

Online Role-Playing Games and Young Adult Literature

Jen Scott Curwood, The University of Sydney, js.curwood@sydney.edu.au

Abstract: Drawing on theories of affinity spaces and traditions of online ethnographic research, this study seeks to understand the culture of physical, virtual, and blended spheres that adolescents inhabit. This paper highlights the ways in which youth use online role-playing games as a response to literature, such as *The Hunger Games* trilogy. Specifically, it considers how Tumblr, a microblogging site, offers a platform for readers to readily become writers and gamers. The analysis focuses on one young woman's creative writing and role-playing processes over time, and includes a discussion of how games can shape young adults' engagement with literature in and out of school contexts.

Introduction

A decade ago, the National Endowment for the Arts released *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, which warned of a marked decline in youths' engagement with literature. The report contrasted books with digital media, arguing that the latter "often require no more than passive participation" and "foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification" (Bradshaw & Nichols, 2004, p. vii). Today, it's not uncommon to encounter media pundits and teachers alike echoing this argument that young people today don't read because they are too busy playing videogames, texting friends, or exploring uncharted online territory. By creating this dichotomy between technology and literature, it obscures the growing amount of empirical research that suggests that technology can enrich young people's understanding of literature and promote their multimodal composition skills.

As a result of greater accessibility and affordability of Internet-connected devices, youth are increasingly using online spaces to collaborate, communicate, and innovate. They see these spaces as a way to share their creative work that is often inspired by books, films, games, and other media (Black & Steinkuehler, 2009). Over the past two years, I have conducted an ethnographic study of *The Hunger Games* affinity space to gain insight into how fan culture can support the literacy practices inherent in writing stories, creating art, producing songs, and playing games. In this paper, I offer a case study of how one Australian adolescent uses Tumblr as part of a literature-based online role-playing game, and ask: How do role-playing games promote critical engagement with literature?

Online Affinity Spaces

Affinity spaces are physical, virtual, or blended spaces where people interact around a common interest (Gee, 2004). They contain multiple *portals*, or entry points, that offer diverse interest-driven trajectories, opportunities to learn with others, and paths toward becoming an authentic participant (Squire, 2011). Youth draw on a variety of modes and semiotic resources as they engage with their common passion in online affinity spaces (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013). While the field continues to theorize affinity spaces (Hayes & Duncan, 2012), further research is needed to shed light on the nature of literacy development and social interaction within online contexts.

Recently, several colleagues and I argued that an update to Gee's (2004) initial categorization of online affinity spaces was necessary (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012). We posited that contemporary affinity spaces have nine defining features: 1) A common endeavor is primary; 2) Participation is self-directed, multi-faceted, and dynamic; 3) Portals are often multimodal; 4) Affinity spaces provide a passionate, public audience for content; 5) Socializing plays an important role in affinity space participation; 6) Leadership roles vary within and among portals; 7) Knowledge is distributed across the entire affinity space; 8) Many portals place a high value on cataloguing content and documenting practices; and 9) Affinity spaces encompass a variety of media-specific and social networking portals.

Online affinity spaces offer fans a way to come together around a shared interest, across time and space. Moreover, many fan-based affinity spaces either emerge from games or include games as a part of the fandom. Prior scholarship indicates that games support complex forms of learning that include collaborative inquiry, the development of situated identities, and participation in a common discourse (Gee, 2003; Squire, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2006). This study seeks to add to this body of research by analyzing how affinity spaces and role-playing games shape young people's knowledge of literature as well as game design.

Methods

Research Context

To understand the literacy practices inherent in affinity spaces, I have taken a sociocultural, situated approach by observing and participating in the space associated with *The Hunger Games*, a young adult trilogy. Over the past two years, I have examined fan practices in various portals where young people write fan fiction, create art, produce videos, compose music, and design games (Curwood, 2013a; Curwood, 2013b; Curwood et al., 2013). Role-playing games, in particular, offer youth an opportunity to deepen their content knowledge, participate in social interactions, and develop their creative writing skills.

