What Happens off the Field? Proposing a Rhetorical Approach of the Affinity Spaces Surrounding Games.
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Abstract: This paper considers the relation between literacy, social media practices and rhetoric, by focusing on game-related spaces as sites for learning. Studies from various disciplinary research domains like anthropology (e.g. Ito and Bittanti 2010) and socio-linguistics (e.g. Gee 2003) connect games and learning. Gee (2003) provocatively claims that games can be considered more powerful learning environments than traditional education. He attributes several learning principles to gaming, thereby also calling attention to affinity groups “bonded primarily through shared endeavors, goals, and practices and not shared race, gender, nation, ethnicity, or culture” (Gee 2003: 197). These observations are supported by recent research that has provided evidence for the ubiquity of learning in the digital spaces where people form affinity groups, like games and the spaces surrounding them (e.g. Steinkuehler and Duncan 2008). Earlier explorations of communities and learning practices (e.g. Anderson 1983; Bey 1991; Pratt 1991) supports Gee’s (2005) claim that the relationship between membership and learning should be approached cautiously. This paper claims that rhetorical theory can offer substantive insights in the world of gaming and learning. Based on the theoretical insights of game scholars like Frasca (1999), Bogost (2007), and Voorhees (2009), this paper proposes to broaden the scope of research to the affinity spaces outside of games and to analyze the interactions within those spaces from a rhetorical perspective. A small but growing body of research relates the study of video games to the theory of New Rhetoric. Here, rhetoric should not be defined merely as an act of persuasion through language, but a means for meaning making in a world of symbols and interactions (Herrick 2004: 223). Based on insights from New Rhetoric, and Kenneth Burke in particular, the concepts of circumference and identification are introduced as a means to widen the analytical lens (Kimberling 1982). Brief examples from discussion forums for Fifa 11 are used to illustrate the conceptualizations.

Keywords/Key Phrases: Affinity Spaces, New Rhetoric, Video Games, Circumference, Social Media, Identification.
1. Introduction

According to Squire, game studies have focused mainly on what happens in games, rather than on the social interactions surrounding them (2008: 653). Often, the focus is on the hypothesized increase in learners’ performances caused by using video games in educational settings. However, this type of study fails to address that an important part of learning from video games takes place outside the game (Gee 2005; Squire 2008; Steinkuehler and Duncan 2008; Jenkins 2006, 2010). Consequently, it becomes increasingly important to consider reflections on games in research.

In this paper, a focus on affinity spaces is suggested as a way to broaden the scope of research to include spaces where games are discussed spontaneously – either through language, images, appropriations or modifications (Gee 2005). A brief overview of the conceptualization of affinity spaces is discussed and related to earlier theoretical explorations of communities and learning practices.

Furthermore, this paper suggests that studying discussions about games in digital affinity spaces can provide insight in practices of knowledge construction and learning as well as in new emerging rhetorical practices. From a methodological perspective a rhetorical approach is suggested, specifically by introducing the concepts of circumference, identification and division. As the first step in a four year research project exploring theories from New Rhetoric in relation to social media practices, a preliminary analysis is presented. Examples from discussion forums for Fifa 11 are used to illustrate the conceptualizations.

2. Beyond communities of practice

An important theory for studying knowledge construction and learning in a social context involves the notion of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). Grounded in the study of apprenticeship, Lave and Wenger (1991) describe learning as the process of getting acquainted with the symbols and practices of a particular community. By performing minor yet meaningful tasks, newcomers are acquiring the skills and knowledge that is necessary for becoming established members of a group. In other words, communities are described as living curricula for the apprentice (Wenger 2006).

The concept of communities of practice has been used to describe and analyze human interaction in both online and offline environments. However, both this concept, as well as some of its underlying ideas, have been subject to criticism (for an overview see Barton and Tusting 2005). In what follows, this paper addresses a number of alternative theories and conceptual refinements from perspectives such as educational and literacy studies (e.g. Gee 2005), sociology (e.g. Anderson 1983), political theory (e.g. Bey 1991), and anthropology (e.g. Pratt 1991).

