Status and Learning in *The Sims* Community

Jeremy A. Dietmeier

University of Wisconsin - Madison

Abstract

Given the increasing pressure to attend top colleges, students are placed into a competitive education model even though research suggests that such direct competition causes students to feel anxious and teaches them not to enjoy learning (Squire, 2010). A viable alternative to this model is to create a learning community in the classroom, possibly through the use of online forums. These communities have been forming naturally online around video games with participants voluntarily coming together to learn. This paper looks at one such learning community that has arisen around *The Sims 3* at the forum site Mod the Sims. Through an analysis of explicit visual status markers, the behaviors or those with and without status, and the importance of status in this space, we begin to see the attributes of this learning community. After outlining the data collection methods, I present an analysis of selected data and the ways in which a learning community promotes education.

The top colleges in the United States currently accept fewer than 10% of their applicants (US News &World, 2010). As more students strive to enter these programs, and more students are academically capable of performing at the top level, high schools are becoming a place of competition. Students must work hard to get into top colleges and are willing to do whatever it takes to assure that they are viewed as better than their classmates. Research suggests that such direct competition causes students to feel anxious and teaches them not to enjoy learning (Squire, 2010). Unfortunately, this is the atmosphere that students must compete in, and low college acceptance rates, as well as programs such as high stakes assessment, will keep it this way.

To gain a better understanding of learning in an environment where status exists without direct, aggressive competition, I investigated the online social community of *The Sims 3* (Electronic Arts, 2009), specifically the creator forums found at Mod the Sims (modthesims.info). Standing in this community is not a zero-sum game and exists in a community around a non-competitive game. For the purposes of this paper, I relied on the explicit visual symbols, discussed later in this paper, to determine one's status. Those with high status are respected and sought out for help while at the same time showing respect for those with lower status, creating a merit-driven social structure. This leads to learning (Steinkuehler, 2004). People are able to seek out help and learn together instead of horde their knowledge for the potential to gain a higher standing. Being able to recreate this environment has the potential to increase learning across all academic levels, generating a new generation of learners. By studying *The Sims 3* social community we can gain a better understanding of what it means to be a part of a learning community, how status can affect learning, and how we can alter the social pedagogy in order to improve education.

Background

Researchers are already looking at ways that we can use forums and online learning spaces in schools to facilitate learning. One method some teachers are trying is called the "Flipped Classroom" technique (Strayer, 2007). This method involves the teacher preparing a series of videos for students to watch at home instead of lecturing during class. The students are able to use video conferencing during the lecture and discuss what the teacher is saying. Imagine students trying to do this in a classroom. While this method does have some advantages, it still occurs in a competitive education model. Barab, et.al (2001) created an online forum for teachers to collaborate. They were able to share ideas, receive feedback, and remain current on teaching practices being used by others in the area. The teachers focused on helping everyone improve, not proving that they were the best teacher. By removing the competition from the learning environment, everyone benefited greatly from participating. The teachers that participated all reported learning something from the forums as well as feeling as though they were able to contribute something as well. It was a pleasant learning experience that many wanted to participate in again. Many students do not feel the same way about classrooms. We do see this enthusiasm for learning from students on online sites (Steinkuehler & King, 2009). These students enjoy being a member of a learning community, one they feel valued in. Creating a community of learners, such as the one that has formed around *The Sims*, is a viable alternative to the current competitive education model.

The Sims is a global phenomenon that started as a single player game, but has since exploded into an online community. According to their web site, *The Sims* is a "strategic life-simulation game series that lets you create and control your very own on-screen character – a Sim!" (Electronic Arts, n.d.). This description focuses on the life-simulation aspect of the game on a single computer, what Steinkuehler (2006) refers to as the "little-g game". This is the part of

the game that is created by the designers and is installed straight from the box it came in. What the description does not include is designing homes and clothes and sharing these creations with others around the world. This is, however, still recognized as an important function of the game by the developers as the homepage's most predominant link is to its community site. The community did not happen by chance. Will Wright, the game's designer, encourages players to alternate between playing the game and designing items, so there are multiple facets in which to enjoy the game. This online community of sharing and learning is the "big-G Game," which, according to Steinkuehler (2006) makes the games "meaningful and consequential." Without the big-G Game, players would still design, but their design would be limited. While Electronic Arts provides a great number of items within the little-g game, players generate hundreds more objects in the big-G game available for download by players around the world. The need for this big-G space led to the creation of dozens of *The Sims* fan sites, including Mod the Sims. The site describes itself as "one of the largest Sims 2 & Sims 3 sites… We have a friendly atmosphere and pride ourselves on the quality of creations, while being entirely free to use" (Mod the Sims, n.d.). It often has over three thousand users online, contains over 250,000 threads, and houses over 160,000 different items for users to download (Mod the Sims, n.d.). This site provides a place for players to gather and learn as a community instead of competing with one another.

