Engagement through Digital Role-Playing Game Participatory Cultures

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore three recent computer-based role-playing games (RPGs), and I discuss how each RPG creates or intersects with a *participatory culture*, as defined by Henry Jenkins, in his 2006 report, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Education for the 21st century.* Through participation, players of these games experience increased engagement with the material related to the imaginative worlds these games create. I discuss how each participatory culture is defined, and how its participants are invited to engage within its *affinity space*. Finally, I discuss how traditional classrooms may be improved and *transformed* through play in these virtual spaces.

*Keywords:* *Participatory Culture, Role-Playing Games, Affinity Spaces, Engagement*

**Introduction**

In 1979, when I was in the second grade, I had one of the most transformative and meaningful experiences of my life. One day, during recess, I spied three boys a few years my senior sitting against the wall, circled around a cardboard box emblazoned with a dragon. The box sat open-end up to catch the numerous strange polyhedron dice the boys were throwing, and as they spoke to one another, it sounded to me as if they were telling each other a story. Each of the boys had a green sheet of paper in front of them, covered in writing and drawings of various open geometric shapes, which held numbers inside of them. As the boys spoke to each other about what their *character* was going to do, they would roll the dice, and it appeared that the results of their throws had a direct relationship to the paper in front of them. They would cheer or groan, as the dice seemed to determine the success or failure of their endeavors. I had never seen anything quite like it. It reminded me of playing make-believe with the kids on the playground, but it was better structured, more like a board game. The boys eventually noticed me, and instead of telling me to ‘beat it’, as I feared these older boys might have the inclination to do, one of the elder boys invited me to join them. Nervous and excited, I accepted the offer, and sat down. The boy to my left gave me a *character sheet*, as he named it, and explained to me that they were playing *Dungeons and Dragons*, a game of epic fantasy where you fought monsters and won treasure. With a few moments of instruction about *hit points*, *saving throws*, and *weapon damage*, I was off and running—and I’ve been hooked ever since.

My participation that day had a profound effect on my life, and my involvement in role-playing games (RPGs) been a guiding force in the direction of my personal interests and professional pursuits. Looking back at my childhood experience with an educator’s eye, I can see now that I was fortunate enough to find and join a *participatory culture* (Jenkins, H. 2006).

Jenkins (2006) defines a *participatory culture* as a culture:

1. With relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement,
2. With strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others,
3. With some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices,
4. Where members believe that their contributions matter, and
5. Where members feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created).

My peers taught me the rudiments of play in a single sitting, and thus initiated me into the participatory culture. Unlike a typical board game, there was an immersive quality to the game play that encouraged dramatic performance and creative problem solving. Simply by speaking as if I were my character and directing his actions in the imaginative world of the game, I was immediately invited to acts of artistic expression. In each game we played together, my peers continued to support my growth as a player—through instruction and by example, they taught me the idioms of role-play and the mechanics and tactics I needed to become successful in game play. Our *adventures* were accomplished in the context of a group, or *party*, and we worked collaboratively towards common goals. The better I became as a player through the help and guidance of my fellow players, the better the success of our joint adventures.

Outside of the game sessions, we collectively indulged in numerous creative activities, including designing characters, drawing pictures, and writing backstory for our characters’ personal narratives. We spent time and creative effort to perfect accents and personality quirks, and developed a deep understanding of the motivations of our fictitious personalities.

Later, as I gained more experience and my skills progressed, I began to design dungeons, challenges, story lines, and magic items, all of which I shared with the group through *dungeon mastering*, or acting as the narrator in the game. Dungeon mastering was a position with prestige and requiring a certain mastery of the game’s rules and idioms, and was treated with a fair amount of respect by the other participants. This gave me confidence and pride in myself and in my work, which was incredibly important to me as a counterbalance to the social struggles I had as an awkward child in grade school. I began to teach others what I learned about the game, and promoted our culture through involving new participants.

Like Andy Maul wrote about in his *Teacher’s Retrospective* (Herr-Stephenson & Parker, 2010), RPGs have been incredibly influential in my life. These games have encouraged me to interact with my peers, inspired creativity and identity work, and promoted my interest in many subjects, including mythology, history, math, theater and creative writing, since these all were key academic areas that contributed to my success as a player and a *Dungeon Master*. My involvement with *Dungeons and Dragons* led to magazine subscriptions, attending and speaking at gaming conventions, joining organized play groups, developing original fiction and gaming content, contributing to wikis and blogs, multiple forms of artistic expression (such as painting miniatures, drawing, and creative writing to name a few), and a personal association and affiliation that would lead to many lasting friendships. Ultimately, it led me to choose a career as an educator who uses RPGs as a medium for instruction, and to choose to extend my academic career and obtain a master’s degree in education.

Much to my growing excitement, my research has uncovered that I am not the only one on whom RPGs have had a significant and lasting impact. Many educational and social benefits of RPGs have been cited in academic literature, and Henry Jenkins (2006) suggests through his reference to play, performance, simulation and a combination of other ‘new literacy skills’, that RPGs are themselves a form of new literacy that should not be ignored. RPGs create around them a fertile ground for investigation, creativity and collaborative problem solving through the establishment of a “virtual world” (Berry, M. & Parker, J., 2010). Further, the participatory culture that develop around RPGs can be seen as *affinity spaces* (Gee, J.P., 2004), which “offer powerful opportunities for learning”, because they are “sustained by common endeavors that bridge difference in age, class, race, gender, and educational level” and because “people can participate in various ways according to their skills and interests, because they depend on peer-to-peer teaching with each participant constantly motivated to acquire new knowledge or refine their existing skills, and because they allow each participant to feel like an expert while tapping the expertise of others.”

In this paper I will explore three recent computer-based RPGs, and will discuss how each RPG creates or intersects with a *participatory culture*, which in turn increases engagement for its participants. I will discuss how each participatory culture is defined, and how its participants are invited to engage within its *affinity space*. Finally, I will discuss how traditional classrooms may be improved and *transformed* through play in these virtual spaces.

**Classcraft: Using RPGs for Classroom Management and Engagement**

*Classcraft* (<http://www.classcraft.com>) is an online RPG designed for teachers and students to play together in the classroom alongside their day-to-day educational experience. Using the metaphor of a fantasy RPG, each student creates a character, and the teacher becomes the *Game Master*, who is responsible for managing the gameplay experience. Students are grouped into *parties* of 4 to 6 players, and within those groups, players individually assume a specific role (*Warrior, Mage, or Healer*). Each role has its own specific powers that have individual or group significance, both within the context of the game (healing other players) and within the context of the classroom (getting extra time to complete a test).

As the players advance in the game, they gain *experience points* and *coins* for activities (e.g. completing homework or answering specific subject-related questions), which they can spend to give their characters more abilities and to customize their avatars. If the players are late for class, show a lack of involvement, or act out, they can suffer *damage*, and if they fall below their character’s total *hit points*, they may *fall in battle*. A fallen hero must suffer a consequence randomly chosen from a pre-determined list, which may include such consequences as detention or writing out a five-page text. Furthermore, when a character *falls in battle*, they inflict damage to the rest of their party as well.

Each class day begins with a random event, which can be positive or negative, and can affect a single player, a party, the entire class, or the teacher, and serves to focus the class on the activities of the day. As the class progresses, behavior by the players or actions taken by the *Game Master* can grant boons or exact damage from the players and these actions work to progress the activities of the game. Game play extends beyond the confines of the physical classroom—the website also supplies a forum for students to discuss matters of the classroom with each other, such as how to complete homework assignments, or strategies to help party members get to class on time. The forum provides a space for students to mentor other students on class assignments, which is one way that a player might gain experience. The teacher is also a member of the forum, and can contribute by acknowledging those that are helping one another with experience points, or by answering questions on assignments that other students may be unable to explain. In this way, the classroom is extended into the virtual space and both collaboration and instruction continues outside of the classroom.

The main focus of Classcraft is to solve issues of classroom management (late homework, tardiness, acting out, etc.) as well as increasing engagement in the students’ day-to-day work, and the effects of playing the game have some strong reported results. (Crowley, D. 2014) One teacher who uses Classcraft, Ricardo Higuera, a 7th grade world history teacher from the Southern California town of Thermal, reports that the game has all but solved a tardiness issue that he had been experiencing. The grouping of students into parties creates a motivation for students to rely on one another, and hold each other accountable, creating incentives to collaborate. This leads to creating a participatory culture where students are connected to others in the class, and share goals and resources. Shawn Young, a physics teacher who uses the game, tells us “I have kids who would never have talked to each other, who are helping each other out after school.”

Engagement in classwork is also reported to increase through the use of the game. Higuera reports, “Academically, I have noticed quiz scores and class participation increase. Before, some of my more apathetic students wouldn’t care if they failed a quiz. Now, they’re more wary to [fail] because they know it affects their character’s level and team standings in the game.” Young comments, “The game is built to reinforce what makes you a good learner. Participating well in class, doing your work, collaborating. It really rewards that. That’s how you level up in the game”. Young also gives us some informal quantitative measures: “We have teachers saying their class averages have gone up 20, 25 percent in the months following implementing Classcraft.” Young credits the increase in engagement to the fact that the game offers significant rewards (such as getting help on a question on a quiz, getting more time to complete a test, or being able to turn in a paper a day later), provides a continuous feedback cycle, and encourages a classroom dynamic rooted in collaboration.

One interesting effect of the game is its novel decoupling of typical consequences for behavioral missteps (e.g. getting detention for being late for class) from their default stigma. Since it is all part of the game, the players are more compliant with accepting the consequences of their actions. Young reports that his students would typically resist punishments for misbehavior “they’d be like, ‘Oh, you’re mean, you’re giving me detention,’ and try and get out of it.” However, with Classcraft, his students willingly comply with the consequences of their actions; “Now, they’re like, ‘This is the game, it’s cool, I’ll go.’ You don’t even need to check if they’re going. They’re definitely going.” (Crawley, 2014).

While Classcraft does not directly focus on the content of the curriculum being taught in the classroom, the role-playing themed *gamification*[[1]](#endnote-1) serves to engage the students in a participatory culture where compliance with desired classroom behaviors is how the students advance in the game. The students cross natural boundaries and communicate with members of the class with whom they wouldn’t normally have relations, and students previously disenfranchised from the activities of the classroom are given a reason to engage and participate. In this way, the participatory culture of the virtual community within the game supports development of the actual community of the classroom. Classcraft has the potential to transform classrooms by providing a game-like context which serves to engage and motivate its participants to compliance with expected behaviors and outcomes, and which de-stigmatizes failures and consequences of failure by treating them as just part of the game.

**Never Alone: Collaboration with Alaskan Natives to Extend Culture via a RPG**

*Never Alone* (<http://neveralonegame.com>) (also titled ‘Kisima Ingitchuna’) is a newly-released RPG game for PC, Xbox One and PlayStation 4 that reports itself to be the first game developed in collaboration with the Iñupiat, an Alaskan native people. Almost 40 Alaskan native elders, storytellers and community members contributed to the development of the game. The player takes the role of a young Iñupiat girl and her arctic fox companion, as they adventure to find the source of the eternal blizzard that rages and threatens the survival of everything that they know. The game takes the player through engaging environments where the player must perform heroic deeds and will meet legendary characters from Iñupiat legends, narrated by a master storyteller in the native Iñupiat language. Along with the engaging game play, the player is exposed to over 30 minutes of interviews from elders, storytellers and other members of the Iñupiat community, as they share stories and wisdom about their culture. I find this to be a fascinating example of a transformation of incredible cultural content that is at risk of being lost to time and progress, into an engaging game that teaches vital cultural stories and wisdom, not only to the Iñupiat culture’s own youth that may choose to play the game, but also potentially to the world at large.

A player’s goal within the game is to navigate an environment by avoiding hazards and completing tests in a representationally physical fashion. A player’s actions could include jumping, running, or object manipulation, much akin to a classic video game such as Mario Brothers, but in this case, all set within the world of the Alaskan Arctic. Through gameplay, the learning can be seen as student-driven, as the actions of the game character are under complete control of the player, and accomplishing tasks in the game unlocks content that is viewed within context of the activities of the character in the game.

In being a single- or two-player game, this game does not necessarily by itself create a participatory culture. However, the game invites the player into an existant participatory culture consisting of members of the Iñupiat people. Players are initiated into the Iñupiat community through game play, as they are taught stories and wisdom once only held by cultural insiders. Playing the game is a superior means to create engagement than merely exposing students to passive media–according to Roger Hargreaves, reporting for Metro.co.uk, “experiencing and interacting with the world of the Iñupiat creates a sense of empathy that would never come from blankly staring at the TV.” As the player receives the wisdom and stories of the Iñupiat people, they begin to become experts in the culture, and gain the capability to retain and perpetuate those stories and wisdom, either casually through discourse, or by encouraging others to play the game as well. A player might also be encouraged to learn more about the Iñupiat culture outside of the game, and might equally be driven to create their own narratives of wisdom through relating to those stories, and to the results of their game play.

It is encouraging that this is a game that has been developed through a private company and is being released as an entertainment title, while at the same time having very clear pedagogical and content goals. The game itself is a storyteller, in the tradition of the people that it is working to teach about, and the game’s epic nature reflects the epic narratives of the stories of the Iñupiat people.

Once could imagine the use of this game within a larger classroom curriculum on native cultures, and the creation of activities and assessment around the learning that happens within the game. Students participating in this game would not only learn what stories the Iñupiat people have to share, but in a sense, they would gain a window into what it is to be Iñupiat through their experiences.

**Storium: Collaborative Storytelling RPG Teaches Writing Skills and Connects Students Through Creativity**

Storium (<http://www.storium.com>) is an online RPG storytelling game, which provides a platform for collaborative storytelling between a number of players and a *narrator* or *game master*. Each story takes place within the context of a setting or world, which a narrator may select from a collection of pre-made worlds, or the narrator may construct a custom world on his or her own using the editing tools on the website. The narrator invites players to join a story, and each player creates a *character* within the story. The narrator and players contribute to the story through the use of *story cards*, which represent places, characters, situations, and other story components. In each scene, the narrator sets the stage with a segment of creative writing, and constructs a test using a set of *story cards*. Each player must meet the obstacle either individually or as a group with his or her own cards, and if the player uses the right cards (*strength* and *weakness* cards, relating to their character’s abilities and background) they are permitted to write accompanying textual narration of how the scene plays out.