From a multiliteracies perspective, Gee (2005) has problematized the term community by pointing out that it bears a number of undesirable connotations. In a digitally mediated society, the notion of membership is likely to exclude certain people and practices from the scope of research (Gee 2005). As such, the approach would lead to a limited perspective on learning within our digital culture. As an alternative, Gee (2007) has suggested to transcend the idea of communities, by focusing on the spaces where learning occurs. After all, people “bond first and foremost to an endeavor or interest and secondarily, if at all, to each other” (98). This shift of attention toward spaces does not imply a complete disregard of community formation and practices. Rather it allows examination of thoughts, values, actions and interactions of a variety of individuals who operate within these spaces, without the presumption of membership (Gee 2005: 223). Gee suggests that affinity spaces – ideally – possess eleven features which attribute to effective learning. In short, these characteristics are: the affiliation of people based primarily on common interests and endeavors; the absence of segregation between newcomers, master and others who share the common space; the permeability and resourcefulness of leadership; the possibility to generate new content, both internally and externally; the possibility to transform the space through content generation; the encouragement of intensive and individual knowledge as well as extensive, distributed and dispersed
knowledge; the acknowledgement and encouragement of tacit knowledge; the variation in forms and routes to participation and status (225-228).

From a sociological perspective, and based on a study of nationalism, Anderson (1983) suggests that people identify and affiliate with social groups through symbolic representations based on abstractions of differences among the group members. He points out that this helps to construct imagined communities. The concept stresses that membership is often based on imagined ties, in addition to observable participatory practices. In other words, people can perceive themselves as part of a community, even if the other members are complete strangers.

From a politico-historical perspective, the temporary character of affinity spaces has been stressed. Bey (1991) refers to social spaces as temporary autonomous zones (TAZ). People move in and out of these zones and bond with others only temporarily. In fact, Bey describes people as psychic travellers who are motivated by desire or curiosity (105). He points out that the uninstitutionalized, non-hierarchical nature of the TAZ is what allows for conflict, collaboration and community formation in an unsegregated and unrestrained way.

From an anthropological perspective, Pratt (1991) disapproves of a focus on communities that excludes the social practices which deviate from the norm – i.e. the assumed shared practices. By introducing the concept of the contact zone, she refers to the tumultuous interaction between culturally diverse individuals within the context of unequal power relations (582). Pratt points out that this has implications for education. For example, it becomes necessary to honor differences and conflict in the classroom, in order to better scaffold learning. She presents the art of the contact zone as a pedagogical practice which acts on the recognition that whatever is said in instructive settings is systematically received in radically different, unpredictable and imprescriptible ways (39).

The theories of communities of practice, affinity spaces, imagined communities, TAZ and contact zone focus on issues of community formation. The concept of affinity spaces teaches us that community formation is a potential resource for learning in a social context. Additionally, the concept of imagined communities stresses identification as a crucial issue of community formation. In addition, temporality is proven important from a socio-historical perspective (TAZ). Finally, from an anthropological perspective, the concept of the contact zone shows that conflict, division and differentiation are inherent to learning, thereby problematizing the idea of affinity spaces in relation to formal education. In what follows, rhetorical theory in general, and New Rhetoric in particular, are introduced as a conceptual and methodological framework to account for these issues when studying video games and their affinity spaces.

3. A rhetorical approach

In the field of game studies, there is a small but growing body of research that relates the study of video games to the theory of New Rhetoric, and especially the theories of Kenneth Burke (e.g. Gee 2006; Bogost 2007). Burke was a literary critic and rhetorician who studied meaning making in literature. He stated that man is “a symbol-using, symbol-making and symbol-misusing animal” (Burke 1966: 16). To study humans’ symbol use and analyze the motives of human action, Burke developed the theoretical and methodological framework of dramatism. A central idea within this framework is that of circumference. It refers to the shifting, broadening and enlarging scope of the analysis of human symbol use (Burke 1966: 359).