Methods and Analysis

For the purpose of this paper I chose to study the Mod the Sims user forum. Each individual forum is its own community with different social norms and practices, thus the Mod the Sims forum will be used as a single case study. I wanted to investigate the ways users obtain and display high status and its effect on the interactions in the community. Due to the size of the website, I randomly selected one forum from Mod the Sims, the Sims 2 Building forum, and

took a random sample of 15 threads that had been posted in during October 2011. The threads

averaged 22 posts each and had a total of 72 different posters. In order to gain a better

understanding of the status markers, I also looked at the five most active posters in the sample

and read their most recent 10 posts as well as looked at their user profile. I open coded the

forums, posts, and profiles for any indicators of status and refined these codes into two

overarching themes: explicit visual indicators of status and textual indicators of status. The

explicit visual indicators are markers that are provided by the website and are easily viewed and

identified by the reader. The textual indicators of status are the ways posters position themselves

in relation to other posters within their responses.

Findings

Symbols of status

Let us take a look at how status is designated and recognized on the Mod the Sims

message boards, starting with the simpler markers. The first status marker I noticed on the site

was the use of titles given to posters. We see the uses of titles denoting status every day.

Referring to another person as Mister, Doctor, or Professor immediately sets the other party into

a status hierarchy. This is easily seen when addressing someone and using a title lower than the

status the person has achieved and being corrected. The titles given on the site are directly

related to the number of posts a contributor makes in that once they reach a certain number of

posts, their title automatically changes. While the titles do not tell the reader specifically what

the posters status is, it does give some insight into their level of experience within this

community. For example, the first title a poster receives is "test subject." This does not explicitly

tell other users that the poster is new, but it does imply being at a lower position in a research

and learning environment. Along the same lines, two higher titles are "instructor" and "field

researcher." Some more explicit titles include "forum resident" and "head poster," both of which

acknowledge the posters commitment to the forums. While on the site, I noticed two titles that

gave me pause. The first was "33258261111*2^333333-1." I knew this was the posters title as it

was located in the same location as the other titles, but it did not seem to follow the same

patterns as the other titles. The second title shed light on the situation. It was "admin of ponies."

It turns out that moderators of the site, those who enforce rules and help control conversational

topics, are given the power to change their title to anything they would like. This shows a higher

level of status as they are not bound by the titles within the system, but rather get to take control

of that system and alter the way people see them. Along the same lines as receiving a title based

on the number of posts contributed to Mod the Sims, some posters are honored with the title of

"featured creator," a recognition bestowed on them by the administrators for showcasing the best

talent and creativity on Mod the Sims. This instantly attests to the skills and knowledge of the

poster. Similar to player of the week awards found in sports, this designation recognizes the

poster for their contributions and lets other readers know who they might want to approach with

questions on a given subject.

　　　Another simple, but slightly more complex, status marker is the use of badges next to a

posters name. The badges are small icons under each posters name with a different image. These

images include a blue ribbon, an artist's pallet, a cup of coffee, and a cow, among others. The

badges display status for both members of the "in-group" and the "out-group." People perusing

the site for the first time may not know what these badges mean as they are not explicitly

labeled. Even so, having more badges demonstrates some skill. It usually correlated that those

with more posts had more badges. Hovering over the badge gives its specific meaning, be it

Featured Creator, an honor awarded by the community, or Donator, a badge that can be

purchased by giving to the website. This gives a quick reference guide to the work being done by the user. For people within the "in-group" I am certain these badges have greater significance. They better understand the significance of being a Featured Creator versus being a Donator and will equate different status levels with the two badges.

Behaviors of Status

It is here that the signifiers become more complex. One way posters are able to earn status is by demonstrating their knowledge of the game and the forums by posting links to other threads. A practice only available to those with extensive knowledge and ability to remember and find older threads, it sets some posters above those that lack this knowledge. New posters often do not know how to use the search feature on forums, or simply do not wish to bother themselves to use it, and instead post on topics that have already been covered in the community. These posts are usually caught by moderators that direct the poster to the original thread and close the new one. However, I observed times when other forum participants directed the user to the original thread as well. This shows the respondents knowledge of the subject and forum guidelines, as well as stationing them above the poster. The other common situation where this occurs is when there are related topics. People often redirect users to related threads as a way to facilitate what is occurring on the current thread. I never witnessed a user with fewer than one hundred posts linking to another thread, suggesting that those with more status is correlated with sharing links.