Storium has also expanded its offering to include a version tailored for schools, named aptly ‘Storium for Schools’. They will be working with educators to identify and develop curriculum-relevant game material for differing ages and subject matter. Their first alpha test in a formal classroom setting was ‘Storium: a River Valley Civilizations World’, with Manor New Technology High School (<http://mnths.manorisd.net>) in Austin, Texas. The test ran from September to October of 2014, included nearly 100 students, and covered the concepts and facts that students had learned in their world civilization class. The students created characters that lived in a fictitious river valley community much akin to those found in the cradle of civilization, and through playing the game they told stories of their characters’ exploits and struggles. The students recorded and shared with Storium over an hour of video about their experiences, of which a sample was edited and placed on YouTube for public consumption (Hood, S. 2014). Interviews with the participants report a high level of engagement in the project, with individuals saying they enjoyed the activity for the creativity it allowed them to practice, and the freedom to write historical fiction in the context of a non-fiction history class. They enjoyed the fact that they were writing in a different format than an essay, and they enjoyed reading each other’s writing, instead of a textbook.

Through playing Storium, the students formed a participatory culture in which they encouraged each other to contribute, and they understood the value of their own contributions. Students were inspired to contribute to Storium frequently due to its engaging game play, as well as due to the fact that the students had to work together in order to get their submissions in on time for their grade. Members of a given story bonded as contributors to a particular narrative, and as players of a particular instance of the game. Some students reported a feeling of empowerment in being able to decide where the story would go, and reported that through the game they found writing ‘fun’. Some students also provided feedback for improvement of the game which would allow them to have more powerful tools for collaboration in the segments of the story that other players have written. This shows that the students were involving themselves not just in the participatory culture of their classmates and teacher, but also they positioned themselves within the participatory culture of all of Storium’s users as well as the developers.

Through the participatory culture created by Manor New Technology High School’s participation in Storium, certain activities associated with the academic setting of the classroom, such as researching and developing writing skills, are naturally promoted. Players wish to do better in the game, for themselves and ultimately for each other. Narrators and players are encouraged to research the topics involved in their game world (which may be historical or include important thematic components related to educational curriculum), and they are given the opportunity to demonstrate their content mastery through game play, which involves participation in multiple new literacy skills. The record of the game play is kept within the content of the story, and can be referenced in the future both for further game participation, and as a demonstrable example of the players’ mastery of the content.

Additionally, any of the student participants has the opportunity to act within the larger *affinity space* created by all players of Storium. Storium’s participatory culture is supported by a Facebook page, as well as a set of internal community forums which supports players and narrators. These virtual spaces provide a location for players and narrators to come together into storytelling groups, for members of the community to give gameplay advice, to showcase exemplary stories, and to provide the developers with feedback on the game.

Participation in Storium holds a tremendous potential for transforming academic pursuits usually undertaken for the reward of a grade or a completed assignment. Storium provides an intrinsic value to these academic subjects, as they are skills necessary for performing well in the game, and thus allowing them to gain praise and acknowledgement from the audience of their peers.

**Conclusion**

RPGs are well situated to create or support *participatory cultures*; they offer *affinity spaces* for creativity and cooperative engagement, and put participants into a relationship that orients their activities toward one another and for the sake of one another. Through that relationship, participants are inspired to create and engage, and support one another in their endeavors. Further, participation in these *affinity spaces* is often met with very low barriers, and participants do not discriminate based on differences in their membership, but celebrate their shared passions and endeavors.

There are many examples of computer-based RPG products and projects that this paper does not have the scope to cover, but in my initial investigations, I believe RPGs show strong evidence of educational merit, both in their ability to create a participatory culture that reinforces the activities of the game, and to give students a side door access into educational content that they may find less engaging in more traditional settings and contexts, or in which they feel less capable of participating. Each of the examples I have chosen here demonstrates the RPG’s involvement or potential involvement with a related participatory culture, and the subsequent high engagement those participatory cultures afford. The effect that RPGs can have in improving or transforming the work done in the traditional classroom is not to be disregarded – as engagement is one of the most important prerequisites of learning. There is a need for additional investigation into the subject of RPGs used in educational contexts, for which this work is only the small beginning.

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ENDNOTES

1. Gamification is the use of game thinking and game mechanics in non-game contexts to engage users in solving problems and increase users’ self contributions. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamification) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)