This theory has been adopted and in order to study popular culture - first by Kimberling (1982), and since then, by many others (e.g. Blakesley 2003; Voorhees 2009; Rutten, Mottart and Soetaert 2010a). Recently, game researchers are also starting to pick up and transform Burke’s ideas about circumference (e.g. McAllister 2004; Gee 2006; Thompson 2009; Bourgonjon et al. 2011). Thompson, for example, argues that game studies might be conceived as gradually widening analyses in succession focusing on the game, game play, game play readings, analysis of these readings, etc. (2009: 281). This is important, as Macklin notes that “the playing field extends beyond the game itself to the social context and the rhetorical perspectives (intentional or otherwise) of its creators” (in Jenkins 2010).
Kimberling notes that focusing on circumference challenges researchers to think about the scope and breadth of their study (1982: 17). This involves focusing not just on artifacts themselves, but also the public discussions of the artifacts. The connection between circumference and discussion is apparent in Burke’s own writing. He stated that the selection of a set of terms also implies the selection of a circumference (Burke 1945: 90). For Burke, the use of terms or symbols necessarily creates a **terministic screen**.

“We must use terministic screens, since we can't say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology.” (Burke 1966: 50)

Every term is based on a selection of reality, but also on a deflection, since the choice for a term directs attention towards certain aspects of reality and away from others (Burke 1966).

Burke (1945) noted that taken-for-granted notions contained in language constitute a paradox: they allow for both **identification** and **division**. Burke’s description of the **parlor game or unending conversation** signals the relation between language use and identification in his work:

“Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you pit in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him [sic], another comes to your defense; another aligns himself [sic] against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.” (Burke, 1941: 110-111)

Based on this metaphor of the unending conversation, affinity spaces could be described as ongoing argumentative conversations in which people engage temporarily by identifying with others and joining the discussion. This description connects the issues of identification, temporality and division. The conceptualization of affinity spaces as conversations stresses the importance of studying language use and argumentation as a means to understand how meaning is made in these spaces.

In what follows, a preliminary analysis of the forums of the popular soccer game *Fifa 11* is presented, based on the concepts circumference and identification.

### 3.1 Circumference

When studying people who participate in digital affinity spaces a focus on circumference is important in order to get a more holistic perspective on the different terministic screens. These screens can be identified by clustering discussion subjects into thematic domains. With regard to *Fifa 11*, potential domains are: the discussion of soccer actions and strategies, managerial decision making and planning, the analysis of the interface and software mechanics, explorations of soccer and forum ethics, etc. For example, players are discussing what they encounter in the game itself (e.g. emotions when a pass is intercepted at a crucial moment or why a pass was required in that situation), what they encounter in other sports and soccer games come up (e.g. “That pass would have never been intercepted in *PES 2011*”), the way the game is programmed (focusing on the aesthetic and/or procedural design of the game; e.g. in posts discussing the “pathetically weak passing in *Fifa 11*”), contributions to discussions by others as well as their own (focusing on argumentative warrants by addressing rules of forums or other social instances (e.g. “No problem pointing out flaws etc., but doing so in a positive and constructive
manner in what is (as you said yourself) a ‘general discussion forum’ would be appreciated much more, rather than calling the game a *ship wreck*).

### 3.2 Identification and division

Van Looy, Courtois and De Vocht (2010) stress the importance of focusing on identification when studying games. They note that playing games requires anticipation of the reactions, and thus implies practicing to take different perspectives (127). From a rhetorical perspective on identification, discussions in relation to games require this as well. Burke noted that rhetoric is most successful when appeals to the audience allow for identification with the purpose of the rhetor (1945). From this perspective, rhetoric can be understood as an attempt to establish common ground – and ultimately social cohesion – while also perpetuating division (Rutten, Mottart and Soetaert 2010b; Zappen 2010).