Another marker that signifies insider and outsider status is the use of specific language and lingo. In her study of the cultural practices in *Lineage*, Steinkuehler (2009) notes that text that appears as nonsense talk to some can carry deep meaning for others. For example, she notes how the sentence, "Afk g2g too ef ot regen no poms," does not appear to have any

communicative qualities. To those that play the game, however, it efficiently explains the current game situation. This quick sentence tells other players that they need to go to the Elven Forest in order to regenerate mana because they do not have any mana potions (Steinkuehler, 2009). Because the real-time communication constraints that appear in *Lineage* are not present on this asynchronous website, we do not see the same truncated lingo, but similarily complex communications occur. Posters have a similarly specialized language that is foreign to outsiders. One example of this occurs when posters suggest trying "constrainFloorElevation False." For a person outside of the community, this contains no useful knowledge, but to a more skilled player, it contains a plethora of information, providing a cheat code that allows for players to create ramps. It is a display of knowledge that demonstrates the posters skill as a designer and gives them status.

So far the ways to gain status are a direct result of the poster's actions, but it is also possible for other readers to alter a poster's status as well. Each post, along with the number of posts made by the author, shows how many times the author has received a "thanks" from another user. Posters are able to show their appreciation for the advice they receive by giving other users a thanks, similar to how people are able to give posts a thumbs up or down on other sites. Promoting another user in this way recognizes their skill, allowing other readers to quickly identify those that have been of help to others most frequently. This becomes more interesting when compared with the number of total posts the user has, showing how often the person is considered to be helpful versus how often they post. For example user Bestie Treehawk* has four hundred posts, but zero thanks compared to LiuSi who has over eight hundred thanks on only eighty posts. While Bestie Treehawk may visit the site more often and seek help from others, LiuSi has been able to give advice to hundreds of users that chose to recognize her

expertise by giving her a thanks. While simply having the number of posts a user makes is helpful, by adding a way for users to recognizer other posters expertise, Mod the Sims helps users quickly identify those with a higher status within the community.

The Importance of Status

As we can see, there are many status signifiers present in the Mod the Sims forums, but do the users feel that status is important? Without a way to prove one's superiority in a non-competitive game, is high status sought, or is it simply an added bonus? With the new advances in technology, some people are finding it easier to communicate and find acceptance through technological communication over face to face interactions (Pierce, 2009). For some this online status is the only social status they may receive or care about. Furthermore, because players are unable to post high scores or demonstrate how quickly they can beat a level, posters rely on their knowledge and expertise to be valued in the community. For example, posters will often defend their knowledge. User Giggle started a new thread asking for help on a problem; he knew how to make an underground pool, but could not make a gate go across it. At one point in the thread, simsample, a moderator, tries to help out by directing Giggle to another thread about underground pools. Feeling as though his knowledge, and therefore his expertise, were being placed at a level below where he currently stands, he quickly responded, "Yeah, I know all that…" with the ellipsis denoting his agitation. He continued by stating that he understood the mechanics found in the other thread and that his question was in regards to making a gate over one. If his status was not as important, one could venture that Giggle might thank the moderator for trying to help, but reiterate his problem. He appears to be annoyed that the moderator does not recognize his level of expertise and must therefore correct him.

If it is important to have status, then, how do those with status react to those without it? There is no hard and true answer to this question even within one community, but there are some patterns that emerged. The first of which is to treat everyone as equals within the learning community, despite what their status may be. We can see this in the interaction between Giggle and simsample. Although simsample, a moderator with many posts and thanks, is revered highly within the community, Giggle felt it was within his right to oppose simsample's solution and point out how the moderator had not understood the problem being presented. This interaction is more similar to how one might treat an equal than a superior. On a different thread another moderator, QHouse, disagrees with a solution presented by Giggle and offers his own solution and a link to another thread. He later edits his post, crossing out what he said, and instead saying he believes that Giggle is correct. Here, QHouse is recognizing the knowledge of someone with lower status than his own. Rather than pretend to be correct because of his higher status, he concedes to Giggle and suggests that people look to him for advice on this subject. In most status hierarchies, it would be unnatural to see people challenging authority or giving such praise to those beneath them, but it is common practice on these forums.

