

Cultural Clash: Technologies of Community in Computer Gaming
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In scholarly conversations concerning digital technology, it is at this point obvious that gaming enjoys widespread popularity and wields significant cultural impact in Western contexts. Over half of U.S. teenagers now report regularly playing video games (“MacArthur,” 2006). Gaming long has been used in the military industrial complex to train pilots (e.g., the 1979 program *Flight Simulator* [“Bruce Artwick,” 1996]), and in the medical community, gaming appears with increasing frequency, such as for mental screening purposes. One study at Oregon Health and Science University recently asked elderly test participants to play a computer card game known as *FreeCell*, observing the gamers’ playing behaviors to determine the existence of cognitive damage (Hitti, 2006).

This presentation focuses on the infusion of gaming into the world of English teaching, where it has the potential not only to engage students with their coursework, but to prepare them for employment after college. The widely read technology magazine *Wired* recently chronicled how one young job seeker was offered a top engineering management position because of his “decisive edge: He was one of the top guild masters in the online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*” (Brown & Thomas, 2006, p. 120). Gaming, as the article explained, has made users “more flexible in their thinking and more sensitive to social cues,” because gamers are “learning to be [i.e., adjusting to a new culture] as opposed to learning about” the information that is typically taught during a traditional text-and-lecture educational process (p. 120).

As gaming has evolved from mindless activities requiring limited skill sets to extremely challenging problem-solving contests on the physical, mental, and emotional levels, in short, as the practice of gaming has come to involve more and more complex rhetorical situations, expertise in

gaming often suggests the mastery of valuable computational and communicative knowledge; this fact is being noticed in the world of the professions, as we have just suggested. Yet in the professional and technical communication field, many teachers persist in underestimating the communicative skills developed through gaming. The historical stigma attached to gaming—that gamers are physically isolated, socially awkward individuals, for instance—may generate such resistance. Yet a number of researchers have provided evidence that these assumptions are unwarranted. Here we focus on Johnson’s (2005) work on this topic.

Johnson (2005) explores, then explodes, several of these stereotypes in his popular culture analysis *Everything Bad Is Good for You*. Feeding these stereotypes, Johnson argues, is the standard by which gaming is most often assessed: “. . . [A]s McLuhan famously observed, the problem with judging new cultural systems on their own terms is that the presence of the recent past inevitably colors your vision of the emerging form. . . . Games have historically suffered from this syndrome, largely because they have been contrasted with the older conventions of reading” (p. 18). Meanwhile, the intellectual skills gaming uniquely cultivates are inadvertently—or at times deliberately—overlooked.

As Johnson explains in terms of the phrase “Sleeper Curve,” the technologies of contemporary popular culture (be they television shows, video games, or similar) continually increase in complexity of meaning as audiences master each technological iteration. The result is not merely an ongoing series of ever more sophisticated gadgets, but technologies that encourage a similar mental sophistication in their consumers. Concerning gaming skills, not only is there typically “a sequence of tasks you know you have to complete to proceed further into the world . . . building roads and laying power lines, retreating through a tunnel sequence . . . conversing with characters when you’ve already memorized their lines,” but the auxiliary texts related to gaming

(e.g., ranging from guides resembling *CliffsNotes* to those such as the 53,000-word “walk through” orientation to *Grand Theft Auto III*) are consulted exponentially more frequently than said *CliffsNotes*. At intellectual and neurological levels, people gain in cognitive power not just in the gaming alone but in the interaction between gaming skills practice and text consultation (pp. 27-35).

Exploding some of the key stereotypes about gaming’s merit as an activity may help teachers discover powerful new ways of reaching students. Gee (2003) notes that, indeed, much of the knowledge generated in gaming is highly relevant to the goals of many disciplines. Having entered the gaming world in order to write of it first hand, Gee echoes Johnson in his discussion of how the knowledge generated from gaming dovetails with the learning goals of education, cognitive science, and theoretical linguistics fields. For instance, Gee lists 36 types of learning (“principles”) prioritized by both educators and gaming, such as the *Situated Meaning Principle* (whereby students/gamers must contextualize otherwise abstract symbols by attaching them to specific “embodied experiences”), and the *Cultural Models about the World Principle* (whereby students/gamers reflect on preexisting cultural models, “juxtapos[ing] them to [oppositional] new models”) (p. 108, 166). As Gee conclusively reiterates, “The argument . . . is not that what people are learning when [gaming] is always good. Rather, what they are doing when [gaming] is often good learning” (p. 199).