Focusing on situations where arguments are challenged or extended is a way to study how people identify and learn to anticipate the reactions of others from a rhetorical perspective. As can be learned from discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell 2005) people combine or switch between terms. In other words, studying how rhetors adapt to the terministic screen of their audiences allows insights about identification and anticipation. On the one hand, a challenge of an argument or a request to extend an argument presents an occasion to study how rhetors fail to identify with their audience and how the audience presents the “correct” screen – either in a direct or indirect way. This stresses how rhetoric and the use of certain terministic screens can lead to division while attempting to stimulate identification. On the other hand, the rhetors’ reactions following a challenge or request accentuate the persistence of attempts to establish common ground and the practice of adaptation. Examples of such situations with regard to *Fifa 11* can be found in discussion topics such as “Tackling” or the previously mentioned “pathetically weak passing in *Fifa 11*” (e.g.: Contributor A: “Good topic! I believe that tackling could be worked on, for me I have noticed that the higher the level of defending the greater range of tackling ability (I know this goes without saying). I think *EA* sports has done a great job in developing a game that is both fun and realistic, unlike *NHL 11* which is too realistic and no fun.” Followed by challenge of contributor B: “You must not play soccer much in real life. In real life, count how many times you fall when you bump into some or run into someone when you are in the sideline and fall as a result. How about the pass from all the way back from defense to the strikers using a ground pass. Yeah defenders just let the strikers do an easy first touch...This is typical *EA* support for a game”).

### 4. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has proposed to explore rhetorical theory in relation to social learning theories that focus on game contexts. The concepts of circumference and identification have been introduced, thereby calling for the study of discussions and terministic screens. From this perspective it is interesting to see that outside the game, players are discussing the game and each other’s rhetorical practices in great detail. From an educational perspective studying terministic screens in affinity spaces is interesting because they indicate what becoming an expert entails and how this is related to experience through participation – both in and surrounding the game. In other words, studying rhetorical practices in affinity spaces offers insight in how knowledge is constructed and how learning takes place (Bricker 2005; Steinkuehler and Duncan 2008). Thus, the insights gained from such research are valuable with regard to both rhetorical theory and educational theory.

As a preliminary study for a four year research project on social media, this paper has focused on an online discussion forum where meaning making occurs. Of course, many other digital affinity spaces can be found that differ from this type of discussion forums. In the case of *Fifa 11* it is interesting to see that outside the game, players are creating manuals on how to improve their playing style, uploading movies with compilations of their most beautiful goals, providing audio commentaries for played matches, etc. The planned research will address the transformations of rhetoric in relation to these new forms of communication and meaning making, as well as the different forms of literacy emerging in digital affinity spaces.
The concepts of affinity spaces and circumference have been introduced to allow a wider scope for game research. However, broadening the analytic lens should also apply to the proposed rhetorical perspective. Zappen (2005: 319) points out that traditional rhetoric needs to be extended and transformed into a comprehensive theory of digital rhetoric. Indeed, rhetorical studies of video games already point to new forms of rhetoric (e.g. Frasca 1999, Bogost 2008). These studies call attention to the procedural aspect of games (Bogost 2008) and the way gamers discuss, influence and transcend these rules (Frasca 1999). As Walz argues, video games both require and offer possibilities for symbolic identification (2005: 195). An active role of the gamer is implied. Future research in digital affinity spaces should explore similar transformations and their implications for rhetorical theory. In fact, developing a comprehensive theory of rhetorical practices in digital spaces can add to the understanding of rhetoric and criticism (Zappen 2005: 319), but can also inspire education (Bricker and Bell 2008: 491-494).

Based on a metaphor by Kenneth Burke, this paper has proposed to describe affinity spaces as ongoing conversations. This allows for a combination of rhetorical and educational perspectives on what happens in these spaces. Rhetorical practices can be understood as learning processes in which people learn to make sense of the world by trying to understand and effectively identify with others. It could be enlightening to consider how this description implies a perspective on students learning to identify, evaluate and craft arguments in order to become engaged in the process of knowledge development (Bricker 2005). In addition, future research should try to establish how a better understanding of students’ informal rhetorical practices can offer opportunities for better scaffolding their learning process.

6. References


