The WoW! Learning Project

Robertpupil

Susanlearner

World of Warcraft

"The gamer's mindset—the fact that they are learning in a totally new way—means they'll treat the world as a place for creation, not just for consumption. This is the true impact videogames will have on our culture." —Will Wright, The Sims creator, 2006

World of Warcraft (WoW), a massively multiple online role playing game (MMORPG) in the dungeons and dragons genre, is the most successful personal computer game ever released. As of 2009, it had more than 11.5 million active subscribers worldwide, amounting to 62.2% of the online gaming market. A common misconception is that online video games are populated predominantly by teenage boys, but only about 25% of MMORPG players are teenagers and the average WoW player spends about 23 hours a week in game. About 84% of players, according to the Daedalus survey (Yee, 2005), are male.

Biggs and Tang (*Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, 2007) introduced the metaphor of "Robert and Susan" higher education student archetypes. Susan learns in a deep way using higher order thinking skills, like theorizing, reflecting, and generating. Robert learns in a surface way using skills at a much lower cognitive level, like note-taking and memorization; he is happy do the minimum to get by. WoW has its own Roberts and Susans in its pool of hardcore raiders, casual players, and those inbetween.

Although it is a game, WoW, its communities, and its cultural artefacts share a number of commonalities with lifelong learning in online higher education: both are occupied predominantly by the same age demographic; both have Robert and Susan types; both have structures that support ad-hoc groups where alliances shift, merge, and collapse dynamically as people come and go; both encourage the formation of communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) through their design and purposes; and, finally, both, with varying degrees of success, encourage learning and collaboration resulting in an ongoing learning journey.

The Social View of Learning

we participate therefore we are

understanding is socially constructed

Figure 1: Social Understanding
Brown's *Minds on Fire* social view of learning (Brown & Adler, 2008)

What Is Social Learning & Social Knowing

"We participate; therefore we are." (*Minds on Fire*, 2008)

What exactly constitutes education or learning? Learning is different than knowledge or facts in the same way that data differs from information. Without a context, a fact is just a piece of data. It is only information or learning when it can be applied to something. Biggs and Tang are saying something similar, when they say, "The acquisition of information in itself does not bring about [effective learning changes], but the way we structure that information and think with it does." They go on to say "education is about conceptual change, not just the acquisition of information."

How do we elicit this conceptual change? They enumerate four precursors. The most interesting is the fourth: "[S]tudents work collaboratively and in dialogue with others, both peers and teachers." Brown and Adler (*Minds on Fire*, 2008) call this "social learning" and explain that "our understanding of content is socially constructed through conversations about that content and through grounded interactions." This matches Weinberger's (*Everything Is Miscellaneous*, 2007) ideas about social knowing:

> What you learn isn't prefiltered and approved, sitting on a shelf, waiting to be consumed... Now we can see for ourselves that knowledge isn't in our heads: It is between us. It emerges from public and social thought and it stays there, because social knowing, like the global conversations that give rise to it, is never finished.—David Weinberger

Lifelong learning, like Weinberger's social knowing, is never finished. It continues on outside the four walls of the classroom. It is on Twitter or Facebook. It is at home. It arises in conversations with friends and in the games we play. This social component, previously undervalued, is key.

Research Questions

What do I hope to discover?

Three initial research branches:

1) What encourages game players to persist in learning and working, although many tasks are boring and repetitive, and to continue improving long past their current goal? How does this relate to Hagel and Brown's "lessons" (*How World of Warcraft Promotes Innovation*, 2009)?

2) How does the social structure around the game resemble a community of practice? How much of a role does social knowing play in the development of expertise and the dissemination of learning? What features would be useful to adopt when designing learning communities?

3) How is the "Robert and Susan" metaphor applicable to World of Warcraft and what does that gain us in understanding how to successfully encourage lifelong learning and build communities of practice?

World of Warcraft Learning! The 30-Second Summary

Examine how metaphors and game design of World of Warcraft motivate people to learn and to work in communities of practice, in order to transfer motivation, social knowledge building, and persistence to online higher education practices for lifelong learning.

Michelle A. Hoyle

ideas LAB

US
UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX