Chapter 5.12

Learning Reflection and Creativity in Online Game Communities

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INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly being recognized that participation in role-playing gaming communities contributes to the learning of their members. Within the field of educational research, there is a wide spreading interest in online communities and virtual worlds: Online technologies provide new opportunities for “anytime/anywhere” social interaction and the number of innovative curricular designs that incorporate online collaborative environments has been steadily increasing since such technology first emerged. As Lave and Wenger (1991) argue, understanding the learning in naturally occurring contexts, and not just formal ones, is crucial if we are to forward learning and educational theory and practice beyond the contexts we ourselves contrive. “We ought to investigate more naturally occurring, self-sustaining indigenous virtual cultures so that our theory might be a more accurate reflection of them and our practice a better reflection on them in days to come.” (Galarneau, 2004; Steinkuehler, 2005 p. 80-81)

The two online communities with which we are involved, Woldian Games and Neverwinter Nights, are the two cases we would like to present for discussing the contribution of online role-playing gaming communities to the learning of their members, specifically focusing on learning to be reflective and creative. Now with a 20-year long history, Woldian Games is a fantasy-role playing community that asynchronously interacts by posting on various boards for gaming and

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chatting within the community Web site, www.
woldiangames.com. Released in 2002, Neverwinter Nights continues to be played online by
tens of thousands of players worldwide everyday.
The main reason for this sustained popularity is,
along with continuing support from the developer,
Bioware (http://nwn.bioware.com), the ease with
which game owners can create their own interactive
graphical game environments and open them
for online play by all other owners.

Our purpose in this article is to demonstrate
that the virtual and networked communities of
online role-playing games encourage and facilitate
learning and development of not only technical
and communications skills, but reflection and
creativity. We will achieve this purpose by present-
ing cases of online role-playing games, which
encourage and facilitate the learning of reflection
and creativity, particularly in their community
aspect, cases of individuals learning technical
and communications skills and also reflection
and creativity by participating in online role-
playing game communities, and cases of successful
academic use of online role-playing games. Prior
background information and a theoretical
perspective on technologies for reflective and
creative learning also supports the presentation
of these cases and findings.

PRACTICAL AND ACADEMIC
BACKGROUND

Woldian Games

Along with the increasing interest in online
communities and virtual worlds, the use of asyn-
chronous computer-mediated communications
to support educational practices is also growing.
Asynchronous communication methods in general
deserve special attention, since this method is
specifically regarded as being open to discussion,
thus promoting the development of understanding,
even through disagreements (Joinson, 2003).

In addition, asynchronous communication is
highlighted for its contribution to personal and
collective reflection for learning.1

As an active participant in the online com-
community for almost two years, valuable data and
information have been collected by contributing
to the playing and other community activities.
Furthermore we have been conducting e-mail
interviews with other players, whom we have
relatively close communication with and whom
we have thought would have insightful comments
and be available for the purposes of our research.

Neverwinter Nights

Play of Neverwinter Nights is real-time, so in-
game community interactions are synchronous.
On the other hand, off-line time between play
sessions allows not only individual reflection,
but asynchronous communication with other
community members, not only via direct e-mail,
but on the forum sites or chat rooms that, along
with Web pages, are typical parts of a particular
Neverwinter game’s community presence.2

Our observations are based on active participa-
tion for more than three years in playing, guiding
play (called “Dungeon Mastering” in Dungeons
& Dragons, upon which Neverwinter Nights is
based), administering technical and organizational
matters for a number of game communities, and
building game environments by choosing content
and reprogramming rules.

Technologies for Reflective
and Creative Learning

Asynchronous communication tools like “list-
servs, e-mail, and discussion forums” have contrib-
uted to transforming how people communicate and
share knowledge, or learn and reflect. A discussion
thread is a good example of reflective learning
from an asynchronous tool: “One learner can
post a thought, and hours (or days) later, another
learner can comment on the posting…Learners can
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