The Hunger Games, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay* are part of a growing number of dystopian novels written for young adults. From 2008 to 2012, Suzanne Collins' trilogy sold over 50 million copies worldwide. Set in a post-apocalyptic world, Panem includes an affluent capitol, surrounded by thirteen impoverished districts. In the Dark Days, the districts rose up against the capitol. To remind the citizens of Panem that such a revolution must never happen again, they are subjected to the Hunger Games each year. The protagonist, 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen, must fight for her survival. In response to the trilogy, many fans have turned to the Internet; *Hunger Games* Top Sites currently tracks over 50 fan sites that have a combined total of 30 million page views.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection began with *systematic observation* to gain insight into the dynamics of communication and semi-otic production in the online affinity space. I conducted multiple *interviews* with thirty focal participants via Skype, email, or private messages. Participants range in age from 11 to 17, and they represented a variety of countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. These interviews sought information about the factors that shaped their literacy practices, participation in online affinity spaces, and engagement with *The Hunger Games* novels. I also collected *artifacts*, including discussion board rules, online profiles, and creative work. Drawing on descriptive case analysis (Yin, 2003), I created case studies from focal participants in *The Hunger Games* affinity space. Using a thematic analysis framework (Boyatzis, 1998; Saldaña, 2009), I performed several repeated rounds of qualitative coding, gradually consolidating and refining the participants' discussions of their literacy practices into several broad patterns.

Focal Participant

In this paper, I offer a case study of a 17-year-old from Western Australia. Georgia is in her final year of high school and plans to apply to university. She explains, "I'm an arts student, so I don't take any math or sciences because I find them unnecessary, and also quite stifling – there is no room to create, or to see things from a peculiar perspective. I prefer subjective, creative subjects with deep analytical possibilities such as literature." While she fondly recalls her teachers introducing her to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *1984*, and *Macbeth*, she reports feeling frustrated by the prescriptive assignments that she often encounters in school. This year, Georgia said that she was "exceptionally fortunate to have been assigned a wonderful literature teacher. Her methods are engaging, and she encourages her students to interpret the text in their own respective ways... She understands, from reading my work in particular, how strongly I respond to certain texts emotionally – so she takes care to encourage my emotional responses."

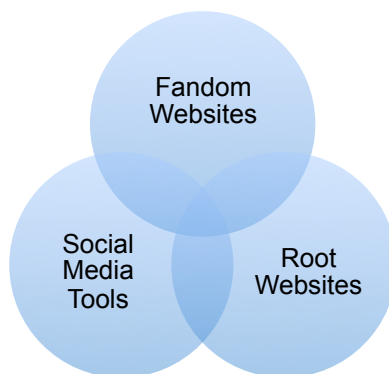


Figure 1. Types of portals into fan-based online affinity spaces.

Georgia is a fan of dystopian literature and she first read *The Hunger Games* in 2009. Georgia explains that the trilogy was not popular with her friends at school, and she wanted to “seek out like-minded people with whom I could converse and fangirl – people who would share my excitement and passion.” Over the past four years, Georgia has been an avid participant in *The Hunger Games* online affinity space. She regularly seeks out opportunities on Mockingjay.net, TheFandom.net, Hypable.com, Twitter, and Tumblr to engage in with others within the fandom. Each of these portals represents a different type of entry point into fan-based online affinity spaces. While Tumblr and Twitter are social media tools and TheFandom.net and Hypable.com involve diverse fandoms, Mockingjay.net is a root website unique to the *Hunger Games* affinity space (see Figure 1). These various portals allow Georgia to engage with other fans and deepen her understanding of plot and the genre. More than that, they encourage Georgia’s creative response to literature; she notes, “I like my creativity to flow, and I like to be inspired to read or write.”

Findings

While Georgia is active on multiple portals within *The Hunger Games* affinity space, this analysis will focus specifically on how Georgia uses Tumblr to support engagement with literature and foster her literacy development. Based on a thematic analysis of Georgia’s player profiles, game rules, and chat transcripts as well as multiple interviews, findings indicate that she uses the microblogging platform in a couple of key ways. Not only does literature-based role-playing give Georgia the opportunity to be a game designer, it also allows her to use her literary knowledge as an integral part of gameplay.

