

Calling on Your Peers: Collective Information Literacy in *World of Warcraft*

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Abstract

Literacy learning is a naturally occurring and pervasive part of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) and virtual worlds (Gee, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2007, Black & Steinkuehler, 2009). Sophisticated practices using science literacy (Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2009) and advanced reading comprehension (Steinkuehler, Compton-Lilly, & King, 2009) have been documented outside of school and other traditional learning spaces, in online discussion forums and fandom texts related to games like *World of Warcraft* (WoW). These communities function as participatory cultures (Jenkins, 2006), with community members producing and consuming information in a way similar to that described by Levy's (1997) collective intelligence theory. Levy describes collective intelligence as the process of everyone putting forth the knowledge they have so that every member of the community can access the knowledge of the community at large. This is seen not only in written documentation of participation of the community of an MMO like a wiki, in the case of WoW a wiki like wowhead.com but also in in-game chat. The in-game chat produces a call-and-response pattern that employs information literacy skills, i.e. a player realizes they have an information need and seeks the information by asking the community who then respond with the answer. These communities in and around MMOs also function as communities of practice as described by Lave and Wenger (1991), they offer information to members and use apprenticing to help new members learn the standards and practices (Steinkuehler, 2004).

With the vast amount of diverse information circulating and changing within these spaces, it seems an obvious choice to observe these communities and analyze their information literacy practices. Traditional information literacy theories and standards were designed to account for information literacy practices within formal learning environments (AASL, 1998; ACRL, 2000). Most traditional models for information literacy include a five step process: 1) seeking information, 2) evaluating information, 3) interpreting information, 4) synthesizing information, and 5) disseminating information. However, these models are unable to account for some of the most basic practices found therein. This is due to the fact

that the tradition models focus on formal educational settings using institutionally created information resources being sought and found by a single person on a solitary journey, with the output of their search usually ending in a paper. A contemporary framework for information literacy skills is needed that incorporates the collaborative nature of communities like WoW, as well as information literacy's connection to other 21st century skills. Using examples culled from eight months of online ethnographic data (Steinkuehler and King, 2009), we have examined the information literacy practices that arise in the in-game chat of WoW. In this paper we specifically focus on the call-and-response seeking and disseminating that occurs within the chat log, and how these situations demonstrate information literacy skills as well as expertise in the community. The importance of evaluating the practices of communities like those in WoW has been discussed by Gee (2003). We can discover much about learning by observing naturalistic occurrence of activities. In the case of information literacy, observing the natural occurrence of these skills in collaborative space made it obvious that the boys in the study were using these skills and that the way the skills were being used in collaborative spaces was different than that of existing standards and theories.

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