In light of these findings, where might teachers begin to explore the educational implications for gaming? As *Wired* demonstrates and Gee emphasizes, the creation of (digital) community is one of gaming’s dominant elements, and as educators, trained to cultivate and support connection among our students, we find ourselves pulled in this direction. We

consequently are prompted to seek out and explore disciplinary understandings of community as frameworks for best respecting gaming's communal focus.

Here we look particularly at the concept of the *discourse community*, a key concept in the professional and technical communication field. For scholars in professional and technical communication, many seminal analyses of discourse community established themselves as humanist acts of social critique (e.g., Nystrand's [1982] discussion of the language acts "allowed" by a community, Swales's [1990] focus on genre usage as indicative of a community's sociorhetorical purposes, Porter's [1992] use of poststructuralism to dismantle the influence of a discourse's target audience, Bizzell's [1992] exploration of an academic discourse community's shaping of her students).

Nystrand's (1982) significant work on the idea of the discourse community established these parameters for defining the concept: "The conditions of meaning in any . . . community are enhanced as the context of any sign, event, or utterance is elaborated according to the possibilities allowed by the group." Decisions made during speaking, writing, or printing—or the acts of language production—are shaped as the "community acts on the speaker" (pp. 15-17). Swales (1990), meanwhile, understands a discourse community's actions by the ways it uses genre to achieve its social objectives. For Swales, factors such as the goals that community members share, the methods employed for communication, and the interaction between "novice" and "expert" members define a *discourse community* in a manner emphasizing the community's purposes for existence and methods of self-perpetuation (pp. 23-29).

Examining discourse communities in light of the concept of audience, Porter (1992) chronicles a poststructuralist history of how an audience's presence during the writing process came to be defined largely in terms of two roles—essentially as a minimal or as an extensive

influence over the writer. He then explores how the common understanding of discourse community is similarly basic and consequently also deserving of poststructuralist critique: “A poststructural analysis of a community does not accept the foundational terminology of the community as a given ... [Nor does it] accept the community’s announced borders but rather investigates the dynamic nature of communities, the fluctuating borders, the intermixing of communities” (p. 105). To demonstrate, Porter uses the concept of the “forum,” or the “concrete, local manifestation of the operation of the discourse community.” It is at this location where the texts written “refer to other texts within [the forum] and to some outside it,” by default invoking not just one simple audience role but many audiences and their roles (p. 107, 109).

Like Porter, Bizzell’s (1992) significant, earliest discussions of discourse communities in her collection of essays *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness* emphasize how successful language-users recognize and work with “the expectations they share by virtue of belonging to [a] particular community. These expectations are embodied in the discourse conventions, which are in turn conditioned by the community’s work” (p. 81). Specifically, discourse conventions are highly shaped by the community’s style tenets and “canonical knowledge” (p. 222). Focusing on academic discourse to elaborate the concept of the discourse community, Bizzell chronicles her study of students as they learn to write in and for a college context; in doing so she grapples with the problem of teaching discourse conventions while not making academic discourse “a Procrustean bed that all students—and professorial—writing must fit” (p. 259). This challenge demonstrates the profound influence of discourse conventions on directing and even confining a community’s members.

Although profoundly significant, it would seem that widely accepted conceptualizations of *community* in the professional and technical communication field nonetheless may offer only

limited support to the notion that gaming—despite its highly communal emphasis—is relevant to our teaching. A new conceptualization of *community*, one constructed for professional and technical writing classes willing to explore the relevance of gaming to its work, therefore is needed. We look next at other disciplines’ construction of *community* to see if any of these may facilitate our teaching.

