (Ito, et al., 2008). Social media provide a space for relationships based on commonly shared interests. Currently, increased and sustained online activities in bulletin boards, forums, and multi-media-based social networks enable the creation and sustainment of thriving communities of individuals with niche interests, such as social media sites devoted to heavy metal music, video games, contemporary digital art, independent cinema, and indigenous and native culture, among others. These online niche communities create the conditions for compelling new ways of interaction where individuals can share information and teach and learn from each other around their specific interests. The kinds of niche engagement online offer compelling insights into how people interact, communicate, and learn through social media about interests they are passionate about.

Niche online communities are largely peer-driven and decentralized. Given that the peer communication and learning involved in online niche communities is often non-hierarchal, decentralized networks can provide insights into learning online. Often confused with distributed network morphologies, a decentralized network is one where there is no single leader or central organizing figure, but a cluster of influential individuals distributed amongst other individuals of varying engagement and expertise. This organizational structure is not limited to humans and includes the artifacts of human production, such as ideas. Further, a decentralized network is neither static nor benevolent. It is dynamic, structured, and moves towards a quality of control different than typical conceptions of hegemony in human relationships. For example, influential ideas and individuals attract more attention and prominence because they receive a lion’s share of attention in the first place. Understanding how these influential individuals and ideas emerge in online learning environments is one of a number of critical components to not only our understanding of how these communities work but also to leveraging the power of peer-networks in student learning and engagement.
LEARNING IS NICHES

As the body of research concerning online niche learning communities grows, educators are seeking to incorporate online and mobile learning environments into their pedagogical practice. Researchers are also interested in the design qualities of curricula and pedagogical strategies specific to these new forms of communication. For example, one of the editors of this book, Juan Carlos Castro, from Concordia University in Montréal, Canada, has been developing and researching a mobile application to engage at-risk students with their communities. The application, MonCoin (French for “My Corner”), is a mobile-based visual arts curriculum that allows students to share images and text. Students and teachers interact using the MonCoin application by taking and sharing photographs in response to questions about aspects of their community. Users are able to comment, view, and see each other’s images located on a map.

The interactivity and the decentralized nature of the application and curriculum seek to facilitate educational and civic engagement among at-risk adolescents. Castro and his research team have confirmed that the leveling effect of decentralized curricula is far more effective than more teacher-centered approach in engaging at-risk youth online. Further, educators need to also create the space in their curricula to allow for niche communities to emerge. One of the more surprising findings from Castro’s research was the disinterest the youth showed in engaging with civic issues. Instead, they were more concerned initially with techniques for crafting visually engaging images. This was their niche community that emerged. Only after the youth in the study had developed their individual and collective identity were they then willing to engage critically with the civic questions surrounding their neighborhoods. As educators are more and more subjected to the demands of policy makers who demand a certain level of homogenization, there also needs to be spaces for niche interests to emerge in online educational environments. Leveraging peer learning is not necessarily about dictating the conditions in which individuals interact, but also creating the space for peer interaction to occur around learners’ interests.

CREATING IS NICHES

The work of Jason Edward Lewis, another editor of this book, is a prime example of the important role that niche plays in fostering learning and engagement at Obx Laboratories for Experimental Media at Concordia University in Montréal, Canada. The lab uses a research-creation approach in exploring the limits of new media technology’s use for original artistic expression, with a special emphasis on how the materiality of digital software and hardware affect the creative process and expands creative environments. Work in the lab falls under two broad research trajectories, one of which examines the intersection between Aboriginal culture(s) and networked media, and the other of which seeks to understand how the writing and reading of text is evolving.

The first trajectory is directed by Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC). AbTeC creates and develops workshops and games that aim to give Aboriginals the autonomy and tools necessary for entering and shaping the online world. By combining a deep engagement with the Aboriginal community with AbTeC’s creative production and significant support for new Aboriginal digital media creators, Lewis and cofounder of AbTeC, Skawennati Fragnito, have created a network that models how to successfully encourage the participation of Aboriginal people in the new, networked world. The niche qualities of AbTeC provide a setting in which the Aboriginal community can gather around creative production.
The second trajectory, Writing Complex, focuses on the future of digital text. Major outcomes of Writing Complex have been the NextText architecture, which has been used to create Java and Processing libraries for creating interactive and dynamic text; Mr. Softie, a typographic text editor for creating high-resolution still and moving image text compositions; Public Lettering, a series of three large-scale public artworks (Cityspeak, Citywide, and Passage Oublié) that allow people to contribute text to public space and engage each other in real-time conversation; and the P.o.E.M.M., or Poetry for Excitable [Mo-bile] Media project exploring the use of touch interaction and mobile screens as methods for presenting interactive poetry. As it moves into its tenth year, Obx Labs plans to continue working along these two major trajectories. By working with partners in several locations across Canada to expand the AbTec’s workshops and by looking at how to extend its model of cultural integration to non-game forms of digital media, Obx Labs hopes that the tools, techniques, and methodologies developed in this first decade will provide the foundation for pushing forward into entirely new areas of research-creation. These two trajectories provide interruptions in the traditional forms of communal creative spaces by embracing a niche quality that is not attempting to be everything to everyone. Instead, Lewis’s work embraces the customizable characteristics of Web 2.0 technologies in developing spaces for creative communities to emerge.

