KNOWing how to Play: Gamer Knowledges and Knowledge Acquisition

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Abstract

This article examines the different types of knowledge that MMORPG players develop as they learn and play a game. Data is drawn from a year of case-study/ethnography based research sessions with a ten-member raiding group in the game *World of Warcraft*. Drawing from the work of Aristotle, contemporary game studies scholarship, actor network theory, and the concept of "practices," what is presented here is a matrix of complex gamer knowledge types intended not only to expand the reader's understanding of the robust variations and nuances in gamer knowledge but also to serve as a potential example of how to articulate that richness in future research. The matrix is accompanied by rationale and examples of how the knowledges function in game experiences.
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It's a random Thursday night, and I'm sipping from a bottle of carbonated water, brow slightly furrowed, as I listen to a cacophony of sound blasting from my headset. I have one hand on my keyboard, and when given the word to go, the hand that rested on the bottle joins it, and my fingers fly about the board as I join nine other players in an attempt to defeat Al'Akir, the Wind Lord of *World of Warcraft*.

> "There are tornados coming, Phill!"
> "Looking," I respond.
> "Speed up!" I turn, in game, and I'm facing the tornado. It hurls me from the platform. "Shit! Did you just keyboard turn?"

I did. At the time, I didn't realize I had chosen from options about turning. I was just turning.

> "I used my arrow keys, yes."
> "You have to use the mouse! I'll show you after the wipe."

When we'd all died (AKA we "wiped"), the raid leader, Iceman, slowly walked me through how to use my mouse to turn my character and run quickly. It was far faster than my laborious use of the arrow keys. The next time a tornado rolled past me, I was ready.

I don't share that account due to my pride over my mouse-turning *WoW* abilities; I share it because it illustrates the power of game knowledge in the practice of gaming. It also illustrates the communication of knowledge, as I was

about to hear a rehearsed, rhetorically rich explanation of how to turn. But that short exchange—only a few minutes of quick explanation and modeling—led to a communicative moment that transformed my ability to understand the game and to execute in a specific, rather frequent, situation. I'd been gaming my entire life, but that didn't mean I *knew* what I was doing.

There isn't a *World of Warcraft* manual, and in classic gamer style I wouldn't have opted to read one had it existed. The tutorial stage at the beginning of the game showed me how to speak to other players, find teams, and take on tasks from the various NPC (non-player character) "contacts," but at no point did it mention that using the mouse made the player character move as fast as the mouse could be moved, or even that the mouse would be used to turn. Iceman had quickly shown me something of profound value to my gaming practices. He'd given me the ability to act efficiently in the game environment, and specifically in that moment he'd shown me how to stop the groans coming from the other eight players when my armor-clad goblin came face-to-wind with a swirling tornado.

James Paul Gee (2003) would refer to the piece of information that Iceman gave me as shared game knowledge that was dispersed by Iceman to a researcher who was, at the time, knocking on the door to his affinity group but didn't yet know the codeword. I had quickly and easily learned something of tremendous value from a single in-game miscue. I learned something Iceman had known "forever," and I could later share that same piece of knowledge with another gamer.

Scholarship on games and learning isn't a new concept. Gee (2003, 2005) has written numerous books and articles on the topic. A tremendous body of scholarship exists on how games help people learn (Barab, 2003; Bogost, 2006, 2007; McGonigal, 2011; Prensky, 2001, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2006), how people learn in games (Chen, 2011; Gee, 2003, 2005), and how game design aids in learning (Barab, 2003; Bogost, 2006; Schell, 2014). In addition to the vast number of publications, there is also a yearly conference on games and learning hosted at the University of Wisconsin, appropriately titled the *Games + Learning + Society* conference (GLS). Major composition and rhetoric conferences *The Conference on College Composition and Communication* (CCCC) and *Computers & Writing* (CW) both have hosted numerous panels on gaming in the last several years. The body of literature about how games help people learn, how people learn in games, and the implications that games and game thinking have on our learning is expanding by the day. My goal, then, is not to replicate those previous studies; the collected scholarship does a fantastic job of explaining in great detail what I quickly summarize here: gamers learn through practice and social learning (Chen, 2011; Gee, 2003, 2005; Taylor, 2006), games can only be played by learning and then mastering their systems (Bogost, 2007; Hawisher and Selfe (2007); Chen, 2011; McGonigal, 2011; Prensky, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2006), and gamers use each other both directly (by communicating) and indirectly (by using resources like wikis, FAQ documents, tutorial videos, etc.) to learn (Gee, 2003, 2005).

The current scholarship has established a solid body of literature about the how and much of the why of games and learning, but coming at games from the study of rhetoric, I was much more curious about the *types* of knowledge that gamers develop through play and the ways they composed and shared that knowledge with other gamers. During my year of researching *WoW* raiders, I observed that they develop varied, distinct forms of knowledge and that almost every *WoW* player with any level of experience had at least one preferred method of sharing game knowledge, be that a blog, through videos, or just through dissemination within the game interface or a voice chat program. Indeed the raid team members I researched learned and gained knowledge at almost every turn, but it wasn't a flat, equal, homogenous type of knowledge. The differences in type and method of sharing are important. If we, as researchers and scholars, want to speak about the robust and detailed nature of how gamers learn and collaborate, understanding the nuances of their knowledge types will aid us in explaining communication, collaboration and learning that can be, at times, difficult to see.

1. Methods

This article is but a portion of a much larger research project.[1] I refer to the study that informs this writing as a quasi-ethnographic study. This phrase has prompted some to balk, and I understand that, but it's important to make an effort to be accurate as to what took place. For a year, I conducted research following ethnographic methodology

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[1] In fact the report on the larger study is forthcoming as the monograph Identity, Collaboration and Digital Work in the World of Warcraft from Parlor Press.