Specifically, for scholars in information science, the conceptualization of *community* often has been explored as an opportunity to encourage human connection via shared scholarship on digital literacies. Such instances can be seen in discussions of pioneers Emanuel Goldberg and Vannevar Bush. In his historiography *Emanuel Goldberg and His Knowledge Machine*, Buckland (2006) offers a historiography of chemist Goldberg’s extensive work in film technology and its impact on subsequent electronic inventions. For Buckland, the influence of Goldberg’s contributions to information technologies has historically been marginalized: “How and why did the record of a famous man of considerable achievements come to be so thoroughly erased? . . . It illustrates how accidental received history can be” (p. xii, 255). By reinserting Goldberg’s work into the disciplinary narratives most often recounted within information science, Buckland redirects credit to Goldberg and in doing so argues that the act of constructing a digital historical narrative encourages the development of a “community of interest” (1998), in this case, the information science discipline. As he chronicles, “The nurturing of a community interested in the history of information systems has been consciously cultivated by a series of steps taken . . . to build a supportive infrastructure. . . . [One] investment in infrastructure was the creation of a database of pioneering individuals and organizations: Who they were and what was known about the location of their personal and professional papers” (1998).

Although one premise of the Goldberg historiography is that much of Goldberg's influence over digital technology was misattributed to military scientist Vannevar Bush (Bush's development of an electronic information retrieval technology, the Memex, frequently is credited as anticipating today's World Wide Web [Stewart, 2006]), other discussions about Bush's work nonetheless serve to illustrate information science's uses of *community*. In their collection *From Memex to Hypertext*, Nyce and Kahn (1991) contextualize Bush's best-known papers. As with Buckland's approach to Goldberg, the editors explore Bush's discussions on the sharing and retrieval of bodies of knowledge and the historical narration of that knowledge: "[The Memex] . . . supported the explicit recording of 'trails of association,' something Bush saw as an attribute of human memory . . . prone to fading in its non-mechanical form" (p. 122). The communal implications of digitally-mediated, perpetuated, narrated knowledge is detailed in a later essay in the collection by Meyrowitz: "Some are looking at hypertext . . . as a way to put together all the disparate decisions of an organization. . . . [W]e all think and believe that hypertext is . . . an infrastructure, national and international, . . . linking together myriad types of information for an enormous variety of audiences" (p. 288).

As with information science discussions of Goldberg's and Bush's work that critique sources of centralized, accepted bodies of knowledge, Theodor Nelson, founder of the first hypertext endeavor, Project Xanadu (*Ted Nelson, 2007*), focuses on how such bodies are influenced by misinformation—and how such misinformation becomes redistributed and diluted within networked groups of technology users. Nelson explains that a digitally-mediated venue such as Xanadu "is an alternative paradigm for a computer universe, with its own alternative history of the computer field and alternative ideas of media, computer life, and the nature of connections" (1999, p. 2). In other words, by arguing how people have technologically interacted, and specifically how

these interactions have generated differing beliefs (or “agendas”) regarding the generation, storage, and retrieval of knowledge, Nelson offers an understanding of *community* by characterizing groups within information science itself. Nelson’s own approach to what technologically-mediated knowledge should be comprises a community as well: “We have always proposed a complete alternative computing and literary universe—sweeping, simple and principled—which has remained very different from the evolving computer world and its evolving traditions that masquerade as ‘technology’” (p. 3).

Given the differences between two disciplinary understandings of *community*, those of the professional and technical communication field and the information science field, we now are prompted to determine what if anything from these understandings can assist us in importing gaming’s communal nature into classroom contexts. Because both fields offer discussions of *community* that continue to profoundly influence pedagogical reflection and practice, wholesale rejection obviously would be an inappropriate simplification. We therefore argue that a synthesis of these understandings would inspire the most productive teaching strategies—in particular, the *discourse* focus in professional and technical communication’s *discourse community*, infused with the *critique of accepted knowledge sources* focus in information science’s *community*. For teachers in the writing classroom, such a synthesis might take the form of, for instance, asking our students to use gaming-writing as opportunities for analyzing discourse (especially analysis of digital genres such as blogs, FAQs, etc.) and for historically tracking the development of dominating “facts” and beliefs (such as the examination of the best practices surrounding a particular game, how the degree of one’s awareness of these practices might constitute community boundaries and identities, etc.). At this time, we are conducting ethnographic research into gamers, writing, and gaming-writing, so

that we might better realize an appropriate scholarly synthesis of *community* and how such a synthesis in turn can inspire specific rubrics for curricular use of gaming.

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