In other situations, the person with higher status recognizes their position of expertise over others, but still treats those beneath them with respect. During one thread, Bestie Treehawk posts about a subject only tangentially related to the topic at hand. In many forums, this action would be treated with disdain and the poster would be verbally reprimanded for posting off topic. Instead, MoleVenom, a poster with higher status than Bestie Treehawk, responds by first answering the off topic question then suggesting a new thread be made on this topic. She even asks that the moderator split the thread instead of requiring Bestie to make on his own. In this response we can see that MoleVenom knows the rules about posting on topic, but rather than be

upset that the new post is off topic, she calmly informs the poster about forum rules. This is different than treating Bestie as an equal because MoleVenom still maintains a position above Bestie, but rather than use this position to reprimand him, she educates him. Later in the same thread, MoleVenom and Giggle have been working on a highly technical process when a newcomer to the site asks them about the process. Giggle recognizes that the level of detail he and MoleVenom are using is too high for the new poster. Instead of dismissing the poster, though, he directs the user to another thread that deals with the more basic elements of the problem. Again we see the person with higher status and expertise using their knowledge to help others instead of insulting them about their lack of knowledge.

Discussion

An interesting aspect of this game and the community that surrounds it is the lack of a way to beat the game. Players may create personal goals, but they will never find a "Game Over" or "Congratulations! You won!" screen. In a game that is by its nature non-competitive, it seems it would be harder to generate status and label people as better than others. Instead of focusing on one's ability to win, the focus is instead on their ability to design. Just as some would point out that it is easy to pick out a more elegantly designed house in the real world, players are able to recognize skill and ability in game. This recognition is what creates *The Sims* community's merit-based hierarchy.

While this happens to be the case on Mod the Sims, I want to briefly acknowledge that not all *Sims 3* forums are like this and that these findings cannot be generalized to *The Sims 3* community at large. Gee and Hayes (2010) studied another site called More Awesome than You which has different behavioral norms than those found at Mod the Sims. According to posters on the site, you don't use this site to be fawned over for your new recoloring, but rather to gain

information and downloads to make your game more awesome. These posters are quite harsh to outsiders, people they disagree with, and those without a high level of skill. This is in stark contrast to the behaviors I witnessed taking place at Mod the Sims where a newcomer's inexperience is recognized, but not belittled. It is also important to note that the behaviors are a creation of the atmosphere, not the people themselves. In their research, Gee and Hayes (2010) studied posts made by the same people on multiple sites and noted that although they may behave kindly to newcomers in one space, they may belittle them in others. Additionally, they noted that similar numbers of men and women participated on the sites they studied, so it is not simply due to the fact that women may treat people kinder and be drawn to one site or another (Gee & Hayes 2010). As such it appears that the culture, rather than the individuals participating, create the acceptable social norms.

It is apparent that people are communicating in these spaces in order to improve their game and design skills and that people in these spaces have and covet status, but what does this mean for learning? Lave and Wegner (1991) coined the term 'communities of practice' to describe how practices help bind people to a community that at the same time legitimizes the practices. Lave continues this thought by looking at shared cognition. Learning is not the internalization of knowledge, but rather becoming a member of a community of practice. It is through the development of skill and knowledge that one is able to join the community (Barab, MaKinster, Moor, Cunningham, The ILF Design Team, 2001). For our posters it is through the development of design skills and expertise that they are able to join the community, which through its very existence in turn legitimizes the posters actions. Additionally, it is not by keeping this knowledge to themselves that posters learn, but by contributing to the community of practice. James Paul Gee (2005b) takes this idea farther with his ideas on affinity spaces. He

describes how they form from voluntary interests and the desire to share knowledge and expertise. The forum posters are not forced to visit the site or to play and design with *The Sims*, but rather from their desire to learn, are drawn to them in what we can think of as interest-driven learning. The users' interests drive their ability to learn and seek out complex material and assistance to solving their problems (Steinkuehler, Compton-Lilly, & King, 2010). Squire (2010) informs us that this type of social space populated by users with multiple interests, levels of expertise, and opportunities to lead others creates a situation in which learning is inevitable. Mod the Sims provides a space for learners to gather, share their knowledge, and advance their skills in ways they would be unable to do on their own.

