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Exploring Portals and Participation in Europa Universalis' Affinity Spaces
by

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Abstract

Although there is disagreement among researchers about when, how, and which digital games should be used in formal educational settings, digital games are already present in classrooms. Affinity spaces provide both a theoretical framework and methodology for addressing this issue. Europa Universalis IV and its affinity space was explored as a source of novel insight for educational researchers, teachers, and game developers interested in serious games, learning through affinity spaces, and scaffolding within online gaming communities. This research aims to extend our understanding of games' affinity spaces and learning within their communities.

Despite the abundance of research on digital games in educational settings, there remains a general lack of consensus among educational researchers on the topic. This may be due to the ever changing technological and digital gaming landscape or to the perpetual difficulty of describing the contexts suited for learning through digital games. “[H]ow can one theoretical framework account for both the moment-to-moment interactions that constitute gameplay (including the player’s goals and interactions) while also accounting for the broader socio-cultural contexts that constitute the activity?” (Squire, 2002). Research on affinity spaces help to bridge the *context* gap in games by attempting to describe both physical and virtual informal learning. This research applies Gee’s theoretical framework of affinity spaces (2004) to *Europa Universalis IV* (EUIV), a complex grand-strategy game, to identify novel portals for learning in its affinity space.

Games and Learning in Affinity Spaces

Affinity Spaces are described as informal learning spaces where a common endeavor connects all participants (Gee, 2004). These informal learning spaces are spread across physical and virtual environments including the game’s technological affordances, online forums (Reddit, Steam, and Paradox forums), social media (Facebook and Twitter), video sharing sites (Youtube and Twitch), blogging platforms (Tumblr and WordPress), and creative sites (DeviantArt and FanFiction.net). Therefore knowledge in affinity spaces is dispersed throughout its many participants, online tools, and technology (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012). Digital games¹, are particularly interesting for studying affinity spaces because gaming communities primarily are connected by online networks, which leave a ‘digital trail’ of the community’s activities and interactions (Lammers et. al., 2012). Game-focused affinity spaces can therefore provide a more holistic description of how learning is facilitated by the game itself and through its affinity space.

Selection of Europa Universalis IV. EUIV was selected by the researcher as a possible game for teaching and facilitating self-regulated learning of history content. As an avid gamer,

¹ computer and videogames

the researcher played EUIV over the last three years and developed a research interest around this game. Past research on Europa Universalis II, the second edition of EUIV, showed empirically that EUII had potential for teaching history (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2012). Therefore this research focused on three broad questions: 1) What are people learning through EUIV's affinity spaces? 2) What motivates people to engage and contribute to EUIV's affinity spaces? And lastly, 3) What is the content of EUIV's affinity spaces?

Proposed Methods

Game Affinity Space Analysis (GASA)

A modified framework, Game Affinity Space Analysis (GASA), utilizes Foster, Mishra, & Koehler's TPACK framework (2011) and applies it to affinity spaces in order to describe what is learned through EUIV's affinity space. The GASA framework uses EUIV as the common endeavor that the affinity space develops around (Lammers et. al., 2012). The technological lens of the GASA framework is used to identify the game and its affordances as the 'T'. The pedagogical, 'P' lens describes the in-game pedagogy or the set of scaffolds the game provides to allow it players to engage with the game. Lastly, the 'CK' refers to the game content knowledge across affinity spaces.

Portal Network Analysis (PNA). This study is also interested in the different media and portals participants use to create and share content through EUIV's affinity space. Therefore, by using the GASA framework and applying PNA this study can elucidate which portals are used by players, developers, or core participants by analyzing the game content knowledge in the affinity space.

Playing Research Methodology. This research aims to describe EUIV's in-game pedagogy and technology. The Playing Research Methodology be used to provide an in-depth game analysis (Foster et. al., 2011). By deconstructing the game through first-hand play EUIV's technological affordances will be qualified.

Interviews and Observations. Participant voices and perspectives will be obtained through observations and interviews. Participants are identified as players of EUIV and are categorized as players, core members, and/or developers. Both methods will be used to gain deep knowledge about participants learning through EUIV and its affinity spaces.

Implications

This ongoing project aims to establish a basis for further research into EUIV's gaming community and culture. The potential of games for learning remains shrouded in questions about which games should be used, what content games teach, and how they should be implemented. In an ever changing technological climate we must find the ways and reasons that people are already leveraging affinity spaces to teach and learn. This study proposes application for: 1) researchers interested in motivation and socially shared-regulation of learning in affinity spaces, 2) teachers and teacher educators interested in designing meaningful gaming experiences for learning, and 3) game developers interested in game affordances that encourage player buy-in and affinity space mediated content support.

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Author Biography

Magdalene Moy is a second year PhD student in the Educational Leadership Development and Learning Technologies program with a concentration in STEM education. Magdalene has received a M.S. in microbiology from Thomas Jefferson University and worked at Drexel University for two years as an Assistant Director of Teaching Laboratories before starting this program. Her interests explore self-regulation of learning, informal learning environments, and gaming. Currently, Magdalene works with Dean Nancy Songer on the Philly Scientists project as part of the curriculum team. She also co-designed and co-instructs a community, course-based research experience, Mobilizing the Scientific Method, with Dr. Karen Kabnick through Drexel's Biology Department and Robeson High School. One of her passion projects includes opening a closed elementary school in Pittsburgh as a community and educational resource center. When Magdalene has free time she enjoys gaming, especially Europa Universalis IV.