Game Design Matters

Georgia and a friend created *The Hunger Games Role Play*, which allowed other fans to propose characters, join in the role-play, and shape the game rules. Capitalizing on the rapidly growing popularity of the trilogy and the upcoming release of the first film, Georgia used Tumblr hashtags to share their RPG within the affinity space. At its peak in 2011, the game had twenty different players that represented each of the districts within Panem. Within the game, each character had his or her own Tumblr, which was linked from the Follow List page. This allowed each player to have multiple characters and to follow the Tumblrs of all other players within the game. In Figure 2, Georgia introduces the game and directs potential players to hyperlinked pages that explain how the game works and how they can join.



Figure 2. Screen shot from *The Hunger Games Role-play*

Georgia’s first foray into role-playing was instrumental in informing her understanding of game design and game rules. In one interview, Georgia shared that the game rules developed over time and in consultation with other

players. Since *The Hunger Games* involves a fight-to-the-death game, it was vital that the rules of engagement and the accepted levels of violence be clear at the onset. For that reason, one rule stated, “Being rude or derogatory to role-players while either one of you is out of character is not acceptable. Save it for the arena, children!” and another noted, “The official rating of this role-play is MA. In keeping with the spirit of the Games, violence is acceptable. However, if you wish to delve into all the gory details, please take advantage of the Read More feature for the sake of readers who may not wish to witness it.” This latter rule allowed some players to include violent acts in detail while permitting others to choose to avoid reading such (perhaps gratuitous) descriptions. At the same time, this rule opened the opportunity to explore romances between characters.

As a game designer, Georgia quickly learned that part of designing a role-playing game is setting expectations for game play. For instance, some players were active daily while others either were not able or chose not to participate so frequently. Consequently, one rule stated, “if you are inactive for three weeks without declaring hiatus to us, we will option your role for another to fill.” Additionally, role-playing games require clear rules and shared expectations. Part of this entails having a common discourse; with text-based online role-playing games, this extends to grammatical features of the game. One rule specifically addressed this: “Role-playing is fun and easy, but more enjoyable for readers and role-players alike when you use correct punctuation, grammar and sentence structure. Please refrain from “script format” (putting actions in *asterisks* between dialogue). You don’t have to write full paragraphs, but a more professional structure is more descriptive, and reads better!”

Literary Knowledge Fosters Gameplay

In order to design *The Hunger Games Role Play*, Georgia needed to have an in-depth knowledge of the setting of Panem, the rules of the Games, and the characters. At the same time, her interaction with other fans within the affinity space meant that they could readily ask questions and that they would likely correct any of her misconceptions. The role-playing game gave Georgia her first opportunity to embody a character from *The Hunger Games*. To do so, she had to understand her character’s motivations and interactions with others within the story. But she also needed to consider how *Hunger Games* author Suzanne Collins used descriptive language and dialogue to advance the plot. Rather than being a passive reader of *The Hunger Games*, Georgia’s role-playing offered her the chance to become a game designer. It also allowed her to create two separate Tumblrs for the characters of Cinna and Cashmere. Over the course of 33,000 words, these role-plays gave Georgia an opportunity to develop her craft as a writer.

Georgia was drawn to Cinna, an important character throughout the trilogy, and Cashmere, a minor character in *Catching Fire*, and wanted to explore them more within the context of the role-playing game. While both characters hail from the Capitol, the similarities end there. Cinna is a brilliant stylist and a double agent who plots a revolution. Cashmere is a career tribute and previous victor of the Hunger Games. By role-playing these two characters, Georgia was able to delve into their histories, their motivations, and their voices. This can be seen in their Tumblr introductions and design (Figure 3). Cinna’s introduction focuses on his role as a stylist; in her posts, Georgia shared some of her artistic interpretations of Cinna’s designs. As Cinna, Georgia’s writing is descriptive and poetic; she talks of practical beauty, obscure materials, and raging fires. In contrast, Georgia takes on an entirely different voice as Cashmere; she is confrontational, blunt, and haughty. A minor character in one novel, Georgia’s writing as Cashmere allows her more room for exploration and interpretation.