CURRENT ISSUES WITH NICHE

With the ubiquity of Web 2.0 technologies, it has become imperative to address how the pervasive use of social media in the larger Web 2.0 sphere impacts peoples’ behaviors and cognitions; the lessons we can glean from analyzing peoples’ interactions on the Web must necessarily inform theories of online instruction. The increased and sustained online activities in bulletin boards, forums, and multimedia-based social networks have not yet been analyzed within the framework of communities with niche interests. What makes these communities tick? How do participants develop and propagate their online identities in using social media? How are hierarchies developed and maintained with such success between members of these niche online communities? What are the theoretical and practical impacts of the exponentially large uptake of social media tools by niche interest groups on the design of online and mobile learning environments? How can we leverage current research in the fields of socio-cognitive effects of learning, art education, citizenship education, as well as sociocultural and curriculum theory development to paint a picture of instructional design for the participatory Web? These are some of the questions the chapters in this book hope to address.

RESEARCHING NICHE

The first section of this book illustrates the ways that art-based interest groups produce and share knowledge using Web 2.0 technologies. As our culture becomes increasingly visual and digitized, it is imperative that we be able to navigate visual landscapes in order to be aware and autonomous digital citizens. This is especially true for adolescents and young adults, and the influence visual culture has on youth is undeniable. This first section explores the ways that youth, fringe communities, and artists are influencing visual culture by their involvement and production of knowledge in niche online communities. It also discusses current and prospective future pedagogical practices in art education. In chapter
1. Freedman discusses the range of visual arts learning that occurs in the visual culture learning domain and theorizes the manners in which the characteristics of art and design education sustain and support niche online communities. Chapter 2 presents work by Jackson, Robinson, and Simon on the art-based constructivist teaching and learning practices supported in a commercial videogame, namely, Little Big Planet. Informal visual networks are the focus of chapter 3, wherein Heijnen offers insight into the informal cultural production of youth and a formulation of an alternative approach for formal art education practice. In chapter 4, Haak presents a narrative case study exploring the role of women in textile-based arts, focusing specifically on an online quilting community. This section concludes with Pente’s work, presented in chapter 5, which addresses the ethical aspects of digital life by analyzing niche communities through two distinct lenses, those of the inoperable community and artistic interventionist practices that are founded in neoliberal philosophies.

The second section of this book explores niche online communities from feminist perspectives. The peer-driven decentralized nature of social networking makes it a popular method for marginalized groups to coalesce. While many oppressed groups have been traditionally silenced or omitted from the mainstream, feminist groups are voicing their concerns through niche online communities, utilizing Web 2.0 technologies to mobilize, educate, and network in novel ways. In chapter 6, Das presents an ethnographic study wherein she explores how feminist gamers are utilizing Web 2.0 technologies to build their identities and how they are using technology to generate and propagate knowledge. Rabah presents a critical discourse analysis, in chapter 7, that focuses on Lebanese women’s use of a feminist Website to challenge current hegemonic discourses. Chapter 8 sees Makeyeva providing insight into why online narratives about women’s combat experiences, in a military context, must necessarily be interpreted using contemporary feminist traditions. The final piece in this section, chapter 9, authored by Manifold, provides a description of three women’s participation in niche online fandom communities and explores how they were empowered to act with agency in their everyday lives and careers.

The book’s third section investigates pedagogy and learning in the era of Web 2.0. While traditional methods of educating may suit the needs of some learners, the traditional schooling system does not meet the needs of many, especially those who are unmotivated or are at risk of failing. Technology can be a powerful teaching tool; however, effective methods of implementing technology in the classroom can be an onerous task. The chapters in the third section of this book investigate different pedagogical practices that Web 2.0 technologies afford, offering interesting lessons for educational practitioners. In chapter 10, McGray and Thomas explore the possibilities for understanding participation in niche online communities via a theoretical framework of citizenship education. Shen and Chen present, in chapter 11, the results of a qualitative study that explored doctoral students’ perceptions of social presence in online dissertation courses. In chapter 12, Davidson and Durocher describe an autobiographical narrative study on the pedagogical and humanistic implications of using asynchronous online discussions for mechanical customizations and tuning of motorcycles. Finally, to wrap up this section, in chapter 13, Thomas, Fournier-Sylvester, and Venkatesh present a case for using forum-based social media platforms as a curriculum supplement to improve the quality of citizenship education in secondary and post-secondary classrooms.

The fourth section of the book explores issues of identity and community. Cyberspace has often been criticized for its lack of face-to-face interaction, but it is this anonymity that can make it appealing to some, especially those seeking anonymity or alternative modes of self-identification. Unlike traditional communities that meet in real-time and face-to-face, niche online communities are redefining what a “community” can be. The opportunities brought on by Web 2.0 technologies for identity and community
formation are remarkable. These chapters investigate how online communities operate successfully, offering new ideas of identity formation and community organization. Chapter 14 presents a multiple case study by Davidson, Gulka, Valle, and Castonguay on the increasing importance of technology stewarding in the development of niche online communities. Sweeny discusses, in chapter 15, an online media art community, Rhizome, focusing specifically on the relationship between new media artistic production, digital interaction, and online collaborative formations. In chapter 16, Shane describes how online connectivity shapes expressions of a specific niche online community, the Otherkin. Tzemopoulos describes a narrative research project, in chapter 17, focusing on the emancipatory nature of the Virtual Ability Island, an online community in Second Life for people with disabilities. The focus of chapter 18, by Cambre, is a theoretical insight on the shifting semiotic vocabulary of the Guy Fawkes mask used by the niche online community of Anonymous as a disruptive insertion of online visual communication. The final piece in this section, chapter 19, authored by Wershler, Sinervo, and Tien uses theories of circulation, subculture, and materiality to discuss the activities of unauthorized comic book scanners and the mechanisms by which they structure their community.

The fifth and final section of the book uncovers the ways members of the broad heavy metal music scene use online technologies to build, sustain, and even break down the notion of community. Although it may seem like a homogenous group, consumers of heavy metal culture are anything but. The chapters in this final section showcase the ways various metal communities self-identify virtually and offline, affording fascinating psychological, psychoanalytic, and communication-oriented insights into the emerging academic field of metal studies. In chapter 20, Urbaniak uses a cyber-ethnographic approach to describe how heavy metal fans use verbal and non-verbal content to develop perceptions of expertise in forum-based online interactions. Chapter 21 sees Venkatesh, Podoshen, Perri, and Urbaniak provide an in-depth qualitative exploration of the inner workings of a niche extreme metal scene, namely black metal. Of particular concern in this chapter are questions about the propagation of racism and xenophobia via a minority of black metal scene members using social media. Wallin provides a psychoanalytic account of the affective force of black metal in chapter 22 and describes how black metal functions, on the one hand, as a misanthropic and destructive force, while on the other, as a vehicle for negotiating feelings of intense despair, depression, and nihilism. The section concludes with chapter 23, a postscript penned by Netherton, who discusses the fragility in using the word “community” to describe the niche online black metal scene.

The book is concluded by Castro, who in chapter 24, titled “The Code We Learn With” exhorts us to consider how learning online is not only a matter of interaction between humans, but also participating with and shaping the digital code that itself is learning and constructing the conditions in which we learn.

THE FUTURE IS NICHE

More and more, individuals united by their affinities are navigating the vast archipelago of cyberspace’s Websites and virtual environments. Currently, Web 2.0 technologies are being utilized by educators, artists, activists, and marginalized communities to connect with one another, to mobilize change, and to shape and influence our society. As we move into an ever-more screen-mediated world, niche online communities are staking out and claiming new territories in cyberspace. Collective cultures are experimenting with ways individuals and communities might leverage digital media as a tool for preserving and advancing culture and languages, and for projecting self-determined images out into a mediasphere
awash in stereotypical portrayals of marginalized groups. Democratizing and decentralizing ideas of knowledge and power, niche communities are using technology as a tool for telling their own stories and to impact their environments – virtual, real, local, and global. One can only imagine the influence that niche online communities will have on culture and education, but one thing remains clear: the future is niche.

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**REFERENCES**