Status plays an interesting role in learning in these spaces. The acceptance by those with high status of those with low status creates an environment in which learning can thrive. Asking questions and seeking clarification is important to gaining understanding and knowledge. When students feel bullied or intimidated by more intelligent peers, they are less likely to ask for help (Slee, 2000). This is not a problem at Mod the Sims due to their culture of acceptance. If we return to the example of Giggle answering the question of a less experienced poster, we can see that he invited the poster into the environment and culture and assists him with his problem. He does not respond with criticism or mocking the posters low status. This helps the poster feel welcome and encourages more questions. This is what Gee and Hayes (2010) refer to as a professional-amateur community and what Steinkuehler and Oh (2012) call apprenticeship. Even though people are at different levels, they are members of the same community aiming to help each other learn. This works both ways as those that have professional status can still learn from those with amateur status. On one occasion, mIng oNes was having problems understanding a new concept. mIng has been a featured designer, has over six thousand posts, and is a well-

respected poster. When she does not understand, however, Giggle, who has lower status, was able to offer advice in a non-threatening manner. mIng was grateful, and even though she needed help from someone with lower status, she was still unafraid to ask for clarification. This is in stark contrast to More Awesome than You where asking questions and being an amateur is not an accepted part of the community.

Interestingly, even though status is present, it is a side product of the community, further promoting learning. Many designers are not interested in making money for their designs and instead do their work for the community, gaining status off-market (Gee & Hayes, 2010). For the designers on Mod the Sims it is about making things for others, teaching new players how to create new objects, and developing new building strategies together. Instead of seeking out high status, it occurs as a side product of their desire to help others. Furthermore, students that are oriented towards wanting to be a member of the popular group, or those with high status, are less likely to seek help when compared to those that are oriented towards developing ability (Ryan, Hicks, Midgley, 1997). Because status is not as important as learning new skills at Mod the Sims, people become more apt to ask questions. This atmosphere gives posters the freedom to ask questions and learn while More Awesome the You, a more competitive space, discourages this kind of behavior.

This community encourages people to work with, or even simply give the solution to, people who may not be as skilled. Although status is more of a byproduct, it is still achieved and appreciated at Mod the Sims. At the same time one person achieving a high status does not prevent others from gaining status as well. This is not the case in schools. School systems and testing promote individualism within the classroom. In order to obtain academic status, students look not only their GPA, but also to their class rank in order to compare their ability to those

around them. It is, therefore, against the interest of students to help their classmates lest they risk they chance of helping them gain status and in turn lower their own. Unless given permission by the teacher, most students will work alone as helping others is viewed as cheating (Dewey, 1900).

The way status roles work at Mod the Sims creates an environment in which learning can thrive. The learners take control of their education and direct it in ways not afforded them in schools, designing their learning (Gee, 2005a). There is not a set way for players to use the site, but rather they are able to direct their learning based on interests. None of the posters with high status enforce a set of problems that must be solved in order to solve other problems. By not having a set order of the flow of information, this also allows users to seek out the information they need at the moment they need it to facilitate their gameplay. By providing information only when they players need it, they will not be bogged down with extra information they do not need and are more likely to retain their new skill (Gee, 2005a). Furthermore, those with high status and skill levels have never mastered the game and are able to use the site in order to work with others to solve new problems. They may master a skill, but there is always a new skill to be learned (Gee, 2005a).

Conclusions

Status was achieved in many ways on Mod the Sims. There were explicit visual status markers, including titles and stickers, as well as behavioral habits of those with and without status, such as linking to other threads. The status markers helped other users identify reliable sources of information and people that would be most able to help with a certain problem. A classroom-based forum could follow this template and help students identify other students that have the knowledge or expertise to assist with their problems. A sticker system could be

implemented to demonstrate a student's strengths, such as favorite classes or academic awards. This gives other students quick access to which students might be most helpful with their problem. To help students convey their knowledge, the forum could encourage the use of outside links to verify claims made within a post, similar to Wikipedia's citation rules. This will help students quickly weed out which information is reliable and which information needs to be verified first. These status markers will allow students to participate and gain status without significantly marking students as the top or bottom students in the class.

It is not enough to tout the ideals of an online learning environment and how they may help improve test scores. Further research needs to be done in the area to learn whether or not it empirically improves learning, and if it does, for which students would online learning be beneficial. Video games and learning is currently in the spotlight, but some feel as though it is not making any major advances in changing the teaching pedagogy (Shelton, 2008). We need to establish a forum learning environment in a real classroom and ensure that it encourages status in ways similar to that of Mod the Sims. This will require accountability on the part of the students to treat each other with respect and to work together. It will also require close moderation on the part of the educator to ensure that no bullying or trolling (mocking someone in an effort to receive an angry rebuttal usually for personal enjoyment) takes place. Students would be able to use the space to discuss classroom topics, including finding homework help. By comparing the learning in this environment to one in a traditional classroom we can begin to see how online learning spaces may be able to facilitate education.

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