Investigating Youth’s Life Online Phenomena: Subverting Dichotomies through Negotiation of Offline and Online Identities

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dialectics between living in offline and digitally-mediated worlds and how youth construct their identity and sense of self, negotiate meaning, and make sense of their social experiences. Situating the study within the context of the popular MMORPG, World of Warcraft (WoW), the authors investigate the interplay between the everyday, situated lives of five digital youth gamers, aged 18 to 25, and their activities and ‘lived practices’ in WoW. Findings suggest a recurrent theme that challenges ascribed dichotomies between youth’s presence in the offline and online world in terms of their identities in play, sense of embodiment, and orientation toward work, play, and the spirit of communitas within WoW. Exploration of such a phenomenon indicates a more intimately enmeshed and dialectically coupled experience of youths’ in their contextual traversals, providing a fundamental conceptual understanding of the impact of youths exodus to the virtual world and its implications for 21st century teaching and learning. The outcomes address theoretical challenges associated with the interpretation of 21st century literacy performances that may be characterized as a need to move away from static and linear narratives of development to a more divergent becoming of learners through the learning process.

Keywords: Identity, Online Ethnography, Performing Cyborg, Virtual Worlds, Youth

1. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of interaction in which youth engage the world and each other has rapidly changed over the last decade. In an information age characterized by digital migrations (Meadows, 2008) and exodus to virtual worlds (Castronova, 2007), today’s youth are not only fluent and playful with digital technologies but are also developing alternative, sophisticated, and reflective literacies. Learning situated within digital contextualization is characterized by high degrees of personal agency which contrasts with learning in schools where youth are far more often asked to internalize and accept information rather than create and challenge existing ways of knowing. With the hybridization of learning with popular media culture,
learners expect, and derive, little gratification from conventional curriculum. They may simply ‘play the game’ of schooling before investing heavily in their own cultural capital of learning in out-of-school spaces thereafter. More importantly, the kind of learning that happens within these informal spaces fundamentally differs from the learning experiences arising from conventional pedagogy, both in terms of meeting youth’s personal fulfillment as well as in preparing them for the new kinds of literacies imperative at a time of fast-paced social and economic change.

In Singapore, youth between the ages of 15 and 25 form the largest group of Internet users within the country. Over 85 percent of Singaporean youth use the Internet for communication and content creation purposes (instant messaging, social networking, blogging, twitter, uploading Youtube videos, playing video games) (IDA, 2010). For this group of users, life becomes increasingly digitally mediated such that many new opportunities are presented for them to make, share, and create new forms of culture. This is evidenced by the rapid growth of self-organizing and self-educating online youth communities (e.g., Second Life’s RidgeCats, comprised of National University of Singapore students, and World of Warcraft’s Rebirth Guild comprising Singaporean youth from all walks of life) that are constantly evolving through the interaction between and efforts of its constituent members. Complex social, economic, and cultural networks are dynamically emerging (Thomas & Seely-Brown, 2007), impinging on the kinds of learning and identity construction processes that youth experience. As digital activities get increasingly enmeshed with offline life, the increasingly pervasive influence of digital media culture spawns a new phenomenon of youth’s life online. New construal in terms of performance of self and subjectivities emerge as youths traverse across multiple contexts of meaning-making. In a bid to grasp the scope and significance of this phenomenon, our study looks at unpacking how youths construct and negotiate their identity and sense of self, and make meaning of their social experiences online.

Situating our work within the context of the extremely popular immersive multiplayer game space, World of Warcraft (WoW), we illustrate these concepts through a descriptive of youth WoW game players, focusing on their lived experiences that are undergirded by negotiation of offline and online dialectics. Given the currency of the phenomenon of youth living online, it is intended that the implications of our work will strengthen current efforts in augmenting an understanding of the broader learning context within which youth’s learning activities are situated, while providing rich points of reference for critical 21st century literacy dispositions, of valuing action and process over result and product (Hung, Lim, & Jamaludin, 2010), that will be personally relevant, meaningful, and efficacious for learners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary youth culture such as active engagement in social media activities reflects the growing collection of technologies within popular culture that is profoundly affecting the development and expression of human lives (Levinson, 1998) and broadly engaging the multiple ‘I’ that are in dialogue with other selves and the cultural world. Among the spectrum of new technologies, recent studies on digital media phenomena have shown en masse migration to online worlds that are emerging as one of the most influential technologies impacting youth culture. Subsequently, this eventuates a life online phenomena, whereby not only are today’s youth in constant interplay with digital technologies but so too are they developing new kinds of literacy skills, coupled with new cultural norms, social ties, and practices. Within the context of youth’s life online phenomena, the socio-spatial dimensions that underpin the development of youth’s meaning-making experiences create interrelated dynamics that not only afford youth the agency for explorative emplacements (Soja, 1993) but also bearing upon their identity trajectories. Recent work in online ethnography and the anthropology of modern cultural flows (Hine, 2000; Miller
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