With both characters, Georgia’s literary knowledge is instrumental to her participation in the role-playing game. Writing in the omniscient third person, she focused on her characters’ dialogue with others and her description of their surroundings, actions, and interactions. Role-playing demanded that Georgia be responsive to how others within the game advanced the storyline. For instance, Cinna and Katniss engaged in a lengthy exchange within the game. When another role-player introduced the idea that Katniss felt regret at her perceived weakness and poor decisions, Georgia-as-Cinna immediately responded,

“You made the decisions that needed to be made. War is war; it is unfortunate that we had to resort to war to reach equality, but it was necessary. And look at all the good work you’ve done, and all the lives you’ll save, the people who’ve liberated; you always were brave. The bravest woman I have ever known. You have never needed me to be brave.” His words were earnest, heartfelt, things that he had always been reluctant to put into words. The line of his stitches and the stroke of his pencil spoke volumes more than his words; but they were all he had, here and now. Katniss needed to understand how she had changed the world.

While Georgia’s literary knowledge fostered her engagement in the role-playing game, Tumblr’s interactive design encouraged her interaction with others and offered her an eager audience for her creative work.

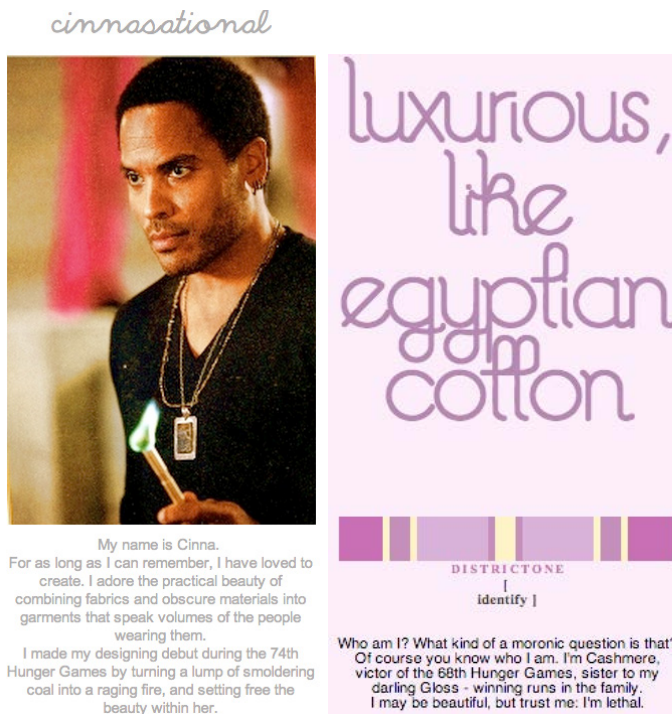


Figure 3. Screenshot from Cinna's and Cashmere's Tumblrs.

Implications

Research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project indicates that 80% of adolescents use online social network sites, 38% share original creative work online, and 21% remix their own creative works, inspired by others' words and images (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010; Lenhart, Madden, Smith, Purcell, Zickuhr, & Rainie, 2011). Clearly, many young people are using online spaces as a way to explore their interests, develop their identities, and engage with diverse modes and semiotic resources. Rather than situating novels and digital tools as two opposing forces in their lives, this study suggests that technology can in fact be a way to deepen young adults' engagement with literature. Unlike classrooms, most affinity spaces distribute opportunities for leadership across many individuals, texts, and tools (Gomez, Schieble, Curwood, & Hassett, 2010). For students like Georgia who are disengaged with school and result the prescribed nature of their literary experiences in English classes, online role-playing games offer a powerful way for them to demonstrate their leadership, develop their literacy skills, and engage in self-directed learning.

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